

# British Combat Pilots

THERE'S SOMETHING IN THE AIR. By Flying Officer X (H. E. Bates). 169 pp. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. \$2.

By MEYER BERGER

HERE is sheer beauty in writing. This little volume of short pieces will give the reader a clearer conception of the combat's thinking, fighting, living, than anything that has come before. The little tales are gems cut from purest carbon, handed down so that they spit cold fire.

It is done with quiet little words. Emotion is superbly checked in every passage, yet the full impact flows through the reader. Night scenes that come within the bomber pilot's vision over England, over the Channel, over Brest and Germany are painted so crisply that they crackle:

The lights of the drome and the lights of the [enemy] bombers were like the lights of a party around a Christmas tree. \* \* \* Then he hit another and he saw it, too, burning among the lights as if something in the Christmas tree had fallen and caught fire. Even then the lights of the drome still kept burning and the bombers circled round like coloured fireflies. It was all so fantastic, with the red and white light shining in the darkness and the coloured lights moving in the sky and the orange fires breaking the darkness, that Anderson could not believe it to be true.

No other book on the British flier—or any other flier for that matter—has the sharp, authentic note Flying Officer Bates has written into this work. Commissioned by the English Government as Flying Officer X, he got all his material first hand, and he has made it come alive. If there were decorations for this sort of thing, H. E. Bates would have the highest.

"The Young Man From Kalgourie," the tale of an Australian pilot, is perhaps a little better than some of the rest of these gems. It tells the story of a youth whose farmer parents managed to keep from him, on their remote acres, the news that war had come to Britain and that London and the English countryside were crumbling under Nazi bombs. It tells how he finally learned of it, anyhow, and how he went to England to learn how to pilot a Stirling and how he went out again and again to repay the German pilots for their deadly gifts. It tells how he came to have a "popsy"—a girl—who would wait for him each night when his Stirling was on operations, and of her bitterness one night when he did not come back. "In a week," she says, speaking out of deep pain, "nobody will even remember him":

For a moment I did not answer. Now I was not thinking of him. I was thinking of the two people who had so bravely and stupidly kept the war from him and then had so bravely and proudly let him go. I was



From "Drawing the R. A. F." by Eric Kennington (Oxford).  
"Pilot Officer Richard Payne Stevens."

thinking of the farm with the sheep and the eucalyptus trees, the pink and mauve asters and the yellow Spring wattle flaming in the sun. I was thinking of the thousands of farms like it peopled by thousands of people like them: the simple, decent, kindly, immemorial people all over the earth.

"No," I said to her. "There will be many who will remember him."

These are tales told in impressive quiet, tales that are innocent of even the suggestion of flagrant heroism that colors so many stories about combat pilots. The tone is so even and the flow so temperate that the reader is apt to wonder, when he has done with the book, how this effect was achieved. An ordinary writer would have used angry words, words closer to hand. Flying Officer X seems to shun them, yet all the feeling of a magnificent anger and of heroic achievement seems to burn into the reader's soul.

The finest example of this magical literary technique, I think, is "The Sun Rises Twice." It is the story of a Stirling pilot who won no medals though he flew faster and farther on most operations than any of his decorated flying mates. It is a model of simplicity—nothing more than a literary hors d'oeuvre—but the taste lingers. In "Sergeant Carmichael," the story of a bomber that comes down in the Channel in early morning dark, suspense is attained by honest writing without once falling back on conventional literary trickery. In this piece there is something of Stephen Crane, but mostly it is Flying Officer X, and no Crane admirer will murmur at the resemblance.

There's something in the air and pretty soon every one must be aware of it. It is something miraculously clean and clear. It is the writing of Flying Officer X.