

Reviews & Previews

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Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines

Seventeen days in October 1910 saw the world's best aviators trying to set records and win races in all sorts of aerial contraptions.



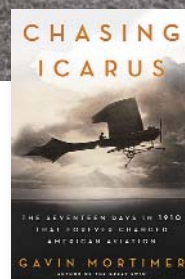
Chasing Icarus: The Seventeen Days in 1910 That Forever Changed American Aviation

by Gavin Mortimer. Walker Publishing, 2009. 305 pp., \$26.

CHASING ICARUS offers a detailed account of the aeronautical excitement that filled the last two weeks of October 1910. The headlines

began on October 14, when English aviator Claude Grahame-White landed his Farman biplane next to the White House and greeted President William Howard Taft. The next day, Walter Wellman, a 52-year-old Ohio newspaperman and adventurer, accompanied by five crewmen, took off in the airship *America* from Atlantic City, New Jersey, bound for Europe. Two days later, on October 17,

Spectators at the Belmont Park air meet (top, left and right) saw Edmond Audemars (above, underneath wing) fly – briefly – in the Demoiselle. Above, left: Melvin Vaniman and Kiddo, a cat, aboard the SS Trent after abandoning the airship America at sea.



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10 balloons lifted off from St. Louis, Missouri, in the fifth annual James Gordon Bennett balloon race. On October 22, the world's leading aviators gathered at New York's Belmont race course for an air meet.

These two weeks were filled with tension. Would Wellman and his crew cross the Atlantic? Would they even survive? Had Augustus Post and Allan Hawley, the favored American team in the balloon competition, flown to their deaths in the Canadian wilds, or would they emerge from the North woods victorious? Readers will find all of the drama they can handle, along with engaging biographical portraits of the always daring, sometimes foolish aeronautical pioneers involved.

It is a bit of a shame, however, that the author allows an anti-Wright bias to peek through an otherwise well-balanced account. While it is reasonable to note the resentment expressed by aviators and aircraft builders who were the potential targets of the Wrights' patent infringement suits, it is scarcely reasonable for Mortimer to charge the inventors of the airplane with "paranoiac greed." In addition, he writes: "The younger of the two brothers [Orville] had never before flown in the east—discounting the brief exhibition he had performed for the military at Ft. Myer, Virginia in 1908."

That "brief exhibition" included 20 flights, during which Orville set eight world records. He returned to Fort Myer for 36 more flights in 1909, during which time he completed all of the requirements for the sale of the first airplane to the U.S. Army. He then traveled to Germany, where he made a total of 64 flights. Early in 1910, before the Belmont meet, he completed 250 to 300 flights in Montgomery,

Alabama, and Dayton, Ohio. Orville was not only one of the two inventors of the airplane, at the time of the Belmont meet he was also perhaps the world's most experienced aviator.

Nevertheless, Mortimer has given us a dramatic and valuable account of the early days of aviation—a book that is genuinely hard to put down.

■ ■ ■ TOM CROUCH, A

SENIOR AERONAUTICS CURATOR AT THE NATIONAL AIR AND SPACE MUSEUM, IS A HISTORIAN

OF THE WRIGHT BROTHERS.

These two weeks were filled with tension. Had Augustus Post and Allan Hawley flown to their deaths in the Canadian wilds?

Conquering the Sky: The Secret Flights of the Wright Brothers at Kitty Hawk

by Larry E. Tise. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 250 pp., \$25.

THE SUBTITLE refers to a week in May 1908 the Wright brothers spent making test flights at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, but the book itself is more a minutely detailed account of the Wrights' relationship with the press during that time.

Though the brothers had invited reporters to witness one 1904 flight, when it failed, the newspapers left the brothers alone. As did the U.S. government (whose attention the brothers wanted), burned by having spent six figures on Samuel Langley's 1903 Aerodrome, which, like nearly every other early flying machine, had steadfastly refused to fly. Finally, though, in 1907, the Wrights convinced France and the United States that they had indeed built a *Flyer* that could honestly, truly fly, even offering to demonstrate it—carrying a passenger—before the customer signed the check.

For the 1908 demonstrations, the

brothers modified their successful 1905 machine, which had originally been built for a single pilot lying prone on the bottom wing. They now installed two seats and reconfigured the controls. Always cautious, they wanted to test the new configuration—away from prying eyes. That meant returning to remote Kitty Hawk, with its high winds and soft dunes. Once word got out, though, big-city newspapers assigned their best reporters to brave the sand, chiggers, and May heat in order to get the scoop.

Despite the Wrights' resolve to conduct their test flights in private, the reporters hid in the woods and watched. A photographer from *Collier's Weekly* even snapped a picture of the Wrights' biplane in flight.

When Wilbur departed for France to fly for government representatives, there would be no more hiding. In just one week's time, the photo in *Collier's* and stories in the *London Daily Mail* and the *New York Herald* pushed the pair out of anonymity and into global fame. "Wright Brothers' Success in the Air No Longer a Secret," trumpeted the *Herald*.

With the exception of *The Papers of Wilbur and Orville Wright*, edited by Marvin McFarland, most accounts of the Wrights gloss over those seven days in May with a couple of paragraphs. In the preface of this book, Larry Tise explains that after visiting Kitty Hawk as a child, he read up on

the brothers, and couldn't understand why most of the books focused on the events leading up to the brothers' December 17, 1903 first flight. He says he hopes the book will fill at least one gap in the Wrights' story, and he succeeds—in excruciating detail. While *Conquering the Sky* is not useful as an introduction to the Wright

brothers, for anyone fanatical about them, the book is a must.

■ ■ ■ PHIL SCOTT IS THE AUTHOR OF *SHOULDERS OF GIANTS: A HISTORY OF HUMAN FLIGHT TO 1919*.



Reviews & Previews

A Hundred Feet Over Hell: Flying With the Men of the 220th Recon Airplane Company Over I Corps and the DMZ, Vietnam 1968-1969

by Jim Hooper. Zenith Press, 2009. 258 pp., \$25.

DURING 1968 AND 1969, the author's brother, Bill, served in the U.S. Army flying a Cessna O-1 Bird Dog over the Demilitarized Zone, or DMZ, in Vietnam until he was seriously wounded while flying a mission. After a lengthy hospitalization and rehab, he returned home and told his brother Jim about his experiences and those of the men of the 220th Recon Airplane Company—the Catkillers. An established author and combat reporter, Jim Hooper began gathering documents, facts, and records while locating the men in his brother's unit. The book narrates the period from Bill Hooper's arrival in the unit as an FNG (a traditional GI vulgarity—one of many terms, some slang, some official, defined in the book's glossary) until the end of his final mission.

One note: Copy on the book's jacket states that the book often uses the men's "own words." The author re-creates long conversations enclosed in quotation marks, and skeptical readers will rightly question how, after time has passed, one can recall a lengthy exchange word for word. The technique, now a mainstream practice in non-fiction writing (although not one to be emulated), is untrustworthy. Look past that, though, and you're in for a helluva read.

The DMZ abutted I Corps at the northern border of South Vietnam. Though this was U.S. Marine Corps country, an Army unit provided support for artillery adjustment,

>>> Highlights <<<



Front Row Center 4: Inside the Great American Air Show

by Erik Hildebrandt. Cleared Hot Media, 2009. 172 pp., \$39.95.



Frequent contributor Erik Hildebrandt unveils his latest book documenting the air-show world. *Front Row Center 4*, based on photographs he took during last year's airshow season, features such performers as Michael Goulian, Jacquie B, and the Red Arrows.

From top to bottom: Chuck Aaron flying the Red Bull helicopter; the Collaborators, led by Sean D. Tucker; Julie Clark, flying her T-34 through streams of pyrotechnics.



recon, and control of air strikes. In the rest of the theater, however, Army O-1 pilots did not act as FACs, or forward air controllers, for air strikes; the Army ran artillery, and the U.S. Air Force FACs ran air strikes. As an added attraction in I Corps, the battleship *USS New Jersey* maintained a constant vigil off the coast during 1968 and 1969 and could be called upon to add nine 16-inch guns to the almost continuous chorus of "Incoming."

Here is where some of the most hair-raising fights of the war erupted. The DMZ had been created by treaty to be a buffer zone between the north and south, but the north simply ignored the rules and occupied the entire area, using it as a storage site for supplying its forces in their forays south. Their allies equipped the North Vietnamese army with some bodacious anti-aircraft firepower—multi-barrel and radar-directed

automatic guns ranging up to 57-millimeter cannon. Because the O-1s lacked armor, the aircrew's only defenses were to fly very low over areas with thicker foliage, use the aircraft's light weight and excellent maneuverability to evade the gunners, and hope artillery or an air strike was on its way.

Hooper examines various combat encounters from many points of view to build detailed composite pictures of events. And he delves deeply into the emotions and bonds that held the unit together, recounting amusing after-hours high jinks, the grim humor of wartime, and the washing away of a day's stress in that universal solvent, alcohol.

The best thing about the book is

that—conversational re-creations notwithstanding—every page rings true, and with very rare exception, names are named. Writing fearlessly and with an artfulness that few others have managed, Hooper has captured the ironies, the buccaneer's ethos, and the rhythms of men at war.

Thirty years ago, Robert Mason published *Chickenhawk*, a classic personal account of Vietnam helicopter operations that is still as potent as a satchel charge. I'd rank *A Hundred Feet Over Hell* right up there with it.

■ ■ ■ GEORGE C. LARSON SERVED AS A MACV (MILITARY ASSISTANCE COMMAND, VIETNAM) ADVISOR IN II CORPS AND FLEW MANY HOURS IN THE BACK SEAT OF AN O-1 IN QUANG DUC PROVINCE.

>>> Excerpt <<<

Space Exploration for Dummies

by Cynthia Phillips and Shana Priwer. Wiley, 2009. 364 pp., \$19.99.

The following excerpt is from a chapter entitled "Ten Ways Space Travel Isn't Like Television or the Movies."

SPACE ISN'T NOISY

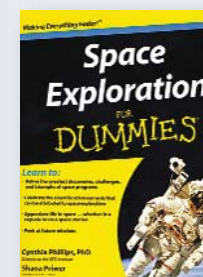
From *Star Wars* to the arcade down the street, most popular portrayals of space depict it as a very noisy place. Between the whooshing of starships and the sounds of laser guns shooting audibly (directly into space, mind you), space appears about as quiet as a New York City street during rush hour. Explosions are fiery, loud events, and one spaceship crashing into another results in audible, audience-pleasing sounds.

The fundamental problem with space noise is that sound waves don't transmit in a vacuum. A *vacuum* is defined as matter-free space, or space with a gaseous pressure significantly lower than its atmospheric pressure. The parts of outer space that lie between planets and stars (in other words, most of it) are consid-

ered a vacuum. Sound waves are mechanical vibrations that require a molecular substance, such as water or air, to travel through. Vacuums are devoid of those molecules, so there's no way sound can transmit through them.

The classic 1968 movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* got this one right. During the scenes in which an astronaut travels outside his ship in a spacesuit, all you can hear is his breathing. Unfortunately for scientific accuracy, audiences find silence boring. They much prefer special effects, so expect on-screen spaceships to continue whooshing by.

Excerpt from *Space Exploration For Dummies* by Cynthia Phillips and Shana Priwer, provided with permission by John Wiley & Sons. Available wherever books are sold.



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