



## Goshawk Squadron

*Derek Robinson*

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World War One aviators were more than just soldiers they were the knights of the sky, and the press and public idolised the gallant young heroes. But for Stanley Woolley, commanding officer of Goshawk Squadron, the romance of chivalry in the clouds is just a myth. There are two types of men up there: victims and murderers, and the code he drums into his men bans any notion of sport or fair play. This produces better killers but, even so, Wolley believes the whole squadron will be dead within three months. Derek Robinson quietly builds the day-to-day details of these mens lives and deaths into a powerful indictment of war. But this classic of war literature is also very funny, often painfully so; Shortlisted for the Booker Prize, this is Derek Robinson's masterly novel of the war in the air over the Western Front in 1918.

## **Goshawk Squadron Details**

Date : Published September 29th 2005 by Robinson Publishing (first published 1971)

ISBN : 9781845291723

Author : Derek Robinson

Format : Paperback 240 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, Aviation, War, Military Fiction, World War I

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## From Reader Review Goshawk Squadron for online ebook

### **Jon says**

Horror of war RFC style. Would recommend as an antidote to anyone who loved Biggles as a boy.

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### **Rob Kitchin says**

Goshawk Squadron was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1971. It was criticised by some former RFC pilots who felt it denigrated the memories of those who fought the air war. Others praised it for showing the true nature of a war that was brutal mass slaughter and it was no different in the air to other services. Pilots were flying planes made of principally of wood, canvas and wire, and the engines were treated with castor oil to keep them lubricated, the fumes of which acted as a laxative that was countered by alcohol. Pilots often flew several missions a day traversing two sets of trenches where they were liable to be shot at from both sides, plus sustained anti-air barrages, to face superior planes. Tensions and fears were high amongst pilots, most of whom had only recently finished school, and they often let off steam in local villages. Robinson captures the true dark nature of war; it's brutal realities. The tale is relatively straightforward, following the men's exploits and relationships over a few months. The action sequences are excellent and the opening couple of chapters are amongst the best I've read in a while; the writing really alive on the page, laced with dark humour. It then settles down, becoming a little more mundane. Whilst some of the men are well drawn and distinctive, others are pretty indistinguishable and under-realised. And in Woolley he pushes the callous leader, who really believes he is doing the right thing by his men by trying to harden them to be ruthless, to its limits. Overall, an engaging, well written novel that shows war for what it really is.

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### **Kingsley says**

easily one of my favorite books ever

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### **Will says**

A parallel to Catch-22 in terms of finding a sort of dark humor in war, this book does a great job at working with your imagination to capture the experience of flying in WWI

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### **Jur says**

'Every second you are in the air,' Woolley said, 'someone is trying to kill you. If he does it properly you will never know. You must look for him, because he's always there.' He stared at them, and his black, pouchy eyes were full of anger at their stupid humanitarianism. 'God damn it,' he said. 'you're murderers turned loose against murderers! Some will come at you head-on with an axe. But the ones that think, the good ones, the professionals, they hide behind a tree and stick you through the ribs from behind. They are up there now.'

'They go up every day and murder nice chaps like you.' Woolley made nice chaps sound like a genetic defect.

"they'll all be dead in a year."

"That's an absurd way to think."

"They'll all be dead in six months, then."

"I don't see how you can possibly lead the squadron if that's what you really believe."

"I don't. I personally believe there won't be one of them alive by the end of April."

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"Listen, I'll make you a bargain. I'll never tell the truth, if you'll never tell lies. [...] It'll show us the best side of each other."

### **Walt Shiel says**

This is sort of a less-humorous World War I version of *Catch-22*. Robinson's *Goshawk Squadron* is very well done and brutally realistic, albeit with some rather flamboyantly over-the-top characters.

The dogfights are carefully drawn and help to immerse the reader in the thick of the action.

The action accurately follows the course of the war as it occurred in 1918, adding to the building urgency as a major German attack strikes deep into the Allied lines.

The only aspect that interfered with my reading was Robinson's penchant for constantly shifting points of view within a scene, including shifting to the POV of characters that had never been truly defined. However, his ability quickly to find the core of their hopes and fears without slowing the action mitigated that "problem."

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Overall, *Goshawk Squadron* is clearly one of the seminal historical novels of the WW I aviation genre, well deserving of having been short listed for the Booker Prize back in the early '70s. I can't believe I hadn't discovered it decades ago! If you're looking for WW I aviation fiction, this book must be on your to-read list.

### **Blake Hiatt says**

I'd call it "Catch 22 with a vicious edge."

Kill or be killed was the mantra CO Woolley tried to drum into the heads of his young pilots.

As a fictional book, I found it to be quite believable as the way war actually is rather than as war is portrayed.

Well worth the read.

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### **Colin Davison says**

I'm writing this as we approach the centenary of the end of World War One. With the proper remembrance of those who gave their lives on both sides, it's worth reading *Goshawk Squadron* before talking of heroes. I bought the book simply as part of a project to read all Booker Prize short-listed fiction. What to expect from the title, the cover, and one of those online sidebars that suggested I might like similar novels heroically titled 'Winged Victory' and 'The Company of Eagles'?

So this bleak, merciless tale, in which the CO trains his pilots to shoot the enemy in the back was quite a surprise. No wonder some veterans of the Royal Flying Corps were horrified after reading it. Biggles and derring-do it isn't.

It's hard to get away from that comparison in *The Guardian* and elsewhere of the book with *Catch 22*, or maybe better, for its savage, insolent wit as First World War version of *M\*A\*S\*H*. And in its description of the flyers' riotous, drunken night at a local restaurant the humour is as wild as anything in Waugh or Kingsley Amis.

Yet it is not to be forgotten that the night ends in a man's death, and possibly a rape. For what is remarkable about Robinson's grim comedy is that he manages to combine it with vivid descriptions of aerial combat and its horrible, lurid details, engines failing, pilots pissing in their pants, watching colleagues burn.

The characters are differentiated only by a few telling lines of description when they first appear - sturdy Derbyshire farm lad Kimberley or Capt. Woodruffe who exceptionally "has the face of a man who pays bills on time and believes what the country tells him." The new recruits are bushy-tailed if not always bright, the veterans (ie 20 or over) cynical.

In another novel it would be a weakness; but these are youths, not yet fully developed personalities when thrown into the skies in flimsy kites with a high likelihood of death within three months.

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### **Stephanie Pieck says**

"War is not sporting. War is not fair."

These are some of the last lines in the Afterword of Derek Robinson's novel *Goshawk Squadron*, yet they perfectly sum up the entire book. In the final year of World War I, the British sent young men into the skies in constructs of polished wood, stretched canvas, and piano wire. Loaded with fuel and equipped with guns, these biplanes were used for observation, attack, and defense. The Germans had planes, too, but they were often faster and better built. British squadrons lost and replaced men so quickly that surviving members and officers were often hard-pressed to keep the names straight.

This fictional account of one such squadron was a glimpse into history. The squadron's commanding officer uses unorthodox and harsh tactics to prepare his men for battle. The men, not understanding why he is training them this way or what he is trying to teach them, resent him.

*Goshawk Squadron* was not a pleasant book, even though it provided a useful historical context. I am glad I read it, but I am also glad I'm finished.

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### **Nooilforpacifists says**

*M\*A\*S\*H* meets *Catch-22* in War I--but Sherman was right.

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### **Matt says**

A story which is both a tragedy and a comedy, Goshawk Squadron describes the adventures of a Royal Flying Corps unit in World War I France. Robinson draws amazing pictures of both the quirkiness of the British aviators and the hell they go through as they learn their trade: not just shooting down enemy planes or destroying their materiel on the ground, but killing the men up close and personal.

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### **Fred Baerkircher says**

It's a surprisingly complex novel about WWI airmen. The author was a pilot, and displays what feels like an intimate knowledge of what that life was like. These characters exhibit the blithe gallows humor evocative of the upper classes many of the pilots hailed from, and they do some pretty despicable things. The book has a MASH-like attitude towards the futility and hopelessness of the war.

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### **C says**

An entertaining story

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### **Cheryl Sinclair says**

Does not read like fiction. Fascinating behind the scenes of world war 1 flyers.

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### **Uthpala Dassanayake says**

“Goshawk squadron is the last book of a trilogy” I would have liked to see this on the first page, better still on the cover rather than at the end of the book... Anyway, it is a good book on its own so I am not disappointed.

There are innumerable books on war, themed sub-themed or sprinkled with all sorts of other facets such as patriotism, glory, passion, love, hatred, tragic... But nothing I previously read has addressed the brutal pointlessness so bluntly.

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