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The Man in Action

Squadron Leader H. E. Bates is perhaps best remembered as Britain's finest modern short story writer. During the war, however, he distinguished himself as a pilot and also, under commission from the Government, in writing about life in the RAF. There are, in fact, few better novels of the war in the air than his Fair Stood The Wind For France (1944) and the short stories about the RAF he published under the pseudonym Flying Officer X. The following article was written for the American magazine, Flying, in September, 1942, and features another of the great Spitfire heroes, Squadron Leader A. C. Deere.

On a bright December afternoon a Stirling returning from a raid on the docks at Brest came into its aerodrome to land. Its pilot, an Australian, touched down with an exactitude that seemed to indicate that nothing extraordinary was wrong. He was within a day or two of his twenty-third birthday. His second pilot, contrary to the popular supposition that the pilots of bombers are for some reason middle-aged men, was a boy of 19. Among the crew was a young engineer, who was badly wounded. The floor of the plane was greasy with oil and blood and from the port outer engine a stream of petrol was pouring out like a bright fan in the wind. As the plane touched down it began to disintegrate. First the port outer propeller fell away; then the whole of the port inner engine. Then the complete port wing fell off and, falling, caught fire. The huge tyres of the Stirling were punctured and flat, and finally the whole aircraft tilted violently to port, flinging the starboard wing high into the air. The task of carrying a dying man from a plane which seemed at any moment about to blow up would, in civilian life, have been front page news; complete with pictures, personal interview and possibly framed certificates. Fortunately the plane did not blow up. Half an hour later its crew with the exception of the wounded engineer, now safely in hospital, were having tea, and of that extraordinary episode, and of the earlier episode in which the Stirling had beaten off the violent attacks of 10 Messerschmitts, there was nothing in the next morning's newspapers.

In this story and behind it, in ten thousand others of which the public will never see a record because there are so many of them, there is to be found a fraction of the picture that is being made, every day, every night, over sea and land and in all latitudes, of the men of the RAF in action. The title of these pictures is not heroism, since the RAF, with its vital genius for the rejection of normal speech and the coinage of new, does not know the word. Nor are they

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THE MAN IN ACTION

ever likely to occupy the place in popular literature and art long held by 'The Charge of the Light Brigade'. On the contrary they are, and will probably continue to be, taken very much for granted. For since the day when the British made the incredible and ghastly heroic blunder in the Crimea and somehow got it immortalized as a national epic, the standards of heroism, like the standards of speed and science and plain inhumanity, have undergone great changes. They have changed so far that they have, in some cases, ceased to mean anything. This has become very true of flying in general and, within the last three years, of the RAF in particular. One simple result of this is that the work of the RAF, which an earlier age would certainly have immortalised in verse, even if it was bad verse, is today recorded in language as plain, matter-of-fact and perishable as a cardboard box. The work of the RAF—words like deeds, exploits, feats of valour and so on have no place in its vocabulary—lies hidden too often behind colourless communiqués and factual broadcasts that we now take as much for granted as the kitchen stove.

For this flatness, the lack of the heroic touch in the history of its action achievement, the RAF is itself partly responsible. The men of the RAF are largely inarticulate; they would prefer anonymity; and perhaps the worst of all sins in the RAF is the process known as 'shooting a line'. The now immortal father of all line-shooters was a fighter pilot who was heard to declaim, with fine pomposity, in one of those unfortunate silences that sometimes fall on general conversation, 'There was I, flying upside down.' This remark has since become the standard by which any personal flying achievement in the RAF, whether heroic or not, has come to be judged. To shoot a line is now embarrassing, boring, comic, or in plain bad taste. In this way the RAF has elected to speak even of its most exceptional achievements in terms of understatement. To find the pilot who will tell you the story of a combat with

Humorous comment by the popular British cartoonist, Russell Brockbank, on the RAF's dislike of boasting, drawn in August, 1940.



"... I put my airplane into a screaming vertical dive, the eight guns of my Spitfire belching death to the Nazi invader!"

THE SPITFIRE LOG

simplicity, directness and lack of embarrassment is in consequence a rare thing.

To fly and to be inarticulate, even to pretend to be inarticulate, have become, with rare exceptions, inseparable qualities. To treat the daily association with danger as if it were nothing more than a game of cricket has become almost a rule. Laconic, nonchalant, dry, indifferent, the RAF passes a common verdict even on the most glorious of its moments of action with a couple of words. 'Good show,' it says. 'Good show.'

But what the RAF *does* and what the RAF *says* about what it does are necessarily different things. The fact that the achievements of the RAF have not so far been recorded with outstanding objectivity, force and imagination is due to very simple things. Pilots, for the most part, cannot write; writers, for the most part, cannot fly. The day on which we get a fusion of these qualities in one person we may be given, even though in a limited way, a real picture of the RAF in action. It will be limited not only because one pilot cannot speak for ten thousand, but because the fighter pilot differs from the bomber pilot and the bomber pilot in turn from the coastal pilot and all three in turn from the ferry pilot as much as the Spitfire from the Stirling, the Hampden from the Sunderland, the Liberator from the Kittyhawk. These types are not only temperamentally different from each other; their daily life is different; their actions and reactions are different; only their final aim, the destruction of an enemy, is the same. To understand them, to assess the differences in their lives and their performance in action, one must live with them for a long time.

Of all flying types the fighter pilot is, to the public, the most attractive. The reasons are again simple. His actions are seen as a triumph of individuality; he flies alone in a high-powered piece of mechanism which is capable, in his hands, of evolutions at great speed, of great beauty and spectacular effect. He is engaged in a dangerous, apparently wonderful and often fatal occupation. Like the bull-fighter, he works near to and often in line with death. To the public this near-fatal occupation, whether of bull-fighters, tight-rope walkers or fighter pilots, is fascinating to contemplate. For of all pilots the fighter pilot is most likely to be seen—and during the Battle of Britain was constantly seen—in action. The coastal pilot is invisible, far out at sea; the bomber pilot is invisible, far out in darkness. The Spitfire pilot flies in the sun, turning his plane like a silver fish many thousand feet up, and fascinates the world below.

This is one part of the picture; the finished, pleasant, spectacular part, seen by the public. There are two others. One is the daily and almost certainly boring routine of the aerodrome and the dispersal point, which the public never sees; the other is that of the action itself—which the public also rarely sees and which the combatant will rarely discuss, the action involving emotions, reactions and tension, for which the public has no remotely comparable experience of its own. The picture of life on the aerodrome is simple. On duty throughout all the daylight hours—as few as eight in winter, as many as 18 in

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THE MAN IN ACTION

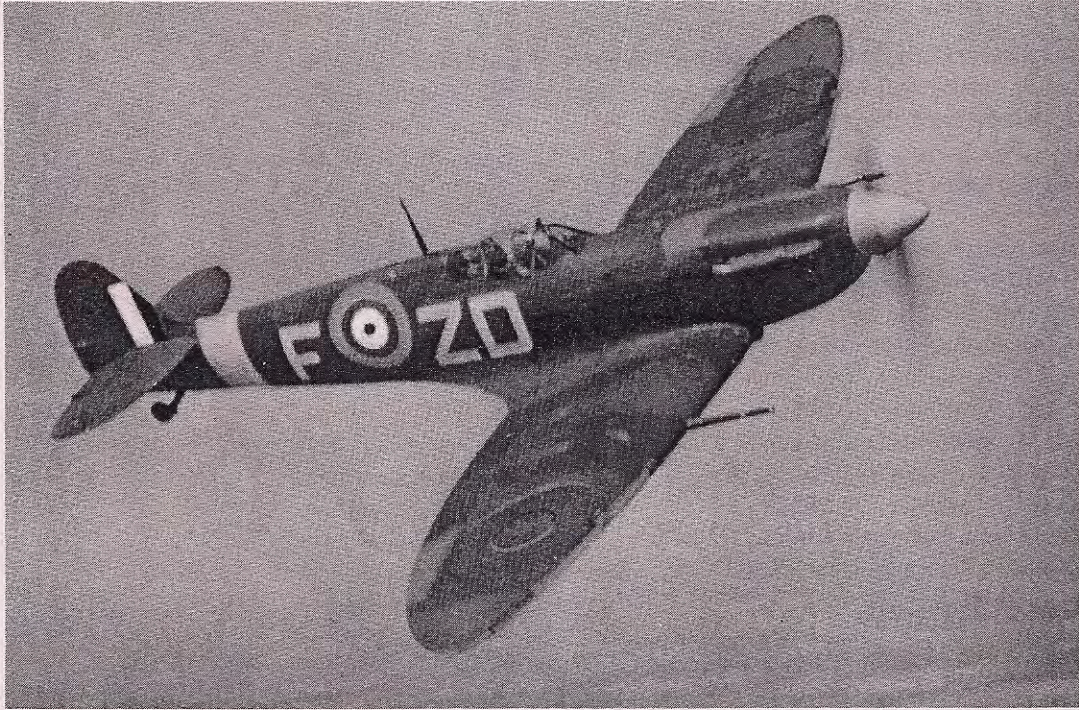
summer—the fighter pilot's problem is often not how to kill Germans but how to kill time. His life, while waiting for action, may be intensely boring, dull, directionless. To counteract these things he reads, plays cards, revises navigation, talks shop. His action, even when it comes, is packed into a hundred minutes, of which perhaps 10 or 15 form the vortex in which he destroys or is destroyed.

From the thousands of stories by the fighters in action it is not possible to select one which will typify the fighter pilot. It is simpler to select a man who has crowded into one life the experience of 20 pilots and to record of him simply—'This is not typical. It belongs to the highest and rarest achievement. But it happened.'

Of all fighter pilots Squadron Leader A. C. Deere, DFC and bar, is probably least typical. He was born in New Zealand; joined the RAF in 1937; won service boxing championships; played football. In four months of the summer of 1940, from May to August, he destroyed 17 enemy planes. He was shot down seven times; baled out three times. He collided head-on with an enemy machine; a pupil pilot cut his Spitfire in two. One plane of his was once blown 150 yards along the ground by a bomb; another blew up three seconds after he left it.

His action began in May, 1940. He had volunteered, with another pilot, to escort a small training-type aircraft to Marck, the aerodrome at Calais. He was to land there and pick up a squadron leader who had force-landed. The Battle of France was in progress; Calais was surrounded by the enemy; the aerodrome was a kind of 'No-man's land'. When the trainer landed, the passenger was nowhere to be seen. After waiting a few moments the trainer took off again and was just airborne when a dozen Me 109s attacked the escort planes. The trainer, forced back to land, hit a hedge. Then followed what Deere himself has described as 'a grand shooting match with the Me's'—the words are typical—leaving Deere and his fellow pilot still flying and the wrecks of Messerschmitts lying all about the beach, the aerodrome and the town. The action seems to have been a fine example of the gay ferocity for which fighter pilots have become famous: Deere claimed two certainly destroyed and one probable, his companion one certainty and two probables. The pilot of the trainer got away.

From that moment Deere seems to have had no rest. His patrols over the coast of France began at 3.45 a.m.; often he made two before breakfast. In a few days his squadron lost six pilots; and soon Deere, although only a pilot officer, had become its leader. His adventures began to be fantastic. When he pursued a Dornier from Dunkirk to Ostend and both the Dornier and his own machine crash-landed, Deere was knocked out and his machine began to burn. As he scrambled clear, half conscious, his machine exploded. Two days later he collided with an Me 109 in mid-air. Each pilot seems to have thought



Illustrations from Squadron Leader H. E. Bates' article for the American magazine *Flying* in September, 1942.



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THE MAN IN ACTION

that the other would give way. They passed each other once, turned and came together again. Deere lost a little height in the second turn and the belly of the Me tore along the fuselage of his plane, running the hood down on his head. The propeller was snapped off by this impact and the engine partially torn out. Deere, blinded by smoke and flames, could see nothing and could only hold the plane in a 100 mph glide which took him gradually over the English coast. There his craft hit a concrete anti-invasion post, ripped off a wing, skidded through two cornfields and finally burnt up.

A week or two later he chased a Heinkel over the Channel towards Calais. Shooting down the Heinkel, he was immediately 'jumped on by a swarm of other fighters'. A bullet ripped the watch from his wrist; another scorched an eyebrow. His aircraft was full of holes, and over Ashford, 20 miles inland and at 800 feet, it began to fall to pieces. Those were the days when shoppers in that market town in the heart of the Kentish sheep and hop and orchard country would look up 20 times a day—I myself among them—and watch the battles in the blue summer air. They must have watched with horror that day as Deere baled out of his disintegrating plane, his parachute not opening until he was perilously close to the earth. Yet Deere was flying again next day.

Two days later he had his oil tank shot away and had to force-land without his air speed indicator; soon afterwards his rudder was shot away and his engine set on fire. He bailed out again and landed in a plum tree. Next morning his aerodrome was dive-bombed. A bomb fell immediately in front of him as he sat in his plane, blew the engine of the Spitfire out and sent the plane itself hurtling upside down with Deere in it, for 150 yards. He was helped out by a fellow pilot and ran for shelter. Afterwards he was put to bed and was still in bed, next day, when another raid began. He got up from his bed immediately, went up in his Spitfire and shot down a Dornier.

Shortly afterwards he was teaching tactics to a pupil. Something went wrong; the pupil collided with the teacher, cutting the Spitfire in half. Deere was caught in the wreckage of his plane and could not jump. The plane fell for several thousand feet before he could get clear. Half of his parachute harness had been torn off; the rip cord dangled out of his reach. Deere closed his eyes and waited, knowing there was nothing he could do. Suddenly his shoulders were violently jerked by the parachute opening of its own accord. That day Deere was in hospital for the third time.

A large part of these adventures cannot be called heroic; they are examples of fantastic misfortunes which may and do happen to any pilot, any day, anywhere. Deere's career is remarkable because he brings to such a succession of events, any one of which might have been his death, an indomitable stoicism; the spirit of apparently careless fatalism which is an important part of the fighter pilot's make-up. Above all he brings to them, as almost every pilot does, a passion for flying.