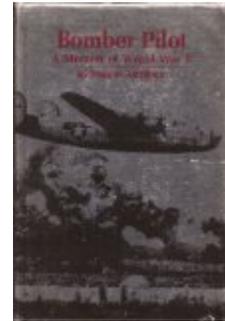


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Philip Ardery. *Bomber Pilot: A Memoir of World War II*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1978. x + 233 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-1379-1.

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The View from 20,000 Feet

In the summer of 1940, Philip Ardery, then a first lieutenant in the U.S. Army Reserve, made a calculation. Sitting in the mud while on maneuvers in Wisconsin, watching his comrades use beer cans and stovepipes to simulate mortar rounds and tubes, unable to eat the beans then swimming in his rain-soaked mess kit, Ardery decided that the Army's Air Corps was the place for him. Like countless other earth-bound sufferers in the infantry, the life of the airman, with all the attendant images of chivalry and soft beds, appealed to him. Though his law practice in Frankfort, Kentucky, was just beginning to flourish and despite being somewhat old to make the shift (Ardery was twenty-six at the time, and the age limit to enter training was twenty-seven), Ardery successfully negotiated the physical examination and embarked for flight training that fall.

Ardery's memoir, entitled *Bomber Pilot*, tells the story of his training as a flyer, his combat and command experiences with the 8th Air Force in Europe and North Africa, and his eventual good fortune in returning home to his wife and son in Texas in late 1944. Although *Bomber Pilot* is not without its flaws, Ardery's experiences as a pilot in some of the most famous (or infamous) raids of the Second World War, including the August 1, 1943, raid on the oil installations at Ploesti, Romania, make this book worthwhile reading for anyone interested in the European air war. Ardery also served as a squadron commander and wing operations officer, service that allows him to shed some light on the nature and problems of command in the Air Corps as well.

Ardery begins by relating his adventures as a "gadget" (a flying cadet) in Lincoln, Nebraska, and later in Texas, anxious to earn his wings and depart for the clearly unavoidable war against Germany and Japan. His own skill as a pilot and his knack for command got in his way, however, and for a time he was retained in Texas as a flight instructor, to train the ever-increasing number of new cadets as the United States' preparations for war increased in intensity. While in Texas, he married and fathered a son, but despite reluctance to leave these "hostages to fortune" (p. 58), Ardery ultimately decided that he must join the fray and in June 1943, as a squadron commander, he departed for England.

No sooner had he touched down in England than he was rerouted to North Africa to join General "Ted" Timberlake's so-called Flying Circus, which operated out of Libya and bombed targets in Italy, Crete, and Austria in support of the British and American operations in the Mediterranean area. Ardery understood that the Mediterranean was a sideshow and this realization irked him somewhat, though his squadron saw plenty of difficult combat, especially during one raid on Wiener Neustadt, a suburb of Vienna.

Like most memoirs of war, *Bomber Pilot* is peppered with interesting, often unbelievable vignettes that illustrate the vagaries of chance and the often surreal nature of battle. Many of the best such stories occurred while Ardery was stationed in North Africa. While returning from over Reggio di Calabria on the "toe" of Italy's "boot," one of Ardery's fellow pilots, Robert Lee Wright,

ran into some serious trouble. Two of the engines on his enormous B-24 had been knocked out by flak and, just after crossing the coast of Sicily, his number one engine gave out. B-24's were not considered airworthy even with two engines, and flying with only one was supposed to be impossible. Nevertheless, Wright was determined to land the plane rather than abandon it, since the nearest land was Sicily (still enemy-held, he believed) and his crew members might need the medical and emergency equipment on board in order to survive or possibly avoid capture. So Wright wheeled the mammoth plane around and performed a miraculous landing on a soft field (B-24's were known to crack hardened concrete runways if a landing was less than perfect) and his entire crew emerged unscathed. And that was not the end of Wright's luck that day. For the invasion of Sicily had begun just moments prior to his landing, and Canadian forces held the beach near which he had landed. Wright and his crew fought with the ground forces for two weeks before returning to Ardery's base in Bengasi, laden with trophies of their exploits (pp. 88-90).

Ardery also recalls strange, momentary feelings he had while on missions, such as the reassurance he felt whenever the tailgunner of one of his crews fired. "We really couldn't hear the tail turret," he remembered, "but after we had ridden in our bombers for a while there was a peculiar faint vibration that would run down the skin of the ship and up the seats to let us know little Pete Peterson of Fowble's crew was warming up his guns. When Pete's guns chattered, some Nazi always regretted it. And when I felt the vibrations of his guns coming through the seat of my pants it was like someone scratching a mosquito bite in the middle of my back" (p. 124).

But the real "highlight" of then-Captain Ardery's tour in North Africa (and of the book, in fact) was the raid on the oil fields in Ploesti, Romania, on August 1, 1943. Weeks of specialized training and instruction were necessary to prepare the crews for this single mission, which would be at the absolute limit of their B-24's range and which would require them to fly for long distances at tree-top level in order to minimize the accuracy of German anti-aircraft fire and to give as little warning as possible to the numerous German fighter squadrons assigned to protect the oil fields. The basic outlines of the raid, the navigational errors, and the tremendous casualties suffered by the Americans are no doubt familiar to students of the European air war, but Ardery's first-hand account of the battle is worth reading.

His discussion of the crews' pre-flight preparations

are particularly interesting, and even humorous at times. The crews, knowing the dangers of the mission, were apparently preoccupied with the prospect of captivity (which may have been a convenient way of avoiding thoughts of the more real possibility of their deaths). Ardery and other pilots stuffed huge musette bags with items they deemed necessary for their escape attempts, like clean underwear, chewing gum, and cigarettes (for barter purposes). Ardery even spent the night before the mission taping a hacksaw blade to the bottom of his foot with skin-colored tape so that he could escape from the Germans. He planned to cross the Danube and head for Yugoslavia after he was shot down, in order to join with Tito and become a guerrilla fighter. A joke circulated among the squadron that crew members had so many compasses concealed on them for the purposes of escape that "the only way they could walk was north" (p. 100).

Ardery stayed for awhile longer in North Africa, but ultimately returned to fight what he clearly deemed the "real" war over Germany itself. Mission piled upon mission, and Ardery relates a number of interesting vignettes, especially relating to the problems caused by British weather, the effects of the V-weapons on Allied morale, and relations between American servicemen and British civilians. This non-combat focus is partly a result of Ardery's position as a squadron commander and later, a wing operations officer. In these positions, he was not required to fly on every mission, though he certainly did not shirk his duties as a combat pilot. The desk jobs that he filled obviously embarrassed him somewhat, and he clearly made every effort to get into the air as often as possible. But his time on the ground gave him insight into areas of the airman's experience that other memoirists do not often relate.

Ardery's relatively high rank somehow spoils certain elements of the work, however. As a pilot trainer, a squadron commander, and later a group and wing operations officer, Ardery never developed the attachment to a crew or to a plane that one sees in other, more gripping, accounts of life in a heavy bomber (witness the drama of *Memphis Belle*, either the early documentary or the recent feature film). Other people come and go, and their deaths or their victories are never felt as strongly by the reader (or by Ardery, I suspect) as those of the subjects of other battle narratives. The reader simply does not become intimately enough acquainted with anyone (besides Ardery) to develop an intense interest in their fate.

Also as a result of his rank, Ardery does not seem to suffer from some of the indignities and inconveniences

of military life that would engender sympathy for his plight in the reader. While in the United States, he was allowed to commandeer a plane so he could visit his parents (albeit briefly) in Kentucky. He complains at one point during flight training of how conscious he was that he was no longer a first lieutenant, but rather a flying cadet with only the status of an “enlisted private.” Not many enlisted privates had maid service, which Ardery, as an officer, had. Later, in Europe, he was introduced to London social life through well-connected friends and had talks with Edward R. Murrow and T. S. Eliot. He even worked in wing operations at one point with the actor Jimmy Stewart. Reaching a high rank is certainly testimony to Ardery’s intelligence and skill, and such incidents and acquaintances add much-needed color to the work, but they also give *Bomber Pilot* an elitist, sometimes snobbish tone that could detract from the reader’s enjoyment.

If anything, Ardery’s account seems too calculated. Ardery reveals rare sparks of emotion, especially when reminiscing about his family, wife, and newborn son back in the States, but in general the narrative is very detached. Not that a reader should demand constant blood-and-guts action from such an intentionally thoughtful and reflective memoir, but from a participant in some of the most hair-raising battles of the war, who witnessed what were undoubtedly some incredibly gut-wrenching tragedies during his combat tour, one certainly expects more emotional involvement than Ardery exhibits. Even during the raid on Ploesti, one of the most gripping passages of the memoir, Ardery maintains a disappointing authorial aloofness. While on the bombing run over the oil fields, for example, Ardery’s wingman, a pilot named Pete Hughes, struggled to keep his plane on course after it received severe damage to the left wing and began to leak gasoline and burn. Hughes managed to drop his bombs on target and then desperately tried to land the plane in a nearby valley before the remaining fuel caught fire and the ship exploded. Ardery describes this tragic scene for a page, chronicling Hughes’ heroism and skill in keeping the plane aloft until a landing site could be found. But just before the ship touched down, its fire-damaged left wing broke loose and the ship cartwheeled into the ground in a fiery explosion. Ardery’s commentary on this incident, the tragic death of someone he knew very well, amounts to little more than clichés, however. The meaning of the incident for Ardery is to be found in the fact that “Pete had given his life and the lives of his crew to carry out his assigned task. To the very end he gave the battle every ounce he had” (pp. 105-6). Having read

and heard other accounts of similar incidents, I was overcome by the tragedy of the scene and horrified by the fate of Pete Hughes and his crew, but I was also disappointed with the hackneyed phrases that Ardery commonly uses to conclude such passages. I would expect such reporting from a newsreel, not from a doomed man’s friend.

A few other striking propensities mar Ardery’s narrative as well. One is Ardery’s tendency to focus too frequently on his status and the correctness of his behavior as a commander. While he makes constant references to his unsuitability for military life, it is clear that Ardery sees himself as an effective, if ever-learning, leader of men. As a result, he glosses over tales of pre-flight jitters or episodes of near-panic in the air in favor of emphasizing the importance of a commander keeping his cool so as not to lose the respect and obedience of his men. Ardery constantly compares the performance of his squadron or wing to those commanded by other men, with his own invariably proving somehow superior. Petty squabbles and turf-battles that erupted among squadron commanders or other officers (common in any organization) receive undue attention, given their unimportance to anyone other than Ardery and his immediate circle. Ardery seems concerned to the point of vanity with continually proving that he made proper decisions on matters that have no meaning for the reader.

As a historian, I appreciate Ardery’s efforts to document his experiences. His story is filled with that mixture of the peculiar and the universal that makes memoir literature a valuable tool of historical study. Through his unique perspective, we understand something of what thousands of other men endured in preparing for and fighting the air war over Europe during World War II.

As a human being, I also admire Ardery’s undoubted courage, sympathize with his sacrifices, and feel the power of his convictions. Ardery is obviously a contemplative, intelligent man, who, even under the stress of combat, took the time to discover meaning and purpose in the myriad horrors and rare wonders he experienced. The final, short chapter of the book is entitled, “Something To Believe In,” and it brings home what is important to Ardery. Like so many other veterans, Ardery was proud to have done his duty and emerged from the war with a deep appreciation of the privileges of being an American but also of the simple pleasures of life, like watching dogs chasing rabbits or seeing pigeons roosting among the rafters of a tobacco barn in his native Kentucky. Fittingly, the memoir ends with a touching scene in which his son, Pete, peeks around his mother’s skirt in

the doorway of their Texas home and with Ardery realizing how fortunate he was to have returned at all.

But as a reader, I was somewhat disappointed with *Bomber Pilot*. I have seen enough of the countless documentaries broadcast on the “History” (read “War”) Channel to know that Ardery’s descriptions of the raids in which he participated do not do them justice. The fact that Ardery survived the murderous raid on Ploesti makes his testimony invaluable, and yet there is little to distinguish the ten or so pages that Ardery uses to describe the mission. The pictures published in the memoir (and there are a great number of them, some of which are truly stunning) give the reader some sense of what he or she is missing in the narrative.

Bomber Pilot simply does not measure up to the best of the memoir literature of World War II (I would name E. B. Sledge’s remarkable *With The Old Breed* as an example). Nor does Ardery’s work really even compare with the very best of the secondary literature on the air war in providing the reader with a riveting and touching account of the horrors, tragedies, and tri-

umphs of the United States’ strategic bombing campaign. The claims that *Aerospace Historian* makes for Ardery’s work notwithstanding, Thomas Childers’ recent *Wings of Morning* does a much more compelling job of “captur[ing] the drama of the bomber war” and “setting the reader front row center” for a trip high over Germany in a B-24. (I will admit to potential partisanship on this matter, since Childers was my doctoral advisor... but *Wings of Morning* is truly an outstanding book.) A general audience would probably be disappointed by the lack of drama and suspense and by the general detachment of Ardery’s account. Too often the reader is not “front row center,” but seemingly observing the action and the tragedy from 20,000 feet above. Nevertheless, for readers interested in strategic bombing or the training and command institutions of the U.S. air forces, Ardery’s account will provide informative and worthwhile reading.

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