



WHY FLYERS FLEW

Analyzing “The Flight to Flanders” poem

Recommended Grade Levels: 6-8

Course/Content Area: U.S. History; Language Arts

Authored by: National World War I Museum and Memorial

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- What was life like as an aviator in WWI?
- Why did flyers agree to take on such a dangerous job in the war?
- Did the flyers’ reputation of romance and heroism match the reality of their job?
- How does one balance duty to their nation with fear for their own safety?

SUMMARY: The life expectancy of a WWI aviator averaged six weeks. Despite the risk to their personal safety, hundreds of men felt honored to battle enemies in the sky and challenged themselves to become aces. Around the world, aviators had a reputation as outstanding heroes; they became celebrities revered by the public. But what was life as an aviator really like? As students review primary sources and analyze a poem written by a Royal Flying Corps pilot they'll decide if flying was as glamorous as the media portrayed it to be.

TIME NEEDED: One 30-minute class periods.

OBJECTIVES: *Students will be able to:*
Explain responsibilities of a WWI aviator.
Define terms related to WWI aviation.
Assess the dangers of being a WWI fighter pilot.
Compare the media's perception of flyers' jobs with a flyer's perception of his job.
Reflect on their own ideas of patriotic duty, bravery and heroism.

INTERDISCIPLINARY: Social Studies, Communication Arts

THEMES & CONNECTIONS: This lesson works best when included in a broader study of the First World War. This should include the different nations involved in the war and the geography of the western front.

MATERIALS NEEDED: Projection or printouts of Wills cigarette cards.
"The Flight to Flanders" worksheets for all students – Appendix B

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Air War

No other dimension of the war saw such rapid technological advances as air combat. The airplane, invented by Americans Orville and Wilbur Wright in 1903, was still a novelty when fighting began. Both sides first used planes for reconnaissance, then began arming them. Pilots fired at each other, dropped bombs, and strafed the trenches. Eventually, machine guns mounted on planes were synchronized to shoot through the propellers. Inventors experimented with two and three wings, swiveling mounts for a second machine gunner, and radio-telegraph communication. Both sides began targeting civilians from the air. German bombing killed about 3,000 British civilians, truly moving the battlefield to the home front.

Knights of the Air

For soldiers in the trenches, air combat was a romantic part of the war. Flyers were regarded as aerial knights who respected each other even as they fought. Skill, bravery, and luck, not just numbers and machines, could determine victory. Everyone knew the names of the “aces” – pilots who had shot down five or more enemy planes. They were celebrated as national heroes, and their exploits became legendary. Germany’s Manfred von Richthofen, “the Red Baron,” was the leading ace with 80 victories against Allied aircraft.

- “Air War” Museum Exhibit (Kansas City, MO: National WWI Museum and Memorial).

LESSON

Pre-Assessment:

- Students will take a quick multiple-choice quiz – See Appendix A.
- Save responses; these will be compared against post-assessment results to measure growth.

Directions:

1. Class discussion:
 - Discuss the idea of bravery and heroism. Ask students to define these ideas and offer examples of jobs they believe fit those definitions. If military service does not come up organically, ask the class if they believe it fits the definitions they provided.
 - Ask students if they have any family or close friends that have fought in a war/served overseas. Discuss what those people did and what they had to give up in order to serve.
 - Ask students if they were a part of the military what role they would like to serve and why.
2. Explain that in WWI new jobs were created according to technological advances. Tell them they'll learn about airplanes and aviators and their role in WWI. Share the Background Information provided with the class.
3. Inform students that flyers were considered special heroes and Aces were considered special celebrities. Display the Royal Flying Corps images (Appendix B) with the class (projection is recommended, but printed sheets will also work.)

Discussion:

- What is this artifact? (*a collectible card included in cigarette packages*) Does it make students think of anything that is popular today? (*baseball cards*) Who would have received it? (*primarily young men smoked cigarettes at this time*) What was its purpose? (*it was a propaganda device designed to increase the public's interest in the war and to give civilians special troops to cheer on*)

- What is the impression given about Corps members?
 - What adjectives and phrases indicate that flyers are special and heroic?
 - After reviewing the card does the class believe the job of a WWI flyer is glamorous?
 - Do students believe that flyers viewed themselves the same way they were portrayed on the cigarette cards?
4. Distribute student poetry worksheets. (Appendix C)
 5. Read through the first stanza together. Ask students if they see any phrases that indicate the difficulties of being a WWI aviator.
 6. Ask students to read through the poem once before doing anything.
 7. After a first read, students should highlight or circle any phrases they feel indicate a hardship experienced by the pilot.
 8. Class discussion:
 - What hardships were experienced?
 - How did Huteson feel about his experiences?
 - Are you surprised? How did students feel as readers?
 - How would students feel placed in the same situation? Have any of their ideas about military jobs they'd like to try changed?
 - Have any ideas about the glamour and romanticism of being a WWI Ace changed?

Post-Assessment:

Give students the same multiple-choice quiz given as a pre-assessment. Use the scores to determine student growth resulting from the lesson.

Modifications/Accommodations:

To aid students that struggle with reading have the class work with partners as they read "The Call of Duty" poem.

Extension activity: Students write a brief essay about their feelings of patriotic responsibility and its complexity.

APPENDIX A:

Pre/Post-Assessment

1. Airplanes were commonly used in wars prior to WWI.
 - a. True
 - b. False

2. In order to become a WWI flying Ace, an aviator had to have taken down _____ enemy aircraft.
 - a. 10
 - b. 20
 - c. 8
 - d. 5

3. Where might the public be exposed to propaganda asking them to support the war?
 - a. On public posters
 - b. At the movies
 - c. In product advertising
 - d. All of the above

4. Aviators'/Flyers' primary job was to shoot down enemy planes.
 - a. True
 - b. False

5. On the western front, where did most aviators fly?
 - a. Germany
 - b. Spain
 - c. France
 - d. Ireland

Quiz Key:

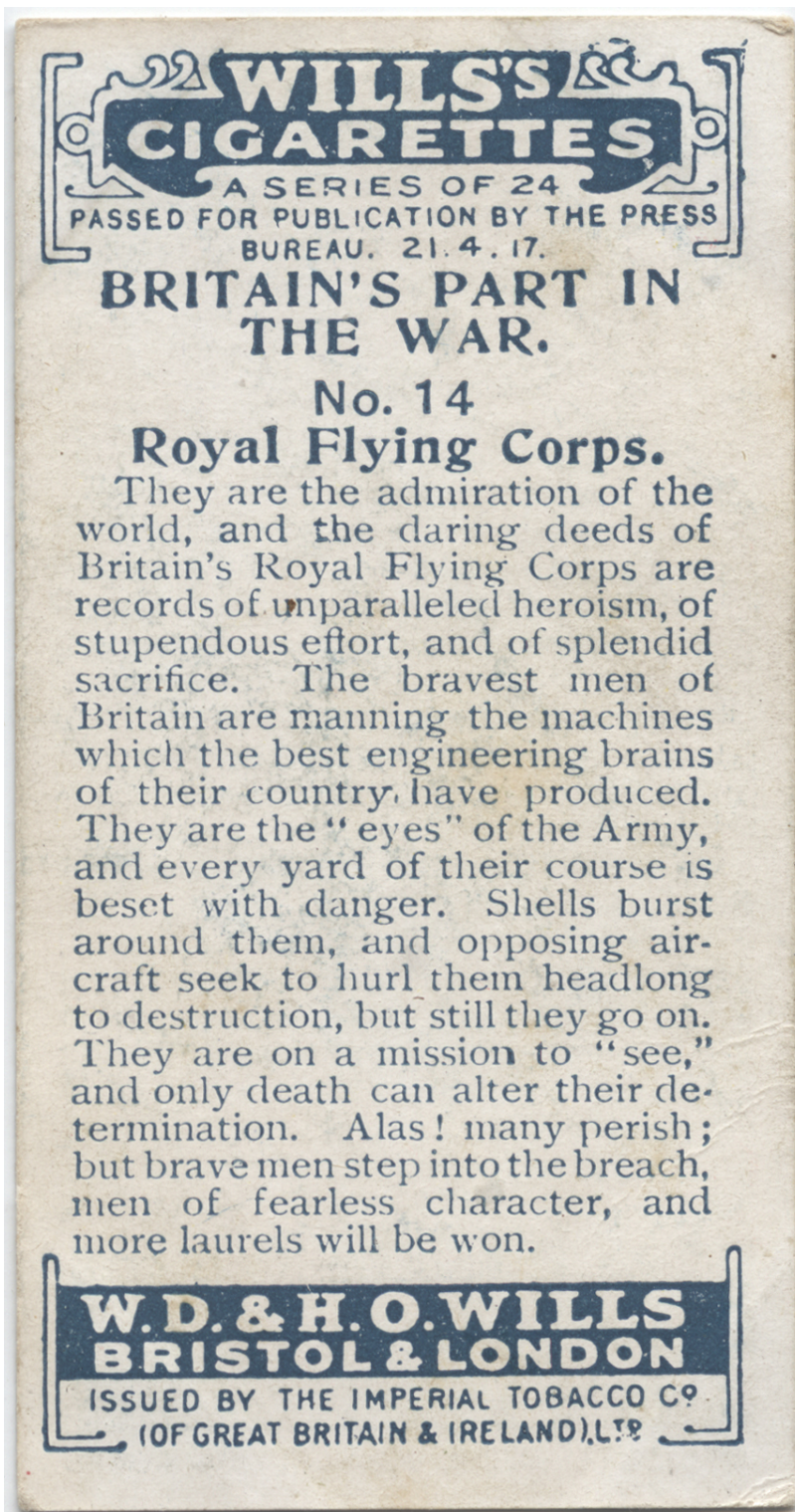
1. B – False. Having been invented in 1903, WWI was the first war to feature airplanes as a weapon.
2. D – Aviators had to take down five enemy aircraft to be considered an ace. “Aircraft” did not mean solely airplanes; balloons and other flying machines were included in the definition. Crashes needed to be verified by someone who observed the shot.
3. D – Propaganda could be found just about everywhere during WWI. Posters were most prevalent, but things like popular music, movies, Four Minute Men speeches, reading material and product advertising also spread messages about the war.
4. B - False. The original use of airplanes in WWI was for reconnaissance.
5. C – The bulk of fighting on the western front took place in France.

APPENDIX B:

Wills Cigarette Card



“Britain’s Part in the War: Royal Flying Corps, Wills Cigarette card – front, 2014.92.9” (Kansas City, MO: National WWI Museum and Memorial).



"Britain's Part in the War: Royal Flying Corps, Wills Cigarette card – back, 2014.92.9" (Kansas City, MO: National WWI Museum and Memorial).

APPENDIX C:

“Flight to Flanders” Poem Analysis

This poem, by British pilot Lt. Lessel Hutcehon of the Royal Flying Corps (later Royal Air Force), fuses the notion of sacrifice with responsibility. Taken from his own experiences, he details many of the hardships faced by pilots. Highlight and make notes as you read to analyze the mixture of heroism and fear the poet uses to describe both the known and unknown dangers ahead. Use the glossary provided to define the bolded terms used in the poem.

Use your analysis of the poem to answer the following questions. Write your ideas below.

- Knowing that the life expectancy of a World War One airman was roughly six weeks, what do you think made some men volunteer to be flyers?
- What is patriotic responsibility?
- Does the meaning of patriotic duty change depending upon your personal feelings about war?
- Is the defense of an ideal, such as democracy or empire, worth the ultimate sacrifice of one’s life?
- Does being a flyer sound as exciting and glamorous as it was made out to be to those back home?

The Flight to Flanders

by Lessel Hutcheon

Does he know the road to **Flanders**, does he know the **criss-cross tracks**

With the row of sturdy **hangars** at the end?

Does he know that shady corner where, the job done, we relax

To the music of the engines round the bend?

It is here that he is coming with his gun and battle 'plane

To the little **aerodrome** at - well, *you* know!

To a wooden hut abutting on a quiet country lane,

For he's ordered overseas and he must go.

Has he seen those leagues of **trenches**, the traverses steep and stark,

High over which the British pilots ride?

Does he know the fear of flying miles to east-ward of his mark

When his only map has vanished over-side?

It is there that he is going, and it takes a deal of doing,

There are many things he really ought to know;

And there isn't time to **swot 'em** if a **Fokker** he's pursuing,

For he's ordered overseas and he must go.

Does he know that ruined town, that old --- of renown?

Has he heard the **crack of Archie** bursting near?

Has he known that ghastly moment when your engine lets you down?

Has he ever had that feeling known as fear?

It's to Flanders he is going with a brand-new aeroplane

To take the place of one that's dropped below,

To **fly and fight and photo** mid the storms of wind and rain,

For he's ordered overseas and he must go.

Then the hangar door flies open and the engine starts its roar,
And the pilot gives the signal with his hand;
As he rises over England he looks back upon the shore,
For the Lord alone knows where he's going to land.
Now the plane begins to gather speed, completing lap on lap,
Till, after diving down and skimming low,
They're off to shattered Flanders, by the compass and the map -
They were ordered overseas and had to go.

Glossary

Flanders – central battle site in Northern France; much of WWI's action occurred here

criss-cross tracks – description of landing strips at aerodomes

hangars – storage houses for aeroplanes

aerodome – makeshift airports for WWI aviators

trenches – massive ditches where soldiers fought; these stretched all across Northern France during WWI

swot 'em – fire at

Fokker – German plane

crack of Archie – anti-aircraft artillery used to bring planes down

fly and fight and photo – the requirements of an aviator; he was to fly, fight enemy pilots, bomb the enemy from the sky, and take aerial photos of enemy activity

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Hutcheon, Lessel. "Flight to Flanders." In *The Muse in Arms*. Frederick A. Stokes Co. "Book, 2010.130.102" (Kansas City, MO: National WWI Museum and Memorial).