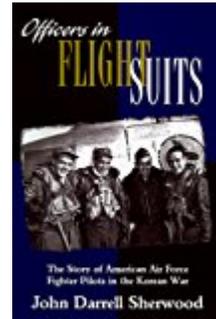




John Darrell Sherwood. *Officers in Flight Suits: The Story of American Air Force Fighter Pilots in the Korean War.* New York: New York University Press, 1996. xiii + 239 pp. \$21.56 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-8038-1.



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To Fly and Fight—USAF Fighter Pilots in the Korean War

When the Korean War began in the summer of 1950, the United States Air Force was the youngest branch of the American military, having been created as a service coequal to the Army and Navy less than three years earlier. Although the operational history of the USAF and the experience of many of its officers stretched back into the time when it was a branch of the Army known as the United States Army Air Force, the USAF hadn't yet made its mark as a separate service. The Korean War came at a propitious time, giving the USAF a vehicle in which to shape itself as an institution. The fighter pilots who fought in the Korean War would become the leaders of the new Air Force. Their attitudes toward flying and toward the military in general would come to shape Air Force thinking over the next several decades.

In this book John Sherwood has provided the reader with a close look at the pilots who flew fighters during the Korean War—pilots who, by their skills and attitudes, would establish a style for those who followed. This style is defined by the author as “flight suit attitude.” He writes:

Flight suit attitude ... was a sense of self-confidence

and pride that verged on arrogance ... the aircraft of preference was the high-performance, single-seat fighter ... This culture placed a premium on cockiness and informality. A flight suit officer spent more time in a flight suit than in a uniform. In his world, status was based upon flying ability, not degrees, rank, or “officer” skills (p. 6).

Where did this flight suit attitude develop? The author begins by examining the backgrounds of Air Force fighter pilots in this fledgling branch of the United States' military services. In a chapter entitled “An Absence of Ring-Knockers” he looks to a lower percentage of college-educated officers in the Air Force than in the Army or Navy, and particularly to the absence of academy graduates, as a contributing factor to a flight suit attitude. Success in this early Air Force was not based on a fraternity of academy graduates, indoctrinated in a set of shared military values; success was based, rather, on the ability to fly well and on the opportunity to participate in combat in Korea. The author presses home his point by looking at the backgrounds of eleven pilots who flew in Korea, perhaps the best known

of whom are Robinson Risner and Earl Brown. Only one pilot whose experiences are described in this book came into the Air Force from West Point; many came from relatively humble backgrounds. Their reminiscences of life in training and combat are spread throughout the book, giving it a personal, anecdotal character.

Pilot training is another factor that the author considers. In a chapter entitled "Stick and Rudder University," Sherwood examines the training given to Air Force pilots in the late 1940s and early 1950s and its contributions to the flight suit attitude. He notes that the majority of Air Force officers during the Korean War were pilots. Indeed, two-thirds of Air Force officers received their commission after completing the Aviation Cadet program, the emphasis of which was on flying skills. "Ancestry, education, and prior military training or military academy experience had very little to do with one's status in the Air Force ..." (p. 39). The primary concern was how well one could fly an airplane. The result for the Air Force was a more casual junior officer than the usual Army lieutenant or Navy ensign.

In his consideration of the air war over Korea for fighter pilots, the author looks separately at the experiences of those who flew fighter-interceptors and those who flew fighter-bombers. The former group garnered much of the glory. The air combat of F-86 against MiG is the image which springs to mind when one thinks of the Air Force experience in Korea. This image has been reinforced in the public mind through literature and movies. It is maintained within the Air Force as well by such devices as art on the walls of the Pentagon or a Korean War vintage F-86 on a pedestal at the front gate of Nellis AFB. These F-86/MiG engagements were the very essence of the continuing Air Force image of a fighter pilot.

The experiences of the fighter-bomber pilots in Korea were of another sort. Flying somewhat lower-performance aircraft than the F-86, such as the F-80 or F-84, the pilots in fighter-bombers faced a more hazardous day-to-day life from ground fire. Sherwood notes that "... only 147 Air Force planes were lost in air-to-air combat; by comparison, over 816 planes were shot down by ground fire" (pp 98-99). These pilots were often given less status than the F-86 pilots, who sometimes referred to them derogatorily as "straight wings" in officer clubs. The stress of the hazardous flying also led to a higher incidence of mental illness among fighter-bomber pilots. This dual nature of the fighter pilots' experiences lends an interesting element to the book. The pilots who flew fighter-bombers had no less of a flight suit attitude for

their experiences, however.

Throughout this book one also finds ample evidence of the social life of pilots during the Korean War. In a chapter entitled "Thunderboxes and Sabre Dancers" Sherwood looks at such elements of time spent away from the cockpit as bases, the O clubs and day rooms, the R & R opportunities in Japan, and even at female companionship of several very different types. But all seem very secondary to the experiences of flying fighters. Even the rustic conditions at Korean air bases served to remind the pilots that their primary reason for being in Korea was to fly fighter aircraft.

Sherwood concludes his book with a look at the careers of the eleven pilots after the Korean War. All but one remained in the Air Force. Most discovered that the flight suit attitude they embraced early in their flying careers did not always serve them well in the developing bureaucracy of the United States Air Force. But most maintained this attitude anyhow, even when a promotion might be lost as a result. Almost inevitably, with few exceptions, they didn't rise above the rank of colonel. It is at that stage of one's career, as one of the pilots noted, where "MiGs start to matter less and power politics take over" (p. 163). But the author concludes that the presence of the pilots who flew fighters in the Korean War contributed much to the shaping of the Air Force.

Interestingly, the obituary of a former Korean War era fighter pilot appeared briefly in recent news, the report neatly reinforcing some of the concepts in Sherwood's book. *U.S. News & World Report* noted the passing at the age of 70 of one John Boyd, Colonel, USAF, retired. A USAF fighter pilot in Korea and, later, an instructor pilot, Boyd's military influence ranged from the development of doctrines of air combat through the design of planes to his service in the Pentagon, where he and members of a so-called "Fighter Mafia" apparently helped prevail upon the Air Force to build the F-16 and A-10. His influence after his retirement extended to Congress and to people like Dick Cheney, who listened to and learned from Boyd's ideas on historical trends in military success presented in briefings. Boyd seems the epitome of an officer in a flight suit, the type of pilot Sherwood describes so well. James Fallows, writing in *U.S. News & World Report*, notes:

To those who listened, [Boyd] offered a worldview in which crucial military qualities—adaptability, innovation—grew from moral strengths and other "warrior" virtues. Yes-man careerism, by-the-book thought, and the military's budget-oriented "culture of procure-

ment” were his great nemeses. (*U.S. News & World Report*, March 24, 1997, p. 9)

John Sherwood has written an excellent book, combining the military history of USAF fighter operations in the Korean War with the social context of the pilots who flew the fighters. He has contributed much towards a better understanding of the developmental years of the United States Air Force. This book is well worth the reading for anyone with an interest in the Korean War, in the

United States Air Force, or in those elusive qualities of character on which larger organizations turn.

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