

Reaper's Lament: Aviation Stories by Pilots Who Should Be Dead

Steven Lane Smith

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Reaper's Lament is a harrowing account of pilots and the dangers they've battled.

Steven Lane Smith's *Reaper's Lament* compiles hair-raising, death-defying stories from aviation's history—most from the perspectives of lucky pilots.

Rather than forwarding a typical, linear history, the book features standalone chapters about near misses in the sky, dog fights, aerial warfare with the weather, and sundry other aviation happenings. It anthropomorphizes the Grim Reaper as a jealous collector of dead pilots and details all that can go wrong up in the air, celebrating the brave captains and crew members who managed to make it out alive.

Some chapters are stronger than others. The black humor and caustic cynicism of "Borkum," whose Texan author remains anonymous, makes it by far the most entertaining story. Also unlike other entries, it's character-driven. Many entries concentrate on mechanical rundowns of piloting, as with "Alaska," which focuses on the problems associated with flying in dangerous conditions.

Because of the book's major focus on the Vietnam War, many of the contributing and profiled pilots are former American flyboys who spent the 1960s and 1970s dodging North Vietnamese bullets and locals ("natives in the region below them were known for skinning captured airmen alive!", one says). Often, such chapters are taken from other memoirs, some published while the war was still raging. It is disjuncting to have original work lumped together with work that is sometimes five decades old.

The Grim Reaper character is referenced in almost every chapter, and is a forced trope that unnaturally ties the disparate content together. Different contributors write with different levels of skill. Robert "Bob" Shumaker and the anonymous author of "Borkum" both recount their tales with literary flourishes and strong pacing. Other chapters are more prosaic, and too many focus more on the mechanics of flying than on actual terror in the sky. Details about wind shear, altitude, takeoff, and descent sap the pathos out of otherwise thrilling and frightening stories.

The conclusion stops short of tying the pieces together, and the Grim Reaper is not mentioned at all; the trope fades away as the book transitions from first person accounts of flying into broad overviews of famous, and famously death-defying, aviators. These are excellent pages for their history angles, although as a review of the lives of a select few combat aces, their broadness avoids active portrayals of their heroics. Encyclopedic descriptions of bombers, kill totals, and their last days on Earth are anticlimactic.

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BENJAMIN WELTON (May 14, 2019)

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