

Book Reviews

The Quick and the Dead

By William Waterton

Reviewed by Flight Lieutenant James Brooks

Introduction

Aviation regulatory bodies in the 21st Century are now demanding increasingly greater control with accountability, airworthiness assurance and risk management being underpinned by reliable evidence and proof that every safety related decision is sound. Whether this current culture was born due to past mistakes or increasingly complex technology, it is nevertheless a far distant cry from the apparently relaxed safety culture, which frustrated the author William Waterton, in this auto-biographical account of post war test jet flying with Gloster Aircraft Company. Although originally written in 1956 and out of print for many years, this recently re-published work is as relevant today as it was in 1956.

The Quick and the Dead follows Second World War veteran William Waterton's fascinating professional life as Chief Test Pilot for Gloster Aircraft Company from his point of view, with the apparent objective to highlight that aviation cultures have to change. The book is written as the RAF refused to grant Waterton a permanent commission so he entered the commercial world at a time when the jet age was approaching and the strength of the British aircraft industry was subsiding in favour of American and Russian dominance. This, Waterton argues throughout the book, was largely due to the fall in free enterprise of British aircraft companies. "The Services have received a number of dud designs since the war. Men have died in them" (p87). This sparks articulately detailed examples of how aircraft designers and civil servants failed to cooperate with test pilots; ignoring their concerns and putting them and front line pilots' lives at risk.

However, a key difference to other books in this genre is his involvement as a company commercial representative, flying the globe showing off his aircraft. There are plentiful examples of his exciting endeavours relived with humorous and melancholy moments, which balance well against the technical facets of flying diverse machines and navigating great distances. His interactions and relationships with heads of state, princesses and military chiefs to name a few, add a personal touch to the book as unlike other military men biographies, Waterton does not detail his personal life. Instead of family ties and romantic interludes that often populate similar biographies, Waterton prefers to detail these professional relationships with foreign personalities and also his fellow pilots and bosses. The human touch is also made up for when he explains his emotional turmoil when dealing with unsafe management decisions and peer deaths, which are sadly common themes throughout the book.

Open source searches of Waterton reveal that he was a fearlessly critical man who tested his superiors as well as the aircraft. However, any indications he gives to this in the book are minor in nature compared to the highly proficient manner in which he approached his profession. Criticisms of aircraft, management and himself are all equally supported with ample evidence and a balanced view thereby making his arguments credible and authentic.

A significant observation is that in many ways this book illustrates how Waterton was ahead of his time. As a person, Waterton openly questioned the decisions of his superiors and challenged those who he deemed were ignoring flight safety. The post war culture was not ready for this rebelliousness, and, as a result, his credibility suffered. Nevertheless, it is difficult to disagree with his argument that so many were exercising poor flight safety and displaying an ignorance to risk. Unlike the safety driven culture of today, Waterton states that the "*...results of an investigation are never submitted or released. . . In the Services, as well as in civil flying, all the information relating to accidents is not made known. I can think of no parallel evasion of the law – a cause of death being kept hush-hush*" (p182). His account leads the reader to believe that he was a lone voice, concerned with the potential impact of having such an undisciplined culture. Furthermore, he also repetitively highlights the importance of the competence of pilots, designers and engineers as well as oversight of activities and assurance methods in order to confirm that individuals and organizations are doing what they were asked to do. These are key themes of how aviation is managed today in both the military and civilian environment, which will lead the reader to realise the significant legacy he has left behind. Indeed it could be argued that the British military aviation environment failed to learn from the lessons identified in this book until the Nimrod disaster of 2006. Now it is post 2006 and the formation of the Military Aviation Authority has been established it would appear that Waterton's legacy now flourishes with the competence of pilots, designers and engineers being recorded, scrutinised and reviewed as he may have wanted.

Waterton's writing style also provides something which numerous other military test pilot authors do not. Exhilarating accounts such as *Chuck Yeagar: An Autobiography* provide plentiful testimonies of how he performed valiant achievements including breaking the speed barrier

despite having cracked ribs and copious fun times with drunken flying buddies. Aviation detail is high in many flight test books so would therefore only satisfy the keenest aviation enthusiast. However Waterton's writing style is simpler than most with limited acronyms and specialist language yet he provides enough detail for the enthusiast to benefit. As a result, he expertly opens up the reader access significantly compared to many other military books, and as a result *The Quick and The Dead* would be a pleasant read for anyone, whether in the business of military aviation or not. The book is however expected to be especially interesting to those involved in contemporary flight safety, airworthiness and related subjects. Whether there is a commercial drive to satisfy customers or operational drive to fly more hours, modern aviation questioning and learning cultures are very different compared to Waterton's world. Instead of aircraft being pushed to the production line before the test pilot is content that it is safe to fly, today Waterton would have had a greater influence on aircraft safety records. Equally, however, he would also be only one of a team of test and evaluation, operational and public relations staff in the modern age; losing his freedom that he so enjoyed back then. The book is therefore of great relevance to the modern reader. It is a reminder of what our world could be like if we loosen our grip on aviation safety. Regulation may slow us down and may erode the amount of output military personnel strive for, however *The Quick and the Dead* is a judicious account of what could happen if we ignore these constraints, especially at a time where the cultural acceptance threshold for military deaths is ever decreasing.

The book does not however take away the romantic heroism that so many pilots such as Waterton demonstrated in this new era of fast jet testing. This book will excite and, for most readers, generate empathy with the author. He, like others, put their life on the line in the interest of others and in some cases it is only more recently that we are learning from the mistakes he was desperately trying to avoid.

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