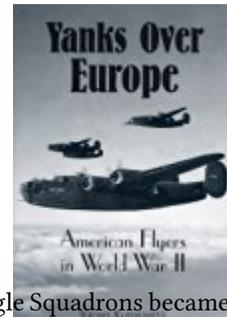


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jerome Klinkowitz. *Yanks Over Europe: American Flyers in World War II*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996. x + 148 pp. \$19.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-1961-8.

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Published on H-War (October, 1996)



Memoirs by participants in armed conflicts are not new. The fiftieth anniversary of World War II was marked by a spate of books about all aspects of that conflict. Among these many books were memoirs by individuals famous and not-so-famous, all of whom shared the experience of the war in one way or another and many of whom waited over four decades to make public their recollections (over 40 percent of the books listed in the bibliography in *Yanks Over Europe* were published in 1985 or later). Jerome Klinkowitz has hit upon the idea of mining these memoirs, both old and new, to present an anecdote-laden overview of air operations in Europe during World War II from the perspective of the aircrews. Although the author notes in his acknowledgements that he spoke with veterans, this book is essentially “a study of the written record ... of American flyers of the Eighth and Fifteenth Air Forces” (p. ix). With this interesting approach he has given the reader impressions of the air war over Europe, providing glimpses of what it was like to serve in fighters or bombers, flying from Cambridgeshire and Kent or from the Foggia Plain. He quotes, sometimes extensively, from these memoirs, using anecdotes to portray both the boredom and the terror of war. The picture he paints is one largely of ordinary individuals who are somehow caught up in a scenario which they may dislike, but which they pursue with serious purpose.

The book is divided into five chapters, the first three of which deal with the air war from England. In “Eagles,” we read of the American pilots who became volunteers with the Royal Air Force before the United States formally was in the war. A theme Klinkowitz finds here is that American flyers are the archetypical American pragmatists; they care not so much for the formalities of military life, but are quite effective as airmen. Americans are, by and large, civilian-soldiers who can accomplish their

tasks. In September of 1942, the Eagle Squadrons became part of the Fourth Fighter Group of the Eighth Air Force, which leads to the second chapter, “Fighter Jocks.” In this chapter, and in “Bombers” which follows, the author follows the exploits of pilots and crews of the Eighth Air Force as they fight their war in the skies over Europe, choosing anecdotes which indicate the author’s view that one’s perceptions of the air war were determined largely by the way in which one participated.

In the fourth chapter, labeled “Mediterranean Theater,” the reader is given a view of the life of American flyers in a very different setting. Flying from North Africa or from Italy seems a much different experience than flying from the almost comfortable existence in England. In addition, the author identifies a different dimension in the Mediterranean air war which makes for a “more intimate style of description” (p. 124). Aircrews of the Fifteenth Air Force seem to express in their memoirs a more realistic approach to the war, seeing it for what it is.

In the concluding chapter, Klinkowitz tries to find common threads running through these memoirs and succeeds, at least partially, when he notes that the war in the air is less personal, more abstract. In their minds American fighter pilots shoot down German planes, not German pilots; American bomber crews drop bombs onto targets, not onto the people who happen to be on the ground in the targeted areas.

One aspect of the air war was not treated in any great detail by the author. He puts very little into his book of what it was like to be shot down and become a prisoner of war. Aside from a few pages in the concluding chapter and an occasional reference elsewhere, this aspect of the air war receives little treatment. It is, of course, an element of many memoirs from World War II aircrews.

For example, Hub Zemke's experiences are recounted in several chapters of *Zemke's Wolf Pack* (1988) as are Francis Gabreski's in *Gabby; A Fighter Pilot's Life* (1991) and William R. Cubbins' in *The War of the Cottontails* (1989). Omitting this sort of experience may make for a more comfortable read, but it certainly removes one element from the experience of American flyers.

While the author has provided a quite readable and even interesting look at American aircrews in World War II, this book can be viewed on a slightly different level. Klinkowitz's book can be used as a large bibliographic essay, leading the perceptive reader to the original memoirs (not all of which can be found easily, according to the author). In those instances where the original mem-

oirs can be consulted, a much more detailed picture of the American experience in World War II emerges.

For whatever reason one chooses to read *Yanks Over Europe*, it remains a rather engaging book. This approach to analysis has been tried before by Klinkowitz in his 1989 book, *Their Finest Hours: Narratives of the RAF and Luftwaffe in World War II*. It would be interesting to see the approach used for a variety of operational aspects of World War II.

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Citation: David Eyman. Review of Klinkowitz, Jerome, *Yanks Over Europe: American Flyers in World War II*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. October, 1996.

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