From Birdwomen to Skygirls: American Girls’ Aviation Stories

By F Erisman


This is a sequel to Erisman’s first survey of aviation stories for young readers, Boys’ Books, Boys’ Dreams and the Mystique of Flight (2006) reviewed in this journal August 2009. Three famous aviatrices shape this socio-literary analysis which covers the years 1910 to 1960. The pioneering aviator and journalist Harriet Quimby inspired the first stories for girls and in Erisman’s view, her fatal crash (1912) nipped the genre in the bud by making ‘the idea of girl’s flying unpalatable’. Amelia Earhart helped to revive the genre in the 1930s but more importantly raised expectations for equality in civil aviation. The experience of Helen Richey destroyed all such hopes. In 1934 she became the first woman pilot for a passenger carrier but faced such antagonism from male colleagues that she resigned. Not until 1973 did a woman again take over the controls of a passenger airline.

Barred from the cockpit, women became the public face of the passenger airlines. In 1934 a new series, Jane, Stewardess of the Airlines described a career which initially was treated so seriously that it required a nursing qualification. By 1960, however, marketers set the standards of the profession and the books: the last aviation series in the 1950s features air hostess Beth Dean described by Erisman as a ‘company clone’ whose work is just a stepping stone to marriage.

Erisman’s basic narrative is not entirely new. The aviation historian Joseph Corn outlined this depressing evolution from air pioneers to air hostesses in a 1979 article, ‘Making Flying ‘Thinkable’: Women Pilots and the Selling of Aviation, 1927-1940’ (American Quarterly Vol 31 No 4 Autumn 1979) — oddly enough not cited in Erisman’s bibliography. It would have been interesting if he had responded fully to Corn’s thesis about a conscious business strategy that exploited women first as pilots to sell safety to the general public and then as stewardesses to sell in-flight comfort as well as ‘the brand’. There also is not enough reference to the Depression and broader economic influences in the interwar years that created the glass ceiling. Nevertheless Erisman has performed a valuable service by calling attention to a forgotten genre that illuminates the social history of aviation.

Eugenie Buchan

Principles and Practice of Aviation Medicine

Edited by C Curdt-Christiansen et al


As is my usual practice, I have read this book from cover to cover, in the hope, that I may learn from the text and make a balanced criticism. Sadly this book has a number of readability problems which make some sections very difficult to follow. This has nothing to do with the fact that the book was originally written for a German audience and then globalised into English. There are many spelling mistakes and grammatical errors.

It states at the outset that this is a textbook for Aviation Medical Examiners written by AMEs. If only this were so.

The section on Nutrition contains many 18-24 lettered words that are repeated and not abbreviated. This makes reading difficult as one has to keep going back to check if the new word is the same word or if it has been modified.

The cardiology section is too informative and somewhat confusing. It has been written by very knowledgeable cardiologists who have written it at their own knowledge level, which is not the same as that of the humble AME looking for an explanation. I must take issue with the authors who state that the AME is able on the information provided to make cardiological decisions. In the real civil licensing aviation medicine world, the decisions must be taken by
the Regulators, not their national AMEs.

Some chapters are very good and well written, but let down by poorly explained diagrams and pictures.

The Psychiatric section is interesting but dwells at length on problems which are not really the concern of an AME, in that many of the problem cases will never sensibly get relicensed. The Editor should have picked up on words like ‘Suicidality’. This is not a word in general use across Europe, nor is ‘phenomenological orientation’. There are many other such words in this chapter which may be understood by clinical psychologists but not by the readership that this book is aimed at.

Psychology is used in different ways in different countries. In Germany there is a very formalised approach to the subject, not seen in many other nations. It has been well explained and a case made for more intervention in certain circumstances. This is not understood or appreciated in other parts of the world.

In the chapter on ‘Neuropsychological Disorders after Brain Injury’ there is a lack of simple diagrams explaining where the injury referred to in the text, is, in the brain. It was otherwise very interesting and informative.

The remaining chapters are written clearly and are of value to the aviation medicine physician. The Appendices are also useful including describing in detail ICAO Annex 1 ‘Personnel Licensing’ and the FAA basic medical regulations including the certification procedures.

Would I recommend this book to go on the AME shelf, probably not until it has been rewritten to make it readable for all of us, and not just the few.

Dr Ian Perry, FRAeS

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**The Origins of Air War: the Development of Military Air Strategy in World War I**

**By R F Grattan**


This is something of a surprise. First it’s appearance — it is a small unassuming volume, which does not have the appearance of anything special. It is. Secondly it’s title — The first part would suggest yet another book on the early years of military aviation. Yes it is, but the second part of the title is perhaps more descriptive. This book is not an account of the day-to-day confrontations which brought air power into being as a weapon of war. It is about strategy and how it is made.

The introductory chapter is perhaps as close as this book gets to being a standard book on the origins of air war. Major events, before and during WW1 are briefly described, together with the factors which influenced them. This chapter, together with Appendix 1 a time line 1914-1918, help the reader establish and easily reference the context for issues and events discussed in the book. The ‘Time Line’ helpfully follows two strands, general events and aviation events.

The subsequent chapters move swiftly on to discuss the important factors which inevitably influence both tactics and strategy. After chapters on organisation, aircraft, equipment and weapons, there follows a chapter on the men. This chapter discusses a number of the key players influencing the policy and development of British air power, before introducing some of the personalities involved in the application of air power on both sides during WW1. These ‘aces’ were the developers of successful tactics, men who analysed actions in order to give themselves a competitive advantage. The following chapter discusses roles and tactics in some depth, moving forward from a time when the primary function was reconnaissance, to a time when air power had matured to become a major differentiating factor in the outcome of war.

The penultimate chapter concerns strategy, defining tactics as the means of winning battles, and strategy as the way of winning wars. After some discussion of the concept of winning, the author considers strategy development in the context which has been set by the foregoing chapters. The final chapter presents an analysis and conclusion. These two chapters really are the centrepiece of this work. All of the preceding chapters serve to set the conditions for progress toward the final outcome.

This is an extremely well researched book, which has the feel of an academic paper, yet it remains readable. I believe that this book justifies a place in the collection of anyone seriously interested in the development of air power and its place in warfare, indeed it is sufficiently wide-ranging that it may take the place of several other books. This attribute goes some way toward justifying its price. The main chapters are followed by no less than five appendices and all chapters are thoroughly referenced to an impressive list of sources.

Ian Wilson, CEng, FRAeS