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THE BELOVED SKY

WING LEADER. By "Johnnie" Johnson. (Chatto & Windus. 15s.)

By H. E. BATES

ONE of the more striking things to be noted in many books of combat reminiscence after the second world war, especially those by men of the R.A.F., is the almost entire absence of a note of disenchantment.

After 1918 the spate of war books, many of them first and only novels, was a stream of gall. No generation ever expressed itself about war with such a dark breath of bitterness.

From Faulkner, Remarque and Sassoon down to the obscurest odd-men-out who wrote of the malignant barbarities of the Somme and Passchendaele and then said no more, hardly a writer was free of it; and it is worth noting that one, C. E. Montague, actually called his probe into war's futilities "Disenchantment," a title that virtually fitted all the rest of them.

Consider, by contrast, "Wing Leader," a book by an officer not only of great distinction but of achievement and decoration unsurpassed by any Allied pilot of the war. An attempt by Douglas Bader in a short foreword to turn the whole thing into a romping fourth-form rag would have been inappropriate if it had succeeded, which happily it does not.

The book is, nevertheless, pitched on a pleasant, racy, almost enraptured note of eagerness, and you will fail to find in it a single really bitter, aggrieved or snarling line. It is, in fact, a testament of high purpose and adventure by a young man who, like so many of that great company of his youth, enjoyed his war.

The quality of flying, like that of art, depends finally on the character of the performer. From the first page of this excellent book by "Johnnie" Johnson, (officially Group-Captain J. E. Johnson, D.S.O. and two bars, D.F.C. and bar, destroyer of thirty-eight enemy aircraft and now Deputy-Director of Tactical Operations at the Air Ministry) the impression is of a warm, thoughtful, modest man capable of firm self-criticism and much courage and with a sense of humour, of purpose and of dedication.

Yet somewhere back in the nineteen-thirties several people, among them an R.A.F. officer whose standards were those of the hunting field, rejected this man's plea to be allowed to join the Auxiliary Air Force, in order to get into which "you almost had to own your own aeroplane." and

the R.A.F.V.R., with the result that he joined, half in despair, the Leicestershire Yeomanry, where he was pleased to find it was not "necessary to know how to fly in order to ride a horse."

I hope that if the "very keen fox-hunting type" can now spare time to get off his horse he will read this chronicle by the aspirant he rejected. It may inspire him to a belief that there are greater things in the world than horse-flesh and perhaps even to the conclusion that it was a very good thing, in 1939, that there were men like "Johnnie" Johnson who firmly believed in that proposition and in themselves.

Or he may care to read the book, as it is possible to do, for its sheer personal, historical excitements; for its comradeship; for its humour; and for its tale of high ardour and skill in various battles—the Battle of Britain, D-Day, Normandy, the Lowlands and the rest. If he also cares to spend some time looking at the photographs he will not only find the book exciting; he may even be deeply moved, as I am, by the startling youthfulness of the faces portrayed. How terribly young they were, in those days, in their beloved sky.

P.o.W.'s Tale

Piece of Cake. By Geoff. Taylor. (Peter Davies. 15s.)

FOR more than two years this Australian bomber pilot was in an Army prisoners' camp in Saxony, until one morning the Germans had left and the Cosacks had arrived. During the two years, he had had forty-eight hours of undetected freedom on a nearby air base, trying unsuccessfully with a companion to steal a Ju.88.

That is all there is to say in a summary of his story, but his long book, moving with all the deliberation of a prisoner's monotonous existence, succeeds wonderfully in conveying the slow deterioration, the misery relieved by self-denial on behalf of less fortunate new arrivals, the harsh treatment given to those who stole food, the plight of the Poles and the Russians, the revival of an apparently dead consciousness of sex with the arrival of a batch of women fighters from Warsaw, the stench and filth, and the endless preoccupation with hunger until it even put a stop to reading because too many of the characters in a book were well-fed.

This is a powerful and grim book, yet it achieves a naturalness that saves it from horror.

E. COLSTON SHEPHERD