

# H-Net Reviews

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**John Darrell Sherwood.** *Officers in Flight Suits: The Story of American Air Force Fighter Pilots in the Korean War.* New York: New York University Press, 1996. xiii + 239 pp. \$21.56 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-8038-1.

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The aviation history of the Korean war has fallen into two categories. The first being a highly popular account of aerial warfare revolving around heroic narrative themes. The other creates an analytical framework which conveys historical data but does not analyze social and cultural aspects. John Sherwood has employed a method of analysis that integrates social and cultural factors into the study of Korea's air war. This socio-military study of United States Air Force fighter pilots during the Korean air war is a highly readable and well researched book.

In the recent past, aviation history of the Korean conflict has been dominated by studies that focus on strategic, tactical and operational aspects of the aerial war. Aviation historiography of Korea's aerial war has been well-served by Robert Futrell (*The United States Air Force in Korea, 1950-1953*) and Richard Hallion (*The Naval Air War in Korea*), who have covered the operational and tactical roles played by the United States Air Force and United States Navy. Sherwood's work fills the gap by producing a socio-military contexts of the United States Air Force, and especially the work and life of the fighter pilots of the Korean war.

Sherwood focuses on what he calls the "flight suit attitude" as a cultural perspective. Of this central theme Mr. Sherwood writes, "[a] flight suit attitude was not simply an expression of machismo, it was a means of psychological survival in a danger-filled environment" (p. 38) of pilot training and aerial combat over the war-torn skies of Korea. The story unfolds creating an interesting and scholarly historical analysis. Sherwood's chapters on pilot training promulgate the theme of the flight suit attitude, "[t]he fear, the challenges, and dangers of learning to fly, in the end, would enable these men to transcend distinction in military status and become a unified band of brothers" (p. 46). This distinguished the pilots and created a society within the military which in many ways is the antithesis of the military mindset of conformity and discipline. The attitudinal sense of importance in the then

new United States Air Force during this era Sherwood, suggests was based on flying; "[m]ilitary ancestry and institutional traditions were irrelevant to him; instead, elitism in the Air Force was defined by skill, courage, and plane type" (p. 67). Moreover, the Air Force fighter pilot became the individual warrior for glory and prestige within the montage of war. Sherwood maintains that the environment in which these men fought in many ways perpetuated this rather "go-it-alone" (p. 88) mentality. Fighter pilots during the Korean war would also break standard rules of engagement and risking their own lives and the aircraft for the sake of an air kill.

The argument, the "flight suit attitude" runs throughout the work and displays extensive research illustrating the dynamics of the social and cultural elements of the fighter pilot in Korea. The chapters on base life and recreation of the pilots are complementary to the main theme and add a dimension to military history that connects the military affairs with the cultural aspects of American society. The military, or more specifically the United States Air Force, does not operate within a vacuum, but rather reflects the social and cultural characteristics of a society, these elements are most readily perceived in the fighter pilot in Korea.

The only quibble that this reviewer has is the lack of technical specifications on the aircrafts flown (especially the F-86 Sabre, F-80 Shooting Star and F-84 Thunderjet), which would only add to the appendices. The military aviation historian will realize the dearth of literature on the air war in Korea and welcome this work as an important addition to the study and understanding of the multi-dimensional aspects of the topic.

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