

A Global Forum for Naval Historical Scholarship

International Journal of Naval History

August 2004/ December 2004

Volume 3 Numbers 2/3

Norman Polmar and Dana Bell, *One Hundred Years of World Military Aircraft* (Naval Institute Press, 2004), ISBN 1 59114 686 0, 432 pp. including bibliography.

Reviewed by Joseph-James Ahern,
American Philosophical Society Library
Philadelphia, USA

The century following the Wright Brothers' first flight at Kitty Hawk, N.C. has seen thousands of military aircraft designs take to the sky. From propeller driven reconnaissance aircraft made of fabric and wood to jet bombers fabricated from high tech material, the aircraft has had a significant impact on how wars are fought -- adapting to new roles and incorporating new technology. To narrow down the thousands to a select few is a daunting task. In *One Hundred Years of World Military Aircraft*, Norman Polmar and Dana Bell take on that extraordinary task by selecting the top 100 aircraft that have made a significant impact on military history out of the thousands that have flown. Naturally, to narrow down such a wide field to a select few will draw criticism. To which even Polmar and Bell readily acknowledge in the preface their choices "will immediately be challenged." (p. xi) While the reader might ponder at the selections, it is unquestionable that the authors have produced a well-written, informative desktop reference to some of the world's most recognizable warbirds.

Despite the initial description, this is not a ranked listing of the aircraft. The writing style of the book follows closely the "Historic Aircraft" column from the Naval Institute's *Naval History* magazine (which Polmar is the long running author). Each entry is concise, and informative. In the preface the authors provide the origin and development of the work -- namely a series of conversations between one of the authors

and the late John W. R. Taylor, editor of *Jane's All the World's Aircraft*. In selecting the aircraft, they looked to designs that were either the first of their type, the largest, had the best performance, or had influenced political or military decisions or public attitudes towards military aviation. They did decide not to include aircraft that were purely civilian, experimental, and research as well as lighter-than-air and unmanned planes. An additional attribute of the work is that Bell and Polmar have not limited themselves to simply combat aircraft or successful aircraft. They have included transport planes (such as the Lockheed C-130 Hercules and the Messerschmitt Me 321/323 Gigant), as well as reconnaissance aircraft (like the Lockheed U-2), and aircraft that were a design failure but were influential in showing the value of such an aircraft on the battlefield (such as the Curtiss O-52 Owl).

The book is arranged around six periods of military flight which make up the chapters: Before Conflict, World War I, Between the Wars, World War II (which is divided into two chapters The Axis and The Allies), The Cold War, and New Technology Aircraft. Within the chapter aircraft are listed alphabetically by manufacturer, with each plane getting a two to four page description that provides the aircraft's service history along with its design, development, production run, and significant contribution to military aviation. Finally, a photograph and a chart of the aircraft's technical specifications accompany the entries. Finally, the authors have provided a brief introduction to each chapter, which places the aircraft into the military and aviation context of the era.

Equally valuable is the work's bibliography. Polmar and Bell have provided the sources used in compiling the book, listing them by aircraft nationality. Thus providing the reader with an extensive reference list to Twentieth Century military aircraft publications. While the book does not take on any deep intellectual thesis nor try to re-write history, it does open for discussion what makes a successful military aircraft. Many readers will ask why certain aircraft were included over some of their favorites, and in the process learn about ones they may not have previously encountered. In all, *One Hundred Years of World Military Aircraft* is an enjoyable and informative book to read. It is an

ideal introduction piece for those just learning about military aircraft, as well as a useful quick reference tool for the seasoned military historian.



The Editors
International Journal of Naval History
editors@ijnhonline.org

© Copyright 2004, International Journal of Naval History, All Rights Reserved