

## From Pacifism to Spitfire: John Magee in the RCAF, 1940-1941

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Germany's defeat of France in May-June 1940 deprived Great Britain of a major continental ally, which circumstance continued until 22 June 1941, when Hitler launched his invasion of the Soviet Union. Even so, most military analysts in London and Washington doubted that the USSR could hold against Germany. They reasoned that following the predicted surrender of the Soviets, Berlin would presumably turn to unfinished business: subduing the British Isles. Feelings in America ran high for Britain. Measures short of war and grants of moderate aid won favor on Capitol Hill. The majority view in Washington and the broad public, however, held that the United States should avoid anything like the 1917 Great War intervention. A few thousand Americans, mostly in their late-teens to mid-twenties, nevertheless made their way to Britain to join the fight against Germany. These volunteers enrolled in civilian or armed services, the Royal Navy, for instance, or more often the Royal Air Force (RAF). Other Americans eager for action got to Britain as members of the Canadian forces, most particularly the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF). One such youngster was an aspiring poet, John

Gillespie Magee, Jr., inducted into the RCAF in 1940.<sup>1</sup> The degree to which he has been remembered since his death in December 1941, at age nineteen, stems from composing a sonnet popular with Anglophone aviators, “High Flight.” More urgent from Magee’s standpoint than the poem was his dedication to Britain’s wellbeing, born of personal ties and affection for that country’s cultural traditions. To historians, interest in Magee’s brief life must track to the ambiguous nature of Anglo-U.S. relations in the period before Pearl Harbor, and the turn in popular opinion away from pacifism.

#### Volunteer Aviators

Despite deficits that favored Germany—its 2,700 warplanes versus Britain’s 1,500—the RAF’s Fighter Command checked the Luftwaffe in July-October 1940 (Battle of Britain), thereby denying Germany control of the skies, a prerequisite to Hitler’s planned invasion (*Seelöwe*).<sup>2</sup> At the peak of the air war, as German casualty rates mounted, Churchill famously celebrated the RAF: “Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.”<sup>3</sup> The “few” included eight American volunteers who flew with Fighter Command in 1940.<sup>4</sup> Two were killed, others wounded, as subsequently happened to hundreds of Americans enrolled in the RAF or the RCAF.

Volunteers who joined the RAF enjoyed broad publicity, outstripping attention given those in Britain’s less glamorous army or stodgier navy.<sup>5</sup> Like their comrades in those services, the RAF

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<sup>1</sup> The John G. Magee Family Papers are housed in the Divinity School at Yale University.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Caine, *Eagles of the RAF: The World War II Eagle Squadrons* (Washington: National Defense University Press, 1991), p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Speech in House of Commons, 20 August 1940, Winston S. Churchill (grandson) ed., *Never Give In! the Best of Winston Churchill’s Speeches* (New York: Hyperion, 2003), p. 245.

<sup>4</sup> Alex Kershaw, *The Few: The American “Knights of the Air” Who Risked Everything to Save Great Britain in the Summer of 1940* (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2006), p. 239; Caine, *Eagles of the RAF: The World War II Eagle Squadrons*, pp. 40-43, 90-91.

<sup>5</sup> Lynne Olson, *Citizens of London: The Americans Who Stood with Britain in its Darkest, Finest Hour* (New York: Random House, 2010),

Americans enrolled despite laws that prohibited Americans—on pain of forfeiting citizenship—from enlisting in foreign militaries. The enforcement of such controls did relax over time, as dictated by White House perceptions of the evolving British need and aided by informal recruitment agencies, such as the privately funded Clayton Knight Committee. The prohibitions were never formally repealed, though, and played a part in clouding the tabulation of RAF Americans. The RAF Museum recently posted this explanation on its website: “It is impossible to say exactly, as most Americans pretended to be Canadians to join up, but hundreds if not thousands of US citizens served with the Royal Air Force or Royal Canadian Air Force.”<sup>6</sup>

The RAF Yanks were a more disparate lot than those who served during the Great War in the fabled La Fayette Escadrille. Social Register enrollees were fewer, with allowance for such men as William Fiske III, Olympics gold medalist (bobsledding in 1928 and 1932). Fair-haired boy of a banking magnate, Chicago-born Fiske—who posed as a Canadian to acquire an RAF commission—flew a Hurricane in the Battle of Britain. He died from wounds in August 1940, aged twenty-nine. More typical types sprang from the white middle class. Contra Fiske, a Cambridge University graduate married to an English aristocrat (Rose Bingham, Countess of Warwick), they were younger, single at the time of air force induction, and lacked college credentials. Examples included Minnesota farm boy Arthur Donahue, who flew a Spitfire in the Battle of Britain, where he survived (but died in action near Singapore in September 1942). Robert Raymond, who piloted a Lancaster bomber, had worked in his father’s furniture shop in Kansas City, Missouri and had originally adhered to the isolationist creed.<sup>7</sup> The 244 men who flew in the three RAF Eagle Squadrons, hyped fighter units composed of Americans, were mostly of blue-collar background,

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pp. 136-137.

<sup>6</sup> rafmuseum.org.uk/research/online-exhibitions/americans-in-the-royal-air-force/. Regarding twenty-two U.S. volunteers in the Royal Navy, see iwm.org.uk/memorials/item/memorial/80551.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Raymond, *A Yank in Bomber Command* (Pacifica: Pacifica Press, 1998), p. 129.

alloyed by part-time college students and a smattering of teachers, accountants, and shopkeepers.<sup>8</sup>

The RAF Yanks were remunerated at levels commensurate with their British comrades. The rate was inferior to that paid to aviators in the U.S. Army and Navy, not to mention the still better compensation for pilots in Claire Chennault's China outfit, the Flying Tigers. Many men who volunteered for Britain had in earlier days tried to pursue careers in U.S. military aviation, but were unsuccessful. Reasons for failure included deficient aptitude for navy or army life, imperfect eyesight, inability to withstand the physical demands of flying, and bewilderment with its technical aspects.

In sum, many volunteers had little or no prior flying experience and were judged unfit for American service. All perforce settled for modest salaries while tempting fate by resorting to unlawful ruse whenever they made themselves available to RAF and RCAF recruiters. Still, volunteers kept coming, seldom with regret, though most after Pearl Harbor sought transfer to a U.S. air service. They, in turn, were gladly received by London, resigned to replenishing thinning RAF ranks with whoever was available. On this point, Raymond had no illusion, when in November 1940 he presented himself in London for RAF enlistment: "I didn't think I could be a pilot, but I was lucky. Britain was scraping the bottom of the manpower barrel, so if you had two feet, two arms, two eyes, et al, you got in."<sup>9</sup> London publicists meanwhile, to impress opinion in America about Britain, the war, and the ultimate logic of U.S. intervention, rehearsed lines on winsome Yanks aiding the "mother country."

Poles, Czechs, Frenchmen, and Belgians, all hoping to contribute to their countries' liberation, figured prominently in the RAF. In contrast, the purposes of pre-Pearl Harbor U.S. airmen, their country neither at war with Germany nor occupied, were decidedly mixed. Some volunteers felt that the British and Allies were, effectively, fighting a U.S. war as well as their own. Nazi ideology and Hitler's despotism also offended the volunteers, who were willing to support democracy's cause

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<sup>8</sup> Caine, *Eagles of the RAF: The World War II Eagle Squadrons*, pp. 55-57, 335-350.

<sup>9</sup> Raymond, *A Yank In Bomber Command*, p. 7.

against “a barbarian conquest” or simply to “defend our way of life.”<sup>10</sup> Synchronized with his zeal for flying, the chance to fight Nazism motivated Andrew Mamedoff, a Jewish pilot from Connecticut (probably the first Jewish American airman to die in the war, October 1941).<sup>11</sup> Overall, the men acted from diverse motives: fondness for planes, desire to escape dead-end prospects in Depression America, hunger for adventure, and, in some cases, exoneration for rejection by U.S. military aviation. As he gloried in June 1941 in his new career, far away from Missouri furniture retailing, Raymond was hardly alone:

[T]here’s nothing I’ll ever like better than flying. I even like being around the planes on the ground. I like the roar of the motors, the smell of oil and gasoline fumes, the planes taxiing in, the ground crews swarming over the new arrivals. Then there is the little petrol lorry dashing about filling tanks. There’s men getting into flying clothes and parachutes. Above are the planes roaring in flight. Honestly, I love it.<sup>12</sup>

The volunteers endured training regimes in Britain and Canada, the latter usually more strenuous. The washout rates were not inordinate, but accidents were common, taking a toll on lives and injuries from mishandled takeoffs, wild landings, and midair collisions. Graduates of the courses normally served with Fighter Command units in southeastern England—involved in deadly aerial duels, escorting bombers to continental targets, providing cover to lumbering ship convoys. As for Americans in Bomber Command, deployments were fewer, owing to limited offensive operations in 1940-41; the equipment and aircraft was also less appealing. The Americans preferred the élan of the fighter pilot, who had at his disposal two of the world’s foremost single-seat warplanes: the sturdy Hurricane and the mythic Spitfire. The

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<sup>10</sup> Arthur Gerald Donahue, *An American Fighter Pilot in the RAF: Tally-Ho! and Last Flight from Singapore* (Oakpast: Leonaur, 2014 [1942, 1944]), p. 19; Kershaw, *The Few: The American “Knights of the Air” Who Risked Everything to Save Britain in the Summer of 1940*, p. 211.

<sup>11</sup> Kershaw, *The Few: The American “Knights of the Air” Who Risked Everything to Save Britain in the Summer of 1940*, p. 220.

<sup>12</sup> Raymond, *A Yank in Bomber Command*, p. 21.

prospect of flying these machines electrified the young men. They were seldom disappointed by the actual experience and inclined to lyricism on the speed, maneuverability, and lethal prowess of the “hot ships.”<sup>13</sup> To fly a Spitfire, said Donahue, “was the very height of my hopes.”<sup>14</sup>

Life in pre-Pearl Harbor Britain usually agreed with the volunteers. They did grouse about foul weather—gray slate rain, dankness—and the cookery, yet appreciated innumerable expressions of gratitude for their presence in the country. These were offered not only by Parliamentarians and senior-grade military officers but also by ordinary civilians. Women were attentive. Pub owners and shopkeepers provided grub, goods, and services gratis. Railway ticket-takers, cabmen, cinema and theater operators, club owners, hoteliers, and restaurant staffs were indulgent. The crankiness that later marred British feeling about GIs—“overpaid, oversexed, and over here”—was not yet evident.<sup>15</sup> Although the gum-chewing casualness and indifference of many volunteers to military decorum made RAF officers grumble about Yankee slovenliness, the dominant attitude was forgiving, especially as the numbers of Americans killed in combat or accidents climbed. Of the Eagle Squadrons, by war’s end forty-four percent of the men had died in action while others perished in training or transatlantic crossing.<sup>16</sup> Of U.S. nationals assimilated individually into RAF or RCAF units, the rate of loss also ran on par with that suffered by tens of thousands of British, Canadian, and Commonwealth airmen.

Abundant testimonials on civilian stoicism, the finesse of RAF pilots, the skill of ground crews, and collective determination of a nation to fight despite piling setbacks, confirmed the Americans’ approval of Britons with whom they interacted. To the degree that volunteers

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<sup>13</sup> Caine, *Eagles of the RAF: The World War Two Eagle Squadrons*, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> Donahue, *An American Fighter Pilot in the RAF: Tally-Ho! and Last Flight from Singapore*, p. 24; Kershaw, *The Few: The American “Knights of the Air” Who Risked Everything to Save Britain in the Summer of 1940*, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Olson, *Citizens of London: The Americans Who Stood with Britain in its Darkest, Finest Hour*, p. 132.

<sup>16</sup> Caine, *Eagles of the RAF: The World War II Eagle Squadrons*, pp. 162, 279-280.

harbored doubts, these centered on reservations about imperialism and empire and the tautness of British social divisions. “I sometimes feel that England does not deserve to win this war,” Raymond admitted in an unguarded moment. “Never have I seen such class distinctions drawn and maintained . . . the abuse of the Old School Tie is stronger than ever on every side . . . This nation seems inexplicably proud of its defects in its national character.”<sup>17</sup> Resentment also flared among volunteers when they detected traces of condescension for purported gaucheness or poor command of the King’s English. Yet none of this gripe ran deep and, in any case, it was overshadowed by solidarity with a people who faced daily dangers. Raymond wrote home about elderly ladies with whom he shared tea in a London lounge: “They are real veterans of this blitzkrieg, and even the dive-bombers don’t faze them.”<sup>18</sup>

Like their RAF and RCAF comrades, the Americans were haunted by specters of severe wounds or death, made more disturbing as friends disappeared. But few dwelt upon the morbid. They concentrated on immediate business: killing Germans. In dispersal huts and mess halls, the pilots in conversation deflected what they deemed irrelevant, prizing nonchalance or banter instead. Homesickness and fears were subdued by liquor, carousing, “wenching.”<sup>19</sup> Only in private correspondence did anxieties commonly surface, instanced by Edward Land, a Mississippian pilot of a RCAF bomber, who before dying in combat divulged in a letter to his brother:

I know I don’t have much longer to live . . . I can see it and feel it around and about me. I know down deep within myself that one of these nights I shall go out and not return. My pals one of these mornings will all be sitting down to breakfast without me . . . A moment’s reverent silence and quiet; then all will continue as before . . . Yes, I know! Because all the time this goes on about me, one day I have a pal—the next day I don’t. Through the months they’ve come and gone. Here today, gone tomorrow.

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<sup>17</sup> Raymond, *A Yank in Bomber Command*, p. 81.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Donahue, *An American Fighter Pilot in the RAF: Tally-Ho! and Last Flight from Singapore*, p. 97; Caine, *Eagles of the RAF: The World War II Eagle Squadrons*, p. 243.

It used to shake me when I lost a friend—but now—well, I suppose one gets hardened to it all and it's just to be expected . . . Wish I had some plain old Mississippi cornbread to eat. Haven't seen a piece since I've been in the foreign service. Englishmen have never heard of it.<sup>20</sup>

#### Magee Agonistes

Like Edward Land, distance from familiar faces and places affected John Gillespie Magee, Jr. Also like Land, Magee sensed his time on earth running out. He exclaimed to his father that men of his generation anticipated abbreviated lives.<sup>21</sup> While in RCAF training, Magee confided to his brother David that he expected—even longed for—heroic death in violent circumstances. John elsewhere said that if necessary to defeat Nazi evil, he would willingly forfeit his life.<sup>22</sup>

Unlike Land, Magee, though a U.S. citizen, spent most of his childhood abroad. Born in 1922 in Shanghai, he lived primarily in China and England. His father, Reverend John Gillespie Magee, scion of an industrialist Pittsburgh family, had rejected the material advantages and presumption of the privileged business class. A 1906 Yale University graduate (Skull and Bones member), he chose a life of Christian pastoral duty. He took assignment in 1912 to China upon ordination and completion of studies at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He headed the Episcopal mission in Nanjing, where he also chaired the local committee of the International Red Cross, which maintained clinics for destitute people. He held these positions until called in 1940 to the curacy at a venerable Washington church

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<sup>20</sup> Edward Land to his brother Frank, 22 April 1942, in Andrew Carroll, ed. *War Letters: Extraordinary Correspondence from American Wars* (New York: Scribner, 2001), p. 200.

<sup>21</sup> Hermann, Hagedorn, *Sunward I've Climbed: The Story of John Magee Poet and Soldier 1922-1941* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1942), p. 86.

<sup>22</sup> John Magee, Jr. to Dear Frater [David Magee], nd 1940, Box 3, John G. Magee Family Papers; Roger Cole, *High Flight: The Life and Poetry of Pilot Officer John Gillespie Magee* (Llandysul [Wales]: Gomer Press, 2013), p. 41.



associated with the presidents, St. John's, a block from the White House. (Magee was among the officiating ministers at FDR's funeral service in April 1945. He later served as Episcopal chaplain at Yale, 1946-1953.)

Reverend Magee in 1921 married an Anglican missionary, Faith Emmeline Backhouse, a British subject and daughter of a Suffolk rector. The Magee-Backhouse union produced four sons, John being eldest. Through his eighth year, he lived in Nanjing, except in 1927-28, when Reverend Magee sent the family to Japan (Maebashi) for safety when civil unrest threatened the mission compound. The boy otherwise thrived in a Nanjing household framed by the routines of Anglican piety and good works and administered by alert parents. He attended Nanjing's American cooperative school (Hillcrest), learning Mandarin on the side. His playmates were both Chinese and white. Racial chauvinism, including unself-conscious forms that customarily swirled about in quasi-colonial settings, little intruded. Yet to quicken his appreciation of Western civilization, specifically its Anglo-American variant, Magee's parents delivered him at age nine to a boarding school in Kent, St. Clare's. (Proximity to widowed grandmother Backhouse in nearby Kingsdown counted in St. Clare's favor.) In 1936, they enrolled him at renowned Rugby in Warwickshire, preparatory for university matriculation.

Magee experienced lonely moments at Rugby but escaped the endemic bullying and mental-physical abuses fostered by the school's "fagging" system. His willingness to test school rules via pranks and push authorities (within the limits of acceptable rebelliousness), sound academic record, and athleticism armored him. The avuncular interest of Rugby headmaster, Hugh Lyon, gave Magee added standing, enhanced by his inclusion on Lyon family excursions to the Lake District and Yorkshire coast. "The more I got to know him the more I loved him and treasured his confidence," Lyon once explained.<sup>23</sup> Magee meanwhile became besotted with the headmaster's daughter, Elinor, a year older than he. Magee knew in his bursting adolescent heart that he must love her forever and marry her, a sentiment gently unrequited. Even in autumn 1941, by which time he ostentatiously smoked a pipe,

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<sup>23</sup> Hugh Lyon to Reverend John Magee, 23 December 1941, Box 14, John G. Magee Family Papers.

sported a moustache, larked about on a motorcycle, and donned a RCAF uniform, Elinor thought him endearing but juvenile.<sup>24</sup>

A published versifier, Hugh Lyon approved Magee's interest in writing poems, the better ones reproduced in the school newspaper, *New Rugbeian*. Lyon told the youth—by turns iconoclastic, temperamental—that “some day you are going to write much better poetry than I am writing.”<sup>25</sup> This prediction, combined with worshipful fixation on the Great War martyr and Rugby poet, Rupert Brooke, fortified Magee. Like Brooke, whom he credited with giving “new sight to blinded eyes,” his would be a literary vocation. This was disclosed to his satisfaction at age sixteen when he won the Rugby poetry prize (as Brooke had done in 1905) for a work, “Brave New World.”<sup>26</sup> Somber in tone and substance, it touched on themes normally unexamined by schoolboys in their mid-teens: the fleetingness of vigor, ephemeralness of physical beauty, waning of hope, waxing of disillusionment, cooling of erotic love, religion as anodyne, the inevitability of death.

Magee also threaded through “Brave New World” ideas on the duty of conscience in times of national alarm and war. He espoused pacifism, a concept consistent with revulsion for the Great War felt among Rugby friends and exemplified by the 1933 Oxford Union resolution against fighting for King and Country. He laced “Brave New World” with indignation.

Yes, lost for ever  
—for soon there will have come  
A grinding discord in the tune of Life

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<sup>24</sup> Ray Haas, *Touching the Face of God: The Story of John Gillespie Magee, Jr. and His Poem “High Flight”* (Wilson, North Carolina: High Flight Productions, 2014), pp. 280-281; Hagedorn, *Sunward I've Climbed: The Story of John Magee Poet and Soldier 1922-1941*, pp. 138, 152; Cole, *High Flight: The Life and Poetry of Pilot Officer John Gillespie Magee*, pp. 54-57.

<sup>25</sup> Hagedorn, *Sunward I've Climbed: The Story of John Magee Poet and Soldier 1922-1941*, p. 25.

<sup>26</sup> “New sight to blinded eyes” is from “Sonnet to Rupert Brooke” in John Magee, *The Complete Works of John Magee: The Pilot Poet* (Cheltenham: This England Books, 1989), p. 91.

Infinite things desired, lofty visions  
All find their end with the coming of War  
and instantly  
A paradise is hurled to nothingness—

And in the brutal holocaust of war  
Swept by the lurid posters, roll of drums  
His chapped hands fumbling rifle, hand grenade,  
Each youth has time to contemplate his Soul  
Feeling, perhaps, uneasy as his bullet  
Pierces a stomach in the opposing trenches . . .

The heated hand on the sword and the blood's rising  
These have made killing their only business  
Bored to an inch of extinction in the killing . . .<sup>27</sup>

The stance of her son disquieted Faith Backhouse Magee, relocated by 1939 with her younger boys in England, away from strife-torn China. She took pride in the Backhouse's soldierly tradition, exemplified by her brother, Edward, a career army officer commissioned at the Royal Military Academy (Sandhurst) who served honorably (wounded, POW) in the Great War. She thought that John willfully misunderstood such men and their sacrifices in righteous wars over the generations.<sup>28</sup> Reverend Magee shared his wife's view but was evidently less offended. As he outwardly tolerated his son's budding agnosticism and suspicion of organized religion, so too he sought—from his Nanjing post—to instruct John on the imperative to resist viciousness. Magee senior explained what he saw in December 1937-January 1938, when he and other resident foreigners helped to organize the Nanjing Safety Zone

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<sup>27</sup> Magee, "Brave New World" in *Ibid.*, pp. 115-116.

<sup>28</sup> Hagedorn, *Sunward I've Climbed: The Story of John Magee Poet and Solider, 1922-1941*, pp. 44-45.

(which saved thousands of Chinese civilians from rampaging Japanese soldiers).<sup>29</sup>

The orgy of murder, rape, burning and looting that followed the entrance of the Japanese into this city made me think of what an Assyrian invasion of Samaria must have been or the sack of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. I did not imagine that such a thing could happen in the modern world . . . Innocent people were shot down like rabbits in the streets by the thousands and there were dead bodies lying here and there on every street and alley in the city. I saw two heaps of about 400 lying on the river bank . . . Among the dead were many women and children although these were not so many as the men. I have seen the dead body of a little [child] of about seven who had been bayoneted in five places. Some were burned to death. The Japanese soldiers acted like fiends incarnate. One man in a silk gown was shot down not far from the house where I was staying in the Refugee zone in the city while . . . I [was] standing on the balcony of the house. They shot him twice while they were laughing and talking and smoking cigarettes, with no more feeling than you might shoot at a wild duck . . . The most awful sight I have seen—at least of an individual—was of a boatman . . . who had had gasoline poured over him and then been set on fire. Whether he will recover I do not know but I do not know how he could as the upper and lower parts of his body were burned black.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> A committee, led by John Rabe of the Siemens Company, established the Nanjing Safety Zone. Businessmen, educators, and missionaries from Germany, Denmark, Great Britain, and the United States composed the committee membership. Rabe, a German citizen and member of the Nazi party, and Minnie Vautrin of Ginling Women's College remain the best remembered figures. Reverend Magee was no less heroic. In 1938, he undertook a U.S. speaking tour to tell the Nanjing tale.

<sup>30</sup> Reverend John Magee to John Magee, Jr., 13 January 1938, Box 2, John G. Magee Family Papers.

Reverend Magee's unsparing reportage rattled John's confidence in pacifism. The youngster decided that "complete pacifism" did not suit him.<sup>31</sup> To his father, he allowed, "I cannot help wishing that something will come along to repay the Japanese for such brutal, such excessive cruelty . . . I shall never forget some of the things you said."<sup>32</sup> Still, John did not renounce the main tenets of his pacifist creed. These were steadied in Easter 1939, when he joined a North Devon retreat with antiwar-minded companions who grounded their pacifism in a Christian ethic premised on the sanctity of human life.

In early August 1939, Magee junior sailed third class to America on the *Queen Mary*. The idea was to strengthen his acquaintance, briefly made in prior visits, with his paternal aunts, uncles, and cousins. Nanjing's torment, and inchoate doubts on the merits of pacifism, seemingly vanished. He raced into summer frolics. Supported by his father's reassurances that Germany was not so lunatic to provoke another war, the boy should have a "grand time."<sup>33</sup> Enconced in the care of the wealthy Magee clan, John chased entitled Pittsburgh girls, Elinor Lyon momentarily erased from his mind. He attended parties, dances, and polo matches at Rolling Rock Club, set on thousands of acres of prime Pennsylvania countryside. He gaddled about and accumulated hefty tabs while running hard to keep pace with a fast crowd. Magee carried on so extravagantly that his aunt (his father's sister, Mary Scaife) and uncle (his father's brother, James), who had agreed in advance to cover all expenses, resented his carelessness and spendthrift. These misdemeanors when relayed to John's frugal parents triggered consternation, then scolding.

Chastened, and offering apology to all scandalized adults, Magee looked hopefully to an escape to Britain in September and a glorious final Rugby year as editor-in-chief of the school newspaper.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Hagedorn, *Sunward I've Climbed: The Story of John Magee Poet and Soldier, 1922-1941*, p. 45.

<sup>32</sup> Haas, *Touching the Face of God: The Story of John Gillespie Magee, Jr. and His Poem "High Flight,"* p. 12.

<sup>33</sup> Reverend John Magee to John Magee, Jr., 14 August 1939, Box 2, John G. Magee Family Papers.

<sup>34</sup> Cole, *High Flight: The Life and Poetry of Pilot Officer John Gillespie Magee* p. 17; Reverend Magee to Mrs. Douglas Davison, nd, Box 21,

The outbreak of hostilities nixed this prospect. The State Department, complying with neutrality strictures that forbade citizens from entering war zones, rejected his application for passport renewal.<sup>35</sup>

Stranded in Pittsburgh, surrounded by peeved relatives, Magee thought to find productive employment, perhaps as a children's tutor. Nothing came of this idea. His aunt, Mary Scaife, instead bankrolled him at a private Connecticut academy, Avon Old Farms School, a feeder to Yale, where following family tradition he should later enroll.

Magee scorned Avon as academically inferior to Rugby: "I am just wallowing in a sort of intellectual backwater." The student body struck him as provincial, dull, conformist, and corrupted by materialism, to which he felt shamefully susceptible: "I am finding it rather hard to believe in myself."<sup>36</sup> Far from kindred spirits, Avon schoolmates thought him an oddity, somewhat prissy, likely "a queer."<sup>37</sup> Magee's frustration was compounded when his poems (composed between his thirteenth and sixteenth years) submitted to publisher Charles Scribner, were rejected—too derivative of John Keats and Brooke, said an anonymous referee. At best, the poems were *esquisses* that if reworked Scribner might review again.<sup>38</sup>

Undaunted, Magee, helped by Avon's print-shop teacher, self-published a volume of seventeen poems. Although prefaced with disarming modesty about their immaturity, they possessed urgency for the adolescent versifier: "Death comes swift, and all too soon."<sup>39</sup> Meanwhile, at cost to his parents' serenity of mind, but to the satisfaction of a recusant Avon mentor (fine arts instructor Paul Cushing Child, later married to food maven Julia Child), Magee drifted further

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John G. Magee Family Papers.

<sup>35</sup> Haas, *Touching the Face of God: The Story of John Gillespie Magee, Jr. and His Poem "High Flight,"* p. 42.

<sup>36</sup> John Magee, Jr., to Dearest Mother, 13 December 1939, Box 2, John G. Magee Family Papers.

<sup>37</sup> Clarence Derrick, *Recollections of Avon Old Farms School 1935-1941*, p. 37, August 1992, [issuu.com/avonoldfarms/docs/recollections](http://issuu.com/avonoldfarms/docs/recollections).

<sup>38</sup> Haas, *Touching the Face of God: The Story of John Gillespie Magee, Jr. and His Poem "High Flight,"* pp. 57-59.

<sup>39</sup> "Mortality" in Magee, *The Complete Works of John Magee: The Pilot Poet*, p. 95.

wayward: agnosticism shading into atheism, intensified hostility to the Church temporal, preference for a Bohemian life with openness to “free ideas” about marriage and sex.<sup>40</sup> He did not entirely disappoint, however. He graduated with distinction from Avon in 1940 and secured a scholarship (on the strength of family connections and legacy advantage) to attend Yale, otherwise unaffordable to his chronically strapped missionary parents.<sup>41</sup>

On 9 June, Magee celebrated his eighteenth birthday—by which date the tattered British Expeditionary Force had been ejected from France, German soldiers were about to enter Paris, and the Battle of Britain loomed. In these circumstances, and with the blessing of Charles Seymour, president of Yale and friend of his father, Magee chose to postpone his college career. Not only would he defer Yale but had decided also to pursue a truer calling than pacifism, described by him as “a fallen ideal.” He determined to serve for the duration with His Majesty’s armed forces, ideally the RAF. “I’ve got to get into this [war],” he avowed.<sup>42</sup>

Magee’s conversion, seemingly abrupt to conscientious-objector friends, had developed gradually. It fed on lingering Nanjing images, unease about the safety of mother and brothers, concern for the Lyons’ well-being, and felt obligation to English society, more alluring than what he dismissed as a commercially obsessed and flinty United States.

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<sup>40</sup> Faith Backhouse Magee to My darling Mother, 16 July 1940, Box 2; Rolf (no surname) to Dearest Faith and John, 4 January 1943, Box 4, John G. Magee Family Papers; Hagedorn, *Sunward I’ve Climbed: The Story of John Magee*, pp. 67, 70-71.

<sup>41</sup> Yale’s President Charles Seymour had been a friend of Reverend Magee since their days in Skull and Bones. The two men consulted on young Magee’s prospective Yale career in 1940. Also relevant are passages about a Yale scholarship in letter from James Magee to John Magee, Jr., 18 March 1940, Box 1, John G. Magee Family Papers.

<sup>42</sup> Haas, *Touching the Face of God: The Story of John Gillespie Magee, Jr. and His Poem “High Flight,”* p. 86; Hagedorn, *Sunward I’ve Climbed: The Story of John Magee Poet and Soldier 1922-1941*, p. 87.

“There is no poetry in Americans,” he protested to his mother, while to him “England meant life and feeling.”<sup>43</sup>

Beginning in autumn 1939, as his Pittsburgh relatives argued that Europe’s war should not touch America or ensnare him by virtue of U.S. citizenship, Magee became increasingly defiant. His retorts incensed Uncle James, former Republican congressman and pillar of the Pittsburgh legal community. Miffed with John for his summer capers, and irked by his poetic pose and incessant word play, James spouted raw truths about perfidious Albion. Not again would Americans, snookered in 1917, let themselves be duped. That John had the “nerve” to champion to his elders and benefactors Britain’s facile viewpoint—that its war against Nazi Germany was America’s—was the “acme” of arrogance and disregard for U.S. welfare.<sup>44</sup> Uncle James fired off to nephew John on 18 March 1940 (which day Mussolini met Hitler at the Brenner Pass to pledge cooperation with Berlin):

There is no more complacent, self-satisfied race on earth than the British . . . We saved the [Great War] for them, at pretty awful cost and later we paid for the entire war. We were sucked into that war . . . to help out England and uphold her past colonization sins. They now try to do it over again and are not getting away with it, and they never will again. A good deal of that debt money was borrowed after the war for rehabilitation or what have you. And very naturally England said nothing about payment when she borrowed or that there was any question about payment. They borrowed the money like you would borrow \$5.00 from one of your school friends and then they welshed. In the international scheme of things England will never again have the same standing.<sup>45</sup>

After France surrendered, John volleyed—not directly to Uncle James but in a letter home—that Americans should stop depending on

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<sup>43</sup> John Magee, Jr., to his mother, 15 February 1940, Box 2, John G. Magee Family Papers.

<sup>44</sup> James Magee to John Magee, Jr., 18 March 1940, Box 1, John G. Magee Papers.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*



their Atlantic buffer. They needed to rethink in light of new realities created by aerial warfare:

I am convinced that the United States must not make the tragic mistake of France in saying "It can't happen here." All you have to do is transpose the Atlantic for the Maginot Line and you have what seems to me to be a very similar (almost ominously similar) situation . . . I have no patience with the Americans who insist that they are safe behind the Atlantic. The fact that bombers are made now which can fly across the Atlantic and back with thirty tons of bombs may not mean anything to them, but they may live to rue the day when they failed to read their newspapers with foresight.<sup>46</sup>

Magee had to scrap the notion of joining the RAF, given obstacles emplaced by the State Department to British travel. He viewed the RCAF as an acceptable substitute. Exactly when and how he approached the RCAF remains murky. Most likely the Clayton Knight Committee via its New York office played a role. By means also unclear, he finagled an interview in Ottawa with Air Vice Marshal Lloyd Breadner, who subsequently endorsed Magee's RCAF application.<sup>47</sup>

In September 1940, Magee presented himself in Montreal to RCAF recruiting officers, suitably impressed by Breadner's recommendation and letters from Avon/Yale and family contacts.<sup>48</sup> Evidently, the Canadians chose to overlook Magee's fib that he was an Oxford student, marooned in America by war's outbreak, who wanted to return to Britain for duty. In the event, Magee was offered a provisional RCAF enlistment. Over six feet tall, he weighed only 137 pounds. Until he added bulk to his gangling frame, he did not qualify for the RCAF, which problem he resolved by gorging caloric-rich foods,

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<sup>46</sup> Hagedorn, *Sunward I've Climbed: The Story of John Magee Poet and Soldier 1922-1941*, p. 129.

<sup>47</sup> Haas, *Touching the Face of God: The Story of John Gillespie Magee, Jr. and His Poem "High Flight,"* pp. 62-64, 79-80.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 77-80.

avoiding physical exertion, and sleeping for long hours.<sup>49</sup> The RCAF fully approved his application in October, enlisting him as an Aircraftsman 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade.

Until sent to Britain in July 1941, Magee stayed in Canada, except for a family idyll in Martha's Vineyard before RCAF induction and two furloughs (Christmas 1940, June 1941) in Washington, where parents and brothers were shifting to new routines. To his brothers, he seemed a bold hero, a suave ladies' man. To his parents, he remained a worry: not fully formed, naïve, existentially unready for warrior rigors. Even so, they admired and (outwardly) blessed his decision to rally for Britain.<sup>50</sup>

The senior Magees experienced that trepidation peculiar to sending a child to war. On the eve of his British departure, mother and father prayed with John, oscillating between orthodox Christianity and doubt. All three asked for future reunion and deliverance from evil. (In Christmas 1940, John had taken Communion from his father, nearly overcome by emotion in administering the sacrament to his son.<sup>51</sup>) Faith Backhouse Magee wrote to her mother: "We are sending over to England now, the most precious contribution which we can possibly send in the shape of our eldest son."<sup>52</sup>

Commissioned in July 1941 as a pilot officer, equivalent to U.S. army second lieutenant, Magee had survived RCAF courses at Ontario bases—St. Catherine's, Trenton, Toronto, and Uplands. To pass, he overcame an innate resistance to discipline and what he derided as the "infernal" military mind. Impertinence to superiors landed him a few days and nights in the guardhouse.<sup>53</sup> Prone to showing off, he once deliberately flew his trainer-plane close ("skimming") to a farmhouse, an escapade that frightened the inhabitants and prompted rebukes from

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<sup>49</sup> Cole, *High Flight: The Life and Poetry of Pilot Officer John Gillespie Magee*, p. 25.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>51</sup> Hagedorn, *Sunward I've Climbed: The Story of John Magee Poet and Soldier 1922-1942*, p. 102,

<sup>52</sup> Faith Backhouse Magee to My darling mother, 4 July 1941, Box 1, John G. Magee Papers.

<sup>53</sup> Hagedorn, *Sunward I've Climbed: The Story of John Magee Poet and Soldier 1922-1942*, pp. 96-97.

RCAF seniors. Recklessness and laxity, along with inexperience, nearly (twice) ended his life.<sup>54</sup> He smashed one plane and did lesser damage to others. By his own admission, he was not an adept navigator.<sup>55</sup> Yet Magee proved good enough, said (most) instructors, persuaded by his stamina and reflexes. His technical skills steadily improved. Relying on instruments, he learned to fly blind in adverse weather and night conditions. After recovering from near-paralyzing fear occasioned by an early air mishap, he mastered dizzying aerobatics: rolls, loops, stall turns, spins. He began to envision a future in which he would live both as professional aviator and poet. As for RCAF supervisors, they reckoned he might in time become a fair fighter pilot. Accordingly, Magee dodged assignment to fly bombers or bide in Canada to train overseas-bound airmen. Luckily, from his standpoint, he would serve in the capacity and country of his preference.<sup>56</sup>

Until his departure for England, Magee in Canada enjoyed what attractions were available to an air novice, principally women his age, whom he pursued ardently. These included a blonde Czech actress, Tanya Davis, whom he several times mentioned—but not to Elinor Lyon—as his fiancée and who he gifted with poems. He also retired what remained of pacifist scrupulousness. One night on sentry duty he meditated:

I'm in a sand-bagged machine-gun post, with a Lewis gun in front of me filled with 500 rounds of incendiary ammunition. From my vantage point I could rake the whole aerodrome, if need be. This is indeed a symbolic and powerful position . . . With all its discomforts, this is the life! The throb of an aeroplane engine is music in my ears now.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp. 103-106, 121; Cole, *High Flight: The Life and Poetry of Pilot Officer John Gillespie Magee*, pp. 29-31, 35-36, 38-39.

<sup>55</sup> Haas, *Touching the Face of God: The Story of John Gillespie Magee, Jr. and His Poem "High Flight,"* pp. 117, 123.

<sup>56</sup> Hagedorn, *Sunward I've Climbed: The Story of John Magee Poet and Soldier 1922-1941*, pp. 100, 109, 125.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 97 Haas, *Touching the Face of God: The Story of John Gillespie Magee, Jr. and His Poem "High Flight,"* p. 89.

During his Washington furlough in June 1941, Magee convened a meeting with young men potentially interested in RCAF enlistment.<sup>58</sup> On whether to hate any German who he might one day face in a dogfight, Magee admitted to toughening: “I’m afraid if I don’t hate him that his bullets will get me before mine get him.”<sup>59</sup>

After shipping in July by convoy from Halifax to Britain, Magee underwent added training in a South Wales station, Llandow, prerequisite to obtaining Spitfire qualification. He got to fly his first Spitfire in August: “It is a thrilling and at the same time a terrifying aircraft . . . it takes off so quickly that before you have recovered from the shock you are sitting pretty at 5,000 feet.”<sup>60</sup>

After he finished the Llandow course, Magee in September joined 412 RCAF Squadron in the Lincolnshire fenlands, initially at Digby but then to a satellite base near the leafy village of Wellingore. He relished the camaraderie of Canadian and British officers—“a hell of a good bunch of fellows”—in mess, pubs, and parties. He enthused in a letter, “I have never had such fun in my life.”<sup>61</sup> Fellow officers requited. One characterized Magee as “remarkably articulate, precocious, and interesting.”<sup>62</sup> Another pronounced him warmly-regarded by all.<sup>63</sup> He won the goodwill of enlisted men, too. His batman, who at first thought him effete (posh accent, poetic pretensions), dubbed him “Longfellow Magee” but later depicted him as manly with “plenty of guts.”<sup>64</sup> A surprise highlight of this RCAF life occurred in mid-November, when

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<sup>58</sup> Haas, *Touching the Face of God: The Story of John Gillespie Magee, Jr. and His Poem “High Flight,”* pp. 129-130.

<sup>59</sup> Hagedorn, *Sunward I’ve Climbed: The Story of John Magee Poet and Soldier 1922-1941,* p. 133.

<sup>60</sup> Cole, *High Flight: The Life and Poetry of Pilot Officer John Gillespie Magee,* p. 43.

<sup>61</sup> Magee, *The Complete Works of John Magee: The Pilot Poet,* p. 63.

<sup>62</sup> Haas, *Touching the Face of God: The Story of John Gillespie Magee, Jr. and His Poem “High Flight,”* p. 168.

<sup>63</sup> Roderick Smith to Christopher Magee, 3 April 1987, p. 5, Box 4, John G. Magee Family Papers.

<sup>64</sup> Cole, *High Flight: The Life and Poetry of Pilot Officer John Gillespie Magee,* p. 90.

King George VI visited the Wellingore base to engage Magee and others in conversation, flavoring it with “salty” language.<sup>65</sup> Most predictably, as was his wont, Magee sought female companionship among the local population, even as his feeling for Elinor Lyon reignited: “her face was everywhere.”<sup>66</sup>

Glad to be back in Britain after U.S. purgatory, Magee hastened to see Elinor, then reading English at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford. During visits, he latched onto any hint that implied her affection for him. He envisioned an eternity amid dreaming Oxford spires, her studying and writing inspiring his own. Gracious to him but otherwise not encouraging, Elinor unbeknownst to him had settled on another (Peter Wright, a Classics scholar whom she married in 1944, after a two-year stint in the Women's Royal Naval Service). Magee meantime sought Hugh Lyon at Rugby. Their conversations and Magee's deportment pleased the headmaster, who saw signs that his former pupil had become less self-preoccupied and more considerate. On the cusp of becoming a “fine man,” he seemed to Lyon increasingly sure of his place in the cosmos, irrespective of whether it, Great Britain, or ultimate meaning was divinely mandated.<sup>67</sup>

Magee planned to spend Yuletide with pater Lyon, muse Elinor, and all the other Lyons at Rugby. Before this planned rendezvous, and as Wellingore schedules allowed, Magee returned to familiar haunts via his Spitfire and treated acquaintances and Rugby students/faculty to aerial stunts. These risked injury and actually caused (minor) harm to the plane. In the event, nobody seemed bothered as he paraded his aeronautical dexterity, if not prudence, before admirers.

Magee marveled at his own Spitfire skill, man and machine soaring to 30,000 feet, diving, vanishing into cloud banks, darting out of sunshine. He captured the exhilaration of this feeling in “High Flight,” written in late summer 1941.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., pp. 64-65.

<sup>66</sup> Magee, *The Complete Works of John Magee: The Pilot Poet*, p. 59.

<sup>67</sup> Cole, *High Flight: The Life and Poetry of Pilot Officer John Gillespie Magee*, p. 57.

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth  
 And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;  
 Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth  
 Of sun-split clouds—and done a hundred things  
 You have not dreamed of—wheeled and soared and swung  
 High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,  
 I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung  
 My eager craft through footless halls of air . . .  
 Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue  
 I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace,  
 Where never lark, or ever eagle flew—  
 And, while with silent lifting mind I've trod  
 The high untrespassed sanctity of space,  
 Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.<sup>68</sup>

In a September letter to home, Magee disparaged “High Flight” as a casual effort, a “ditty,” the probable reason for his not acknowledging language borrowed from three poets who had commended flying. No more than he did his parents ever proclaim “High Flight” as singular but cherished it as an expression of their son’s exuberant spirit.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> “High Flight” in Magee, *The Complete Works of John Magee: The Pilot Poet*, p. 79.

<sup>69</sup> On “source material” for “High Flight,” see Haas’s *Touching the Face of God: The Story of John Gillespie Magee, Jr., and His Poem “High Flight,”* pp. 286-290 and [rpo.library.utoronto.ca/content/high-flight](http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/content/high-flight).

Most pertinent is a poetry anthology assembled by an instructor and three cadets at the Royal Air Force College, Cranwell. See Rupert de la Bère, compiler, *Icarus: An Anthology of the Poetry of Flight* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1938). Among other works, *Icarus* contained poems by Magee’s favorite Rupert Brooke (“Clouds”), Rugby’s legendary headmaster Matthew Arnold (“The Dying Eagle”), and William Butler Yeats (“An Irish Airman Foresees His Death”). These works alone would have recommended the volume to Magee and along the way led him to G. W. M. Dunn’s “New World” (*Icarus*, pp. 143-144), “Dominion over Air” by a person identified only as C. A. F.

While Elinor's visage flitted across his awareness and flying and poetry concentrated his mind, Magee yearned to show his mettle. He never doubted the virtue of serving Britain or discarding pacifism, let alone delaying Yale (where, as Magee's freshman class entered in September 1940, law school student Robert Stuart founded the isolationist-oriented America First Committee). He prayed to intercept a German plane before Christmas.<sup>70</sup> As for staying alive, he calculated the odds as low: "I do not expect to last. It's not a very sensible thing to talk about on the whole, but to be good you've got to take chances and you can't win all the time. Anyway, I'd rather be good."<sup>71</sup> He came to think himself a version of Icarus, his wings not yet singed. "In the end, it's not the years in your life, it's the life in your years," he told an RCAF buddy.<sup>72</sup>

Magee's showing in 412 Squadron assignments varied in intensity and competence but trended upward in the months that he flew. Some missions were uneventful, even tedious: coastal patrols, air cover for convoys. Other missions involved shooting machine guns and canon at Axis cargo ships in the North Sea and attacking German ground targets in occupied France. Magee became one of the Squadron's section leaders. He volunteered in Lincolnshire to test battered planes after their repair, one harrowing air maneuver watched by the Duke of Kent on

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B. (*Icarus*, p. 128), and Cuthbert Hicks's "The Blind Man Flies" (*Icarus*, p. 100). From Dunn, C. A. F. B., and Hicks, Magee plainly lifted. The memorable "and touched the face of God" came from the last line of Hicks's poem.

Regarding appraisals of "High Flight" by Magee's mother and father, parental pride showed but not large claims, as evidenced in their review of his RCAF career: undated December 1941 in Box 4, John G. Magee Family Papers; the letter is from one of Magee's parents (not indicated) to an unnamed recipient.

<sup>70</sup> Haas, *Touching the Face of God: The Story of John Gillespie Magee, Jr., and His Poem "High Flight,"* p. 187; Hagedorn, *Sunward I've Climbed: The Story of John Magee Poet and Soldier 1922-1941*, p. 159.

<sup>71</sup> Magee, *The Complete Works of John Magee: The Pilot Poet*, p. 63.

<sup>72</sup> Cole, *High Flight: The Life and Poetry of Pilot Officer John Gillespie Magee*, p. 71; Haas, *Touching the Face of God: The Story of John Gillespie Magee, Jr., and His Poem "High Flight,"* p. 155.

inspection tour. The duke congratulated a chuffed Magee, lucky to have safely landed: “Nice work.”<sup>73</sup>

Magee’s most serious action occurred on 8 November 1941, during a 412 Squadron sweep near Dunkirk to cover the withdrawal of twelve Blenheim bombers after striking targets in Lille. The 412 sustained significant losses when Messerschmitt 109Fs swooped out of a blinding sun. Magee was directly fired upon while blasting a “squirt” at one, apparently without effect. Terrified at first, Magee managed to collect his composure before the melee ended.<sup>74</sup> This experience prompted another poem, his last: “Per Ardua.” In it, he conjured the shades of pilots in the earlier Battle of Britain and pleaded that they calm his nerve as they congregated in “Valhalla’s silence” awaiting the “dawn of Victory.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Cole, *High Flight: The Life and Poetry of Pilot Officer John Gillespie Magee*, p. 49.

<sup>74</sup> Roderick Smith to Christopher Magee, 3 April 1987, p.11, Box 4, John G. Magee Family Papers; Haas, *Touching the Face of God: The Story of John Gillespie Magee, Jr., and His Poem “High Flight,”* pp. 184-187.

<sup>75</sup> “Per Ardua” in Magee, *The Complete Works of John Magee: The Pilot Poet*, p. 81. *Per Ardua Ad Astra* (“through adversity to the stars”) was adopted by the Royal Flying Corps in 1912 and became the RCAF’s motto.

“Per Ardua”

(To those who gave their lives to England during the Battle of Britain and left such a shining example to us who follow, these lines are dedicated.)

They that have climbed the white mists of the morning;  
They that have soared, before the world's awake,  
To herald up their foeman to them, scorning  
The thin dawn's rest their weary folk might take;

Some that have left other mouths to tell the story  
Of high, blue battle, quite young limbs that bled;  
How they had thundered up the clouds to glory,  
Or fallen to an English field stained red;



Most of the pilots in 412 Squadron during Magee's time died in the war.<sup>76</sup> His turn came on 11 December, on which date, coincidentally, Germany and Italy declared war on the United States. Magee perished in a midair accident near Wellingore, following routine formation practice. A cadet, nineteen-year-old Ernest Aubrey Griffin, enrolled nearby at the Royal Air Force College (Cranwell), unexpectedly drove his trainer-plane out of low clouds and rammed Magee's Spitfire making its airfield descent. Magee separated from his disintegrating cockpit and tried to set his parachute, but it lacked sufficient altitude to open. Griffin, too, did not have a chance.<sup>77</sup>

#### Coda

A life full of promise, left incomplete, what might he have become? Could Magee have fulfilled his youthful vision of himself as both poet and man of action? Would his poetry have matured, gaining him recognition and a means of livelihood, maybe teaching at a school like Rugby (which employed Elinor Lyon's husband on the faculty in the postwar era)? Might Magee's turbulent and inquisitive adolescent

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Because my faltering feet would fail I find them  
Laughing beside me, steadying the hand  
That seeks their deadly courage—yet behind them  
The cold light dies in that once brilliant land . . .

Do these, who help the quickened pulse run slowly,  
Whose stern, remembered image cools the brow—  
Till the far dawn of Victory, know only  
Night's darkness, and Valhalla's silence now?

<sup>76</sup> Roderick Smith to Christopher Magee, 3 April 1987, p. 4, Box 4, John G. Magee Family Papers.

<sup>77</sup> Flying Officer E. Howe to Dear Madam (Magee's grandmother), 20 December 1941, Box 1, John G. Magee Family Papers; Haas, *Touching the Face of God: The Story of John Gillespie Magee, Jr. and His Poem "High Flight,"* pp. 197, 217.

self have yielded to the “steady lukewarm glow of middle age” (Hugh Lyon’s locution)?<sup>78</sup>

Had Magee lived, would he have settled in the United States, where his parents and brothers made their home? Quite likely, John would have made good on his idea to enter Yale after the war and, following his father’s example, been taken into Skull and Bones. There he should have become acquainted with George H. W. Bush, two years younger than Magee, and like him a veteran aviator who went to war (in the U.S. navy) after graduating from boarding school (Phillips Academy). Unlike Magee, Bush was lucky: in September 1944, a submarine, USS *Finback*, fished the future president out of the Pacific after his crew and plane were lost to Japanese fire.

John Magee’s brother David, also enlisting after prep school (Hotchkiss), served as a bombardier aboard B-25s in the USAAF during the war. He later enrolled at Yale, class of 1949, overlapping with Bush. David lived (1925-2013) into the twenty-first century, having risen to investment portfolio manager and vice president of the Morgan Guaranty Trust Company. In 2002, David donated to the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall film footage surreptitiously shot by Reverend Magee on his 16mm camera in 1937, recording Japanese crimes and Chinese victims.<sup>79</sup>

If he had lived, given his erstwhile pacifist convictions, how might John in the postwar years have thought about the Allies’ air campaigns or discussed them with brother David? To Elinor Lyon, Magee, even while in RCAF officer uniform, had confessed war to be hateful and foolish.<sup>80</sup> Perhaps he would agree with Bishop George Bell of Chichester, who protested (1944) Bomber Command’s neglect of proportionality and lack of discrimination between legitimate and illegitimate targets, as defined in traditional just war theory and

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<sup>78</sup> Hugh Lyon to Reverend Magee, 23 December 1941, Box 14, John G. Magee Family Papers.

<sup>79</sup> Clips of film taken by Reverend Magee in Nanjing were shown to members of Congress in 1938. Portions of the Magee film and related photographs are deposited (and digitized) in the John G. Magee Family Papers.

<sup>80</sup> Hagedorn, *Sunward I’ve Climbed: The Story of John Magee Poet and Soldier 1922-1941*, pp. 137, 152.

international law. After the fire-bombings of Hamburg and Berlin, only days before the Dresden raids, Bell told the House of Lords that extirpating German cities ran antithetical to “the ideals by which our cause is inspired . . . this progressive devastation of cities is threatening the root of civilization . . . [human beings] overwhelmed in the colossal tornado of smoke, blast and flame.”<sup>81</sup>

In postwar years, some veterans of the air war revisited the problems raised by Bishop Bell. Robert Raymond, the one-time Yank pilot in Bomber Command, acknowledged after his Hamburg mission: “Last night we made a holocaust of Hamburg.” In reference to another RAF action, against Turin, Raymond said: “Even when I see buildings blowing up and in flames, I can’t imagine people in them.”<sup>82</sup> Decades later, even as memory receded, Raymond did think about those victims. Like him and David Magee, RCAF pilot Jack Widdicombe of rural Manitoba flew bombers (Lancasters) in the European theater.<sup>83</sup> A participant in the Dresden assault, Widdicombe, a much-decorated veteran, expressed (2018) ambivalence that John Magee might have shared, pause and dread laced with hope that right duty had been done. Upon arrival in blitzed London, a few months after Magee’s death, young (b. 1921) Widdicombe and a friend had toured the city by bus: “We drove for an hour and it was total destruction . . . I said ‘how in the world can people do that to one another? Why don’t people refuse to do it?’ Then a year later, I was doing it. It took me a long time to get my head around that.”<sup>84</sup> Widdicombe’s 419 (Moose) Squadron conducted 400 bombing missions, sacrificing 129 planes and nearly two hundred men captured. More than six hundred crewmen died.<sup>85</sup>

As an article of Christian faith, Reverend Magee took comfort in the thought of John, his body lying in a Lincolnshire plot, his eternal

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<sup>81</sup> Bishop Bell, “Obliteration is not a justifiable act of war,” 9 February 1944, Brian MacArthur, ed., *The Penguin Book of Twentieth-Century Speeches* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), pp. 223-227.

<sup>82</sup> Raymond, *A Yank in Bomber Command*, pp. 138, 162.

<sup>83</sup> <https://globalnews.ca/news/3059392/95-year-old-veteran-golfer-has-25-medals>

<sup>84</sup> [legionmagazine.com/en/jack-widdicombe-from-combine-to-lancaster](http://legionmagazine.com/en/jack-widdicombe-from-combine-to-lancaster)

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

soul reposing in the “sovereign will” of God, capacious and intimate, where the rival tugs of justice and mercy were harmonized.<sup>86</sup> Magee senior found solace too in secular spheres: in February 1942 Archibald MacLeish, poet and Librarian of Congress, featured “High Flight” in a much-advertised Washington exhibition, “Poems of Faith and Freedom.” A photostat of the first draft of Rupert Brooke’s “The Soldier” also appeared among the displays with its lapidarian line: “If I should die, think only this of me: That there’s some corner of a foreign field that is forever England.” Pilot Officer Magee might have blushed that “High Flight,” flecked with undisclosed appropriations, should have occupied a spot near his idol’s work. As for Reverend Magee, he hoped “High Flight” would bolster American youths with requisite “idealism” as titanic battles awaited. (In the fullness of time, “High Flight” became the official poem of the RAF and RCAF and required recitation by memory for cadets at the U.S. Air Force Academy.<sup>87</sup>)

Faith Backhouse Magee broke from the solitude of a bereaved mother to establish an epistolary friendship with Cadet Griffin’s parents. In Oxford after the war, they and she met in tribute to their stolen sons.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Reverend Magee to Dear Mother, 12 July 1940, Box 1, John G. Magee Family Papers; Forward by the Reverend Canon F. Hugh Magee in Cole, *High Flight: The Life and Poetry of Pilot Officer John Gillespie Magee*, p. vii. Magee’s tombstone, along with those of other RCAF pilots, sits in the village of Scopwick on grounds maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

<sup>87</sup> The text of “High Flight” appears on the memorial (Arlington National Cemetery) to the Space Shuttle *Challenger* that failed on 28 January 1986, killing its crew of seven astronauts. At the suggestion of speechwriter Peggy Noonan, President Ronald Reagan incorporated the last lines of the poem when he addressed the nation on the *Challenger* tragedy.

<sup>88</sup> Forward by the Reverend Canon F. Hugh Magee in Cole, *High Flight: The Life and Poetry of Pilot Officer John Gillespie Magee*, p. vii.