

## Foreword

The war of 1939-1945 required total commitment from British citizens. That included writers. Almost everyone from Noel Coward to George Orwell was anxious to do their bit. Some like Evelyn Waugh saw themselves as men of action rather than scribblers and spurned the pen for the sword – a mistake as it turned out. Most though, decided they could make the most effective contribution by practising what they did best.

Herbert Ernest Bates was thirty-four years old when the war broke out, and married with four children. He was already a well-known writer and a junior member of the literary establishment with friends like Graham Greene. Despite his age and family responsibilities he first tried for a commission in the Royal Air Force only to be turned down.

He spent a frustrating time trying to get worthwhile war work. Eventually, in September, the Air Ministry offered an unusual assignment. They proposed to commission him into the RAF simply as a short story writer, charged with showing the public the private face of the aircrews who by now were engaged in an all out bombing campaign. Bates was alarmed at first – he knew nothing about flying or military aviation. That soon gave way to a feeling of pride and excitement. He left the ministry ‘feeling rather as if I had been awarded a literary Victoria Cross.’ The results, published anonymously at first under the pen name ‘Flying Officer X,’ would enthral hundreds of thousands of readers and delight his superiors.

The stories are all taken from Bates’s time at bomber stations in the east of England during the autumn and winter of 1941-1942. It was a painful period for the RAF and for Bomber Command in particular. The realisation was dawning that without better navigational aids bombing was hopelessly inaccurate and wasteful.

Bates's job was not to analyse operational shortcomings but to anatomise – and celebrate – the character of those doing the flying and dying. He did so triumphantly, subtly exposing the motivations and mindsets of men who spent little time examining their emotions, explaining them in a way they would have been hard pressed to do themselves.

He spent three months based at Oakington, a newly built station in the flatlands north of Cambridge. It was home to 7 Squadron equipped with the giant new four-engined Stirlings and 101 Squadron flying Wellingtons. During that time they were flying sorties over Germany interspersed with trips to Brest where the battlecruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* (Salmon and Gluckstein in RAF slang) were berthed, menacing Britain's vital trans-Atlantic supply line. It was a dismal place and a dismal time. Thirteen aircraft were lost, thirty-eight aircrew were killed and thirteen taken prisoner. The losses achieved little. Bates was profoundly aware of the gap between himself as an observer and

those who were taking the risks. He offered a sympathetic ear, rarely probing, and these taciturn men opened up to him over a drink in the mess or the local pub. The stories show that he was not only a great writer, but also a superb listener.

As a fan of Bates's writing, I am delighted that the *Flying Officer X* stories are collected into one volume here for the first time together with some previously unpublished stories from the same period.

Patrick Bishop, 2015