

Crossing the Line: A Bluejacket's World War II Odyssey, by Alvin Kernan. Naval Institute Press, 1994. Pp. 173. \$21.95.

Alvin Kernan's *Crossing the Line* is the latest in a remarkable series of recent memoirs by men of letters who, now nearing the end of successful academic careers, have returned to their early lives as young men during WWII. Like William Manchester's *Goodbye Darkness* and Samuel Hynes' *Flights of Passage*, Kernan's memoir uses the tools of learning and judgment honed over a lifetime of thoughtful reading to provide order and context for the experiences he recounts. His work, like the other memoirs, is particularly interesting when set against the novels written immediately after the war by men who were their contemporaries, particularly those by James Jones and Norman Mailer. For these writers the war was interesting primarily for the way in which it revealed flaws at the heart of the American experience, and their chief victims were young enlisted men up against the system, and getting shot at to boot. Kernan, however, remembers the navy as "a genial place" if "you kept out of trouble," and war itself as frankly "exciting." He harbors no illusions now about the navy as a perfect institution—as the author of books about Samuel Johnson and several literary studies of satire, Kernan certainly has a healthy sense of human limitations—but he clearly respects and admires many of the professional military men he remembers meeting.

But why, one wonders, did Kernan wait so long to tell his story? Perhaps because he was busy with his career at Yale and Princeton; perhaps because he didn't want to be a tiresome "professional veteran." He had never doubted that the war "remained the defining experience" of his life, but for much of the time it was little more than "a vague and troubling presence in the mind, not easily recalled or talked about . . ." Finally, prompted in part by the example of his own ancestor who fought as a nineteen-year-old at Gettysburg but left his experiences regrettably undescribed, Kernan began his memoir as an attempt to define the nature of his war experience for his children.

The memoir does that much, certainly, but it also paints a vivid picture of life aboard an aircraft carrier—first the original U. S. S. *Enterprise*, then the ill-fated U. S. S. *Hornet*—as seen by an enlisted man of remarkable intelligence and capability. Not that Kernan is boastful—when he won a Navy Cross a reporter who interviewed him dubbed him “Modest Alvin Kernan,” much to the delight of his friends on the *Enterprise*. Indeed, what comes across most strongly is the older Kernan’s amused memory of his younger self’s naïveté and the ways in which he was typical of his class and his generation—uneducated and poor, with few prospects. When Kernan graduated from high school in south-central Wyoming in 1940, his mother was seriously ill with cancer and he knew his step-father’s pipe dream of growing rich running a dude ranch in the middle of the Depression was doomed to failure. Hoping to escape an existence in “a world where disaster is always ready to happen,” Kernan joined the navy at seventeen, eight months before that epitome of disasters, Pearl Harbor, which he missed only because his ship was delayed enroute to Hawaii. By the time Kernan left the navy, nearly five years later, he had participated in the Battles of Midway and Okinawa; escaped from the carrier *Hornet* almost as it sank beneath him; won his Navy Cross; been fished from the ocean from a plane that tumbled off the carrier deck in the morning; flown a mission the same afternoon; and, finally after the Japanese surrender, observed the nuclear devastation at Nagasaki and wandered alone through a deserted naval base in Tokyo. He had also won \$3,000 in his last poker game, enough with the GI bill, to start his academic career at Columbia.

Still only twenty-two, he had seen more disasters than he could have imagined, yet come through “without a scratch.” Like most who have been in battle, Kernan credits his survival to luck and chance, though it is clear that competence and courage were a large part of his makeup. Everything in his account is interesting, from the report of his early training to the Afterword in which he describes a visit to the widow of his dead pilot and commander. But perhaps the most significant event in Kernan’s life as a sailor was the night in late November 1943, during the battle for Tarawa in the Marshall Islands, when Butch O’Hare died, and when Kernan got his first taste of “media arrogance,” a deliberate and intriguing anachronism. Kernan had been trained as an ordnance

man, then became an aerial gunner, in part because of his expertise with machine guns and partly because he had applied to pilot training school. His ship, the *Enterprise*, and others in Admiral Arthur Radford's Task Force 50.2 had been harassed by Japanese medium bombers—"Bettys"—attacking them at night from bases on Kwajalein. Fighter pilot Lieutenant Commander Edward H. "Butch" O'Hare had won the Medal of Honor in 1942 for downing five Japanese planes in defense of the U.S.S. *Lexington*. Now O'Hare and Radford worked out a plan to send night-fighters up to meet and surprise the Bettys. In perhaps the only moment in his book when Kernan describes war as grand adventure, he recalls his last glimpse of O'Hare:

Canopy back, goggles up, yellow Mae West, khaki shirt, and helmet, seated aggressively forward, riding the plane hard, looking like the tough Medal of Honor recipient American Ace that he was, Butch O'Hare's face was sharply illuminated by his canopy light for one brief last moment.

What happened afterwards remains vivid yet confused in Kernan's mind: "Really messy firefights don't sort themselves out in the mind clearly, either sooner or later, and heavy feelings of responsibility and guilt lurk around all combat deaths." Kernan, as ordered, had fired at a Japanese plane that had, through its pilot's confusion, tried to join the American formation. The Betty had responded firing "at everything in his range, including O'Hare and us, but had I, blasting away, hit the group commander as well?" When he was back on the *Enterprise*, an unidentified "hoarsely aggressive" reporter sensed a possible scandal in O'Hare's death and ask Kernan directly: "Were you shooting too? . . . Did you hit him?" If he had come at me with more sympathy, I might have tried to tell him how mixed-up it all was, but his bullying got my back up, and I walked away shouting, 'Get the hell away from me.'

As it turned out, Kernan was awarded the Navy Cross for his part in the battle. O'Hare was memorialized by having the nation's busiest airport, in Chicago, named after him. Although his death meant "a great loss to the navy . . . there was little sentimentality expressed openly for his death," Kernan notes. "Partly this was professional sangfroid, partly it was that between officers and enlisted men an impermeable filter blocked all transmission of emotion."

This sounds hard, but it's one of the virtues of Kernan's book that he

is honest about what he did and what he thought, then and now. Although he trained to be a pilot and an officer, he requested to return to the enlisted ranks because of delays in the training and impatience to get back into the action, and one of the most valuable aspects of his account is the long-term scrutiny of the navy by an exceptionally observant enlisted man. He harbors no burning resentment against the military or the officer corps:

The gap between enlisted men and officers in the American navy during World War II was medieval, but there was little class consciousness, less so among the men than the officers, who were actually trying to maintain an undemocratic way of thinking and acting. The enlisted men accepted the division as a necessary part of military life but so American were we that we never dreamed that it could in any way affect our actual status as freeborn citizens who because of a run of bad luck and some unfortunate circumstances, like the Depression, just happened to be down for a time.

But when he heard an executive officer one day at the end of the war refer to “those fucking enlisted men,” Kernan was shocked. How could this officer, and presumably others as well, lack any sense of “what we felt so strongly: the great dangers and victories that we had just shared, everyone playing his part and doing all that could be done to win the war?”

The older Kernan is still appalled by the officer’s slur, but no longer surprised—his latest book before this one was entitled *The Death of Literature*, and it is clear that he regards the human condition, especially as seen in academe, skeptically. He understands now what he may have only sensed as a young man half a century ago: the roots of war lie in human fallibility. Thus “war is not an aberration, only a speeded-up version of how it always is.”

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