



# **The Unsubstantial Air: American Fliers in the First World War**

*Samuel Hynes*

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*The Unsubstantial Air* is the gripping story of the Americans who fought and died in the aerial battles of World War I. Much more than a traditional military history, it is an account of the excitement of becoming a pilot and flying in combat over the Western Front, told through the words and voices of the aviators themselves.

A World War II pilot himself, the memoirist and critic Samuel Hynes revives the adventurous young men who inspired his own generation to take to the sky. The volunteer fliers were often privileged-the sorts of college athletes and Ivy League students who might appear in an F. Scott Fitzgerald novel, and sometimes did. Others were country boys from the farms and ranches of the West. Hynes follows them from the flying clubs of Harvard, Princeton, and Yale and the grass airfields of Texas and Canada to training grounds in Europe and on to the front, where they learned how to fight a war in the air. And to the bars and clubs of Paris and London, where they unwound and discovered another kind of excitement, another challenge. He shows how East Coast aristocrats like Teddy Roosevelt's son Quentin and Arizona roughnecks like Frank Luke the Balloon Buster all dreamed of chivalric single combat in the sky, and how they came to know both the beauty of flight and the constant presence of death.

By drawing on letters sent home, diaries kept, and memoirs published in the years that followed, Hynes brings to life the emotions, anxieties, and triumphs of the young pilots. They gasp in wonder at the world seen from a plane, struggle to keep their hands from freezing in open air cockpits, party with actresses and aristocrats, rest at Voltaire's castle, and search for their friends' bodies on the battlefield. Their romantic war becomes more than that-a harsh but often thrilling reality. Weaving together their testimonies, *The Unsubstantial Air* is a moving portrait of a generation coming of age under new and extreme circumstances.

## The Unsubstantial Air: American Fliers in the First World War Details

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# **From Reader Review The Unsubstantial Air: American Fliers in the First World War for online ebook**

## **Don Alesi says**

If you are interested in the WWI aviation and the U.S. role in it then do not read this as your first book. To truly appreciate the book as I did, one must read some more general books about WWI aviation first.

This book tells the story of American pilots as the United States entered the war. The U.S. was totally unprepared for aerial warfare and the book goes into great detail to explain it.

If on the other hand you wish to further educate yourself and get into the details of the Young men who flew, then this book is a must read. The book dispels many of the myths about the U.S. Air service.

Personally, I enjoyed the book. I hope the reader will too.

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## **Urey Patrick says**

This is an unusual perspective on WWI - a history of the American participation in the air war. America did not enter the war until 1917, and did not enter the front line fighting until 1918. Yet there was an allure that the author captures extremely well - the attraction of young men to the mythology of war, especially distant war. American volunteers joined various allied forces - Canadian, British, French - and many sought to join the war in the air - the glory of individual combat, chivalric flying knights, and the heady promise of great adventure and great causes.

Early flyers joined French, British and Canadian air services. Young Americans formed flying clubs, besieged their respective colleges for support, and in 1917, left schools, homes and towns for the great adventure in the air. Then the reality - there was no American air service, no training program, no fields, no support structure, no airplanes... the young men spent months building it all in the inevitably disordered chaos and extemporized national efforts to create a substantive military machine, and to create something entirely new -- a military air service.

The author makes good use of extensive letters, diaries, remembrances to expand and personalize official histories and squadron war records. The death rate intrudes - many in training, many in combat, many from related causes and the nature of 1917-1918 medicine and practices. It is moving, affecting and fills the reader with a variety of emotions - sadness, admiration, respect, wonder... the sacrifice, the toll it takes on them, and the nature of World War I aviation, air combat and life between patrols are not new... it is characteristic of young warriors in all wars. But it is interesting and compelling, and it is unique in that this is a history focused on such a singularly abbreviated and specialized aspect of the Great War -- the American air forces. In addition to the individual perspectives and histories, the author also relates the growth and development of air power over the course of the war. The subject matter alone is a fresh angle on World War I that has received attention. Hynes, a combat pilot in his own early years, has written an absorbing and fascinating account of a brief but momentous historical evolution.

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## **Jared says**

As a naval aviator, I enjoyed this book. I identify with their love of flying and yearning to be part of something bigger than themselves. This book is not so much a history of the Great War as it is a memoir of American flyers in it. I also enjoyed the author's constant reference to the tone of the flyers' own letters and memoirs. He noted their romance with flying but also the dreadful reality of the risk inherent to flying (much greater then than now yet never gone) and the dreadful meat grinder of combat.

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## **Paul says**

I heard about this book from a friend and requested a copy from the library. It wasn't yet in my local library system, but they found one for me (librarians are wonderful people) and I read it straight through.

I was a USAF fighter pilot from 1973 to 1997. Samuel Hynes flew fighters for the Marine Corps from 1943 to 1953. The Unsubstantial Air is about the first American fighter pilots, the young men who flew with the British and French ... and later on, the USA ... during the Great War between approximately 1916-1918. You can safely assume I was enthralled by Hynes' book.

Using wartime diaries, letters, telegrams, newspaper articles, and personal recollections of surviving early aviators, Hynes traces the beginnings of young American men's fascination with the idea of flying; the establishment of college flying clubs here and there in the USA; and the early days of young American men heading off to England and France to play a role in the most important and romantic thing going in those days, the war in Europe. He follows the paths of the first volunteers, who generally started off as French Foreign Legionnaires or ambulance drivers and then gravitated to aviation. He recounts the beginnings of wartime flying training in the USA, the way young men with minimal flight training were transported to England and France, the building of training airfields overseas and the different ways men were taught to fly by the French and British. He follows key figures (Quentin Roosevelt, son of Teddy, for one; Billy Mitchell for another), who organized and oversaw American flight training in France in preparation for the USA's eventual entry into the war.

All of this, and particularly the chapters describing actual combat over the front lines, is riveting reading, but what most fascinated me was discovering how little the essentials have changed. What attracted the first young men to flying in combat ... the romantic idea of one-on-one combat, of being a knight of the air ... is what attracts young men and women today. The desire to be above all things a chase pilot (a pursuit pilot, or as we call them today, a fighter pilot, sent aloft to shoot down enemy aircraft), as opposed to a "mere" observation or bomber pilot ... that too appears to be eternal.

No one knew how to conduct aerial combat in the beginning. They learned quickly: how to conduct aerial gunnery, how to strafe and bomb, how to provide mutual support to other pilots; the fundamentals every fighter pilot today must master. The life fighter pilots lived, the independence and spirited parties and drinking and whoring, the eagerness to take off at dawn to confront the Boche, the shock of a comrade's sudden death ... well, it's the life Samuel Hynes lived in WWII and Korea; it's the life I lived in F-15 squadrons during the Cold War and Desert Storm.

This really is a fabulous history of the beginnings of aviation and air power in wartime (as an aside, it's taken us almost a hundred years, but the vision of air power pioneers like Billy Mitchell, which is powerfully spelled out in Hynes' history, have finally become reality with improved aircraft, better command and control, and smart weapons). If you're at all interested in military aviation, *The Unsubstantial Air* is essential reading.

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### **William says**

The author's sources (letters, diaries, memoirs, etc. from the pilots themselves) provide wonderful insight into the minds of our WWI aviators. Hynes mixes these sources with his excellent chronological narrative of the war years.

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### **Vivian Blaxell says**

Clever and lyrical and horrifying all at once.

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### **Jimmy says**

This is the story of the young Americans who flew in World War one and is written by a former US pilot of World War Two. I think the author's background contributed to the insight of bringing out the experiences of the young Americans who ventured into military aviation. At that time, aviation was a new area of military combat. The book spent considerable time capturing the romanticism of various young Americans who wanted to be combat pilots. As those familiar with World War One know, the United States didn't enter the war until the last year. Even before the US entrance into the war there were already a steady stream of Americans venturing overseas to seek the experience of war or helping out the Allies with the war. Many went over to France seeking adventure as ambulance drivers, members of the Foreign Legion, etc. However some Americans wanted more and some of these wanted to be military pilots for the French and British. Much of the bulk of the book focuses on these Americans. Actually much of the book focuses on trying to be a pilot, the training and only towards the second half of the book do we read of combat and missions in the front.

I think the author's own experiences led him to be aware of young men and their visions of romanticism of war, and how in an atrocious war such as World War One it was the pilots that was the nearest equivalent of individual knights of previous wars. The infantry at that time consisted of massive amount of men doing the same thing. But with pilots there is the vision among many of one on one duels between pilots, and the public recognition and popularity of military aces. In the beginning some of the Americans pilots formed self-identities that pilots should be from the best of the American stock—men who were athletes from elite Ivy League schools with a college education and a can do spirit. It's a dashing and romantic image. Of course as the book goes on to tell the readers, not all pilots were fighter for some were observers or did the work of coordinating ground attacks, etc. Even then, with those who are in squadrons and wings dedicated to combat they often travel in groups and often disengage from their enemies if the situation wasn't favorable. And like with any war, when it comes time to actual combat the gruesome and brutality inflicted by man upon his fellow man is an ugly affair. I squirmed at the thought of men falling down in their planes to their death and having to make difficult choice of whether to jump out of a burning plane to avoid being burned to death or dying from the fall (remember there were no parachutes yet). It's a gruesome thought. Apparently

this was discussed among pilots themselves and recorded privately in journals of what one would do. There's a story in the book of a certain pilot who have always insisted on staying with a plane on fire but when the situation occurred with his plane opted to bail out and free fall to his death.

The author capture the danger of not just only combat but flying itself during World War was a dangerous affair with the technology of planes being prone to accidents much more frequently than we typically hear of today. It is incredible that there are people who want to pursue being a pilot. The book even talk about the fatalism that crept into some of the pilots' outlook.

I think the biggest thing that I got away with the book is that young men and their romanticism with war is the same now as it was back then. Sure, the technology is different. The uniforms and styles may not be the same. But young men wishing to experience adventure and thinking war would provide it often get more than they bargain for. What a portrait this book paints for us.

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### **Jim says**

This was an okay book. It didn't grab me like other books Mr. Hynes has written. I'm not disappointed, though.

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### **Allie says**

Interesting topic for war buffs but the style was a bit slow. Rather than follow specific pilots, he chose to narrate the book chronologically, which made it feel like the worst kind of textbook. That said, his love for the topic and the novelty of the information were both helpful to get through it. Would only recommend for the die hard war book fans.

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### **KOMET says**

The author (as a veteran Second World War combat pilot) brings a special sensitivity and awareness to the subject matter of this book --- the young American men who flew in combat in Europe during the First World War --- that stands it in good stead. Airplanes are so commonplace to us today that we tend to take them for granted. But in 1917 and 1918, they were new technology, seen first-hand by very few people, fragile yet robust as their potential continued to grow. And under the impetus of the war, as airplanes continued to develop as lethal, efficient, killing machines, a mystique developed around the scout, 'chasse', or pursuit (fighter) pilot, who was equated with the knights of yore.

"The Unsubstantial Air" offers the reader through diary and letter excerpts from the airmen themselves rarefied views into what flying and the war was for them. I thoroughly enjoyed the experience and highly recommend this book for anyone who has a curiosity about what flying was like when aviation was in its infancy.

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## **A.L. Sowards says**

This book was different from your average history book, and I really enjoyed it. It's about American airmen in WWI. The author was a WWII pilot, so he was looking back at his roots, in a way. The book felt like his guide through numerous personal accounts (letters, diaries, memoirs), and he didn't hide his personal attachment to these men who were pioneers in aviation and aerial combat. I really enjoyed his writing style. I listened to the audiobook, so I won't quote from it, but it's one I wouldn't mind picking up again sometime. (That's not too much of a surprise--I kind of have a thing for WWI pilots, and books with painted biplanes on the cover.)

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## **Mike Prochot says**

Samuel Hynes basically mines the letters, personal journals, published memorials and unit histories of and relating to the American airmen in World War One to give us an account of what it was like to be an American airman in those early days.

Due to the subject matter, with the anniversary celebrations and the resultant new found interest in the "War To End All Wars", it is easy to give the book a high mark or maybe a nod of reverence. However, while I did enjoy the book I do not think that this is a major work by any stretch of the imagination. I did not like it as much as I had hoped to as when I read the cover notes and the published reviews.

We get a little of the history of the Ivy League, well-to-do students push for air power prior to America's involvement in WW1, which is covered in more detail in other recent books. Interestingly, Hynes uses this aspect of the history of air-power in America to put forth the theory that this college (and blue blood money) movement was the basis of the evolution of the "lone-wolf" or "special breed apart" status of combat pilots which was so prevalent in World Wars One and Two, filling books, movies, music and magazines with the genre.

From there, we move through an overall review of what it was like to go from learning to fly in wingless machines to becoming an operational combat pilot. The insight one gets from the personal letters and journals is just how the young men approached their fears in the air and dealt with the stress of combat and the short life of an airman at the front. We also get a sense of the innocent and yet dramatic patriotism that seemed to infect the majority of these men.

While I did enjoy reading the personal accounts with their hopes, aspirations and naivete pouring through, I did not agree with or for that matter fully understand the author's need to repeat or rephrase the words written in those personal narratives.

All in all, an interesting read, but in my opinion, more of a Grayline Tour of life at an aerodrome in the First World War. There are more detailed accounts written elsewhere.

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## Louis says

Aviation during World War I is remembered today for its sense of romance. The dashing figure of the pilot, a daredevil in the cockpit, became a hero of generations of boys (including Charles Schulz, who made Snoopy dream of fighting the Red Baron by flying his doghouse). Samuel Hynes recaptures the excitement and glamour of aerial battle in World War I.

Many of the young fliers were college boys (many colleges established flying clubs in the early 1910s) but others were less-privileged country boys. The book takes us through their training (often quite basic) to the voyage to Europe, bar-hopping in London and Paris and finally into battle. Making skillful use of letters and diaries, Hynes captures the ambitions of the young pilots to achieve glory while facing (or avoiding) the risks involved. In this dance between valor and death, they found excitement, danger and the destruction of war.

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## Steve says

Outstanding history (and at times meditation) on America's first flying warriors. The planes of World War I were only a little more than a decade removed from the Wright Brothers' first success, and they were primitive indeed. But the romance of flying had already caught fire on American universities (and beyond), as flying clubs cropped up everywhere, paralleling the rapid military developments in the air overseas. These young men wanted to be a part of the show, and some of them started filtering (as volunteers) toward France before America even entered the war. Their attraction toward fighting in the air was a romantic one, like knights in one-on-one combat. There is some early truth to that, which Hynes (a combat pilot himself) beautifully captures throughout the book. This passage in particular captures that "Dawn Patrol" romanticism.

*And so they flew their first patrols and saw what the earth at war was like. The treeless shell-torn ground, the blown-in trenches, the ruined towns, and beyond the front the French roads, white and straight and bordered by poplars, that are the only dependable guides to where you are. And they felt the strange beauty of it all: how the flashes of the artillery show up most brilliantly in the hours before first light, and how sunrise is more splendid seen from the air high above the mud and desolation, how the dawn repays the discomfort and danger. And saw -- or didn't see -- their first German plane. And learned -- or didn't learn -- the lessons of flying disciplines.*

And Hynes spends considerable time discussing those "disciplines." This is never boring, and I doubt few are even aware of how these pilots were trained, and what they had to endure once they took to the air. They had no parachutes, the planes were flimsy, and tactics were something they were discovering (and revising) as they flew. Hynes builds his history largely around the diaries and letters of several pilots, so you hear their voices, their excitement, their fears, and late, as casualties skyrocketed, their fatalism. Highly recommended.

Note: As I was finishing this book, I watched the "Wings," the old 1927 movie about the Air War. I highly recommend it. There's a forgettable love story or two, but what makes the movie so fascinating, especially after reading Hynes' book, is how accurate the movie is.

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## **David says**

Hynes, a pilot himself and a very good writer, writes a book about the US airmen of a World War I. This is not a typical war book about strategy and battles. Instead it is a book about the airmen and the, at the time, new innovation of using airplanes in war. The airmen are generally college students who want to enter the big war and prove themselves to be men. The wonder of flying comes across in Hynes's writing. Lyrical and memorable.

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