



The Biggles Bible

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THE Biggles bible

An ancient tome discovered at Hawksview airfield in Cheshire has profound wisdom for us all on the dark art of flugelling. Daniel Langton was there for ye unveiling



The venerable tome discovered at Hawksview airfield

AMONG the many scholarly discoveries made this century, few have captured the popular imagination to the extent that *The Book of the Ethics of Biggles* has done.

Found wrapped in an ancient wind-sock at Hawksview airfield in Cheshire, these fragments of hard-won knowledge handed down from generation to generation of fliers had long been thought lost.

Following careful restoration over hundreds of hours, it is now possible to present a partial account of the wisdom of those who flew before us.

Modern scholars discount the traditional claim that the original author was James Bigglesworth of the Camel Squadron, and prefer to refer to the work as Pseudo-Biggles.

With the exception of a few individuals working on the fringes who argue for the authorship of B-25 bombardier John Catch-22 Yossarian, it is now generally accepted that Pseudo-Biggles represents a compilation of texts from different times and places usually expressed in the medium of aphorisms and likely redacted by grounded pilots in the late 20th century with nothing better to do.

Small pilot, big sky

A dominant theme in much wisdom literature is a profound sense of human fragility and frailty in the face of a hostile and uncaring universe.

Pseudo-Biggles is no exception, and includes some of most heart-rending expressions of the Dark Night of the Soul one can find.

Among the texts that reflect the deep paranoia that often attends flight is the earliest known reference to the golden rule: "Keep thy airspeed up lest the earth come from below to smite thee."

And who among us does not recognise the profound truth in the haunting observation that "There are certain aircraft sounds that can only be heard when flying solo"?

It is clear that then, as now, much of the anxiety of aviation concerned landings and fuel calculations. Thus we have advice such as: "You can land anywhere once," and "Always try to keep the number of your landings equal to the number of your takeoffs."

There is also a recognition that perfection in this regard is unattainable: "A good landing is one from which you can walk away. A great landing is one after which they can use the aeroplane again."

Bladder calling: emergency

With regard to fuel endurance, there are warnings that "Any attempt to stretch fuel is guaranteed to increase headwind", "The only time an aircraft has too much fuel on board is when it is on fire", and "Never pass up a chance to upload

fuel or unload the bladder".

It is worth noting that the well-known commandment: "Never trust a fuel gauge" has come down to us unchanged over time, and can be found in many languages.

It is striking how many of the texts wrestle with the inevitable confrontation with mortality faced by all those who would trespass upon the heavens.

These range from the analytical ("Flying isn't dangerous. Crashing is") to the earnestly pragmatic ("Fly the plane all the way into the crash"). In contrast to many other examples of wisdom literature, the skies are not a locus for redemption or divinity, but of danger.

As it is said: "Stay out of clouds. The silver lining everyone keeps talking about might be another aircraft going in the opposite direction".

And few of us have forgotten the ancient teaching of how to achieve a long life as an aviator: "There are old pilots and bold pilots, but no old, bold pilots", usually misattributed to Anonymous.

In spite of this, or perhaps because of it, a fierce spirit of bravado tends to characterise many of the sayings.

Classic examples include the claims that "A pilot is never lost - he is temporarily unfamiliar with his surroundings", and "I'm not perfect, but I'm a pilot, and that's almost the same thing".

And it is difficult not to exalt with the author of the verse: "It's not that all pilots are good-looking. It's just that good-looking people seem more capable of flying aeroplanes".

But Pseudo-Biggles contains multitudes, and one can find many different world views contained therein.

For some, the life of the airborne is instinctive and natural ("Flying is learning how to throw yourself at the ground and miss"), while for others it is the culmination of a lifetime of striving after perfection ("Truly superior pilots are those who use their superior judgment to avoid those situations where they might have to use their superior skills").

Is my moustache on fire, skipper?

On occasion, one must suspend one's modern sensibilities and remember that the texts were written at a very different time and place. Examples might include the misogynistic assertion that "It's not an emergency until your moustache is on fire", the xenophobic advice that "East is least, West is best", or the ugly bigotry against ground dwellers in the claim that "Pilots take no special joy in walking".

For much of the collection, scholars continue to debate the provenance and contexts of much of the material, and argue for a number of distinct traditions.

Evidence of a trinitarian school of thought includes texts such as: "There are three simple rules for making a smooth landing. Unfortunately, no one knows what they are", and: "Try not to run out of airspeed, altitude and ideas at the same time". Alongside this is evidence of an earlier tradition that emphasised a primitive form of dualism, reflected in texts such as "You start with a bag full of luck and an empty bag of experience. The trick is to fill the bag of experience before you empty the bag of luck", and "It's always better to be on the ground wishing you were in the air than in the air wishing you were on the ground".

There is also a suggestion of a mystical tradition, with several authorities suggesting that hallucinogenic substances were consumed in esoteric rituals to achieve an alternate state of consciousness.

In support are verses such as: "Try to stay in the middle of the air. Do not go near the edges of it. The edges of the air can be recognised by the appearance of ground, buildings, sea, trees and interstellar space".

This would also explain references to animal totem spirits found in proverbs such as: "Eagles may soar, but weasels don't get sucked into jet engines".



You're welcome, young Langton. Don't mention it

Heresy, I tell thee!

A number of scholars have identified the seeds of heresy in the recent discoveries, including the movement away from flying as an art form to that of an applied science influenced by engineering.

An example is the assertion: "The probability of survival is inversely proportional to the angle of arrival".

But such precision in thought is rare, and much more representative is the kind of parable easily understood by the people rather than the priesthood, such as: "It's best to keep the pointed end going forward as much as possible".

Even from this short survey, it should be apparent that *The Book of the Ethics of Biggles* represents one of the world's great works of religious literature.

As an inspiration for aviators it is unsurpassed, reminding each generation of its sacred duty: "The ultimate responsibility of the pilot is to fulfil the dreams of the millions of earthbound ancestors who can only stare skyward and wish".

• Daniel Langton is based at Hawksview airfield, where much of the work of recovery continues.

Convinced that a second volume of aviatic wisdom once existed, he has issued an open call for members of the piloting fraternity to bring forward any further fragments that might help with the future publication of a scholarly edition, so please send your favourite aviation aphorisms to him at daniel.r.langton@gmail.com. □

A version of this story appeared in Cheshire Flyer, the fabulous club magazine edited by Sharon Cox.

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