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Fate Is The Hunter: A Pilot's Memoir



Synopsis

Ernest K. Gann's classic memoir is an up-close and thrilling account of the treacherous early days of commercial aviation. In his inimitable style, Gann brings you right into the cockpit, recounting both the triumphs and terrors of pilots who flew when flying was anything but routine.

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Customer Reviews

"Mr. Gann is a writer saturated in his subject; he has the skill to make every instant sharp and important and we catch the fever to know that documentary writing does not often invite." (V.S. Pritchett New Statesman)"This book is an episodic log of some of the more memorable of [the author's] nearly ten thousand hours aloft in peace and (as a member of the Air Transport Command) in war. It is also an attempt to define by example his belief in the phenomenon of luck -- that 'the pattern of anyone fate is only partly contrived by the individual.'" (The New Yorker)"Few writers have ever drawn their readers so intimately into the shielded sanctum of the cockpit, and it is here that Mr. Gann is truly the artist." (New York Times Book Review)"Fate Is the Hunter is partly autobiographical, partly a chronicle of some of the most memorable and courageous pilots the reader will ever encounter in print; and always this book is about the workings of fate. . . . The book is studded with characters equally as memorable as the dramas they act out." (Cornelius Ryan, author of A Bridge Too Far and The Longest Day)"This fascinating, well-told autobiography is a complete refutation of the comfortable cliché that 'man is master of his fate.' As far as pilots are concerned, fate (or death) is a hunter who is constantly in pursuit of them. . . . There is nothing

depressing about Fate Is the Hunter. There is tension and suspense in it but there is great humor too. Happily, Gann never gets too technical for the layman to understand." (Saturday Review)"This purely wonderful autobiographical volume is the best thing on flying and the meaning of flying that we have had since Antoine de Saint-Exupéry took us aloft on his winged prose in the late 1930s and early 1940s. . . . It is a splendid and many-faceted personal memoir that is not only one man's story but the story, in essence, of all men who fly." (Chicago Sunday Tribune)

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This is the book that pushed me over the edge, prompting me to make my own journey from being an enthusiastic Private Pilot to becoming a Captain at a major airline, over the course of thirty years. This is Gann's autobiography and follows his amazing flying career, starting with his new-hire class at American Airlines during the 1930's. During World War II, he flies cargo missions across the Atlantic, and also in Asia across the Himalayas, usually tired, overloaded, in the most dreadful weather, with dead reckoning often the primary means of navigation. It is a riveting true story that makes the reader feel like an invisible observer riding along on the jumpseat during countless flights, dealing with mechanical failures, perfect storms, colorful characters, and inevitable human error. Gann has a disarming honesty, disavowing any heroic mantle or superhuman airmanship. He is a highly skilled master of his craft, but he grimly comes to acknowledge that Fate or chance circumstance will often be the salvation of one man and his plane, or a cruel grim reaper to another, for no apparent reason. Reading this book gives us a greater appreciation of the fine transport category aircraft we enjoy flying today, and the myriad ways safety has been enhanced. I have read it numerous times over the years, with new perspective as I had my own moments of elation or despair. Although written many years ago, the job and the circumstances of professional aviation still have a great deal in common with those long ago days. Many times I have thought of a situation from this book as I faced a similar hazard or situation. You will too. I am sure you will also become a better pilot by reading this book, and gain a greater appreciation of the flying pioneers who came before us. Who knows, it may inspire you to make the leap, as it did for me many years ago.

These stories of the early days of commercial airline flying are amazing. And the fact that Gann survived through his flying career is even more amazing. He recounts at least half-a-dozen flying misadventures where his survival was essentially a coin-toss. And the book is replete with names of his friends and colleagues who lost the toss. Gann is an amazing writer. To me, there are three

kinds of writers. The first are so bad that you notice the writing because it gets in the way. The second are good and the writing becomes transparent as you read. And the third are so good that you notice the writing again, because its elegance and style and freshness slap you in the face - when you read Gann, be prepared to get slapped silly.

This is Ernest K. Gann's semi-autobiographical, seminal work covering his career in commercial aviation from the 1930's through WWII and the post-war years. Gann flew twin and four-engined aircraft for American Airlines and the Air Transport Command in WWII. The narrative covers a series of incidents and accidents, and a plethora of pilots, co-pilots, navigators, radio operators, flight engineers and other airline employees who took part in Gann's career. There is a central question that the book tries to answer, and it is right in the title. Throughout Gann's flying time, he was part of, or witness to aviation close calls and disasters. Weather, equipment, and pilot error may be the answers the accident investigators attributed, but why did one airplane go down in a ball of flame, and Gann's airplane fly with the same circumstances, but land safely. How many times can fate be the answer, to living to tell the tale, while mourning the loss of another captain, crew, and passengers. Gann's writing style is very personal in the book, and the people he describes become personal to the reader, through Gann's writing skill. Ross, Beatie, Keim, and scores of other characters will seem like they were part of your crew, if you give Ernest Gann the chance to tell you about them.

Ernest K. Gann is a well known aviation writer and before that, a successful pilot of airliners and military transports in the time period during, before, and after World War II. "Fate is the Hunter" is probably his best known book, and it deserves to be. Reading it, we are in the presence of a classic that can be read on at least two levels: as a drawn-out adventure story taking place over a period of years, studded with gems of aviation art from a period that now seems very long ago, or as a thoughtful reflection on danger and man's reaction to it, guided by a deep familiarity with the psychology of superstition. From the first point of view, we get to see the near-collision with the Taj Mahal on takeoff, and the wild ride in ice-laden clouds over the Appalachians that nearly brought down Capt. Gann's airliner in a time period when anti-ice equipment was primitive and instrument navigation in its infancy. Straddling the two points of view we have the Arctic adventure when a military transport with wounded coming back from Europe has to land on a frozen lake in Canada, in a region with so much natural magnetism that navigation systems of the day are useless, a region so vast that radio contact can only be made when the target has already been localized and the

search aircraft is getting rather close to it. I'm remembering a movie of this that I saw in childhood, although I lack the online skills to find the name and date; but Mr. Gann's description of it is ever so much scarier. As we read through the book, which is a fast, exciting read, we begin to see the second point of view. Like everything that humans perceive as very dangerous, early aviation had superstitions. Looking back on his career at a mature age, Capt. Gann names all his colleagues, pilots just as good as himself in all humility, and wonders why, after so many near misses, he is practically the only one still alive to tell the tale. He concludes, I believe, that there is a mysterious fate choosing its next victim like a Valkyrie flying in formation with each airplane. You can soar effortlessly above the clouds in godlike majesty for many hours, but someday this force will rear back and bite you. If you live you'll have a tale like Mr. Gann's to tell your grandchildren, and if you don't, it could be months before the search parties find what's left of your body. Those of us who have learned to fly in "modern times" (say, after 1970?), and the general public as well, have little notion of how dangerous flying really is. We are taught that 80% (or something) of accidents are caused by pilot error, and if you follow procedures meticulously, "flying is safer than driving to the airport." (This is a familiar cliché now.) Mr. Gann's book shows us this isn't true. Like everything, flying depends on humans to carry it out. Humans forget they have already loaded an airplane to capacity and fill the fuel tanks to capacity as well. Humans fail to tie down the cargo. Humans make navigational errors, or start an approach when the airport is below minimums because the wind was different than predicted and they don't have enough fuel to fly someplace else to land. Humans get a report from the stewardess that there is an unusual vibration coming from the rear and ignore it because they are scheduled to go on leave after this flight and want badly to get home. Pilots will devour this book. But everyone, even those who don't give a d@#n about aviation and have never flown in their lives, should read it. When they have finished, they should re-think our present day delusion that we can make any technology safe that involves energy management (high speeds, high altitudes, high pressures or temperatures, explosive or flammable fuels). However, they also need to reflect that before aviation and automobiles, before railroads, one of the most common causes of death for healthy males in England was falls from horseback. (This is attested in Dr. Paul Johnson's book, "The Birth of the Modern: World Society 1815-1830.") Danger is omnipresent in this world. When humans are aware enough of it to trigger our natural reaction, fear, we develop superstitions to help us cope. The reality might well be that it's mostly random, even after you've done everything right. But humans can't coldly face that unless they are very special. Earnest K. Gann was that kind of person, and his thoughts on danger are therefore relevant for the rest of us.

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