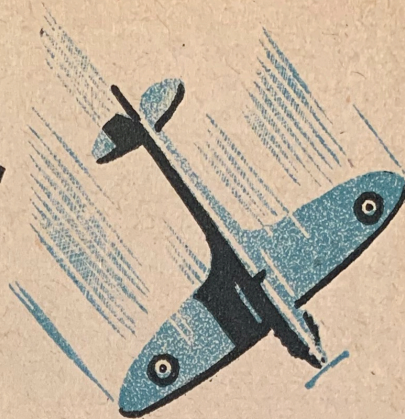


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Flying beyond the reach of fear

A GLIMPSE INTO THE FIGHTER PILOT'S MIND

by FLYING OFFICER X *



WHAT do pilots think? What do they feel?

Does flying change them? Do they fly for flying's sake or for the sake of a cause? How do they behave before they go up and when they come down, and in the proximity of death?

Are they, except as pilots, very different from ordinary men?

These questions and dozens likewise are flung at any Royal Air Force man a score of times a year.

Note that they are not questions asked about soldiers, whose reactions under fire have presumably been exhaustively known throughout history; and about sailors, whose feelings in storm and action are, no doubt, roughly the same in a destroyer as in the ships of Columbus and Saint Paul.

They are questions you are asked only about men who fly.

Soldiers are presumed to feel sickness, fear, exultation, emptiness, or to feel nothing at all in the face of battle. Sailors presumably feel the same emotions or have no time to feel any emotions in action at sea. Nobody doubts they are men; nobody dreams they are supermen.

Yet for some reason or other, pilots

are suspected of being a little above the one and a little below the other. It is hard for an outsider to believe that they do not, through special behaviour, feel special emotions.

It is fairly safe to say there are no new emotions; though there are, no doubt, new ways of expressing and feeling the same emotions. There are also new ways of hiding them.

These are two reasons why it is difficult to persuade pilots to tell what they think and feel.

What they think and feel is undoubtedly very like what the rest of us think and feel, but in a world of violent action, sudden death, and specialised physical behaviour—a world in which a man may kill another man 30,000 feet above the earth at four o'clock, yet comfortably watch the easy dancing of Ginger Rogers in a cinema at five—pilots become rather like schoolboys. They invent and are loyal to a protective communal code of speech and manner.

This code compels them roughly to be unimpressible, inarticulate, self-effacing. By utterly excluding the boaster it victimises almost anyone who talks about himself. In the early days of the war there was fortunately a pilot who, setting an appalling precedent in this matter, was heard to begin an account of an air combat with the words:

* This well-known pseudonym conceals an even better-known real name—that of a famous writer of short stories.

"FIGHTER
BOYS" OF
A FAMOUS
COUNTY
SQUADRON

Drawn from
life by
OLIVE SNELL



JEFF

PADDY

PETE

"There was I flying upside down."

From that day to this it has been harder to persuade a Royal Air Force pilot to tell his story, to give his impressions of flight, to dissect even the simplest of his flying emotions, than to persuade a child that potatoes are nicer than bananas.

In a sense, all this is the result of a man playing a part. And since the pilot has a part to play he must also, naturally, have lines to speak.

These lines are not his own. They are imposed on him by communal rules.

Thus it happens that he never talks of an action being, in the words of the official communiqués, an outstanding success. For him it is only a "piece of cake." He will not go into personal details about those he dislikes.

"There's a bad type," he says.

He rarely talks about aircraft, only about "kites." He rarely crashes them; he only "wraps them up." His girl is a "popsie." His greatest praise is "good show."

He never discusses death nor the fear of death. "There's no future in it," he says.

Note that this language, avoiding reality, is not very original; it is even rather silly; it has none of the inventive virility of American or colonial speech.

Yet its communal force is so consider-

able that Canadians with all the rich territory of American English as their background, have adopted it with as much ardour as New Zealanders, South Africans, Australians, and the English themselves.

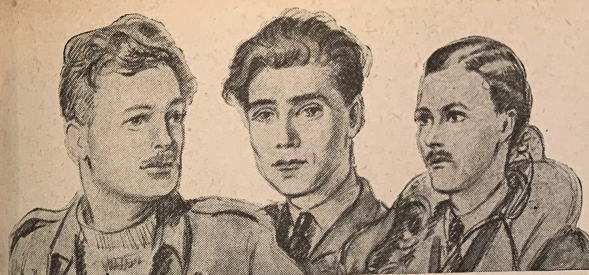
Naturally more outspoken than the English, much less reticent about personal achievement, they, too, become victimised by the rule of understatement, by this curious language invented not to reveal but to hide.

Already a great deal of outside scorn has been poured on this exclusive speech which confines those who use it consistently to a vocabulary rather more primitive than that of a shepherd with nobody to talk to but his dog.

Still it persists, grows constantly, imposes itself on new generations of men. Much of it is silly; more—and naturally the more virile part—is unprintable.

But in essence, it always remains the same—a language invented by men living in fear of the opinion of their fellow-men; something of the same fear that keeps schoolboys from telling teacher.

To all this there are, of course, exceptions. It is no accident, I think, that the most distinguished pilots I have known have also been, apart from flying, the most distinguished men. They talked their own language.



MIKE

REG

DAVE

In flying, as in literature, painting, statesmanship, politics, and other arts, it is not, in the final assessment, technical accomplishment that matters, but the man.

Into this category go men like Richard Hilary, Ritchie, Bader, Kuttelwascher, John Llewellyn Rhys, and plenty of others. There go many more, unknown beyond the tiny circle of their own squadrons. In all cases, they were not simply men of action.

These are the men of whom some of our visitors have noted odd facts. Men of action are popularly men of physical strength. Americans have noted and will no doubt go on noting until the end of the war, the small, sometimes even feminine, physique of many British air aces.

Members of the first Eagle squadron found it hard to identify small, delicate-looking men with the great air battles of 1940. They expected toughness and found resilience instead—that excellent quality which the British national character shares with the Russian.

All of which still does not define what

pilots feel. Behind it all, their emotions remain. And what are they?

There is no doubt that flying is a refiner's fire. Anyone who needs a proof of that should read Hilary's *The Last Enemy*, a portrait of a nauseatingly selfish young Oxford undergraduate, on his own admission replete with all the snobbery of his class, who, through action in the air, became not only a fine pilot but a very changed and admirable man.

In him, as in many other young men who have flown in this war, fear, fatigue, and exaltation combine, perhaps, to produce friction sufficient to burn away the clutter of unessential things.

Fear, as for the rest of us, is the dominant emotion—fear of opinion, of ourselves, and of the moment beyond. There has never been a pilot, I think, who under all that laconic exterior and monosyllabic speech, was not afraid, and who was not an infinitely better pilot and man because of it.

There was never one who, having been through that, didn't know the meaning of "the calm confidence born in the conquest of fear."

That is what pilots feel.

Silence is the fence around wisdom.—ORIENTAL PROVERB.