WINGS OVER AMERICA

ACME

HARRY BRUNO (third from left), Chairman, Awards Committee, International League of Aviators, at White House as President Roosevelt awards Harmon Trophy for outstanding airman of 1939 to Major Alexander P. de Seversky. Present at ceremony are Lieut. Colonel C. W. Kerwood, President, American Section, I.L.A., and the late Major-General Herbert L. Dargue (right).

WINGS OVER AMERICA

The Inside Story of American Aviation

By HARRY BRUNO

Introduction by
MAJOR ALEXANDER P. DE SEVERSKY

Illustrated

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Dedicated to the

QUIET BIRDMEN

who are still with us, and to those who have Gone West—a mighty squadron whose efforts have helped make aviation progress and have written aviation progress in the air

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INTRODUCTION

By Major Alexander P. de Seversky

One of the things that has emerged most sharply in the first months of American participation in the world war for survival is the superb quality of American airmen. In its leadership and in its rank-and-file, our aviation personnel has proved itself peerless, not merely in the matter of courage and audacity—these are matters of course for Americans—but in technical skill and boundless resourcefulness.

Like all the democracies, the United States was caught by the global crisis virtually unprepared. Even after the conflict actually started in Europe, we shied away from the inevitable. Stubbornly we counted on some miracle to protect us from the conflagration. It would be a short war anyhow, we hoped. The German morale was cracking. Hitler didn't have the oil and other strategic materials. Passive assistance, as the arsenal of democracy, would weight the scales of victory for the democracies without direct American participation.

Then came Pearl Harbor and the rude shock to wishful-thinking and lethargy. We were awake, and suddenly aware of our inability to strike back. Confronted with determined, well prepared foes who employed new strategies and new weapons, we could counter only with traditional orthodox ideas and with weapons that were both outmoded and insufficient. We realized that war had been lifted into the third dimension; the struggle was not primarily on the surface where we had expected it, but in the skies. In a kind

of panic we spread what little aerial force we had in all directions—everywhere too late and too little, and nearly everywhere inferior in the quality of equipment.

From the outset it was clear that Japan, possessing superior aviation equipment and numbers, would spread its mastery through the skies of the entire southwestern Pacific. For a moment, indeed, it looked as if our situation was hopeless. The technological handicap seemed too great to overcome. Yet the tide of Japanese conquest was stemmed! The gallantry and sheer ability of our aviation personnel, their tactical knowledge and inborn mechanical talents, overcame the handicap. The enemy was fought to a standstill.

There has been an unfortunate tendency in some quarters to exaggerate the quality of some of our aircraft. Miracles performed by our airmen have been unfairly credited to the machines rather than the men. In justice to these men, it should be emphasized that in the Pacific and elsewhere we have frequently scored against enemy aviation *despite* the inadequacy of our equipment.

The matchless mettle of our flying men is not an accident. It is the end-product of a history of achievement that stretches from the very first flight of the Wright brothers to our own day. And this book by Harry Bruno is a fitting, able and highly valuable acknowledgment of that fact.

The small group of American aeronautical pioneers was closely welded by their common faith in flying into a knighthood of the skies. They were sustained, often in the face of skepticism, indifference and disaster, by their keen sense of the future, by their profound conviction that air power was destined to shape the world, in war and in peace alike. As the circle of aviation enthusiasts grew, newcomers were caught up by the almost religious fervor for the cause of flying which inspired the pioneers. The world is familiar

with groups of men emotionally consecrated to some idea of social reform. But here was a strange phenomenon: the same sort of consecration to a technological cause!

In its early stages aviation was more of an art than a science. The techniques had not yet been clarified and every flier was in a sense an innovator, daring and improvising and dreaming far beyond immediate technical possibilities. Our airmen were inspired by the challenge of gravity, by visions of fantastic speeds that would shrink the world to a neighborhood. They labored incessantly and selflessly, determined to solve a multitude of problems. Like all true artists and dreamers, the thought of personal gain was far from their minds. I knew many of them intimately and I can attest that they would rather have starved in aviation than made fortunes in other fields of activity.

These were the addicts of flying, happy only in a cockpit, with the wind lashing their faces. When the aeronautical business finally became respectable and profits began to accrue, these were reaped for the most part by business men and financiers. The aviation "crackpots" were too absorbed in the actual workings of their craft to pay much heed to financial exploitation. Small wonder that so many solid citizens of the banking and manufacturing type who were drawn into the industry looked on the enthusiasts as strange, unpredictable creatures, and treated them as mere thrill-chasers. They were unable to comprehend that it was not a chase for thrills, but a purposeful straining for aviation progress and a relentless experimentation at the risk of life and limb.

I repeat, it was not business but a consecration to the aviation cause, though I fear that only airmen can quite understand what I mean. That devotion to flying permeated the whole industry personnel, from pilot to engineer to the humblest helper and mechanic. It is a telltale fact that for

years workers in the aviation plants earned a great deal less than corresponding workers in other industries. As head of an aviation company, I talked to hundreds of these men and know that they preferred to remain in aviation, despite higher earnings open to them elsewhere. Every riveter was attached to his rivet gun, every sheetmetal worker to his bench by a deep interest in his job. Not until the war years were aviation wages brought up to equality with automotive wages.

I have had considerable opportunity to meet aeronautical folk the world over. Just before the outbreak of this war, for instance, I was in many European countries and made contact with every variety of aviation man. On the basis of personal knowledge, therefore, I want to attest that we in America have the finest body of aeronautical men in the world. They are unsurpassed anywhere for creative imagination, ingenuity, flying talent and devotion to their chosen calling.

The contribution of the airmen in our flying services has been, in a sense, even more remarkable than in the civilian domain. The civil airman could find at least the satisfaction of public acclaim for their feats. The personnel in the flying services took the same chances in ordinary line of duty, and had only their inner satisfaction as reward.

As aviation gathered momentum, it inevitably encroached on older forms of transport. It cut through old patterns of thought in the military fields. Naturally these encroachments aroused opposition. The old always throws up barriers against the new; it is almost a law of nature. Artificial handicaps were imposed on the development of aeronautics. Fatuous attempts were made to fit a three-dimensional idea into a two-dimensional framework. For the aviation fraternity that meant a fight. Many of its leaders—among

whom General "Billy" Mitchell ranks so high—were obliged to appeal to the people of the country.

They brought the struggle for aviation into the open, through articles, radio, books. Today the fight is still under way, but the grim reality of a war for survival has added to the significance of that struggle. Convinced that air power must be given primacy in the war effort, that it holds the only key to victory, we openly demand the right of way for air power. We demand its emancipation from earthbound minds, and its unification as a separate military arm. The men who are most aware of this need are the seasoned students of air strategy who now lead our aviation on so many fighting fronts. Though silent, bound by a necessary and justified discipline, they are in fact even more deeply conscious than the rest of us of the importance of freeing our air power from the bondage of obsolete strategic ideas.

Harry Bruno has done not merely a noble but a profoundly necessary thing in paying tribute to America's aviation pioneers. By focussing attention at this time on the aeronautical fraternity, on its ideals and its struggles, he has rendered a direct service to the war effort. He has underlined the fact that aviation is not just another weapon, not just an extension of old methods, but a totally new species of machine, operating in a different medium and calling for a different sort of mind to lead it.

The old strategy, based on old implements of war, has in large measure become obsolete. The leadership that has been conditioned to think and act only within the bounds of that strategy cannot be trusted to make the utmost use of the aerial weapon. We haven't the time for them to learn by trial and error. The best we can hope from them is that they will learn from disaster and rush to imitate the enemy.

who inflicted the disaster. What we need, however, is not imitation but creative leadership. We must somehow break through orthodoxies, must bring daring imagination into play, must out-think and out-plan the Axis through new, revolutionary concepts.

Only airmen, steeped in their own element, can provide such leadership. Harry Bruno's great service is that he has succeeded in conveying the spirit of such men in terms of their careers. He has provided a heartening record in that he makes clear that America has no dearth of aviation brains and leadership. We have scores of brilliant men who have devoted all their lives to the science of flying; men who ate and slept and dreamed and lived aeronautics; who in a sense are an embodiment of the aviation idea.

It should be noted, moreover, that the author of this book has himself made a large contribution to the aviation fraternity and the cause of air power. As an organizer of the Quiet Birdmen, which came into being after the end of World War I, Harry Bruno and a group of close friends labored unselfishly to spread the air-power idea through the nation; indeed, through the world. They organized chapters (which they called Hangars) in every city and town of the nation. Their efforts are now paying dividends that will help to save America and human civilization.

The United Nations will win this war through superior science, or they will not win it at all. We must cut loose from the past and embark on audacious new strategies, with air power as their core. We must utilize our superior technological set-up to spring intellectual suprises, in machines and strategic innovations, on the enemy. And thus it will be that the dreamers, the pioneers, of yesterday's aviation will become the realists and leaders of today and tomorrow. The dynamics of air power are so intensive that we must plan