

# Fictions of Frustration: Two Novels about Cold War Fighter Pilots

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**B**y a remarkable coincidence, 1961 saw the publication of two novels about flying F-86 Sabre jet fighter aircraft in Europe during the late 1950s. Canadian R.J. Childerhose's *Splash One Tiger* and American James Salter's *The Arm of Flesh* are written by veteran fighter pilots, and their novels reveal a unique subculture of Cold War fiction that has never been studied. Like the protagonists of John LeCarré's spy novels, the most celebrated fiction of this era, the pilots in Childerhose and Salter's stories endure frustrated lives by preparing for a war that will never come. Despite their constant training and standing alerts to counter a Soviet invasion, they never fight the enemy because he only threatens to attack. Even if he did, the nuclear weapons that would be used make the fighter pilots irrelevant.

Instead of the Soviet enemy, which they cannot fight, the fighter pilots in the novels confront antagonists that are just as frustrating, especially the constantly threatening and unforgiving flying weather of northern Europe. The pilots' lives on the ground are beset by the peacetime air force bureaucracy, the narrow tribal conventions of their flying comrades, and the daily disappointments and discontents of their personal lives, usually caused by troublesome women. These frustrations are only made endurable by the solitary ecstasy of flying their powerful and always dangerous aircraft.

War in the air and the fighter pilot were less than half a century old in the 1950s after their introduction into combat during the First World War. Piloting the most technologically advanced of machines, with the seemingly miraculous power of flight, the fighter pilot captured the

popular imagination with the epic myth of the heroic warrior engaged in single combat. British fighter pilot, Cecil Lewis, reflected on his experience of fighting above the faceless masses of men in the trenches below:

To be alone, to have your life in your own hands, to use your own skill, single-handed, against the enemy. It was like the lists of the Middle Ages, the only sphere in modern warfare where a man saw his adversary and faced him in mortal combat, the only sphere where there was still chivalry and honour. If you won, it was your own bravery and skill; if you lost, it was because you had met a better man. (Lewis 35)

The Germans, the French, and finally even the reticent British, publicized and exploited this mythology as the so-called “knights of the air,” with the most famous among them the “Red Baron,” Manfred von Richthofen, with his 80 victories, and the Canadian and the Royal Military College’s own Billy Bishop, with his claimed 72 kills. In the Second World War, heroic young fighter pilots saved their nation during the Battle of Britain, earning the accolade of Winston Churchill, as he echoed Shakespeare’s warrior King Henry V: “Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.”

When the Korean War ignited in 1950, American fighter pilots fought their Russian adversaries in the first all-jet conflict, but the pilots still relied on their eyesight and machine guns, as they had since Richthofen and Britain’s Spitfire pilots flew, to seek and attack the enemy. After combat ended in Korea, the Cold War continued in Europe, with NATO fighter pilots—including Korean War veterans—flying the same Sabre jets, with the same fighter pilot ethos, as James Salter recalled in 2013, but with touches of post-modernist self-effacing irony:

There's the fact that people are being killed [in accidents]. And there was a competition always going on, a sifting out, a sorting out. There was working with all this tremendously powerful machinery. And then, of course, there was also the fact that you were the one on the horse [that is, in the fighter plane's cockpit]. Everyone was in business to support you—all the ground crews, all the supply people, everybody. That gave you a feeling, I would say, of over-importance, probably. You wore that. You had to wear it.... As a pilot you're nobility from the very beginning." (Salter, *New Yorker*, 46-47)

Living in this highly stressful world proves fatal for a fighter pilot in each of the two novels, who Childerhose and Salter represent as a frustrated outsider. Buzz Saunders is a veteran Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) fighter pilot of the Second World War. His aggressive flaunting of the rules during the war is not tolerated by the peacetime air force, whose mantra is "safety first." He refuses to conform and obey because he believes bureaucratic rules destroy the essential fighting spirit that wins wars, and which he teaches to his young pilots. He cannot survive in the peacetime air force, and his belatedly recognized heroic death is the final irony in the novel. Salter's outsider is Robert Cassada, a young rookie United States Air Force (USAF) pilot and new to his squadron, whose oddness becomes the catalyst for the other characters' fears, resentments, and affections. He is simultaneously feared as a reckless risk taker who will crash, and admired because he dares to evoke the romance of the fighter pilot about which the others dare not speak. Cassada's romantic daring tempts the flight into deteriorating weather that kills him, confirming the hostile prejudices against him by some, and making him a hero to others. His fatal flight frames, and is the narrative spine, of Salter's entire novel.

These thematic similarities are represented in two stylistically contrasting modes of fiction. Childerhose's is a conventional third-person omniscient narrative focused on the hero, Saunders, and unfolds in chronological order. The book was the author's first novel. He also wrote other non-fiction books about his experiences flying Sabres with the RCAF: *The F-86 Sabre* (1965) spices the technical with personal anecdote. His air force memoir, *Wild Blue* (1978), is a self-deprecating and humorous narrative about flying in Canada, Europe, North Africa, and ferrying Sabres across the North Atlantic. Childerhose also published *Fighter Pilot* (1965), a war novel for adolescent readers. Salter's novel is his second, and complexly structured through first-person stream-of-consciousness narratives by multiple narrators, in acknowledged imitation of William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. The focal character, Cassada, is not among the narrators, but is the focus of the others' narratives. The novel's chronology is also complex. The present dramatizes the attempts and failures of Cassada and his leader to land in virtually zero visibility, and the aftermath of the two resulting accidents. The narrative of this fatal flight begins the novel, is interspersed throughout it, and concludes the story. In between these passages are flashbacks, narrated by multiple characters, about Cassada's arrival and life in the squadron until his fatal crash.

The author of *The Arm of Flesh* had a twelve-year career as a fighter pilot in the USAF, including combat during the Korean War, when he shot down one enemy MiG-15. As a pilot he was known as James A. Horowitz, his birth name. When he published his first novel, *The Hunters* (1956), about Sabre pilots in the Korea, he invented the authorial name "James Salter" so as not to jeopardize his air force career. ("I didn't want to appear bookish," he recalled [Salter, *New Yorker*, 46].) The success of that first novel, which in my opinion is the best ever written about fighter pilots in English, was made into a bad Hollywood movie, and led to its author's leaving

the air force in 1957. He then began a distinguished literary career as James Salter, critically acclaimed as a “writer’s writer,” if not a bestselling author. In 2000, Salter revised and republished *The Arm of Flesh* as *Cassada*, with a third-person omniscient narrator and the multiple narrators removed. In his Forward to *Cassada*, Salter admits that *The Arm of Flesh* was “largely a failure,” but this study will use the original version of the novel to preserve its contemporaneousness with Childerhose’s novel, also published in 1961. While Salter came from privileged New York City roots, and was a graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point, Childerhose grew up in the small prairie town of Virden, Manitoba. He did not attend university, and after a series of dead-end jobs he enlisted in the RCAF to become a fighter pilot flying the Sabre in Germany. I wrote to both authors in 2015 to ask if they knew of each other’s books, but Childerhose was hospitalized with a chronic illness and was unable to answer. He died on 12 February 2016, age 87. Salter died on 19 June 2015, at age 90, before replying to my letter.

Salter’s novels, with the exception of *The Arm of Flesh*, are still in print, as well as his memoir, *Burning the Days* (1997), which also includes extended narratives of his air force flying in the U.S., Korea, Europe, and North Africa for gunnery practice. Childerhose’s novel is long out of print and virtually unknown in Canada, although I teach it in my War Literature course at the Royal Military College of Canada. It receives mixed reviews from my students, many of whom have difficulty getting over their military prejudices against the ego of fighter pilots.

I find it hard to judge which is the better novel and admire both of them. Salter is the more psychologically penetrating and a wonderful prose stylist. His novel is certainly the more aesthetically sophisticated, but this deliberate and seemingly forced artfulness at times intrudes on the reading experience. Childerhose’s storytelling is more direct, with a strange

sentimentality that sometimes intrudes, most certainly at the novel's end, but which also moves me as profound pathos. Both writers give us insight into the feelings of men living in a narrow and specialized slice of life, that in other texts about fighter pilots is made dispassionate by technical writing, masculine reticence, and what Tom Wolfe called "the right stuff," which demands disciplined coolness in the face of danger.

Notorious for its overcast skies and soggy weather, Northern Europe was a dangerous flying environment, especially for the early jet fighters with their high speeds and limited endurance that reduced decision time for their pilots, and without today's technology that makes safe flying possible in those conditions. The bad weather was a more dangerous enemy than the Soviet bloc air forces, but one that challenged the competitive and aggressive fighter pilot protagonist at the beginning of Childerhose's novel. Saunders grins at the "cruddy" wet day as he thinks that "his section was likely the only one in Europe going flying" (1). After take-off, he lies to the air traffic controller that the cloud base is twice the marginal 500 feet it really is. In the clear skies above the clouds, Saunders leads his section of four pilots in unauthorized mock dog fighting with a section of USAF Sabres. After defeating them, he and his mates plunge back into the clouds, where the veteran Saunders himself feels anxiety about making a safe landing, while his best friend crashes into a hillside when his essential instruments fail and his inexperienced wingman cannot lead him to a safe landing.

Salter's novel also opens with a flight of two Sabres, low on fuel in deteriorating weather and led by the inexperienced wingman, Cassada, because his leader's radio has failed. As in the Canadian novel, the rookie fighter pilot fails to lead his leader to a safe landing. The young man, driven by his own competitive and romantic streak, had successfully goaded the more experienced pilot to risk a dash for home before the weather closes in. Technical failure spoils

his daring, leading to Cassada's fatal crash because he lacks the skill to land on instruments. His leader is forced to eject after his jet runs out of fuel above the clouds. He is also utterly frustrated by having to abandon a flying aircraft that he cannot land. In both novels, the fighter pilots' competitiveness, driven by the will for aerial combat, is fatally defeated by the unbeatable forces of nature.

The response to this ever-present threat of dangerous flying weather by the Canadian and American air forces is the relentless campaign for flight safety. Saunders' main antagonist in *Splash One Tiger* is Wing Commander Claud Lynch, who wants to ground Saunders for his flaunting of safety regulations, as he threatens, "I'm going to catch you on a violation of flying orders: air fighting, low-flying. Something" (112). Even Saunders' former wartime commander, who had tolerated rule breaking as the mark of aggressiveness for his fighter pilots, warns: "It's a peacetime airforce we're in, Buzz, let's face it. ... There's no room for a lone wolf here. During the war, sure — they needed them. But no more" (73). Saunders, defending the combative spirit he wants to instill in his young pilots, taunts his superior officer with the question, "What happens if Russia starts a war?" And to his shock his commanding officer replies with this heresy: "Maybe the Canadian government is gambling there won't be a war. ... Maybe there's no more need for individual pilots to fight against each other. Times change" (72).

Flight safety frames and narratively drives Slater's novel, with the fighter pilot's hubris resulting in the fatal accident after the failure to land in bad weather and approaching darkness. There is also severe disapproval of risky dog fighting with "the crazy Canadians" (76), although in this American telling of the tale, it is the Canadians who are defeated in the mock dog fight. Wickenden, the most safety conscious pilot in the squadron, who predicts Cassada's death because of his unsafe flying, condemns the braggadocio of the pilots who return from their

aerial “trysting” (75) with the Canadians, with the bitter warning that “his pockets [are] still full of luck. Staying up there like he did to tangle with someone, and knowing all the time what the weather was. I’d have grounded them both” (82). And after Cassada’s crash, Clyde, the squadron commander, worries about how he will explain the accident to the investigation board, and that bureaucratic sanction will diminish his chances of promotion.

While the culture of peacetime military bureaucracy pervades both novels, the more immediate concern of their writers is the *comitatus* bonding among the fighter pilots. Saunders is unforgiving in his contempt for those who do not meet his high expectations of aggression and flying skill. He kills him at the end of the book, when he risks his life to guide a stricken aircraft to a safe landing, piloted—ironically—by his nemesis, Lynch. The fighter pilots in Salter’s novel also judge each other’s flying skill in absolute terms, and with intense competitiveness. Cassada, the newcomer, does not win the praise of his squadron mates as a pilot. He is too eager, imprecise, and impulsive. But Isbell, the veteran Operations Officer who is also attuned to the romance of flying, senses in the young man some of his own romantic feelings. After a glorious morning flight with Cassada, the two exchange cryptic, inarticulate comments about what they had experienced in the air, until the young blurts out, “The whole world’s like that.” Salter then takes us into Isbell’s mind,

A chance remark that entered my heart. I didn’t know what to say.

Suddenly he was not what he seemed—as wise as a schoolboy who knows sex—he was entirely different. Yes, I thought. The whole world is. And early we rise to discover the earth. I felt a sudden desire to bequeath him my dreams, to offer them up. All of the searching is only for someone who can understand them. (98)



Such moments of lyrical empathy are not permitted among the pilots because it betrays an effeminate softness at odds with their manly warrior ethos. And it is to this weakness that Isbell submits, against his better judgment and experience, when Cassada tempts him to make their last fateful flight.

But it is to the women in the novels that Salter and Childerhose have given uninhibited feelings and unflinching honesty. In *The Arm of Flesh*, Ernestine, the squadron commander's wife, has a predatory affair with a young pilot, and taunts her husband with the hypocrisy of the funeral service for Cassada, which labeled him a hero: "Oh, that sermon. All that stuff. Doesn't anybody tell these chaplains what's really going on.... It's such a farce" (167). And in a domestic scene of the highest emotional tension, Marian, Isbell's wife, refuses her husband's unspoken desire to have sex before he leaves for a long mission to North Africa. Entering into her consciousness, Salter writes: "Can't you tell I don't want to. I hate it. I hate to feel the first touch. It's just not something I do well. I must have been born this way. I can't help it" (49). Salter defeats the myth of the fighter pilot's sexual prowess with his female character's devastating honesty, even as he confirms it with her husband's infidelity.

And it is a woman, Marj Matthews, the university educated widow of Saunders' dead buddy who crashes at the beginning of the novel, who is most brutally honest about what the outside world thinks about fighter pilots. Significantly, Childerhose stages this confrontation amid the ruins of a German castle, recalling the chivalry of long ago and its mythical link to fighter pilots as "knights of the air." "Haltingly ... for he was no poet of the air" (82), Saunders tries and fails to convince his dead friend's wife of the irresistible attraction of flying fighters. But her practical mind will have none of it: "Flying airplanes. Just flying airplanes. You've completely cut yourself off from the administrative side of things.... You're not the airforce's well-rounded

career officer" (84). Saunders realizes that she may be right: "For the first time in his life he was seeing a picture that he'd refused to look at by himself. A feeling of despair came over him..."

(84). Before Saunders' last and fatal flight, Marj has this bitter exchange with him:

"Buzz, you're not a child. For heaven's sake, grow up."

"I'm a fighter pilot..."

"Buzz, the RCAF doesn't need fighter pilots. They don't want them. Can't you understand that?..."

"I'm safe. I can fly the damn airplane for them."

"Of course you can," she agreed warmly. "But can't you see? Everyone can fly Sabres safely." (267)

Childerhose and Salter kill their fighter pilots in their novels. They die of frustration, victims of the Cold War world that devalues what they do. Saunders in *Splash One Tiger* is the more significant fictional death because he is the novel's protagonist and represents the wartime combat ethos that Childerhose insists is dying in the peacetime RCAF. Salter ends *The Arm of Flesh*, after Cassada's hypocritical funeral, in a nostalgic and domestic key that is discordant with the fighter pilot mythology of individualized competitive aggression. Isbell, his tour in Germany over and slightly drunk, is travelling by train, with his wife and young children in tow, to catch the ship that will take them back to the States and away from the Cold War front line. The ending of each novel does not promise well for fighter pilots when the books were published in 1961.

Since then, popular interest in the fighter pilot was briefly sparked during the Vietnam War, but even then their exploits were overshadowed by the horrendous bombing. Beginning in 1977, the combat flying by the X-wing starfighters in the *Star Wars* movies projected the fighter

pilot into a fantastic science fiction future. *Top Gun*, the 1986 pop-culture hit movie, with the boyish Tom Cruise as a naval aviator, briefly reawakened the romantic appeal of the fighter pilot, only to have it crash in 1991 with the "Tailhook scandal" of sexism and harassment of women at the annual gathering of naval and marine pilots. The two wars in the Persian Gulf, and the one in the Balkans, saw little air combat, and that only against feckless enemies. The massive escalating costs and almost decade-long delays of the Joint Strike Fighter program have also devalued the fighter pilot brand. And today, it is the pilotless, remotely controlled drones that capture public attention. The myth of the fighter pilot, after but one century, may itself be dying: the leading edge technology that brought fighter pilots to life, now represented by the drones and all their high-tech digital technology, may be killing them. Childerhose and Salter foretold that passing in their 1961 novels, with their fighter pilots' frustrations in the Cold War.

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