

Book Review

Boyd: The Fighter Pilot who changed the Art of War

By Robert Coram

Reviewed by Group Captain Shaun Harvey

Introduction

This is a biography of a fascinating officer and essential reading for all airmen. It will appeal to a wide variety of interests. Aircrew and would-be fighter pilots will enjoy the examination of the ultra-competitive '40-second Boyd,' who at the Nellis Fighter Weapons School maintained the stunning record of defeating all-comers in air-to-air combat within 40 seconds. Readers with a technical bias will enjoy Boyd, the research pilot who developed and documented the first USAF fighter tactics manual and then a theory of air manoeuvre (against the express wishes of his chain of command) and marshalled his ideas up the steep dogmatic slopes of the USAF planning staff to deliver air superiority in fighters such as the F-16. Those who study leadership will discover Boyd the officer as a zealous maverick who demanded and received unflinching loyalty and commitment from his carefully-chosen acolytes. Finally, blue-sky thinkers will appreciate Boyd the visionary, who studied strategy and warfare and advanced a theory of winning that has helped transform our view of the use of air power, driven the US Marines' theories of manoeuvre warfare and is still advancing the competitive philosophies of business gurus.

Col John Boyd is best known to us for his OODA loop, and this may be his greatest contribution to warfighting. But as this book reveals, there is far more to it than the linear, repetitive sequence of Observe, Orientate, Decide and Act that we tend to describe orbits around. Indeed, there is far more to Boyd than the OODA loop. Here, Coram presents us Boyd and his theories as a life-study in application, learning, adaptation and winning.

Readers wishing fully to understand OODA loops, fast transitions and Boyd's other theories of combat will be offered a thorough and comprehensive introduction to the Col's research, mindset and philosophy. However, Boyd regrettably published very little of his work, so to take the study of this man further, it will be necessary to research the material on the internet (including YouTube lecture material from Boyd himself) and the books of Frans Osinga (*Science, Strategy and War: The Strategic Theory of John Boyd*. Routledge; 2006) and Grant Hammond (*The Mind of War: John Boyd and American Security*. Smithsonian Books, 2004). Nonetheless, this Biography provides the perfect preface to further study.

Coram's examination of Boyd's behaviour in and out of work also makes for fascinating reading. From his propensity for 'hosing' Generals in his briefings to the way in which he encouraged his students and acolytes; Boyd's approach embodies the term '*maverick*'. The '*to be or to do?*' speech Boyd would give to his junior officers, is just as pertinent in today's military as it was then in the USAF and justifies the book's price tag alone. There is also the tale of the relationship Boyd had with his acolytes; those who surrounded and supported Boyd, fighting the 'Pentagon Wars'. Without this unusual and eclectic mix of committed supporters, Boyd could not have achieved the influence he did over programmes such as the F-16 and A-10.

Robert Coram took nearly 3 years to write this book. His research is meticulous and his presentation clear, highlighting his journalistic roots. Importantly, he doesn't shy from a critical examination of Boyd's character as a maverick, obsessive genius and dreadful family man. While the story of Boyd's early days is fascinating, it sets the conditions for the more exciting adventures to follow, especially those in the Pentagon. As Boyd collects his acolytes and wages his own war on those Generals he sees as dogmatic and negligent, the book gathers momentum and becomes a real 'page-turner'.

Ironically, the USAF has yet to come to terms fully with the impact of John Boyd. For an officer whose theories shaped so fundamentally the tactics of air combat and the design of its platforms and weapon systems, Boyd is barely remembered by his own Service. There is a small building bearing his name at Nellis AFB, a road at Maxwell AFB called 'The OODA Loop' and during my last visit, I was surprised to find that the otherwise comprehensive bookshop at Wright-Patterson AFB stocked no copies of this biography. In contrast, the US Marines honour Boyd, base much of their combat thinking on Boyd's work and still deliver his lectures to students at Quantico.

This is a must have book for all airmen. It forces the reader to think about what it is to be a warrior, an officer, change agent, colleague and a human being. An enjoyable read - try it and make up your own mind on this fascinating fighter pilot.

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