

David Cotterrell: An Airman's Ecstasy

Date: 16th May 2010

Materials:

DVCAM video, custom web-based live sub-titling and broadcast software (developed by Rob Smith).

A live broadcast, sub-titled film documenting gliders over the historic airfield at RAF Cranwell

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 windswept heights with easy grace
Where never lark, or even 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.

John Gillespie Magee (1922 - 41)

Magee's poem was written in 1941, three months before his death during a training flight aged 19. The grass airfield at Cranwell, from where he flew to 30,000 feet and found the inspiration for his poem, is still owned by the RAF but is now occupied by gliders.

The poem, location and activity had some personal significance to Cotterrell, in that his grandfather had been through similar training, perhaps at the same location as he began his six war years within bomber command. Surviving the war, his grandfather maintained his love of flight, but described his horror at the effect of high-octane fuel on airmen, and in his later years found that flying unpowered sail-planes offered a way to maintain a relationship to the freedom of flight, without the terrible reference to war.

Cotterrell's live broadcast followed the circling gliders above Cranwell while overlaying the words of Magee, in a short transient homage to the strange contradictory nature of the experience of flight within conflict.

David Cotterrell



An Airman's Ecstasy- John Gillespie Magee 1922-41

Screenshot from live web-cast of film Credit: David Cotterrell (2010)