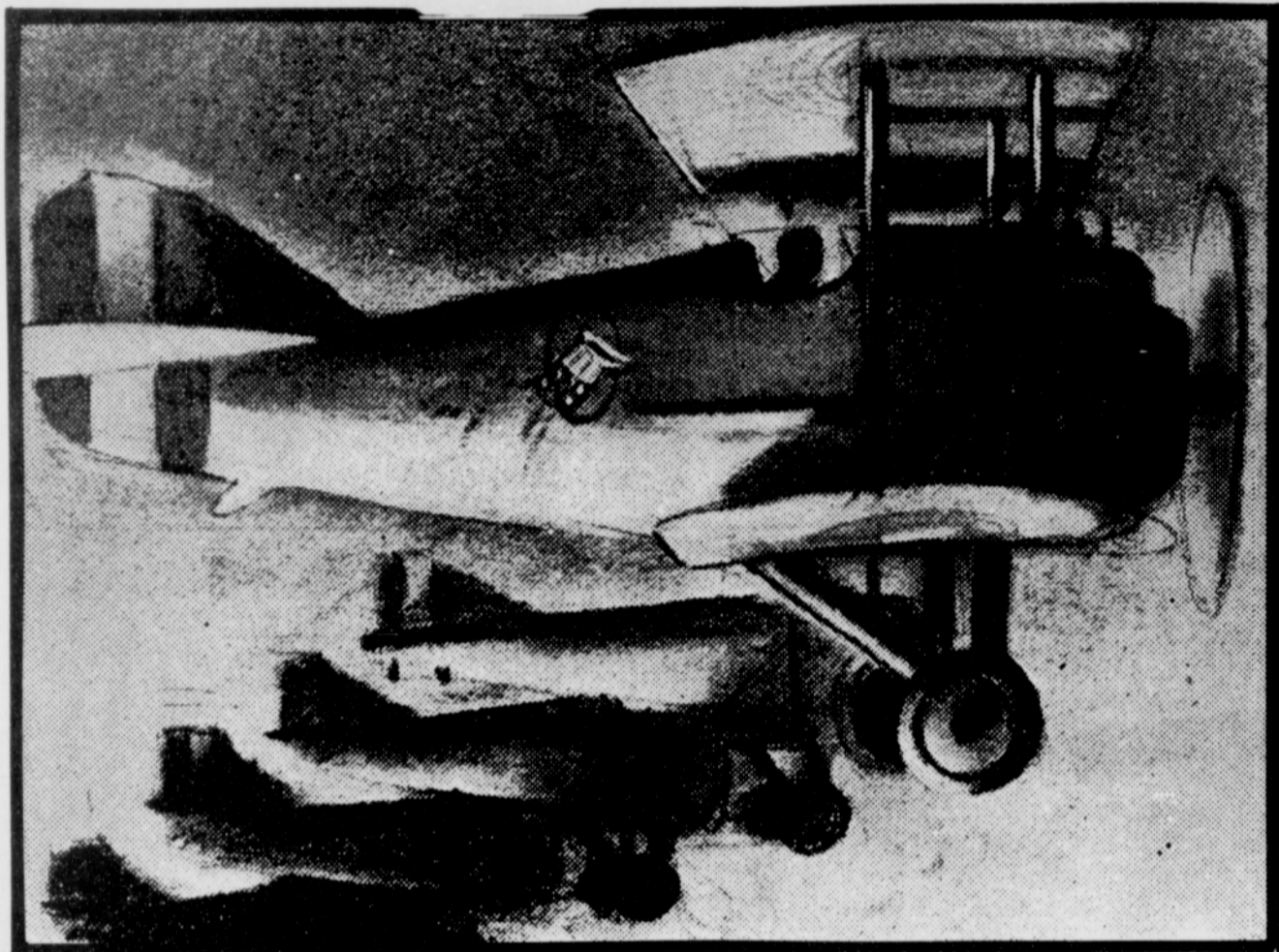


30 SECONDS OVER ARMAGEDDON



FROM THE 1943 WALT DISNEY ANIMATION OF ALEXANDER DE SEVERSKY'S "VICTORY THROUGH AIRPOWER"

BY MICHAEL McCUSKER

"We shan't have to leave our fortress, now, when we want to blow up civilization."

~MARK TWAIN

"Planes were invented by the Wright Brothers some years ago and when not engaged in killing people are wont to take them from one place to another."

~I. A. R. WYLIE

Without the presence of insects or birds humanity might not have thought of flying through the air, though perhaps even without these the simple act of falling to the ground could well have been inspiration for flight.

The first attempts to swim through the sky imitated birds. Blotchy old films of some of these tries — men jumping from cliffs flapping artificial wings attached to their arms or backs; strange homemade contraptions that usually crashed — seem funny now, but recorded real tragedy in visually eloquent pain (sometimes death) and failed or misapplied concepts of aerodynamics.

By the time Wilbur and Orville Wright successfully flew the first engine powered airplane 100 years ago this month, the striving to attain free flight above the earth had developed balloons and gliders. Practical gas engines designed by Benz and Daimler provided the motive breakthrough. At Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, December 17, 1903, the Wright Brothers flew the world's first true airplane, which they named simply *Flyer*. Orville Wright piloted the motorized glider a few feet over sand dunes on a windswept beach and raised human beings on wings of their own.

Those wings have developed more rapidly in the past century than any other human invention. Supersonic jets, space rockets and intercontinental nuclear missiles are far removed from the generation of flying machines spawned by the Wright Brothers' success. Within only a few years warplanes were hurtling into the skies. Powered flight developed in many

directions but it has been as an agent of warfare that has made the past century the bloodiest battleground in history. The bomber in particular has accounted for the slaughter of more victims than a hundred-fold of previous eras.

Francesco Lana de Terzi wrote in 1670 his visions of fleets of aerial machines that could fly over cities and drop vast numbers of missiles down upon defenseless citizens below. On October 23, 1911, the first bombs were dropped from such machines over Tripoli during the Italo-Turkish war. The Turks protested the war crime of a hospital bombed.

Aerial bombardment developed in World War 1 from reconnaissance flying; if an enemy could be seen he might as well be bombed. Strategic bombing, or the psychological destruction of civilian fortitude, came afterward, first with the great German zeppelin raids on London. For most of the war the belligerents concentrated primarily on tactical bombing, which meant of each other's soldiers.

The first long-range heavy bomber raids were made by the French in 1915 against German cities. Later that year London suffered its first Zeppelin raids, which were followed by attacks by large bomber formations when Britain's air defenses outmatched the huge dirigibles. In turn, British bombers retaliated against Germany. The Italians made the only truly strategic raids during World War 1, massing large numbers of aircraft to attack a single target, such as the Austro-Hungarian city of Pola on October 22, 1918, the last major air raid of the war. The other warring nations haphazardly bombed each other for revenge and to raise morale in their respective homelands.

World War 1 bombers were crude and clumsy, unable to haul big enough bomb loads for real damage. Yet they killed thousands of soldiers and civilians, and more significant to the human psyche, made the very sky that envelopes the earth the most dangerous threat to existence.

War movies and television documentaries have made World War 2 the *sine qua non* of air warfare. Photographs and films of huge formations of bombers flying through anti-aircraft bursts and whirling enemy fighters to drop tons upon tons of explosives on heavily populated cities — de Terzi's vision fulfilled. Europe pounded to rubble. Japan set on fire and nuked by American B-29s. The pre-World War 2 terror bombing of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War prompted Picasso's masterpiece, which portrayed the outcry of ordinary citizens against deliberate and indiscriminate death from the sky.

The two nuclear bombs that ended World War 2 were carried by large human-guided machines. More than half a century later humanity has transferred its awesome arsenal of aerial devastation to primarily technological control, maintaining only a slippery hold on the trigger.

The two World Wars left much of the world in ruins, great cities bombed to rubble. European hegemony passed to two rival superpowers that had been allies and victors against Nazism, the United States and Communist Russia. The result was a half century Cold War and a nuclear arms race between two conflicting and aggressive ideologies, a balance of terror defended by arguments that only nuclear parity would prevent a Third World War.

The U.S. and the USSR spent hundreds of billions of dollars developing their nuclear arsenals, each government posing the threat of the other to continually escalate the race. Each claimed to be defending itself against the other, and the contradictory idea of a "preventive war" — starting a war to prevent a war — was a common rationale for threatening world obliteration. The two superpowers derived their power from increasing their arsenals and making treaties that allowed for more and deadlier weapons.

At the same time that the U.S. and USSR were racing through generations of nuclear weapons both built up their conventional forces and imported weapons, troops and military aircraft to small wars that erupted all over the globe. Each war was a threat of nuclear confrontation, yet simultaneously these wars skirted oblivion by acting as pressure releases against the big blow.

From its supposedly inviolable hemispheric fortress surrounded by oceans the United States exported a highly sophisticated form of terror during the Cold War and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, attacking countries all over the world for one purpose or another, generally from the air with bombs and missiles. It pioneered many of the methods of war from the air and stratosphere and used bombs more than any other nation, especially on cities and small villages of other nations.

With few exceptions (the USSR in Afghanistan; Israel in its wars), the United States has been the major user of bombs since World War 2, which includes nuclear tests. North Korea was blasted and hundreds of thousands of Chinese soldiers napalmed during 1950-53. More than twice the amount of bombs dropped over Europe during World War II were used on California-sized Vietnam in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Civilians in the north made their lives underground underneath incessant American bombing. North Vietnamese city dwellers, like Londoners a quarter century before, evacuated their children to rural areas.

STARDUST

We burst out of our egg into a history infinitely larger than our own, flung out among rocks and stars that hurtle from the center of a cataclysm at speeds greater than light. Our Earth is a mote from that moment of creation, if indeed that is how the universe began, and it continues to be thrown back to God knows where. We might never know but we will exhaust the rest of our history attempting to find out. It is doubtful we will more than scratch a few score of the billion stars in our single galaxy before evolution discards us for something else or we quicken the process by our own perverse ingenuity.

We pursue the exploration of space in much the manner our western European ancestors forced themselves upon the larger world in fierce competition as merchants, seamen and soldiers from separate nations in perpetual conflict. We are a species of insatiable plunderers, though of course we tell ourselves we are not, that we seek only knowledge, but our great hunger is for wealth and for what is useful to us. Unless we experience a mass epiphany overnight, we will most likely behave beyond the ozone the same as our predecessors beyond the oceans. We will pillage planets and hammer space matter until it is functional. We have virtually sucked Earth dry and our vision of the universe is of one huge orchard of riches.

We cover our own single planet like maggots on a peach. Our prospects are the stuff of cheap science fiction: our only hope might be to send seedlings off the home planet so that a few might germinate someplace else, if in all the vast cosmos there is any place else for us.

We repeat the old errors. We leave Earth as relentless exploiters. If it was absurd for Europeans to spread across the Earth's oceans and claim foreign lands for kings and countries never heard of by inhabitants of the far shores, how much more so spacesuited humans to plant flags on barren worlds and say that they belong in perpetuity to a far distant particle of rock indistinguishable if even visible among the lights of space.

We ought to consider the United Nations as a central agency for space exploration. It would avoid wasteful duplication of resources and money consumed by ruthless competition between nations and multinational corporations and make them as well as the bounties of outer space available for the millions of Earthlings who are in need of useful and sustainable work, food, housing, health/medical care and education. If the idea seems outworldly, it might be useful to remember that UN medical teams eradicated smallpox (with a few notable military exceptions).

Efficiency must give way to poetry. No machine or computer can view Earth with the same personal response as a human. Earth is, after all, our neighborhood, our nest. It will not be our technology that saves us but our distinct human perceptions.

The efforts to go off planet seem to have little to do with the rest of day to day humanity, yet our era makes the first baby steps of an adventure that will occupy humanity the rest of its time in the cosmos. We might be the last generations of humanity to be a single planet species. 'One World' history and philosophy will be mere prelude to the immense galactic story that awaits our bumbling erratic first paragraph. An age is superseding an earlier one right under our feet, or more truthfully, over our heads.

And perhaps it might be worth remembering that it is not our divine right to eat the Milky Way.

~MICHAEL McCUSKER

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