**“High Flight”**

**by John Gillespie Magee, Jr**

**Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of earth,**

**And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;**

**Sunwards I’ve climbed and joined the tumbling mirth**

**Of sun-split clouds – and done a thousand things**

**You have not dreamed of - wheeled and soared and swung**

**High in the sunlit silence. Hovering 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, or 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.**

The history and background of “High Flight”

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| During the dark days of the Battle of Britain, hundreds of Americans crossed the border into Canada to enlist with the Royal Canadian Air Force. Knowingly breaking the law, but with the tacit approval of the then still officially neutral United States Government, they volunteered to fight Hitler's Germany.  John Gillespie Magee, Jr., was one such American. Born in 1922 to an English mother and a Scotch-Irish-American father, Magee was just 18 years old when he entered flight training. Within the year, he was sent to England flying the Supermarine Spitfire.  Flying fighter sweeps over France and air defense over England against the German Luftwaffe, he rose to the rank of Pilot Officer. At the time, German bombers were crossing the English Channel with great regularity to attack Britain's cities and factories.  On September 3, 1941, Magee flew a high altitude (30,000 feet) test flight in a newer model of the Spitfire V. As he orbited and climbed upward, he was struck with the inspiration of a poem -- "To touch the face of God."  Once back on the ground, he wrote a letter to his parents. In it he commented, "I am enclosing a verse I wrote the other day. It started at 30,000 feet, and was finished soon after I landed." On the back of the letter, he jotted down his poem, 'High Flight'.  Just three months later, on December 11, 1941 (and only three days after the US entered the war), John Gillespie Magee, Jr., was killed in a mid-air collision over Tangmere, England at about 400 feet AGL. He was 19 years old. |