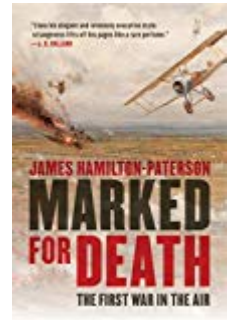


**James Hamilton-Paterson.** *Marked for Death: The First War in the Air.* New York: Pegasus Books, 2016. 416 pp. \$27.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-68177-158-8.



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The story of aviation during the First World War remains a topic that captures the public imagination and endures as a field of historical inquiry, with an abundance of new titles published each year, exploring everything from pilot biographies to squadron histories. *Marked for Death*, by James Hamilton-Paterson, provides a broad overview of the air war in general, while also demythologizing popular, but inaccurate, tropes long associated with the conflict's aerial component. While described as a history of all sides of the war, this work is predominately a story grounded in the British experience of the conflict. Although Hamilton-Patterson does, at times, employ sources from French, American, and German aviators, the narrative centers on the perspective of the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) and the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS).

In addition to providing an overview of the air war, *Marked for Death* works to debunk the myth of the ace as a gallant knight of the air. The book's thesis largely challenges long-standing perceptions of First World War aviators and argues

that their experiences in the air were far more gruesome and violent than previously depicted in popular culture. Far from the image of fluttering scarves and acts of aerial chivalry, those who became aces did so through ruthless tactics and brutal violence. The material elucidated here is far from new; nevertheless, this work provides a concise and useful introduction on the topic to a general audience.

Hamilton-Paterson examines the First World War in the air through eleven thematically organized chapters, each of which follows a roughly chronological progression. Chapter 1, "Air War and the State," explores the often contentious relationship between the British military, the nation's aviation industry, and the fledgling Royal Flying Corps immediately before and during the conflict. Chapter 2 delves into the technical and mechanical realities of early flight to explain, in part, why the biplane design, which remains an iconic image of the First World War, became the dominant form of airframe construction. Hamilton-Paterson then explores the technological de-

velopment of militarized aviation and the rapid evolution of machine guns, bombs, and rockets. Here, the author highlights what he views as the ongoing and contentious debate surrounding the invention and development of the interrupter gear, which revolutionized aerial combat by allowing a pilot to fire through his propeller unharmed. While that debate may have abated in academic circles, his discussion does highlight the often porous nature of technological innovation during the war, where one nation's invention quickly became its adversary's greatest tool.[1]

*Marked for Death's* fourth chapter, on combat and other missions, is one of the book's strongest moments. Hamilton-Paterson admirably explains the limits of communication between the ground and the air and contextualizes the resulting consequences on the ground war. Tales of airborne antennas dragging along the ground, upending tea tables and creating havoc for ground crews are insightful and entertaining. The author also highlights the ineffective means employed for air to ground communication. This narrative is only made stronger with the included descriptions of infantrymen attempting to roll out cotton message boards while under fire in the vain attempt to coordinate air support. Examples like these further strengthen the author's argument that the air war as a difficult and unglamorous experience. The next three chapters are more directly aimed at a general audience unfamiliar with the First World War in the air. Chapter 5, "The Making of a Flying Man," largely relies on the accounts of aviators like Arthur Gould Lee to discuss training practices within the RFC and RNAS. Tales of undertrained and unprepared aviators will likely not surprise readers previously exposed to the topic, but the narrative is well colored by accounts from those who served. Chapters 6 and 7, entitled "How they Lived" and "Aces," respectively, also feel familiar to those who have examined this topic before. Tales of alcoholism, carousing,

and parties on all sides of the lines highlight the dangerous work facing the war's aviators.

The eighth chapter, "Airmen and Medics," represents the book's standout contribution to the field. Hamilton-Paterson examines the fascinating story of aviation medicine during the first decades of powered flight. He highlights the physical strain of flying at altitude without pressurized cabins or oxygen. Remarkably, the air war continued until 1917 before doctors began serving with air crews in the RFC. The author provides fascinating source material through medical records and personal accounts. Here we are exposed to stories of observers so disoriented by a lack of oxygen that they photographed enemy positions using the same glass plate multiple times, and veteran pilots who, when tested, repeatedly fainted at heights exceeding eight thousand feet. Hamilton-Paterson also shows the extraordinary disconnect between aviators and aircraft designers, using numerous examples from all sides of the conflict to demonstrate the ways in which effective design meant great personal risk for the men sitting in the cockpit. Perhaps the most striking example is that of the German Albatros fighter, whose inboard radiator was placed within the upper wing, directly over the pilot, virtually guaranteeing scalding hot fluid would blind the aviator should the aircraft be hit by enemy fire. *Marked for Death's* closing chapters examine the lack of parachutes issued to airmen during the conflict and the military and cultural reasons behind the decision to withhold them, even after they became technically viable. Hamilton-Paterson also explores British Home Defense duties during the war, and closes on lesser-known experiences of aviators in the Balkans and Mesopotamia.

One must assess the book's larger mission of debunking the lingering myths regarding the First World War in the air. In this regard, the book succeeds more often than not in relating the gruesome realities of the air war to a general audience who might be unfamiliar with the conflict's aerial

component and its reach in a broader, global conflict. *Marked for Death* ultimately works to provide insight into lesser-known aspects about the air war, such as the burgeoning field of aviation medicine. There are some legends of the war, however, that seem to occasionally escape the author's scrutiny. The extraordinary tale of Willy Coppens landing his aircraft on top of an observation balloon, for example, is relayed to the reader without any sense that the episode borders on impossibility. The book also engages with popular works on the topic; however, it overlooks major works in the field that cover similar ground in greater detail.[2] For those new to First World War aviation, however, this book provides an admirable and interesting introduction to the subject.

#### Notes

[1]. See Marc Dierikx, *Fokker: A Transatlantic Biography* (Washington, DC, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997).

[2]. One of the standard works here is John Morrow, *The Great War in the Air: Military Aviation from 1909-1921* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1993).

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