Book Review: 'Ascent'

by Arthur Salm

"Ascent" by Jed Mercurio; Simon & Schuster; 243 pages; $24.

Neil Armstrong, Johnny-Come-Lately? He will be if the Russians have their way in Jed Mercurio's full-throttle "Ascent."

The novel opens in the rubble of postwar Stalingrad, where young Yefgenii Yeremin and other orphans toil away at the backbreaking work of rebuilding. Horribly brutalized by the older boys, Yefgenii, a bright, talented kid, sees an opportunity - every year one orphan is selected to be groomed as a fighter pilot - and makes his move.

We next see Yefgenii as a rookie pilot in North Korea. The Soviets aren't there, officially, so their MiGs have North Korean markings. Being shot down and captured is tantamount to treason.

TAKING OFF - 'Ascent' by Jed Mercurio is nerve-shredding tale about a Russian cosmonaut's adventurous life. CNS Photo.

Yefgenii turns out to be quite an efficient killing machine, eventually becoming known in the skies as Ivan the Terrible, dogfighting, with spectacular success, with American Sabres. Also in the skies, though as a rule not engaging Yefgenii, are Gus Grissom, Wally Schirra, John Glenn - and Neil Armstrong. Their fates, it seems, are intertwined.

Mercurio's prose is crisp, stripped down, even elementary, for all its techno-talk. Many of the battle scenes are studded with flyboy jargon that pilots will revel in and the rest of us will skim for impressions; amazingly, enough is there to give you a very good idea of what's going on, even if you don't know pitch from yaw from a hole in your aileron. Mercurio respects his war planes without falling in cross-eyed love with them, a la the gorked-out, pray-for-war shoot-'em-ups of Dale Brown.

Yefgenii is not quite a cipher, but not quite human; the woman who will be his wife is never even referred to by name. This foreshortening of personality hamstrings the tale badly for the central chunk of the book - Yefgenii's heroic battles over Korea (and boy, is it a strain to root for the Russkies) and his later exile to a base in Siberia - but dovetails perfectly with the final pages.

This last segment of "Ascent" makes the book seem wildly out of balance, taking place in only a handful of pages - except it doesn't. Checking back, I found that fully one-third of the novel flashed by at escape velocity.

It's the late 1960s. Yefgenii has been unofficially rehabilitated: He is in training as a cosmonaut, but under a pseudonym. This may come in handy, for the Soviet Union announces only successful ventures into space.

Apollo 9 and Apollo 10 have circled the moon and returned. Apollo 11, piloted by Neil Armstrong, is scheduled to blast off in a few weeks. The Russian rocket, command module and lander aren't ready; many of their myriad systems haven't been fully tested, and the lander is too heavy by 70 kilos. That's about the weight of one man. The modules are designed for two, but if only one man were to make the attempt ... one very capable man... one man who doesn't officially exist. ...

"Ascent" ascends into a kind of existential wonder: The thousand and two tasks Yefgenii must perform in orbit and beyond - everything from shooting the stars with a sextant over the receding Earth's horizon to calculating fuel consumption and trajectory on paper - contrasts with his ever-increasing isolation, both physical and, if you will, spiritual: He is a nonperson at home; who, or, more to the point, what is he out here?

If a foot treads on the moon, of course, no one can hear it. But what would it mean if no one ever saw it?

"Ascent" is a few kilos overweight in the skies over Korea, and absent the human components that would have made the journey more complete. But in space, untethered, it's a nerve-shredding, unsettling and, ultimately, a deeply satisfying techno-adventure.

Take your protein pill and put your helmet on.

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