

Century of Flight

by **PETER J ALMOND**

Price: £9.99

ISBN: 09339392-5

Publisher: W H Smith



Although this is a small book, it is a real gem because it goes far beyond the aircraft and pilots featured in aviation history books and tries to tell the story of the impact of flight across the full range of human development. Peter Almond has given prominence to airports and how flying for most people has become either a hassle of delays and crowds or a simple move from a lounge/shopping mall to a lounge/cinema/restaurant, with little sense of the outside world at all. Aviation has had the most remarkable impact on bringing people together, eg the British 'GI brides' returning to Britain with their kids in 1953 (p 251). The opening essay was written in a non-technical way to reach a wide audience, and the main section kicked off (p 36) with the beautiful Aviator's Poem (accompanied by the perfect Spitfire picture from Getty's archive).

Each caption tells a story or provides a context. The author has tried to show the real fragility of the early planes, such as the 1910 death of Charles Rolls (of Rolls-Royce) (p 68-9), and the determination of women to share in the growth of the vast new technology from the start (p 74), through to Amelia Earhart and Amy Johnson (front cover), and the women auxiliaries of World War II (p 205). He has also tried to show how aviation events produce the century's most sensational pictures of news, politics and history, whether it is Bleriot crossing the channel, Lindbergh crossing the Atlantic, the Dambusters, Gary Powers' U2 shot down over Russia (p 296-7) or 2 hijacked planes crashing into the World Trade Centre in New York (p 424-5). This is the most up-to-date book of its kind, and includes the Afghanistan operation. Some people may be surprised at the relative skimpiness of World War II (and dividing it at 1943), but in the context of 100 years Almond argues that it works because pre-1943 was mostly defensive for the allies, post was primarily offensive. The Dambusters and Doolittle Raid were picked for their morale-boosting impacts on the US and British publics.

The intended point of Almond's selections was not just simply to show the variety of aircraft types but what impact they had in real situations. Thus it mattered less that the first atomic bombing in 1945 came from a B-29 aircraft than the human and physical devastation it unleashed (p 242-3) (nuclear radiation burns are rarely, if ever, seen in aviation books), and helps explain why air power became the most powerful military force on earth. The power of helicopters is in their utility. Thus the air ambulance idea couldn't be more dramatically demonstrated than the picture in Pakistan (p 400).

And then there is just the sheer starkness and beauty of flight. The sound barrier broken (p 414), Stealth (p 389), the Vulcan (p 285), Pacific Clipper (p 181), Wright Flyer (p 63) etc. And the fun – early aviation: p 65, p 128, p 161; middle: p 325, p 336; modern: p 359, p 435, p 442. Not to mention the bizarre: from the first carrier landing (p 112), to the wind blast tests (p 292) to the microlight over Hong Kong (p 440).

Arguably, the book could have been bigger, to show off Getty's remarkable pictures to best effect (as in his first book with Getty, *Aviation: The Early Years* (Konnemann 1997)). But then there is a trade off for price, and this is a transportable book. It is also available in the US through Barnes and Noble. There is a French edition and soon to be Italian and Spanish editions. All in all this is a comprehensive and imaginative book, and very good value for money.

This article has been republished online with Open Access.

Ministry of Defence © Crown Copyright 2023. The full printed text of this article is licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0. To view this licence, visit <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/>. Where we have identified any third-party copyright information or otherwise reserved rights, you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned. For all other imagery and graphics in this article, or for any other enquires regarding this publication, please contact: Director of Defence Studies (RAF), Cormorant Building (Room 119), Shrivenham, Swindon, Wiltshire SN6 8LA.

 **ROYAL
AIR FORCE**
**Centre for Air and
Space Power Studies**

OGL