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INTRODUCTION

That fliers can be superstitious has long been acknowledged within the aviation community.¹ Especially in reference to the Allies in World War II, furthermore, the subject has been touched on repeatedly by popular writers; but, with very few exceptions, academic historians have tended to ignore this aspect of the military aircrew experience.² The trend thus far among the latter has been to concentrate on aspects of strategic bombing and various other air campaigns along with the thoughts and actions of leading air commanders.³ This gap is unfortunate, given how powerful belief could be among pilots and other combat crewmen in the efficacy of various supernatural means of avoiding destruction and ensuring survival, as a number of physicians perceived at the time.⁴ Recent work in the behavioral sciences, moreover, offers important insights into the psychological mechanisms that could make otherwise rational and discerning men become, as cultural historian Martin Francis has written, “intensely superstitious.”⁵ Given the extent to which supernatural belief has been recognized by scholars as an important psychological coping mechanism among Allied soldiers fighting on the ground in both world wars, furthermore, a full-scale study of the phenomenon among those men flying for the American, British, and associated dominion air forces as well as naval air arms in the war against the Axis appears worthwhile.⁶

Why, though, concentrate on these particular fliers? Superstitious thought and action, after all, also occurred in enemy air forces and among Russian fliers.⁷ What is more, magical thinking was by no means confined to World War II: belief in the supernatural also influenced combat pilots in, for example, World War I, Korea, Vietnam, the Falklands, the Gulf War, and most recently Afghanistan.⁸

The Allied air endeavor, however, was much larger than that of the Axis opposition, and collectively it exceeded the not insubstantial Soviet air effort on the Eastern Front. The aerial campaigns of World War II, furthermore, were much greater in scale and scope than either those that came before or those that have occurred since.

In World War I, the US Army air service produced around 17,500 pilots, only a limited number of whom went to France in 1918; while in World War II, even after heavy losses and not counting the navigators, bombardiers, flight engineers, and air gunners needed to man the heavy bomber fleets, the United States Army Air Forces (USAAF) were fielding over 140,500 pilots by the time hostilities ceased.⁹ On top of this were the almost 50,000 United States Navy (USN) pilots and over 10,000 United States Marine Corps (USMC) pilots on duty.¹⁰ In 1968, about 47,500 air force personnel, the vast majority ground crewmen rather than combat fliers, were committed to air operations over North Vietnam: this was in contrast to August 1945, when the USAAF around the globe had fielded over 2 million personnel.¹¹

Meanwhile, the Royal Air Force (RAF), at the end of World War II, was over three and a half times bigger than it had been at the end of World War I and would shrink to under a tenth of its wartime size in the second half of the twentieth century.¹² The same basic pattern of expansion and contraction also held true for the Fleet Air Arm (FAA) of the Royal Navy.¹³

The comparative scale of the Allied air effort directed against the Axis powers means a proportionately larger number of the kind of first-person written and oral accounts exist that are crucial to developing an understanding of superstition among combat airmen. At the same time, the inclusion of fliers from not only the United States but also the United Kingdom as well as the British Commonwealth and Empire serving either in the RAF, the FAA, or in national air forces modeled on the former—principally the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF), and Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF)—allows for a wider transnational picture to be drawn.

In order to understand the appeal of the supernatural to these pilots and other crewmen, it is first necessary to discuss context. The prevalence of superstition among those of similar age and intelligence needs to be outlined, along with the extent of such belief in wider populations in the timeframe under consideration. Even more important, the stresses and uncertainties induced by aerial combat need to be laid out in order

to explain why large numbers of comparatively intelligent and educated volunteers “in a modern scientific war,” as military historian Mark Connelly has put it, “still clung to animal-like rituals to appease the gods of battle.”¹⁴

The consequent reliance on the supernatural, though, took many forms, so subsequent individual chapters are devoted to: appeals for specific and direct intervention by a monotheistic deity; reliance on personal or group talismans and charms; a tendency toward ritualistic words and action often not directly associated with religion; the appearance of apparently hexed persons, objects, or events; numerology and magical symbolism; and, finally, supposed supernatural premonitions of doom.

Gremlins are not discussed. Although these mythical creatures appealed to the whimsical nature of certain fliers, notably of course Roald Dahl, and the term became a useful rhetorical means of attributing blame for undiagnosed electro-mechanical problems or odd atmospheric phenomena like St. Elmo’s fire, there is no indication that any flier thought gremlins, as such, actually existed.¹⁵

Chapter 2, it should be stressed, does not consider religious faith *per se* to be a form of superstition—“an unreasonable or groundless notion”—insofar as the existence of God is inherently untestable in scientific terms.¹⁶ As for the utility of calling on the Almighty for help, though scientific trials indicate that mass intercessory appeals have no discernable effect on recovery from medical procedures or disease, if each miracle is unique and hence nonreplicable, then the effect of prayer too is simply not subject to the scientific method.¹⁷ A case can certainly be made, however, that the prospect of imminent and untimely death drove even those without much or any religious conviction toward pleas for salvation on earth as opposed to entry to heaven.¹⁸

As we shall see, some forms of superstitious thought among Allied combat fliers were not entirely lacking in rational content. Just as important, as a number of recent studies have shown, even the most completely irrational beliefs, while having no direct physical impact on the future of the people concerned, can still have an effect on self-confidence and thereby performance.¹⁹

It was easy enough for more rational contemporary observers to be rather dismissive about aircrew superstitions, writing them off as backward and childish examples of magical thinking.²⁰ More than seventy-five years on, historians can approach the subject more dispassionately, not

only chronicling the extent of such thinking but also explaining why it became so prevalent, as well as the role it played in buttressing or undermining morale and operational effectiveness. A fair amount of scholarly attention has been devoted to the policies adopted toward those who eventually refused to fly any more combat missions. It is time to shed more light on one of the mechanisms through which the vast majority were able to keep going.²¹



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