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*Fighter Aces: Knights of the Sky*, a 2017 book by John Sadler and Rosie Serdiville, examines the history of the fighter pilot. It largely focuses on the First and Second World Wars, though the final chapter briefly details developments up to the 1982 Falklands War. It was published as part of Casemate’s Short History series, which, as advertised by the publisher, aims to provide “accessible, authoritative and entertaining introductions to military history topics.” The book potentially addresses a gap in the historiography, as there has been little prior work taking an accessible approach to this topic. But the book is not just a military history. By using the phrase “knights of the sky,” Sadler and Serdiville highlight the fighter pilot’s status as a cultural and mythological icon. The fighter pilot’s place in the historiography is often rooted in a sense of privileged glamour, which is prevalent in this book as well. The book therefore needs to be considered in terms of both how well it presents an accessible history of the fighter pilot and how well it analyzes and engages with the concept of fighter pilot mythology.

Many of the fundamentals of the book are good. Sadler and Serdiville’s grasp of the purely technical side of the subject, like the names and purposes of aircraft, purpose of the pilots, tactics used, and dates in service, is sufficient for an introductory work. The content is logically arranged to take the reader through the chronological development of the fighter pilot as a person alongside the technology they used and the conflicts they fought in. Small information boxes provide extra details about certain topics or people, allowing the interested reader to learn more without breaking up the flow of the narrative. The prose is enthusiastic and engaging throughout. Sometimes, though, it is too enthusiastic. For example, the book’s prologue tells the story of American fighter ace James Jabara’s accidental shoot down of his wingman Dick Frailey in 1953 during the Korean War. But the significance of this story, a damning example of Jabara’s arrogance, is lost among Sadler and Serdiville’s use of phrases like “spent cases rattling from the wings to drop like sparkling brass confetti” (p. 7). Similarly intense passages appear throughout the book, potentially distracting from the historical points being made. Generally, though, the book succeeds in terms of accessibility.

The book also appears at first to do well in examining the mythology. Near the start of the book, the authors lay out a clear picture. First, with lines like “It was a dream of glory, those aerial bouts … it must have felt nearer to the tales of ancient warriors than to the world of Tommy Atkins,” they depict how aerial fighting was glamorized (p. 14). Second, by specifying that “in reality, it was very
far from glorious," they make it clear that the glamorous view was far from the truth. Finally, by noting how, for the public, "The silver aircraft soaring above a desolate hell of mangled trench-scapes endowed those flyers with God-like qualities," the authors illustrate that the public ultimately engaged with the glamorous view, in spite of the reality. These three points are an excellent foundation for understanding the mythology. The narrative about the mythology continues throughout the book. Noting how "we love to glamorize the past," the book ends with a consideration of what will happen to this mythology in a future where there may be no need for fighter pilots (p. 156).

Despite these positive aspects of the book, there are also some issues. The early parts of the analysis assume that the mythology developed the same way among the different Allied nations. The authors also quote British prime minister David Lloyd George's 1917 speech about flyers being "the knighthood of this war" as being representative of the views of the British nation as a whole (p. 15). Neither of these assumptions is reflected by the wider evidence available, though both of these mistakes are common in the historiography. The authors could also have provided more detail on the mythology as a cultural phenomenon rather than a purely military one. There is a brief mention of W. E. Johns's "Biggles" novels but no mention, for example, of interwar aviation films like the 1927 Wings, winner of the first ever Academy Award for Best Picture. Such films did much to drive the mythology, and their absence from this book is unfortunate.

But it is not these relatively small omissions that are the main problem. Instead, the authors' efforts are undermined by an overriding issue with the book. A detailed reading reveals significant problems with the authors' use of sources. In the First World War section of the book, there are repeated errors. For example, the authors misrepresent both the origins and the nature of the Immelmann turn, and the claim that British ace James McCudden left his manuscript memoir and medals with his fiancée is pure fantasy. McCudden actually left his medals with his sister and the manuscript with the mother of a friend. The more errors I saw, the more I worried about where the authors got their information. They are often unclear about their sources, an issue not helped by the source notes at the back covering six chapters when the book only has five. Some fundamental issues are on show. For example, in discussing the experiences of British pilot Alan Bott, the authors describe him spotting a formation of enemy airplanes stacked "like the rungs of a venetian blind" (p. 45). Considering the enthusiastic style taken by the authors, this appears as their own words, but it is in fact a direct quote from Bott's 1917 book, An Airman's Outings. Not only is this phrase not identified as Bott's words via use of quotation marks, but An Airman's Outings is also never cited as a source. This suggests a lack of care.

A bigger issue, however, is in the use of sources the authors do acknowledge. Much of their analysis of the events of First World War aviation combat comes from Alan Clark's 1973 book, Aces High: The War in the Air over the Western Front. Relying so heavily on a source that was forty-five years old when this book was published is problematic. The authors would have benefited from consulting much more up-to-date analyses, like James Pugh's 2017 The Royal Flying Corps, the Western Front and the Control of the Air, 1914–1918. Worse, however, is that Aces High is not a reliable source. Clark did not cite any of his work and mainly related stories he felt sounded good. It is the origin of many mistakes that have been corrected by other books over the years.

This poor use of sources is most visible in the book's enthusiastic depiction of Canadian ace William Barker's Victoria Cross action in October 1918, a single-handed engagement with a large number of enemy planes that was to become one of the foundations of fighter pilot mythology. The
authors describe how "three-score enemy now confronted" Barker, before describing his fight with language that differs little from that of a Biggles novel: "Despite his wound and despite the odds, he just charged, knocking down the plane that had first fired on him. One down and only 59 to go! He swiftly made that just 58, his second victim exploding in flames" (p. 79). The problem is that almost none of the details described by Sadler and Serdiville is true. The true nature of the Barker fight has been repeatedly examined in the historiography. For example, Wayne Ralph’s excellent 1997 biography, Barker VC: The Life, Death and Legend of Canada’s Most Decorated War Hero, has traced how the number of planes Barker was meant to have fought swelled significantly, as much as five times the actual number, in mythological retellings of the fight over time and demonstrated how there is no actual evidence that Barker shot down anyone at all. Clark, though, just related the fake propaganda version of this fight in Aces High, and Sadler and Serdiville have simply and uncritically repeated that here, adding their own dramatic prose. The authors’ failure to check their facts means they have presented an untrue story as historical record. But by repackaging a fictional version of Barker’s fight for a modern audience, the book also undermines its authority to study objectively the mythology of the fighter pilot, as it is now spreading that mythology itself. This is a particular shame, as studying the stories surrounding Barker’s fight could have been an excellent starting point for any reader interested in how such mythologies developed.

The authors likewise lean heavily on a single source for their section on the Battle of Britain, Len Deighton’s 1977 Fighter: The True Story of the Battle of Britain. This is a less problematic work than Aces High, but relying on it again ignores the decades of research that have been done since Deighton was writing. I soon noticed more mistakes in the Second World War section, like the unsupported assertion that the interwar Royal Air Force “ruled out” the possibility of engaging enemy fighters, and it barely mentions the Polish and Czechoslovakian contribution to the battle (p. 86). It was hard to continue to have faith in the narrative given by the authors in light of their errors.

This is unfortunate. Considering the book’s other strengths, if the authors had only taken more care with their sources and not presented fiction as fact, this could have been an excellent introductory guide to the topic. As it is, I can only recommend it with reservations. It remains a reasonable and accessible basic summary of the development of the fighter pilot. But anyone reading it must maintain a skeptical eye when engaging with the authors’ constant uncritical use of anecdotes that are presented as history, as they can easily mislead.
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