



Martin Francis (2008) *The Flyer: British Culture and the Royal Air Force 1935-1945*, Oxford University Press, 266 pages, ISBN 978-0-19-927748-3, £30.

This reviewer approached 'The Flyer' from his perspective of teaching culture as a vital part of understanding its important role in the performance of international business policy. Hence I wished to analyse whether the book delivers insights on the aerial warfare which go beyond the many books written about the two main commands, Fighter and Bomber, and their roles in events such as the Battle of Britain and the strategic bombing campaigns.

Simply put, culture is often articulated as "this is how things are done around here". Much early research on culture was carried out by Hofstede through examining how managers in the computer giant IBM made decisions that were strongly influenced by the national cultures existing in their individual countries of operation. There was the recognition that the best laid plans would be wasted should the people required to implement them lacked confidence in the strategic competence of their managers. Or disputed the plans themselves if alien to their cultures, were not given the required skills and training to implement them successfully leading to low morale. Even now in Britain, too many managers fail to provide the leadership their increasingly knowledgeable workforces expect. Today is a more cynical age than the jingoistic age seventy years ago that *The Flyer* is examining. As I write, we witness the 'corruption' within the Palace of Westminster of so-called 'honourable members'.

Professor Francis has written a book of strong academic standing. He divides *The Flyer* into eight themes: pre-War hooligans into war-time heroes, a man's world, flyers as lovers, flyers as husbands, the environment of fear, honourable men or psychopaths, their re-introduction into a peace time Britain, and their place in modern literature. In the Introduction, Prof. Francis sets out the sociological dimension to his study. In doing so he could be said to be reflecting the subject's current interests in gender issues, homosexuality, and the changing role of men. Understandably such an approach may alienate military historians. However he does recognize the multi-national membership of the Commands including Coastal Command, the important supporting role taken by women, and the psychological traumas that warfare brings.

The struggle to remain independent of the two senior services after the Great War became reflected in how the RAF evolved its own meritocratic culture, not shaped by officers drawn from a relatively limited social background. Whereas the Great War's flyers over the trenches were chivalric fighters to the British public, Japanese and German bomber fleets in action over Shanghai and Guernica began to show what could happen to their homes if Britain went to war. Though the image of the glamorous and carefree playboy unfairly persisted into 1940, the efforts of the pilots, fighting and too often dying in view of the civilians below, immortalized later by Winston Churchill, changed public attitudes towards these young men. As in today's youth, men tend to have a laid-back approach to dress - contrary to women. That informality differentiated the RAF from the other services, often to their annoyance when liaising over combined offensives. A drinking culture, common in British cities today, helped the often transient bonding of the flyers, whether in fighters or bombers, together in a masculine approach to the threats presented by battle with its casualties. Nevertheless class-bias and petty snobbery persisted, even with a VC winner such as Guy Gibson.



The weakening of the fighting spirit brought about by falling in love still has mythical status – the Samsom syndrome. Hence sexual restraint putting duty before deep love was accepted by many as a safeguard of that spirit. Nevertheless there was contrast with the Great War's flyers where sexual release with a prostitute was a substitute. The later war's flyers flew off British airfields, met with women serving on them and had access to local hostelrys. Courtship could blossom into marriage, emotional release from the traumas of combat was possible. The women 'plotters' and aircraft 'ferry pilots' were seen as being especially glamorous, the latter sometimes being used to improve the morale of squadrons which had suffered heavy losses. Clio played her role alongside Mars and had to continue when her Mars was posted as 'missing'.

But when courtship led to marriage, powerful emotions could arise, especially where families lived on or near the bases – so wives soon knew if a flight returning from a bombing mission had lost many planes. Gibson had his wife work in a distant munitions factory to ease her worries about the missions he was flying. Many pilots felt that loyalty to a wife could affect that owed to their crews. Marriage to their 'girl-brides' was put off until the war was over, but often the flyers were killed in action before its end. Yet many found family domesticity was the antidote to combat. It was not one available to the army forces in North Africa and Burma.

Men in occupations where injury and death are strong possibilities acknowledge fear. Grand Prix drivers of past decades had mortality rates similar to bomber crews. Recollecting their races, former British World Champions have spoken of managing fear, even when team mates were killed. Though not all flyers were conscripts, fear affected most, either about being killed or dying through a particular cause, such as the fear of drowning if the aircraft was forced to ditch in the sea. Understandably many became superstitious. Also the fear of fear was present - by letting down comrades and being thought a coward. Lord Moran first articulated the path of stress in his observations of the psychological behaviour of Great War fighter pilots, from training into combat performance followed by post-traumatic stress. A similar pattern was repeated for bomber crews in the USAAF. Confessions to women, lovers or otherwise, often helped: this means of relief was unavailable to the Great War pilots in combat above the trenches. Later flyers writing about their own deaths were not to see it in jingoistic patriotism but in terms of their families, their homes and doing the best job they could.

Focusing on flyers who escaped death but suffered severe burns, such as Richard Hillary, or loss of limbs, such as Colin Hodgkinson (though the result of a pre-war accident), 'A Darker Blue' shows how disablement was linked to the risk of losing masculinity; not always helped by an aversion of some women to the injuries. Of course, severe facial disfigurements were too obvious (a consequence of high-octane fuel tanks being located in front of and close to their faces) when at social events with civilians, even after the best treatments, both medical and societal, provided by Archibald McIndoe, the famous plastic surgeon. Prof. Francis then diverts into examples of men suffering physiological changes as results of their experiences and others masquerading in RAF uniforms for criminal purposes including murder.

Part of the weakness of the earlier sections was in mixing real people and real events with characters from novels and plays. Even when some authors have served as flyers, such as Richard Hillary, imagined events can creep in to give the narratives more drama. Yet real



events were sometimes hidden to avoid showing that those fighting a just war may commit war crimes even if only at platoon or company level. News of the shooting of some German SS prisoners in the dunes behind the Normandy beaches did reach the Allied armies fighting in Italy (Major APR Canfor, pers.comm.) As the author does highlight, contradictory behaviours were not welcome to civilian readers and theatre goers wanting their heroes to be like Sir Lancelot. The RAF drew its personnel from a wide spectrum of society so featured their strengths and weaknesses, albeit modified by their responses to the personal experiences of combat.

The often loving relationship between flyers and their machines is a masculine trait continuing in modern Britain between men and their cars, identifiable in Jenson Button and his Brawn car during this year's Formula 1 racing season. The aesthetic pleasure many pilots felt in the artistic lines of their flying machines mirrored their feelings towards beautiful women, especially those they were able to merge with in spirit if not in body. Though the idea of a fighter pilot in a Spitfire could be related back, in the public mind, to medieval knights and their warhorses in the lists, this was more difficult one to accept for the crew in their Lancaster on a bombing run to Berlin. Revenge for 'what they did to us' would carry more weight with the public after the Blitz of so many British cities.

Prof. Francis completes his book by covering the flyers' transition from total war into the flawed peace. From performing well in destroying German cities and their citizens, they had to experience the loss of intense comradeship in the return to living within increasingly fragmented communities. However films such as *The Dambusters* helped continue the grateful thanks for what the young men had done though understandably this diminished with the passage of time as the fruits of victory turned sour in leading up to the Suez fiasco. Even some women in the WAAF found re-integration difficult. For the Poles and the Czechs, integration became impossible as the Soviet regimes which took control of their countries did not want to weaken the image of the Red Army as the only victors. Black personnel faced racism, colonial flyers found the loosening of Empire's ties diminished respect for having aided Britain in her hour of need. But overall most flyers re-integrated back into civilian society pleased with what they had achieved and grateful to have survived. They had 'grown up' during the five years of hostilities and knew they had been an important part of Britain's 'finest hour'.

In concluding the issues raised in the book I still have reservations about the accuracy of using the word culture. However in describing features of flyers' lives they do give insights into them that have been too often distorted in articles, books and films. Without wishing to put off potential purchasers, by setting aside its limitations this well written book can be purchased as an academic appraisal of how RAF and its personnel performed during their finest hour in turning amateur conscript/volunteer intakes into a professional force which did so much towards the eventual Allied victory in 1945.

For those seeking further insights, some 55 pages cover notes and the bibliography.

George Bailey