



# Bombs Away

*John Steinbeck*

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**Bombs Away** John Steinbeck

**A magnificent volume of short novels and an essential World War II report from one of America's great twentieth-century writers**

On the heels of the enormous success of his masterwork *The Grapes of Wrath*-and at the height of the American war effort-John Steinbeck, one of the most prolific and influential literary figures of his generation, wrote *Bombs Away*, a nonfiction account of his experiences with U.S. Army Air Force bomber crews during World War II. Now, for the first time since its original publication in 1942, Penguin Classics presents this exclusive edition of Steinbeck's introduction to the then-nascent U.S. Army Air Force and its bomber crew-the essential core unit behind American air power that Steinbeck described as "the greatest team in the world."

## Bombs Away Details

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Author : John Steinbeck

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# From Reader Review Bombs Away for online ebook

## David Macpherson says

This book was fascinating and engaging, but not for the reason intended. This was written as a recruitment tool in 1942 to get the kids in the bombers instead of back on the farm. The writing is clunky and everything is peachy and perfect, but it was so damned funny. This is the perfect thing to read while reading *Catch 22*. Everything Steinbeck says here is shown to be false in Heller. I loved when Steinbeck wrote that the officers are all intelligent and thoughtful. It is the ideal that the *Catch 22* Mocks and shows to be such baloney. Thank god this book was short.

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## Falina says

I didn't really expect to like *Bombs Away*--it's a propaganda novel, and I'm not American, I'm not in the middle of a war, and I know that the details described are so outdated that they must have very little modern relevance. However, despite all this, the book turned out to be fascinating. I liked the blow-by-blow descriptions of how each member of the team is selected and trained. I like the hint of Steinbeck you see in the novel, even though he is trying to keep his opinions to himself and play things pretty straight. I haven't looked into his life much yet (I have a biography that I'm saving for a rainy day), but I know he was essentially a pacifist and so writing these propaganda novels must have produced a lot of ambivalence in him. I wish he had also written some more balanced depictions of World War II after it was over.

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## Max says

What even is this? Propaganda? I can't believe Steinbeck wrote this. I did not enjoy this at all. I should have expected it from reading the blurb, but I am also really curious so I read it anyway. It's too pro-military, pro-america, just propaganda. Not for me.

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## Jeff says

It is a strange, almost mystical thing that happens to flying men. It is as though the experience had cut them off so that they can only communicate with their own kind, can only be understood by other flying men. When they meet they go away together and perhaps they don't talk about flying, although that isn't likely. But at least they know and understand each other. They have been through something that has the impact of religion, and while most of them are never able to say it, never want to say it, they all understand it.

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## Paul Haspel says

Be advised, if you read *Bombs Away*, that you will not find it to be the "typical" John Steinbeck book -- if indeed there is such a thing. It is not an epic novel like *The Grapes of Wrath* or *East of Eden*, nor is it a short

tale on the order of *Cannery Row*, *Of Mice and Men*, or *The Pearl*. Rather, *Bombs Away* is a nonfiction work chronicling, as its subtitle indicates, the story of a bomber team from World War II. Steinbeck wrote the book in 1942 on behalf of what were then called the U.S. Army Air Forces; its intent was not only to tell the story of the young men who flew planes like the B-17 Flying Fortresses and B-24 Liberators, but to encourage qualified candidates to join the Air Force and share in its high-risk work.

As U.S. Air Force Academy professor James Meredith points out in a perceptive foreword to the Penguin Books edition of this book, *Bombs Away* can be regarded as propaganda, but propaganda with a "politically benign purpose" (xiii). It strikes me that *Bombs Away* is only propaganda in the same sense that Laurence Olivier's 1944 film of *Henry V*, funded in part by the British Government and made in consultation with Winston Churchill himself, can be called propaganda. In spite of propagandistic qualities, Olivier's *Henry V* works as a film, and Steinbeck's *Bombs Away* works as a book.

Steinbeck's style is not always to my liking; he often writes "which" where he should write "that," and every time he does so I imagine his original English teacher at Salinas High School cringing and saying, "Oh, no, not again." But then there are passages of pure poetry, like this one from the chapter "The Pilot":

*There is nothing like the first flight. It can never be repeated and the feeling of it can never be duplicated. It is a new dimension discovered....The great law has been broken. Probably men have wanted to revolt against the law of gravity since they first noticed that birds and some insects are given a dispensation against it. The great envy that children have of birds, the dreams of flying if one only knew a trick with the hands or could press a magic button under the arm, the complete hunger for flight that is in all of us -- all these are answered in the first take-off. Later the preoccupation will be with methods and techniques and instruments, but the first pure joy in release, there is nothing like it. These things, these thoughts and words, have been trite until it happens to you and then the feeling is ringed with fire. (96)*

The book starts with the bomber itself, and then devotes chapters to the work of the crew members: the bombardier, the aerial gunner, the navigator, the pilot, the aerial engineer/crew chief, and the radio engineer. Steinbeck tells the story of each crew member through semi-fictional, Everyman-style vignettes that set forth a "typical" young American's journey out of civilian life and into membership on a bomber crew. The last chapter, "The Bomber Team," emphasizes the crew's coalescing as a unified team capable of carrying out the dangerous work of bombing operations against Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan.

*Bombs Away* is well-illustrated with many photographs that bring to life the era in which the bombers were made and the men were found to fly them. It is not a perfect book, but for Steinbeck fans, or for readers with an interest in World War II aviation history, it is likely to be a rewarding book.

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## Larry Dacus says

### United States Goes to War

Something different from John Steinbeck. Written to assure parents and populace that their men were getting the best training possible before entering the war theater. I would have wanted to read this if my son was heading into action in WW2 I think Penguin should consider a new introduction. The author of the current one makes way too much of a fuss over this being propaganda and it's almost if he wants the allies to apologize for beating the Axis forces I found this to be interesting and informative on what was required to create a bomb crew.

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## Erik says

It's a pretty good description of the training a bomber team went through. I actually really enjoyed reading those parts. But there's not much else going for it. Steinbeck seems to have really phoned it in. It's missing his normally descriptive writing and is instead written in a very basic style that feels aimed at grade schoolers. His best novels and nonfiction work are full of great characters, but the people here are totally generic and aren't explored at all (I'm assuming they're creations and not anyone he actually met). I guess that's the point since it's designed to make the average American male feel like he could be these people. There's also a lot of really weird characterizations of the types of people who would fit each role and what they would be like after the war, all of which reality has shown to be false.

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## Kevin Hogg says

The reviews on the back cover claim it's more exciting than his fiction. It's not. This was written during World War II to teach Americans about the training and responsibilities of bomber crews. It's interesting from a historical perspective, but it can drag at times. Because of the time period, it also has a lot of repetition of jingoistic "Americans are the best" statements. Some of them don't make much sense, such as Americans being the best at teamwork because they play team sports. Even in the 1940s, this certainly wasn't exclusive to the United States. He also goes out of his way to tell the reader again and again that everyone on the crew is of equal importance and that the pilot isn't above any of the rest. However, it is noticeable that there are 29 pages devoted to pilot training, with only 8 about the crew chief and 4 about the radio engineer. With all of that said, he does combine the basic discussion of training with several narratives. In each chapter, a fictional (I assume) character is introduced to show what background is helpful and walk the reader through the training. These characters combine to form a bomber team, and the reader gets to experience their final training missions through their stories. This helps keep the reader engaged. Overall, it's got a bit of interesting (although partially outdated) information about training of pilots, navigators, bombardiers, gunners, radio engineers, and aerial engineers. I would not say, however, that it is nearly as interesting as his novels.

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## Charles Moore says

Bombs Away: The Story of a Bomber Team by John Steinbeck. (Penguin Classic, 156 pages, paper, 1942) Never heard of Bombs Away by Steinbeck? (Neither had I. I found this at the Johnson City Public Library book sale.) Probably because you never thought Steinbeck would write such a bias pro-military book. Which this is. Bombs Away is hardly a masterpiece on the order of Canary Row or The Grapes of Wrath. Steinbeck wrote this for the military to help bolster support for the Air Force in 1942. Steinbeck had two goals in mind: to show the public that our air crews were the best of the best and the country will win the war because of your support! Bombs Away is just about that heavy handed. Hemingway thought it was trash.

But there is an interesting story at work here. Steinbeck is fairly honest in telling us about the teamwork and effort that goes into training a crew to deliver the payloads. He's a bit short with the ground crew and the command structure and barely mentions the co-pilot. But he does praise the average American kid for having talents and skills to do more than just march and shoot. He gives praise, I think where praise is due.

Hemingway was all about “the manly man” and his role in war. Steinbeck would probably have been more pacifist with an edge towards socialism.

But the tables are turned here. Steinbeck doesn't support the war. He supports the warrior. The style is too sparse for my liking. It's written I think more for the style of the Army Air Force public relations campaigns than for a great novel. But, in the time, that may have all that was needed. When you send your boy off to fight and die do you really want flowery language?

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### **Angeliki says**

Προπαγάνδα του Β'ΠΠ για εσωτερικ? αμερικανικ? καταν?λωση τ?που "στε?λτε τα παιδι? σας στον π?λεμο θα ε?ναι τ?λεια!". Μ?τριο.

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### **Sheri-lee says**

American Air Force propaganda ... which I get in the context of when it was written and to some extent this probably reflects a lot of nationalist pride/propaganda of the time.

What this book did do is really clarify what it is that a lot (sorry) Americans do which just gets under the skin of other nations. It's a stereotype, I know ... and not every American does it. (Just using the word Americans to describe yourselves as citizens of the United States when there are more countries in the Americas kind of points to what I'm about to say ...). Here goes. I'm Canadian and while I love Canada and would like to say it's the best country in the world, I think most Canadians try to recognize that although we love our country fiercely, so do other nationalities. And in doing so, when we describe anything national, be it military/health care/national parks, I feel like it's usually said, "Some of the best in the world" vs. Steinbeck's (and a lot of American sentiment) " ... it is this ability of Americans, exemplified in their team sports of being both individuals and units in a group at the same time, which makes them both the finest team players and finest flyers in the world." Right. Because no other countries play team sports, and if they do, they aren't good at it or don't get the idea of team. Sigh. This is one example of more than I care to count through out the book. I think national pride is important but there is an unfortunate stereotype to Americans who don't (or can't) acknowledge that just maybe there might be some people out there better at something.

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### **Brian says**

Hemingway said he would willingly cut three fingers off his throwing hand rather than write a book like this one. I think he was being generous.

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### **TE says**

This short but impactful book has received rather mixed reviews, in part because of its admittedly somewhat propagandistic nature, but it's an insightful look into one small facet of the war machine crafted by the US during the Second World War, which did nothing less than save the world. If that in itself sounds somewhat

propagandistic and excessively laudatory, bear in mind that many of the other accounts of the war I have spent time reading include the works, or perhaps rather, indictments, of authors and survivors such as Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi. This is another look at that critical period in history, and how the US viewed its role at the time, through one of the most well-known authors of the era, John Steinbeck. This account almost seems the memoir of what we would today call an imbedded journalist, who experienced a behind-the-scenes view of the training of a bomber crew, specifically that of the B-17s and B-24s, which operated in both the European and Pacific theaters. I think the most valuable aspect of it is the personal accounts of some of the persons highlighted in their respective roles, such as the navigator, pilot, bombardier, and the gunners. Not only does it provide some detail of military operations, but it also describes the mentality of many in the US, and their experiences immediately preceding the outbreak of the war, coming out of the Great Depression. It's definitely a worthwhile read, if viewed through the lens of both its purpose (which is reasonably still somewhat debated) and the general attitude of the day.

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### **Borge Arild says**

*Bombs Away* is a little known work of Steinbeck and for good reasons. The positive view of air power and the prowess of the heavy bomber was disputed over Schweinfurt barely a year after the book was written and in modern times the overt propaganda style is not in good taste. However, this book is interesting because of the vision Steinbeck has of the American society in the 40s. Gone are the time of the depression and young American men are given the chance to rise to the occasion (women are barely mentioned). On the surface this book makes life in the air force sound like a kind of scout camp; but beneath is a real sympathy for the fighting men and their individuality and skill. How the survivors of the Schweinfurt raids felt about this book I can only guess (Martin Middelbrook's excellent book "*The Schweinfurt–Regensburg Mission*" gives a good description of the first raid); but this book must be read as a time capsule from 1942 and not as an enduring piece of art.

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### **Daniel Bratell says**

This is Steinbeck's attempt at helping the allied during the war and he might have chosen the worst possible way of doing it by writing propaganda to recruit people to the American bomber force. He wrote this book, some 150 pages, of descriptions of the life of every member of a crew of a heavy bomber with real people (or made up real people) as examples.

There are a few problems here. First, what the heavy bomber crews did might have been heroic the same way as it is heroic swimming with sharks when you are bleeding, but they performed atrocities. There was no precision bombing of only military targets even when they tried, and some did not even try. Instead it was terror bombing of civilians, killing women and children and making millions of people homeless. The heavy bomber fleet made way more damage and killed way more innocent people than the nukes did and as far as I know the terror bombings didn't shorten the war by a single day.

Secondly, that being on a heavy bomber is as safe as Russian roulette is barely mentioned. I think only once and then in a way to downplay the risks. During the war the American Army lost 400k men. A fifth of those were fliers, mostly on bombers, despite the relative rarity of flight crews compared to infantry soldiers or other ground troops. The chance of surviving all mandatory missions in a single tour was statistically about 25%.

Thirdly, he tries to present every role as a unique opportunity to make a difference in the war by being carefully selected and trained. In reality they took everyone and gave them a minimum of training (increased towards the end of the war). For instance, the gunners of the planes are described as marksmen shooting down enemy fighters one shot at a time thanks to the American practice of shooting squirrels with .22 guns or air-rifles. Yeah, that is not what it was about. Gunners were more or less useless cannon fodder (and not included in post war planes). Their only purpose was to spew out enough lead that fighters attacked from non-optimal distances and angles, increasing the chances a little bit.

Then it is the "real world" people who are so happy and feeling so home in the bomber crews. Carefully selected "real world" people I guess. Or not real people. Or really stupid people. Real people should have been afraid, scared and worried.

I don't know how much Steinbeck knew about this during the war but he should have had plenty of time after the war to do something about the book and he did not. By the way, Hemingway said, about this book, that he would rather have cut off three fingers than write this book. Before reading it I dismissed that as theatrics, but now I get it.

In summary: No literary value, no science value and no historical value except as an example of war propaganda. An easy 1 star.

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