

Fighter Pilot by Helen Doe. Amberley Publishing; 2016. £9.99.

I have always considered reviewing autobiographies to be a high risk occupation, with biographies written by family members a close second. However, a first 'thumb through' of *Fighter Pilot*, a biography of Wing Commander Bob Doe DSO DFC, written by his daughter, revealed a 255-page paperback with a comprehensive index, sixty plus monochrome photographs and an impressive bibliography of primary and secondary sources, coupled with an equally valuable listing of notes cross-referenced in the text. When one then reads the author's *bona fides*, one learns that she is an academic with considerable achievements as an historian. To cap it all, Dr Helen Doe is a member of this Society!

Endorsements for the book, by Professor Richard Overy and Stephen Bungay, appear on its cover and, if there were any remaining doubts as to its quality, the Acknowledgements page reflects the breadth of the author's research.

With all thoughts of 'high risk' melting away, my remaining concern, centred on the subject matter. Several years ago, and on the Society's behalf, I prepared an evening lecture to be delivered near the subject's birthplace at Moffett called 'Lord Dowding and the Battle of Britain'. In this I tried to trace Dowding's influence on the whole of the battle, from his early ideas to the detail of his strategic plan and its execution. I did not seek to review the battle on a daily basis, although I did offer opinions on Bader and his 'big wing' theory. My fear, therefore, was that this book might prove to be little more than an account of one individual's experiences and solely their contribution to the battle.

I need not have been concerned. Helen Doe's book is much more than a limited account of a short but important period; rather it is a comprehensive account of the life of a man, admired and respected widely across the military aviation community.

The author has skilfully avoided, what could so easily have been, a rather dry or repetitious account and uses a mix of Bob Doe's own comments, historical narrative and factual information gleaned from interviews and the official records, which together make the book flow nicely. There are no fancy flashbacks and the account canters along at a good pace, offering no temptation to skip to something a bit more interesting, a few pages further on. That said, the first half of the book deals with Doe's upbringing, his transformation to a skilled operator and his success during the battle. The period after the battle and his subsequent serious injury, followed by a spell as an instructor, contains some very interesting information about those who helped his recovery and whose contribution to, often innovative, maxillofacial surgical procedures is often overlooked in preference to some more high profile exponents in the field of facial reconstruction. Doe's posting to the Far East is then covered in considerable detail and it might be argued that his sustained involvement with the RIAF and the Burma campaign was as important as the contribution he made to the Battle of Britain.

Doe's post-war service warrants only 22 pages which includes an, I thought, unnecessarily detailed account of the 25th Anniversary dedication of the Battle of Britain. Although the author comments on the failure of her father's first marriage and makes brief mention of her half- and stepsisters, there is little more about Doe the family man, although other accounts allude to a third marriage and more children. It seems, however, that Doe found the post-war RAF, and certainly after he finished active flying duties, an uncomfortable place and the book seems to gently confirm this.

The account might have benefitted from a little more information as to how Doe spent the remaining forty or so years of his life after retiring and how he coped with the world beyond the air force. We know that he had a successful civilian career beyond the air force, but I sense there was more to tell.

This book is probably the best biographical account I have read of anybody in any walk of life and I recommend it without reservation. Whilst the final comment from Doe, that he and his colleagues should not be seen as heroes but remembered for what they did, is probably a good reflection of the man but perhaps too modest, given the pivotal importance of the Battle of Britain and its place in history.