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point of view

An Appreciation of Ensan Case's *Wingmen*

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**The Best American War Novel about Love between Men: An Appreciation of Ensan Case's *Wingmen***by [Eric Patterson](#)

World War II was a pivotal event in the modern history of sexual minorities, setting off the social changes that led to today's array of glbtq communities and movements. Allan Berube's path-breaking study, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (1990), reveals that among the millions of young men and women that the war suddenly thrust into the largest military organization in American history, there were hundreds of thousands who felt—or who were about to discover that they felt—same-sex attraction.



While some of these young people were rejected because of discriminatory policies imposed by civilian and military leaders and psychologists, during the war most of those in the armed forces who today might identify as different in sexual orientation or gender served their country with the same commitment shown by members of the majority. Indeed, large numbers served with distinction, and many also made the greatest sacrifice. Enlisted people and officers, and military and government leaders often were aware of same-sex relationships, and often chose to ignore them, at least at the time, given the urgent personnel demands of the war.

Because of the increased visibility of men attracted to men during the war, they frequently were depicted in the flood of war fiction that appeared after 1945, and more often than not with considerable hostility. Some of the best novels, like James Jones' *The Thin Red Line* (1962), are relatively objective, but others, such as Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), probably the most highly-regarded of these books, mobilize homophobic stereotypes of such men as unstable, incompetent, or predatory. There is a similar hostile pattern among many of the more commercial, widely-read World War II novels, such as Richard Newhafer's *The Last Tallyho* (1964).

Several post-war novels by homosexual authors depict male-male desire with more understanding and accuracy, for instance, John Home Burns' *The Gallery* (1947), Loren Wahl's *The Invisible Glass* (1950), James Barr's *Quatrefoil* (1950), and Lonnie Coleman's *Ship's Company* (1955). However, some of these books also focus on stereotypical characters and are burdened with negative assumptions about homosexuality, and some simply are not convincing.

But most readers are unaware of a realistic World War II novel of superior quality that rejects the stereotypes and provides a powerful and thought-provoking parallel to the extraordinary testimony Berube presents from male veterans. The novel is *Wingmen* by Ensan Case, a pseudonymous former Navy officer born in 1950. It was published in 1979 and has recently been reissued.

*Wingmen* is a compelling and convincing novel of the naval air war in the Pacific, and also a complex and moving account of the development of a strong professional, emotional, and sexual bond between two men in a hostile environment. It is told with remarkable skill, subtlety, and insight.

In addition, it raises a long list of questions about our culture's construction of homosexuality and masculinity. It deserves to be recognized as an effective narrative of combat during World War II. It is, I believe, the best novel about the men in that conflict who loved other men.

**The Novel's Place in American World War II Fiction**

To understand the significance of

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*Wingmen* and the reasons it deserves to be ranked highly, it is important to think about the main patterns of American fiction depicting men in war.



An Essex-class aircraft carrier, circa 1943, identical to *Wingmen's* U.S.S. *Constitution*.

Beginning with Stephen Crane's masterpiece *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), and continuing in the work of early modernist writers, particularly Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time* (1924) and John Dos Passos's *Three Soldiers* (1921), American writers established a strong tradition of realistic writing confronting the physical and psychological ordeal of war.

Following World War II, young writers who had served in the armed forces drew on and extended this tradition, several competing to write "the" great novel of the conflict. Mailer's novel is the most complex in content and form; other writers who made themselves contenders were Jones, first in *From Here to Eternity* (1951) and then in *The Thin Red Line*, and Herman Wouk in *The Caine Mutiny* (1951). Mailer and Jones, in particular, expressed intense alienation from the hierarchy of the U.S. armed forces, while Wouk's book initially appears to appeal to this reaction but ultimately makes a defense of authority.

These novels reached a huge audience, were made into successful films, and were emulated by a host of other writers aiming at commercial success. Some of these more commercial novels are quite competently written, although others, like much popular writing, are formulaic. Estimates are that between 1945 and 1960 well over a thousand realistic war novels of varying quality were published in the U.S.

Then, with Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* in 1961, a second major pattern of war novels emerged, rejecting the conventions of modernist realism and employing narrative methods derived from literary absurdism in order to intensify the critical attack on militarism and authority. The other two most important examples of this pattern that are widely known are Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). These novels, and others influenced by them, define a radically different, post-modernist way of telling about war.

More recent writing about the ensuing conflicts in which the U.S. has involved itself continues to operate within these two major patterns.

In *Wingmen*, Case skillfully uses the methods of modernist realism to present the experiences of a group of Navy fighter pilots from mid-1943 to mid-1944, when U.S. forces, capitalizing on their swift and crucial victory over the larger Japanese force attacking Midway in 1942, advanced westward to assault the Japanese-held strongholds of Wake, Tarawa, Truk, and other islands in Micronesia.

The narrative is structured chronologically, providing an account of the part played in combat by a fighter squadron, VF-20, aboard a fictional carrier, the U.S.S. *Constitution*. It opens with the carrier at Pearl Harbor, being prepared to return to the conflict, with new pilots preparing to join her. In the course of the narrative, episodes describing the squadron's action in major battles alternate with descriptions of periods of recuperation and preparation in Hawai'i. But, in contrast to the more commercially-motivated and formulaic novels about the War, and like the best of the modernist realist representations of it, *Wingmen* is far from being a simple linear account provided by a single unifying narrative voice that describes and interprets what it tells the reader.

Case employs a restrained omniscient narrative that presents the perspectives of several central characters with deliberately limited comment on their significance. The reader is shown, rather than told, what motivates the main characters. Case's account of them moves forward compellingly in a series of discontinuous, relatively brief, economical, but vividly-described scenes. These develop personalities and relationships through small details, incidents, and glimpses of the thoughts of the main characters in the scenes, shifting focus both within and between scenes.

Many of the scenes involve extensive dialogue, which is virtuosically handled throughout, persuasively conveying the characters' perspectives and relationships. In the airmen's speech there is a lot of masculine humor, which is entirely believable and quite funny and enjoyable. Frequently the incidental situations between the men of the squadron as they work, and particularly during R&R, are amusing and make the reader laugh aloud.

For a reader who was not in the Navy, the dialogue and situations open up a convincing and intriguing prospect into the masculine world of that institution. The realism of the dialogue does not extend to distracting obscenity. When the author does use obscenity in the dialogue, it captures the intensity and energy of groups of men interacting together, whether they are playful or serious. Unlike many war writers, Case also convincingly captures the quality of military

slang, with its constellation of abbreviations, acronyms, and technical terms, but his highly effective descriptions of the action make it easy for readers without knowledge of this specialized language to follow the narrative.

The succession of scenes is punctuated at various points by fictional military documents that both carry the action forward and provide important insights into it. As with the narrative's presentation of the characters' thoughts, the reader must reflect on many of these documents to understand their full significance; again, the reader is shown rather than told.

Case's descriptions are clear and vivid, but his language is spare and taut, without any of the inflated rhetoric that weighs down many novels about the war, particularly the more commercial ones. The writing is comparable to some of the best accounts of the war, such as Jones' novels.

The descriptions of flight and aerial combat in the episodes at Marcus and Wake Islands and at Tarawa and Truk are particularly powerful, giving a reader who has not flown a plane—much less fought an enemy using one—a highly believable, almost cinematic perspective on the experience of flying in war. When one compares Case's descriptions of being in air battles with those in other novels of World War II, it is clear that he knows what he is writing about.



Grumman F6F Hellcats, circa 1944, the planes piloted by Lt. Commander Jack Hardigan and Ensign Fred Trusteau in *Wingmen*.

### ***Wingmen* and Gay Fiction**

To label *Wingmen* a “gay” novel is somewhat misleading, although it is necessary for convenience, and calling it a “gay romance” novel is even more inaccurate, because it is entirely unlike the usually improbable, if perhaps emotionally (and sexually) gratifying fantasies offered by today's commercial “m/m” fiction.

The men in the novel do not think of themselves as gay, and the word does not occur in the book. Like vast numbers of men then, and now as well, they think of themselves as men, and also experience physical and emotional attraction to men. It is a mistake to make generalizations about gay men, now or in the past, based only on those who are visible to the majority, whether it is by adopting the label or via a vast range of other means of signification.

Those who are most visible to—and most often targeted by—the majority are those whose gender expression differs from the majority's gender system. What the majority has failed to see is that there always have been, and always will be, far more males who desire males than it ever realizes; this is so precisely because their behavior is conventionally masculine. It is one of the many possible ways in which a male can be “homosexual,” and it includes a lot of men.

Also, regarding readers' expectations of the novel, those merely looking for descriptions of men having hot sex together will not find them in *Wingmen*, because its focus is social and psychological. There are two brief, restrained, moving episodes relating to the physical desire between the two main characters, but the author is concerned with them in relation to a related but different subject, the close, careful, accurate delineation of the thoughts and feelings of men who are attracted to one another in an all-male situation in which same-sex desire is not tolerated.

Case's deliberate examination of the process of two men testing themselves and each other, and exploring whether mutual attraction—and trust—exists and can continue in a hostile male context is what makes *Wingmen* such an appealing and important book. In fiction about male love, there are few books that examine so fully and perceptively the way in which a man living and working within a group of other men gradually realizes that he is attracted to one of them, tries to understand his feelings, tentatively testing what they mean and whether the man he cares about feels anything similar, and questions whether there is any possibility of expressing what he feels for him.

Now, with large and visible communities of sexual minority people, especially in larger urban and academic settings, it is easy to forget that many people still are in the closet; and indeed that their lives would be impossible without it. There continue to be many contexts in which being out is not an option, particularly for many men who identify as conventionally masculine.

Great effort has brought change, but until very recently in the armed forces, and still in many other areas of society, particularly in work groups that are all (or mostly) male, men cannot easily or safely express desire for other men. Moreover, now, as throughout the past, many men who love men in fact are drawn to all-male environments because of the intense comradeship in work and in play that men can create together. The collaboration of comradeship,

whether in work, sports, or war, can integrate men with each other in ways that can be profoundly satisfying, whatever a man's sexual orientation.

That this desired atmosphere of male intimacy can be destroyed by the candid expression of male-male sexual desire is at the center of the dilemma facing men who want both types of male intimacy. If a man wants to enjoy being with men in many male environments, he must be very cautious about the expression of desire. To express it risks forfeiting the bonds with men made possible by having a position within the system of hegemonic masculinity that is privileged by American culture.

This is the central personal conflict affecting the two men who fall in love in *Wingmen*, played out within the gigantic conflict of World War II. *Wingmen* is not simply a fine novel about male love during wartime, it is also an extremely perceptive and thought-provoking account of the place of homosexuality in environments that at once are intensely homosocial and intensely homophobic.

*Wingmen* speaks to every man who has felt desire for another man in a setting in which it cannot be expressed, whether in the armed forces, in an all-male school, in athletics, in the police or firefighters, or in any other all-male (or, today, largely-male) space.

### **Tactics and Strategy amid Pacific Struggle: Fred and Jack**

Within the narrative structure that he establishes, Case concentrates on two main characters, Ensign Fred Trusteau and Lieutenant Commander Jack Hardigan, who heads the squadron of thirty-two pilots that Fred joins on the *Constitution*. (Jack's name is the only playfully suggestive element in the narrative, which otherwise employs language without any extravagances. It brings a smile when you first read it, but Jack quickly becomes a believable, complex, recognizable character. It is a narrative wink.)

In the first part of the novel, when the carrier is preparing for action, Case gradually and subtly suggests the backgrounds and personalities of both officers through a series of briefly noted details as the members of the squadron intensively practice their combat skills and then relax, playing cards, drinking, and sometimes meeting women off base when they are in Pearl Harbor.

The reader slowly learns about each man through his interactions with the squadron. Fred is twenty-one, but has discovered early the importance of observing carefully and thinking for himself about what he sees. Adopted at six, with a father who owns a hardware store in San Jose, his childhood has taught him the importance of using his intelligence, particularly in dealing with other men.

In breaks from training, he joins the others in their adventures with "booze and broads," but feels little real interest in women, preferring to be in the company of men. The comic situations in the novel, of which there are quite a few, all of them enjoyable, sometimes involve others in the squadron, but many center on Fred, who has an understated, wry sense of humor that the other men find engaging.

As Fred himself recognizes, success with women is necessary in order to be accepted by other men, to be integrated into a group of comrades. By having sex with a prostitute—and impressing several of the men in the next room in the process—Fred gains their respect, though he takes little pleasure in the act. As Fred thinks of it, it is "part of the price of acceptance" by the men.

Fred's limited sexual desire for the woman actually works to his advantage in the episode: he cannot achieve an orgasm—which, he reflects, is "par for the course" for him with women—but stays erect for seventeen-and-a-half minutes, delighting her and amazing his pals, who are listening through the wall.

Fred also uses his quiet intelligence in all of his work with the squadron, developing his skill as a fighter pilot, and continually observing and learning from the other men, particularly Jack, the Skipper.

The men in the squadron are mostly in their twenties, while Jack, who became a Navy pilot before the war and fought at Midway, is about thirty or slightly older. As with Fred, Jack's personality and background are suggested gradually, through his actions and through the fragments of what he thinks about in various scenes.

He is the kind of man who always concentrates on his work, and his fundamental motivation is to take care of his men, to try to teach them the skills they need both to fight and to survive. Given his experience in combat, he is well aware that many of his men will die, and he wants to keep that number as low as possible while ensuring that they fight effectively.

Unlike other squadron leaders who divide their charges into skilled and unskilled pilots, Jack teaches cohesion. In working with his squadron, he is consistently conscientious and fair, without any of the bluster or bullying of other officers. He is also serious and reserved, though he likes to play cards with the men and he relaxes

and jokes with them there is no likelihood of any emergency. But he was a young pilot in a very different Navy, and increasingly feels out of place with the "thin-skinned, loudmouthed, shallow" young men of the squadron.

As with Fred, we learn a few key facts about Jack's background: he has been a Navy pilot since 1935, comes from Maine, and has a father and older brother who are bankers. His family has pressured him to get married, but he is not interested in doing so. On leaves earlier in his career, along with his pilot friends he has had casual involvements with women, but he is usually more interested in his work.

He dates Eleanor Hawkins, an attractive Navy war widow in Hawai'i who is eager for him to marry her, but he pulls back, realizing that while she is ardent, intimacy with her does nothing for him.

It seems plausible, though we are never told so explicitly, that Jack joined the Navy because he prefers male company and does not want to be pushed into marriage. In this, of course, Case subtly suggests a highly significant point about military and particularly naval careers, one that social historians and biographers also have noted: some men are drawn to military careers, especially at sea, because they do not wish to marry women and prefer the intense bonds with men that are possible in communities of men.

Both Fred and Jack are presented as men who put their work before everything else, and who continually and conscientiously try to improve it. Like many young men working with a somewhat older man who is very good at what he does, Fred admires Jack, learns from him, emulates him, and seeks to please him.

Fred volunteers to keep the squadron's War Diary, a brief daily record of its actions, and does it scrupulously. Because he is observant, Fred takes the initiative on several problems relating to the squadron's work, helping Jack and gaining his respect and gratitude. When Fred occasionally screws up, his first reaction is anxiety at disappointing his Skipper. Fred's attitude is sincerely respectful, never obsequious or manipulative.

Slowly, through a series of persuasively depicted minor incidents that poignantly capture Fred's evolving feelings through his interactions with Jack and the other men, he realizes the degree to which he is attracted to men rather than women, and that his admiration for VF-20's Skipper is desire. Fred remains completely professional in his work with Jack, but with an intense, private awareness of the depth and importance of what he feels. There is no suggestion of guilt or shame as Fred comes to understand his desire, but he keeps it to himself. Few other books capture so effectively and insightfully the psychological perspective of one man in love with another in a context in which almost nothing can be expressed.

In a stunning episode, Case shows how Fred realizes the depth of what he feels about the Skipper. One night shortly before the *Constitution* leaves Hawai'i for her first long training cruise with Fred and the other new pilots, Fred is slightly surprised at having a wet dream, the first since he was sixteen. Like many dreams, this one is bizarre, involving a card game at his father's hardware store, but otherwise it is vague and passes from his mind. However, its significance is clarified a week later, when, as Jack briefs the pilots about their training cruise, Fred suddenly remembers his dream and realizes who was with him when he ejaculated:

"A battle was raging in Fred's mind as he considered the man with the pointer at the front of the ready room. He had given up trying to concentrate and retain the information that the skipper was giving out—information that could quite conceivably save his life. He was instead trying to sort out the first incredible rush of sensations that had nearly smothered him only minutes before. When the skipper had first taken the floor to begin the briefing, he had, for no reason at all, remembered the dream. In a way, it was as if a switch had been thrown, and a light had come on, revealing with perfect clarity what had heretofore been hidden in darkness, struggling to get out. And now that it was out, Fred wasn't at all sure that he wanted it that way."

After his shock passes and he accepts his dream's importance, Fred very cautiously makes his admiration toward Jack evident, but without any expectation that Jack could reciprocate. He is proud to work with a man like Jack and loves him, and he wants to express it, but he does so only in ways that are appropriate within the context of their work together with the men in the squadron.

The episode in which Fred designs the VF-20 squadron insignia, expressing his private feeling for Jack as well as the general attitude of respect felt by the other men, is a particularly moving instance of this. What he designs is perfectly appropriate, but also discreetly indicates the depth of Fred's feelings, not primarily through an element that he includes in the insignia, but through one that he omits. In this short, brilliant episode, readers will find an illustration of a fundamental fact that many men who love men instantly will recognize: in a homosocial, homophobic space, the deepest

personal devotion to another man, to be expressed publicly, must be expressed only through a kind of code.

At a similar pace, and through similar details, Case shows Jack gradually recognizing Fred's importance to him. As the Skipper, Jack's perspective is that of a leader who is teaching and evaluating the men, and finding out how they work together and with him. Despite Fred's incidental mishaps—which stem from his comradeship with the other men, whose rowdiness gets them into scrapes—Fred's careful observation of the squadron's work allows him to understand and anticipate problems, several times saving Jack and the squadron a great deal of trouble.

Fred assists Jack without ever getting in his way or annoying him, and occasional conversations between them increase Jack's respect for Fred's intelligence and dedication, while intensifying Fred's admiration. Jack has high expectations but is encouraging and never patronizing, and comes to feel confidence in Fred that is expressed through friendly humor.

Jack values Fred's commitment, and wishes it were shared by more men on the *Constitution*, which has gained a reputation as a "hard-luck ship" as a result of problems caused by lack of professionalism among some of the men.

The following passage describes Jack's thoughts after yet another frustrating conference he and the other squadron commanders have with the Air Group Commander, a hostile, bullying martinet:

"...He finished his Scotch and crumpled the cup into his palm. The air group commander bothered him somewhat, but Fred Trusteau kept slipping into his mind and he couldn't quite shake it. The young man was like an oasis of sanity in a desert of punishing responsibility. This was a world he had looked forward to returning to, only to find out that it wasn't the same anymore. The things Fred Trusteau said made sense: the things he did made him easy to work with. Why didn't someone else volunteer to write the War Diary? Why did it happen to be he who had discovered the navigation snafu? Why couldn't a few more of his pilots be that observant?"

The reverie is interrupted: "Mooning over your chances with Eleanor Hawkins?" asked Wood. Jack snapped back to the present. "Eleanor Hawkins?" His voice was very serious. "The only chances with her end up in a wedding. I'm not ready for that right yet."

Jack's respect for Fred's commitment to their work is confirmed by the younger man's skill, initiative, and resolution in flying. Through a few little gestures, Jack indicates to Fred the degree of respect and confidence he feels.

Their mutual trust increases as they fly together as the war progresses, and they come to rely upon one another. Not surprisingly, like the others in the squadron, the Skipper comes to call Fred "Trusty." In their first assault, on Marcus Island, when Fred is forced to land on the carrier *Essex* and it is unclear for several hours whether he has survived, Jack begins to realize how much he cares about him, although he struggles to remind himself that Fred is "just another pilot" and that he cannot allow himself to feel too much.

Jack realizes considerably later than Fred does that his feeling for the other man involves desire, and he realizes it in a way that is initially quite unsettling to him.

Readers who have been in parallel personal situations, albeit perhaps in contexts different from war, and have experienced similar feelings will be impressed and moved by the psychological realism and insight with which Case depicts the relationship between Fred and Jack.

Particularly moving are the small actions, almost unnoticeable to others in the squadron, through which the two men cautiously indicate their affection for each other. As often happens when two men—whatever their sexual orientation—like each other, they kid one another, which, as many who have been in all-male contexts already should realize, can almost amount, in an entirely acceptable way, to a kind of masculine flirting.

Both men also experience instances of acute anxiety and doubt about the developing relationship, but this gradually changes, particularly after they fly with each other in the attack on the Japanese at Wake Island, and is completely resolved at Tarawa by the extraordinarily intense energy, excitement, and danger of flying and fighting—in darkness—together.

Case develops the relationship of the two men without any overt interpersonal melodrama, subtly indicating each stage through Jack and Fred's actions and thoughts during daily routines on base and at sea, through card games and drinking parties during breaks and leaves, and through their collaboration in flying. The pacing, balance, and dexterity with which Case illuminates the intense internal reactions of the men to each other in what are apparently—to everyone else present—ordinary bureaucratic routines is remarkable.

The novel achieves a consistent balance in its presentation of the war, of the characters' interactions, and of the internal unfolding of the perspectives of the main characters. Their energy—especially, their gradual realization that they love each other—drives the novel. *Wingmen* is an extraordinarily accurate representation of men discovering and testing their love for each other outside of a gay context, in a homosocial situation in which homosexuality, if it becomes visible, can destroy their relationship, and even the men themselves.

Because they are part of the enormous apparatus of the American war effort, the men of VF-20—at least those as thoughtful and highly motivated as Jack and Fred—not only strive to perfect their skills as part of a squadron that is a tactical element in the Navy's assault on Japanese power, but also continually seek to guess and understand the larger strategy of which their squadron is a part. As dedicated military men, they think both tactically and strategically.

While it is never made explicit, readers will see a striking parallel with Jack and Fred's personal situation, in which they must engage in an ongoing, private, secret campaign to approach one another, and to maintain their bond in a hostile environment once it is forged. Careful evaluation of tactics and strategy is essential to the survival of their relationship as "more than wingmen," as Fred puts it, and it is a campaign as perilous as that which they are fighting against the Japanese.

Although Case carefully observes and describes the interactions of the men, and particularly Fred and Jack, he leaves much to the reader's imagination. None of the men is described in any great physical detail, although general characteristics such as height, build, and hair are noted briefly.

There are, however, incidental indications about Jack as Fred observes him in various scenes. Fred notes Jack's height and long legs, and admires his dark sideburns, deciding, as a young man might when he admires another man, to shave his at the same length. While Fred is young and athletic, Jack responds less to his looks than to his competence and dedication, which reminds him of what he values most about the Navy, its professionalism prior to the war, before it was inundated with men having less commitment.

### ***Wingmen and Buddies***

The central focus of attention for the men Case describes is the urgent process of becoming an effective fighter pilot, which means continually improving tactics in flying and fighting. As was true for Navy fighter pilots, the squadron is organized in pairs called sections, each made up of a section leader and another pilot following closely by him as his wingman.

The two men in each section develop their ability to fly and fight in tandem, sticking together and protecting each other, and coordinating effectively with the other sections in the squadron, first in repeated combat exercises and then in the ultimate test of skill and cooperation, the chaos and violence of battle. As Berube has noted, many parts of the American armed forces during World War II employed some form of a "buddy system," either formally, as in the case of Navy fighter pilots, or more informally, as among combat infantry.

Berube explains that in combat, buddy relationships, both for men attracted to women and for those attracted to other men, were a fundamental source of strength and survival. Whatever their sexuality, buddies protected each other and cared for each other, sometimes died for the other, and grieved when a buddy was injured or killed. To be buddies in war blurred the boundary between the homosocial and the homosexual, and to some degree neutralized the homophobia that usually was ready to police that boundary and suppress the expression of affection and attraction between men.

The organization and tactics of the squadron described in *Wingmen* thus are a manifestation of an important way in which the U.S. armed forces used intense male relationships to maintain cohesion and to achieve success in World War II. For the men in VF-20, flying as wingmen is a further, militarily essential and officially-endorsed, intensification of the male comradeship that they have experienced in the homosocial conditions of living and training together since joining the Navy. To fly and fight together is to be committed to other men and interdependent with them. Wingmen risk their lives for each other, and owe their lives to each other.

When the squadron still is involved in intensive combat training at sea before their first engagement of the Japanese, personnel changes require Jack to choose a new wingman, and his confidence in Fred causes Jack to select him. Jack's decision is confirmed by Fred's performance as they fly together in combat; in fighting the enemy, the two become essential to one another.

In describing their experience of battle, and the evolution of their friendship into a profound emotional and physical bond, Case suggests the complexity of the personal dynamics between two men. While it never is said explicitly, the backgrounds and needs of

both, Fred's distant relationship with his father, Jack's aloofness from his insistent family, the difference in age of about a decade, as well as the varied ways in which they interact, as Fred learns from Jack and assists him, becoming at least as skilled as his teacher, and Jack comes to find Fred indispensable, as they fight as equals, all suggest that their relationship is shaped by what are the most profound patterns in which a male couple may interact, some echoing the commitment between brothers, some the commitment between son and father.

For most of the men, being wingmen simply is a military necessity, and a form of friendship and trust. Unlike Fred and Jack, the focus of their sexual interest is on the women they know in Hawai'i or back home. Some become casually involved with prostitutes, while some are looking for "nice girls." Some do not think much about the war beyond the immediate requirements of their work, and while most are seriously committed to the squadron, a few are lazy and careless. Others, particularly some of the higher officers, are ambitious to climb the ranks of the Navy, sometimes at the expense of those serving under them.

Among the other men in VF-20, the most significant, at least for Fred, is Lt. Hanson T. Brogan, a good man who is a skilled pilot and acey-deucey player. At a key point, when Fred worries he has somehow alienated Jack, his friendship with Brogan helps him snap out of depression, get his focus back on flying, and likely saves his life. Brogan is one of those easygoing masculine men so secure in himself that he easily touches other men in the course of work or recreation and never gives a second thought to being undressed around them.

It is during one of Fred's talks with Brogan in Brogan's room that Fred receives the definitive proof that he is attracted to men, when he realizes that looking at Brogan, relaxed on his bunk naked, has given him an erection. It is a moment that likely was experienced by many young men during the war, who usually, like Fred, knew to keep the knowledge to themselves. Brogan makes another, more deliberate gift to Fred, teaching him how to win at acey-deucey, thus making him a celebrity among the men.

### **Men in Authority**

Several of the officers senior to Jack also are notable characters, because in their conduct they suggest a spectrum of behavior that illustrates the difference between successful and incompetent military authority. At one end are careless blowhards and bullies like Lt. Commander Deal and Air Group Commander Jennings, whose narcissism causes other men to die. Others are arrogant, ignorant men like the Marine Major on the *U.S.S. Belleau Wood*.

At the opposite point are men like the Captain of the *Constitution* and Admiral Berkey, who are motivated by their intense commitment to meet the demands of the conflict as well as their profound concern for their men. Although they are rougher men, Brogan and the acey-deucey-playing Commander who was his friend also are at this end. As are Jack and Fred, of course. The various men Case presents thus may be seen as defining a spectrum of ways of being a man in war, a spectrum of types of masculine authority.

The array of men Case depicts demonstrates that one major element of success for a military leader is caring about the lives of his men. By definition, given their commitment to the men they fight with and to each other, this includes rather than excludes men like Jack and Fred, and raises the much larger question of whether, if military organizations were capable of recognizing it, some men who love men in fact have a particular contribution to make to leadership. It also shows that male love can be thought of not as distinct from or even antithetical to male friendship, but as being on a continuum with it.

All of the many male characters in *Wingmen*, officers and enlisted men, may be considered in terms of this spectrum. What is notable is that the two homosexual characters are at the ideal end. In terms of the assumptions about men in 1943 and 1944—which still persist today—men who love men supposedly somehow are marked by detectable differences in their behavior. But Fred and Jack are not so marked, and the unsettling implication, for those who denigrate male love, is that any other man on the spectrum could love a man.

Four years after *Wingmen* is set, the Kinsey Report on male sexuality would shock Americans with exactly that information. The even more unsettling implication, again at least to those who were and are disturbed by sexual minorities, is that male homosexuals are not necessarily somehow "feminine." Sexual orientation and gender behavior are not necessarily linked.

Alienation is powerfully described in *Wingmen*, but it is not the alienation from American military authority so pervasive in many of the most esteemed modernist realist novels of the war. Although Case presents striking examples of the abuse of command by selfish, careless, arrogant men such as Deal and Jennings, in contrast to writers such as Mailer, Jones, and others, he does not use his account of Fred and Jack to criticize American militarism



and the larger American cultural problems of which it can be seen to be a part.

Instead, Case offers a trenchant criticism of another, even more profound form of cultural domination, made from the perspective of men who love men: both Fred and Jack, although deeply committed to the organization and the nation that they serve, are silently but intensely alienated from the compulsory—and compulsive—heterosexuality all around them. Fred values the comradeship of the squadron, but privately tires of their endless sexual bragging and fantasizing. He also subtly resists being forced into situations with women.

Jack also resists compulsory heterosexuality. He dodges Eleanor Hawkins' proposal, fends off insistent questions from his parents and older brother about when he will get married, and, on his visit home for his father's funeral, even encounters and evades this sort of interrogation from a well-meaning stranger.

Everyone assumes that men like Jack and Fred want women and want to get married, and constantly seeks to push them toward heteronormativity. The experience of both men points up an aspect of the sexual authoritarianism of American culture that none of the heterosexual writers on World War II was even capable of recognizing or understanding, much less presenting with Case's powerful insight.

### **Continual Surveillance**

One other man, Lt. Duane Higgins, the second in command of VF-20, plays a central role in the novel. Like Jack, Higgins was a Navy pilot before the war, and fought at Midway, flying as Jack's wingman. Duane, like Fred, learned from Jack and is dedicated to him. Although Duane is a fine pilot, he is sometimes distracted, because he is frequently less concerned with his responsibilities in the squadron than he is with making money winning at cards.

When Fred joins the squadron and begins to gain Jack's respect, Duane is slightly envious. His feelings of jealousy involve no conscious element of desire for Jack—indeed, Duane eventually pursues and marries Eleanor, after confirming that Jack is not interested in her. But Duane clearly is resentful of Fred and possessive of Jack.

Also, he cannot fathom why Jack would not want a woman as attractive as Eleanor. As he observes the growing trust between Jack and Fred, Duane gradually begins to question what it means. During the daily routines of the squadron, he tracks their intimacy, quietly monitoring and judging, and his surveillance finally reaches a critical point. And simultaneously his carelessness about the squadron finally places him definitively at the wrong end of the spectrum of men in the book.

Although it is possible to read the relationship between Brogan and his friend the Commander as being sexual, particularly given what the Commander says about Brogan to Fred and the inclusion of the perhaps suggestive detail that the Commander and Brogan have a shared skill at acey-deucey, no other non-heterosexual characters are depicted in the book, so Duane's hostile focus is entirely on Fred and Jack.

As is true of the novel throughout, Case refuses to resort to the easy solutions of melodrama. Nevertheless, the character of Duane Higgins effectively suggests the intensity and scope, and perhaps also some of the root causes, of the hostility that men like Jack and Fred could face. As the two men gradually navigate the complex obstacles to their intimacy, Higgins observes like a spy following a critical, secret military engagement.

Here, from the section describing the carrier's return trip to Hawai'i, after Tarawa: "They spent a lot of time together now, the Skipper and Trusteau. Higgins had kept an eye on them for quite a while now. They were indeed very close. Just last night at the crew's movie on the hanger deck they sat in the front row, on the very end. Duane had sat behind them and noticed that as soon as the movie was underway, Jack leaned over against Trusteau, and they watched the whole movie . . . with their shoulders touching. There was plenty of room; they weren't crowded together. The hangar deck was so big that on the other side of the screen, a half-dozen mechanics and a crew chief were lowering a spare Dauntless from the overhead. It made Duane wonder."

Prior to this, Case offers an even more perceptive and subtle observation about surveillance, when he shows Higgins watching Fred and Jack, who are not aware that he is looking at them in a crowded, noisy room. He subjects the gaze between them to his own suspicious scrutiny. Everywhere, for men like Fred and Jack, the homoerotic gaze is at risk in the homophobic panopticon. When they have the ordinary, natural, necessary impulse to touch or hold each other, it is impossible. Under this continual surveillance, as Case puts it, "they were two men who were as close as two men could be, but they were still very much apart."

All of the central characters in *Wingmen* go through substantial and believable development, and each, in the process, provides remarkable insights into aspects of male interaction in an all-male environment. Fred and Jack develop in positive ways, through their mutual interaction. Duane's development, in contrast, provides a disturbing picture of the emergence of aggressive homophobia, and while it only briefly becomes directly visible to Jack, and somewhat less to Fred, it is frightening in its implications, indicating the obsessive lengths to which some people will go to patrol and suppress the sexuality of others.

By implication, this development reminds the reader of the official homophobic purges during and especially immediately following World War II, as well as the intense atmosphere of hostility during the late 1940s and early 1950s, when homosexuality was equated with Communist subversion. The development of Duane's character anticipates the Lavender Scare that accompanied the Red Scare.

Although *Wingmen* is very different from Melville's great novella *Billy Budd*, Higgins is somewhat akin to Claggart, the Master-at-Arms who, like the others in Melville's tale of the Handsome Sailor, is drawn by Billy's homoerotic appeal, but unlike them is simultaneously impelled to destroy him. Like Claggart, who would have loved Billy "but for Fate and Ban," Higgins is fixated on Jack.

Higgins' obsession becomes so intense that, during preparation for the climactic assault on Truk, it affects his focus and imperils the squadron. One of the many impressively provocative implications of *Wingmen* is that the actual threat to "unit cohesion" and "good order and discipline" involving homosexuality comes not from men who love men, but from men who hate their love.

Concerning the ending of the novel, it is enough to say that, in keeping with the sophisticated and restrained approach that he takes in developing the relationship of Trusty and the Skipper, Case does not resolve their personal situation—or Duane Higgins' suspicions about them—through melodramatic action, either between Fred and Jack or among the men of the squadron. Rather, the plot is resolved, as personal relationships so often actually were during World War II, by the violence of the war itself.

The novel concludes with a "scrapbook" of fictional documents, akin to those with which the narrative is interspersed, and a short, powerful epilogue. This resolution is a brilliant means of closing the narrative while raising a wide range of significant implications concerning the lives of men who love men, and, as before, Case achieves this without resorting to any simplistic attempt to explicate or resolve these implications. But they are there for the reader who is willing to think about their importance.

One question that the conclusion raises is whether the stress of hostility toward men who love men may not in fact be equal to, or perhaps ultimately even worse than, the stress of combat with the enemy. Our society still cannot adequately address post-traumatic stress disorder among military veterans, and it is a much longer way from even beginning to understand the traumatic stress inflicted by the hatred of same-sex relationships.

Another implicit and related question concerns the causes of this hostility; why do some ostensibly heterosexual men become so obsessed with male-male sex, and so resentful of it, and so concerned to expose it? Yet another is whether, in fact, loving other men may not actually make a military man, or perhaps any man, more effective in working with and leading men. And, indeed, whether, for some men, it may not make them more masculine rather than less.

The ending also makes one think about what kind of life two men can have in a world where they are surrounded by others who do not want them to be together, and which demands constant maneuvering and strategizing, and what then happens to one when the other is gone. The novel's resonance extends far beyond the time and the world that it depicts.

### **Male Love and Masculinity**

One way to estimate the importance of *Wingmen*, as a novel about World War II and about men who love men, is to compare it to a popular novel that directly addresses the same subjects, Richard Newhafer's *The Last Tallyho* (1964). A naval aviator decorated for his conduct in the War in the Pacific, Newhafer wrote popular fiction and screenplays. His novel is superficially quite similar to Case's, describing a Navy fighter squadron during the Pacific battles of 1943 and 1944. But how completely different the two works are.

At the center of Newhafer's narrative is Air Group Commander Bob Crowley, a caricature of several of the then-prevailing homophobic stereotypes. Impotent with women, tormented by repeated homoerotic nightmares, malingering and incompetent in his leadership position, distrusted and disliked by his men, and cowardly in battle, Crowley eventually is led by his "warped desire" to fraternize with and seduce a lonely, weak, whimpering enlisted man.

A suspicious and outraged career petty officer gathers evidence about the two and informs another commander, who confronts them as they commit "sodomy" in Crowley's bunk. Crowley is such a coward that, shamed by being found out, he slits his wrists rather than choosing to die in battle, and the enlisted man soon is ripped to pieces in a Japanese Zero attack.

The motivations and perspectives of neither man are explored with any insight, and the two function merely as a grotesque contrast to the growing competence and heroism of the heterosexual male characters, who eventually are rewarded with beautiful, appreciative, submissive women. Although the battle episodes are vividly described, the omniscient narrative voice often is pompous and bombastic, particularly in its accolades of hegemonic masculinity.

The contrast between Newhafer's simplistic characters and Case's insights into the lives of men in groups, both those men who are heterosexual and those who are not, is overwhelming. Although both Newhafer and Case were in the Navy, Case is a generation younger, and speaks from the perspective of young men in the 1960s and 1970s who refused to accept the suffocating prejudices that prevailed among men of Newhafer's age.

The contrast in style also is striking. Whereas Newhafer's writing is festooned with silly Hollywoodish rhetoric, Case's is complex, controlled, and austere. It is an amusing irony that Newhafer's style, with its overblown, semi-hysterical tone, seems much more "feminine," in a conventional sexist sense, than Case's, which is the direct opposite.

The two novels exist in a deliberately dialectical relationship: as Case has explained in recent interviews, and as the acknowledgement at the start of his novel indicates, *Wingmen* was written in direct response to *The Last Tallyho*. A more powerful, effective, and deserved rebuke to the kind of contempt for love between men displayed by Newhafer is difficult to imagine.

Not only does *Wingmen* repudiate the hostility toward male love that saturates so much World War II fiction, but the form of its narrative also subverts the archetypic structure of popular, conventionally sexist war ideology, in which the costs of war to the men who fight it are compensated for by women. Such narratives were ubiquitous during the war, in Hollywood films, popular fiction, war propaganda, political rhetoric, and advertising, and still persist today.

*Wingmen* subverts this paradigm by placing love between men, between warriors, at the center of the type of narrative structure that had justified the warrior's sacrifices by offering romance with women as a reward. While their age difference is significant to Fred in a positive way, it is less so to Jack, who interacts with him, in flying and personally, although not in the public world of the squadron, as an equal. Neither is of subordinate status in the relationship, in contrast to heterosexual war narratives, in which women are largely passive, a haven or goal that men struggle to reach. Like Walt Whitman, the poet and prophet of male love, Case offers the reader the alternate possibility of the "love of comrades," of men who are active equals.

The novel also challenges an even more fundamental cultural paradigm than the heterosexual romantic love ideology: the paradigm of hegemonic masculinity itself. Fred and Jack exemplify almost all the criteria of the group that American culture historically has privileged most highly: they are male, white, middle-class, educated, fit, handsome, and from European Christian backgrounds—except they are not heterosexual.

Although neither is a Kinsey 6 in terms of sexual response, both are men who love men. The novel's disruption of the usual expectations fostered by narratives celebrating hegemonic masculinity is dramatic, startling, and affirming to men who love men.

Case provides remarkable insight into the intense bond that can come to unite two men through coordinated, interdependent action amid danger, what could be called the bond of a male warrior couple. Such relationships, constructed in ways that omit homosexuality and acknowledge the culture's insistence on heteronormativity, are everywhere in American popular entertainment narratives about military men, frontiersmen, and superheroes, as well as in much serious American literature such as that by Cooper, Melville, and Hemingway, and ultimately derive from Classical epics, particularly Homer's *Iliad*.

But they are not merely a cultural construct: for many men, such actual relationships are fostered by interdependence in military training and combat, particularly through various buddy systems. Readers of military history and sociology, biography, and American veterans' testimony—including that collected by Berube and other researchers, straight and gay—will be aware that such comradeships occur repeatedly in military and paramilitary life. They also develop in athletics and in other largely-male, high-risk work, such as that of police and firefighters.

These relationships have been supposed not to be sexual, at least

until very recently, and many are not, but some are, though the men may not necessarily identify as gay. Heterosexual or homosexual, all such comrade relationships are intensely, though often quietly, emotional and often physically affectionate. For men in such contexts who are physically attracted to each other, intense sexual interaction can parallel the intense excitement of interaction in warfare or athletic contests. Both involve a shared thrill that is only possible together.

As Berube explains, during World War II some men who loved men explicitly recognized the cultural and historical precedents for such comrade-couples: "Some gay soldiers and officers, particularly those with college education, carried with them a mythology, developed from reading the Classics and in conversation with other gay men, about 'armies of lovers,' such as the 'Sacred Band of Thebes' in ancient Greece, and heroic military leaders, such as Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Frederick the Great, and Lawrence of Arabia, who like themselves had had male lovers. . . . It confirmed that there always had been gay warriors who fought with courage and skill, sometimes spurred on by the desire to fight bravely by the side of their lovers."

Although Greek culture constructed sexuality and gender quite differently from our own, for generations men who love men have made this transhistorical identification. Case never burdens his novel with any historical or literary references, and never editorializes about the cultural tradition of heroic love, but, for readers who are aware of this tradition, *Wingmen* can be seen as part of a persistent pattern in literature and art stemming from the Classical ideal exemplified by such male warrior couples as Achilles and Patroclus, Damon and Pythias, Harmodius and Aristogeiton, and Hephaestion and Alexander.

*Wingmen* thus should take its place beside what is the only other equally important and widely-read narrative affirming male love in World War II, *The Charioteer* (1953), by the British author Mary Renault. The tone of the epilogue of *Wingmen* reinforces this Classical parallel, particularly with the great tradition of the homoerotic elegy.

Of course, some will reject the idea of a narrative of homosexual heroism that operates within the framework of hegemonic masculinity, rather than explicitly rejecting its constructions of sex, race, class, education, ability, and cultural background. But to do that is to ignore the particular power that the imagery of masculinity has for American culture, including some men who love men.

In the 1950s and into the 1960s, uncontested representations of men who epitomized the ideal were everywhere, and representations of men who loved men, except as dangerous or ridiculous marginal figures, were non-existent. Men who did not understand themselves as dangerous or ridiculous but who desired men did not see themselves represented in American culture, but they did see and admire the images of masculinity in popular culture, including those in the many big budget World War II movies of the period.

All of the major realist war novels were made into films. So, for men who grew up at this time it is hard not to think of the movie versions of stories about the war, with their heroic men and waiting women, without the subversive temptation of picturing *Wingmen* as a film.

One more observation about the appeal of the novel for men who desire men and were born during the baby boom. The post-war ideal of the hegemonically masculine depicted the men of our fathers' generation, the men who had won World War II. So, *Wingmen* offers us a means of understanding what it would have been like to be a man who loved men in the generation of our fathers.

For us, it can suggest an answer to the intriguing and perhaps disturbing question of what it would have been like for us to have been in the war and to have known our fathers. Many readers, both older and younger, will find it satisfying to see the hegemonic ideal transgressed to include, at its core, the love that we always have been told is its absolute negation.

First published in 1979, *Wingmen* arrived at a time when the protest movement that would change the place of homosexuality in the U.S. military was building. In 1975, Air Force Sergeant Leonard Matlovich, recipient of the Purple Heart and the Bronze Star in Viet Nam, took the courageous step of publicly coming out, and then was dismissed from service, which helped to make the struggle for full integration of gay men and lesbians into the armed services a national issue. This struggle was met with intense resistance, culminating in the two decades when the discriminatory and destructive "Don't Ask-Don't Tell" policy was imposed, but as more and more courageous military men and women spoke out against it, the end of discrimination finally came in 2011.

In recent years, numerous veterans have published eloquent and sometimes disturbing accounts of their experiences before the repeal of DADT, and there are striking parallels with the circumstances in *Wingmen*. Many, like Fred and Jack, have shared love secretly with another they work with, being able to talk safely

about "everything except themselves and each other."

Is there the prospect that the armed forces now might actually begin to recognize and value the capacity that some men and women, because of their sexual orientation, can have for intense dedication to same-sex comrades? The armed forces, of course, have benefited from sexual minorities throughout American history; perhaps now those in leadership positions will begin to recognize and respect them.

For all who supported ending DADT, particularly those who were directly affected by it as well as those, both homosexual and heterosexual, in the armed forces today who seek to redress its damage, reading *Wingmen* will be enlightening and encouraging.

*Wingmen* was originally published during the last phase of the culture of gay liberation, before the sudden explosion of the AIDS epidemic. This global catastrophe, which in the U.S. struck sexually active gay men first, rapidly transformed the lives of men who desire men here and throughout the Western world.

For many the analogy with war was overwhelming: suddenly, with no warning, an unseen enemy struck down young men in the midst of life, and they had to mobilize to defend themselves, often with the support of lesbian and straight allies. They frequently employed the metaphors of warfare to describe their experiences with the health care system and a government that was brutally indifferent, and often used a buddy system to protect and preserve the lives of the men they loved. As one who re-read *Wingmen* then in a hospital as a caregiver, the parallel is obvious to me.

The profound male commitment presented in *Wingmen* also presaged a profound development in the gay community due in large part to the impact of AIDS, the shift away from promiscuity toward committed relationships, which has been a marked pattern over the past several decades among many men who desire men, and which has been a major factor in the extraordinary momentum of the ongoing movement toward same-sex marriage.

*Wingmen* is a remarkable and valuable novel. Its social and psychological insight, as well as artistry, substantial and impressive as they were when it first was published, have only increased over time.

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Educated at Amherst College and Yale University, Eric Patterson taught American literature, American cultural studies, and glbtq studies at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York until his retirement in 2013. He has written on the construction of authority in the police movies of Clint Eastwood, on a gay perspective on Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, and on approaches to reducing homophobia at colleges and universities. He is the author of *On Brokeback Mountain: Meditations about Masculinity, Fear, and Love in the Story and the Film* (2008). Since 1988 he has lived with his partner (now husband), T.R. Forbes, a soil scientist and writer, near Ithaca, New York.



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