

BOOK Reviews

Jet Blast (and the hand of fate)

By John Ackroyd
Redline Books 280 pages, copiously
illustrated

This book came in the post as a consequence of our interview with Andy Green in the October issue of *General Aviation*, and it is a truly fascinating account of one man's amazing contribution to almost every headline-making record of our generation. When Andy Green says we need to get away from the cult of vapid, vacuous and vain celebrity and learn to prize our real achievers, it's men like John Ackroyd he's thinking of.

Whenever great and daring deeds have been done in recent times, Ackroyd has been there or thereabouts. A former Saunders-Roe apprentice with a fascination for aviation – he saw John Derry die at Farnborough in 1952 – he designed Richard Noble's world land speed record car Thrust 2 after answering a small ad which read 'Wanted, 650mph car designer', worked for Craig Breedlove and Rosco McGlashan and was pivotal in all of Richard Branson's record-breaking balloon epics. A genius with an innate feel for how things really work, he has designed hovercraft, electric cars, aircraft, balloon capsule systems and soap box racers, but his forte is extreme speed, how cars hold together in the transonic zone and how hot jets and rockets make them go.

The general view of such garden-shed engineers is of bald men with ill-considered spectacles mended with sticking plaster, but Ackroyd is no such animal – he was a fully-rounded tearaway who wrecked more cars than he fixed and never let convention or the law stand in his way. He's been fined, banned, evicted, sacked, unemployed and of no fixed abode and he's never held a 'proper' job for any length of time, but the line of least resistance has never interested him and he has always lived the life less ordinary. It's the emotional aspects of this book that stay with you longest; Ackroyd's dedication to these projects cost him his marriage, family and home and guaranteed him a life of poverty. An abiding impression on reading *Jet Blast* is that the pursuit of record speed calls for about



one percent brilliance larded with inhuman levels of persistence, pig-headed obstinacy and an utterly unreasonable refusal to quit, with stress and strain lasting for year after year after year. In the end you win, lose or run out of money, and either way the thing that has occupied your every waking thought suddenly disappears. The desolation of 'post-project blues' can only be alleviated when the phone rings, and somebody somewhere is cooking up another mad scheme...

In any civilised society, statues would be raised to people like Ackroyd. Instead, he is left to potter about the Isle of Wight on a bicycle scavenged from a tip and dream of great feats to come. If you want an uplifting read, or if you want to get a kid's nose out of the X-Factor and into a world of real value and worth, get on to Amazon and buy this book – *Pat Malone*

Dowding of Fighter Command

By Vincent Orange
Grub Street Publishers 310
pages, 16 of photographs

The story of how Hugh Dowding's prescience paved the way for victory in the Battle of Britain, thus quieting the appeasers and helping the Churchill faction consolidate its hold on power, has been told many times. His removal from power by Air Marshals and political opponents whose outdated adherence to the mistaken doctrines of Hugh Trenchard made them look foolish when put to the test is also old news, as is the fact that the names of those who conspired to bring Trenchard down are now largely meaningless and forgotten. Vincent Orange's version of Trenchard's life draws all the strings together and can be regarded as a definitive account of the great man's life. Caught up in the action is Keith Park, whose tactics allied with Dowding's strategy to ensure victory in the Battle, and who was subsequently undermined and supplanted by the madly ambitious but far less able Trafford Leigh Mallory, assisted by political friends and acolytes like Douglas Bader.

There are a lot of interesting facts in the book; for instance, many people will be unaware of the sheer size of the French air force in the 1930s. In May 1940 they had 3,289 modern aircraft, of which 2,122 were fighters. Unfortunately, their planning was poor and they were all over the place, flying no fewer than 60 different types including a lot of pretty useless old warthogs. They had some good fighters and bombers – the MS406 and the Sud Est LeO 451 are cited – but their organisation was as good as their planning; they had too few crews, too few

spares, poorly developed tactics and no defence system involving radar, radio and observer posts. Thanks to Dowding, Britain did, and that was the critical difference. Dowding's insistence on husbanding his resources despite intense pressure to send fighters into France and to protect shipping that was sent through the Channel as a flag-waving exercise, helped to ensure that the RAF

had the tools to fight off the Luftwaffe onslaught when it came, although it was a damned close-run thing.

Dowding was a difficult and uncompromising man, even to his few friends, and that did him no favours when the knives came out. He was also cranky; a proselytising vegetarian, he believed in fairies and flying saucers and swore that his dead wife visited him regularly for conversations. His devotion to spiritualism was complete in his

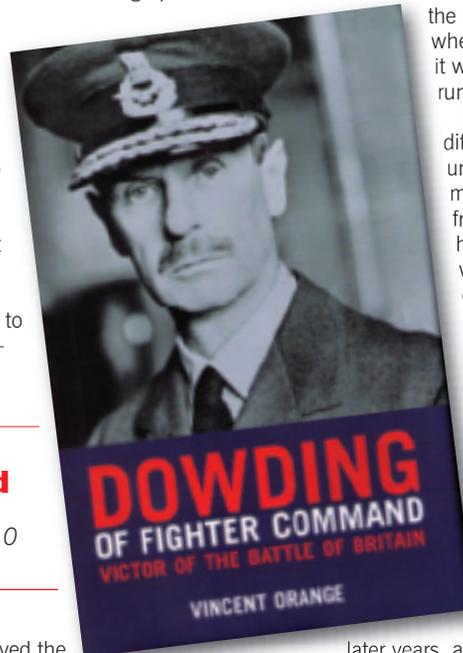
later years, and further set him apart him from the run of folk. Nonetheless, when he died in 1970 he was buried in Westminster Abbey following a funeral attended by 46 air marshals, and his statue now stands outside St Clement Danes. Addressing his responsibility for victory in the Battle Vincent Orange asks: "Is it too much to claim that Trafalgar saved the nation, but the Battle of Britain saved the world?" Probably, but I get his drift. – *Pat Malone*

The 100 Greatest Women in Aviation

Liz Moscrop and Sanjay Rampal
Published by Aerocomm 216 pages, well
illustrated

This is a coffee-table sized paperback, heavily researched and full of fascinating stories about women who've made their way in what, it might be argued, remains a man's world. Women in aviation, while far more numerous today than ever, are still too much of a rarity. But things are improving – I was mildly surprised to see in this book Moslem women pilots flying in headscarves for Etihad, and if they can do it, the sky's the limit.

The first woman to get a pilot's licence, I learn, was Baroness Deroche, who received ticket No 36 from the FAI in February 1910. She went on to set distance and altitude records before being killed in a landing accident. The first British woman was Hilda Hewlett, pictured here with a frightening head of hair, who not only ran a flying school at Brooklands in 1911 and taught her son Francis to fly but founded a company, Hewlett and Blondeau, which built more than 800 military aircraft. Bessie Coleman was the first black woman pilot, as long ago as 1920, and the story of British javelin champion Lady Mary Heath, the six-foot-three daughter of a criminally insane murderer, who flew from



Cape Town to Cairo in 1928, defies belief. Lilya Litvak, the ice-cold 'White Rose of Stalingrad' was the first woman to shoot down an enemy aircraft in air-to-air combat and went on to become the first fighter ace, while her colleague Katya Budanova scored eleven kills before she herself died. She was not, however, the world's first female combat pilot – that was Sabiha Gokcen, who flew with the Turkish military in 1937.

Our own recently-



Morrow Lindbergh, Jean Batten, Beryl Markham, Betty Skelton, Jackie Cochran, Hanna Reitsch, Valentina Tereshkova, Sheila Scott, Barbara Harmer, Eileen Collins – the authors wisely do not get into the business of ranking their pilots in order of contribution; and any attempt to do so would certainly lead to bloodshed. This is an inspiring enough tome for a bloke, and a worthy present for any girl who wants to step out of the stereotype and fly like every woman should. – Pat Malone



Ann Welch and husband Lorne ready to test the K-1 glider at Lasham in 1954

decorated ATA women are represented by Pauline Gower, Lettice Curtis and Diana Barnato Walker. I was pleased to see the exploits of Ann Welch recorded here; Ann, who died in 2002, flew 150 different aircraft in the ATA and founded the Surrey Gliding Club, was an energetic AOPA supporter. From the modern era we have Polly Vacher and Jenny Murray, who pioneered round-the-world flying in fixed-wing aircraft and helicopter, and Judy Leden, the world-beating hang-glider pilot who has comprehensively beaten the men at their own game.

All the girls you'd expect are here – Pancho Barnes, Amy Johnson, Amelia Earhart, Ann

Flying into hell

By Mel Rolfe

Grub Street: Paperback £8.99
ISBN 978 1 906502 09 6

Sub-titled 'The Bomber Command Offensive as recorded by the crews themselves', this book is just that. As a change from some of the many sanitized reports by people who have never been near a war, these are separate records from members of aircrews who saw action and who faced the inevitable consequences.

To give due credit to these true stories, I would need to do a breakdown of the 20 chapters, each of which provides insights into some of the crews' origins, outlooks, behaviours and attitudes. This would occupy several pages, which might be justifiable in value terms but clearly is not practicable.

So here are a few examples: the reactions of a new crew meeting enemy fire for the first time, successfully bombing their target, but experiencing hair-raising problems

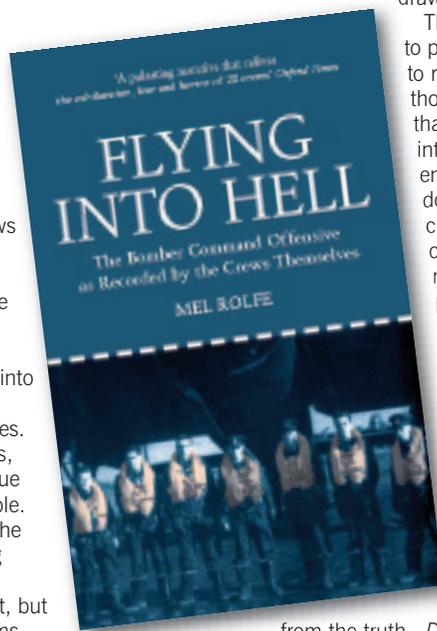
when trying to return to Waddington in their damaged Lockheed Hudson; the bomb aimer – who had never handled an aeroplane and had not even driven a car – who was called to take control of a Lancaster while the pilot left his seat to visit the Elsan, resulting in the aircraft leaving the stream and becoming a lone target for the enemy's ack-ack. It was hit, the bomb doors were damaged and one of the two mines on board came adrift on touch down and chased the aircraft along the runway. Then there was the pilot who was shown his own grave three years after he had been shot down and presumed killed.

There were many more. Not all were experiences in operations against the enemy. A pilot on a training flight, from North Weald in a Bristol Blenheim, with three observers on board, was challenged to do aerobatics. He attempted a slow roll, lost control and the attempts at recovery made less horrific reading than the subsequent discovery: a placard stating 'This aircraft has a cracked stern frame. For God's sake treat it gently', signed by the squadron commander.

The true Britishness of it all is brought home when a match at the Sussex county cricket ground at Hove was reluctantly abandoned after a German aircraft released four bombs onto the pitch. They failed to explode, but despite the potentially lethal weapons that were buried in the centre of the action, some team members disagreed with the decision to draw stumps!

This book is difficult to put aside. I intend to read it again more thoroughly and I hope that this brief introduction will encourage others to do so. My only criticism is a lack of chapter cross-references to the photographs, the related stories of which are difficult to pinpoint. Before opening the pages I thought, wrongly, that it must have been written before and the contents would be stale. This is a long way

from the truth. David Ogilvy ■



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