

ON THE BOOKSHELF

BOOKS EVERY PILOT SHOULD OWN

By Jan W. Steenblik, Technical Editor

December brings Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, the shortest days of the year, and the anniversary of Orville and Wilbur Wright's first successful manned flights of an airplane. It's a time for reflection and, in much of North America, a great time to curl up in front of the fire with a good book.

Last year at this time, we recommended three all-time classics of aviation literature—*Wind, Sand, and Stars*, by Antoine de Saint Exupéry; *The Spirit of St. Louis*, by Charles A. Lindbergh; and *Fate Is the Hunter*, by Ernest K. Gann.

(To read about these books, plus the recommendations of readers, visit ALPA's public website, www.alpa.org/bookshelf. The page that opens includes a link to the November/December 2008 "On the Bookshelf.")

It's been said, "Life is too short to read bad books," so here are our recommendations for three more top picks; all six are available through Internet sites such as Amazon.com.

Song of the Sky by Guy Murchie: *Song of the Sky*, published in 1954, seems not to be as widely known as Ernest K. Gann's *Fate is the Hunter* and other aviation classics,

but is every bit as deserving of a place on every pilot's bookshelf.

How to begin to describe this extraordinary book, or do justice to it?

Murchie, a former war correspondent, taught navigation during World War II, then became a navigator for American Airlines. As Bob Buck did with *North Star Over My Shoulder*, Murchie loosely drapes his narrative on a transatlantic crossing—in Murchie's case, a cargo flight from New York to Shannon in a C-54.

Song of the Sky is divided into three parts, which deal, in order, with navigation, the sky and the weather found in it, and the history of flight. But throughout the book's 423 pages, Murchie adroitly weaves in geography, history, oceanography, microbiology, astronomy, physics, anthropology, and more. *Song of the Sky* is not an encyclopedia, but Murchie's knowledge was encyclopedic; you can open this book to any page, start reading, and immediately be drawn into something fascinating.

An added bonus: Wonderful illustrations by the author.

Stranger to the Ground by Richard Bach: More widely known for his 1970 novella, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, and later books such as *Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah*, Bach penned his best work in *Stranger*, based on his



experiences as an Air National Guard pilot recalled to active duty in Europe during the Cold War in the early 1960s.

Bach flew the Republic F-84F Thunderstreak, an early single-engine jet fighter-bomber. Former USAF pilots with stick time in the F-84F in Europe will tell you Bach is dead-on in his description of flying the airplane, the weather, the long waits in the cold predawn while sitting cockpit alert, the exhilaration of buzzing GIs at five feet AGL, the eerie beauty of close formation flight at night.

The F-84F was said to be virtually unrecoverable in a spin; Bach writes vividly about spinning out of a night formation flight in weather and barely escaping. And of training to lob The Device—an underwing nuke—onto a target from a low-level run-in and pull-up.

North Star Over My Shoulder by Bob Buck: Pilot, author, aviation legend—Capt. Robert N. Buck (TWA, Ret.), who died in 2007 at the age of 93, was one of those elder statesmen of ALPA and the airline industry who went everywhere, saw and did it all, and knew everybody.

Buck's late-life memoir, published by Simon & Schuster in 2002, is as much a must-read as his classic *Weather Flying*. Written in a captivating style as easy-going and graceful as the man himself was, *North Star* chronicles a life of adventure and discovery, plus the enormous changes from radial engines, rag wings, and contact flying to today's jet fleets and satellite navigation. In retirement he flew light airplanes and gliders with his son, Capt. Robert O. Buck (Delta, Ret.).

For his weather research in a heavily instrumented B-17 and a P-61 Black Widow night fighter, U.S. President Harry S. Truman presented him, as a civilian, with the Air Medal, and ALPA honored him with the Association's Air Safety Award in 1963.

Capt. Buck retired in January 1974 as TWA's senior B-747 captain, ending an extraordinary career in which he never scratched an airplane. His favorite airline flying was the B-707 era, when pilots enjoyed the astonishing performance and reliability of the new jet airliners, the service to passengers was still gracious, and the skies had not yet filled up. 🌐

