

# Book Review: The High and the Mighty

by Scott Kruize

Nearly two decades before Airport and all its sequels began...over three decades before Airplane! and its sequel lambasted the whole genre into hysterical silliness...there was the original 'high-tech airliner full of people is going down aaaaahhhhhggg we're all gonna die!' movie: *The High and the Mighty* .

Personally, I do not know if it's possible for a powerful, advanced radial piston engine to:

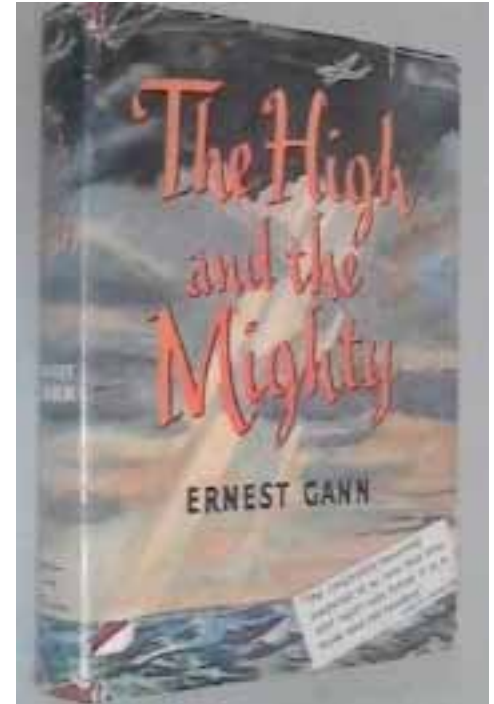
- *Run on regular, routine airline service for a substantial period of time, then*
- *pass today's routine and preflight inspections today, and*
- *start up and behave itself perfectly for several hours, but then*
- *give two widely-spaced, extremely brief severe shakes, while*
- *showing a teensy five-degree rise in head temperature over the course of an hour, then:*
- *seize;*
- *throw its propeller into and through the adjacent wing structure, and*
- *burst into flames;*
- *wrench itself almost, but not quite, out of its mount, and finally:*
- *hang in the slipstream forever- more at a worse-than-useless 30 degree angle*

Presumably, author Ernest K. Gann actually does know whether this is all possible. He writes as if he thoroughly understands technical matters like this. In this particular case, the plot required the engine to behave this way in order to throw an airliner, just barely past its halfway 'point of no return' between Hawaii and San Francisco, into a panic.

I also have no idea if a pilot with a long history of exceptionally competent flying could one day encounter a freak accident on takeoff which killed everybody on his plane except him. If so, would he give up flying for awhile, and go into seclusion? Then would he someday re-emerge and get a job as a lowly co-pilot? This was also a necessary plot element.

I stumbled across a used copy of *The High and the Mighty* at a garage sale at Ocean Shores. Of course I'd heard of it. How could anyone not, who's ever known anything about airplanes, or ever watched a Hollywood movie, since the mid-50s?

I had to admit, though, that I'd never read the novel nor seen the movie. Bought the book for fifty cents, and read it over the course of one leisurely weekend there. This was possible not because the novel is short, or



because I'm some kind of super speed reader. Rather, it's because I have an extremely low threshold for soap-opera stuff, which is why I can't read any of those silly romance novels. *The High and the Mighty* alternates between two major elements. The first — which I read with great interest — was about the intricate details of aeronautical engineering as applied to modern airline flying, their flight control systems, emergency procedures, the vagaries of radio communications, the ingenuity and resourcefulness of Man as imminent disaster threatens, the Coast Guard's personnel and the service's astonishingly high-tech capabilities in 1954.

The other half is soap opera stuff: the crew members and passengers of the doomed flight ponder things such as facing up to oneself, the finding of true love, the stark reality that money can't buy everything, the Meaning of Life, and how to conjure up the fortitude to face death. Yeah, yeah, yeah...yada yada yada...

By skimming lightly over all those parts, I was able to and read the remaining half-a- book in a slow weekend's free reading time.

This is not to say it isn't a good book all the way through. I have to say that Ernest K. Gann's writing is good, and of course he knows a great deal more than I do about how to write things that actually **sell**.

And sell it did. Not only were many hundreds of thousands of copies of *The High and the Mighty* sold, but it became a recognizable classic, and opened the door to making a Hollywood movie, for which Gann wrote the screenplay from his own book.

Once in Hollywood, various flourishes were added, including the dramatic photography of the DC-4 cruising over impossibly beautiful Pacific skies, and of course, the portrayal of John Wayne as The Co-Pilot with a Past. I know all this because after reading the novel, I had to tell Sandra all about it, and that I'd like to see the movie. She said she had seen it, way back when, while she was married to that other guy,

what's-his-name, Tim or Tom something-or-other... From time to time, Sandra suggests that we watch some movie, and occasionally it'll be one that I saw, a long, long time ago, when I was briefly married to that blond musician what's-her-name, Jean or Janice or something-or-other...

Two observations: it's OK to watch a movie with your spouse, even though they saw it *Way Back When*. Also, it's possible to enjoy watching *The High and the Mighty* nowadays. Have a fun evening doing so, and don't think about *Airplane!* You can do it.

Well, if you're like me, you can ALMOST do it!