

## **Critical Thought and the Culture of the Fighter Pilot**

**W**hile stationed in South Korea I found most of the young fighter pilots I met have internalized the message of the 1986 film *Top Gun*, a film which imprinted in the minds of thousands of young men the image of the fighter pilot as a rebel who plays by the rules only when necessary (the main character's call sign is "Maverick," for heaven's sake). My squadron mates were programmed to regard with suspicion the notion that missives from on high are always right, that the Public Affairs answer is always the best one. Consequently, they focus their "patriotism" in one direction: their allegiance lies with those who gather in the squadron bar every Friday night. Those elite few share an undivided loyalty, built in the air, where their fate rests in the hands of their wingman. All else is suspect. And when senior officials throw notions of patriotism and the Army's discarded "be all you can be" at these pilots, they automatically throw up their defenses and withdraw. Anything mandated from above is suspect, since rules originate outside the trusted group. They come to believe flying aircraft into battle is not about contributing to the greater good. For them it's about successful take offs and landings, about putting as much ordnance on-target as possible, and about surviving to fly another day. These are not things inherently connected with patriotism, with contributions to something greater than oneself. These ideas highlight the individual, and when that individual is back on the ground after a successful mission, he returns to the highly exclusive club of pilots who have survived their latest eye-to-eye with death. These men and women do not fly for their country. They fly for each other, and for themselves.

Richard Hillary was much the same sort of person. He served in the RAF during World War II, and wrote about his time as a fighter pilot in his 1942 memoir, *The Last Enemy*. He noted in the book that while attending pre-World War II Oxford, he and his classmates were galvanized by a "deep-rooted distrust of all organized emotion and standardized patriotism" (11). He could have served today. I first learned of Hillary's book reading Sebastian Faulks' *The Fatal Englishman* (1996), a study of three young lives

cut short. One of these lives is Hillary's, and about these men Faulks writes, "in their premature ends there is a natural poignancy that brutally epitomizes the disappointment that is also common but less evident in longer, duller lives" (xiii). Here Faulks ponders disappointment in both shortened and long life. In short lives the disappointment lies in what is unattained, unachieved; in lives lived to the full, "dullness" breeds the same feeling. Here Faulks echoes Achilles' "two fates" monologue in *The Iliad*: a noble death early in life brings glory, while long life wards off death but reduces glory won in youth. For Faulks, longevity is not to be praised.

Richard Hillary's short life began in Australia in 1919. He attended Oxford before joining the RAF so he could fly Spitfires in the war. Shot down, Hillary suffered terrible burns and underwent reconstructive surgery to repair his mangled face and hands. In the midst of these surgeries he left the hospital, convincing both his doctors and the military to give him another chance in the air. RAF leadership did not correct this mistake until it was too late. No one gave Hillary a firm "no," and as a result he returned to a flying squadron. He soon died in a plane crash during training, and as Faulk puts it, "the story went round that Richard Hillary's was a coffin they had to fill with sand" (196).

From the beginning I noted similarities between Hillary and the young fighter pilots I have known. Hillary's own words echo those of USAF pilots serving today, some 50 years later. He wrote that he hoped "when war came it might be fought with a maximum of individuality and a minimum of discipline" (Hillary 13). He noted war "gave us the opportunity to demonstrate in action our dislike of organized emotion and patriotism" (28). Such values are exactly the opposite of those senior military leadership seeks to instill in our officers, particularly in the face of impending war. I wondered, as I read these words, how many of our young pilots in both Gulf Wars, and in Afghanistan, championed a "patriotism" that was really an unbridled joy at tempting death to break things and kill people. That is the Air Force fighter pilot's job, after all. And since war beats training for realism, pilots can know what killing people feels like. Having done both is something to which few USAF fighter pilots can lay claim.

That is not to say Hillary, or our own pilots, have an unnatural affinity for killing. During a hunting trip, Hillary shoots a stag, and decides "I am no sportsman and the dying look in the beast's eyes resolved me to confine my killing to Germans" (Hillary 96). 2001's terrorist attacks brought out passion and threats of savagery from many Americans, including military members. I believe, however, that most pilots think more about the joys of flight and less about killing. Of course, they understand killing is an acceptable part of the game—and, in war, the goal. Hillary certainly didn't regret taking the lives of those German pilots he downed before his own tragedy.

Another similarity presents itself: the stereotypical fighter pilot is one who gives little thought to the future. This is not so much from desire as it is from necessity: Hillary wrote “we had little time to think, and each day brought new action. No one thought of the future: sufficient unto the day was the emotion thereof. At night one switched off one’s mind like an electric light” (Hillary 135). Hillary and his squadron experienced something so overwhelming that our uniquely human characteristic—that of planning for and anticipating the future—was suppressed. The one thing fighter pilots can truly count on is their next launch—all else is left up to fate. Faulks writes that the men in Hillary’s squadron did not ponder their circumstances: “they accepted the concomitant risk not so much without qualm as without thought” (133). I have often heard good-natured ribbing directed at sky divers. “Why would you throw yourself out of a perfectly good airplane,” people ask, shaking their heads. I can’t imagine sky divers enjoy dwelling on the implications. In the same way, pilots probably spend little time asking themselves “why would I launch myself into the air when the ground is so comfortingly safe?” Most pilots would answer that question with another: “Why wouldn’t I?” Pondering the excitement and thrill of flight requires less critical thought, less soul-searching. Pilots can easily stave off questioning their mortality and the fact they’re continually tempting fate.

And yet, in Richard Hillary we have a man who begins to ask questions most pilots don’t want to ask. He joins those men and women who begin to ponder their motivation, who question their definition of words like “patriotism,” who wonder about the moment of death. Hillary, that brash, swash-buckling pilot of the early war, met and befriended a fellow pilot named Peter Pease, and he realized Pease had something he did not. Pease’s self-assurance, his “grace and mental strength” and the “certainty of [his] character” drew Hillary to his new-found friend (Faulks 129-130). He realized Pease was comfortable with his reasons for fighting the war—he knew his “common good.” Hillary did not; he described his generation as “selfish and egocentric without any Holy Grail in which we could lose ourselves” (Hillary 28). He could not compete with Pease for assurance, and “resented Peter’s self-confidence” (100). Faulks finds this aspect of their friendship interesting, noting two things: one, that “Richard did not believe in the old values that Peter represented, but he had no better ones to put in their place; he had only a childish truculence. There was no doubt in his mind as to which of them would be happier at the moment of his death”; and two, “what Hillary was trying to tease out of Peter was a reason for dying” (129). Hillary was beginning to probe the idea of death, and it wasn’t a pleasant experience.

Hillary did change; he began to see the value of striving for something

greater than himself, and he could thank his friend's influence for that. When Pease died in battle his fiancée, Denise, stepped into the void in Hillary's life. They spent hours in deep discussions about man's place in the world, and what we both must be, and sacrifice, for the greater good. He began to ask himself weighty questions: "was it still possible for men to lead the egocentric life, to work out their own salvation without concern for the rest; could they simply look to themselves—or, more important, could I?" (Hillary 152-153). Denise furthered what Pease started, telling Hillary, "do you really believe you can go through life to the end, always taking and never giving? And do you really imagine that you haven't given to me, haven't helped me? Well, you have" (166). Hillary eventually realized self-ishness and individuality, while important, should not be the driving forces in his life. He saw the world outside himself, and knew it was worth fighting for. His change of heart was gradual and ultimately intellectual—even though his own disfigurement and the deaths of his friends may have served as an emotional trigger for that change. It was a change of conviction: he came to believe that the War was not only worth fighting but was an historic emergency with moral implications (171).

These last are the sorts of words military leadership likes to hear. This is Duty, Honor, Country, is it not? I think, however, that Hillary's convictions were more pure than those the typical military leadership tries to instill in the ranks; the conclusions he reached did not spring from arguments made by leaders offering patriotism as a way to both better his world and to be all he could be. No: Hillary's world view was larger than patriotism, larger than England. Hillary's realizations became for him a holy grail far better than anything the propagandists could create.

Hillary expounded upon this grail in the last pages of his book. Contemplating his dead comrades, he wrote that they spoke to him through the conversations he had with Peter, and he regretted not listening: "I had gone my way unheeding, [. . .] in some curious way suspended, blind, lifeless, as they could never be" (Hillary 220). He began to realize what all those conversations with Pease had been illuminating. He was finally, genuinely, thinking critically, after years of refusing to contemplate and then accept the answers to all his questions. Hillary's conversations with Pease started a process he was only now able to finish, and this self-realization opened the floodgates. While the war had conveniently served as his—and his generation's—grail for so long (Hillary 28), his quest now became the need to share his story with the world so that the world might be a better place because of the telling. Hillary finally moved from a man who refused to view his world critically, to one who actively sought and accepted the answers he needed. He did this not for his country, not for a white-washed notion of patriotism, but as a way to broaden the experience of humanity,

to help others step into the light.

We should applaud officers who reach the same conclusions, and should try to instill the notion that critical thinking is one of the warrior's best weapons. A good officer doesn't blindly accept missives from above without critical thought.

Hillary's book is important because it not only tells a good story but also chronicles his awakening. Prior to and in the early stages of the war, Hillary distrusted the "standardized patriotism" fed him, not because of a reasoned thought process. Quite understandably, he paid lip service to this ideal while in reality he abdicated responsibility by replacing that ideal with selfishness. The key to Hillary's transformation lies in Peter Pease. Deeply affected by the convictions of one who was inside his trusted circle, Hillary finally understood the need for critical analysis. Through that he discovered his role in the world, accepting that role with the conviction of a man long lost. The section on Hillary in *The Fatal Englishman* is a fine introduction, and Hillary's own *The Last Enemy* deepens the picture Faulks paints. Read these books not just for the compelling story they tell, but both for the welcome transformation Hillary undergoes and the hope it offers us today. We see in Hillary our own active duty men and women, for there are Richard Hillarys serving in 2003.

### Works Cited

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