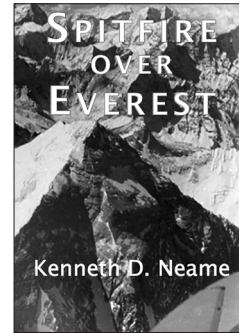


Book Reviews

Spitfire Over Everest



By Kenneth D Neame

Publisher: Hayloft Publishing (12th November 2018) (ISBN: 978-1-910237-39-7), 262 Pages

Reviewed by Honorary Group Captain Paul Beaver

Biography: Paul Beaver is an Honorary Group Captain in No 601 Squadron, author of *Spitfire People* and Vice-President of the Spitfire Society. He has written over 65 books. Until 2013, he was the senior flying reservist in the British armed forces as Colonel (Reserves) in the Joint Helicopter Command.

Introduction

This account of Spitfire operations in India in the immediate post-war period has a delightful period feel to the narrative and it is clear from the start that this account was originally penned for a private audience. In fact, the book was previously published as a private memoir for the benefit of the author's family in 1992.

Added to the fact that the Everest sortie is a very small part of the story which starts with selection, flying training and an initial squadron posting to Occupied Germany, the book is perhaps misnamed. The tales of flying Tiger Moth and Harvard, as well as a glimpse of contemporary life in the Royal Air Force College, Cranwell are delightful. There is no doubt that the author was a well-motivated, skilled and adaptable pilot; ideally suited to the mainly solo operations demanded by Spitfire photo-reconnaissance operations even after the end of hostilities.

Neame was clearly rated by his superiors and returned their trust with some of the first pictures of Mount Everest. These pictures were used in the great expedition of 1953 which finally conquered the world's greatest peak albeit that they were unofficial and acquired by illegally overflying Tibet (prior to its annexation by China). His story gets out in 1951 when the *Daily*

Express headlines: "Lone Pilot keeps Secret Five Years" using some of his own pictures from a hand-held Leica camera. There is no doubt that Neame was proud of his achievement, given that he was a National Service pilot who played a part in the final mountaineering challenge, this is not surprising.

What particularly appeals to both the Spitfire enthusiast and the historian of the period, as well as those who just love a flying yarn, is that it is written from the heart. There is an attention to detail which informs and only occasionally distracts from the narrative. That detail includes schematics of various sorties which are firmly in the author's lifetime memory. Some of these, like work for the snow catchment study which requires detailed flying in Sikkim, north of Darjeeling in marginal weather. Together with some clear photographs, the sketches are useful indicators of the huge scale of flying in northern India at the time. For the historian of India immediately before Partition, it has much historical merit. The last days of the Raj still included servants, bearers and the various *wallahs* with their restricted practices and job identity. One charming piece is about the lack of space in the Spitfire. This meant travelling from an air station without bedding caused confusion when arriving at an Officers' Mess in need of towels and other essentials; civilians turning up at Officers' Messes today are not alone in their embarrassment.

This is a book of its era and is typical of the genre of family memoir. A personal account of a rarely described period, told with care and affection, at a time when most couldn't wait to leave the Service. For Kenneth Neame, it was a time of pure excitement and he thrived.

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