



Armchair AVIATION

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

Blue Moon Over Cuba: Aerial Reconnaissance during the Cuban Missile Crisis

By Capt William B. Ecker USN (Retd) and Kenneth V. Jack; Osprey Publishing, Midland House, West Way, Botley, Oxford, OX2 0PH; 9½in x 6in (245 x 152mm); hardback; 287 pages, illustrated; £18.99. ISBN 978-1-78096-071-5

FOR THOSE WHO were not yet born or too young, it may be hard to understand that October and November 1962 were the most frightening and trying times since World War Two. These two months were the closest the world has ever come to nuclear war. American cities ceased their weekly tests of the big yellow sirens mounted atop prominent buildings so that they did not falsely alarm the public below. Neighbours warned their friends to take money from bank accounts and to stock up on canned food.

Although several books have described the political manoeuvrings that generated the crisis, little has been written about the men and machines that “fought” the crisis to a successful conclusion, except in passing mention or in technical, often classified, papers.

This new book is based on the memoir of the recently deceased commanding officer of the US Navy Vought RF-8 Crusader squadron which flew the first productive low-level missions over Cuba, and refined — with material that only personal experience can bring — by a former enlisted technician serving with the squadron at that time. The account combines several viewpoints into a highly readable and creditable story of just exactly how the Navy and Marine Corps aviators and groundcrews contributed to the American response to the Soviets’ highly provocative act of placing nuclear-armed missiles a scant 90 miles from the USA.



The book starts with an excellent introduction to the pre-crisis situation, including the disastrous Bay of Pigs operation in April 1961, the first major international test of the new and somewhat naïve Kennedy administration. There is also a description of the first plans of a Vietnam-style “Alpha Strike” against Cuban targets by American naval forces.

A somewhat scary look at the Russian build-up of missile sites follows, as the USA watched from the high-altitude perch of U-2 spyplanes. But more detailed, close-up photography was needed.

The authors describe the heavily restrictive planning that prevented another mission being flown until the Navy convinced the president and his advisers that the RF-8 was the right aircraft for the job. The mire of security and inter-service jealousy almost kept the missions of what would be called *Blue Moon* from happening.

Captain Ecker’s memoir of the first mission on October 23, 1962, is heart-pumping stuff, and it forms the basis for the 10min sequence in the 2000 movie *Thirteen Days*, which featured a computer-generated presentation of Ecker and his wingman over the Cuban coastline photographing the surprised Cuban and Russian engineers building their missile sites. The film receives its own treatment in the book and is a welcome addition to the overall discussion.

The authors also touch on the initial failing of the USAF and its McDonnell RF-101s, which were not properly equipped with the right cameras. At one point, the USAF tried bullying the Navy into “sharing” its KA-45 and KA-46 cameras that gave the RF-8A its great reconnaissance capabilities, shooting along the Crusader’s flight path. This conflict made for a tragi-comic aspect of the crisis which resulted in Navy and

Marine pilots re-flying several of the USAF’s missions. The authors note that the USAF wrote very little about its role in the crisis, although it certainly claimed its share of the glory in *Life* magazine and others.

This new book is very welcome at the time of the 50th anniversary of the crisis, giving an account of those tension-filled days when the world stood so close to the brink of its own destruction. And that’s no exaggeration!

PETER B. MERSKY

High-flying Women: A World History of Female Pilots

By Alain Pelletier; Haynes Publishing, Sparkford, Yeovil, Somerset BA22 7JJ; 9¼in x 11½in (235mm x 292mm); hardback; 192 pages, illustrated; £25. ISBN 978-0-85733-257-8

THIS VOLUME FIRST appeared in French, but it is good to see an English edition. The author has attempted to recount the lives of all of the “fearless aviatrixes” in aviation history, and to provide detailed biographies of 50 of them. In the restrictive available wordage and pagination this was a bold objective, and it has to be said that the author is only partly successful. The manner in which the book is divided means that one has to search back and forth to cover specific periods, as the chapters are devoted to various types of pilot; pioneers, aerobats, competitors, “shooting stars”, glider pilots, long-distance flyers, “fighting women” (which includes accounts of the women pilots of Britain’s Air Transport Auxiliary and the USA’s Women Airforce Service Pilots) and icons.

It will already be evident that some aviatrixes might belong in more than one chapter, and two other chapters, “Aviatrixes around the world” and “And many others . . .” reveal the problems of this arrangement. Fortunately there is a good index to help struggling readers, but some women are poorly covered, simply being buried



in listings of names. One such is Hilda Hewlett, who was the first British woman to gain a Royal Aero Club pilot’s certificate, taught her son to fly and, with Gustave Blondeau, set up a flying school and then an aircraft factory, but gets a paltry two lines of narrative. The “detailed biographies” are limited to a few hundred words, which permits only the sketchiest outlines of sometimes lengthy careers full of accomplishments.

Pictorially the book is good, with a bountiful collection of well-reproduced black-and-white and colour images. As a basic quick reference tool this volume might prove handy, but it has limitations.

PHILIP JARRETT

The Sowreys: A Unique and Remarkable Record of One Family’s 65 Years of Distinguished Service

By Air Cdre Graham Pitchfork RAF (Retd); Grub Street, 4 Rainham Close, London SW11 6SS; 7 in x 9¼in (178mm x 248mm) hardback; 240 pages, illustrated; £20. ISBN 978-1-90811-731-1

I WOULD NOT envy any author tasked with combining six biographies in one book, but that is effectively what we have here. The three

brothers John, Fred and William Sowrey all served in the Royal Flying Corps and RAF in the First World War and continued to serve in the inter-war years. Fred won fame by bringing down the Zeppelin L.32 on September 23, 1916, and seems to have been entitled to at least a share of a Gotha bomber shot down on the night of May 19–20, 1918. The accounts of their various careers are interwoven in the chronological narrative, which is greatly enhanced by family correspondence and relevant extracts from archives. The brothers’ service in Iraq in various roles during the 1920s and 1930s provides a fascinating insight into the

