Blueprints of a Golden Age: Collecting the History of Interwar Aviation  
By Mark Van Bergen

In 1918, on the heels of “The War to End All Wars,” airplanes made of wood and fabric were still staggering through the skies. Only 23 years later, in 1941, jet aircraft started to appear and all-aluminum airplanes pushed against the sound barrier. Those 23 years are considered the Golden Age of Aviation. Such an awe-inspiring leap in knowledge, exploration and technology occurred in that time period that it still continues to affect our everyday lives. This era was driven forward by innovators and explorers such as Charles Lindbergh, Amelia Earhart, Wiley Post, and Jack Northrup, people who risked life and reputation to push farther, faster, and higher. It was filled with planes that soared to new heights, did impossible things, and left us with a sense of romance and adventure that captivates us to this day. Developments in this time period included the transition from wood and fabric to steel and aluminum, the evolution from 60 horsepower rotary engines to 1500 horsepower V12s and jet engines, and advances in navigation that took pilots from following train tracks to flying across vast oceans in order to land on small islands.

It is this period, my favorite period of aviation, that I have tried to capture in the collection presented here. The books that I have selected are all published in this era with the specific subject of contemporary aviation. My collection spans genres from fictional books written about the adventurous spirit of pilots to biographies of the aviation heros of the time. It contains technical manuals on fabrication, maintenance and piloting of these aircraft, and includes summaries, histories and predictions regarding the field of aviation as well. I assembled this collection of books and publications in order to best capture the progress and adventure of this era of aviation.

My interest in this topic stems from a lifelong obsession with flight. I cannot remember a time when aviation has not consumed my thoughts and dreams. As soon as I learned I could grow up to be an aeronautical engineer, that is what I knew I had to do. This passion drives me to get my Aeronautics masters degree at Stanford University, and it is with that passion that I collected these books and manuals. I add to my collection of aviation books whenever I get the chance, and I now own over 220 books about all facets of aviation. From those 220 books, one special collection has always held my interest, and that is the group of 28 books I present here. I acquired these books from used book stores, libraries, air museums, garager sales, and friends and family. Originally I had intended my chosen collection to include additional books, published later, about the interwar period. Ultimately, I decided to focus on what I see as the true heart of the collection: the contemporary books that represent the time period and carry the history not only in their words but in their bindings and pages as well.

My desire to collect books on this subject and from this time period stems from my feeling that this time period of aviation often gets pushed to the back of historians and enthusiasts minds, despite its title of “Golden Age.” This era is flanked and usually overshadowed in terms of interest by two world wars, and the airplanes and developments are outclassed and outdated in terms of speed and range by today's aircraft -- so the community has seemingly lost interest in this incredible era. I wish to preserve and share the knowledge, the stories, and the technologies of this era, and in my mind the best way to do that is in the same way all of this information was originally stored and disseminated: through the books of the time.
The books in this collection fall into two main groupings: technical manuals and contemporary histories, the latter of which includes biographical accounts and fictional works about aviation. I selected books from both of these groups for the collection as they each contribute their own unique perspective on the time period. The technical works, such as pilot training manuals, maintenance manuals and navigational atlases, are invaluable primary sources for understanding the technology available at the time and how it was utilised. The contemporary histories capture the people, aircraft, and explorations of this era. These histories help bring the era to life by giving the interwar period and its aircraft a humanity and romance that help us more fully understand the effect of aviation in this time period.

In the interwar period, information was primarily stored and accessed through books and libraries. The technical books in this collection were, at the time, how the most cutting edge information was shared. For this reason, preserving and collecting books such as these preserves the information, so that we can learn from the techniques, successes, and mistakes of the past. The history of technology can help humanity to further itself; countless ideas have been tried, some good ones have succeeded, some have been forgotten. We have also made many aviation mistakes that are bound to be repeated if we do not learn from them. In preserving this collection of technical books, I seek to not only preserve the history of aviation, but also to produce a resource that can help us fly forward into the future.

Some noteworthy examples of technical books in this collection include *Air Navigation* (Weems, 1938), *Aviation Handbook* (Warner, 1931), *Airplane Mechanics Rigging Handbook* (Hartz, 1930), and *Airways of America* (Lobeck, 1938). *Air Navigation* is a training manual and reference manual for aerial navigators, published in 1938. It contains countless diagrams, charts, and descriptions of navigational methods. This book is a snapshot in the development of aerial navigation in a time of great transition in that field. *Aviation Handbook* is an early attempt at publishing a book that thoroughly describes the methods and data one would need to design, build, fix, and fly an aircraft. It is interesting to note that in the aeronautical engineering field to this day, we still use much of the same data, although it has been expanded upon and more thoroughly explored. The *Airplane Mechanics Rigging Handbook* is of particular interest because it lays out a technique that all but died at the end of the interwar period, that of aircraft rigging. In the early days of aviation and up until the end of the interwar period, aircraft were built out of wood and fabric. These lightweight materials necessitated that some parts of the aircraft be rigged with cabling and wires. This book describes the techniques to rig and tune an aircraft, which is quickly becoming a lost art. Books like this one preserve aviation techniques and processes that are otherwise bordering on extinction. Finally, the atlas *Airways of America* is fascinating because it shows how seemingly primitive some of the technologies used in this era of exploration were. This book is a navigational aid with beautiful maps and landmark photographs, which helped interwar pilots identify the world streaming past below, so that they could know where they were, when to turn, and where to land.

So many incredible aviation exploits filled the interwar period. The historical or bibliographic works in my collection capture these events as accurately as possible while remaining true to their time. While histories compiled by modern authors are perhaps more detailed and complete, the contemporary stories share intimate information unavailable in modern histories. For example, in the book *Flying with Lindbergh* (1929), Keyhoe describes his personal adventures, challenges, and accomplishments that he shared with one of aviation’s greatest figures, Charles Lindbergh, most famous for his solo flight across the Atlantic. Accounts like Keyhoe’s give us a sense of participating in the experiences they describe, and give us, the
readers, a chance to feel closer to people like Lindbergh rather than just knowing the details of their life histories. Other historical books in the collection include yearbooks and summaries of aviation such as *The World’s Wings* (Davis, 1927), which tells of the greatest feats, planes, and pilots that were contributing to exploration in the field at the time. They provide pictures and descriptions of planes that, unless observed from the contemporary viewpoint delivered by these works, would be glossed over or forgotten. Some of these books, such as *Victory Through Air Power* (de Seversky, 1942), seek to use the lessons learned at the time to predict further into the future. These books use the knowledge of contemporary aircraft and techniques to extrapolate and show a future that we know never came, or to predict events and technologies that did ultimately occur. These fascinating books give us a glimpse of what course people of the interwar period expected aviation to take. Finally, the fictional works in the collection show us the aspects of interwar aviation that captured public interest and pull us into the world of interwar aviation through fictional characters created in that time period. *The Steep Ascent* (Lindbergh, 1944) is an excellent example of this because Anne Morrow Lindbergh wrote a story of flying based on her own experience of flying all over the world with her husband Charles, and includes in it details otherwise only available through firsthand experience.

This collection of published works from aviation’s Golden Age between the world wars, originating from my ongoing personal interest, has evolved into an effort to preserve the history of aviation in the interwar period. I will strive to continue expanding and sharing this collection so that others can experience and learn from this incredible era of aeronautical development, adventure, romance, and exploration.
Bibliography


An account of the Royal Air Force from the Air Ministries perspective up until 1936. It chronicles the RAF in both the first world war as well as in the early interwar period. The copy in the collection is a hardcover that has some damage and staining on the cover.


A publication of Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company, an airship manufacturer at the time, this book tells the history of airships as well as the contemporary state of the technology and the many virtues of the designs. The copy in the collection is a hard cover in good condition with a beautifully designed and decorated embossed binding cover.


A buying catalogue of aircraft and a summary of aviation for the year of 1941. It lays out all of the major aircraft being produced for sale in the year of 1941 and is interspersed with ads for aviation technologies and services. The copy in the collection is a hard cover with damages and repairs to many of the pages.


This handbook covers the methods for fabricating aircraft out of sheet metal as well as the different materials used and their properties. This technology was still relatively new at the time of this book’s publishing, with many aircraft still containing or relying on fabric for their main construction. The copy in the collection is in good condition.


A reference book for aviation terminology and definitions, this book is an almost encyclopedic summary of aviation at the time of its printing. The copy in the collection is in very good condition.


This book extensively describes the technologies, components and specific models of aircraft engines from the time period of the books publishing. This book was an excellent resource for mechanics of the era, not only by describing the technologies, but also by teaching how to fix, tune, and repair the complex machine that was the aircraft engine. The copy in the collection is in good condition.


This book is the firsthand account of Richard Byrd’s first flight over the North Pole in 1926. This flight is a great example of the exploration in the interwar period. Throughout the firsthand account he describes the technologies, techniques, and aircraft of the interwar period. The copy in the collection is a hardcover in good condition, but missing its dust cover.

A contemporary, fictional account of flying in the American Army Air Corps in the interwar period. The copy in the collection is a first edition in decent condition but missing its dust cover.


This book is a survey of aviation throughout the world at the time of its printing. It covers the many nations involved in aviation and discusses both military and civilian aviation. This book does an excellent job of showing the incredible variation of designs during the interwar period. The copy in the collection is a hard copy in decent condition with slight fading to its cover.


A prediction of how the future of military aviation will affect the way war is waged. Published in 1942, this book outlines the tactics and technologies developed and tested in the interwar period. The book is written by Alexander P. de Seversky, aircraft designer and head of the Seversky Aircraft Corporation. The copy in the collection is a hard cover in good condition but without the dust jacket.


An almost autobiographical piece created by splicing together entries from Amelia Earhart’s own journal about her final trip attempting an around-the-world flight. The copy in the collection is a first edition.

Describing the art of aircraft rigging, this handbook covers everything from the wood used in aircraft structures of the time to the proper way to prepare a parachute prior to flying. This book shows the types of materials, construction techniques, and geometries of aircraft in the interwar period. The copy in the collection is in very good condition.


This book acts as an instruction book, textbook, and manual for pilots in training and prospective pilots. It has a description of piloting techniques at the time, and includes enough background information about flying and aviation to educate a prospective pilot who had never flown. The copy in this collection is in very good condition with minimal wear.

This book was written by Bulgaria's first aeronautical engineer to serve as an introduction to future pilots who wanted to learn about aviation and how to fly. This book describes aviation history, gives a basic knowledge of how aircraft work, and describes how one goes about piloting and working on aircraft. This book was extraordinarily popular in the time that it was published. The copy in this collection is in good condition with very minor wear on the cover.

Keyhoe, Donald E. *Flying with Lindbergh*. New York, NY, Grosset and Dunlap, 1929.

A biographical book about aviation pioneer Charles Lindbergh written by a naval aviator and manager of Lindbergh’s cross country publicity tour after his trans-Atlantic flight. The author talks about Lindbergh in a firsthand way that gives the reader the feeling of a personal relationship with Lindbergh. The copy in this collection is a 4th printing of the book and was a library copy. It is in worn condition, and the binding has been replaced.


A small manual describing the basic components and technologies aboard planes of the time. This manual familiarized practicing aircraft and engine mechanics with the technologies described within, and also educated prospective mechanics. The copy in this collection is a first edition in good condition.


This is a non-fiction account of pilot Dick Hilton learning how to fly for the US Navy at the Pensacola navy training field. The book in this collection is hard cover copy in decent condition but without a dust jacket.

A manual for aircraft mechanics, this technical book describes the engine and maintenance technologies of the time period, and how to inspect, repair, and adjust aircraft. This book is a very good snapshot of the technologies of time, as it describes their workings in great detail. The copy in this collection is in good condition.


A firsthand account of pioneering flights where Anne Morrow Lindbergh (the author) and her husband Charles Lindbergh explored the southern trans-Atlantic air routes for Pan-American Airways in 1933. The copy in this collection have is an early edition, missing its dust jacket but in otherwise good condition.


A fiction novella about a pregnant wife flying with her husband on a flight over the Alps. Inspired by Anne Morrow Lindbergh’s flights with her husband. Written after the interwar period but describing aviation as it was in the interwar period. The copy in this collection is a first edition with the dust cover intact.


An atlas of united air routes from New York to San Francisco with detailed maps of each leg of the route. This book demonstrates the state of aerial navigation at the time of its printing. It has a map of each leg of the flight, along with pictures and diagrams of landmarks for the pilot to find and follow. The book also contains a description of other methods of navigation, as well as a chapter on predicting weather along the route. This book is in fair condition. It has a broken binding and a worn cover but the pages are still in excellent condition.

This is a manual for a quartermaster course on naval aviation mechanics at the US Navy Gas Engine School. This course covers everything from mathematics for mechanics to the fabrication and repair methods for naval aircraft. This course also lays out the specifications for multiple naval aircraft, including flying boat and float-type seaplanes. The copy in this collection is in worn but decent condition.


A yearbook of aviation to summarize the state of aviation for 1936. This book summarizes the most innovative and exciting aircraft of the year and describes their specifications, and does the same for some of the engines developed during the year. This book also describes some of the most important flights and aerial exploration of the year. The copy in this collection is an ex-library copy in good condition.

An overview of the state of gliding in 1930, this book contains both a history of gliding up until that year as well as the current practices in both glider construction and piloting. This book takes a look at gliding as a whole and describes to the reader how to construct and fly the gliders of the time. The copy in this collection is a hardcover 4th edition in good condition.


This handbook covers all technical aspects of aviation, from aerodynamics to structural analysis. Included in this handbook are all the engineering data necessary for aircraft design, displayed in tables, diagrams, and charts. The copy in this collection is a softcover first edition in good condition.

This manual of aerial navigation shows the techniques practiced at the time to navigate an aircraft in flight. This book served as an educational textbook for training navigators. The extensive maps and diagrams in this book show the state of the art of aerial navigation during the interwar period. The copy in this collection is a softcover in good condition with only minor wear to the cover.

*Aero Digest*. April 1936.

This magazine outlines the aviation accomplishments and aircraft developed in the year 1936. This magazine is also full of advertisements for technologies and services related to aviation. It is an excellent snapshot of aviation in the year 1936. The copy in this collection is in worn but intact condition.

A paper manual for civil pilot training in 1941. It outlines the protocols and methods for civilian flying. The copy in this collection is in good condition with slight use evident.