

# ON THE BOOKSHELF

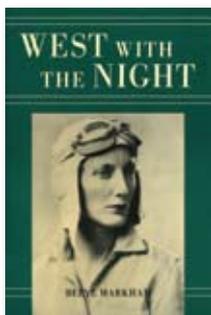
BOOKS EVERY PILOT SHOULD OWN

By Jan W. Steenblik, Technical Editor

**B**uilding on our young tradition of reviewing some of the classics of aviation literature in December, we have a few more books to add to the six that we reviewed in 2008 and 2009. (To read about these books, plus the recommendations of readers, visit [www.alpa.org/bookshelf](http://www.alpa.org/bookshelf).)

Here are five more recommended reads; all are available through Internet shopping sites.

**West with the Night**, by Beryl Markham, is the autobiography of the remarkable woman who, in September 1936, became the first pilot to fly solo from England to



North America, nosing over in a Nova Scotia peat bog after a fuel tank vent iced up. But only one chapter in two dozen concerns that flight.

Born in England in 1902, Markham was four when her father took her to British East Africa (now Kenya) where he carved a farm from wilderness.

At 17, she left the farm after her father lost everything in a drought. She supported herself as a horse trainer, but a chance encounter with one of Kenya's first pilots changed her life.

Markham earned the equivalent of a commercial pilot certificate and flew around the wild, untamed eastern part of Africa carrying mail, passengers, and supplies—often at night—in her single-engine Avian. For a while she flew scouting flights for elephant hunters.

Few pilots have had her gift for describing not only flight but the larger context in which she lived. Ernest Hemingway wrote to his editor that Markham "... can write rings around all of us who consider ourselves as writers.... [*West with the Night*] is really a bloody wonderful book." He was right.

**My Secret War**, by Richard S. Drury, was published in 1979, but the U.S. government did not officially acknowledge U.S. involvement in that conflict—the fierce combat in Laos during the Vietnam War—until 1997. One of the best accounts of combat in the air, Drury's first book details two secret wars, the second being his internal (and sometimes overt) battle against what he describes as the often overbearing, incompetent, and corrupt policies and actions of the U.S. government and some of his own commanding officers.

Drury arrived at his base in Nakhon Phanom ("Naked Fanny"), Thailand, in May 1969, an idealistic young U.S. Air Force captain. During his nearly year-long tour, he flew 220 combat missions, most over Laos. Clearly a romantic,

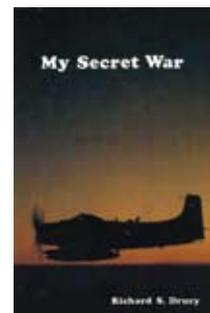
he had managed to get himself into the airplane he wanted most to fly—the Douglas A-1 Skyraider.

The A-1, designed in 1944, was a relatively slow taildragger that weighed 25,000 pounds fully loaded and had a 2,700-hp radial engine swinging a 14-foot, four-bladed prop. The wing spanned 50 feet, boasted 7 hard points on each side, and could lift more than the airplane's empty weight in ordnance. For close air support and counterinsurgency, the airplane was perhaps without equal.

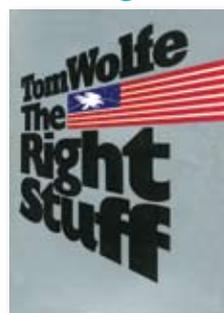
The A-1 pilots pounded the Ho Chi Minh trail during the night, drawing some of the heaviest antiaircraft fire ever seen anywhere. During the day, some of them flew even more dangerous and harrowing "Sandy" flights, providing close air support for daring helicopter rescues of downed pilots. As a Skyraider combat pilot, Drury was awarded the Silver Star, 4 Distinguished Flying Crosses, and 20 Air Medals.

Drury, who began his airline career at Flying Tiger Line in 1973 and retired from FedEx in 2003 as an international MD-11 captain and check airman, loved the A-1, the flying, and the camaraderie of his fellow "Hobos"; believed in the mission though it was doomed; and despised squadron and wing commanders who exaggerated or outright lied about their combat exploits to grab medals and promotions.

Whether you served in the "secret war" or not, *My Secret War* will put you right there, jinking over the treetops through withering ground fire, smoke, weather, and equipment failures.



**The Right Stuff**, by Tom Wolfe, is a tour de force that plunges right to the heart of what it is to be a pilot, to have, in Wolfe's words, *The Right Stuff*.



Wolfe's energetic style of writing and affection for exclamation points are well-suited to his examination of the selection and training of, and public reaction to, the first U.S. astronauts, the Mercury Seven.

President Eisenhower decided, arbitrarily, that the first U.S. men in space should be chosen from the relatively small pool of military and civilian test pilots. The place to be in that tight little community was Edwards AFB in California's high desert, and the ace of the base was Chuck Yeager.

Though readers may take issue with Wolfe's claim that

Yeager's folksy West Virginia drawl drifted down from the high desert to airline cockpits everywhere, the rest of the book is spot-on. Oh, the egos, the competition, the fear of being left behind that the righteous True Brothers, those imbued with *The Right Stuff*, shared!

And the dangers: Peacetime military flying alone offered a pilot "more ways to get himself killed than his wife and children could imagine," and the test pilots pushing the envelope in the first rocket-powered airplanes faced even more risks.

When the manned "space race" began, the True Brothers debated whether astronauts would be just "spam in a can," and if applying for the Mercury program would sideline one's career. They found public and news media adoration of the Seven, especially of John Glenn after his first U.S. orbital flight—New York City cops crying openly in the street!—initially baffling.

"The difference between pilot and passenger in any flying craft came down to one point: control," Wolfe writes. Well, yes! The Seven insisted on, and were given, a window, a hatch, and manual control.

But after Gus Grissom "screwed the pooch" and lost the capsule in the Atlantic, "The True Brothers were incredulous...the Mercury astronauts had an official immunity to three-fourths of the things by which test pilots were ordinarily judged. They were by now ablaze with the superstitious aura of the single-combat warrior [an ancient tradition in which a battle between two warriors determines the outcome of a war between clashing armies]. They were the heroes of Kennedy's political comeback, the updated new frontier whose symbol was a voyage to the moon."

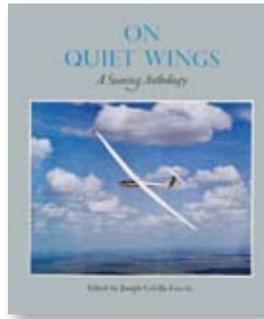
Back at Edwards, test pilots Walker, White, Crossfield, and Yeager "had *already* ridden rockets from the X-1 to the X-15. And they had ridden them as *pilots*." And: "People were impressed because the Mercury astronauts were willing to risk having Redstone rockets blow up under them. Christ! Rockets had already blown up under good men!"

Some of that flying at Edwards is vividly described—including Yeager's flight above 100,000 feet in the NF-104, which was an F-104 (an unforgiving beast) fitted with an auxiliary rocket engine. Yeager lost control of the NF-104 and ejected, then was badly burned on the face and hand by molten metal from the falling ejection seat—so badly that the teenager who found him in the desert puked. Yeager recovered and went on to fly 100 B-57 missions in Southeast Asia.

Wolfe's ability to get inside people's heads and get it all on paper is amazing; *The Right Stuff* is hard to put down.

***On Quiet Wings: A Soaring Anthology***, edited by Joseph Colville Lincoln, offers a superb sampling of writing about gliding and soaring. This coffee-table-size book is beautifully laid out and profusely illustrated with great photos and drawings.

From the preface: "The great moments in soaring are won by men [and women who]...have known the terrors of rotor

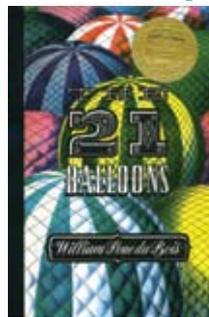


cloud, the crash of hail on metal, the growing of ice on leading edges and canopy, the near flash of lightning under a black overcast; or the agony of staying aloft in zero sink, a few hundred feet over brutal terrain while the sweat runs and nerves pull taut.... They have also known the exaltation of the heights when, shivering from cold, with a heavy pull of oxygen through their mask, they have seen range after range of mountains growing fainter blue with distance, and over them blazing cumulus clouds towering toward heaven...."

Lincoln culled most of the contents from 33 years of *Soaring*, the monthly magazine of the Soaring Society of America. *On Quiet Wings* covers much ground—mythology; early history; the adaptations of soaring birds; training, troop, and cargo gliders in World War II; cross-country flying; record flying; contest soaring; accidents; and mountain wave flying.

Published in 1972, *On Quiet Wings* is dated: Today's glass superships boast max glide ratios exceeding 50:1, and race and record attempts are saved on GPS recorders. The soaring altitude record is now 50,721 feet; the distance record, 1,217 nm. But the book remains a classic, and every glider pilot should own a copy; so should every power pilot who's ever wondered what it's like to climb on quiet wings.

### ***The Twenty-One Balloons***, written and



illustrated by William Pène du Bois, received the John Newbery Medal for children's literature in 1948.

The plot: A retired San Francisco schoolteacher plans to spend a year aloft in a one-room cabin suspended beneath a huge hydrogen balloon. He launches on Aug. 15, 1883. A week later, he suffers a bird strike (the plot device is credible!) and lands on a tropic isle—Kakatoa, dominated by the volcano that actually erupted explosively on Aug. 27, 1883.

Twenty families secretly inhabit the interior of the island. They periodically sail away to sell diamonds from an extraordinary mine at the base of the volcano and to replenish their supplies. When the volcano acts up, the families and their guest escape on a giant platform buoyed by 20 balloons.

The novel is a delightful piece of whimsy, offering such marvelous inventions as a 20-day culinary calendar: On the first day of the month, everyone eats at the "A" family's American restaurant. The next day, they eat at the "B" family's British chop house, and so on. The children pilot a balloon merry-go-round that launches as eight linked balloons and, after landing at sea, converts to eight small sailboats.

The book takes license with meteorology, geology, and history, and ignores the grim results of history's greatest volcanic eruption—40,000 or more dead, and a 5-year mini-ice age in Europe. But, after all, this is a novel for children. Enjoy it yourself, then give it to a young reader. 🍷

### **Reviews Wanted**

Want to submit your own book review? Send it to [magazine@alpa.org](mailto:magazine@alpa.org). We'll post it on [www.alpa.org/bookshelf](http://www.alpa.org/bookshelf).