



## *Flying against Fate: Superstition and Allied Aircrews in World War II*

by S.P. MacKenzie.

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Warriors face death every day. Skill, courage, alertness, and equipment get you only so far. In *Flying against Fate*, historian S.P. MacKenzie (Univ. of South Carolina) tackles an understudied<sup>1</sup> sidelight of warfare: the magical beliefs, rituals, and talismans that serve as psychological crutches for those who must repeatedly confront their own mortality. According to cited behavioral studies (19), magical thinking and superstitions offer a sense of agency and control in the killing zones where fate appears random. Allied Bomber Command losses in World War II exceeded 50 percent of aviators (a figure never shared with squadrons), whose mission quotas per “tour” were always adjusted upwards.

The book comprises an introduction, seven chapters, and a conclusion. It lacks illustrations (save on its the cover<sup>2</sup>) of talismans, mascots, jinxes, symbols, and prayer rituals, dressing sequences, knocking on wood, or urination on tail-wheels<sup>3</sup> for good luck—before or after a mission. Chapter 1, “Men against Odds,” discusses the flyers’ chances of dying in crashes or (less often) aerial combat (6). Chapter 2, “Asking for Miracles,” concerns communal prayer events, which were more common in the US Army Air Force than in the Royal Air Force (RAF), though chaplains duly attended to both nations’ fighting forces. Prayers offered during bombing runs over defended targets often sought quid pro quo “deals” with the Almighty. The anecdotal evidence the author cites (26) for the absence of atheists in the trenches of the sky is not persuasive.

In chapter 3, “Talismans and Mascots,” we learn that Bibles were thought to have “quasimagical protective properties” (29)—an example of MacKenzie’s blurring of the line between religion and superstition in discussing Christian and (rarely) Jewish objects and practices. More popular than St. Christopher medals were “trinkets, items of clothing, and toy figures” (30), extending to a desiccated kangaroo’s foot, fresh four-leaf clovers, buckeyes, a pink glass elephant, and rings; a 100th Bomber Group aircraft even carried “a piece of decomposing baloney” once owned by a man who survived his tour of duty (33).<sup>4</sup> Bombardier Les Bartlett had a chain of five charms hanging from his bombsight, and “no less than twenty-six B-29s, fifty-four B-24s, and over sixty B-17s had the adjective ‘lucky’ in the ship names” (37).

Chapter 4 treats “Incantations and Rituals.” Airmen kissing the ground after returning from a mission was understandable, commonplace, and as old as Homeric epic (*Ody.* 13.354—the veteran Odysseus restored to Ithaca). Less easily explained were an air gunner’s moving a pack of cigarettes from a (specifically) rear trouser pocket to a (specifically) left breast pocket on takeoff (47) or kissing the be-

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1. The author does cite Edwin E. Koch, “GI Lore: Lore of the 15th Air Force,” *NY Folklore Quarterly* 9 (1953) 59-70, and Bill Wallrich “Superstition and the Air Force,” *Western Folklore* 19 (1960) 11-16.

2. Depicting an (8th US Army Air Force) B-17 crew with their plane, dog, and monkey.

3. The practice was eventually prohibited because it caused corrosion problems (49).

4. Caps, shoes, a piece of parachute, a wooden Indian, lucky polka-dot shorts are mentioned as well; wearable items often went unlaundered “in case the process drained away the luck” (35).

hind of a toy rabbit. Pulling parachute harness crotch-straps too tight and then loosening them with exclamations of pain and relief also seemed to “work” (52)—“You never really know about these things and there was no reason to invite any bad luck,” sagely explains pilot and humorist Truman Smith.<sup>5</sup>

MacKenzie turns to negative supernatural energies in chapter 5, “Jinxes and Jonahs,” respectively Greek and Hebrew terms that denote bad luck sources that must be shunned, such as the taboo against lighting three cigarettes on one match (54). Certain men, planes, and units were thought to attract bad luck (56–57). A Jonah brought ill luck to (i.e., jinxed) a ship or plane. Sex-starved men far from home both craved and feared women. Certain females could be pariahs, harbingers of death, when near an aircraft. One such individual was believed to have planted a “kiss of death” on the 339th Fighter Group (62), and some Women's Auxiliary Air Force members were known in airmen's slang as “chop-girls.” Some men even feared that “Nose Art”<sup>6</sup> featuring sexy, scantily clad female bodies might attract the fire of enemy guns (73–74).

“Numbers and Symbols,” we read in chapter 6, especially the dreaded thirteen, were fraught with ill luck and danger; hence the omission of “13” or its replacement by the euphemism “12A” when numbering planes or missions (71). Other numbers were lucky, such as seven and eleven. Dreams and visions receive less attention here than soldiers' memoirs (ancient<sup>7</sup> as well as modern) might lead us to expect (74–77). Fliers saw a beloved woman, a fellow pilot, a man outside a tail-gunner's turret, or heard a harp. MacKenzie ascribes such apparitions to fatigue, angst, severe cold (-56°F at 25,000 feet), hypoxia, noise, or damaged planes. He explains, without citing the literature on “crisis apparitions” and “sensed presences,”<sup>8</sup> that extreme physiological and mental pressures may disturb the senses and mental functioning.

“Premonitions of Disaster” (chap. 7)—for example, the sense of the impending doom of someone “marked for death” (89–90)—tended to be remembered when the feared outcome actually came true and forgotten when it did not. MacKenzie argues that one does not record or recall long afterward for oral historians irrelevant eerie visions. Bomber crews were more susceptible to uncanny experiences than fighter pilots, probably, the author observes, because of the greater individual agency felt by the latter in their smaller aircraft.

MacKenzie's succinct 112-page main text is equipped with copious endnotes and a prodigious bibliography of oral histories, books, and articles. The book is long on data—many examples of modes of propitiating “Luck”—but short on the psychology of (exclusively Anglophone) Allied fliers,<sup>9</sup> the theology of the powers that sent men into war,<sup>10</sup> and the comparative anthropology of religion and superstition.<sup>11</sup> Preoccupied with belief, not results, MacKenzie omits any consideration of miracles or divine

5. See his *The Wrong Stuff* (1996; rpt. Norman: U Okla Pr, 2002).

6. See Jeffrey L. Ethell, *World War II Nose Art* (Osceola, WI: MBI Publ., 1993), or *Wikipedia*, s.v. “Nose Art.”

7. Herodotus (6.117) reports with rationalist caveats a man “seeing things” (viz., a giant enemy warrior) from the spirit world during hand-to-hand combat at the Battle of Marathon.

8. See, e.g., Gabriel Herman, “Greek Epiphanies and the Sensed Presence,” *Historia* 60 (2011) 1–31.

9. “Magical thinking” exists in all nations, military ranks, and periods, but the author unpersuasively justifies his narrower choice by the generous data available from American and Commonwealth sources.

10. American clergy christened and blessed their spiritual charges' bomb-dropping aircraft (43). See Gerald F. Linderman, *The World within War: America's Combat Experience in World War II* (NY: Free Pr, 1997), on infantrymen reacting to combat with talismans, prayers, and other, grimmer protective mechanisms: normalization of the horrific, fatalism, trophy-taking, desensitization, focus on “the job,” and psychosis.

11. MacKenzie, an “agnostic leaning towards atheism” (118n18), skirts hard questions about distinguishing monotheistic religion from so-called superstition “insofar as the existence of God is inherently untestable in scientific terms” (3). To his credit, he includes Abrahamic mass and individual prayer in chapter 2.

wrath, the intercession of cosmic forces in mass killings of soldiers and civilians, or slaughters orchestrated by secular powers and blessed by chaplains' assurances of divine favor.

Can purely irrational beliefs in fact exert a positive "effect on self-confidence and thereby performance" (3)? "Hope Psychology" shows, and "Sports Psychology" confirms, that belief in "god on our side" or the efficacy of unwashed socks or Hail Marys can improve performance in combat. Certainly, charms and rituals did not "impede fliers in the performance of their duties" (102), while shared beliefs and practices reduced tensions and built cohesion within the self-identified group.

For these reasons, Allied commanders all the way up the ranks to James "Jimmy" Doolittle, Dwight Eisenhower, and Franklin Roosevelt, together with home-front propaganda machines in Washington, New York, Chicago, and Hollywood, never ceased so-called morale-building efforts that in truth aimed at ceaseless social control of large populations through active encouragement or benign neglect of superstition (97–99).<sup>12</sup> If a flyboy had brought a particular crusted shirt on his previous missions and survived, it made a kind of *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* "sense" to wear it again; as rear-gunner Bob Pierson asserted "it must have worked because I'm still here" (34–36). The man in the street grasps no better now than then the laws of probability. "The human brain ... constantly seeks to detect patterns in perceived events" (50). Seek and ye shall find, whether your selected pattern exists in reality or only in your mind.

The record shows that a few bomber crews living on the razor's edge chose to name their aircraft *Friday the Thirteenth* (128 sorties and still flying after the war), *H-a-a-r-d Luck* (nose art: brassiere cups made of two half eight-balls<sup>13</sup>), *SNAFU*, and *13th Jinx*.

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12. See Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1989), chap. 11: "Accentuate the Positive."

13. See image – [www.miwsr.com/rd/1715.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1715.htm). The book's best brassiere story (96) involves a flesh-and-blood woman giving up her brassiere to a gunner already aboard his plane—he could not fly without one and his previous specimens were missing. See further Fussell, *ibid.*, chap. 8, "Drinking Far Too Much, Copulating Too Little," on the sexual deprivations of young conscripts.