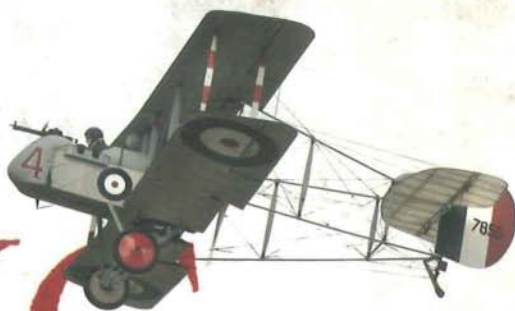


ON A WING AND A PRAYER



'A vivid, moving story of the men who fought the Great War in the Air. Quite superb.'

MAX ARTHUR

The untold story of the
pioneering aviation heroes of
WWI, in their own words



JOSHUA LEVINE

Bestselling author of

Forgotten Voices of the Blitz and the Battle for Britain

Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	ix
<i>Prologue: December 1917</i>	1
1 Emulating the Birds	7
2 The Combatants	27
3 A Flying Start	63
4 And so to War	91
5 An Office Job	124
6 Fighters and the Fokker Scourge	149
7 Life and Death	183
8 Over the Top	226
9 Bombing and the Royal Air Force	269
10 A Fight to the End	308
<i>Epilogue</i>	346
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	352
<i>Index</i>	355

Introduction

There are certain historical subjects which can always be counted on to capture the public imagination. One of these is infantry fighting on the Western Front, with its vivid evocations of suffering and wasted life. Yet taking place above the very same Western Front was a conflict that is less well known, but which deserves to become just as embedded in the public consciousness – the Great War in the Air.

Most people will have heard of Baron von Richthofen, but they will have little idea of why he was flying or who he was flying against. Yet the story of air fighting is one of intense human emotion, of young men growing up quickly in an exciting and terrible world, of chivalry and fear and danger, of the creation of modern warfare, of the development of modern sensibilities. Such an extraordinary story deserves a wider audience, and an acknowledgment of its place in history.

In 1976, it began to reach that wider audience when the BBC broadcast a television drama called *Wings*. Set in a Royal Flying Corps squadron in 1915, its central character is a young blacksmith who becomes a sergeant pilot on the Western Front. It is a moving series, which portrays the lives of young men attempting to make sense of a strange and terrifying world – and that is exactly what this book tries to do; to place individuals in the foreground who can paint

detailed pictures, whilst never losing sight of the chaos erupting in the background.

Whilst writing this book, I have discovered how vivid and evocative a world it can be; I have found myself immersed in it – in its diaries, novels, letters, memoirs, aircraft, people, and sensibilities – only returning to the twenty-first century to pay the occasional bill. I hope that you, the reader, find yourself similarly engaged (not perhaps to the detriment of your household finances) so that the exploits of Mannock, Ball, James, Powell, and many others, become important to you. It is easy to identify with these recognizably modern men, carrying out a modern activity, with surprisingly modern attitudes, from a time long gone.

Whilst the time may have gone, one of its inhabitants is still with us. Henry Allingham, 111 years old as I write, served with the Royal Naval Air Service on the Western Front and at Jutland. He is a Victorian by birth, who has watched troops return from both the Boer War and the Second Gulf War. He has outlived many comrades by over ninety years, and he is the sole founder member of the Royal Air Force still alive. In the year of its ninetieth anniversary, it is fitting that we should remember the men who came together, some willingly, others less so, to form the Royal Air Force, and equally fitting that we should remember the thousands of airmen who died as it came into being.

In the pages that follow, the thoughts, feelings, fears and sensations of long ago are aired. Listen to them, and enter a world quite different to our own – inhabited by people not so very different at all.

JOSHUA LEVINE