



The Unsubstantial Air: American Fliers in the First World War, by Samuel Hynes, ISBN 9780374278007 Farrar, Straus, and Giroux,, hardcover & ebook, 336 pages, illustrated.

My initial impression of *The Unsubstantial Air*, from judging this book by its cover, was pretty sceptical. Was it one more book about Rickenbacker and Luke and Lufbery, rehashing the stories that have been told many times before? Was it one of the flood of books written quickly to cash in on the WWI centennial? After reading just a couple dozen pages, however, I was pleasantly surprised at how wrong I had been.

This is an incredibly insightful overview of what it was like to be an American pilot in the First World War. It is not simply a repeat of war stories – using the writings of many individuals, he describes the pilots’ pre-war lives, their civilian and military flight training, their reactions to living in foreign countries, their time in combat, and how their experiences affected their lives afterward if they survived.

Samuel Hynes takes full advantage of his experience as a young pilot in WWII – the last conflict that abruptly pushed thousands of young men into military aviation – to describe what they went through and what they thought about it. He has clearly thought deeply about his military experiences and how they affected the rest of his life; this level of understanding allows him to share these insights with his readers.

One example among many will suffice to illustrate this. Hynes comments (p.212) on the common phenomenon of pilots being disgusted by their hometown newspapers’ exaggerated accounts of events in which they participated: “Pilots know that the newspaper version will miss the important details: the roles the other pilots on the patrol played, and what the Boche did, and the weather, and the way luck enters in, and fear, and nerves. Civilians won’t get it right... And so pilots at the front withdraw into their pilots’ world, where there are other young men like themselves who understand the contingencies of combat...”

One of the other joys of this book is how Prof. Hynes puts the actions and attitudes of these young pilots into their historical, cultural, and socio-economic contexts. In reading it, you start to understand for the first time how their views were shaped by such factors as contemporary concepts of manhood; an upper-class, Ivy League background (for many); grandfathers who were Civil War veterans; etc. Hynes submerges you in the American life of the turn of the last century and the result is fascinating.

The raw material for this excellent book consisted of the first-person writings of over 60 individual pilots. As I was reading, it occurred to me that a hundred writers could have started with the same raw material but that probably none of them would have interpreted it with the same insight and brilliance. Whether this will be your first exposure to World War I aviation or you've already read dozens of books on the subject, I can't recommend this highly enough. - **Steve Suddaby**