

The Fighting Faces of the Sky

THERE'S SOMETHING IN THE AIR.

By Flying Officer X (H. E. Bates).
New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1943.
172 pp. \$2.

Reviewed by BEN RAY REDMAN

ON April 1, 1918, when aerial warfare on the Western Front had reached unprecedented heights of fury, and more than one British squadron was celebrating its fiftieth or umpty-umptyeth Hun, the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service—to the infinite disgust and mutual contempt of the enforcedly contracting parties—were united under the name of the Royal Air Force. Disgust? Contempt? Why, naturally. The R.F.C. and the R.N.A.S. had their traditions, however brief; they had their brave histories. But what pilot, military or naval, could take pride in serving under this newly arranged trio of initials? What naval or military pilot could happily contemplate being lumped, in a common mass, with his opposite number? Strong men shuddered. And when it was later rumored that the R.A.F. was going to be decked out in a meaningless uniform of its own, possibly blue (musical comedy stuff!) with a cloth belt and gilt buck'le instead of a proper Sam Browne, there was mutiny in many a winged heart. *Fade Out.*

Fade In. It is twenty-five years later. Those once-despised initials are no longer new; they and that uniform are no longer meaningless. The world knows their meaning. Committed to a struggle against wicked odds, the R.A.F. met the Luftwaffe's full force and grew stronger under fire; grew ever stronger, by day and by night, until the Battle of Britain was won, and with it the probably immortal tribute in which a gifted leader phrased the thought and gratitude of less articulate millions. Now, according to Hitler's own admission, and thanks in great measure to the R.A.F., the Battle of Germany is already on.

What are they like, the men and boys who did and are doing the job? What are their lives like? Articles, short stories, books, and films have tried to tell us; some of them simply and accurately, but far more of them with melodramatic or sentimental distortions. So it is pleasant to be able to report that Flying Officer X (who in private and civilian literary life is H. E. Bates, author of several novels, a play, and ten volumes of short stories) has made a genuine if limited contribution to the cause of simplicity and accuracy. His contribution is semi-official, for "In the summer of 1941

he was commissioned Flying Officer X by the British Government and was stationed with the Bomber Command to study the men of the R.A.F. in and out of action." It might even be called a work of propaganda. But there is



—From "Their Finest Hour."
Spitfires in Formation

the propagation of truth as well as of falsehood.

Mr. Bates's limitations are self-imposed. He is more interested in the character behind action than in action itself, and his twenty-one short sketches are predominantly character sketches. Action is there, but it is for

Soldier in a Global War

MOMENT OF TRUTH. By Colonel Charles Sweeney. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943. 305 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by HENRY WREATH

THE author of this highly controversial book is a professional soldier. Charles Sweeney enlisted in the French Army when the First World War broke out. Transferred to the American Army with the rank of major, he commanded a battalion of infantry in France. Later he was a member of military missions sent to North Africa and Poland. After the fall of France in 1940 he became Commander of the First Foreign Division to be formed with regiments of the Foreign Legion. And he organized and commanded the First Eagle Squadron in England.

"Moment of Truth" is a realistic book on our war situation, as seen by a soldier. "The soldier is a pessimist. To him everything is transient . . . And it is good that he should be a pessimist. Misery is the best school of the soldier . . . a spirit of healthy

the most part subsidiary or illustrative. The result is a quiet book, a designedly quiet book. At times the reader might feel that the author has pushed his design too far; that the reticences are almost exhibitionistic in his under-writing a kind of exaggeration, his silences thunderous. He throws lines away instead of leaning on them; he lowers his voice instead of raising it. But so do most of those of whom he is writing.

For a vivid sense of war-flying, I think, I will, I think, have to go to another author, or at least to another book. In this one Mr. Bates seldom makes me feel that I am "air-borne" (if the old R.A.F. may use a word that belongs to the new); he never evokes for me at least, sensations of actual combat. But he knows the men whom he writes, and because of his knowledge, and his ability to communicate it, you will know and remember many of them. And you will find them good company. They speak in a different slang than their fathers did. They are better trained, more scientific, and less expert—one gathers—than serious drinking. Flying from England as they are, from well established stations, the routine of their lives is unlike the expeditionary routines of the last war. Greatest change of all, perhaps, fighter aristocrats and humble bombers now fly as peers. Whatever the changes, the faces are familiar. And the thoughts and feelings and hopes and hates and determinations behind the faces.

pessimism has inspired the writing of the following pages."

The author first reviews our most enemy Germany. He knew General von Seeckt, founder of the Reichswehr, very well and he thinks without Seeckt and not Hitler was "the great man of Germany." It was von Seeckt who first dreamed of Germany ruling the world. When he died the General Staff decided Germany's fate. "As this General Staff goes, so goes Germany."

From here on Colonel Sweeney, like a mathematician disregarding economic and political factors, outlines the possible conquest of Europe. Germany has a vulnerable flank, he says, a southwestern one. But Germany is the mistress of the continent. She can mobilize twenty-six million men. Therefore a frontal attack on the continent is out of the question because "frontal attacks are foolish." The Italian invasion is hardly more attractive. "To repel an invasion Italy can mobilize eight million soldiers and auxiliaries. Meanwhile we would be struggling with the problem of trans-