

THE FLYING PULPS

By MARTIN COLE

"He fired a short burst to clear his guns, sent his Spad into a tight banking turn and then a roaring dive after hunland's ace, master murderer. His twin Vickers spit hot steel and tracers . . .

"brat-a-tat-tat, brat-a-tat-tat, bra-a-a-a-a-a-"

The above deathless, or, more apt, *deadly* prose was written nearly forty years ago, and was the sort of stuff millions of red-blooded American kids ate up in the latest flying "pulp" magazines. In those pre-TV days of the 1930's, when the country was paralyzed with the Great Depression, the bleakness of growing up was largely offset by the Walter Mitty-like dream world created in some two dozen flying pulps that adorned the drug store magazine racks.

Picture if you will, a boy with a dime or fifteen cents he has made for mowing lawns. He is standing before the racks looking hungrily at those lovely copies of *Battle Aces*, *War Birds*, *Wings*, *G-8 and His Battle Aces*, and other enchanting flying pulps. Each has a vivid cover illustration. For the most part the action pictures are of dog fights on the Western Front during the World War. (This was before it was called World War 1). The boy has a half dozen favorites; he must read them all, yet, he has only the price of one copy.

His dilemma is solved by his young friends, each of whom is also hooked on flying pulps. Those who have the money to spare, are careful not to buy duplicates, and following each's reading, a round-robin trading spree takes place, a sort of junior enterprise, repeated week after week in every neighborhood in the U.S.A.

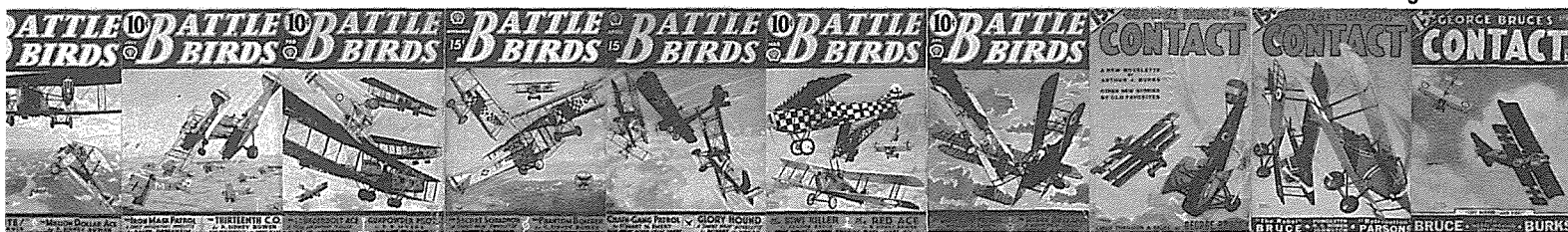
It was this magnitude of reading that made the flying pulps an institution. It manifested a deep interest in aviation that was largely responsible for America's leadership in the world of flying, including the space age astronauts. It was those kids who cut their literary eye-teeth on *G-8 and His Battle Aces* and others of that ilk that gave America a galant Air Force in World War 2.

Talk to the career men in aviation today, and you will find few without their roots of interest vested in the flying pulps. It seems rather strange indeed, that such a profound contribution should go unrecognized, for today the writers and publishers have been largely forgotten. Go to the libraries if you will, search the shelves for a serious study of the flying pulps; you will find nothing whatsoever. Yet, at hand is information on practically every subject known to man. Certainly, those who influenced a whole generation deserve more.

The covers of the flying pulps were printed on glistening enamel-finished paper in striking colors designed to attract



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the eye, but inside, the paper was a drab wood-pulp stock which gave the magazines their name. In size they were a standard ten by seven inches and sold for ten or fifteen cents. Generally they ran 128 pages, with a sprinkling of advertisements in the front and back. The plot formula of all stories was invariably the same. The hero got himself into seemingly inextricable situations, then got himself out, to the self-induced amazement of the reader.

"I learned to read by reading the flying pulps." These are the words of Gene Olson, author of some thirty books, including *THE TIN GOOSE*.¹ "I learned my a-b-c's in school, but it was the pulps that provided the interest."²

"When I was a boy I devoured them and a group of us would trade them around," says Colonel Grover Heiman, USAF(Ret) today, "It was those magazines and their stories that zeroed me in on wanting to fly and led to a 27 year career in the Air Force. Guess Arch Whitehouse was my favorite author."³

That Arch Whitehouse was a favorite author was confirmed by the Commanding Officer of Selfridge Field in 1942, when he made the statement, "Arch Whitehouse recruited at least 25,000 into the Army Air Force." He went on to explain, "when the recruits were asked why they selected the AAF, many declared they had always wanted to fly after reading Arch Whitehouse' air stories."⁴ Concerning this great influence, Mr. Whitehouse told this writer:

"When I got overseas with the 9th Air Force in Britain, I was continually running into airmen who admitted I had had a great influence on their lives, and were amazed that I was THE Arch Whitehouse whose stories they had teathed on. Most of them talked of my Billy "Buzz" Benson stories which ran for eight years in *Sky Birds*, and my Kerry Keen yarns in *Flying Aces*."

Peruse any of several voluminous collections of flying pulps and you will find Arch Whitehouse stories in *Sky Birds*, *Flying Aces*, *Wings*, *Air Stories*, *Aces*, *Sky Aces*, *Sky Fighters*, *Air Adventures*, and *G-8 and His Battle Aces*. This impressive array of story contributions represents the Whitehouse writings during the years 1928 to 1940. Looking back on this marathon stint, Mr. Whitehouse recalls, "When everyone else seemed to be starving to death, pulp writers were in clover, and we couldn't rap it out fast enough."⁵

The pay for 'rapping' it out was two and three cents a word for the top writers. When the country was hit hardest during the depression, for some the pay rate was dropped; the bottom of the scale seems to have been half cent per word.

Joe Archibald was perhaps second in reader popularity; his associations with the pulps preceeded Arch Whitehouse by one year. Beginning in 1928, he wrote consistently until 1943. As an ace writer, he 'rapped' out twenty to thirty thousands words a week. His stories appeared in *Flying Aces*, *War Birds*, *Sky Fighters*, *Lone Eagle*, *Sky Raiders*, *Air War*, *Dare Devil Aces*, *Wings*, *Sky Fighters* and *Air Trails*. He was best known for his Phineas Pinkham stories. In reminiscing about the old days, Joe Archibald had this to say:

"While with *Flying Aces*, I served under four editors, Harold Goldsmith, Helen Wisner, who later married Jim (Walter Mitty) Thurber, Neil Coward, and Herb Powell. I wrote my first Phineas story for Helen. In that first bunch of writers were Arch Whitehouse, Donald Keyhoe, and myself, and we took care of the big part of the contents of that magazine. Arch W. and yours truly wrote the departments of the magazine, and perhaps half a dozen other writers took care of the short stories. Writers like George Fielding Eliot, John Scott Douglas, Syl McDowell and James Perley Hughes also contributed. Another writer, Alexy Rosoff, I can never forget. I don't believe anybody ever knew his real name, but he was a particular pal of mine. An ex-big time bootlegger he admitted, but he could write like hell."⁶

As time went on it became apparent that it was the Phineas Pinkham stories that was selling *Flying Aces*. Unfortunately, Archibald was not rewarded financially by an increase of word rate. However he almost made it another way. In the late 1930's the movie rights came close to being sold to the top movie comedian, Harold Lloyd.

Phineas may be characterized as a sort of country bumpkin pilot on the Western Front. His deportment revealed him to be pitifully ill-equipped to get along in the world, yet he tackled and overcame obstacles that would make strong men quail. The character was tailor-made for Harold Lloyd.

For the older readers Harold Lloyd needs no introduction. For those unfortunate readers of the younger generation, who missed all those incomparable Harold Lloyd movies, let's say Lloyd delighted millions portraying a bumbling mama's boy who managed to extract himself from hilarious situations. The Harold Lloyd studio was in the process of completing the negotiation for the movie rights, when the State Department in Washington learned of the proposed movie. They investigated, then recommended that no film be made that would poke fun at supposedly stupid German officers. The matter was dropped, and the healthy check that Archibald had mentally spent never materialized. To-





day, Harold Lloyd remembers very little of this deal with Archibald, indicating that such matters were largely an activity of his production department.⁷

Possibly, the most enduring of all the characters that caused many a boy's heart to beat faster, is that of G-8. (He has no other name). Today, after a layoff of thirty years, G-8 is staging a comeback in paperbacks.*

Among those recalling the enduring G-8 is Brigadier General Robin Olds, Commandant of Cadets, USAF Academy. "When I was a youngster, I had many heroes. When I was nine years old (Jimmie Mattern) ranked right after G-8 and His Battle Aces in my esteem."⁸

The foster-father of G-8 and His Battle Aces, was Robert J. Hogan. His stories for the most part were purely diabolical, and it might be said that the success of them predicated the horror comic books that followed. Their only relation to World War I was that the action took place on the Western Front.

Among the array of hideous characters, was Dr. Chu Lung, the Oriental fiend-scientist who was allied with the Germans. And there was that cruel Herr Stahlmaske, or, the Steel Mask, whose face had been horribly burned when G-8 shot him down. He had an army of brutes with badly deformed features, who had been recruited from German jails. Others were Groloi, a Haitian witch doctor brought to France to raise a zombie air force; Herr Goulon, who had a hook instead of one hand, and the cleverly evil genius, Herr Doktor Kreuger of the "shrunk, half-paralyzed body" who plagued G-8 the longest.

All of this is pretty strong stuff, but wait . . . there was more. In the "Squadron of Corpses" mad scientists boiled bodies in cauldrons, and sent the remaining skeletons against the Allies. And so, on and on and on.

For eleven years, starting with 1933, the creator of G-8 poured out 200,000 words a month. Not only did Robert Hogan write the G-8 series, but he also kept up two additional series, those of Smoke Wade and Red Falcon. As if that was not enough, he turned out scores of short stories, and answered the fan club mail of "G-8 Speaks."

At this prolific pace Hogan had not time to rewrite, edit or change one word of copy. Striding between two secretaries, bouncing a rubber ball as he dictated, he paced the floor of his home in Sparta, N.Y., and in rapid fire delivery he made his stories flow on endlessly.

We look in on Hogan as he dictates. Smoke Wade flying a

Spad is jumped by three Fokkers. His guns jam and for the moment it appears Wade is at the mercy of his adversaries.

Without pausing, Hogan unfolds the action—

"Angry curses sprayed through clenched white teeth. The pilot slammed back in his seat in disgust. Controls moved with lightning speed. His right hand flashed to his right leg, far down. It came up in a blur and brought with it a big, old-time Western sixgun."

"That was Smoke Wade in a tight spot. The Arizona sun-bronzed cow-poke whirled in his seat. His big six-gun spoke."

"Blam! Blam!"

"The cracks came almost as fast as the answering Spandau rattle about him. One of the three remaining Fokkers leaped into the air and plunged to hell."⁹

Needless to say, Smoke Wade lived to fight another day.¹⁰

If you will examine the structure of the flying-pulp plot with the same scrutiny the scientist gives to the bug on a pin, you will be amazed to learn that when you get right down to the nitty gritty, the emphasis is not on Smoke Wade, nor G-8, nor Phineas Pinkham, or whoever is the hero at the moment. Rather, the emphasis is built upon the airplanes the heroes fly. Such is the analytical viewpoint of Harold Hersey and he should know. For, he created the successful *Flying Aces* and *Sky Birds*.

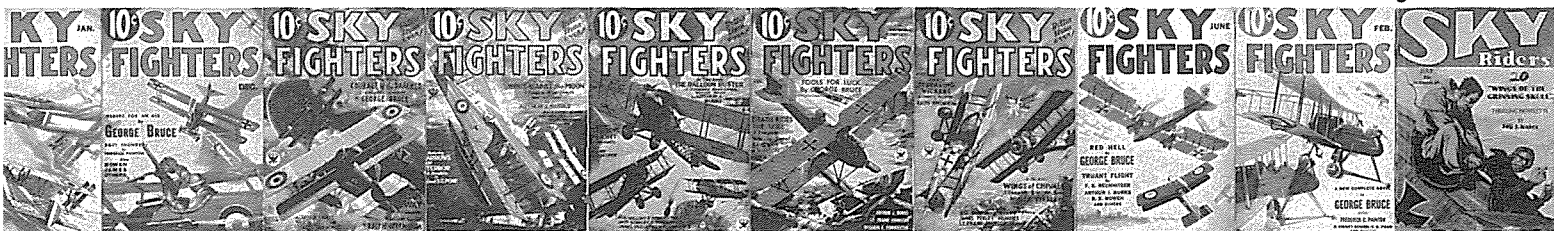
"The machine is the crux of the story," declares Hersey, "without it the hero is a cipher. True, the hero is a helmeted, goggled, leather-coated individual at the controls, but he isn't a he-man *per se*; he is a superman . . . Everything in the aviation yarns leads up to and away from the tarmac. The wise writer kept his hero up in the air (literally as well as figuratively) as much as possible. Why? Because the hero loses some of his God-like qualities when he walks the earth."¹²

World War I pilots who later became pulp writers had a great advantage, of course. Among them there were Arch Whitehouse, Robert Sidney Bowen, Casey Jones, and Donald E. Keyhoe, later to become involved in the Unidentified Flying Objects controversy, and Will D. Parker.¹³

Edwin C. Parsons also endured. He had been in the Lafayette Escadrille in WWI, wrote for the pulps, had a series on the air from radio station KFWB in Los Angeles called "The Lafayette Escadrille," acted in several movies and served as technical advisor on at least one, and still later, in WWII, went back into the service of his country.

*See Page 200, AAHS Journal, Vol. 15, No. 3, (Fall, 1970).





He became RADM E.C. Parsons, USN (Ret) and passed away only a few months ago.

If the flying pulps were the mirror of yearning for millions of youngsters, then the colorful action covers that magnetized them at newsstands must be given their due. Talk to a flying pulp fan and he will immediately recall to mind the photographic reality conveyed by artists Frank Tinsley and Frederick Blakeslee. Tinsley did many of the covers for *Squadron*, *Contact*, *Sky Birds*, *War Birds* and *Air Trails*. Blakeslee's work was mainly with *Battle Birds*, *G-8 and His Battle Aces*, and *Dare Devil Aces*. Perhaps of lesser popularity were the covers of Eugene Franzden and Rudolph Betarski. Franzden's art adorned *Sky Fighters*, *Contact*, *War Birds* and *Lone Eagle*, whereas Betarski confined his paintings to *Aces* and *War Birds*.

Fortunate is the one who has one of the original paintings. Blakeslee oils have been tracked to the homes of several AAHS Members: Kenneth Clendenin, Mrs. Nieto (widow of the late Joseph Nieto), and James J. Sloan. Bill Puglisi is known to have at least one of Frank Tinsley's. There may be others. Tinsley paintings were offered as magazine contest prizes, and the lucky chaps winning a Tinsley, certainly would have been the envy of the neighborhood. Have any of the contest paintings survived? We wonder. And what became of the Blakeslee and Tinsley paintings that hung in a speakeasy on 44th Street? Their presence made it possible for the editors of *Flying Aces* to get their illegal snorts on the cuff.

Speakeasies, and illegal snorts have receded into the dim, distant past, and the stories that were written then remain mostly in the memories of a lot of guys who have never lost their love for airplanes.

Today the pulp magazines are collectors items. Good clean copies go for prices in the \$3.50 to \$5.00 range. One dealer reported recently that a doctor, no doubt with the bug, had cleaned him out of all copies of the "pulp" prior to 1938, at a respectable profit, of course.

And so we return to the boy we saw last in the drug store. We can see him now. He is walking home after spending his last cent for the flying pulp of his choice. As he walks along, his head is buried in the pages. His pace is slow. He pauses when the swarm of Fokkers are about to get the best of the hero, and when the crisis is past he resumes his slow pace.

If this were *you* about forty years ago, wouldn't it be wonderful to turn back the clock, and live that moment once again, to breathlessly read — "*He fired a short burst to clear his guns, sent his Spad into a tight banking turn . . .*"

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2. Interview, Gene Olson with Author, Grants Pass, Ore., 24 April 1970.
3. Letter, Grover Heiman to Author, 31 July 1970.
4. Letter, Arch Whitehouse to Author, 16 Nov. 1969.
5. Ibid., Whitehouse.
6. Letter, Joe Archibald to Author, 15 March 1970.
7. Letter, Harold Lloyd to Author, 21 May 1970.
8. Olds, B/Gen. Robin. "Forty Six Years a Figher Pilot." *JOURNAL of AAHS*, Vol. 13, No. 4, (Winter 1968). This was an address by Gen. Olds given before the 2nd Annual Western Aerospace Historical Symposium, 4 October 1968.
9. Robert W. Roach. "The Flying Pulp." *Cleveland Plain Dealer Sunday Magazine*, 28 Dec. 1969.
10. Hogan, Robert J. "Dead Man's Staffel." *Dare Devil Aces*, Dec. 1932.
11. See also: Bradd, Sydney H. "G-8 and His Battle Aces." *Cross & Cockade Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (Winter 1970).
12. Hersey, Harold B. *Pulpwood Editor*. New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1937.
13. "Billy" Parker, of Phillips Petroleum aviation dept.
14. The pulp industry was born sometime before World War 1 but did not flourish until the depression years. In the 1930's there were around one hundred and twenty pulps on the newsstands; their monthly circulation totaled approximately eleven million. Broadly, the pulps were divided into four catagories. The flying pulps came under the heading of Adventure, that also included exploits wherever he-man adventure was found. Westerns made up a special group. Mystery and love pulps completed the catagory. It is interesting to note that during the heyday of pulps the publishing industry, with all its ramifications was warding off proverbial wolf packs from depression doors in an impressive way. For example each month 35,000 tons of paper was consumed at a cost of \$1,500,000; the printing bills amounted to \$2,000,000 in addition to \$250,000 for art work and a like sum for engraving. At least 100,000,000 words of copy were being bought annually for \$1,500,000. Furthermore, the pulp industry helped support the Post Office by returning some 10,000,000,000 words of rejected manuscripts; it yearly shipped 2,000 carloads of paper and 2,000 carloads of magazines. Sharing in the depression dollars were distributors, wholesalers, dealers, second hand magazine stores, literary agents, typewriter and ink manufacturers, wastepaper dealers, etc.
....."Pulp Pride," *Time*, Sept 16, 1935.
15. The Greek symbol, swastika, also used by American Indian tribes and in Japan, India and Persia, was used on *Flying Aces* until June 1933, about the time the clockwise version was adopted by the Nazi party as a symbol, partly anti-Semitic in intent. On *Flying Aces*, it was encircled by the words, "The symbol of good magazine reading."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

"A Journey Into Nostalgia" is Martin Cole's fourth contribution to the *JOURNAL* this year, following his articles about Robert Short, Moye Stephens and George Milligan.

