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Jack Hardigan's Hellcat fighter squadron blew the Japanese Zekes out of the blazing Pacific skies. But a more subtle kind of hell was brewing in his feelings for rookie pilot Fred Trusteau. As another wingman watches - and waits for the beautiful woman who loves Jack - Hardigan and Trusteau cut a fiery swath through the skies from Wake Island to Tarawa to Truk, there to keep a fateful rendezvous with love and death in the blood-clouded waters of the Pacific.

Wingmen Details

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Author : Ensan Case

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From Reader Review Wingmen for online ebook

Amanda Clay says

I won't lie, the entire time I read this tale of love and war and the men who fly the fightin' Hellcats from the decks of the mighty carriers, I kept imagining square-jawed Montgomery Clift as hotshot young Fred 'Trusty' Trusteau, and the awesome ass of Burt Lancaster filling out the uniform of his CO and reluctant love, Jack Hardigan. (I'm also pretty sure that if Monty ever read this, he imagined that too).

This is a slow-burner written with the level of detail that can only be achieved by someone who really lived this life. I learned more about the War in the Pacific than I could have in a month of the History Channel (circa about 15 years ago when all they ever showed was Victory at Sea). The spark strikes early between Fred and Jack, but there's a lot of solitary longing before that fateful R&R in Pearl Harbor. The book could have done with a subplot or even one more major character as it does lag in places (you can only sail to and from Micronesia so many times) but it's still well written and sweetly romantic, though the sexy is somewhat lacking (they do it, but it's not super-descriptive as is the case in most of these Avon classics). This one was not just good for an Avon Classic, but a good book all-around.

Switchbladesmile says

OMG, this book was great! Just awesome! I loved every page of it and I suffered with Jack and Fred. The precious moments between them were so sweet, so touching.

I also loved the history in this book and the detailed description of the maneuvers, it was exciting and it reminded me of the cruelty of this horrible war. I also felt sad and in the end I cried for both of them, my feelings were mixed.

This book is unique!

Elisa Rolle says

If you consider the time this novel first was out, 1979, and the period it refers to, II World War, Wingmen is a daring novel since it "allows" to its heroes an happily for now ending, something that was seldom read at the time. Novels with gay themes had sometime made their appearance in the past, but most often than not, the heroes were not allowed to be able to enjoy their love. Even in most notorious novels like Gaywick, another release from Avon Books of the '70s, the happily ever after was not a 100% one, and not all the gay characters had it.

Having read "From Here to Eternity", I can recognize the similar theme, but in that novel there was a subtle shame for being gay, and those characters who consciously admitted they were gays, were seen like weak and needing men, beginning sex in exchange of money. Love seemed not part of the equation, and that is the main difference in Wingmen; true, there is sex between Jack and Fred (even if, remember, this is the 1979 and set between 1940s and 1960s, so nothing is overtly on your face), but there is above all love. It's a great love story, and both Jack than Fred are able to admit they are in love, that is not only basic physical desires attracting each other.

Wingmen is also a good war novel, with plenty of details on the war and war setting; it's strange because I have always thought of Avon like a romance publisher, but that is probably the evolution they had from the '70s on, starting to publish the notorious Savage Romance novels. Instead Wingmen is as much a "man" novel as it's a romance, able to mix the two elements in a perfect combination.

And if someone is wondering on the real possibility of such story happening, I strongly suggest to read Coming Out Under Fire by Allan Berube (re-released in 2010 in a 20th Anniversary edition), many of the stories in that essay are a replica of what happened between Jack and Fred in the novel, and many like Jack and Fred came back from that war changed in many ways, and trying to reconnect with a world that was no more theirs. Some of them managed to be happy forever, some of them for a brief period, but at least they tried, at least they had the courage to fight for their love like they fought for their country.

<http://www.amazon.com/dp/1937692086/?...>

Jeff says

I was (very) pleasantly surprised by Wingmen. From the cover and the summary, I was afraid I was wading into schlocky romance territory, but the story had a lot of depth and I couldn't put it down. I like a good slow burn, and Fred and Jack's relationship does take a while to build, but I was quickly hooked and soaking up every delicious detail and scene along the way. The novel was just so very believable - the relationship and the setting, in particular. It's loaded with jargon, but luckily that does not detract from the story and only strengthens it instead. I could see it as a fantastic, understated, romantic movie. Just imagine: the two dashing pilots silhouetted against the starlit Pacific, the covert glances and touches, the heart-stopping battle scenes, etc. Someone make this film and appease me! Can't wait to read it again! (Side note: Jack's appearance, description, name, occupation...could anyone else not help but think 'Jack Harkness' the whole time?! That was sure as hell my mental image of him!)

Wynne Katherine says

Nothing wrong with it.

Just realized that I can't do with just "*It's romance, but not really*" type of book.

I need my good dose of romance, and this book just doesn't have it.

Fenriz Angelo says

Oh man this book is something else, I regret not reading it right away when I discovered it. But it's never too late, right?

People don't lie when they say this book is a classic war story, I could put it alongside with The Thin Red Line, All Quiet in the Western Front, Das Boot, The Naked and the Dead, and many others. The only difference is that unlike in the others, the protagonists of this book are two men that fall in love with each other. Also,

unlike in some of other war books, in here the homosexuals aren't depicted as erratic men, creepy, or a mess. On the contrary, they are role models for the flyboys in the squadron. How radical is that for a book published in the 70's?! I love it.

The story is enthralling and the descriptions of air exercise and combat are easy to follow and the author clearly knows what he's talking about. Even if nothing of importance happened I was glued to the book. The camaraderie on the ship is palpable, the struggle Fred and Jack have due this feeling that they don't quite belong socially with this group of men and still do things to just fit in is so real. The interactions between the characters is full of chemistry, and the ways they both discover in their own way about what made them different from the other men is just so heartwarming to witness.

This story overall has a subtle or not so subtle message about men's behavior in wartimes, criticism about the military regard to the soldiers and a positive message about how every single men can be as heroic and professional in the military as any other regardless of their sexuality.

The only thing that left me with a weird feeling is the ending, i got the feeling the couple had a good life after the war but also not due to an incident that marked Jack for ever. And it's a bit sad...but if i give more thought maybe the author had a reason to end things the way he did. Considering that after the war there was a war within the military regarding hunting down homosexuals because they suddenly didn't need them to serve in a war...what Fred said in the end made sense.

Amazing book, goes straight to my favorite reads of the year!.

Chelsea Bridge says

Now and then, among the run-of- the-mill potboilers and bodice rippers in the local used bookstore, you come across one so exceptional you wonder why it wasn't released as serious literary fiction.

Ensan Case's "Wingmen" is that kind of book.

Full disclosure, I had an email exchange with Mr. Case a few years ago, mostly regarding our shared military background; he was very gracious. Aside from that, I have no personal or professional/financial interest, other than to see a damn good writer get his due.

It has a fascinating back story: Case, a Navy officer of the late Vietnam era, was inspired by a 1960s war novel, "The Last Tallyho", by the then-popular Richard Newhafer. Provoked by the offensive portrayal of a homosexual pilot as an utter failure in all things manly except his inevitable suicide, he set out to write a rebuttal, a Hemingway-esque wartime romance, but one subverted by the casting of two men as romantic leads. Unable to find a niche amid the postmodernist satirical war novels or the straightforward action/adventure successors of Newhafer, or the angst coming-out tales at Alyson, premier gay-interest publisher of the era, "Wingmen" fell between the chairs. It landed at Avon Books, purveyor of tame romances, published in 1979, and promptly disappeared.

Over 30 years later, the author did a random Google search and found his forgotten youthful effort was enjoying a long half-life on the interwebs as an elusive collectors' item. He secured the publishing rights from Avon and "Wingmen" was reissued by Cheyenne Press in the spring of 2012, nearly fifteen years after "Brokeback Mountain" ran in the New Yorker.

The times had finally caught up with Ensan Case, though ironically, he's bound to be compared to Annie Proulx and not vice versa, especially as there are parallels that suggest that her seminal tale has some DNA from "Wingmen" in its ancestry. Aside from the American Archetypal characters and setting far from the gay subculture--and a hero named Jack--there's also a postmortem revelation of the depth of one lover's

devotion to the other easily the equal of Ennis del Mar's discovery of the shirts in terms of its impact. However, this is not "Brokeback Aircraft Carrier."

Much of the power of that short story--and film--came from its rare, realistic, unromanticized depiction of rural poor white men. Though they meet 20 years before Jack Twist and Ennis del Mar, Case's naval officers have far more options in life than the star-crossed ranch hands; no wives or children, but there is a love triangle of sorts, which shadows the men's future. Which is to say, they have one, not the unalloyed "HEA" some of the readers seem to want, but not the forgone bleak conclusion to which Proulx brings her characters.

Both authors set out with thematically different goals: Proulx is succinct that "Brokeback" is about destructive rural homophobia; Case is equally clear that "Wingmen" is a simple love story. As such he had the greater task, because it's almost the hardest kind of story to tell--many a writer has set his prow at the shores of profundity, only to wreck on the shoals of corn, porn, or worse, unintentional comedy. Case succeeds by employing a spare, plainspoken voice free of belletristic flourishes or trendy literary devices. Maybe because the premise was radical for the time, Case took the safe path of focusing on a handful of lives set against the mammoth apparatus of war. It's been done many times—"Saving Private Ryan" et al, but seldom are fictional characters woven so seamlessly into history that never feels like history to the men who are making it.

In Pearl Harbor in the summer of 1943, Ensign Fred Trusteau reports to Fighter Group VF-20 aboard the fictional USS Constitution, under LCDR Jack Hardigan. Two dozen or so young aviators are thrown together and learn--or not--how to be a unit. Case deftly captures the peculiar rhythms of shipboard life--equipment problems, managerial clashes, training snafus, boredom, bickering, cameraderie, and then, abruptly, combat and the randomness of death.

The aerial combat sequences are among the best I've ever read, edge-of-the-seat, cinematic. The characters are vivid without the author trying too hard to make them "colorful!"--the officious Air Group Commander; hellraising LT Brogan; an uptight deck officer; a grizzled crew chief; the division yeoman; even Admiral Nimitz, in a cameo--there's not a cardboard one in the bunch, and all of it related with believable dialog and great military humor. I suspect Case kept notes while he was on active duty. Fred's drunken night on the town with Brogan, and the wardroom etiquette briefing are classics, and to this day I have a hard time keeping a straight face when I meet anyone named Sweeney.

I want to make note of his female characters; this is very much a men's story, in which women are peripheral, with one exception: Eleanor Hawkins, widow of a pilot killed at Midway, lately enamored of Jack, pursuing him with a lusty confidence just this side of brazen. Yet the portrait never stoops to Sadie Hawkins caricature or moralizing. Other women only briefly appear but all receive the same nuanced handling.

Case also manages to impart a lot of historical and technical information without it seeming nakedly expository or spinachy. As he tells the story of VF-20, he also tells the larger story of stepping stones across the Pacific and the defeat of the Imperial Navy. It's a high wire act, sweeping and focused, intimate and epic, and at its heart are three men.

Fred Trusteau is 21, adopted son of a San Jose storekeeper, a college student when war broke out. Jack Hardigan is about 30, the son of a Maine banker, a career Navy officer, veteran of Guadalcanal and Midway. Neither man fits the gay lit trope of hero-as-alienated-sensitive-misfit. They are conventional products of their time and place, small town Depression-era America.

Both date women, more from expectation than enthusiasm; both are baffled by their shipmates' boundless energy for female pursuit. Both are well-liked and respected by their peers, but harbor an internal sense of apartness which is not expressed in their interactions with the other pilots; Fred puts it down to his intelligence and orphan status, the insecurity of one who's always been an outsider to some degree.

Jack's sexuality is not so much repressed as sublimated working in an all-male environment, a bachelor married to his job. His life has heretofore "clicked along...on hidden paths," doing what's expected from a man of his background, but the experience at Midway of death on a monumental scale created a schism with

his previously unintrospective existence. He realizes how lonely he's been and finds himself craving human connection; uncoincidentally, he's new to command and at an age where his confreres are pairing off and starting families.

The apartness is something they seem to subconsciously sense about each other--behold, the power of gaydar, in other words--and they gravitate to each other, seeking each other out, despite differences in age and rank, and soon become close friends. Impressed by Fred's professionalism, Jack selects him as his wingman, an office the younger man discharges with Theban Band-like fidelity. Both men are charmingly clueless about their friendship, though the self-possessed Fred is a giddy schoolboy in his skipper's presence, and the dashing Jack never seems to miss a chance to ruffle the young man's hair or drape a comradely arm around his shoulders.

The light bulb comes on sooner for Fred, privately, with no real hope of reciprocity, expressed outwardly in a puppy-like anxiousness to please. Not till Fred is almost shot down in the first combat action does Jack realize the real nature of his feelings, which disturbs him, and he reacts by avoiding Fred, causing the other man anguish. It takes a second near-loss to jar him out of his denial and allow the relationship to progress to its consummation, but he can't call the thing by its name, knows instinctively if you name it, you claim it, and "it" in those days, presents as great a threat as the enemy, if the other pilots got wind of the relationship. They're oblivious-- except for one.

Duane Higgins, Jack's wingman circa 1941, till they were separated after Guadalcanal, now serves as the executive officer of VF-20, but the two former best friends no longer share the same closeness, to Duane's confusion and hurt.

"The Last Tallyho" depicted its fighting men in a dichotomy of 110 percent heterosexual heroes or cowardly deviants. In reality, situational homosexuality has always been part of single-sex environments, and Case addresses this obliquely through a character who falls in the hard-to-pin-down gray area. There's little background on Duane beyond his working-class Catholic upbringing, but he's more complex in many ways than Fred or Jack.

He carefully cultivates the image of a boozing, skirt-chasing gambler, yet he's thin-skinned, with a puritanical streak. His interest in women seems genuine, but he often has to make an effort not to be put off, or even repelled by them. Ironically, Duane pings gayer than Jack or Fred, to whom he takes an early dislike and whom he jealously senses has replaced him. The relationship between the skipper and his wingman unfolds through the lens of Duane's covert and increasingly hostile scrutiny. His fixation comes to mirror that of a stalking, jilted ex-lover, literally listening at doors. He romances Eleanor Hawkins, initially to discover the nature of her relationship with Jack, then falls for her himself, though the fact that she was previously Jack's is an undeniable component of his attraction.

The snooping campaign comes to a head in a showdown with Jack and a loss of situational awareness at a critical moment, the repercussions of which echo through the lives of all three men long after they part ways.

MAJOR SPOILERS FROM HERE ON

Over 35 years later, "Wingmen" has traveled better than most of its contemporaries, many of which are extremely dated or read like cultural curios. Social change and the fluidity of electronic media have enabled it to reach a new audience; reception has been almost universally positive, if the 5-star reviews here and around the web are any indicator. What criticism there is seems to reflect current tastes rather than literary merit. I mention this because most of it concerns three aspects of the book: the lack of an unequivocally happy ending, the absence of explicit sex between the two main characters, and the inclusion of the "Scrapbook" section.

If the subject matter were anything else, I would dismiss the objections as irrelevant to its artistic validity, but a tragic end for gay characters was de rigueur until quite recently, and on the surface, "Wingmen" would appear to be another link in a long dreary conga line, bringing up the rear behind "The Children's Hour", "Reflections in a Golden Eye," "The Sergeant," et depressing cetera.

But in the above examples, the implication is that nothing but death or eternal solitude is possible for such warped, pitiful creatures. That's a far cry from a man dying of a heart attack to which he may have been

genetically predisposed, after 25-plus years of marriage in all but name. Those years spanned a singularly oppressive period for gay people--read Richard Brooks' "The Brick Foxhole" for some insight into what they were up against. Case couldn't not address it, not without propelling the story into the realm of science fiction--or fanfiction.

Case grounded his story in reality, not make-believe, the reality of two men trying to make a life together in a society both antagonistic and increasingly perceptive. In 1946, two war buddies "batching it" while they built a business wouldn't have raised any eyebrows. By 1969, a pair of middle-aged, never-married men living together for over two decades would have looked like exactly what it was. Toward the end, at least some people would have known or speculated about them. The precariousness of their position would only have grown with time, as would their awareness of the same:

"Fred wasn't about to tell Higgins what it was really like for Jack: the ever-growing paranoia, Jack's fear that he and Fred would be found out, ridiculed, cast out. The creeping mental confusion brought about by the continual battle between his love for Fred and the knowledge of the danger that that love represented, and how in the last years that confusion had reduced Jack's sharpness and wit and decision-making abilities to a constant state of apprehension, always looking over the shoulder to make sure he wasn't followed. Fred suddenly realized that in all their years together, they had never taken a vacation with one another."

"Wingmen" is not expressly political, but there is a more blistering indictment of the corrosive effect of homophobia in that one paragraph than in the entire collected works of Larry Kramer.

It's a bitter end after 400 pages, but there was a lot of sweetness, too. They got a happier ending than most, considering.

Hemingway wrote that all love stories end tragically; someone has to go first. I would add that the great love stories also tend to be the sad ones because conflict is the essence of drama. "Wingmen" would still have worked if Case had left Jack and Fred as contented retirees on a golf course in Palm Springs. That's a nice parting image, but one with the false note of a wish fulfillment fantasy. Instead, he took the unflinching route of leaving Fred alone, watching the sun sink into the Pacific. THAT image is devastating, but it's also one that will resonate with the reader for a long time.

That bitter last image might be more palatable to some readers if they hadn't had to use their imaginations quite so much to envision the "sweet," which brings me to criticism #2, the sketchy presentation of sexual intimacy between Jack and Fred, especially when heterosexual relations are rendered comprehensively and fairly graphically.

My writer's instinct suggests that the first encounter between the men would have been framed as a mirror of the opening scene between Fred and his date, but this time with feeling--intense, emphatically different feeling. I have no idea if Case wrote it and it was cut so as not to offend 1970s readers, or if it was never included to begin with. Modern readers who object to its omission on the grounds of double standards are missing two points--in the 1979 publishing world there absolutely WERE double standards governing that sort of thing--and it's a lot easier to write about bad sex than good sex. Case may have been stymied, like many writers before, by the limitations of language to convey what can be the most transcendent of human experiences. Rather than aiming for the stars and hitting the garage door, he may have opted to let the readers to fill in the blanks and, in another sense, the characters as well.

Though told from a third person omniscient POV, "Wingmen" is Fred's story. Events are related from Jack's perspective, but more time is spent in Fred's head, much of which is consumed by brooding on Jack's feelings for him. As such, we experience the development of those feelings at a remove, like Fred himself does.

To have the moment where questioning becomes certainty occur offstage, and literally cut to a shot of blowing curtains, could be viewed as weakening the narrative, but by leaving it offstage, Case allows an element of UNCERTAINTY to serve a poignant function.

For this is a relationship in which a great deal is left unsaid—Jack's resistance to acknowledging the nature of his attachment, their jocular pillow talk, the heartbreakingly innocuousness of their letters—it's plausible the word "love" was never spoken between them, and that that early uncertainty might always have sown doubt

in Fred as to the mutuality of Jack's feelings, foreshadowing the epilogue.

Objections to the inclusion of the epilogue (criticism 3) center on the rescue of the two pilots after the battle of Truk as the emotional peak of the novel, and ergo, the logical endpoint, beyond which anything else is an anticlimactic wrapping up of loose ends. I suspect the real reason is that they wished Case had left Jack and Fred on the sub so they could imagine a gauzy happy ever after--but many, if not most gay men in postwar America didn't get a happy ever after. Leaving them "[picked up from] the seas off Truk" opens the door to a vision of a far less happy future of closets and cover marriages.

Scrapbook is where we learn their love endured, the chance taken, lasting union.

Between the lines of letters and newspaper clippings is the chronicle of their emotional reunion in Pearl, the blissful early years together, the successful business, the house, Jack's book, the milestones of a life that was, in the balance, far sweeter than it was bitter. But there also is the chronicle of the encroaching threat of postwar social attitudes and the slow erosion of the haven they created, and the reentry of Duane at the point where the events for which he was largely the catalyst come full circle: at Jack's funeral.

What happened after Jack's post-Truk return to the Constitution is left unsaid, but there can be little doubt, especially after the fiasco at Kwajalein, Jack would ever have believed Duane's leaving him and Fred alone to face the Japanese at Truk was an accident, and this was the definitive end of their friendship. For years he's been a few hours away in Santa Barbara, but only after Jack's death does he approach Fred, in the penultimate scene of the novel.

A lesser writer would have made Duane a villain, but Case allows some sympathy for this conflicted, contradictory character, who, with no real malice, did so much damage: dread of exposure by Duane may have inhibited Jack at Truk, when his decision to stay with Fred or leave him to his fate seemed to rest upon the absence of witnesses, and haunted him long after the two men were rescued. But through his monologue in the bar after the funeral, when it never occurs to him to express condolences to Fred, Duane blunders into a kind of redemption, when, with characteristic obtuseness and purely selfish motives, he asks Fred, at the lowest point in the other man's life, to settle the question that has been nagging at him for a quarter of a century:

"...Jack left the target in a...flyable aircraft...did he ditch...because of you?"

and inadvertently gives Fred a priceless gift: the knowledge that Jack would have rather died with him than lived without him. Duane gives Fred certainty at last of the depth of Jack's love for him-- but it's a gift with a sting in the tail, because that's a conversation they will never get to have.

For you get the feeling that this was a very insular relationship, and when Fred loses the man with whom he's spent most of his adult life, his isolation is total.

The decisive tragedy of "Wingmen" isn't that Jack dies, or that his death was probably hastened by the stress of negotiating between his public and closeted lives. It's not even that Fred is left alone. It's that after the life they built together, after all they did--and sacrificed--to be together, as far as the world is concerned, their relationship never existed at all.

And ironically, the only person who knows what Jack really meant to Fred is Duane Higgins.

With no one to talk to, he asks the silent question to himself,

"Oh, Jack, did you really do that? Why didn't you tell me?"

But it's a question for which there can never be an answer. Jack Hardigan now belongs to the past.

That's Ennis del Mar finding the shirts in Jack Twist's closet.

That's "Jack, I swear."

That's why the Scrapbook isn't superfluous, it's crucial.

That's where "Wingmen" goes from being a good novel to being a great one.

GymGuy says

Written in 1979, this novel stands alone in the m/m genre. Written before such low expectations have become the norm, "Wingmen" soars above 99% of what is out there today. I'd give it 10 stars if I could. By contrast, it shows how far writing has sunk from the days when books were actually edited and screened before being published. This can hold its own with the best of Naval Air Battle books.

"Wingmen" is not a true m/m romance by today's standards. It is mostly a WWII story taking place in the battles of Tarawa, Kwajalein and Truk. And yet it is a seriously engaging story of two men who find each other and fall deeply in love: the old-fashioned way. They earn it. There is a tremendous amount of detail. You feel like you are actually in the planes with the pilots and can smell the hot oil deep in the guts of an aircraft carrier. The energy and testosterone are palpable. The knowledge of the author is obviously first-hand. On the m/m side of the equation, this is far more of a "growing-to-love" story than just a romance.

Trusteau is the young ensign who is assigned to the older and far more experienced Hardigan, who has never even considered his lack of interest in women as anything other than simple disinterest. Trusteau on the other hand is aware of his gayness but, because of the time period is at first unable to define it.

The story progresses on multiple fronts. "Trusty" becomes the epitome of the Greatest Generation: courageous, humble and true to his country. "Skipper" is the true leader: strong, wise and willing and able to do whatever it takes to get the job done. Both have the honor code of Navy pilots to uphold, both in the air in bed.

However, as their relationship develops from respect to admiration to "father/son" to "brothers" to hidden lovers, the tension grows ever stronger. Trusty at times is the lovable puppy-dog who worships at the feet of the Skipper. Hardigan is big and strong and fearless...on the surface...while carrying deep inside the realities of death and loss.

This is a character driven story yet is mostly action. It is a love story yet filled with restraint. There are only two intimate scenes in the entire book and both are generally only alluded to, yet the love and respect burn to the soul.

My only complaint, which also has been indicated in other reviews, is that the ending falls terribly flat. It's as though the author felt compelled to tie up the loose strings at the end. Life is a continuum. There are always loose strings. Often it is best to set a story end naturally, and it does at the second-to-the-last chapter. If you read this book, my suggestion is this: Skip the last two chapters.

(view spoiler)

Tighten your cockpit harness and enjoy the ride! This story will have you biting your nails and crying at the same time.

Hilcia says

I began reading Wingmen by Ensan Case on a Saturday afternoon and couldn't put it down until I finished it

late the following day. It's that good!

The love story between Lt. Commander Jack Hardigan, USN and Ensign Frederick "Trusty" Trusteau begins in 1943 toward the end of the Pacific conflict during World War II, after Pearl Harbor and the Battle of Midway. The Navy is in the midst of reorganizing the fleet and reconfiguring their strategy against the Japanese. Experienced naval combat aviators are scarce with a majority falling under the young and untried-in-battle classification.

When Trusteau transfers to the VF-20, the fighting squadron of Air Group Twenty, aboard the fictitious aircraft carrier Constitution, he is an inexperienced aviator and his new skipper Jack Hardigan, a hotshot veteran of Midway with quite a few kills under his belt. Trusteau's admiration for Hardigan is immediate and on a grand scale. As events unfold and Fred becomes Jack's wingman, for Jack, the trust that develops between them in the skies translates to everyday admiration of a young man whose flying skills highlight personal qualities, such as loyalty, efficiency and an ability to think on his toes, while on the ground.

Fred is clueless about his sexuality, but knows he's indifferent to women and doesn't 'fit in' with the other men in his squadron. To fit, Fred follows their lead and has sex with prostitutes, including when he transfers to the VF-20 squadron where he gains the nickname "Trusty" after lasting 17 minutes and gaining a stud's reputation. But Fred doesn't understand why the other men make such a big deal about women. Yet, Fred does everything in his power to get close to Jack, and although it takes him a while to figure it out, it quickly becomes clear that Fred's crush on his skipper is enormous. Jack, on the other hand, is dating a wealthy war widow, and for him it's all about company while on leave. There's more of a friendship than a sexual vibe between them, and Jack prefers to spend time with his men than with her. Unlike Fred, Jack fits in with the men and it isn't until much later that he begins to equate his desire for Fred's company and fear of losing him in combat with a more personal attachment.

These are the 1940's, so the feelings that grow between Jack and Fred are kept closely guarded even from each other. There are two intimate scenes between Jack and Fred that take place away from the ship but, like in the old movies, everything fades to black when they hit the sheets. But feelings and emotions go deep for both of them, and before and after their intimate moments even when the two men are alone on the ship, conversations and physical contact are maintained on the buddy level. There's no outward acknowledgment of feelings, particularly under the circumstances since they were at war.

And it's war! Ensan Case's *Wingmen* is a plot and character driven novel. His research of what transpired in the Pacific during World War II is fantastic and his take of life in an aircraft carrier is riveting. There is a particular vibrant atmosphere to his portrayal of the life men lead at close quarters on the ship, as well as when they are on leave -- the hard drinking and incessant smoking, the jocular ribbing and womanizing, as well as the desire to distinguish themselves during battle -- that allows the reader to know these men. Additionally, Case gives them distinct personalities, making the reader care whether they live or die.

Case also hits the right note when focusing on the politics of command and strategies used by the Americans to hit the Pacific islands -- beginning with Marcus and moving on to Wake, Tarawa, Kwajalein, and Truk -- by incorporating details without, for one moment, slowing the pace or the excitement of the novel. Those details make this novel what it is, as he also incorporates what is critical to the men: the maneuverability of Hellcats, Corsairs and Avengers, dangers of landing on the aircraft carriers, the terrible accidents, lack of supplies. All of those details lead to the strategic air battles in the skies, as well as the one-on-one situations which become some of the most tension-filled and exhilarating moments of the story.

Case ends the book with a postwar section written in letter format that gives the reader a broad idea of what

happens to the main characters after the war and an epilogue that ends in 1969. I would have preferred if Fred and Jack's story had ended a bit earlier, but frankly that did not influence my love of this book one way or another. *Wingmen* by Ensan Case is a fabulous fusion of historical fiction and romance that I recommend to everyone, but particularly to those who love exciting, well-researched tales set in the Pacific during World War II, as well as to readers who love a war time, tension-filled romance.

Califg70 says

A well written book filled with laughter, hope and friendship! The story brings you into each line and makes you feel the moment. One is able to truly visualize the fight scenes, the anguish of longing for someone from a distance and the horror and loss of fighting in a war. I wont give away any details of the story because I truly believe this book MUST be read from beginning to end over and over again!

Alan says

A year after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Ensign Frederick Trusteau, a naval aviator in the US Navy, finds himself transferred into a new outfit, the F20 fighter pilots in Honolulu. Trusteau (Trusty) quickly earns a reputation as a lady's man with the other pilots, which couldn't be further from the truth. He is confused about sexual matters, and dates women because that is what is expected of him, not out of desire. But the one sexual thing that becomes clear to Trusteau is that he gets aroused anytime he comes near his commanding officer, Lieutenant Commander Jack Hardigan.

Hardigan is a flying ace, a hard drinking, hard driving skipper who takes a liking to Trusteau because of Trusty's flying skills and his likable demeanor. Of course Hardigan also appreciates Trusty's handsome looks, but he keeps that to himself. The two become so close that Hardigan makes Trusty his wingman, which angers the second in command, who had enjoyed that prestigious position before Trusty came along.

Hardigan and Trusteau grow closer and more intimate, needing each other's comfort and support until they discover and come to terms with their mutual sexual attraction. They eventually spend a night together in a Honolulu hotel room consummating their love. The second in command sees them together and realizes the nature of their relationship.

The squadron sets sail aboard a fictional aircraft carrier, Constitution, during the later half of the war. They fly deadly missions in several key battles: Wake Island, Tarawa and Truk Lagoon. Both Trusty and Hardigan face danger, are shot down and show extraordinary heroism. In the final battle, Hardigan risks everything to save his wingman. Do they survive the battle? Do they end up together?

This is a well-written, exciting, and emotionally touching novel. It is bound to become a classic in gay literature. It is character driven, and the author takes great care in creating complex, believable characters. I found myself pulling for them on every page.

Case also has a remarkable talent for creating tension in each scene, much of which is derived from the physical and emotional jostling of fighting men jammed together in life-threatening circumstances. And set within these extreme conditions and surrounded by all these manly soldiers, the author paints a touching and plausible love affair between these two men.

I was impressed with the author's depth of knowledge regarding WWII aircraft, procedures aboard an aircraft carrier, WWII battles, and also the camaraderie among military men. Case has done his homework well, and it shows in the seamless authenticity of the entire story.

My one minor complaint came in the last twenty or so pages where the author wraps up loose ends in a postwar montage that is, for the most part, shown through a series of letters. The ending fell flat and added nothing to an otherwise exhilarating story. *Wingman* would be a more enjoyable read had it simply ended in 1945. This novel will no doubt be a five-star hit with readers who enjoy MM, gay fiction, and/or historical military fiction.

Gerry Burnie says

Gerry B's Book Reviews - <http://gerrycan.wordpress.com>

You may have noticed I have a passion for WWII-vintage stories, and have reviewed several in the past. I like the era in general. It was a time when the free-world was drawn together by a war in two theatres, and men bonded together as warrior brothers—and sometimes more. *Wingmen* by Ensan Case (a pseudonym) [Cheyenne Publishing, 2012] captures the latter phenomenon with remarkable clarity and credibility. It is, in fact, one of the best war stories I have read.

Ensign Frederick "Trusty" Trusteau, one of two wingmen assigned to "skipper," Lieutenant Commander J.J. "Jack" Hardigan. Trusteau is a handsome, capable aviator, who has honed his reputation as a "whoremaster" because that was (and is) the gold standard among predominantly male societies. It was very often a sham, or cover-up, but it was better than being considered the "odd-man-out."

Jack Hardigan is a hard-drinking, hard driving skipper, who is dating a wealthy widow in Honolulu, but apart from a certain level of affection, there is no evidence of sexual activity between them. Therefore, there is no grand regrets when she breaks off their relationship for someone else.

The relationship between the two men starts, as it usually does, with earned respect on both sides; in this case as pilots of the famed Grumman Hellcats flown off the deck of a carrier. The bond grows stronger with each mission—warrior brothers—until it inevitably ends in a hotel room in Honolulu, where the line between brothers-in-arms and lovers is finally crossed. However, if you are looking for a torrid, sexually erotic scene between two horny flyboys, you (gratefully) will not find it here. This scene is definitely sexy because of the circumstances—and the fact that we've been waiting for it for nearly two-thirds of the story—but in 1979 you didn't write that sort of thing if you wanted to find a publisher—even an avant-garde one. Nevertheless, I think it is made a more realistic story because of it. This a story about men in love in war, and not about sex per se.

Of course the story wouldn't be complete without an appropriate setting, and Case has provided it on board a fictional aircraft carrier, the Constitution. You can almost smell the sweat and testosterone in these scenes as they jostle aboard her. His apparent knowledge of naval aircraft is an asset as well, with just enough detail to help the reader understand without bogging the pace down in the process.

For those into WWII nostalgia there are also well-known battles, i.e. Wake Island, Tarawa and Truk Lagoon, where most of the Japanese Imperial fleet was wiped out—60 ships and 275 airplanes. Case has also

provided an insight into the gruesomeness of war in some tense scenes where men are shot down, blown apart, and drowned mercilessly in the fray, and in the end Jack risks his life to save his lover.

Nevertheless, I agree with several other reviewers that the story should have ended on a high in 1945. The last part is interesting, mind you, and wraps up some loose ends, but it is anticlimactical. Given the excellence of the preceding, however, I'm not letting it dampen my overall impression. Five bees.

Aura.Hyel says

I first read this unforgettable novel at the time of its first publication. I could not believe how well written it was; it still is some 3-decades plus. The novel would translate to a great motion picture. My colleague, John Steven Lasher, former record-label executive, has composed [he is a conservatory-trained musician] a stirring score, which is based on chapters in the book. It's worth a listen on either Tumblr or YouTube.

Purchase the book; you won't be disappointed.

Marc | Rainbow Gold Reviews says

4.5 stars for the audiobook version of this book.

I haven't read all that many historical fiction books, but the ones I tried were really good and this one is no exception. I was provided a review code for this audiobook and listened to it, while I was working on folding 17,000 letters. It's the kind of work you don't need to concentrate on and it would have been very boring, were it not for this book.

It quickly sucked me into another time and I found the story of the main character quite fascinating. This is a well-written historical fiction story and while it is not explicit and the focus is not on the romance per se, I really loved the focus on the relationship between the main character and his boss and wingman.

It starts as professional respect and turns into friendship and eventually more. It is slow-building and subtle, but very intriguing. I loved the unique perspective and really liked the main characters and secondary characters. The book never tried to simplify the complex nature of the war or the characters. It is not black and white. There are characters who change and some who will never be likable, but are more than mere one-dimensional villains.

Without claiming authority on the time period (at all), the book felt authentic.

Merely the end felt kind of rushed to get to a bittersweet ending. It felt like there was an entire second novel that is scratched at in passing, but it would have been beyond the scope of this book to explore it in detail. Still, I couldn't help but feel a bit stunned at the quick end after the 'main story' is left behind and readers end to the epilogue.

All in all, though, a great audiobook and story I can highly recommend!

Linda ~ chock full of hoot, just a little bit of nanny ~ says

3.5 stars

First thing's first: this is NOT a romance, so anyone reading this as a romance is going to be very disappointed. This is a war story with some romantic elements, but those elements make up a very small percentage of page time. Really, it's more a story of a squadron of pilots, focusing on three of the men, two of whom just happen to be gay and start a relationship with each other, but for the most part that relationship is between the lines.

HOWEVER, all that said, I still really enjoyed the story. I could tell that a lot of research went into this. The lingo, the fight scenes, the war diary, the protocols - I can't attest to how accurate anything is but it sure sounds legit. (Though the military lingo was a little too much at times. I even had to go back and relisten to the first few chapters because I was losing the thread of the story. Once I got used to it though, the story flowed well.) I thought many times while watching that this would make a great war movie, perhaps directed by Ron Howard, and I would've liked for the story to keep going after (view spoiler) since I wasn't invested in the relationship as much as I was the squadron as a whole. So the ending felt a little anti-climatic. The epilogue covered about twenty-five years after the war's end, highlighting the major events in Fred and Jack's lives together. But even though this isn't a romance,
(view spoiler)

Keeping in mind this was originally written in 1979, it's no surprise then that this is not the gay-ok revisionist history that you get in too many m/m romances today. I get why people want their protags to be happy, but I always feel like it disrespects the men (and women) who had to live through those times. I really did like that aspect of it, and just the fact that this was published when it was is an example of all those little steps over the decades that brought us to where we are today.

The narrator does a good job, though I wished he'd made the voices a little more distinctive. My issues with the audiobook isn't because of him though. The editing was less than stellar. I lost track of how many times sentences were repeated, but it was easily over a dozen. This should've been caught before it was released and since I've had experience with this from Audible before, I doubt it's going to be fixed any time soon.

I do recommend this one if you're a WWII buff and enjoy action/adventure stories, but readers wanting Romance (TM) should look elsewhere.
