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Mike Hankins. *Flying Camelot: The F-15, the F-16, and the Weaponization of Fighter Pilot Nostalgia.* Ithaca: Cornell, 2021. 280 pp. $32.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5017-6065-5.

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"How do you know when a fighter pilot walks into the room?" The punchline, "Don't worry, he'll tell you," would never elicit laughter if it didn't tap into an accepted stereotype. But it works, precisely because this classic military joke speaks volumes about the hypermasculine culture that traditionally—and to a lesser extent, even to this day—imbues the fighter community. This cultural norm is reflected in statistics: as recently as 2020, just 6.5 percent of all US Air Force pilots were women, and less than half of those women flew fighters. Michael Hankins, a former Air Force historian who now serves as curator of modern military aircraft at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, convincingly demonstrates that this same culture played a major role in shaping aircraft procurement during the post-Vietnam era.

Even before US involvement in Vietnam peaked in the late 1960s, the Air Force and the Navy separately began work on a next-generation fighter plane slated to enter service in the mid-1970s. For the Navy, this resulted in the Grumman F-14 Tomcat, made famous in the public imagination for its leading role in the 1986 film *Top Gun*. Meanwhile, the Air Force ended up choosing the McDonnell Douglas F-15 Eagle and the General Dynamics F-16 Fighting Falcon. The Air Force decision to produce two distinct aircraft is best understood not from a mission- or cost-driven perspective but rather as the result of deliberate efforts by the so-called fighter Mafia—a cadre of mid-level Air Force officers who downplayed modern technologies like missiles and radar in pursuit of recreating the mythic ideal of World War I-era one-on-one combat between opposing knights of the air.

Hankins lists five defining characteristics of fighter pilot culture, which remained remarkably constant despite enormous technological change between its origins in World War I and the 1990-91 Gulf War. These include aggressiveness; independence; heroic imagery; an ethos that viewed technology as an extension of the pilot; and a competitive, close-knit community that treated outsiders as "unworthy." Hankins observes: "Rather than constituting a sixth element, masculinity is more properly understood as embedded in all of the other five." He is careful to note, "The degree to which individual pilots adhered to this myth forms a spectrum," with some rejecting it outright while others "took it to cartoonish extremes" (pp. 3-4). Building on the work of other scholars who have identified and analyzed fighter pilot culture, Hankins focuses on one instance where this culture clearly influenced technological decision-making.

Concerned that the F-4 Phantom—a fast but heavy plane originally designed to use on-board

radar coupled with sophisticated missiles to intercept Soviet bombers headed for the US in any weather, day or night—was not nimble enough for fighter-vs.-fighter combat in the skies over Vietnam, a group of Air Force pilots pushed for the F-4's replacement to be lightweight, simple, and highly maneuverable. Counting on ground-based radar to guide the fighter within visual range of targets, they envisioned a plane that carried only two air-to-air missiles, and these only to force the adversary into an old-fashioned, close-quarters "dogfight" where superior pilot skill combined with the plane's built-in gun (a feature noticeably missing from the F-4) would ensure victory.

Those who want accounts of air-to-air combat intermingled with scholarly analysis may prefer ***Tiger Check: Automating the U.S. Air Force Fighter Pilot in Air-to-Air Combat, 1950–1980*** (2017), in which Steven Fino takes readers inside the cockpit to explore the often contentious negotiations between pilots and engineers in an ongoing battle over the role of technology vs. pilot skill. Hankins instead focuses on a very different battle—between die-hard fighter pilots and high-ranking policymakers—as he takes the reader into the halls of the Pentagon, as well as behind the closed doors of Washington, DC, hotel rooms where a small team of rogue Air Force officers worked closely with engineers from two aerospace firms to determine the design specs for the F-16 before the military ever issued a formal Request for Proposals.

Hankins describes how, starting in the mid-1960s, with Air Force pilot Major (eventually Colonel) John Boyd as a leading proponent, these mid-level officers and civilian engineers sought to steer the Air Force into procuring a "pure fighter" that met their vision. However, the project evolved into what would become the F-15, a larger and heavier aircraft with advanced radar to identify faraway targets, numerous missiles capable of engaging enemy planes beyond visual range, and the ability to perform multiple missions including bombing. Convinced that only they knew what was best for national defense, Boyd and other members of the fighter Mafia became so disgusted with Air Force bureaucracy that they embarked on a self-styled guerrilla campaign against their own service to introduce the pared-down design that would eventually become the F-16 (pp. 9, 96).

Even with its focus on how pilot culture influenced the supposedly rational military procurement process—a classic case of social construction of technology—this book provides plenty of anecdotes that drive the narrative and make for enjoyable reading. For instance, when Colonel Everest Riccioni, an arrogant and abrasive proponent of the F-16, briefed Air Force vice chief of staff General Robert Meyer (no relation to the author of this review), Riccioni—who had never downed an enemy plane—opened with a refresher on the fundamentals of dogfighting. Meyer, who had scored twenty-six aerial victories in WWII and Korea, not only threw Riccioni out of the room but ordered him reassigned to Korea to get him away from the Pentagon (p. 103). Although this incident is a just speedbump in the eventual development of the F-16, it highlights the oversized egos of the key players involved.

Carefully researched, logically organized, and well written, ***Flying Camelot*** delivers as promised. As such, it has earned a place alongside Fino's ***Tiger Check*** on this reviewer's undergraduate syllabus and graduate reading list.

Alan Meyer teaches aviation history and history of technology at Auburn University. He is the author of ***Weekend Pilots: Technology, Masculinity, and Private Aviation in Postwar America*** (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015).

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