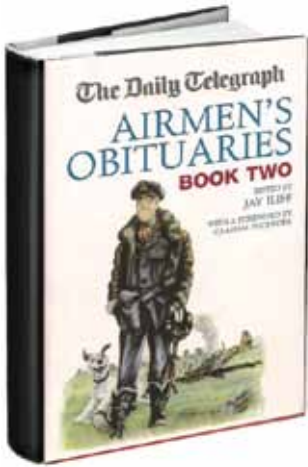


BOOK REVIEWS



The Daily Telegraph

AIRMEN'S OBITUARIES BOOK TWO

EDITED BY JAY ILIFF

London:
Grubb Street, 2007
416 pages (hardcover) ISBN 978-1904943-839

Review by
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While on exchange duty in the United Kingdom some years ago, I was an avid reader of their newspapers and came to very much appreciate the somewhat unique art of the military obituary. They were consistently well written and often entertaining, the British penchant for double-barreled names making them all the more pleasurable. Here in Canada, *The National Post* is perhaps the best source for such works. All this to say that I was highly pleased to learn that Britain's *Daily Telegraph* has produced several volumes of these.

The work under review is *Book Two* (*Book One* includes obituaries of such notable airmen as the German Colonel Erich Hartmann [credited with 352 kills], the Royal Air Force's Squadron Leader "Ginger" Lacey and the American General Ira Eaker, who led the US 8th Air Force in the Second World War [WWII]). Similarly, there are also books on army and naval obituaries.

Book Two is organized into the following sections:

- First World War Veterans;
- Fighter Boys
- Bomber Boys
- Daredevils

- Special Operations Executive (SOE), whose pilots flew Allies' agents into German-occupied Europe
- Foreign Friends
- The Girls
- Civilians
- Test Pilots
- Maritime
- Escapers and Evaders
- Industrialists and Engineers
- George Cross Winners
- Distinguished Leaders

Most of the obituaries in the book were written by Air Commodore Graham Pitchfork and Ted Bishop, the latter having compiled *Book One* and who passed away in 2003. In preparing each entry, these men were assisted by the Air Historical Branch of the Royal Air Force (RAF). Given the rapidity with which the obituaries were published after the subject's death (normally the next day) and the details contained, one would hazard a guess that many of them were prepared well in advance.

Each entry runs three to four pages and some of them make this a book to which

one wants to return from time to time. The format of each follows the time-honoured tradition of opening with a brief mention of the events for which the deceased is best known, which are then described in further detail. The departed airman's birth, early life, and career are then discussed, and the entry ends with details of marriage, if indeed such a union ever took place. The entry for General Stanislaw Skalski (Poland's top-scoring WWII ace with at least 22 kills) ends simply stating, "Stanislaw Skalski was unmarried."¹ Comparatively, the entry for Major General Charles Sweeney, who piloted the B-29 that dropped the atomic bomb on Nagasaki, notes that he "...had three sons and seven daughters by his marriage, which was dissolved."²

Though the book has a definite British flavour and bias, several distinguished Canadians are included, such as Wing Commander "Moose" Fumerton, our most successful WWII night-fighter pilot; Lieutenant-General Reg Lane, who commanded Canada's only Pathfinder Squadron over occupied Europe in WWII, and finally, Air Commodore Len Birchall, the "Saviour of Ceylon," who passed away on 11 September 2004, aged 89.

It is somewhat difficult from a summary of only a few pages to get the true measure of these men and women, but I found that whether due to the deceased's actual accomplishments or the skill of the writers, each comes across as larger than life. For example, Captain Ian Harvey, a pilot with British European Airways, was awarded the George Medal for saving the lives of his passengers when a bomb exploded aboard his civilian airliner while in flight. I was also not disappointed with the entry for Group Captain the 9th Earl of Ilchester (or as his parents named him, Maurice Vivian de Trouffreville Fox-Strangways!). While serving as an RAF apprentice at Brize Norton during WWII, he was caught taking a bath during an air raid. He quickly ran, naked, to the nearest air-raid shelter, which he

found had been set aside for the Women's Auxiliary Air Force. His entry records, "As he appeared at the entrance, a tall, attractive girl shouted, 'he's mine' – a year later she became his wife."³

Currently, members of our own air force are doing sterling work both at home and abroad, whether undertaking hazardous search and rescue missions across Canada or flying the skies above Libya, so when it comes time for these folks to pass, one would hope that their lives will receive similar accolades to those whose deeds are chronicled in this excellent book.

This book is very highly recommended, particularly for courses in which air force history is taught, for those tasked with speeches at our Depart with Dignity ceremonies, or as inspiration for some words in memory of a departed comrade. ■

Colonel Peter J. Williams, an artillery officer, is Director Current Operations on the Strategic Joint Staff.

Abbreviations

RAF	Royal Air Force
WWII	World War II

Notes

1. Jay Illiff, ed., *The Daily Telegraph Airmen's Obituaries Book Two* (London: Grubb Street, 2007), 221.
2. *Ibid.*, 217.
3. *Ibid.*, 367.