



On a Wing and a Prayer

Audacity propels English professor and WWII fighter pilot Geoffrey Morley-Mower into the skies with the RAF

At 1,000 feet in the air, all Geoffrey Morley-Mower can see is a white blur. Ahead of him in the open cockpit of his canvas-covered monoplane sits his instructor taking notes. Half of the would-be pilots have already been weeded out. There are no runways on the large grassy square of the airfield at Anstey, England. He can't see the windsock or tell which way the wind is blowing. And therefore he doesn't know which way to come in for a landing. Most of the time, he just follows the yellow blur of the other painted planes ahead of him. But this time he is the only plane out. Circling round and round the airfield he waits until his instructor loses his temper and inadvertently reveals which way to turn. He is identified as a bumbling fool, careless and inattentive, lacking concentration. But in truth, he isn't a half-wit; he is half-blind.

It all begins in 1937 when Morley-Mower decides to enlist in the British Royal Air Force. For the future JMU English professor, these are the days that shape the rest of his life, after which he will "never be the same innocent" again. Recorded faithfully in his private journals beginning before World War II, these experiences become the inspiration for two books written nearly 50 years later. The first to be published was *Messerschmitt Roulette* in 1993, and *Flying Blind* was published this year.

It isn't fame or glory or the desire to right the wrongs of German tyranny that make Morley-Mower sign up for the British Royal Air Force, but a small sum of money to cover his expenses as he and his brother fulfill their boyhood dream of walking across Europe, through Asia to Tibet, and then to China.

Somehow he gets the notion that, despite the fact he has been wearing glasses since the age of 11, he, too, can become an RAF pilot. There are only a few minor details he has to attend to first. Reporting for his medical board at Kingsway, London, England, he passes the initial medical exam with the help of his physician, a longtime friend of the family, who has recommended a small dose of a drug normally associated with murder trials. This poison, while it won't kill him, will temporarily improve his vision. Moments before the required eye exam, Morley-Mower goes to the lavatory, downs the powder, and is at once miraculously endowed with normal vision.

Next he must report to Air Service Training where it is a little more difficult to fake his way, especially with the flight instructor sitting directly ahead of him. If he can just pull it off until he flies solo, all will be right, for then he can put on his own wire-rimmed spectacles without being caught; and the world will become clear and distinct, etched with the details only the full-sighted see.

Fortunately fate is on his side. Keeping his disability a secret, he manages to pass flight training and earn his wings. Throughout the next few years he faces numerous other eye exams. But again, luck has its way. Some are canceled; for others he memorizes the eye chart. Cheat, peak, whatever it takes, he will do. Once he gets into action, however, his only disguise is a pair of dark prescription lens that pass as sunglasses. No one ever suspects. For who in the world imagines a front-line pilot practicing such a deception?

In truth his vision never once interferes with his ability to carry out his reconnaissance missions. He later distinguishes himself through many heroic acts and is awarded in 1944 the Distinguished Flying Cross at Buckingham Palace by King George VI, himself pins the medal to Morley-Mower's chest.

Shortly after the pilot receives his wings, he is sent to the Indian border with Afghanistan. Here the British are more occupied with tribal pacification than anything else. In this remote place, Morley-Mower flies a Westland Wapiti, a bi-plane designed to use the spare parts of outdated World War I aircraft. Made of wood, wire and fabric, it has no brakes. Instead a heavy, triangular shoe beneath the tailplane slows the primitive aircraft to a halt after landing. But no matter, to Morley-Mower the delight is simply rising into the air.

When the second world war begins in September 1939, he feels trapped in India and begs to be sent to where the real action is. Finally he is granted permission to join No. 451 Squadron of the Royal Australian Air Force in the Western Desert, a unit operating near the Egyptian border with Libya in the Middle East. In this war zone, Morley-Mower flies a Hawker Hurricane plane in armed reconnaissance missions, photographing and surveying enemy sites at dangerously low altitudes. Not once during this entire time does anyone discover his disability.

Once the war is over, however, his secret is somehow revealed. He receives a formal letter informing him that due to his eyesight being below standard he is being reassigned to the equipment branch. This is the kiss of death to Morley-Mower. In *Flying Blind* he writes: "To me it meant deskwork, boredom and denial of freedom of the skies while ironically wearing the blue uniform of the airman."

Indignation fills him as he thinks, "So I can fly in the war but not in peacetime! What kind of logic is that?" A friend suggests appealing to the monarch, a right that could be invoked, but only as a last resort. Morley-Mower knows he might have a chance of pulling off this appeal to George VI, as it is well known that the king is sentimental about the men of the RAF. Trained in the service, too, the king frequently wears his own RAF uniform in public, a tribute to the air force and its pilots, who were credited with saving the nation in 1940 during the Battle of Britain.

But the process of appealing through the upward chain of command is slow and tedious. More than a year's worth of rejections pass before he lands on the highest rung of the administrative appeals process. The air marshal who interviews him commends him for his persistence, but nonetheless hands him a set of papers, reiterating that he is unfit for flying duties, and then cordially dismisses him.

Standing his ground, Morley-Mower states that he has proven himself during wartime conditions and that he doesn't understand being rejected for the peacetime air force. "If I am allowed to put my case before the king, I will abide by any decision he makes.'

Amused by this, the air marshal roars with laughter, saying: "You have bloody nerve. I've read your file and could hardly believe it. You've held us up to ransom. You're a naughty boy."

Morley-Mower, dumbfounded at his success, catches his breath and asks if this means he can keep his wings. The air marshal reassures him saying that the Air Council would never trust him to go to the King, for they would risk "having their backsides caned for not respecting the generation that saved England."

So ends, "in unlikely victory, my rather preposterous deception," Morley-Mower concludes. "In old age I am surprised at my younger self for having attempted it." - *By Christine Leontie*

During his 31 years in the Royal Air Force, Morley-Mower was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Force Cross. He served in India, the Middle East, Gibraltar and Cyprus. He flew Hawker Hurricanes, American Mustangs, subsonic jet aircraft like Meteors and Vampires and during the Cold War he commanded anti-submarine units equipped with Avro Shackletons and American Neptunes.

"Flying is such an ungraspably beautiful thing," the author writes in *Flying Blind*, "Superior to its technology - somewhere between a skill and an art and a pure exercise of the imagination."

Morley-Mower's fascinating account of army and air operations over the wild and lawless terrain of the Afghan border is filled with detail, immediacy and human interest. It is supported by diary entries, giving dates and descriptions of individuals who played prominent roles in the campaigns. It therefore provides a unique contribution to the military and political history of the period; a history almost entirely ignored by scholars because of the advent of a world war.

Flying Blind is a glimpse into a way of life during the last days of the British Empire in India, an era that ended after World War II. It deals with a period in the author's career before *Messerschmitt Roulette: The Western Desert, 1941-42*, in which he describes his adventures as a Hawker Hurricane pilot during General Irwin Rommel's campaigns in Libya and Egypt.

Morley-Mower's *Flying Blind*, Yucca Tree Press, (2000) and *Messerschmitt Roulette*, Phalanx, (1993) are available at the JMU Bookstore, amazon.com and zuccatree@zianet.com He is also the author of *Cabell Under Fire* (1975), a book of essays on the Virginian author, James Branch Cabell.