

Air-Minded is a braided novel of early flight: an aviation evangelist builds the system while an assassin exploits it. Their parallel lives trace aviation's rise from spectacle to infrastructure—and the lives it connects, and ends.

Air-Minded

By Kimberly Sheeter

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AIR-MINDED

A hand in a dark blue sweater sleeve holds a paper airplane made of newspaper. The background is a dramatic, dark sky with a bright light source behind a jagged lightning bolt. The paper airplane is tilted upwards, and the text on it is partially legible.

AVIATION ERA TAKES OFF
NEW FLIGHT MILESTONE REACHES

FLYING ACE
ADVENTURE

KIMBERLY SHEETER

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Prologue:
**Two Men, a Shared Sky and
the Price of Admission**

Flying stripped things down to essentials.

In the early cockpits—canvas skins, trembling struts, fuel sharp in the nose—there was no room for thinking ahead. The stick tugged. The wires hummed. You listened, or you didn't come back.

Sunlight flared and vanished. Knuckles split. Faces burned. The hum stayed in your bones after the wheels hit dirt.

They went up anyway.

The machines told the truth in small ways: a loose rivet, a cable singing wrong.

John Paul Riddle heard invitation.

Earnest Paul Pletch heard vindication.

One treated the cockpit like a partner. The other treated it like proof.

Each found the same thing waiting above the ground—a brief freedom and the price attached to it.

**Book of Paul
(1901–1989)**

**“And in his heart always
the love of the big blue beyond”**

“To Beachey, 1912”

–Carl Sandburg

Gone West (1942)

The cadets shifted in their seats, collars biting their necks. Christmas poinsettias still lined the aisles, their faded red petals a reminder that the holiday had passed. Outside, January heat hung at eighty degrees; inside the small Episcopal chapel at Bradenton, it felt hotter still, humidity clinging to wool.

They had not been in Florida long. In Wales or Yorkshire, it would be near freezing, fog gathering in hollows, boots stiff with frost. Here, the air carried polish, candle wax, and the sourness of damp hymnals—a smell that told them how far from home they were.

They had been trained to fear Messerschmitts, not mosquitoes; artillery, not rattlesnakes. Yet this morning they were learning something simpler: a life could end here as suddenly as anywhere, and just as far from the people who loved them. Several had never attended a funeral. Some would not live long enough to attend another.

At the front of the church, John Paul Riddle stood so straight he looked braced for impact. The stiff figure in the dark suit looked nothing like the grinning pilot in newspaper photographs, shoulder to shoulder with Hap Arnold or RAF brass on inspection tours. Today, he looked like a man burying his own son. He wasn't, but he was standing in for parents four thousand miles away.

Grace Riddle sat alone in the back pew, one of the few women present. Her handkerchief was damp, but she made no move to lift it. She would not sniffle or shift. Discipline

mattered to Paul, and she had learned to match him. Still, she could not stop her tears.

One cadet had reminded her of the child she had imagined and then forced herself not to think about. Now he was everywhere: in the stiff collars, in the silence between verses, in the way Paul stood so terribly still at the coffin's side. She wondered if he remembered the baby they never named.

Paul had been in London for a month, returning only days after the accident. She had spent Christmas alone; he had spent it as a guest of the British Air Ministry. She did not cry until she reached him at the airport, relief breaking through her control. He brought a war back with him as casually as some men brought imported cigarettes.

When the hymn ended, she rose, knees slow to unlock. Whatever the war demanded of Paul, she would support him—not because he needed her, but because these boys did. If she could not be mother to one, she would be mother to many.

Still, doubt crept in. Was aviation salvation or seduction? However brave or brilliant a boy was, he could fall fast and finally.

Nineteen-year-old Alfred T. Lloyd of Radnor, Wales, had flown his Stearman solo for the first time less than a week earlier. His landing was perfect. That night, his friends came for him—laughing, shouting, carrying him from his room for the ritual dunking that celebrated a successful solo. Lloyd had helped dunk another boy the week before.

They tossed him into the swimming pool—the same pool Paul had fought the Army to include, believing it essential to morale and health.

Lloyd surfaced once, then vanished.

At first they thought he was joking. Then came silence. Then panic. One cadet dove in, then another. They dragged him to the edge, lips already blue. They tried compressions, mouth-to-mouth, pounding his chest. Help arrived too late.

The minister, unfamiliar with foreign rolls, reversed the boy's name, calling him Lloyd Alfred. No one corrected him. His family, an ocean away, could not.

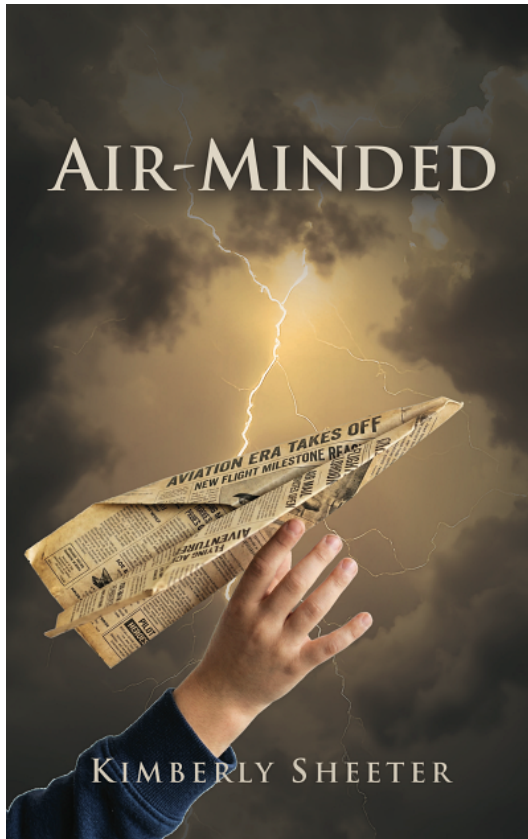
The accident merited a few inches in the local papers, lost among the farm reports and livestock auctions. Paul told reporters hazing was strictly prohibited. "It has never been permitted in our schools," he said. "What happened was a tragic departure from the rules."

Privately, the word cut deep. Hazing had followed him since boyhood—at Annapolis, and later in the Air Corps. Now, as the man in charge, he could not keep it from claiming one of his own.

When the cadets filed out, the Florida sun hit them hard. They would leave one of their own behind in a foreign field, in the British Plot at Oak Ridge Cemetery in Arcadia.

Grace lingered. Her tears had thinned to traces. She would not let anyone see her falter. Purpose would replace grief.

That night, she watched Paul work through the paperwork, each sheet another weight. He said little; she asked nothing. He signed again and again, the ink beginning to blur as his hand shook. Every form translated a boy into a line item. Administrators needed records. The parents would need a story. Grace thought only this: even after a perfect landing, they can still die.



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