



James Hamilton-Paterson. *Marked for Death: The First War in the Air.* New York: Pegasus Books, 2016. 416 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-68177-158-8.

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In 2010, award-winning novelist James Hamilton-Paterson published his first nonfiction work on aviation history, titled *Empire of the Clouds: When Britain's Aircraft Ruled the World*, in which he traced the decline of the British aircraft industry after World War II. With *Marked for Death: The First War in the Air*, Hamilton-Paterson adds to his growing list of nonfiction books with a thematic investigation of airpower during the First World War.

The author largely focuses on the British experience and highlights the development of aviation in other military forces only briefly, usually when comparing the Royal Flying Corps, the Royal Naval Air Service, and the Royal Air Force (RAF). Hamilton-Paterson emphasizes three important threads throughout the work. First, he argues that incremental technological advances in aircraft design and weaponry brought about clear tactical advantages for each side—at times with important strategic impacts—driving a back-and-forth aerial competition between the Entente and Central powers. Secondly, he demonstrates that despite the importance of technology, the war in the air depended on men flying in a very dangerous environment facing death every time they took to the sky. The personal experience of the air war, drawn from a respectable list of published memoirs,

again focuses on the British perspective but with occasional peeks at German, French, and Italian views. Finally, he notes that the way military forces thought about the use of airpower and the status of aviators changed rapidly between 1914 and 1918. A mere novelty at the start of the war, aviation became an important supporting arm for land and naval operations, as well as a darling of the home front, by 1918.

The opening chapters focus on production, design, and weaponry. An important chapter titled “Combat and Other Missions” provides a useful description of the specific roles of aviation during the war. The thematic approach continues with sections on aviator training, squadron life, and pilot attitudes toward fatalism. Of particular interest is a chapter titled “Airmen and Medics” describing the development of aviation physiology and the infrastructure created in support of this new field of medicine. I lived less than a mile from Mount Vernon Hospital in the northwest suburbs of London and was pleased to learn that it was a facility that in 1918 served as the RAF’s Central Hospital. At Mount Vernon, medical boards examined pilot candidates and specialized in “all sorts of new orthopaedic procedures” required to mend aircrew patients surviving crash landings (p. 232).

Hamilton-Paterson departs from his thematic approach at the end of the book with chapters titled "Home Defence" and "Balkans and Mesopotamia," topics that he justifiably includes due to their relative lack of attention within the literature of World War I airpower. The former chapter examines the role of airpower at the strategic level of war, again focusing on the British experience in defending the skies over London against German Zeppelin and Gotha raids and their own efforts to bomb the German homeland. The latter chapter summarizes the use of airpower in the Macedonian and Middle Eastern fronts, as well as air operations in Africa, Gallipoli, and the Italian Alps. Not surprisingly, he describes the challenges involving early aircraft unable to fly in hot climates where the glue holding fabric to wings melted.

A thoughtful postscript brings the reader to the present with comparisons of Great War aviation with

current air operations featuring drones and very expensive combat aircraft. Hamilton-Paterson closes by calling aviators of World War I "unwitting test pilots, which is why so many were marked for death as they climbed up among the wires and spars into their tiny bare cockpits and called to the mechanic to swing the propeller" (p. 309).

Marked for Death is beautifully written, insightful, and generally accurate. A few minor mistakes, such as a statement about the absence of British fighter schools (they had them), do not detract from the value of the work. Meant for the general public, it lacks material from archival sources. However, historians of World War I and airpower in general will likely appreciate Hamilton-Paterson's thematic approach. The chapters on training and early aviation medicine are particularly useful.

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