

'Into Unknown Skies' Review: How the U.S. Achieved Liftoff; America was the birthplace of flight, but its aviation industry lagged after World War I. A 1924 race helped restore the country to glory.

Julia Flynn Siler

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FULL TEXT

One of my earliest childhood memories is of soaring over the cornfields of northern Illinois in a single-engine Cessna piloted by my father. Fumes permeated the plane's small cabin; a metallic thrum lulled me to sleep. Decades later, my dad flew around the world in stages over several years in a twin-engine Beechcraft, writing an account of his journey for our family.

A lifelong aerophile, I relished David Randall's "Into Unknown Skies: An Unlikely Team, a Daring Race, and the First Flight Around the World," a thrilling account about the first air race to circle the globe. The competition pitted the best aviators in the world against one another over 175 days in 1924, during a time when the U.S. was a backwater for airplane design.

Mr. Randall is a journalist and nonfiction author whose previous books include "Dreamland: Adventures in the Strange Science of Sleep" (2012) and "Black Death at the Golden Gate: The Race to Save America From the Bubonic Plague" (2019). "Into Unknown Skies" examines a race intended to draw attention to the potential of flight at a "time when most aircraft were used to deliver the mail or spray crops." He makes a convincing case that public interest in the race helped jump-start the growth of the American aviation industry.

The impetus for an American team to compete came from a military hero named Billy Mitchell, the officer in charge of the Army's aviation section during World War I. Mitchell's valor piloting his personal airplane in France during the Battle of Saint-Mihiel earned him the Distinguished Service Cross. After the armistice, he "became the new face of American aviation," Mr. Randall writes, yet within three days of the peace agreement the U.S. canceled more than \$100 million in aircraft contracts. What had been a booming industry rapidly shriveled.

Exiled some 2,500 miles away from the mainland at an Army base in Hawaii, Mitchell was furious at the decision—and shaken by the news that more than 2,300 U.S.-owned airplanes had been burned following the war. Although the U.S. had been the birthplace of flight, Mitchell, Mr. Randall writes, believed America had "turned its back on its most revolutionary invention" and remained stuck in a past where sea power and land forces mattered more. He predicted that soon "the air will prevail over the water" and argued that air power would make navies "almost useless." He warned of a Japanese air attack on the American base at Pearl Harbor—18 years before it happened.

When England announced in 1924 that a team of its pilots would attempt to fly around the world, France, Portugal, Italy and Argentina soon joined the competition in what would become a freeform endeavor: no international organization putting on the race, no set boundaries for a starting point or finish line. Mitchell saw his chance. He pushed for an American squadron made up of four planes, each with a pilot and a mechanic. He quietly sent his U.S. Air Service lieutenants on scouting missions to determine the best route—not an easy task, considering no one had ever flown across the Pacific. He envisioned adding stops along the way, where a military cargo ship would wait for the team with food, fuel and shelter.

The American squadron was commanded by Lowell Smith, a preacher's son with blue eyes and a "soft chin that

made him look timid." Yet his looks belied his quiet forcefulness and drive. That became evident when he and his mechanic, Leslie Arnold, were forced to land in an unnamed lagoon in French Indochina. (All the planes were equipped with pontoons for water landings.) To rescue them, a fellow American team marched through the jungle at night—wary of the tigers that prowled the area in what is now Vietnam—while the stranded pair huddled in their damaged plane, occasionally hearing the "plunk of a crocodile slithering into the water below them." After 72 hours, Smith and Arnold were rescued—and their plane eventually repaired. The pair rejoined the race.

Perhaps the most vivid character in Mr. Randall's book is Arnold, a former actor and traveling salesman from Connecticut who used his time off aircraft duties during the trip to pursue libertine tours of Asia and elsewhere. As the mechanic to the serious and disciplined pilot Smith, Arnold sought to "inhale all that the Earth had to offer." He is the unlikely hero of the final leg of the race—saving himself and Smith from death after their main gasoline pump failed during an open-water flight to Newfoundland and Labrador.

Packed crowds awaited the returning American heroes, whose challenges and record-breaking flight had been reported in newspapers around the world. The squadron made stops across the country, including at Bolling Field in Washington, D.C., where they were greeted by President Calvin Coolidge and Billy Mitchell—"the man who had envisioned the world flight in a Hail Mary attempt to save American aviation." By the time the squadron reached Los Angeles, an estimated crowd of between 100,000 and 250,000 people crammed onto a field to celebrate them. By the time they finished their race at Sand Point Field in Seattle, they had flown a total of 26,345 miles in 363 hours and 7 minutes. They had traveled through ice fields in the Arctic Circle and deserts in Iraq and bested the other teams, which suffered engine failures and other mishaps. "Other men will fly around the earth," one admiral said, "but never again will anybody fly around it for the first time."

Commercial air travel today is so ubiquitous that it's easy to forget its rocky takeoff. With deep research and suspenseful storytelling, Mr. Randall reminds us that America's pre-eminence in the aviation industry was never assured and that it took a race of unlikely heroes to bring the dream of world flight to the public imagination.

Ms. Siler is a former London-based staff writer for The Wall Street Journal and the author of three nonfiction books.

Credit: By Julia Flynn Siler

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