



## Biggles Learns To Fly

*W.E. Johns*

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Sep 1916 Norfolk Flying School trains dogged delicate-looking Bigglesworth 16. He ships to France on less than 15 air hours. Though gunner Mark saves his first flight, hot dogfights force him to learn or die. Downed twice over Lines, he evades and chases Boche in air and on land, plans new tactics against Hun circuses, drops French spy.

## Biggles Learns To Fly Details

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# From Reader Review Biggles Learns To Fly for online ebook

## John Sheahan says

Less romantic of war flying than I remembered

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## Hans says

B2: This book is old, and its story much older (halfway WW-1), but I still like it. Why?  
It's thin enough to be appealing to young readers and contains modest adventures to keep them reading.  
But meanwhile, it paints a picture of England / France of a century ago.  
The coming-of-age of a boy in troubled times, not shying away, or playing down the horrors of death.

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## Claire Bonello says

How did they let this man write so many books. Amusing at rare moments, but I don't regret not reading these books as a young girl. Also very happy to not need to be a war pilot.

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## Owen Townend says

While Biggles is a classic of its time, I'm not sure it would fly with today's youth.

The most obvious issue would be the 'Hun' and other derogatory terms for our current German allies. However the 'Wilko, Old Man' lingo also seems a far cry from common parlance now. I daresay it's a little amusing to my young ears.

However what certainly isn't quaint is the attention to detail in this book. I would argue that it is so rich and precise it might elevate the story to something easier for adults to follow and appreciate. Considering that the old wartime fascination has largely passed from recent generations, I am not entirely sure any boys or girls of the intended age bracket would gravitate towards a title like this now.

Personally I enjoyed its evocative sense of history and Biggles' naive beginnings. I didn't enjoy its dense strategic prose.

I would recommend this book to those interested in WW1 aircraft, of all ages.

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## Andrew Ives says

Although Biggles may be reknowned as 'for children', this is actually pretty well-written, historically accurate and perfectly grown-up in most of the vocabulary used. Johns writes with enthusiasm and clearly

knows his subject very well indeed. This book is set in 1916-17 although written in the 1930s, set mostly in Northern France and reads more like a set of 16 closely-related and chronologically-arranged episodes, rather than a single novel. Biggles flies a variety of planes as they are developed and he improves as a pilot, as do the enemy. My biggest reservation is that at 204 pages, this already gets a little samey, a little too 'Boys' Own' occasionally, and the proofreading is less than impeccable at times. Maybe Johns just became swept up in the excitement of his own action scenes. This was interesting enough, but I can't imagine anyone reading all 102 Biggles books! 3.25/5

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### **Chris Lightfoot says**

As an avid buff of all things aviation since being a young boy, I can't for the life of me work out why I've just read a Biggles book for the first time! Amazing. I would have loved it 30+ years ago and I loved it now. Full of excitement. I have bought a boxed set of numerous Biggles books so can't wait to continue with reading the next instalment!

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### **Clare O'Beara says**

James Bigglesworth aged seventeen joined the army in 1916 and got posted to the as-yet unnamed Royal Flying Corps. He was a Second Lieutenant and after nine hours of solo flying he was sent to the Front in France. The biplanes were extremely new to war and had been used first for observation, then machine guns and bomb racks were fitted. Triplanes (known as tripehounds) were also in use on the German side. The planes such as Sopwith Pups were made of spruce wood and piano wire, and did not have the luxury of fuel gauges or parachutes.

This book was not the first written of the series but Capt. Johns is undoubtedly recalling his own youth and days in the fighter squadrons. He wrote it in 1935 and must have been amazed by how fast the aviation world had taken off and become sophisticated.

Reading the book we get reminded that the trenches stretched from the French or Belgian coast to the borders of Switzerland. Artillery were often shelling a position they could not see so planes were sent up to spot for them and the basic but effective signalling in use is described. We also see that cavalry was still in use and the unpleasantness of trench warfare is experienced a few times during crash landings, when the young officer is happy to escape back to his own lines.

The people and stress of those early days of aerial combat are extremely well realised, so that a young reader will be thrilled and a mature reader left gasping at the bravery involved. I had read many of the series but not this book, and was delighted to get a chance to read it as reissued for the centenary of the Great War. I'd hoped that Johns might have mentioned something of Biggles' family or home but this is not the case.

To my mind the WW1 books are the best written of the series. Biggles starred in many books but later became a one-dimensional figure as Johns wrote what his publishers told him that boys wanted to read. You may also be interested in 'Biggles - the Authorised Biography' by John Pearson which treats the character as though he was a real person.

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## Olivia says

\*does a happy little squeal\*

Does anyone have this same problem...you find a WW1 or WW2 book (not Christian) that looks interesting and hope, hope, hope that it isn't full of language? Then you go home and the first several pages are full of swear word after swear word? I've done this much too often. So when I found several Biggles books at the charity shop yesterday I was a little incredulous. I heard about these books awhile ago, and though they looked like good books for boys.

And I'm sooo happy! This was full of flying during the Great War...and nothing else. It is clean and Biggles personality and valor during his flying won me over. I know my brother is going to love this and I'm hoping the other books are just as good.

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## Rachel Brown says

Johns was one of those British men of a certain era with a biography that sounds that it can't possibly be true, featuring more heroics, odd incidents, narrow escapes, and prolific writing than one would expect from any twelve reasonably adventurous people. He was a fighter pilot in WWI, where he had a number of exciting incidents, including accidentally shooting off his own propeller, culminating in being shot down and taken prisoner. He then became an RAF recruiting officer, and rejected T. E. Lawrence for giving a false name. Mostly after this, he wrote 160 books, including 100 about ace pilot Biggles. (I cribbed this from his Wikipedia article, which is well worth reading.)

These books were hugely popular in the UK for while, and are probably still easier to find there. They were also reasonably popular in India when I was there. I virtually never see them in the US, and had I known this I would have obtained some before leaving India. They weren't huge favorites of mine, but I did enjoy them and they are excellent for researching early aviation and fighting tactics, such as they were; Johns notes that WWI pilots were not formally taught to fight, but had to learn on the job. Casualty rates were high.

*Biggles Learns to Fly* is a solid, if episodic, adventure story; the interest is in the very realistic details. It takes new pilots time to learn to spot enemy aircraft while flying, even when a more experienced gunner is screaming that they're on top of him, because they're not used to scanning in three dimensions. It fascinated me to read the details of such early, primitive aircraft and aerial warfare. Pilots communicated with hand-signals, and Biggles was sent on his first combat mission after something like ten hours of solo flying.

Here's an excerpt from the very last page, after yet another heroic action.

*Major Mullen shot a glance at Biggles, noting his white face and trembling hands. He had seen the signs. He had seen them too often not to recognize them. The pitcher can go too often to the well, and, as he knew from grim experience, the best of nerves cannot indefinitely stand the strain of air combat.*

The Major sends him off for a week's rest.

This is what we would now call combat stress (acute stress in civilians), which may or may not be a precursor to PTSD. (It becomes PTSD if it doesn't go away.) I found it interesting because of how matter-of-

fact and sympathetic Johns is, depicting it as something that happens to everyone and doesn't reflect badly on Biggles. Some other writing from WWI sees it as a sign of cowardice or mental/moral deficiency. Possibly he would not have been so sympathetic if Biggles wasn't back in reasonably good shape after his rest. Or possibly the RAF had a different attitude. Then again, the book was written in 1935. Benefit of hindsight?

That's also a good example of the tone in general; emotions are noted but not dwelled upon. We only get enough of anyone's interior life to make their actions make sense.

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### **Neil says**

A trip down memory lane, so this review is nostalgia-tinted. It's dated in various ways, but I really enjoyed reading Biggles again. This is based on Johns' own experience as a beginner pilot in WW1, so almost felt educational at times. A very easy read, but at times sobering.

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### **Manny says**

I'm not completely sure, but I think this is the one with the fatal love story. I read it when I was about 8, and I had never read a fatal love story before. It made a lasting impression on me.

So Biggles, who's in his late teens, is a dashing WW I fighter pilot in France, and one day he makes a forced landing at this little French farm. "My mag stopped," he explains to the beautiful mademoiselle who comes out to see what the biplane's doing in their orchard. "Your bag?" she asks, not quite understanding what he's talking about. But apparently it's just the phrase to win a gorgeous French chick's heart, because he's invited back. On the third or fourth visit, he kisses her. "I think my bag stopped..." she sighs. Awwww! Biggles is in lurve. He's never been so happy in his life.

Then... tragedy! He discovers that, oh no, the lovely mademoiselle is really a German spy! She only wanted top-secret information about his Sopwith Camel, which I suppose was the Stealth Bomber of its time. Biggles turns up for a rendezvous, and she's already escaping in a car together with her shady accomplice.

Foolish girl. How could a car ever outrun an airplane? Biggles pursues, his heart full of rage and grief. The shady accomplice pushes the gas pedal all the way down. And, on a sharp bend, they come off the road. He and the treacherous French chick are both instantly killed.

I saw the films much later, but in my memory this scene is inextricably linked to the beginning of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* and the end of *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*. ("All the time in the world", if you remember). They're both by Ian Fleming. Maybe he also read it? I never thought of that before!

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### **Mr Karl says**

I enjoyed it a lot

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## **Robin Rowles says**

Biggles Learns To Fly was first published by Boy's Friend Library, London in 1935, while the events were fresh in the author's mind, long before there was any talk of Hitler and a Second World War.

In September 1916, a seventeen-year-old officer (James Bigglesworth – otherwise known as Biggles, 'the author') appeared in the doorway of one of the narrow wooden huts that had sprung up all over England during the previous eighteen months. He was wearing his distinctive uniform of the Royal Flying Corps. Apart from his Sam Browne belt, still squeaking when he moved, like a pair of new boots, there was little about him to distinguish him from thousands of others in whose ears the call to arms had sounded in vain, and who were doing precisely the same thing in various parts of the country. Indeed, there was nothing remarkable, or even martial, about his physique; on the contrary, he was slim, rather below average height, and somewhat delicate-looking.

During the past two months, Biggles had learnt the art of flying at 'ground' school; an aerodrome in Norfolk known as No 17 Flying Training School, where great looming buildings with hangars, housed an extraordinary collection of hastily built aeroplanes.

Remarkably, Biggles, with less than fifteen hours flying experience, finds himself on the cross-Channel boat to France. Once there, he is sent to tackle the enemy in the hostile skies over First World War France – that were often considered as suicidal missions! In a theatre of war where instinct and lightning-fast reactions are the most important skills that a person can possess.

As far as Biggles was concerned, he had to learn to be a real flier quickly – or die... To his credit, he picked up the art of war-flying with an aptitude that amazed everyone, particularly his flight-commander.

I understand that some people have questioned the author's 'footnotes', but please, let's not forget that this book was originally written in 1935 – and anyway, I found the 'footnotes' most helpful and extremely informative, admittedly, because of my own personal knowledge of such military activities and aviation facts, being somewhat limited!

What I really liked about this well-written book is the fact that the writer's own experiences have been credited as being much the same as described, in this highly entertaining story. So, overall, I found this book well worth reading.

I'm sure this story will have a wide appeal to lots of young readers, as well as a wiser and more mature reader because it 'highlights' the 'nerve and sheer bravery', that those pilots undoubtedly possessed!

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## **Dru says**

Biggles got off to a shaky start, but I was relieved to find that not only did he learn to fly but he also avoided getting killed, which is probably just as well.

The book still reads well after a forty (or so) year gap since I last read it. Drama and excitement, tick.

Horrors of war, tick. The occasional lyrical description of flying, likewise tick.

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### **Trish says**

Decided on a change of pace and thought this was probably a good choice for a first Biggles book, given the whole 'learns to fly' thing. Very much a product of the Boy's Own "get the hun" mentality, and doesn't need a lot of intellectual engagement, but enjoyable.

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