



2014

## “To fly is more fascinating than to read about flying”: British R.F.C. Memoirs of the First World War, 1918-1939

Ian A. Isherwood  
*Gettysburg College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/cwifac>

 Part of the [European History Commons](#), [History of Science, Technology, and Medicine Commons](#), [Military and Veterans Studies Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), [Oral History Commons](#), [Public History Commons](#), and the [Social History Commons](#)

**Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.**

---

Isherwood, Ian A., “To fly is more fascinating than to read about flying’: British R.F.C. Memoirs of the First World War, 1918-1939.” War, Literature and the Arts 26 (2014), 1-20.

This is the publisher’s version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College’s institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/cwifac/13>

This open access article is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact [cupola@gettysburg.edu](mailto:cupola@gettysburg.edu).

---

# “To fly is more fascinating than to read about flying”: British R.F.C. Memoirs of the First World War, 1918-1939

## **Abstract**

Literature concerning aerial warfare was a new genre created by the First World War. With manned flight in its infancy, there were no significant novels or memoirs of pilots in combat before 1914. It was apparent to British publishers during the war that the new technology afforded a unique perspective on the battlefield, one that was practically made for an expanding literary marketplace. As such former Royal Flying Corps pilots created a new type of war book, one written by authors self-described as “Knights in the Air”, a literary mythology carefully constructed by pilots and publishers and propagated in the inter-war period through flight memoirs. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

First World War, World War I, WWI, Royal Flying Corps, WWI pilots, R.F.C., war memoirs, aerial warfare

## **Disciplines**

European History | History | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine | Military and Veterans Studies | Military History | Oral History | Public History | Social History

I A N A. I S H E R W O O D

---

“To fly is more fascinating than to read about flying”:  
British R.F.C. Memoirs of the  
First World War, 1918-1939

Literature concerning aerial warfare was a new genre created by the First World War. With manned flight in its infancy, there were no significant novels or memoirs of pilots in combat before 1914. It was apparent to British publishers during the war that the new technology afforded a unique perspective on the battlefield, one that was practically made for an expanding literary marketplace. As such former Royal Flying Corps pilots created a new type of war book, one written by authors self-described as “Knights in the Air”, a literary mythology carefully constructed by pilots and publishers and propagated in the inter-war period through flight memoirs (Morrow 215-217).<sup>1</sup> This small but important body of martial literature sought to distinguish the pilot memoir from other war books by written by infantry officers in the 1920s and 1930s. The air war was seen as a more righteous face of battle – one certainly with risks – but an experience distinctive from that of the trenches and essentially remembered differently. Pilots created the chivalric myth to demonstrate the heroism of air combat and the “spirit” or high morale of R.F.C. flight crews, particularly, as many of their contemporaries were writing grim accounts of infantry life on the western front in the 1920s and 1930s. The war in the air, to these authors, was a different war than that faced by soldiers on the ground, and pilots sought to show that difference to preserve a heroic war experience in an age of increasing anti-war sentiment and public anxiety over international volatility in Europe in the 1930s. The aerial war was remembered as a

unique an exceptional experience, one that created the image of the pilot as a hero of modern warfare, with an unmistakable link to the nostalgic past.

### **Memoirs and Memoirists**

From the onset of war the actions of the R.F.C. piqued public interest. That interest led to published accounts of the R.F.C. in periodical literature and popular depictions of air combat during the war. Some of these depictions were written by future war memoirists who were on active service and who wrote short accounts of their war experiences as essays or stories for periodicals. Soon after the war, author Paul Bewsher described his intention of writing his war memoir, “to give as vivid a portrayal as possible of a branch of war which, in England at any rate, influenced the general public more than any other” (viii). As Bewsher noted, the public was interested in exciting and adventurous accounts of the war. The flight memoir was a natural book to meet this demand.

The post-war boom of war literature, most prominent in 1919-1921 and then in 1928-1931, was an opportunity for former R.F.C. pilots to publish their war books as a distinctive niche within a flooded market of war recollections.<sup>2</sup> Collectively, R.F.C. memoirs are distinctive subgenre of the war book; the experiences they depict are similar, largely elitist, and represent a distinctive form of combat narrative. R.F.C. memoirs had a significant presence in the literary market and demonstrated a considerable longevity in print: they were published throughout the inter-war period with some of the best being released in the 1930s. This was after the boom in war literature was thought to be over by many in the publishing industry (Brown 299). The experiences depicted were exceptional compared to those of common soldiers – some were written by former POWs who had survived either German or Ottoman captivity, most of whom escaped, further distinguishing their works from other war memoirists. Most were written by pilots and only one, by A.G.J. Whitehouse, was written by an NCO who served as a gunner/observer.<sup>3</sup> Of the fifteen accounts considered in this essay, which have been chosen because they are narrative non-fiction and not published diaries or unit histories, all authors eventually became pilots in the R.F.C. and served in squadrons primarily on the western front.<sup>4</sup> Many of these are iconic flight memoirs and some, if such a thing exists, would be included in any canon of combat flight literature of the twentieth century.

Some flight memoirs were written by authors of multiple books or men who had distinguished post-war careers. The three books which have best survived the test of time are those by Billy Bishop, James McCudden, and Cecil Lewis.

Both McCudden and Bishop wrote their accounts while the war was on-going, McCudden dying in an air accident in July 1918. McCudden's account, *Five Years in the Royal Flying Corps*, was reprinted in the late twenties during the war books boom as *Flying Fury*, and was reissued in the 1960s. McCudden's *Five Years* is an episodic memoir that begins with his service as a young mechanic in the R.F.C. in 1913 and continues through the last weeks of his life in July 1918. It was composed during the war while the author was on leave in 1918. The work therefore lacks the context of later war books, which are more ruminative, because the author wrote it based on recent events. Its compositional form is that of a war diary; it is a historically useful source for its depictions of mess life in the famed 56 Squadron R.F.C.

Bishop's memoir, *Winged Warfare: Hunting the Huns in the Air*, is largely a patriotic book of flight service by a Canadian cavalry trooper turned pilot and Victoria Cross winner. It was published simultaneously in London, New York, and the author's native Canada in 1918 and was reprinted. Brian Bond describes it to be more in the ilk of the "boy's own" style (132, 140). Similar to McCudden, Bishop was an advocate of ruthless air warfare against "the Hun". The two men have much in common in the events in that they describe. Both authors sought to demonstrate the hard-fighting spirit of the R.F.C. and appreciated bravery in the line of duty. That both of these accounts were written while the war was on-going meant that their author's impressions were guided by the conduct of the war at the time, but also, that the depicted anecdotes were fresh in their minds. Both are engaging accounts, written by men of exceptional bravery and flying abilities, who were later highly decorated for their service. Both McCudden and Bishop were elites even within the elite service of the R.F.C.

The majority of R.F.C memoirs were written by less distinctive authors in terms of their record of kills and decorations. This did not diminish their popularity amongst publishers and periodical editors who welcomed books by every kind of pilot. As a distinctive genre, the flight book was an easy sell for publishers, and some R.F.C. authors had multiple books to their credit. Duncan Grinnell-Milne wrote accounts of both his service in the R.F.C. and a captivity narrative of his experience as an escapee from German prisoner of war camps. Both were published independently and his flight narrative, *Wind in the Wires*, skips over much of his POW tale before resuming his service on the western front after his escape in 1918.<sup>5</sup> Former pilot Norman Macmillan wrote two previous books on flying before he penned his war memoir *Into the Blue* in 1929. Alan Bott published books under the pseudonym "Contact" during the war and continued his literary career in

the inter-war period being published by William Blackwood & Sons. Eventually Bott founded his own publishing imprint of Pan Books. Cecil Lewis was an early director of the B.B.C. in the 1920s before turning to playwriting and eventually writing his war memoir *Sagittarius Rising* in 1936. Pilots had a presence in the world of publishing and media throughout the inter-war period.

Pilot memoirists recalled varying motivations for authorship. S.H. Long described the moment he decided to write his memoir whilst serving in Palestine:

One of my officers came to see me about a squadron matter and we started about what we were going to do to pass the time. It was obvious that there would be no more fighting in Palestine. Then came the suggestion of writing a book on my experiences in the Flying Corps and it was decided there and then. I got up promptly, full of enthusiasm, and started straight away, and it is on the reader that I am imposing the result. I have not given many instances of hare-brained escapades and so on, as plenty of people, husbands and sons, perhaps will, on returning from the front, be able to give these, so without making it too technical or boring I have tried to be as instructive as possible. (114-115)

Long's desire not to bore his readers was a typical one. Some authors found the mechanical side of the war compelling, but doubted whether audiences, who consisted of people largely ignorant to the technical aspects of flying, would appreciate it. W.J. Harvey wrote his memoir *Rovers of the Night Sky* about the harrowing duties of a night-time bomber in an age of primitive flight. He hoped that his book would offer technical guidance to those interested in air-fighting, but also, for the benefit of his comrades from the R.F.C. whom he hoped would enjoy it. "To those with whom I served in France I trust it will bring back memories of our work together [...] To my general readers I can only say that this is a blunt narrative. To fly is more fascinating than to read about flying" (v-vi). Though this is probably a truthful assumption, to write a war book was to attempt to recapture some of that excitement for readers.

Similar to other First World War memoirs, pilots who waited to write their accounts faced the predictable problems of memory over the passage of time. As the years passed, they relied more on sources, and attempted to put the war and its influence on British life and culture into the wider context of a lifetime or a generation. Cecil Lewis, writing his memoir *Sagittarius Rising* in 1935-1936,

approached the war not as a recent event that he wanted to chronicle, but instead he sought to place it in the wider context of a longer and much more ramshackle life after the war. Lewis claimed the war disrupted his youth, but not with bitter remorse, instead in a way that made a more traditional life trajectory of university and employment in a profession impossible.

I do not complain of this. It was a fine introduction to life; but now, a step beyond the half-way house, that immense experience begins to fall into perspective as merely an episode. A great episode, of course; one that was to change the whole shape of civilization; but so different, so complete in itself, that now, at a distance of twenty years, my personal memories of it are quite detached – as if they belonged to another life. (1)

Reflecting eighteen years after the Armistice, Lewis approached the war with the detachment and amazement of a man who was attempting to put his war experience, which seemed by his own admission a different life, into a far broader narrative of his existence. He continued, “I can convey something after all. Not a connected narrative of adventure and heroism; rather a series of incidents and impressions [...] before they escape me further, let me set them down”(4).

A.G.J. Whitehouse, author of *Hell in the Heavens*, wrote extensively in his introduction of his motivations for writing his war memoir in the late 1930s. Whitehouse’s account is full of conflicted memories of the war. His principal motivation, which is repeated throughout the text, was to recall the war experience of the P.B.O., or Poor Bloody Observer, whose experiences he believed shared in the same risks of that of pilots but to none of their post-war glory (45). No doubt, this was a truthful assertion as nearly every published account of the British war in the air depicts and celebrates pilot action and not that of gunners or observers.<sup>6</sup> Whitehouse shared a commemorative purpose with other memoirists toward his former friends in the service; he wrote, sadly, “Perhaps I have written it to talk to the men I once lived with” (232). Whitehouse was particularly concerned about what his former comrades would think of his book. “Perhaps it was this same striving for the reclamation of Youth that encouraged me to write this. To be sure, I enjoyed it, once I started; but now it is finished and has found a publisher, I am worrying again. I hope no former member of No. 22 Squadron will misunderstand me, or my motive in offering this book” (8-9). This struggle between individual memory and group identity was one that permeated many accounts especially where there

was significant *esprit de corps* amongst survivors. There was a consciousness by writers of non-fiction toward their comrades, enough not to want to misrepresent their war experiences in published accounts. Beyond the legal ramifications for misrepresentation, which could be significant in British libel laws, this impulse was also about recalling the war fairly in popular non-fiction for survivors, as well as, for the families of the war dead.

Another motivation expressed by memoirists was to describe what was often depicted as a more gallant war in the air compared to infantry life on the western front. Flying was difficult service with high risks. But pilot experiences are more positive in their memories of war, overall, than those of infantrymen. Indeed, the notion of pilots reclaiming some of the heroism or “glory” in warfare was a contextual motivation for some to write in the 1920s and 1930s, especially, to contrast the pilot’s war with that of the infantry. Boyd Cable, who was a popular wartime author of patriotic books, penned the introduction for Thomas Marson’s *Scarlet and Khaki*.<sup>7</sup> Cable differentiated Marson’s account from other war books.

We have lately enjoyed a surfeit of war books in which deliberate muck-raking has been the main or only object, and every possible, or impossible, sordid and unsavoury incident has been strung together so as to convey the belief not only that war is beastly, but that all those who engaged in it were beasts; and it is the greater relief and satisfaction to read this simple and straightforward account of deeds in which our fighting men played as gallant and chivalrous a part as ever did knight of old. (Marson 9)

The fact that Cable reflected patriotically about a war book is not particularly surprising; that he did so in 1930 is more significant and it demonstrates a contrast between the R.F.C. accounts and other war books. Marson’s *Scarlet and Khaki* is a commemorative account that largely praises the courage of wartime units at Gallipoli (where the author lost a leg) and then his administrative service in the R.F.C. on the western front. It is a nostalgic war book that is a patriotic counter to Sassoon’s *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* which was published in the same year. That Marson’s account was written from the perspective of a man who witnessed two fronts and still saw the heroism of warfare, largely because of his later service with the R.F.C., demonstrates that even in the age of Erich Remarque, Sassoon, and Robert Graves, the heroic war book was still written, contracted, and bought.



### **The Exceptional Service**

Cable's emphasis on gallantry and chivalry was not just the opinion of an old patriotic war writer, but instead, a constructed mythology that was endorsed by other R.F.C. memoirists. It was endorsed, it should be said, with qualifications. It can be argued that flight memoirs embrace mythological chivalric notions of air service despite the dangers and the realities of industrial warfare. Flight memoirs did so by contrasting war in the air with that on the ground. This exceptionalism created a mythology of pilot heroism—a romantic construction in most instances—one that can be argued is the genesis of later celebrations of R.A.F. service in the Second World War. Essential to this mythology were the duties performed and the sense of comradeship found in small unit mess life.

It is important to note that many flight memoirists transferred to the R.F.C. from the infantry where they held commissions commanding troops on the ground on the western front. This experience, often in the trenches, gave flight officers a sense of privilege and independence not known in a front line battalion. The contrast between the R.F.C. and the infantry was even starker for an N.C.O. For Observer A.G.J. Whitehouse, who was previously an enlisted machine gunner, volunteering for the R.F.C. was a vast improvement over service on the firing line. On his first day as a gunner Whitehouse claimed he shot down an enemy German plane. On his second day in the air he found himself flying with the commanding officer of the squadron. He wrote of his good fortune, "They [his fellow gunners] were actually relying on me for certain things. And two days before I had been nothing but a fifth-rate trooper in an unknown cavalry outfit" (61). Whitehouse's memoir is not all heroism—he describes the many dangers of being a flight gunner and observer—yet despite his near fatal moments in aerial combat he reflected no desire to go back to the trenches (87). This sense of gratitude to the R.F.C. for its comparable luxury and the military distinction was shared by others. The first sentence of Billy Bishop's *Winged Warfare* displays with stark simplicity the feelings of many: "It was the mud, I think, that made me take to flying" (1).

Norman Macmillan saw active service in France as an officer before volunteering for the R.F.C. He recalled that his fellow officers viewed themselves as "lucky" to have left the trenches for the flying corps (15). Flying came with the significant risks and casualty rates were high, particularly, for new pilots. It is interesting that so many memoirists thought their lives in the air were privileged considering that flight came with perhaps a greater risk of death or capture than if these officers had remained in the infantry. In fact often flight was described romantically. Macmillan wrote of a compelling moment when he realized he wanted to become

a pilot. While sitting in a trench he watched a plane fly overhead. He recalled, “Up there was romance, the elemental struggle. But below, in a trench, there was no romance. There was but grim reality, the hidden tragedy of war” (15). Part of this “romance” in air combat was a feeling of agency over one’s fate compared to the realities of enduring infantry life on the western front.<sup>8</sup> Comparing anti-aircraft shells, or Archie fire, to ground shelling Duncan Grinnell-Milne recalled, “I added that, once I had got used to it [anti-aircraft fire], it had not seemed so terrible after all. I imagined that it could never be as unpleasant as heavy shelling on the ground” (Grinnell-Milne, *Wind* 71). No doubt many officers felt that the risks of air service were as great as or greater than those of the infantry. But in post-war memoirs there is an element of pity demonstrated by pilots flying above infantry and looking down on their misfortune (Lewis 45; Grinnell-Milne *Escapers*, 5). This compelling and comparative imagery proved irresistible to memoirists who believed after the war they were better off in the air.

Major James McCudden served the duration of the war in the R.F.C. and had virtually no idea what ground service entailed until 1917 when he witnessed soldiers fighting at Ypres. McCudden was a former air mechanic of the pre-war army and was certainly not a charmed middle class subaltern, but he found that his years of service in the R.F.C. (since 1913) gave him a privileged view of the war. He wrote in 1918:

All this gave me a taste of what the ground peoples’ job must be like up in the trenches all year round, and then my thoughts wandered to my clean S.E. and the very gentlemanly way we fought aloft. I fully appreciate the thankless lot that the infantryman’s life must be and I am surprised that they carry on so well through it all so cheerfully. (207)

Even with the experience of watching his squadron decimated by 1917 through attrition, he still saw the infantryman’s position as one to be pitied and the role of the flight officer as engaging in a bit of fair sport in the air.

In fact, aerial combat was often referred to as a type of sport. One flight instructor called flying a “great game” and compared his students to big game hunters (Macmillan 14). In Samuel Hynes’s treatment of First World War flying memoirs in *The Soldiers’ Tale*, he identifies the hunting trope as a way to distinguish the adventure and individualism of these works (Hynes 85-91). As most R.F.C. officers were young men familiar with adventure stories, this analogy had its appeal. W.J.

Harvey reflected romantically on the sporting motif while describing the pilot in the third person:

But you can't see his eyes through his goggles. He seems to you a figure of mystery – an automaton of the air. On the ground he is a fellow in his twenties – just as you are, interested in sport, girls, the newest show in town, the latest issue of *La Vie Parisienne*. But in the air he is the king of sportsmen, the master of the most daring of man's inventions. He challenges space, wind, storm, darkness, and wins – or loses – gaily. (77)

To Harvey the appeal of military life was one of adventure and an opportunity for a young man to earn distinction and fame through dangerous service. Even the distinguished uniforms worn by flying officers emphasized this difference between the mud splattered infantry officer and the dashing pilot. Whitehouse reflected on seeing his first commanding officer as the epitome of the jaunty flight officer: “Gosh, but he was tall and handsome! I'd pictured him for months before. Fair and curly-headed with a big green scarf around his throat. A short leather coat, field-boots, and breeches” (19). The exciting and attractive appeal of a pilot in uniform was not lost on this former machine gunner from the trenches.

### **Duty**

The bulk of flight memoirs represent the day-to-day duties of pilots and squadron life behind the lines. Each begins with an introduction to flight service. Usually this is a training sequence. Each memoir depicts something of air combat or the military duties performed, such as artillery spotting or intelligence photography. All say something about squadron life. In these basic and somewhat formulaic aspects of pilot narratives, former R.F.C. pilots and observers reinforced the exceptionalism of their service, while at the same time, correcting the historical record of inaccuracies and misrepresentations found in popular culture. Pilots hoped to both describe their idiosyncratic service but also contribute to the historical record by showing an alternative service than that depicted in other war books.

Flight training, by all accounts, was insufficient for the duties in which pilots were called to perform. In 1914, flight was in its infancy and even instructors had limited experience flying. Training usually consisted of learning to fly with little instruction in the tactics of fighting in the air ('McScotch' 243). Duncan Grinnell-

Milne recalled that he was sent to France with only 33.5 hours of flight time (*Wind* 55). This limited experience was compounded by the fact that officers were often totally ignorant of what flying entailed. Some had never been near a plane before their training (Macmillan 11-12).<sup>9</sup> Still, even with relatively limited experience, S.H. Long spent the first four chapters of his memoir detailing the technical side of flight school, even though his training lasted only six weeks before he departed for the front (26). The training sequence became a narrative device for memoirists to demonstrate, nostalgically in hindsight, the primitive nature of flight while also conveying a sense of youthful naiveté to its risks. Training involved substantial risk: the excitement of flying was somewhat dampened by accidents, ones that foreshadowed crashes in combat. Both Duncan Grinnell-Milne and Cecil Lewis wrote of seeing pilots die as a result of flight errors or mechanical failure in training. Grinnell-Milne approached such tragedies, at least in hindsight, with a rationalization that could only come with the passage of time. "Flying was always like that: at one moment you were splitting your sides at a harmless joke, at the next shuddering at a tragedy" (*Wind* 48).

The tragic elements of warfare were present in post-war R.F.C. recollections but they were not the predominant themes of these texts. Rather than representing the horrors of the western front, like so many of their comrades in the infantry, these accounts largely reinforce the heroic dimensions of war in the air. Chivalric metaphors were common to describe action to reinforce the differences between air fighting and infantry life on the ground. This medieval mythology was not exclusive to Britain but an international expression of martial continuity between knights of old and knights of new (Goebel 223-228). Bernard Bergonzi acknowledges this theme in Cecil Lewis, though, chivalry is frequently referenced in other works as well (Bergonzi 168-169). Lewis wrote that flight was, "the only sphere in modern warfare where a man saw his adversary and faced him in mortal combat, the only sphere where there was still chivalry and honour" (45). Later in the same section of his memoir Lewis contrasted sparring in the air with the vulgarity of high explosive artillery barrages. To Lewis, ground warfare on the western front was "not fighting; it was murder" (45). The chivalric trope reinforced a largely mythological portrait of the pilot as a throwback to pre-modern warfare in spite of his very modern aeroplane. The emphasis on individual warfare, where pilots had "roving commissions" or "permission to attack any legitimate targets which presented themselves," reinforced this notion (Night Hawke, 69). One pilot recalled waving to a German plane whose gun had jammed in the midst of their dogfight. "Just a single wave of the arm above the head, a salute as it might have

been in the days of tilting [. . .] Then, his gun being ready, he opened fire [. . .] I had only an automatic pistol, but I discharged it defiantly [. . .] (Grinnell-Milne, *Wind* 158).

Even the chivalric metaphor had its limitations when confronted with the difficult business of dogfights. Whitehouse recalled the realization that war in the air was not the romance that he initially thought it to be. The death of an airman shared the same fate as that of a man in the trenches:

This was war – killing and dying. Killing as I had never imagined in my school-boy dreams of conquest. Dying ingloriously in mud, filth, and [...] now in the splintered skeletons of battle-planes. Nothing like the heroes I had worshipped between the pages of books, or while gazing at framed pictures of Galahad. Where was the romance? The ladies who knotted their scarves to the lances of their knights. (Whitehouse 26)

Though the actual business of killing in the air certainly tested the limitations of these kinds of metaphors, particularly as the war waged on and squadron engagements became more common, in memoirs published after the war these constructions were still used and sometimes contradicted. Grinnell-Milne, with an analysis that can only be made with maturity, recalled that the “knighthood” myth could be attributed youth of pilots and the high spirits of squadron life. “Youth, adventure, high spirits – those wound up for us the mainspring of life. We would have fought just as well without propaganda; we had no bitter hatred. So it may have been in the days of chivalry” (*Wind* 182). Here the spirit of the R.F.C. was that of gallantry and adventure whereas the actual practicalities of bombing, strafing, and dog-fighting was brutal combat. Grinnell-Milne’s argument was that as young men they were simply not as conscious of the risks of flying. Later as middle aged men, they looked back at those risks with nostalgic gazes, admiring their youthful bravery.

Heroes were made of “knights” who fought and died in individual combat. Celebrated during their lives, pilots were media celebrities during the war. Celebrated in death, these heroes were increasingly memorialized in print by their surviving squadron mates. Marson wrote of British ace Albert Ball:

Of all the fighting pilots that I have known, Ball was the most temperamental. He fought the enemy machine, never

the human being in it. He sought to destroy the mechanism to which he found himself opposed in the air, and was as fearless as remorseless in attaining his end, but whenever he thought of the human being the machine had contained an expression of pity and compassion would come to his lips. Many other pilots shared that attitude of mind. (143)

Ball's pity and compassion toward his enemy demonstrates the conflict within pilots who respected traditionally heroic ideals but still lamented the loss of life in war. Chivalry came with compassionate overtones and not with cold-hearted killing (Marson 162).

Fear of death was a common impulse depicted often frankly, as were superstitions from the insecurity of flight. So was the mourning of lost comrades. Marson wrote of casualties and morale in 1930 hoping to put these into context so that audiences would not misrepresent high casualties for low unit morale: "Despite the War and the inevitably heavy casualties, the Royal Flying Corps in France was a very happy and contented family, and its esprit de corps was marvellous [sic]" (162). Instead of fear of death predominating these accounts, as if often the case of infantry memoirs describing shelling, fear of capture seems to be even more prevalent ('Night Hawke' 116-120; Whitehouse 106-107). These representations reinforce the notion of the R.F.C. as an honourable service, distinctive from that on the ground. Pilots reflected that were more afraid of the dishonour of capture than death at the hands of the enemy in combat. In fact pilots A.J. Evans, Duncan Grinnell-Milne, Geoffrey Harding, Alan Bott and observer Francis Yeats-Brown, would write memoirs that principally demonstrated the airman's captivity at the hands of both the Germans and the Ottomans. Both A.J. Evans and Grinnell-Milne were well-treated by German pilots who intervened in their capture giving them food, wine, and shelter (Grinnell-Milne, *Escaper's* 11; Evans 215). Though initially treated civilly after capture, the monotony of confinement had its effects, and all these pilot/memoirists escaped from prison camps in due course, living to write adventure books based on their captivity and escape. In reflection, it was not aerial combat that haunted Duncan Grinnell-Milne, but instead his time as a German captive (*Wind* 287-288). He recalled the feeling of shame as he crashed behind enemy lines. "I had a sensation of misery, depression and hopelessness, which grew so strong as time went on that I felt almost physically sick" (*Escaper's* 9). Flying and fighting did not elicit this reaction from him but captivity did.

Though battle was an important part to these memoirs, equally so was squadron life. Depictions of mess life demonstrated the *esprit de corps* formed within the R.F.C. Flight officers lived comparable comfort to that of the infantry. One former adjutant of the famed No. 56 Squadron recalled that pilots flew twice a day for two hours but had to be ready to go up at a moment's notice in case an enemy patrol was spotted (Marson 138-140). Most of the day was left for pilots to devote their attentions to other activities such as training, machine improvement, and sports. With leisure time came the opportunities to organize games, such as rugby and football, as well as playing cards, gardening and writing home. Tennant recalled that his squadron set up a golf course in Mesopotamia (37). The invariable strain from flying made it so that men were granted leave when they showed signs of fatigue, something that contributed to high morale (Marson, 138-140). McLanachan described leave as essential to maintaining the ability of pilots to function at a high level (243). Though granted leave, one memoirist recalled arriving in London and decidedly missing the front for its sense of adventure (Whitehouse 189-190). Such a reflection would seem like boilerplate in 1918, propaganda or blind patriotism, but as the account was written in the mid-1930s, the reflection seems to demonstrate more positive feelings towards R.F.C. service from hindsight.

One historiographical aside should be mentioned for its uniqueness. A number of pilot memoirists were interested in correcting the historical record on squadron life that, by the early 1930s, gave an impression that the R.F.C. were heavy drinkers while engaged in their duties. This was not unusual – the same charge was often levied at infantry officers as well – but at least several memoirists found the need to uniformly reject this stereotype and defend the temperance of their flying officers. Marson recalled:

We were neither a wild nor a drinking squadron – not the officers, nor the N.C.O.'s, nor the men. I do not intend by this statement to cast reflections or to suggest that we were unusual in this respect. Since the War some published accounts of life in Air Force messes have conveyed the impression that our main job in the War was the consumption of champagne and oysters. Actually, no fighting squadron could have retained its efficiency except on terms of sobriety. (136-137)

The unfair charge of the heavy drinking, or decadent pilot, was something that was antithetical to the image of the R.F.C.'s professionalism and its war record which

was very important to veterans. Geoffrey Harding wrote that No. 25 Squadron was not full of heavy drinkers. Instead they drank no more “than that of the average infantry unit, which was low” (19). It should be noted that Grinnell-Milne found the old *esprit de corps* to have wavered somewhat when he returned from captivity in 1918 and re-joined the R.F.C. He described new pilots as having “a sort of devil-may-care, hard-drinking recklessness about,” that earlier pilots, by this point sadly killed or captured, lacked (*Wind* 217). These authors sought to deemphasize squadron life’s more bacchanal moments in order to demonstrate sober attention to duty.

### **Aftermath/Commemoration**

None of the flight memoirs in this study are thoroughly disillusioned in their representations of the war. With this generalization, of course, comes a caveat: many have imagery or personal expressions that could be construed negatively if they are taken out of context. Consider Whitehouse’s *Hell in the Heavens*. This account was written 1936 (published in 1938) for the express purpose of honouring other former R.F.C. gunners. Whitehouse began his book with a statement of generalities about war service in his life. Many other war memoirists did the same thing in their introductions. He wrote:

Yes, I lived through it (thanks to no skill of my own) to come back to the horrors of peace and certain bitter reflections. I have been laughed at for fighting for ‘a shilling a day’ in the British Army. I have been sneered at for flying in the Great War as a private. But, worst of all, they accuse us of fighting a war to end war that hasn’t ended wars. My bitterest reflection is that we fought a War to End Wars [. . .] but we did not *finish* it. Let those who smirk at us, who jeer at us for our needless sacrifices, remember that. Had they let us finish it, as we were all more than willing, this world of ours would be a far better place to-day. To glance over to-day’s headlines, to listen to to-day’s news broadcasts, only reminds us that we shall have to go again. And let the dictators reflect the next one *will* be finished. I have been asked dozens of times in the past year: ‘Would you go again?’ What is there to say? Of course we would go again. We say openly that we wouldn’t. We’ve been saying it for nearly twenty years, but with the years our insistence becomes less pronounced. Of course we’d go again. (7-8)



In this section Whitehouse discusses contemporary politics in 1936 and contextualizes his war experiences of nearly twenty years before. It would be easy to read bitterness into the first part of the quote, which has some elements of post-war political disillusionment, while overlooking the spirit in the second half, which is distinctly patriotic. The notion of “letting us finish it” implies that Germany was left undefeated militarily and that the war should have had a more lasting peace won on the battlefield. It should be noted that Whitehouse missed the Hundred Days Offensive in 1918 and did not see the Armistice on the western front, which might have softened his editorial line toward the notion of a compromised victory in 1918. Whitehouse’s work was conflicted over the political legacy of the war and somewhat resentful over the possibility of having to fight again though he made it very clear he would volunteer for service. This is the essential difference between being disillusioned with the war itself and being disappointed with the years of international political wrangling following. The bitter seed of disillusionment with the First World War has been often misinterpreted analysis of the latter.

McLanachan also was concerned about the political developments of the 1930s. Writing his memoir *Fighter Pilot* in 1936, he described in detail the exceptional leadership of the R.F.C. during the war, and its tactical advantages over the Germans. In the final pages of his war memoir, McLanachan described how negative depictions of the British way at war 1914-1918 in newspapers and novels had a detrimental effect on British culture (247). It also affected British war preparedness in the 1930s. In his words a British “inferiority complex” had developed toward the new German air force. In his understanding the independent British spirit and squadron morale of the First World War was being cultivated by the Germans while the R.A.F, in a topsy turvy role reversal, had become more rigid in its organization, and thus more Germanic (246-247). His fear was that in a future conflict the R.A.F. would be at a disadvantage if it lost the spirit of the brave pilots of the R.F.C. McLanachan, like Whitehouse, feared the next war and sought to publish his memoir with the hopes of recapturing some of the honour of his service for the next generation.

In terms of the war’s broader “memory” in British literary culture, these are books of a heroic school of war literature, ones that have more in common with war books of the pre-war era than anything modern(ist). They are accounts firmly on the side of continuity with the past indicated in the often forced medievalism. If we examine two accounts written a year apart we see two variations on the heroic motif. To W.J. Harvey, sacrifice in war was a test of manhood for a generation. He wrote in 1919 of seeing a wounded Tommy while on leave. “The light in his

eyes and the set of his face were no longer those of a boy; they were those of a man whose metal has been tested and vindicated in the hour of supreme trial" (178). The physical sacrifice of this wounded soldier was put into the context of what he called the "most momentous crisis in the world's history" (178). Later, in a chapter entitled "For What Did He Die" he wrote of a comrade, "He died for the love of England and the sweet sound of her name, and the sane, strong things she has fought for" (191). Such sentimentalism was not shared by Norman Macmillan who published *Into the Blue* a year apart from Harvey's book. His account of the end of the war was tempered but still heroic. He wrote: "I left Chattis Hill [. . .] the war and its ways had ended for me. It was a good time and a bad time rolled into one, a picnic and a term of penal servitude combined, but it was a great and glorious adventure, too" (213). This type of conflicted language, ambiguous regarding the war's effects on participants, is common to war memoirs throughout the inter-war period.

Cecil Lewis recalled that with peace came a sense of anti-climax to his story (257). In his introduction to *Sagittarius Rising*, one of the better-known and critically well-received flight memoirs, Lewis attempted to explain the war's impact on his life while dismissing his own imperfect memories of the events portrayed (1-4). The war to Lewis was an "introduction to life", one in which he recalled, "at the distance of twenty years, my personal memories of it are quite detached – as they belonged to another life" (2). Lewis expressed that the volatile political and economic events of the post-war years had changed the perception of the conflict for those who were in it. The "delusion" he saw in liberal thoughts and hopes for peace at Versailles and the subsequent economic crisis was the true disillusion of Europe in the wake of the war (258-259). His memoir reaffirmed these themes. Lewis was conflicted by the memories of a twenty-year-old pilot with those of a man, who in middle age, still deeply mourned the loss of so many friends to flying accidents and battle. Time could both temper the sentimentalism or in some cases patriotic impulses of authors, but it did not always dampen their spirit of comradeship. A heroic sense of the exceptionalism of the R.F.C. and its exploits during the war remained strong afterwards.

Tied to this heroic exceptionalism was the notion of remembering fallen comrades and offering a contribution to the history of the war. Memoirists wanted their books to be a historical source but also to give an impression of the war in memory. Whitehouse reflected: "To me the Great War history is not the story of those who won it, but the memory of those who did not come back" (223). To remember the events of a squadron was to give agency to the war dead and tell their

story. Grinnell-Milne was concerned for the representation of returning veterans in popular culture.

But then, to tell more might be to earn the rather scornful sympathy of those who think all ex-service men a little, just a little crazy, poor fellows. After all the war left its mark on all who fought and shell-shock is a convenient label. That is not to say that all war-writers are shell-shocked – at least, I hope that I shall not be placed in the doleful category. I never suffered much from shell-shock since that is the especial misfortune and privilege of infantrymen; yet, although the memory does not encourage brooding upon such things, I have not forgotten the horrors, the crashes, the burnings to death, the mutilations, the carnage below and aloft. But some of our cleaner fights I can live again, those in which the enemy gave nearly as much as he took. I can hear once more the wires scream [. . .] Sometimes I dream of those days with regret – were they not a part of Youth? - but I do not lose much sleep over them. For, by some odd mental twist, my worst dreams are those in which I fancy myself in gaol or fortress [. . .] From that nightmare of unrest I shall never be free. (*Wind* 287-288)

Grinnell-Milne discusses the way that memoirists chose to represent the war for their audiences. He decided to write in a way he believed to be fair to returning servicemen. To him the trauma of the war lay not in action in battle but in the inactivity of being a prisoner of war in Germany. Along with the war dead, there were many who returned proud of their contributions to the war, only to find that by the late 1920s those contributions were misrepresented in sensationalist literature. An essential part of nearly all of these stories is an emphasis on how the war dead were remembered, the heroism displayed by service and sacrifice, and the R.F.C.'s own sense of uniqueness.

### **Conclusion**

There are few clearer subgenres of British First World War literature than that of the flight memoir. At a time when aerial warfare was experimental and quite literally a trial and error process, pilots were represented as high flying daredevils, but also, as chivalrous knights. This was to demonstrate that in a war of stalemate and attrition, there were still heroes who engaged in personal combat, using a new technology to represent a very old theme. This theme – the young knight in battle - was an easy

metaphor to relate the standards and practices of men who, for many, believed in a distinct code of sportsmanship and honour in combat. As the years passed, early flight was portrayed more amateurish and became somewhat quaint in the author's memories. The developments of civilian and military flight during and between the wars made it so that these memoirists were early pioneers of a new branch of service. As the years went by they became more interested in demonstrating the uniqueness of their war from that of other soldiers. The majority of R.F.C. memoirists hoped to demonstrate a distinctly heroic martial culture that was brave, sober, and gallant. In short, a heroic exceptionalism that pilots and observers compared to the barbarism of war on the ground. Mess life, battle, luck and superstition, hero worship – these all were traits of the flight officer representing the exceptionalism of their own service and demonstrating a war experience that was often tragic but also adventurous. This genre of heroic literature was an important counter-weight to the disillusioned “war book” of the late 1920s in the British publishing market.

## Notes

1. The origins of chivalric language toward pilots came from press accounts during the war. It was accentuated by flight novels and memoirs which all reinforce the same metaphor.
2. These two periods, 1919-1921 and 1928-1931 saw the largest collection of war recollections published in Britain. It should be added that war books were published throughout the inter-war period, but that these periods saw the greatest number of published texts released.
3. It should be noted that Whitehouse later received a commission.
4. They are: Billy Bishop, *Winged Warfare* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1918); Alan Bott, *Eastern Nights – And Flights: A Record of Oriental Adventure* (Edinburgh, William Blackwood, 1920); Paul Bewsher, “*Green Balls*” *The Adventures of a Night Bomber* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1919); Duncan Grinnell-Milne, *Wind in the Wires* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1933); Duncan Grinnell-Milne, *An Escaper's Log* (London: John Lane, 1926); Geoffrey Harding, *Escape Fever* (London: John Hamilton, 1935); Cecil Lewis, *Sagittarius Rising* (London: Peter Davies, 1941); Major S.H. Long, D.S.O., M.C., *In The Blue* (London: John Lane, 1920); ‘Night Hawke’, M.C. (W.J. Harvey), *Rovers of the Night Sky* (London: Cassell, 1919); James McCudden, *Five Years in the R.F.C.* (London: Aeroplane, 1919); Norman Macmillan, *Into the Blue* (London: Duckworth, 1929); Bertrand Marson, *Scarlet and Khaki* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1930); ‘McScotch’ (W. McLanachan), *Fighter Pilot* (London: Routledge & Son. Ltd., 1936); J.E. Tennant, *In the Clouds Above Baghdad* (London: C. Palmer, 1920); A.G.J. Whitehouse, *Hell in the Heavens: The Adventures of an Aerial Gunner in the Royal Flying Corps* (London: W & R Chambers, 1938).
5. Both of Grinnell-Milne's works were reprinted later in the 1950s and 1960s.
6. There are depictions of observers but usually these were ‘stepping stones’, or a transitional experience, to becoming a pilot.

7. Cable was the author of the following war time books: *Action Front*, *Doing their Bit*, *Grapes of Wrath*, *Front Lines*, *Air Men O'War*, the latter stories about the R.N.A.S. and R.F.C.
8. There is an irony to this in that so many R.F.C. pilots were downed by accidents, ground fire, and mechanical failures.
9. This was not true of men who first served as gunners/observers before being granted commissions. Both McCudden and Whitehouse had extensive knowledge of flying before going to flight school.
10. Cecil Lewis describes differences between now and then throughout his memoir. A clear example is on learning to fly, pp. 36-37, and describing early planes going into a spin, p. 41. Grinnell-Milne, whose memoir was published in the early 30s, reflects on new verses old pilots, p. 74.

## Works Cited

- Bergonzi, Bernard. *Heroes Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War*. London,: Constable, 1965. Print.
- Bewsher, Paul. "*Green Balls*" *The Adventures of a Night Bomber*. Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1919. Print.
- Bishop, Billy. *Winged Warfare*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1918. Print.
- Bond, Brian. *Survivors of a Kind*. London: Continuum, 2008. Print.
- Bott, Alan. *Eastern Nights – And Flights: A Record of Oriental Adventure*. Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1920. Print.
- Brown, John. "This War Book Slump." *The Publisher and Bookseller*. 1 August 1930. p. 299.
- Evans, A.J. *The Escaping Club*. London: John Lane, 1921. Print.
- Goebel, Stefan. *The Great War and Medieval Memory: War, Remembrance and Medievalism in Britain and Germany, 1914-1930*. Cambridge: CUP, 2007. Print.
- Grinnell-Milne, Duncan. *An Escaper's Log*. London: John Lane, 1926. Print.
- Grinnell-Milne, Duncan. *Wind in the Wires*. London: Hurst and Blackett, 1933. Print.
- Harding, Geoffrey. *Escape Fever*. London: John Hamilton, 1935. Print.
- Hynes, Samuel, *The Soldiers' Tale*. New York: Viking,1997. Print.
- Lewis, Cecil. *Sagittarius Rising*. London: Peter Davies, 1941. Print.
- Long, Major S.H. *In The Blue*. London: John Lane, 1920. Print.
- McCudden, James. *Five Years in the R.F.C*. London: Aeroplane, 1919. Print.
- 'McScotch" (W. McLanachan). *Fighter Pilot*. London: Routledge & Son. Ltd., 1936. Print.

Macmillan, Norman. *Into the Blue*. London: Duckworth, 1929. Print.

Marson, Bertrand. *Scarlet and Khaki*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1930. Print.

Morrow, John. "Knights of the Sky: The Rise of Military Aviation." *Authority, Identity and the Social History of the Great War*. Eds. Franz Coetzee and Marilyn Shevin-Coetzee. Providence, R.I.: Berghan Books, 1995. Print.

"Night Hawk", M.C. (W.J. Harvey). *Rovers of the Night Sky*. London: Cassell, 1919. Print.

Tennant, J.E. *In the Clouds Above Baghdad*/ London: C. Palmer, 1920. Print. Whitehouse, A.G.J. *Hell in the Heavens: The Adventures of an Aerial Gunner in the Royal Flying Corps*. London: W & R Chambers, 1938. Print.

---

**IAN A. ISHERWOOD** earned his PhD in Modern History from the University of Glasgow. His dissertation was on the British publishing industry and non-fiction war books in the inter-war period. He works at Gettysburg College.