



# ARMCHAIR AVIATION

We take a look at what's available for the aviation history enthusiast in the world of books and other literature, from hot-off-the-press publications to reissued classics

## **The Happy Warrior: James Thomas Byford McCudden VC**

By Alex Revell; Aeronaut Books, PO Box 610253, San Jose, CA 95161; 8½in x 11in (216mm x 279mm) softback; 304 pages, illustrated; £19.25. ISBN 978-1-935881-34-6

JAMES McCUDDEN VC DSO MC MM came from a working class Army family and joined the Royal Flying Corps in 1913 as a mechanic aged 18. He became an observer and then a pilot while still a non-commissioned officer, and was finally promoted Major with an official score of 57 aerial victories before his death aged 23. He wrote his autobiography, *Five Years in the Royal Flying Corps* (called *Flying Fury* in some editions), itself a classic, in the spring of 1918.

Alex Revell's book *The Happy Warrior* (named after Tryggve Gran's description of McCudden) is surely the definitive work on the subject. Revell was planning this book in 1967 when Christopher Cole published his biography, *McCudden VC*, and so shelved the idea. His lifelong project now sees the light of day.

Revell believes that McCudden was among the greatest of all fighter pilots. This depends not only on victory scores, but also on the quality and availability of the opposition; the verifiability of the score claims (McCudden's was better than most other Allied First World War aces, and a lot higher than some that could be mentioned); leadership skills; influence in developing tactics and technology, and the regard in which others held him. McCudden realised that destroying enemy fighters was less important than destroying the two-seaters that were observing the ground forces. A well-flown two-seater needed treating with respect, but McCudden brought down 45 of them between September 1917 and March 1918, twice getting four in one day. He personally tuned his engine to be able to fly some 3,000ft (900m) higher than most other S.E.5as; he had excellent eyesight and an above-average tolerance of low oxygen levels

and extreme cold. A professional soldier to the core, if he had lived he would surely have risen to a high rank.

The main section of the book feels somewhat like a repetition of *Five Years . . .*, and some passages are close to being repeats of the author's other works on No 56 Sqn; but, as he has attempted to write the definitive work, he was bound to use all information available. The appendices and the copious endnotes are the results of decades of research. Revell gives a new perspective on McCudden's fatal crash: the belief that it was the result of a highly experienced pilot making an elementary mistake is at best an oversimplification, and almost certainly there was a cover-up of the true cause.

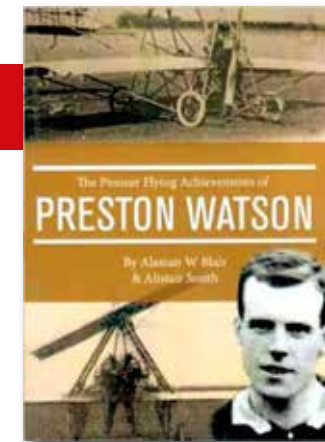
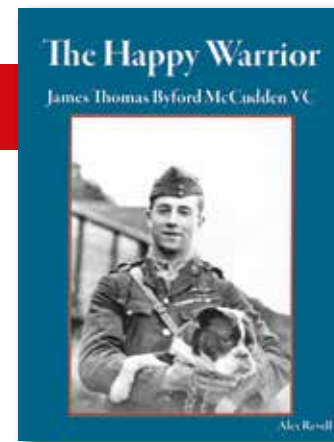
The book is a paperback using fairly coarse paper that is not ideal for reproduction of the photographs, but this is probably about keeping down the costs. There are a fair number of typographical errors: I hesitate to say this as Revell credits his wife with the proofreading, but most examples are not in the main text but in the endnotes and photo captions, and are mostly technicalities which a non-specialist may not pick up. But this remains an essential book for anyone with an interest in Great War aviation.

ADRIAN ROBERTS

## **The Other Space Race – Eisenhower and the Quest for Aerospace Security**

By Nicholas Michael Sambaluk; Naval Institute Press, 291 Wood Road, Annapolis, MD 21412; 6in x 9in (157mm x 233mm); hardback; 320 pages, illustrated; £30. ISBN 978-1-612518-86-2

FOR SEVERAL DECADES it has been a commonly held view that President Dwight D. Eisenhower preferred playing golf to addressing national defence issues and that he led his country sleepwalking into a vacuous disregard



for threats from a belligerent Soviet Union. Under his watch, rumours of a "bomber gap", and then a "missile gap", flourished and gained traction with an electorate still traumatised by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor a decade earlier. It brought widespread shock over the launch of the Soviet Union's Sputnik 1 and caused military chiefs to warn persistently of the USA's potential vulnerability to attack.

The Eisenhower administration lasted eight years, from January 1953 to January 1961. A Republican, Ike had been persuaded to stand for office over concerns that the incumbent, Democrat Harry Truman, had increased the national debt, been profligate with military spending on the whims of paranoid service chiefs and had squandered the nation's financial resources through excessive spending.

A counter-view has gained traction in recent years, however, with the publication of several books in which it is argued that Eisenhower quietly set about preparing the nation to resist the belligerent Soviet bear and, in reality, did more than his predecessor to raise America's defence preparedness. Nicholas Sambaluk's book is one of the latest and most cogently argued interpretations of that issue to date, presenting the facts in a highly readable style while retaining a dispassionate stance and providing copious references.

Support for his view comes from evidence only now coming to light, paired with an increasing amount of declassified material. Conservative in his use of fiscal and material resources, Ike actually initiated a wide range of military and intelligence-gathering assets which prepared the USA for superiority in its deterrent structure, missile programmes and space-based capabilities in the decade after he left office.

Eisenhower was directly responsible for starting the Atlas, Titan and Minuteman inter-continental ballistic missile programmes as well as the Polaris submarine-launched ballistic missile; for expanding the deployment of air-

deliverable tactical nuclear weapons, and for establishing the first generation of spy satellites crucial to debunking the missile-gap myth. He also restrained Pentagon chiefs in their efforts to overbuild the nuclear deterrent when intelligence officials knew, but could not publicly disclose, that Soviet Russia had boasted of war-fighting assets far in excess of its capabilities.

When running for President and slamming the Eisenhower administration for apathy, John F. Kennedy used national fear over perceived Russian military supremacy to suppress classified briefings he received revealing the fallacy that Russia was leaping ahead. When he became President he used this knowledge to retract a pre-election promise to the military for massive spending on the nuclear deterrent, cancelling many aerospace and missile projects and slashing others, gaining many enemies in the process. Insiders knew the truth and this reviewer recalls from personal experience whispers within the Washington DC corridors that Kennedy was "living on borrowed time".

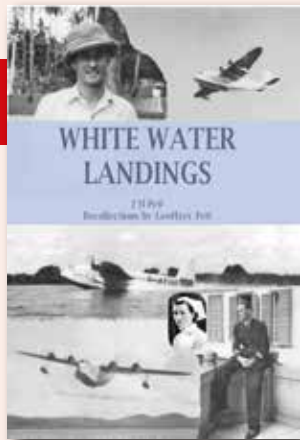
Vindication of the Eisenhower administration is long overdue and this book brings an academic dignity to the debate, with much evidence to show prudent balance between excess and insufficiency during those tense years.

Dr DAVID BAKER

## **The Pioneer Flying Achievements of Preston Watson**

By Alastair Blair and Alistair Smith; Librario Publishing, Brough House, Milton Brodie, Kinloss, Moray IV36 2UA ([www.librario.com](http://www.librario.com)); 5½in x 8½in (146mm x 210mm); softback; 178 pages, illustrated; £11.99. ISBN 978-1-909238-48-0

JUST WHEN WE thought the claims regarding alleged powered flights by Preston Watson of Dundee in 1903 had been laid to rest, this



## “BRISTOL” BLENHEIM THE BLENHEIM SOCIETY

The Journal of the Blenheim Society. Edited by James P. Dale, e-mail james.dale@tesco.net; 11¼in x 8¼in (297mm x 210mm); 16 pages, illustrated; published three times a year and available to Blenheim Society members as a benefit of their annual subscription (£15 for normal membership). Website [www.blenheimsociety.org.uk](http://www.blenheimsociety.org.uk)



LAUNCHED IN 1987 to cater for former aircrew, groundcrew and anyone with an interest in the Blenheim, as well as to record the type's history, the Blenheim Society has also supported the restoration and operation of the sole airworthy example, put back in the air thanks to the determination of the late Graham Warner. The journal is the membership's main channel of communication.

July 2016's issue (No 85), which arrived shortly before *TAH17* went to press, contains a typical mixture of material, beginning with messages from the editor and the society's chairman, plus items of news, lists of new members and obituaries of recently-deceased members. Feature articles comprise rare first-hand recollections by an air gunner who joined the RAF before the onset of World War Two; and an account of a 114 Sqn pilot's career on Blenheims. The journal wraps up with an identification challenge concerning a piece of memorabilia, plus letters, book reviews and photographs, all reflecting a lively and thriving organisation. **MO**

small volume regurgitates all the old worn-out arguments. Unfortunately it is so full of errors regarding the work of Watson and other pioneers that it is grossly misleading. As far as Watson is concerned the authors give prominence to the facts, opinions and reports which favour their hero, much of which is extremely unreliable and invalid belated testimony. It is very wrong to “invite readers to arrive at their own conclusions” after presenting an extremely biased and misleading case. Where is the evidence that “Watson and the Wrights may have been in touch with each other” (p136)? The Wrights meticulously kept all their correspondence, but the authors have found none. There is only a very vague secondhand rumour from the late 1940s that Orville spoke of Watson (p29). It is certainly wrong to state as fact that: “It is known, for instance that at some point he was in correspondence with the Wright brothers”. Yet on page 103 they again assert the link, stating: “Watson was known to the Wright brothers, suggesting he had been in correspondence with them, but at what date and on what subject is not known” — an outrageous leap of assumption.

The authors are clearly out of touch with current understanding of other pioneers' achievements. The accounts of the work of “Cody” (actually Cowdery, not “Chowdery”, as the authors have it), Roe and Mozhaisky are sadly awry. Nor are they very well informed as regards precedents. The first control column to operate rudder and elevators in the manner now accepted was incorporated by Pénau in his prophetic 1876 design for a full-size aeroplane. That was the first “joystick”. They also go to some lengths on the origins of laminated propellers, but seem unaware that those of the 1903 Wright Flyer were laminated.

The postscript overflows with unjustified assumptions and unfounded claims. For example, Watson's rocking wing was totally

different from the fixed parasol wing, apart from the fact that both employed pendulum stability. Watson might have been the first to conceive the rocking-wing system, but there is no evidence that anyone else was inspired or influenced by him to take it up. Similar systems were subsequently adopted by Spratt in the USA with his “control-wing”, and much later still by the hang-glider fraternity, but there is nothing to suggest that Watson's work inspired either of these developments. Nonetheless, it is said that Watson's rocking-wing system “must have enlightened and informed the field of aviation”, but where is the evidence? There is none. To say that wing-warping “certainly waned after Watson's invention” is simply silly. There is nothing to show that Watson's system had any influence on the way things developed. This is not “a matter of opinion”, it is a matter of fact.

The authors' assertion that Watson made “lasting contributions” and deserves “a more prominent place” in aviation's early history is nonsense. He was just one of a great many who pursued their own notions with little or no effect on anyone else. That is why his name does not appear in the authoritative histories, something that seems to baffle the authors.

PHILIP JARRETT

### White Water Landings

By J.M. Pett with Geoffrey Pett; *Princeling Publications* (available from [www.ppbooks.co.uk](http://www.ppbooks.co.uk)); 6in x 9in (152mm x 229mm) hardback; 282 pages, illustrated; £30. ISBN 978-1-320766-91-3

ENJOYABLE REMINISCENCES written by leading individuals involved with Imperial Airways during the 1930s are joined by this late arrival; a compilation of memories from a pioneering yet modest Station Superintendent. Geoffrey Pett was a trainee with the airline

during 1933–36, and at the age of 21 was despatched to take on roles associated with the UK—South Africa route.

He started at the Brindisi flying-boat base in Italy, and then learned a great deal during his first major African posting at Mbeya in Tanganyika. Within 12 months he was the airline's employee at Lindi, on Tanganyika's Indian Ocean Coast. A survey had settled on an area fit to accommodate the Short S.23, and it was his job to turn the plan into a base. It is an illuminating story of how a 22-year-old collated knowledge and developed skills, maturing in a culture where Europeans were a privileged few among a sparse native community. He mixes tales splendidly, telling of how inhabitants found flying-boats unfathomable, and his own amazement as he and the radio officer addressed the issue of guiding arriving aircraft during inclement weather. His description of being sat in a launch as an Empire 'boat roared out of low cloud, then chasing its wake to lead it to the moorings, is a vivid reminder of what these operations entailed. Within 12 months he was on the Nile at Juba in Sudan, repeating the base-creation exercise a few miles south at Rejaf. Again it was a community-centred enterprise. He could not access the river as it was lined by impenetrable scrub, but the natives knew the answer: “Follow the ‘hippo run!’”.

In 1939 Pett returned to Britain, where he met his future wife, before returning to Cairo. They married while she was nursing in Uganda in 1942, but had to navigate a barrage of red tape to do so, as his wedding was not deemed a priority in those busy days of the wartime Horseshoe Route.

This book, put together by Pett's daughter, is based on a series of tape-recordings made up to his death in 2005. Careful editing has preserved the intonations and period expressions that take the reader back to those times, and has also retained much of the intimacy of his recollections. Anyone interested in this period

of aviation will find these little-heard tales of pioneering operations against a backdrop of very different societies and locations invaluable, and there are more than 70 previously unpublished photographs. The book's informality provides an excellent source of aviation and social history.

MIKE HIRST

### First Out in Earnest: The Remarkable Life of Jo Lancaster DFC

By David Gunby; *Fighting High Ltd* (available from [www.casematepublishers.co.uk](http://www.casematepublishers.co.uk)); 6in x 9in (152mm x 229mm) hardback; 320 pages, illustrated; £25. ISBN 978-0-993212-97-0

WHILE MANY of Britain's most distinguished test pilots have enjoyed a degree of fame within the mainstream — indeed the late Eric “Winkle” Brown became a household name in his last few years — one who has eluded greater public acclaim is John Oliver “Jo” Lancaster, whose achievements were every bit as significant as those of his contemporaries. It was Jo who first used an ejection seat “in anger”, when the Armstrong Whitworth AW.52 he was testing in May 1949 became uncontrollable. When the jet flying-wing started dismantling itself in flight, Jo took the decision to use the new-fangled seat and “punch out” into the history books.

Typical of Fighting High's commitment to quality, this attractive, well-produced biography details Lancaster's long and varied life in aviation, from his early days as an Armstrong Whitworth apprentice, through his wartime experiences as an RAF Bomber Command and A&EE pilot (during which, like Winkle, he tested German types) to his post-war exploits as a test pilot and, later, his overseas crop-spraying and aerial survey work. Recommended.

NICK STROUD

