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**Depleting Humanity**  
Environment, Technology, and the Air  
War in V.M. Yeates' *Winged Victory*

Yeates' autobiographical novel *Winged Victory* offers a unique look at the depleting experience of air combat in the Great War. In doing so, it differs from the many works written by soldiers, for the Great War was first and foremost a ground war. The novel charts Royal Flying Corps (RFC) pilot Tom Cundall's journey through the dehumanizing effects of the war to a state of emotional exhaustion. By war's end, after relentless combat missions and the death of his friends, Tom is a broken man, unable to feel anything. But what separates Tom's journey from those of other veteran-writers and, indeed, makes *Winged Victory* a true contribution to the literature of the Great War is that this is not the story of a ground soldier. Tom's journey through war's inhumanity is dominated by the environment of sky and the technology of flight that allowed man, for the first time in human history, to wage war in the air. Over the war's duration, these unique aspects drained Tom of his humanity, placing him among the most prominent and interesting tragic protagonists in Great War literature.

The sky environment was filled with both dread and wonder that did not reflect the world of ground combat fought below. Just to reach this heavenly place required integration of man and machine that was unique to the air war. A pilot's most crucial relationship was with his plane, and these machines were as temperamental as the skies they traveled, creating a particular strain on the "knights of the sky" as they began fighting in the world's first air war. The demands of this new form of combat, defined by both the environment and the technology of flight, further challenged pilots to find measures of stability in their demanding world. But all their coping mechanisms fail to salve the dehumanizing effect of warfare. In the end, Yeates' novel concludes on the same note as the majority of Great War novels: the environment of war will strip a soldier of his humanity. Tom's journey to emptiness takes a different path through the environment of war, but ends up at the same tragic fate.<sup>1</sup>

## The Environment of the Sky

Man has dreamed of traveling through the sky since the tale of Icarus, but it took until the twentieth century to make it a reality. Despite peaceful predictions of the positive influence of air power that were offered when the Wright Brothers introduced manned flight in 1903, when war was declared in August 1914, war in the air also became a reality. But it would be a much different war than that fought on the ground.

The ground soldiers of the Great War lived, fought, and died in an environment created by industrial technology. These destructive forces reshaped the natural world into a man-made hell, poisonous to human beings even when the guns were silent. Shellfire turned the land into a lunar wasteland of ruptured ground and ruined homes. Machine gun fire and hidden snipers made the world above ground inhospitable to human life. Trenches and bunkers were dug for protection but soon succumbed to flooding, vermin and disease. Poor sanitation made the ground septic. Paul Fussell has termed this environment the “Troglodyte” world; soldiers lived underground through huge stretches of trench lines and only surfaced at night to do their work.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, at the ground level, mud filled trenches and the corpse-strewn No Man’s Land are the dominant images of the Great War.

## The View From Below

For the ground soldier, the sky offered a respite to the ever-present squalor of trench life. Confined to the ruptured earth, men looked up and, when the sky was clear, could feel some solace that there was a world beyond the muck of the trenches. Fussell argues that Ruskin’s five-volume *Modern Painters*, published between 1840 and 1860, reaffirmed the sky, particularly at sunrise and sunset, as a symbolic and aesthetic place of beauty and peace in popular imagination. This sentiment toward the realm above is often expressed in the literature of the ground soldier.<sup>3</sup> Siegfried Sassoon talks of the sky as one of “the redeeming features of the war... I was looking westward, away from the war, and the evening star twinkled serenely.”<sup>4</sup> Christopher Tietjens, the protagonist of Ford Maddox Ford’s *Great War epic Parade’s End*, expresses a similar sense of reaffirmation in the world high above the trenches:

Twice he had stood up on a rifleman’s step enforced by a bully-beef case to look over—in those last few minutes. Each time, on stepping down again, he had been struck by that phenomenon: the light seen from the trenches seemed if not

brighter, than more definite. So, from the bottom of the pit-shaft in broad day you can see the stars.<sup>5</sup>

### **View from Above**

The pilots who called this environment home would largely agree with the assessments of the Poor Bloody Infantry. Compared to the world of the trenches, the sky was heaven. It could not be reached by means that soldiers on the ground had. It could not be remade to fit the strategic will of generals. Compared to the man-made ground environment of the Western Front, the sky was a natural, unconquerable landscape foreign to man's dominating will, one that had its own set of rules that could not be easily changed or ignored. In no small sense, all pilots were invading a landscape that two decades previous was outside the realm of human travel. Its effect on this first generation of men in flight would be critical to their war experience.

Traveling through the sky absorbed the pilots' senses. They experience what might best be described as a sense of "wonder" as they reached the heavens, though of a particular kind. This is wonder as Robertson Davies described it:

We have educated ourselves into a world from which wonder, and the fear and dread and splendor and freedom of wonder, have been banished. Of course wonder is costly. You couldn't incorporate it into a modern state because it is the antithesis of the anxiously worshipped security which is what a modern state is asked to give. Wonder is marvelous, but it is also cruel, cruel, cruel. It is undemocratic, discriminatory, and pitiless.<sup>6</sup>

The wonder of flight is a natural kind, and, like the Roman god Janus, it has two faces: the marvelous, and the cruel. In 1927, after his daring transatlantic flight, aviation groundbreaker Charles Lindburgh reflected from his own experience on the this power of flight on man, paralleling Davies's sense of wonder:

Is aviation too arrogant? I don't know. Sometimes flying feels too godlike to be attained by man. Sometimes, the world from above seems too beautiful, too distant for human eyes to see, like a vision at the end of life forming a bridge to death. Can that be why so many pilots lose their lives? Is man encroaching on a forbidden realm?<sup>7</sup>

This “forbidden realm” was both awe-inspiring and hostile to the war pilot. Tom Cundall’s experience parallels Lindburgh’s questions and Davies’ sense of “wonder.” His early flying is filled with the overwhelming power of experiencing a different world:

The world had gone; dissolved into intangible chaos. Nothing had form except the aeroplane and himself and perhaps that queer circular ghost of a rainbow that sat in the blankness in front. Every motion had ceased... The mist grew darker. He kept his speed right but he could feel that was not well... the mist brightened. He came suddenly into sunshine. A cloudless blue vault of sky arched over a gleaming floor of ivory rocks. It was all around him in the twinkling of an eye, and the grey chaos away in another universe, a million light years or a few feet distant. The two spheres were as close together and as far apart as life and death.<sup>8</sup>

Tom, like many of this first generation of flying men, is trying to describe what to a generation before would have been indescribable. He is caught between heaven and earth in a shifting landscape, separate from the chaotic land armies below. In the sky is life everlasting, as close to heaven as soldiers might expect to get, and so the rules of engagement are different. Time and motion no longer operate under the same principles. The unexpected is to be expected.

It is this majesty that can steal a pilot’s attention from the war at hand. During a mission, Tom enjoys the spellbinding view of the cloudy grey sky reflected purple in light, knowing full well that it detracts from the job at hand, one punctuated by bursts of munitions in the air and attacks by German Fokkers.<sup>9</sup> It is as if he has forgotten his own criticism of green pilots: when they are in the air, surrounded on all sides by heavenly vistas, they cannot see what is important. They become blind to the mission at hand while in flight, with the landscape changing shape around them. In the air, a different perspective is needed and can only be gained by experiencing it.

But even to veteran pilots, the sky makes no guarantees to the pilots, and thus to a great degree controls their actions, and increases the sense of chance that rules the actions of men at war. Weather exemplifies this for the pilots. It is both unpredictable and unconquerable. Ground soldiers might be forced to fight in mud-soaked environments and conduct raids in adverse conditions, but light mists and rain could keep pilots grounded for days, safe in their huts compared to the misery of their brethren in soaked earthen works. An exception was when the

pilots were performing ground strafing to support the infantry. These dangerous missions were fought in all but the worst weather, making them the bane of a war pilot's existence.<sup>10</sup> The war in the air inverted the value of weather to pilots and shaped their ideas of the man's place in this environment. Every sunny day and clear blue sky was an invitation to danger, as it would inevitably mean a call to fly and the chance of combat.

This view was opposite to that of the Troglodyte world. For the RFC, any rainy day and black sky offered respite from the war and cause for celebration, but not without risk. If the weather gives the slightest inkling of being off, it becomes an excuse to get drunk and otherwise act as if not on duty. This approach backfires near the novel's conclusion when the men take a chance on getting drunk on a cloudy day. The day turns clear and they are forced to fly "tight" and terrified. Tom survives the excursion on "pure drunkards luck," and vows never to go up "tight" again. The war in the air had enough risks, and, for Tom luck was his reserve for survival. Flying drunk drained it of its potency against the dangers of the war, and created an added terror.<sup>11</sup>

This inspiring, dangerous and unpredictable environment gave war pilots a very particular war experience. Tom's view of the world in flight gives credence to Lindburgh's assertions on "godlike" feelings produced in man in flight. Traveling only a few feet above ground, Tom sees the world of flight in spiritual and invigorating terms in which he himself is more than human. "Formation flying at a height of two feet—most joyous of joys. You are in the midst of the world, yet not of it, a supernal being thunderous with speed and leaping flight."<sup>12</sup> As *C Flight* takes to the sky, Tom experiences the sensation of "the laws of flight," that the world rushing by them on the ground would "move in whatever direction they willed."<sup>13</sup> In short, he has lost sense that he is moving through the world as a traveler; the pilot is the centre of the creation, the world rushing by him at his command. The experience of flight, then, was a source of immortality against the backdrop of war, no doubt contributing to a pilot's resolve to rise up to the challenge of flight (if not combat) again and again. Flight was something heavenly unto itself. Such godlike experiences on the ground are hard to imagine.

This heavenly atmosphere was reinforced by the absence of the physical remains of death in the sky. Dangers abounded, man-made and natural, and fear was ever-present, but while death could be inflicted in the air, it belonged to the ground: corpses were prisoners of gravity. The familiar sight of flaming and smoking planes as they spiral toward their resting place on earth sickens Tom, but these images soon vanish and the sky is left clean of the stain of combat. The novel is by and large absent of the usual hellish descriptions of war's physical wounds that so define First World War literature.

The dead are ever present on the ground. For Erich Maria Remarque, the war has robbed death of all its power to shock the living. We bare witness to a hastily made graveyard being turned into a de facto trench, where the coffins of soldiers serve to protect the living and are thus removed of the dead.<sup>14</sup> Ernest Hemingway's encounter with death in Italy during the war is given a clinical and cynical sheen in his essay/story "A Natural History of the Dead," where corpses are treated almost a separate species to the living. There is a cold objectivity to his description that would seem at home to ground soldiers like Remarque:

Until the dead are buried they change somewhat in appearance each day. The color change of the Caucasian races is from white to yellow, to yellow green, to black. If left long enough in the heat the flesh comes to resemble coal-tar, especially where it has been broken or torn, and it has quite a visible tarlike [sic] iridescence. The dead grow large each day until sometimes they become quite too big for their uniforms, filing these until they seem blown tight enough to burst.<sup>15</sup>

Both of these examples keep death as part of the natural landscape of war, imbedded in the life of the soldier, a constant reminder of a soldier's fragile mortality. But such reminders are absent from the sky. When men died in the sky, they succumbed to the law of gravity and left no stain in heaven. The casualties of air combat die as they return to the ground, blazing trails of smoke. For the pilots of *Winged Victory*, death is largely represented by absence of human beings rather than the presence of their ruined remains. Empty barracks replace gravesites to remind Tom that his colleagues have "gone west," itself a detached expression of death. When the young pilot Grey is killed in one of his first battles, it is the death on the ground that fills Tom's mind as he flies on. "That which had been Grey was a still warm mess of carrion somewhere on the unreal map below. Dead before he had been properly alive."<sup>16</sup>

This absence of the physical reality of death in the air is one reason that Tom continues to fly despite his growing disgust for the war and his disintegrating nerves. While fear and danger are ever present, the finality of death is in that "unreal map" of the ground, which has pegged on it Tom's own sense of mortality. This makes his comment that time not spent on in the air is "dead time" so revealing. In the air he can survive. In the air he can avoid the map of death. In the air he is alive. But death cannot be ignored, even if it is not present; the absence of life comes forward to be recognized. When Tom's fellow pilot and

commiserate soul Seddon is killed, Tom's mind, reeling from combat, fills in the blanks. "The hut was haunted. There were faint echoes of dead voices."<sup>17</sup>

To avoid the permanence of death, Tom finds rejuvenation in "peace flying." But as the war drags on, even this cure fails him. After countless combat missions, Tom recognizes this deathless environment, while filled with wonder, cannot in and of itself sustain him against the strains of the war. He will have to land sometime and each time he does there will be another one of his friends missing, haunting the barracks. He realizes, for the first time, that the world shooting by him is, in fact, steady. Tom is the one passing through it unnoticed. And this awakens him to his small place in the sky's vastness:

Some meaning in the loveliness of the dazzling scene beat against the portals of the anxiety-barred mind. This indifferent splendour flamed all around his path of destruction. It mattered nothing whether he killed or was killed. There was no ethic in nescient heaven: the amoral glory of young summer neither blessed nor cursed human conduct; it knew nothing of heroism or depravity. And beyond all this was a deeper and more physical indefiniteness. It could not be said, this moves, that stays; so much lays in the beholding mind, so little in outward things. Could it ultimately be said, this kills, that is killed?<sup>18</sup>

Tom looks for meaning throughout the novel to cope with the war's hardships; more often than not, these attempts come up empty, leading to Yeates's ultimate conclusion on man's place in war. Flight provides Tom with an overwhelming sense of wonder, one that few human beings in that day and age had ever dreamed of experiencing, but the environment is ultimately indifferent to him. Dead or alive, it is ignorant of man's presence and efforts. It only offers itself to be witnessed, perhaps worshiped, but it will not respond to the desires of those traveling through its splendor.

The infantry had a similar sense of awe and belittlement, but it came from the immensity of the war. Soldiers in combat often find themselves engrossed by the spectacle of large-scale technical destruction, losing themselves in the terrible beauty of events they cannot control. Philosopher and Second World War veteran J. Glen Grey, in attempting to unravel the enduring appeal of battle, labeled this feeling the "Lust of the Eye."<sup>19</sup> It is kindred to the godlike effect of flight described by Lindburgh and experienced by Tom. The difference is one environment created by man, and the other is oblivious to him.

## The Wings of Icarus

Like the sky, the landscape of war on the ground was indifferent to the infantryman. But both the landscape and its indifference were products of the tools of war. The ascendancy of defensive fire with improved range and lethality of machine gun and artillery fire created a war of “men against fire.” Early predictions of the effects of these developments called for impassible “death zones” on the battlefields of the next war. Instead, military planners argued for “offensive” spirit to nullify technological superiority. Contrary to popular belief, most pre-1914 strategic thought in Germany, Britain and France expected an incredibly bloody war, one in which moral forces would overcome material strength.<sup>20</sup>

Technology had been used to create a huge industrial war that diminished the importance of the individual soldier by its vastness. The great distances between combatants further reduced the war’s personal touch. The enemy was rarely seen though his actions were colossal. This comment from the narrator of Richard Aldington’s *Death of a Hero* is representative of this impersonal war on the ground:

The fighting was so impersonal as a rule that it seemed rather a conflict with dreadful hostile forces of Nature than with other men. You did not see the men who fired the ceaseless hail of shells on you, nor the machine gunners who swept away twenty men to death in one zip of their murderous bullets, nor the hands which projected trench-mortars that shook the earth with awful detonations, nor even the invisible sniper who picked you off mysteriously with the sudden impersonal “ping!” of this bullets. Even in the perpetual trench raids you only caught a glimpse of a few different-shaped steel helmets a couple of traverses away; and either their bombs got you, or yours got them. Actual hand to hand fighting occurred, but it was comparatively rare. It was a war of missiles, murderous and soul-shaking explosives, not a war of hand weapons.<sup>21</sup>

It is not surprising that the infantry looked at the actions of small squadrons with resentment. Little Marlow in Manning’s *Her Privates We*, upon seeing a plane, expresses his disdain. “ ‘Them bloody chaps ’ave a cushy job,’ said little Marlow with resentful envy. ‘Just fly over the line, take a peek at ol’ Fritz and as soon as a bit o’ shrapnel comes their way, fuck off ’ome jidy, toot sweet.’ ”<sup>22</sup> At the same time, pilots were seen as “knights of the sky,” engaging in a heroic form of personal combat that was an antithesis to the impersonal struggle of

“men against fire” that defined most land offensives of the Western Front. But the ground soldiers’ disdain and envy of the war pilot were rooted in and reflective of the grunts own experience of warfare. Between these two poles were the deadly and draining realities of fighting a war in a new environment defined by the relationship between man and technology.

Fighting in the sky was a young art. It required greater education and skill to operate the most modern technology of the First World War: officers were the frontline soldiers of the air war. These mature and sophisticated requirements contrasted with the youth of the service. Indeed, the godlike feeling of flight often translated into juvenile action unheard of in the trenches. It is one of Tom’s great joys to take his Sopwith Camel out for a spin like a teenager with a “hot rod” and scare his betters by low-flying stunts. The speed at which he travels precludes him from identification and punishment, allowing him a childish respite against the officers he deems responsible for the war. In one instance this included allegedly forcing General Arthur Currie to duck at a Canadian horses show in France.<sup>23</sup> Despite this youthful idiocy, the relationship between pilot and plane was incredibly complex. In some ways the inhuman relationship was the most important to the pilot. The Camel is Tom’s partner for every battle, every flight, and every scare tactic on his superiors. Indeed, the necessary melding of the two to act as one is the defining characteristic of the air war.

But this symbiotic relationship is never perfect. It is a partnership without a guarantee. Harmony between man and machine is shaky at best, and worsens under the strain of combat. Tom explains that the Camels “don’t like inexperienced hands” are initially hostile to new pilots<sup>24</sup> and so the relationship can be fatal. Camels are clumsy and sensitive to human and environmental controls and thirty percent of new pilots crash on their first flight.<sup>25</sup> Training to fly is a Darwinian experience. Tom cynically surmises that after three months of training you were either dead, a nervous wreck, or one hell of a pilot.<sup>26</sup> What is left silent between these points is that even a hell of a pilot who has managed to gain control over his vehicle can become, as Tom will, a nervous wreck.

The technology, while new, is itself as temperamental and unpredictable as war. The pilots who survive the attrition of training have no guarantee that this machine that they have tamed will operate perfectly once in the air and away from the safety of the ground. This reliance on unreliable technology for survival in a hostile environment is one of the great terrors of the air war. Tom’s nerves are continually shaken by his Camel’s engine stalling, forcing him to glide as he frantically attempts to make the machine do his will. This unpredictability becomes commonplace and saps him of his resolve and increases his fatalism. On the day before his greatly anticipated leave, Tom gazes at pleasant sky but this scene is tempered by fear of technical failure.

It was a morning to make the heart glad—sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright. The rhythm, matching the morning's perfection, ran in his mind. He would soon be hearing a different rhythm, that of his engine, on the indefectability of which his chance of safety would depend. He would spend anxious hours listening for the least irregularity, and the lovely clarity of the day would be a burden and a weariness.<sup>27</sup>

The Camel could not guarantee Tom's survival and this dread of technical failure is continually reaffirmed by Tom's propensity to crash and yet survive, the majority of these being the result of mechanical failure rather than problems incurred during combat. Yeates' intention in these scenes is both mimetic and literary. On the one hand, we see that there can be no trust put into the machines of man to do his will, that they are just as fallible as the person inside, and that even in flight they cannot assure man's safety. On the other, they are a physical reflection of Tom's gradual breakdown. When Tom's engine sputters during a combat mission, he arrives on the ground angry and frustrated because the machine "had no guts," which reflects his low opinion of himself.<sup>28</sup> Throughout the war, Tom identifies himself as the opposite to the "leaders" in his unit, such as Mac or Beal, who have guts, because such qualities are likely to get a man killed in the air. Tom's goal is survival, not the heroics he admires but sees as suicidal in both Mac and Beal. What he hates in his machine he hates in himself, though he cannot express it. It is no accident that engine failure is the usual cause of catastrophe. Tom emerges from each one of these wrecks a little less capable and increasingly more disgusted with the war at large, his own heart working harder and harder to keep up with the war's daily grind.

Tom's relationship to his planes thus becomes both personal and utilitarian. Indeed, both these values must be present to ensure survival. This personal nature of the relationship between man and technology, at the birth of the industrial age, is telling. We tend to see this era as a time of standardization and mass production that was dehumanizing man into (what Lewis Mumford quipped) becoming "tools of our tools." But planes become accustomed to the pilots and vice versa. When Tom offers his plane to Cross, he is rebuked by Cross's claim that engines get used to one individual pilot and so they should stick with their own planes.<sup>29</sup> Every replacement thus had to undergo the same period of adjustment as the two components became accustomed to each other. Even as the technology advanced and the latest models of engine and wing come into reality, Tom faces technical failures that shake his nerves before he reaches the enemy.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, the individual plane is less important than the type of plane itself. Each replacement is touted as an improvement, a better model, but none are immortal and soon it is *the plane* as opposed to *a plane* that Tom is piloting. While the relationship is still personal and utterly important, Tom refuses to let it dominate his view of their role in the war or their importance relative to human life. It is one of the devices he uses to maintain his own humanity. While musing on the completely military side of events, which he loathed, Tom ascertains the war leaders' position on the relationship between man and technology. "Life was cheap and Camels plentiful."<sup>31</sup> But the greater value was in the technology. This belief is exemplified in a bar song of the RFC:

Take the pistons out of my kidney  
 The gudgeon pins out of my brain  
 From the small of my back take the crankshaft  
 And assemble the engine again.<sup>32</sup>

The plane is salvageable, the man is not, giving the plane greater value. The punch line, of course, is that men are the ones who sing this song about their own relative value compared to that of a machine. Black humor such as this is one of the defence mechanisms against the war's degrading effect, but it is too dark to be enjoyed while sober. Tom only finds it funny when drunk. In the end, he doesn't view his plane in the same way as the generals do. He will not value them more than his own kidney, brain and back, or those constituent parts of his friends. His relationship with his various Camels becomes a relationship with one plane.

Still, he cannot escape the intimacy of this relationship, even if it is inhuman. At the novel's end, when the war has finally ruined him, Tom chooses to see his plane one last time. His remark is revealing:

It had been the best machine he had ever flown: and he had treated it well, not strained a wire of it. Now it was just anybody's Camel. If he had been able to feel any more sadness, this farewell would have saddened him.<sup>33</sup>

With his own war over, he can now reflect. He had treated his machine like a human being, and it had responded to his need, but he is far past caring and cannot imbue the attachment with emotion. It was this vehicle that he had used to extract vengeance upon the Germans who had killed his best friend Williamson, and this gives it a special place in Tom's mind: this is the one plane he does not crash. This scene presents the only time that Tom looks at his overworked vehicle

with regret, albeit an empty kind. But the tragedy that Tom cannot feel is that the plane has passed from being a personal relationship, back to being a simply a piece of technology to be slotted into the war effort by some other pilot. The machine still exists, but the relationship has died. Now Tom is past caring for such relationships, even one so unique as that between pilot and plane.

But it is not just the distinct environment of the sky and the machines of flight that shatters Tom's soul. Environment and technology shape the experience of air combat much as they have the pilot, creating a particular form of fighting that has its own draining effects. In the novel, Tom experiences two forms of combat that affect his psyche: intimate and impersonal. Dogfights are intense, brief, and personal forms of combat between individual planes. Set against the backdrop of the wondrous sky they take on a majestic quality. In one encounter, right before a German plane is shot down, Tom cannot help but marvel at the enemy's flight technology:

There was a Hun two-seater on their side, flying west. Tom had never seen such a thing before. The terrible excitement of it: the screaming wires and roaring engine: he pulled the gear handle fully to the top: the aeroplane blackish against the clouds, whose occupant had not seen them against the sky.<sup>34</sup>

Tom's encounter with four Fokker planes is representative of the kind of war he faced. It was in the thick of the dogfight where the elements of war, environment, and technology were played out through the human pilot as he fought to survive. Upon seeing the Germans zoom by him, "His guts turned to jelly. The Huns turned on to his tail and dived."

As they opened fire he did a vertical turn to the left and they missed him. Then he reversed bank quickly as only a Camel could, not daring to turn so that he was going east. The rattle of machine guns got so dangerously loud as he did this, so he kicked the rudder-bar and slide-slipped downwards. The controls went slack; let her go! And in a second he was spinning violently. He brought the throttle back slowly. The Huns would probably think they had shot him on the turn and be satisfied: their game was dodging about among the clouds looking for strays to pounce on, and they would climb away as soon as they saw him falling apparently out of control, and not follow him down, especially as they were right over the lines and there

were many British machines about. Usually it was dangerous to spin away, for a spinning machine was easy to follow down, and although it was difficult to hit then, in coming out of a spin it was apt to present an easy target before the pilot had regained complete control... Which way was he going? His compass was spinning like a top, and there wasn't any sun, and he couldn't see any distance from that height.<sup>35</sup>

This is terribly different combat than that expressed earlier by the narrator of *Death of a Hero*. For Tom the violence is personal. He sees his enemy in the distance and at close range. They do not target his position as artillery or bursts of "Archie" would, since there is no position, instead the target is Tom. He must be hunted and in relatively close quarters. This war is much more intimate and predatory than the more existential/industrial indifference that battles like the Somme so accurately symbolize. And Tom's reactions can produce positive change through his own use of technology. The role of chance in survival, as we have seen in the environment and technology, is never absent but it does not dominate the outcome of combat to the same degree as on the ground. In the example above, it was Tom's own fast thinking, translated into technical action that paid off. But, like the weather or the engine of a Camel, there was no guarantee that the next time would produce the same results. Part of the dread in Tom's journey is the growing notion that every new mission brought him or his colleagues closer to the final mission, to a event where their skill and/or luck failed against the other forces at work in the sky.

Dread was doubled during missions where the pilots supported the infantry by ground strafing: diving on fixed positions and attacking with machine guns. Tom fears these missions most. The risks are incredibly high, and the combat much more impersonal. Technology provided a physical and emotional distance between the attacker and victim of the attack.

Again, you couldn't tell what sort of effect your shooting was having on a target of that sort; it must be doing damage, but the damage was remote and not a direct consequence of your actions. You pointed your aeroplane toward the ground and pressed a lever on the joystick for a second or two, that was all. It wasn't like going up to a man and sticking a bayonet into his neck or guts and giving it a twist: nothing like that: you pressed a lever.<sup>36</sup>

This technological distance challenged Tom's notion of proper conduct in warfare. In the passage above, there is a tremor of guilt at the ease this technology allowed in dispensing violence. Clearly, it was the ground troops who need courage to charge with a bayonet. All Tom does is press a button.

Tom still required the moral resolve to fly and to face the danger of being hit, but killing, normally a personal act, required less effort from him. Tom is loath to engage in combat at all, but this technological distance between the cause and effect of killing further degrades the act of fighting in his mind. Initially, Tom cannot dehumanize his enemy, the Germans are men just like himself, and so combat is incredibly personal.<sup>37</sup> Ultimately, the war's unrelenting pace eventually wears this away. But it is not hate for the enemy that fills this void, but a general indifference toward fighting. The heart of this distance is technological:

Once again they were out to kill; to kill by means of machinery; they were lever-moving controllers of mechanisms. Was this fighting? There was no anger, no red lust, no struggle, no straining muscles and sobbing breath; only the slight movements of levers and the rattle of machine guns. The poor strength of soft human bodies and the thin trickle of force derived from slowly digested grass was replaced by hard steel and the instantaneous combustion of explosives.<sup>38</sup>

Here we witness the popular First World War theme of men against fire. But unlike the passage from *Death of a Hero*, this is not the perspective of the target. This is the view from the cockpit, releasing technical destruction with ease and then witnessing the results of his efforts and finding only indifference at the horror of its effect. Technology creates a physical and emotional distance that allows for this deadened response. Psychologist and soldier David Grossman has noted that this technological distance allows for a dehumanization of the enemy which allow soldiers to kill, making the act seem a tad unreal.<sup>39</sup> Grossman's point is two-fold. First, that there is a relationship between emotional and physical distance involved in killing. Second, that technology plays a role in increasing this distance and thus making it easier to kill.<sup>40</sup>

Tom's experience certainly echoes much of Grossman's argument. Distance indeed plays a role in Tom's view of combat and, in particular, in his preference for the risk adverse role of bombing enemy targets where he cannot witness the results of his actions: he simply unloads ordnance and heads home. But the above passage makes technology a much more prominent factor in creating the indifference of killing. The technology at Tom's disposal allows for minimum

action to cause great violence. The distance that technology creates between cause and effect forces Tom to re-think the nature of combat. Up until the First World War, violence was largely a personal act, regardless of how one justified it. You had to be near the person that you wished to do harm. But Tom's experience of combat, noted in the above passage, is robbed of its intimate, visceral power and replaced by a hollow indifference toward the act of killing. The technology of war, the Camel and its machine gun, create these conditions that Tom must face daily, and they too contribute to his final dehumanization.

### Getting "Tight"

The unique nature of Tom's experience in fighting in the sky with modern technology distinguishes his journey through the world of war from those of his literary contemporaries. But the end of his journey is firmly rooted in the tradition of many Great War narratives: desolation. The war in the sky was a new form of warfare, and its damage on the psyche was hard to ascertain. Tom crashes three times only to be told by a physician, the only medical person on hand, that he had a stout heart: if the problem was not physical, then it was beyond helping.<sup>41</sup> Like the ground soldier, the war seems to have no end in sight, and so the officers find their own salves for the stress of combat, and this cure was its own form of illness.

While drinking is certainly integral to the infantryman's life, it was relished to dangerous heights in Tom's world. Getting "tight" was both cure and contributor to the terror of flight, and became an integral part of existence in everyday life. Both the environment of the sky and the technology of flight required a great amount of mental and physical stamina, and yet the only coping mechanism that worked for the pilots also degrades their ability to fly, fight, and survive. Tom knows it is a temporary measure. At the end of Phase I of the novel, we see Tom drunk and happy singing with his mates in a canteen.<sup>42</sup> But alcohol-sustaining capabilities diminish as the end of the war gets farther and farther from their minds as a possibility, and this scares Tom greatly.

He could still drink himself insensible pretty quickly, thank God. There was always that way out. The real horror of living would come when he reached the stage of being able to pour whisky down his gullet without its having any effect except to ulcerate his stomach and calcify his liver.<sup>43</sup>

He no longer drinks to be happy, but to be void of feeling. This release from the war's effects becomes a permanent reality. The stress of drinking and combat begin to make his hands shake.<sup>44</sup> Getting "tight" slowly loses its medicinal qualities and

contributes to Tom's degradation at the novel's end. Getting drunk was "fun, till you got sick of it, this life of inebriation, irresponsibility, foolishness, and noise. It was a relief to the nerve-racked; a diversion for the sane. *Dulce est desipere in loco*; the war was certainly a locus."<sup>45</sup> A man ruining himself through alcohol abuse arrives at the same place.

## Conclusion

War, in literature and life, is a separate and different world than most of us experience. In this way it is like J. R. R. Tolkien's description of the "Secondary World" in literature of the fantastic. For both, the rules of existence are different from the mimetic world, and values have their own logic and frames of reference.<sup>46</sup> A subset of this secondary world are the environments where war is waged, and they in turn have their own operating principals which differ from place to place and can impact the traveler of these realms in particular ways.

Tom Cundall's war experience in *Winged Victory* is dominated by this distinct environment, the technology that allows him to reach it, and the particulars of combat that both entail. The wondrous sky and the temperamental Sopwith Camel gave Tom a different war experience that did not mirror the realities of ground combat. High above the ruined earth where massive armies fought stalemate battles over stretches of land, Tom flew into the majestic heavens. He became part of the first generation of men who had left the bounds of earth to see the sky through sustained flight. The environment of the sky immersed Tom with a sense of wonder that could not be matched on the ground. But this wonder could not sustain him against the war's degrading effect. Tom's relationship with his Sopwith Camel makes his war experience in the air unique. The Camel was both his friend and nemesis, and the synergy of their capabilities defined the kind of war that was fought in the sky. It was a complicated relationship that crumbled as the war continued and the planes crashed, while at the same time their value compared to the pilot increased. Tom begins to feel he is waging an inhuman war through the Camel by virtue of the distance it provides him from the enemy he cannot see, and abilities that he does not personally have. Yeates suggests that the environment of sky and the technology of flight cannot remove Tom from the totality of the war's negative effect.

The war has made him as indifferent to his home as the sky to his need for meaning or the Camel's engine to his need for survival. Yeates confirms that, regardless of the unique environment or the importance of technology, man left in the world of war too long will be left hollow. At the end of the novel's second phase, Tom returns to England and is invigorated to continue on:

The emotion constricted in his throat; it seemed deep and real; all his other feelings appeared shallow and meretricious in the shock of discovery how unquenchable, how real was his love of England.<sup>47</sup>

At the end of the third phase, neither the sky nor his Camel nor alcohol can give Tom reason to take flight. He arrives in England, on leave, “empty”:

This was England. Wandering lanes, hedged and ditched; casual, opulent beauty; trees heavy with fulfillment. This was his native land. He did not care.<sup>48</sup>

This poignant conclusion makes *Winged Victory* a unique contribution to the universal theme of the degradation of man in the literature of the Great War.

## Notes

1. This argument is not just a literary convention. Soldier and psychologist David Grossman persuasively argues that “war is an environment that will psychologically debilitate 98 percent of all who participate in it for any length of time. And the 2 percent who are not driven insane by war appear to have been already insane—aggressive psychopaths—before coming to the battlefield.” See David Grossman *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1996), p. 43-50.
2. Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: Oxford UP, 2000), in particular his examination of trench life, pp. 36-47.
3. Fussell, p. 52-63.
4. Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (London: Faber & Faber Limited, 1930), p. 45.
5. Ford Madox Ford, *Parades End* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 453
6. Robertson Davies, *World of Wonders* (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 298.
7. Quoted in *Visions of Technology: A Century of Vital Debate about Machines, Systems, and the Human World* edited by Richard Rhodes (New York: Touchstone, 1999), p. 95-96.
8. Yeates, *Winged Victory* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972), p. 34-35.
9. Yeates, p. 154.
10. Yeates, p. 158.
11. Yeates, p. 330-334.
12. Yeates, p. 64.
13. Yeates, p. 146.

14. Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, trans. Brian Murdoch (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 47.
15. Ernest Hemingway, "A Natural History of Death," *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), p. 337.
16. Yeates, p. 293.
17. Yeates, p. 257.
18. Yeates, p. 251.
19. J. Glen Gray, *The Warriors: Reflection of Men in Battle*, (U of Nebraska P: Lincoln, 1998), p. 29-38.
20. On the popularity of the "Doctrine of the Offensive", see Michael Howard, "Men Against Fire," in *The Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machievelli to the Nuclear Age* edited by Peter Paret (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1986), p. 510-526 and Robert Hambridge, "World War I and the Short War Assumption," *Military Review* 64 3 (May 1989), p. 36-47.
21. Richard Aldington, *Death of a Hero*, (London: Hograth Press, 1984), p. 255.
22. Fredrick Manning, *Her Privates We* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1999), p. 20.
23. Yeates, p. 281.
24. Yeates, p. 24.
25. Yeates, p. 25.
26. Yeates, p. 29.
27. Yeates, p. 291.
28. Yeates, p. 325.
29. Yeates, p. 317.
30. Yeates, p. 112-113.
31. Yeates, p. 177.
32. Yeates, p. 329.
33. Yeates, p. 453.
34. Yeates, p. 276.
35. Yeates, p. 140.
36. Yeates, p. 100.
37. Yeates, p. 100.
38. Yeates, p. 340.
39. David Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1996), p. 157-170.
40. Grossman, p. 157-170.
41. Yeates, p. 128.
42. Yeates, p. 196.
43. Yeates, p. 262.
44. Yeates, p. 274.
45. Yeates, p. 307.

46. J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf, Smith of Wootton Major, The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth, Beorhthelm's Son* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1975), p. 40-41.

47. Yeates, p. 298.

48. Yeates, p. 456.

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