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Samuel Hynes, *The Unsubstantial Air: American Flyers in the First World War*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014. Pp. xii, 322. ISBN 978-0-374-27800-7.

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The Unsubstantial Air is an exquisitely written, carefully researched account of American flyers in the First World War, from their selection and training to their combat experiences. Samuel Hynes, Woodrow Wilson Professor of Literature emeritus at Princeton, was himself a US Marine Corps aviator in World War II. He is the author of eight previous books of military history and literary criticism, as well as an award-winning memoir, *The Soldier's Tale*.¹

Hynes notes that the earliest American aviators of World War I were often privileged men of letters, with access to expensive aircraft and training before the war. Flying clubs were formed at Ivy League schools after the war began but before American involvement. Harvard hosted one of the earliest of these organizations, which competed directly with the pilot schools at firms like the Curtiss Aeroplane and Motor Co. Selected for their physical prowess and social ranking, the flyers had often experimented with other high-risk activities like sailing and auto racing. These men were excited to go to war, but also enjoyed a social status that allowed them to avoid the horrors of trench warfare on the Western Front.

These assumptions about flying and class would have consequences for the selection of pilots, but more than that, they would affect the way the young pilots thought about themselves and their pilot culture. From the beginning they would consider themselves an elite, separate from the rest of the military, and a bit superior. They'd be officers and gentlemen, but they would also be adventurers, explorers, and sportsmen, romantic Heroes. An aura of personal danger and possible sudden death would hang over them, and they'd absorb it. It would get into their letters home and into their conversations with one another. They'd fight their war in their own element, apart from the rest of the army, and that separateness would affect the way they lived, and the way they fought and died. (20)

Making extensive use of such primary sources as official documents and letters home to families and loved ones, Hynes tells the stories of the pilots before and during the war. He vividly evokes their exhilaration with flying and their frustrations over the technological limitations of their aircraft: planes of the period were fragile and primitive machines that could be flown only in ideal weather conditions. The pilots frequently complained that they did not get enough time in the air. Furthermore, when they arrived in Europe, most of the American pilots were put to work building aerodromes—unanticipated manual labor for these upper-class airmen. This did not, however, lessen their love for flying and aviation.

The typical route for American pilots before the US entry into the war led through Canada, where they volunteered for the British Royal Air Force or the French Armée de l'Air. Enough Americans joined the latter prior to the war to form their own squadron, the Lafayette Escadrille, under French command. Back in the States, other young pilots joined flying clubs and learned to fly in hopes that the United States would eventually enter the war. Manning obsolescent aircraft, they managed to learn the basics of flight. Once the United States did declare war, American pilots were sent to England and France for further instruction with updated aircraft. Eventually they graduated to combat-ready planes, gained more experience, and were deployed against enemy forces.

Once activated for combat, the pilots had to transition quickly from adventurers out for a lark to warriors willing to fight and die in the air. Hynes recounts their personal stories as they reached for victory in the skies and saw comrades shot down by the enemy. The life expectancy of First World War pilots was short. To cite one well known example, Quentin Roosevelt, youngest son of former President Theodore Roosevelt

1. Subtitle: *Bearing Witness to a Modern War* (NY: Penguin, 1997), winner of the Robert F. Kennedy Book Award in 1998.

was killed in action, shot down by German pilots on 14 July 1918, four months before the war's end, a devastating loss not only for his family, but also his squadron mates.

It should be stressed that Hynes is less concerned with generals like John J. "Blackjack" Pershing or William "Billy" Mitchell, often considered the father of the US Army Air Force, than with recreating the day-to-day lives of the pilots who fought the air war in Europe. As an aviation historian, I strongly recommend Samuel Hynes's absorbing book² to anyone, from beginning students to academic specialists, with an interest in the stories of the American pilots who fought so bravely in the unsubstantial air over the Western Front.

2. He ensures the smooth flow of his narrative in part by foregoing enumerated footnotes in favor of a "Notes" section at the end, with citations keyed to page numbers.