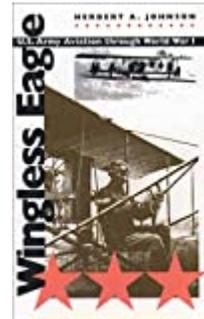




Herbert A. Johnson. *Wingless Eagle: U.S. Army Aviation through World War I.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. xvi + 297 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2627-0.



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More Than the Machines

Herbert Johnson, a retired Air Force historian, has produced a work designed to “begin to explain why the United States Army was so poorly prepared for entry into aerial warfare in World War I” (p. xiv). In this he has succeeded, producing a book that is in-depth enough for devotees of the era, yet still accessible for those who may have only a passing interest. He continues a recent trend toward a more balanced appraisal of the Army’s stewardship of American airpower. While he makes plain the Army’s shortcomings in this regard, he also presents a richer picture that transcends the Air Force’s myth of institutional victimization.

The author is thoughtful and precise while discussing topics that integrate the usual technological and personality-centered approaches with the socio-political context often ignored (or covered too thinly) by historians in this field. While the author has tied in such aspects as extra-government lobbying, officer career progression, H.G. Wells’s *The War in the Air*, and the like, he has not made the usual mistake of being overly enamored with the socio-political angle. Rather, he has blended it with the more traditional technological and personal

emphases like the Wright Patent Litigation, the feud between Benny Foulois and Billy Mitchell, and the natural impact of World War I in Europe.

The first two-thirds of the book is the strength of the work. It deals with early aviation topically from a number of angles. Chapter 1 provides a thorough picture of the “aeronaut constituency,” the nexus of private aviation enthusiasts (most of them luminaries of their day), military pioneers, and political leaders that influenced the development of the early aviation experience. The explanation of the role of the Aero Club and related groups in the development and then fragmentation of America’s early aeronautical vision is well done. Johnson shows an environment where aviation officers enjoyed an unusually cozy relationship with the press, politicians, and the “military industrial complex” that impacted policy, procurement, and attitudes far out of proportion to their official position within the Army. Is it any wonder that Billy Mitchell after the war believed he could survive circumventing the chain of command and taking his accusations public?

The chapter on the Wright patent disputes and their

devastating effect on American aviation are valuable, especially when taken into context with the divisions of military opinion between the various airplane manufacturers, Wright, and Curtiss. These relationships were born of the training pilots received from the companies (and in some cases, personally from the Wrights) and were strengthened by social relationships. The divisiveness was so fierce that even when Wright "Pusher" aircraft and Curtiss pre-war "Jennies" were found to be unsafe, commanders minimized the dangers to "their" system. While technological detail added depth to the work, diagrams would help readers better visualize the technical details under discussion. The central points, however, were clear enough: the almost maniacal nature of the Wright brothers' patent strategy slowed American aviation and destroyed whatever "lead" America should have enjoyed by being the first to fly.

A real gem in Johnson's work is his depiction of the 1915 Goodier court-martial. While most airmen can recapitulate (or rather regurgitate in most cases) the historical myth of Mitchell's courtroom martyrdom, many would find the reality behind the Goodier proceedings more chilling and thought-provoking. He paints a picture of the Goodier case which fits closer to the myth of Mitchell's than did the reality. Accusations of insubordination and actions prejudicial to good order and discipline were but a veneer over a case really dealing with unsafe conditions, improper command actions, cover-ups, fraud, and pettiness that contributed to basic reforms prior to the Great War. To the author's credit, he once again does not overplay his hand and assert this court-martial was primarily responsible for the enhancements in Army aviation included in the National Defense Act of 1916, but does place this event in the proper context leading up to the legislation.

Further, Johnson's ability to draw a picture of the career progression and territorial battles within the Army and the ramifications for Army aviation add texture to such issues as the Mitchell-Foulois feud. In a zero-sum game of promotions and career-enhancing decisions, it is easy to see how personality conflicts translated into

open organizational warfare. The author's experience in the Air Force in general, and the Air Staff in particular, bears fruit here as this treatment has unusual depth and breadth.

The treatment of airpower's role in Pershing's expedition in Mexico outlines the limitations of the American effort and compelling reasons for them. The First Aero Squadron's experiences border on tragicomedy as one plane after another succumbs to bad decisions, bad weather, bad workmanship, and bad luck. Far from being a proof of concept for the Signal Corps, it was a very public proof of failure, demanding attention and action by Congress in the form of sections of the National Defense Act of 1916. Thus, the expectations of the aeronaut constituency, military pioneers, politicians, and the general public are unfulfilled. Yet the absolute failure was the last piece needed. Here the author contends persuasively the failure in Mexico was the "catalytic agent in the development of American air power" (p. 182).

The book does have a few minor weaknesses. While the topical nature of the chapters works, the overall feel is of an edited collection of essays by several collaborators, rather than a single monograph by a single author. I can only surmise this reflects the genealogy of the work itself as several chapters were fleshed out from journal articles spanning two decades. This is evident in some unneeded repetition of material between sections that survived the melding process. The author also included an epilogue dealing with World War I itself which seems anti-climatic and unneeded given the central intent of the book. The strengths of the work, however, more than outweigh these problems.

Besides historians of the period, professional Airmen would be well served by this book as well. Too often aviation history focuses on technical details to the detriment of the total picture. Indeed, as the author contends, "There is a disturbing tendency to ignore biography when writing air force history" (p. 2). Herbert Johnson's research has produced a work that professional Airmen should, but probably will not, read.

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