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A Magnificent Man in his Flying Machine?

In *Men at War* (1942), Ernest Hemingway famously described World War I as “the most colossal, murderous, mismanaged butchery that has ever taken place on earth.” Perhaps the most enduring image of the Great War is the pictures of thousands of soldiers climbing out of their trenches and “going over the top” in a series of suicidal assaults, a testimony to the courage and determination of the individual soldier as well as the bankruptcy of strategic thought of those military and political leaders who sent them into battle. After the war, “life in the trenches” found gifted chroniclers, such as Robert Graves (*Goodbye to All That: An Autobiography* [1930]), Erich Maria Remarque (*Im Westen nichts Neues* [1928]; in English published as *All Quiet on the Western Front*), and Ernst Jünger (*In Stahlgewittern: Aus dem Tagebuch eines Stosstruppführers* [1924]; in English published as *Storm of Steel*), who exposed the brutality, deprivation, and sacrifice experienced by the common soldier. Like their counterparts on the ground, aviators, such as Eddie Rickenbacker (*Fighting the Flying Circus* [1919]), William “Billy” Mitchell (*Our Air Force: The Keystone of National Defense* [1921] and *Winged Defense: The Development and Possibilities of Modern Air Power, Economic and Military* [1925]), Cecil Lewis (*Sagittarius Rising* [1936]), and Elliot White Springs (*War Birds: Diary of an Unknown Aviator* [1926]), published their accounts of the war in the air. In the case of the last, Springs’s most well-known work, *War Birds*, became a commercial and popular success in the United States in the 1920s and “achieved classic status from the day it first appeared” (p. 283).

Spring, the son of a wealthy South Carolina textile manufacturer, Princeton University graduate, and “double ace” with over ten confirmed “kills” in aerial combat, is the subject of David K. Vaughan’s *Letters from a War Bird: The World War I Correspondence of Elliot White Springs*. In a skillfully edited volume, Vaughan provides excerpts from Springs’s letters, portions of his diary, and information from his flight logs that trace Springs’s evolution from a spoiled and carefree college student to an experienced and successful fighter pilot suffering from chronic combat fatigue. Using a chronological approach, Vaughan focuses on Springs’s military service from his initial flight training at Princeton in early 1917 to his advanced training in the United Kingdom and ultimately to Springs’s assignment to operational flying with the recently minted Royal Air Force (previously the Royal Flying Corps) on the western front in May 1918. The book’s final chapter is devoted to a discussion of Springs’s post-war career with special emphasis on his writing efforts and the controversy surrounding his most famous work, *War Birds*.

From a broad perspective, Springs’s correspondence offers valuable insights into the preparation, training, tactics, and operational performance of World War I combat pilots. From a more narrow perspective, the collection details the maturation of a young man and provides glimpses into the state of social issues related to gender, race, and ethnicity. In one respect, Springs’s collegiate experiences offer an unflattering snapshot of a

privileged and self-centered student whose sense of entitlement, frivolous lifestyle, and Princeton tie might well have made him a typecast character in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1922). As a southern upper-class male born at the end of the nineteenth century, in his correspondence, Springs not surprisingly revealed ethnic, religious, and gender biases and prejudices typical of the period. His unreflecting use of the terms "Dago" and "wop" as well as his joke on having a "Jewish nose" in the wake of a crash offer some examples of these attitudes (pp. 34, 36, 171, 252). With respect to gender roles, his oftentimes deprecatory and belittling comments to his stepmother, a woman roughly his own age, concerning her letter writing skills, activities with the Red Cross, and involvement in the women's suffrage movement and his professed amazement that women could play an "excellent game" of bridge are indicative of his chauvinistic and sexist attitudes (p. 120). Comments like "getting married before going to war is like taking a ham sandwich to a banquet" and his plan to "find some sweet young thing and make violent love to her for four days" in order to secure a reliable connection in London to do "errands" for him while he is at the front are but two examples of the objectification of women in his correspondence (pp. 69, 136). Interestingly, both comments are shared in letters to his stepmother.

Despite a "tone of robust near-belligerency" in his correspondence with his father and stepmother, Springs's letters provide a wealth of valuable insights into the making of a combat aviator (p. 89). He began his pilot training as a member of the Princeton Aviation Corps before embarking for England in September 1917 with orders to proceed on to Italy for training with the Italian Air Force as part of the so-called Italian Detachment, which included the future mayor of New York City, Fiorello La Guardia. While La Guardia continued on to Italy for service, Springs's contingent of 150 "aviators" were ordered to remain in England at Oxford. Initially disappointed by the change in assignment, Springs quickly embraced British military customs and the Royal Flying Corps' system of flight instruction. Although he showed enthusiasm for the task, his letters and flight logs from this period clearly reveal the hazards associated with flying at the time, including the effects of poor weather and finicky and unreliable aircraft. In fact, he penned one letter to his stepmother on a scrap of paper as he waited for help in the middle of a beet field after a crash landing due to engine failure (p. 56). Springs's correspondence also reveals that getting lost and crashing aircraft were an accepted part of learning to fly. Despite

these risks, he still wrote about "joyriding about in any old plane" and having "lots of fun watching the crashes ... [that] are always more comic than tragic" (pp. 63-64). A short time later, however, this initial bravado faded as Springs confessed, "Stamford has been a rather gloomy place lately. We've been averaging about six crashes a day and three men killed in four days" (p. 67). In fact, the dangers associated with flying resulted in the deaths of over thirty American pilots from a total of some two hundred during flight training in Great Britain, a shocking, but not exceptional for the time, 16 percent fatality rate prior to operational combat duties.[1]

Springs's letters reveal that the dangers associated with flying and the frequent loss of friends resulted in a widespread sense of fatalism among the would-be pilots and contributed to a freewheeling lifestyle for many that included fast living, profligate spending, and above all heavy drinking. The laconic acceptance of death is apparent throughout the correspondence and perhaps reflects in part the influence of the British system with its emphasis on reserve and understatement. In a letter to his stepmother in March 1918, Springs reflected on several recent deaths and remarked, "It's absolutely unavoidable. To teach men to fly fast planes you must expect to lose a fair percentage.... Every time a man goes up he's flirting with the undertaker and every time he makes a landing he's kidding the three Fates about their scythes being dull" (p. 98). The correspondence also discloses the central role played by alcohol among the majority of pilots as a means for promoting social interaction, but also as a coping mechanism for dealing with stress. In a revealing diary entry of January 5, 1918, the then twenty-one-year-old Springs recorded the following: "Go to bed absolutely sober for the first time since I've been over here" (p. 71).

Springs's discussion of the relative performance characteristic of specific aircraft and combat tactics will be of particular interest to students of the air war and aviation history. With respect to the former, he described the Sopwith Camel as "a tricky little biplane ... [that] could fly upside down and turn inside a stairwell. They would stall at 15000 feet and lose 1000 feet a turn. But they were deadly below 5000 feet if you could suck the Fokkers down to that level" (p. 179). He also noted, "The big scores [i.e., high number of kills] were run up on SEs [Scout Experimental] and Camels or Nieuports or SPADs [aircraft produced by the French manufacturer Société Pour L'Aviation et ses Dérivés]. The SPAD was like a truck on an icy road" (p. 180). With respect to combat tactics, he recommended, "The best way to fight is to rush in—concentrate your fire on one man and make sure of

him—and get out quick. Then if possible and there’s a big dog fight going on—dive down again and pick off another one, etc” (p. 150). In another entry, he warned, “It is foolish to fight EA [Enemy Aircraft] Scouts except when it is possible to start the fight from above. If above and there are no other machines in sight, dive, fire at close range only and then pull up in a climbing turn and go down again. This avoids a dog fight and makes it possible to break off the fight in the advent of the approach of other EA” (p. 178).

Although dog fights were the *raison d’être* of Scout (fighter) pilots during World War I and the mission that received the most publicity and recognition in the popular media, by the late summer of 1918, Springs and his fellow aviators were increasingly called on to conduct ground strafing missions against German troop and equipment concentrations, a much detested mission that forced aircraft down to low altitude where they were vulnerable to aircraft and ground fire alike. In a letter to his stepmother in June 1918, Springs admitted, “But if you know you’re going ground strafing [sic] the next day you don’t sleep as well as you might, That’s the job we all hate” (p. 166). In another letter at the end of August, Springs complained, “But when you’re ordered up to go ground strafing [sic] or go for balloons you feel that the man who gives the order is nothing more or less than an executioner” (p. 209). If pilots hated strafing missions, these attacks also engendered a sense of dread among their targets. For example, Remarque in *All Quiet on the Western Front* observed, “There are so many [enemy] airmen here, and they are so skillful that they can hunt down individuals like rabbits.”^[2] By August 1918, as the air war intensified and Springs witnessed more of his friends die or become prisoners of war, he began to exhibit classic symptoms of combat fatigue or what is known in modern parlance as posttraumatic stress disorder.

At the end of June 1918, Springs was shot down and crashed his aircraft and suffered severe trauma to his head and face. Despite the lingering effects of his injuries, including problems with his vision, Springs returned to combat flying at the end of July. In a telling remark to his stepmother a few days before his twenty-second birthday on July 31, he wrote, “Well I am an old man. The mirror shows no white hairs but mental reflection shows unmistakable signs of old age” (p. 187). From this time onward, his letters offer interesting insights into a man battling to maintain his courage in the face of the lingering effects of his injuries; the psychological impact of the loss of his best friend, John McGavock “Mac”

Grider; and the increasing combat demands placed on him and the men under his command. In his overview of chapter 7, Vaughan aptly comments: “What is surprising is not that Springs and many other pilots eventually suffered some kind of physical and emotional relapse during and after the war, but that they did not suffer it sooner and more completely” (p. 195). In this respect, Springs’s correspondence reveals that “shell shock” was not limited to the ground during the Great War, despite the popular and highly romanticized depiction of the “knights of the air.” In fact, by the middle of August, in a letter to his stepmother, Springs wrote, “But I don’t know which is going to get me first, a bullet or nervous strain” (p. 204). By the end of the month, he began to experience physical manifestations of his condition and he complained, “My nerves are in rotten shape and my eyes are going back on me again. Don’t laugh when I say ‘nerves.’ It’s no joke. Long patrols and ground staffing [sic] will get any man in time” (p. 217). Luckily for Springs and his “nerves,” he survived the war with several close calls in September and two bouts of hospitalization due to an unexplained stomach illness.

In addition to Springs’s correspondence, Vaughan uses the conclusion and two appendices to provide a detailed and convincing analysis of the controversy surrounding Springs’s most famous book, *War Birds*. Although Springs liberally used material from the diaries of his fallen friend, Grider, Vaughan demonstrates that the work was in fact essentially the product of Springs’s own hand and dispels the widespread belief that Springs had copied it wholesale from Grider’s papers.^[3] In another useful appendix, Vaughan provides short biographies of all the aviators mentioned in the correspondence with the curious exception of Mitchell, one of the most famous and controversial aviators of the twentieth century. Likewise, the inclusion of correspondence from Leroy Springs to his son adds further insight into the relationship between the two men, but the absence of any surviving correspondence from his stepmother, Lena, not only is unfortunate, but also leaves a number of questions open related to Springs’s judgments and ideas, especially since the majority of his published wartime letters were addressed to his stepmother and make frequent reference to her letters.

In the final analysis, *Letters from a War Bird* offers a valuable and important record of the military service of one of the leading American aces of World War I. Described in his unit’s history as “a fine pilot and a flight leader ... the last to leave a fight and the first to commence one. He would never desert a pilot in distress,” (p.

177) Springs was undoubtedly an aviator of exceptional skill, great determination, and unquestioned courage. If his correspondence also exposes an often self-centered, spiteful, and self-absorbed character then one must consider the man, his upbringing and personal experiences, and his times. As a student of the classics at Princeton, Springs certainly would have appreciated the observation that no hero is without his tragic flaw.

Notes

[1]. James J. Hudson, *Hostile Skies: A Combat His-*

tory of the American Air Service in World War I (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1968), 33.

[2]. Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, trans. Brian Murdoch (London: Folio Society, 2010), 197.

[3]. For example, Hudson makes the mistaken assertion that Springs admitted that Grider was the real author of *War Birds* (Hudson, *Hostile Skies*, 44). Although the work was dedicated to Grider and was based on his career, it was primarily written by Springs.

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