

Coram, robert boyd: the fighter pilot who changed the art of war

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A biography of Col. John Boyd, Coram's book reads much like the collection of interviews that it is. He gives the impression that if the reader happened upon any of these characters at happy hour, the stories would be identical. Dispersed throughout the book is a supply of background information and context, glimpses and bits about family life, and a very understandable layman's introduction to the scholarly work of John Boyd. Coram is an ex-newspaper man that has recently produced two military biographies.

He lays out for his reader not only the successes of John Boyd, but the rough edges of the man as well. The brilliance that brought the engineering world the Energy-Maneuverability equations was balanced by Boyd's egoism and anti-authoritarianism. Coram's objective seems to be to reveal a principle regarding brilliant personnel: that they are invaluable to any organization, providing the leadership can stomach their idiosyncrasies. Coram sets his Boyd biography up in three sections: Fighter Pilot, Engineer and Scholar. The three sections are based on the three major accomplishments of Col.

Boyd. As a fighter pilot, Boyd used his creative intellect to develop advanced techniques and tactics, based on his subconscious knowledge of the workings of maneuverability based on available energy. As an engineer, Boyd codified the principles of energy-maneuverability, and evaluated all of the fighter aircraft of the time using the equations he developed. This evaluation, although looked upon skeptically at the time, has been proven to be accurate, and the E-M theory continues to be used to both evaluate and design aircraft.

As a scholar, Boyd evaluated decision-making and came up with the ODDA loop. (Observe, Orient, Decide, Act) This concept is a simple diagram of the decision making process, and has been disseminated widely, with variations, all the way from the military to driver training curriculum. A variation of the model is called IPDE; Identify, Predict, Decide, Execute. An old adage says that a man's best work is done after 50, and I believe that John Boyd validated it.

His Destruction and Creation essay, which Coram includes at the end of the biography, is a masterful assembly of the concepts of the Heisenberg Principle and Thermodynamics, applied to a type of his decision-making theory. Concepts of the present system of thought, combined with concepts from multiple other disciplines, can be creatively made into a composite that is more than the sum of the pieces used, and useful for further evaluation. This is essentially the synthesis used in the development of the E-M theory equations.

Coram deals as respectfully as possible with the dysfunctional family life of Boyd. Several passages leave the reader deeply saddened that such a brilliant man could be at the same time so base. He also presents the distinct probability that Boyd's personality and fighter-pilot approach to obstacles caused as many personal difficulties as it remedied. Coram also reveals the truth that presentation is paramount; as Boyd's abrasive presentation of his ideas initially caused much individual resistance, and his masterful presentation of his ideas later on was the main reason that they became widely adopted.

Altogether, a well written biography, that leaves my wishing I had sat thru at least a few happy hours with Col. Boyd and his associates, if only to hear the tall tales of a meritorious veteran warrior-scholar. Coram brings John Boyd to the reader as he was; brilliant, dauntless, abrasive, even offensive, but loyal to his cause and his message. He leaves the reader with the nagging question: Am I going to Do something, or be content to Be somebody?