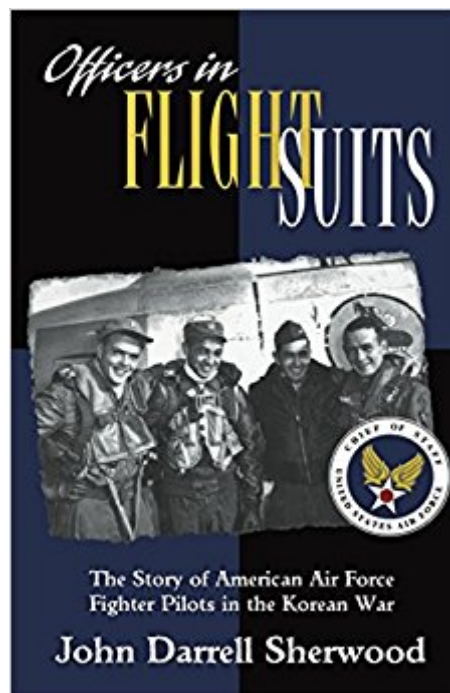




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# Officers In Flight Suits: The Story Of American Air Force Fighter Pilots In The Korean War



## Synopsis

The United States Air Force fought as a truly independent service for the first time during the Korean War. Ruling the skies in many celebrated aerial battles, even against the advanced Soviet MiG-15, American fighter pilots reigned supreme. Yet they also destroyed virtually every major town and city in North Korea, demolished its entire crop irrigation system and killed close to one million civilians. The self-confidence and willingness to take risks which defined the lives of these men became a trademark of the fighter pilot culture, what author John Darrell Sherwood here refers to as the flight suit attitude. In *Officers in Flight Suits*, John Darrell Sherwood takes a closer look at the flight suit officer's life by drawing on memoirs, diaries, letters, novels, unit records, and personal papers as well as interviews with over fifty veterans who served in the Air Force in Korea. Tracing their lives from their training to the flight suit culture they developed, the author demonstrates how their unique lifestyle affected their performance in battle and their attitudes toward others, particularly women, in their off-duty activities.

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## Customer Reviews

"Sherwood paints a vivid and realistic portrait of the culture of Korean War pilots, examining the motivations, their methods, and the effect that being a fighter pilot had on their personal lives." -Air Force  
"Sherwood thoroughly documents the superb performance of air force fighter pilots during the Korean War. They met the best pilots China and the Soviet Union had to offer and won. In doing so, the author has competently mined the extensive documentary resources of the Air Force History and Museums Program and made constructive use of memoirs and interviews." -Journal of

American History • Sherwood provides a definitive account of Air Force pilots, their training, operations and battles, in the Korean War. • -Virginia Pilot "An extraordinary synthesis of social and military history which throws new light on the story of the air combat in Korea." • -Ronald H. Spector, author of After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam

The United States Air Force fought as a truly independent service for the first time during the Korean War. As a result, fighter pilots reigned supreme. In Korea, American air power was challenged by one of the most advanced fighter of the time-- the Soviet MiG-15--and ruled the skies in many celebrated aerial battles. In addition, however, they destroyed virtually every major town and city in North Korea, demolished its entire crop irrigation system, and killed close to one million civilians. Korea, then, is the perfect laboratory for studying the culture of fighter pilots, a culture based on self-confidence and risk-taking, one which has promoted what author John Sherwood calls "flight suit attitude." In *Officers in Flight Suits*, Sherwood explores the flight suit officer's life, drawing on memoirs, diaries, letters, novels, unit records, and personal papers as well as interviews with over fifty veterans who served in the Air Force in Korea. From their training to dramatic encounters during battle, from their socio-economic backgrounds to the flight suit culture they developed, Sherwood investigates every dimension of these pilots' lives. The book provides an illuminating portrait of fighter pilot culture, demonstrating how this culture affected their performance in battle and their attitudes toward others, particularly women, in their off-duty activities. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

It was not what i thought it was going to be but good.

In general, it's very good.

Great insight into the origins of our pilots and how officers in the Air Force differ from other services.....I recommend.....

My Son In Law is in The Air Force Reserve and recommended it, and I really enjoyed this book. Too bad it did not have a hundred more pages.

The U.S. Air Force is the newest branch of the military and was formed in 1947 from the Army Air Force (AAF) which distinguished itself during WWII. The demand for pilots in WWII caused the AAF

to seek out candidates from non-traditional sources outside of the military academies and ROTC programs, with many of its pilots and officers moving up from the enlisted ranks. This was the case for my father's first cousin, for example, who went into pilot training right out of high school and ended up as a P-51 pilot in WWII. So right from the beginning the emphasis in this new and evolving organization was flying skills over links to military academies and other traditional values. As indicated by the title, these men were defined by the flight suits they wore in their cockpits rather than the traditional military uniform. Thus, when the U.S. Air Force (USAF) broke off from the Army in 1947, it already had a different ethos from its earth-bound predecessor due to the nature of the WWII AAF. In Korea, with the advent of the jet fighter, especially as epitomized by the F-86 Sabre, the Air Force and its pilot-officers proved that a more informal attitude or background is compatible with military capability and results. The author also describes aspects of the evolving AAF and USAF that reflect the bureaucratic conundrums and logical contradictions that inevitably afflict large organizations, including the military. Of particular interest to me is the problem of Fear of Flying (FOF) among both cadets and active service military pilots. One school of thought within the WWII AAF ascribed FOF to "unresolved oedipal conflict"--an idea clearly associated with Freudian psychology. Other higher ups in the Air Force, such as General Curtis Lemay, ascribed such fears to simple cowardice or lack of patriotism to be dealt with by public shaming and harsh punishments. Of course, the possibility of being killed while flying in wartime could hardly be considered an absurd delusion! This problem reminds me of the psychologically twisted world of WWII bomber pilots captured in Joseph Heller's brilliant novel *Catch-22*. The world of the fighter-bomber pilot is also contrasted with that of the fighter-interceptor pilot. The job of fighter-bomber pilot is seen to be a much more dangerous one, particularly due to the dangers of ground fire and flak. The fighter-bomber pilots were also flying older and less reliable planes, the straight-winged P-80 and P-84 instead of the new F-86 fighter. The fighter-bomber pilots also enjoyed less status and glamor than that of fighter-interceptor pilots, who could with five Mig kills aspire to Ace, a designation that did not exist for fighter-bomber pilots. The fighter-bomber mission was also more troubling from a psychological standpoint, due to the horror of ground support and strategic bombing missions that often involved dropping napalm on seemingly helpless ground troops and even civilians, rather than the "clean kill" of aerial combat. The author often illustrates his points by referring to the excellent novel written by F-86 pilot James Salter: *The Hunters* (Penguin Modern Classics).

In "Officers in Flight Suits" John Darrell Sherwood describes the social environment of the United States Air Force during the Korean War. Using interviews with twelve airmen who were

representative of the Air Force at the time, Sherwood documents his comparative analysis of their experiences to draw conclusions about society as a whole. The author tries to explain the "Flight Suit" mentality - the mind-set of the alpha male in search of the next thrill. . By the end of the book, he actually laments at the loss of this mind-set in the Air Force of today. The book starts off strong by providing brief biographies of twelve airmen, such as "Robbie" Risner (later a POW during the Vietnam War) and Earl Brown, a black man who retired as a three-star general. Using material from personal interviews, Sherwood breaks down various topics such as "MiG Sweeps", life at the bases in Korea, and R&R trips to Japan. After briefly covering these topics, he concludes the book by revisiting where each of the twelve officers ended up. For readers looking for a description of aerial combat, I would recommend Fehrenbach's "This Kind of War". If you are looking for a book documenting the social history of the 1950's, this one's for you.

When the Korean War began in the summer of 1950, the United States Air Force was the youngest branch of the American military, having been created as a service coequal to the Army and Navy less than three years earlier. Although the operational history of the USAF and the experience of many of its officers stretched back into the time when it was a branch of the Army known as the United States Army Air Force, the USAF hadn't yet made its mark as a separate service. The Korean War came at a propitious time, giving the USAF a vehicle in which to shape itself as an institution. The fighter pilots who fought in the Korean War would become the leaders of the new Air Force. Their attitudes toward flying and toward the military in general would come to shape Air Force thinking over the next several decades. In this book John Sherwood has provided the reader with a close look at the pilots who flew fighters during the Korean War--pilots who, by their skills and attitudes, would establish a style for those who followed. This style is defined by the author as "flight suit attitude." He writes: Flight suit attitude ... was a sense of self-confidence and pride that verged on arrogance ... the aircraft of preference was the high-performance, single-seat fighter ... This culture placed a premium on cockiness and informality. A flight suit officer spent more time in a flight suit than in a uniform. In his world, status was based upon flying ability, not degrees, rank, or "officer" skills (p. 6). Where did this flight suit attitude develop? The author begins by examining the backgrounds of Air Force fighter pilots in this fledgling branch of the United States' military services. In a chapter entitled "An Absence of Ring-Knockers" he looks to a lower percentage of college-educated officers in the Air Force than in the Army or Navy, and particularly to the absence of academy graduates, as a contributing factor to a flight suit attitude. Success in this early Air Force was not based on a fraternity of academy graduates, indoctrinated in a set of shared military values;

success was based, rather, on the ability to fly well and on the opportunity to participate in combat in Korea. The author presses home his point by looking at the backgrounds of eleven pilots who flew in Korea, perhaps the best known of whom are Robinson Risner and Earl Brown. Only one pilot whose experiences are described in this book came into the Air Force from West Point; many came from relatively humble backgrounds. Their reminiscences of life in training and combat are spread throughout the book, giving it a personal, anecdotal character. Pilot training is another factor that the author considers. In a chapter entitled "Stick and Rudder University," Sherwood examines the training given to Air Force pilots in the late 1940s and early 1950s and its contributions to the flight suit attitude. He notes that the majority of Air Force officers during the Korean War were pilots. Indeed, two-thirds of Air Force officers received their commission after completing the Aviation Cadet program, the emphasis of which was on flying skills. "Ancestry, education, and prior military training or military academy experience had very little to do with one's status in the Air Force ..." (p. 39). The primary concern was how well one could fly an airplane. The result for the Air Force was a more casual junior officer than the usual Army lieutenant or Navy ensign. In his consideration of the air war over Korea for fighter pilots, the author looks separately at the experiences of those who flew fighter- interceptors and those who flew fighter-bombers. The former group garnered much of the glory. The air combat of F-86 against MiG is the image which springs to mind when one thinks of the Air Force experience in Korea. This image has been reinforced in the public mind through literature and movies. It is maintained within the Air Force as well by such devices as art on the walls of the Pentagon or a Korean War vintage F-86 on a pedestal at the front gate of Nellis AFB. These F-86/MiG engagements were the very essence of the continuing Air Force image of a fighter pilot. The experiences of the fighter-bomber pilots in Korea were of another sort. Flying somewhat lower-performance aircraft than the F-86, such as the F-80 or F-84, the pilots in fighter-bombers faced a more hazardous day-to-day life from ground fire. Sherwood notes that " ... only 147 Air Force planes were lost in air-to-air combat; by comparison, over 816 planes were shot down by ground fire" (pp 98-99). These pilots were often given less status than the F-86 pilots, who sometimes referred to them derogatorily as "straight wings" in officer clubs. The stress of the hazardous flying also led to a higher incidence of mental illness among fighter-bomber pilots. This dual nature of the fighter pilots' experiences lends an interesting element to the book. The pilots who flew fighter-bombers had no less of a flight suit attitude for their experiences, however. Throughout this book one also finds ample evidence of the social life of pilots during the Korean War. In a chapter entitled "Thunderboxes and Sabre Dancers" Sherwood looks at such elements of time spent away from the cockpit as bases, the O clubs and day rooms, the R & R opportunities in

Japan, and even at female companionship of several very different types. But all seem very secondary to the experiences of flying fighters. Even the rustic conditions at Korean air bases served to remind the pilots that their primary reason for being in Korea was to fly fighter aircraft. Sherwood concludes his book with a look at the careers of the eleven pilots after the Korean War. All but one remained in the Air Force. Most discovered that the flight suit attitude they embraced early in their flying careers did not always serve them well in the developing bureaucracy of the United States Air Force. But most maintained this attitude anyhow, even when a promotion might be lost as a result. Almost inevitably, with few exceptions, they didn't rise above the rank of colonel. It is at that stage of one's career, as one of the pilots noted, where "MiGs start to matter less and power politics take over" (p. 163). But the author concludes that the presence of the pilots who flew fighters in the Korean War contributed much to the shaping of the Air Force. Interestingly, the obituary of a former Korean War era fighter pilot appeared briefly in recent news, the report neatly reinforcing some of the concepts in Sherwood's book. U.S. News & World Report noted the passing at the age of 70 of one John Boyd, Colonel, USAF, retired. A USAF fighter pilot in Korea and, later, an instructor pilot, Boyd's military influence ranged from the development of doctrines of air combat through the design of planes to his service in the Pentagon, where he and members of a so-called "Fighter Mafia" apparently helped prevail upon the Air Force to build the F-16 and A-10. His influence after his retirement extended to Congress and to people like Dick Cheney, who listened to and learned from Boyd's ideas on historical trends in military success presented in briefings. Boyd seems the epitome of an officer in a flight suit, the type of pilot Sherwood describes so well. John Sherwood has written an excellent book, combining the military history of USAF fighter operations in the Korean War with the social context of the pilots who flew the fighters. He has contributed much towards a better understanding of the developmental years of the United States Air Force. This book is well worth the reading for anyone with an interest in the Korean War, in the United States Air Force, or in those elusive qualities of character on which larger organizations turn.

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