

High Flight

by

Pilot Officer John Gillespie Magee, Jr.

September 3, 1941

*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 wind-swept heights with easy grace
Where never lark nor 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.*

You all know this poem. Most pilots can recite it from memory. But how many of you know about John Magee, the pilot who composed the words while piloting a Spitfire on a test flight to 30,000 feet over England in September 1941. He sent it to his parents on the back of a letter saying, "I am enclosing a verse I wrote the other day. It started at 30,000 feet, and was finished soon after I landed."

Magee was born in Shanghai, China, of missionary parents - an American father and an English mother. He won a scholarship to Yale, but instead, like so many young men of his time, joined the Royal Canadian Air Force in late 1940, trained in Canada, and was sent to Britain. He lost his life at age 19 on December 11, 1941, after his Spitfire collided with another airplane over England. He is buried, along with other RCAF

colleagues, in the graveyard in Scopwick village, Lincolnshire, 2 miles from RAF Digby.

Magee's parents lived in Washington, D.C., at the time of his death, and the sonnet came to the attention of the Librarian of Congress, Archibald MacLeish. He acclaimed Magee the first poet of the War, and included the poem in an exhibition of poems of "faith and freedom" at the Library of Congress in February 1942. The poem was then widely reprinted, and the RCAF distributed plaques with the words to all airfields and training stations.

The poem has been recited in many memorials to pilots, the most notable of which was when President Ronald Reagan quoted from the first and last lines in a televised address to the nation after the space shuttle *Challenger* exploded, January 28, 1986.