

DELIRIOUS BURNING BLUE

by Michael Ventura

Austin Chronicle – November 10, 2006

Like most boys my favorite form of play involved fantasies of becoming a man and killing other men. There's a lot of psychological faldral about why boys are like that, but the reason is less psychological than historical. There's been no generation of boys whose elders haven't asked them to fight and die for their tribe, king, god, and/or country. This expectation runs deeply through every culture. Boys absorb it in their earliest years. After millennia of continuous warfare, perhaps it's been burned into our genes. When I was a kid in Brooklyn, rare was the father who hadn't been in the military; rare was the son who hadn't seen photos of his father youthful in uniform. As they'd been called, we assumed we'd be called -- and it never crossed our minds that the cause might not be just. So we played soldier and collected toy soldiers; we played fighter-pilot and built model planes; we watched war movies and read war books -- preparing for, and looking forward to, what they called "the test of combat." It was fun and probably still is. (And now that females fight, girls may do it too.)

Back then, every drugstore and candy-store had a revolving rack of paperbacks, "pocketbooks" that fit in your back pocket, purchased for a quarter or maybe two. I don't remember the writers' names or the books' titles (except for *God Is My Co-Pilot*), but I remember the books. My favorites were about fighter-pilots. There was one by the leading U.S. ace of the Pacific, another by the leading Japanese ace, another by a Kamikaze who somehow survived, and several by Spitfire pilots. One of the first poems I committed to memory (and isn't that an interesting phrase, I never noticed it before: we *commit* to memory, memory is a kind of commitment) -- anyway, the poem I loved and memorized was by a Canadian Spitfire pilot, John Magee, killed in the Battle of Britain at age 19. It ends: *Up, up the long delirious burning blue/ I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace/ Where never lark, or even eagle flew --/ And, while with silent lifting mind I've trod/ The high untrespassed sanctity of space,/ Put out my hand and touched the face of God.*

At age eleven I was certain this was the best poem ever written. Flight-Lieutenant Magee was my ideal: a warrior who could write a memorable sonnet. ("Silent lifting mind" is really pretty good, though it seems to me now that "trod" is really pretty bad. In Magee's defense, he didn't have time for revision, and not many words rhyme with "God." Anyway, he was just a kid.)

The best of those pocketbooks was a collection of letters by a World War One flier, a Brit. I remember neither title nor author but can still recite his dedication: *To my first wife,/ who died long ago,/ to whom these letters were written/ in the springtime of life.* It struck me hard, how he lived through the dangers of war while his young wife did not survive the hazards of peace.

This Brit didn't fancy-up his war. I remember his anger at the disorganization of the Royal Flying Corps compared to the murderously well-organized German squadrons. I remember his fury at Britain's shoddy weapons-merchants (guns on their planes jammed at alarming rates). It was perhaps from him I learned that in his war only 1 in 4 Allied fighter-pilots survived a 9-month tour of duty -- 75% casualties. Arriving at the front with sometimes as little as five hours of flight-time under their belts, new replacements often didn't survive a week.

If you believe our era is worse than others, study World War One. Between June, 1914, and November, 1918, a "conservative estimate" of casualties (says my Viking-Columbia Desk Encyclopedia) counted 10 million dead and 20 million wounded. It's always a good idea for readers to check my math, but: four years and five months of that war averages a casualty count of 6,211 dead and 12,422 wounded *daily*. Incredible. Impossible. But so. (World War Two, just 21 years later, would be approximately four times worse. It was quite as century.)

As I a kid I was a vociferous reader of encyclopedias, so these numbers were familiar to me. Which made the chivalry and beauty of the 1914-1918 air war all the more seductive. For once, legend cannot improve upon fact. As though in reaction to the grinding horror on the ground --

and perhaps because flight was so new; people had been flying just nine years when war began -- these young fighter-pilots attempted to make killing elegant. They succeeded to a remarkable degree. One pilot, Cecil Lewis, later wrote: "To be alone, to have your life in your own hands, to use your own skill, single-handed, against the enemy. It was... the only sphere of modern warfare where a man saw his adversary and faced him in mortal combat, the only sphere where there was still chivalry and honor. If you won, it was your bravery and skill; if you lost, it was because you met a better man." Well, that doesn't speak for those sloppily-trained kids who didn't last a week, but it speaks for how these people saw themselves and how they tried to behave.

Once a pilot proved his worth he could hunt alone, taking off in his biplane whenever he wanted. Their planes were tiny and frail, made of canvas and wood but for the engine and guns. There were no radios, and (for the fighter-planes) no parachutes. Once airborne you were on your own. To us, it would seem like battle in slow-motion. At the beginning of that war, some fighters flew at only 30 m.p.h.; by its end the top cruising speed was 122 m.p.h. If you see these biplanes more or less accurately portrayed (as in *Hell's Angels* or *The Blue Max*), they look like battling butterflies. The pilots thought themselves knights, and said so, painting personal insignias on their planes so one's enemy would know whom he was fighting. Their memoirs are like those of our Civil War, portraying a nightmare that was all the more nightmarish because it was also a terrible and irresistible kind of fun.

These pilots of what was then called The Great War did their best to make it fun, and in a courtly manner. When the French ace Georges Guynemer fought the German ace Ernst Udet, neither could out-maneuver the other for a killing advantage until Udet's gun jammed. Guynemer saw Udet's situation, saluted him, and flew away. (Guynemer, who did not survive the war, said something that marked me when I was young: "If one has not given everything, one has given nothing.") When the German ace Oswald Boelcke was downed, British pilot Frederick Libby wrote: "He was a fine gentleman and a great fighter... a good enemy... our respected friend and enemy." That one's enemy may be worthy of great respect, "a good enemy," is an idea that has fled the world, and we are poorer without it.

When I was a kid my favorite pilot was Albert Ball, a British ace, felled at age 20. He always fought alone. He often flew straight at his opponent, getting his shot when the other veered off to prevent collision. He stayed alone on the ground too, tending his vegetable garden and playing classical airs on his violin. Albert Ball was last seen flying into an enormous white cloud. They say that no one saw him fly out -- which, as a kid, I was willing and eager to believe.

Why do I dig up these memories now? Because they're so seductive. After all I've learned, something in me still wants to be a World War One fighter-pilot! That's nuts. But it helps me understand why we will always war. Something in us likes it. Now that women are allowed, they do it too, so you can't blame it on gender. We war because we want to. Other reasons couldn't exist if that reason didn't.

When I steeped myself in this lore as a boy, how humiliated I'd have been to know that as a man I would dread flying. I've behaved courageously at times; at times I've been a coward; but for a long time now the idea of flight fills me with dread like nothing else. "Delirious burning blue," oh yeah. Only the personal emergency of a loved one can get me on a plane. Well, I've learned enough not to consider myself less of a man for that. And who taught me? Another pilot, Antoine De Saint-Exupery. I trusted him because his exploits were real. When I was 16 he spoke to me Biblically, "as one with authority, and not as one of the scribes." I wanted to know what it was to be a man; he told me. I read this flier's words over and over until I had them by heart: "To be a man is, precisely, to be responsible. It is to feel shame at what seems the unmerited misery of others. It is to feel joy in a victory won by one's comrades. It is to feel, when setting one's stone, that one is contributing to the building of the world."