

Writing about Flying: A Pilot's View

by John Clark Pratt

As a writer of poetry, fact and fiction about flying, I was understandably fascinated by Kelly Cook's comments in an appendix to his recently discovered and published World War II novel, *The Other Capri*. In his short essay, "Novels on Aviation," Cook dismissed all but two novels then written about flying, and even the two he liked—James Salter's *The Hunters* and Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*—he believed to be "uneven works of fiction" (186). Ironically, Cook made these comments in the early 1960's, shortly before *Catch-22* became the bible of what has come to be called the Vietnam Generation. Cook's occasionally high-sounding comments (after all, he was then a graduate student in literature as well as being a fighter pilot) are nevertheless significant. Most writers writing about flying, he continues, have an "essential failing":

The fiction of aviation is soaked in those faults of bombast, lyricism, and feeling which every novelist has recognized as a hazard to his craft. Further, material which might, in the hands of more careful writers, be the legitimate matter of fiction is never taken beyond the intrusion of the individual. Personality is imposed on the impersonal. The writer is always his own theme; he is the pantheistic god who lurks in every word, visible and overpowering, everywhere seen, never behind, beyond, or above the work. As Flaubert foresaw, this personal element makes the art weaker, so that the more a thing is felt the less able is the novelist to express it. The ability to see as Flaubert knew an artist must see is always lost in the fallacy of feeling (186).

It's difficult to fault Kelly Cook's logic, given the then existing canon of aviation fiction. We should also note that his concern was only with imaginative works, not personal narratives, and that there are now a multitude of novels about flying that he could not have known (Cook died in 1967 in Vietnam). Even St. Exupery's *Night Flight*, which he must have read, despite its beauty suffers as fiction from the overwhelming presence of its pilot-author, as does Walt Sheldon's excellent Korean War novel *The Troubling of A Star*. I am surprised, though, that Cook failed to applaud John Hersey's *The War Lover* (1958), and I'm saddened that he could not have considered Ernest Gann's *In The Company of Eagles* (1966) or the absolutely dazzling novel *While He Lies Sleeping* (1964) by the pseudonymous Giro.

Cook was ironically prophetic, however, about the plethora of Vietnam War flying novels that have appeared since his death—many of which describe precisely the same kinds of missions he himself was flying. Novels such as Walt Kross's *Splash One*, Marshall Harrison's *Cadillac Flight*, Stephen Coonts' bestseller *Flight of The Intruder*, Boyne and Thompson's *The Wild Blue*, Henry Zeybel's *The First Ace*, and Mark Berent's five-novel sequence, *Rolling Thunder*, *Steel Tiger*, *Phantom Leader*, *Eagle Station* and *Storm Flight* are each written by former combat pilots—and each suffers from precisely the “writer-as-his-own-theme” problem that Cook so astutely identifies. Although most of these novels are technically accurate in their combat flying scenes, they all exhibit exactly that “fallacy of feeling” that Cook (influenced by Flaubert) correctly condemns.

One wonders why great fiction writers and pilots are so alike, yet so incompatible. Is it because the pilot cannot, by the nature of his or her own craft, deny the “intrusion of the individual” to cease acting as some kind of a god, pantheistic or otherwise? Could any pilot accept being refined out of existence? In a practical sense, doing so might mean, simply, to turn over the controls, to absent oneself, thus to crash and burn. In short, to learn, experience and understand what it is to be a pilot may well require one to deny precisely those elements that create great art; yet not to have been a pilot might well make writing

about this experience impossible. There are many mediocre novelists who have died quietly in bed, but few mediocre combat pilots have been so lucky.

Relevant, I think, is the fact that Kelly Cook was one of the few pilot/authors ever to have also studied and taught the history as well as the craft of fiction. Just before graduating from Notre Dame in 1942, he enlisted in the Army Air Corps and flew as a co-pilot in B-24s until the war's end. Afterward, he taught English until being recalled to active duty during the Korean War as a fighter pilot. Asked to join the English Department faculty of the United States Air Force Academy (where I served with him), he received an MA from the University of North Carolina and a PhD from Denver University. After three years in the classroom, he stayed as an Air Officer Commanding in the military training staff of the Academy, from where he was assigned to the Royal Air Force Academy at Cranwell, England, as an exchange officer. Volunteering for service in Vietnam, Cook was trained in the F-4 and was killed on a mission when the anti-personnel mines his aircraft was carrying malfunctioned and exploded.

I do not think that Kelly Cook would have considered his accidental death as fated or tragic, however, but rather as something that we all must learn sadly to accept and understand. As he says of his protagonist in *The Other Capri*: "death was many names he could remember" (194). His novel certainly shows none of the bombast or sentimentality that pervade lesser works. It also shows a magnificent understanding of flight, as well as what makes good literature meaningful.

Recently published nearly a half-century after the events it depicts (B-24s bombing targets in Germany and Italy), Kelly Cook's *The Other Capri* is simply a gem—a saddening, uplifting, entirely satisfying story of a young B-24 air crew coming of age as the World War II fighting in Italy is winding down. This novel is utterly realistic, yet highly symbolic, and the dialogue among the pilots, commanders, and air crews is the best I have ever seen in any novel about flying.

The Other Capri opens as it ends—with a mission briefing. The central consciousness is Second Lieutenant Clay Ward, the co-pilot of a nine-man B-24 crew that is about to fly its first mission in December 1944 as the last aircraft in the formation (“Tail-end Charlie”) for the Bomb Group. Although they have trained together, the young crew (their ages range from 18 to 25) are apprehensive and unconfident, yet eager. Also new to the briefing is the new Group Commander, Colonel John Wright, who announces that this “whole friggen outfit looks sloppy . . . and I’m gonna shape it up real fast” (8). During the five months that follow, Colonel Wright does indeed shape up the Group: Clay is promoted and gets his own crew, and as the war in Italy ends, so does the novel with wrenching sadness as the surviving air crews are rotated back to the United States for further deployment.

Surviving—a word that cannot be overlooked when reading this novel, for *The Other Capri* is, in an almost hyper-realistic manner, as much a novel of survival as is *Catch-22*, a book that Kelly Cook knew well. But while Heller uses his military characters and situations as satiric paradigms of the world he saw around him, Cook’s concern is with the men themselves and their ultimate humanity. His stated intention was “to write a novel which depended for its detail on the experience of combat flying, but which found its meaning beyond detail in the human condition of man at war in the twentieth century” (187). For Heller, the enemy is not only everyone around us but ourselves as well. For Cook, the “enemy” exists amorphously—“out there,” or more specifically to the air crews, “down there” and is seen only in the forms of shadowy fighters or apartment-sized concentrations of flak. His characters are concerned primarily not with individual survival but with personal interactions of the group—and how they interact! When they’re not talking, Clay’s air crew builds a house out of scavenged supplies, and as their living quarters come together, so do they. Their combat missions allow all of the crew to chatter over the intercom—and it’s from what they say that we learn how human they really are. For example, returning from a mission in a badly shot-up aircraft, they pass over the island of

Capri. The pilot says, "Johnny, check the fuel again," and the following conversation, emanating from all parts of the B-24, occurs as follows:

"How about the broads?"

"What broads?"

"At Capri. Can't you keep up with the conversation?"

"I hear some of the Italians with money have been holed up there during the war."

"I hear there's an island called Ischia that's the best deal."

"What-kia?"

"Isk-kia, north of Capri."

"How do you get out there?"

"Pole vault over and float back with the tide."

"I can put up with everything in this airplane but the immoral language."

"Looks like we got enough [fuel], Lieutenant," [says Johnny].

The Other Capri is filled with such interchanges, and by the end of the novel, we know that we have heard Americans speaking.

There are flaws in this novel, but so there are in *The Red Badge of Courage*, with which it should be properly compared. The reader is overwhelmed at first by the abruptly presented plethora of characters, but then again, so is any new air crew who reports for duty at a strange location. Scenes of intense, often unattributed dialogue suddenly turn into long, descriptive passages that cause one to lose track of the characters, but only for a while. Sometimes the novel sounds like Hemingway, sometimes like Joyce (two of Cook's admitted mentors)—but I suspect that all this unevenness is part of Cook's plan. This coming-of-age narrative is too carefully structured not to have these abruptnesses be intentional—much like flying, combat or otherwise, is a combination of hours of boredom and great pleasure, interspersed with moments of sheer terror.

Above all, *The Other Capri* does *not* evidence the novelistic flaws noted by Cook in the essay quoted above. We never get the sense that the author is forcing us to feel anything, but we do so, constantly, especially in the short scene where Clay Ward goes on pass to the “other” Capri, a village high on a mountain (like the Abruzzi, where Frederic Henry always means to go in *A Farewell to Arms*) where by chance he spends a few days with an Italian couple with whom he cannot verbally communicate. He helps the old man with his fishing chores, and at night they insist that he sleep in a room by himself, beneath a picture of an equally young man in the uniform of the Italian Navy. When Clay leaves, “the old woman ben[ds] down her head and rest[s] it for a moment against Clay’s arm” (151). Even in the presence of the enemy, this scene shows us, humanity exists.

I had read and admired a few of Kelly Cook’s short stories, including “All My Sad Captains,” which I loved, during the time I served with him, but he did not offer me this novel. I wonder, now, whether I would have then appreciated it as much as I do now. Perhaps. Those of us who knew Kelly Cook sensed that he was someone quite different, though, and *The Other Capri* is proof of what that difference was.

Walter McDonald, now one of America’s most impressive poets, then also a pilot and colleague of Kelly’s and mine at the Academy, wrote his impression of Kelly Cook another way. This poem is from McDonald’s first book, *Caliban in Blue*:

For Kelly, *Missing in Action*

When you disappeared
over the North
I pulled down *Dubliners*.

What strange counterparts,
you and the Cong.
You, who said no one would make
General
reading Joyce,
named your F-4 “The Dead,”

and dropped out of the sun
like some death angel
playing mumbledy peg
with bombs.

I never knew what launched
the search for Araby in you,
that wholly secular search
for thrills.

By reading *The Other Capri*, I suspect that we can all understand what Kelly Cook's search really was: to show that even a fighter pilot could see as Flaubert would have the artist see, and write about his vision. In this novel, I think Cook found what he was looking for. □

Editor's Note: Cook, Kelly F. *The Other Capri*. Knoxville: Tennessee Valley Publishing, 1992. 194 Pp. (paper). \$11.25. Includes the story "All My Sad Captains," photographs, and essays by the author.

"For Kelly, *Missing in Action*" reprinted by permission of Texas Tech Press.