

To Flight Lieutenant Frank Lowe, DFM,
and to his comrades of RAF Bomber Command
in the Second World War.

*

Also by Derek Robinson

Fiction

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Non-fiction

Invasion, 1940

DAMNED GOOD SHOW

DEREK ROBINSON



MACLEHOSE PRESS



MACLEHOSE PRESS

An imprint of Quercus
New York • London

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ISBN 978-1-62365-322-4

Distributed in the United States and Canada by Random House Publisher Services
c/o Random House, 1745 Broadway
New York, NY 10019

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PART ONE
High Alert

1

The group captain aimed his pipe at the wireless set. A Mess waiter hurried to switch it off.

“Never trust a man who carries an umbrella wherever he goes,” Rafferty said. “He thinks it will protect him. He deludes himself.”

“I know it’s a big job, being Prime Minister,” Hunt said. “I just wish he wouldn’t sound like an undertaker who’s lost the body.”

They were in the Mess anteroom of RAF Kindrick, a bomber base in Lincolnshire. From here, 409 Squadron flew twin-engined Hampdens.

Only a handful of officers had joined them to hear the Prime Minister’s broadcast. 409 Squadron had been on alert for a week, and all flying personnel were in their crew rooms, listening to their own wireless sets. Rafferty was station commander: a big, broad, hook-nosed group captain with medal ribbons and faded wings from the First World War. Wing Commander Hunt led the squadron. He was thirty and looked younger, except for his eyes. Peacetime flying in the RAF had always been a risky business. Before they got Hampdens, 409 had flown canvas-skinned, fixed-wheel, open-cockpit biplanes that were not far removed from the machines of the Royal Flying Corps. Hunt liked a degree of danger; he believed the RAF thrived on it, and ultra-cautious pilots annoyed him. But he also resented pointless waste, including time wasted writing letters to next of kin. His feelings showed in his eyes. He had angry eyes.

“Chamberlain backed the wrong nag,” the Intelligence Officer said. “He’s lost his shirt.”

“Got rotten odds, anyway,” the adjutant remarked. “I said so at the time.”

“We can’t put all the blame on Chamberlain,” the Medical Officer said. “Let’s face it: everyone cheered when he flew back from Munich. ‘Peace in our time,’ he told them, and that’s exactly what they wanted to hear. Even the *Daily Express*—”

“Gibberish!” Rafferty said. “Pure gibberish. He waved that bloody silly piece of paper as if Hitler had very kindly given him the last bit of bog-roll in Europe.”

“In a sense, he had,” the Intelligence Officer said.

“That speech ...” The adjutant pointed at the wireless. “I wonder if he wrote it. ‘Consequently this country is at war with Germany’ ... Not the most thrilling call to arms I’ve heard.”

“And all in aid of Poland,” the Intelligence Officer said. “That’s a clever trick, considering Poland’s beyond the range of any of our bombers.”

“Cheer up!” Rafferty heaved himself out of his armchair, and everyone stood. “The good news is we’re in business! The balloon’s gone up. The gloves are off, the fat’s in the fire. Cry havoc and something something something.”

“Let slip the dogs of war, sir,” the MO said.

“Too damn true,” Hunt said. He looked at his watch. “Briefing in twenty minutes.”

2

It was the wrong kind of day to go to war: mild, sunny, not much breeze. That sort of weather, in early September, was meant for watching a decisive match in the county cricket championship, with a pint of beer and a popsy who couldn't tell a square cut from a ham sandwich, and didn't care either. Rafferty was forty-three, a bit old for popsies. As he strolled with Hunt to the briefing room, he was thinking about that line, *Let slip the dogs of war*. Did it do justice to the boys of 409 Squadron? Dogs of war? Decent, cheery, honorable chaps? Then he remembered some of the pilots he'd known in the RFC. Not what you'd call nice men. Ruthless killers, more like. Fellows who didn't enjoy their breakfast unless they'd crept up behind some foolish Hun, put twenty rounds in his petrol tank and made a flamer of him. Dogs of war, all right. About as chivalrous as jackals. Still, this war would be different. The bomber boys weren't looking for blood, their job was to knock out precise military targets, every bomb a coconut, until one day *Der Fuehrer* would discover that he had no more toys to play with. With pluck and skill, 409 could become the crack squadron of Bomber Command. With a bit of luck, Rafferty could become an air vice-marshal. Press forward hard enough, and you find yourself leading. Quite right, too.

Hunt wasn't thinking about promotion. He was wondering what it would be like to lead a squadron in action. He had a small face and a slim build. His nickname was Pixie, not very flattering but he didn't mind because it meant that careless pilots who were called to his office got a shock from the blast he delivered. Some came out looking whipped. In the Mess, Pixie Hunt was relaxed, sometimes funny, and he enjoyed argument. In the air, he demanded high standards of flying and a fiercely competitive spirit. When one of his pilots began running around the airfield every day, in training for the marathon in the next Olympic Games, Hunt got rid of him. He had nothing against the Olympics, but there was room for only one obsession in this squadron.

That was in peacetime. Hunt wasn't so blinkered as to think that 409 was trained to the peak of perfection. For a start, fuel and ammunition had been rationed—the Air Ministry was always on a tight budget—so there was very little night-flying, and usually none at weekends. For the same reason his crews had no permanent air gunners or wireless operators. Those jobs were done by volunteers from the groundcrew, fitters or electricians or armament mechanics, as and when they could be spared from their duties. An AC2—the lowest rank in the RAF—got paid an extra sixpence a day for manning a gun in a Hampden. An AC1 or LAC got a shilling for manning a gun *and* a radio. Brave men and keen, and Hunt knew they'd do their best against the enemy, but he'd seen their scores at the annual gunnery exercises: dismal.

At least the gun positions were enclosed, so gunners weren't exposed to the freezing, battering gales as they had been in the bombers that the Hampden replaced. Too bad it didn't have powered turrets. Swinging a machine gun was hard on the arms. It took a lot of practice for a gunner to track his target especially when it was a fighter that was diving and skidding and rolling at two or three hundred miles an hour and looking thinner than a pencil when it was only two hundred yards away. Hunt knew that his part-time gunners never got enough practice.

Too late to worry about that now.

He followed Rafferty into the briefing room. All the aircrew officers were there. They stood. *One direct hit from a Hun bomb and 409 would be finished*, Hunt thought; and was immediately ashamed of such alarm and despondency.

Rafferty told everyone to sit.

"They've started it," he said. "Again. Some people never learn. Now it's up to us to finish it. Well know the Hun, and I'll tell you this: when you kill him he's dead. We killed great quantities of Huns in the last show. We duffed up the Hun then, and we'll duff up the Hun again now. Wing commander?"

Hunt stepped forward.

“War is full of surprises,” he announced. That got their full attention. “Here’s the first. The United States of America is involved. President Roosevelt has asked all the nations at war not to bomb civilians.” He let the words sink in. “Mr. Roosevelt doesn’t want us to bomb undefended towns. That’s not a problem, we weren’t intending to bomb them anyway. He also doesn’t want us to attack any target if there’s any risk of hitting civilians living nearby. Britain has agreed. So has France. It comes to this, gentlemen: we must not bomb the German mainland.”

A rumble of disbelief turned into loud laughter. This was anticlimax in spades. “Bags me two weeks’ leave!” someone called.

“That’s not all,” Hunt said, and they were silent again. “Poland’s out of range, of course, but the enemy has a coastline. He has warships which threaten our shipping. They might even bombard our towns.”

“Tried it last time,” Rafferty said. “Shelled Scarborough, Bridlington, Whitby Abbey. Sorry, wing commander.”

“We can bomb German warships at sea or at anchor without upsetting Mr. Roosevelt,” Hunt said, “because a ship at anchor is not part of the mainland.”

“Bloody clever,” someone muttered.

“The Intelligence Officer will give you the details.”

This was a heavy-set flight lieutenant, very bald, with a mustache thick enough to hide his expression. Above the medal ribbons, his half-wing of an observer had weathered to pearl gray. He was the only man in the squadron to wear spectacles. Everyone called him Bins, short for binoculars.

He unrolled a map of northern Europe. “To refresh your memory: Germany has two stretches of coastline,” he said. “One on each side of Denmark. Obviously, the more important, for us, is the North Sea coastline. It’s nearer, and it has important naval bases at Wilhelmshaven and Emden, plus the inland ports of Bremen and Hamburg. Beyond Denmark, on the Baltic, the German navy also uses Brunsbüttel, here at the mouth of the Kiel Canal. All those warships are available for attack under the Roosevelt Rules. Provided ...”

He hooked another roll of paper over the map and let it fall open.

“This is Wilhelmshaven. You see the town *here*, and the docks *here*. The area in blue is the bay. Now, if a German cruiser, for instance, is tied up to the dockside, you must not bomb it.” He surveyed them over his horn-rims. They looked unhappy. Good. That meant they were listening. “Civilians live nearby. Some may be dockers. Your bombs might harm them.”

“Hard cheese,” someone growled.

“Any German vessel, warship or otherwise, attached to the dockside is part of the mainland and therefore immune. But ...” Bins indulged himself in a short pause, “... if the ship is out *here*, offshore, maybe anchored, maybe not, it’s considered to be at sea. You can sink it with a clear conscience.”

“Are the Huns playing by the same rules?” a pilot asked.

“The German government has not yet responded.”

“Too busy bombing Poland.”

“Possibly. A few words about Denmark, Holland and Belgium. They are neutral and anxious to remain so. Fly over them and you may get shot at by their anti-aircraft guns, perhaps even attacked by their fighters ...”

Bins answered a few questions and removed his maps. Rafferty stepped forward. The briefing had disappointed him: too flat, not enough gusto. “One last thing,” he said briskly. “Don’t believe

anything an air marshal tells you.” That made them stare. “When he’s called Hermann Goering.” They laughed, which was what he wanted. “Half of it’s lies and the other half’s tosh. That’s not our style. The Royal Air Force might not get everything absolutely right but at least we don’t appoint an air marshal who’s too fat to get in a cockpit.” They laughed more freely. “And remember this. You’re lucky, damned lucky. This war isn’t going to be all mud and blood, like last time. This will be the way of the knockout blow, and you’re the boys with the big punch. Good luck!”

Walking back to the Mess for lunch, Rafferty said: “The chaps are in fine fettle, aren’t they? Itching for a scrap.”

“It’s quite crazy, sir,” Hunt said.

“Of course it is, old boy. Totally lunatic.”

“We’re not trained to bomb ships. Nobody in the Command is.”

“Of course not. You counted on mainland targets. We all did. You’re damn good at hitting them, given a spot of decent weather.”

“Warships dodge about so much.”

“Yes. They carry a lot of guns, too.”

“That’s another thing, sir. What’s the best way to hit a ship? Should we go in low?”

“If it was me, I’d be up at eight or ten thousand feet, where the guns can’t reach. Not the light guns anyway.”

“From ten thousand, the target’s as thin as a pin and the bombs drift with the wind.”

“Well, in that case the whole thing’s absurd.”

“Crazy.” Hunt kicked the head off a dandelion. “But I suppose we’ll go ahead and do it anyway.”

“Certainly. Lunatic orders are in the finest tradition of the Service. Don’t think too much. Just do it.”

3

At about that time, an RAF Blenheim took off and headed across the North Sea. The weather was calm. A couple of hours later, the pilot was pleased to discover that he was bang on course, high above the approaches to Wilhelmshaven. That was good flying, plus a slice of luck.

Soon the crew looked down on a perfect view of fourteen German warships in formation: three battleships, four cruisers and seven destroyers. That was a really thick slice of luck. Immediately the Blenheim’s wireless operator reported the sighting. His radio wasn’t powerful enough to send a signal nearly four hundred miles. Bomber Command HQ received tattered fragments of the message and made no sense of them. Nobody’s luck lasts forever.

The Blenheim turned for home and flew into a storm. For the rest of the afternoon the pilot struggled against a thumping headwind. He landed shortly before five p.m. and made his report.

When the order to attack reached 409 Squadron, every crew wanted to go. All week they had been various stages of alert; all day they had been on standby, sitting in their crew rooms, playing cards, reading stale news in newspapers, dozing, waiting, thinking. The sudden promise of action blew away boredom, but not for everyone. “Five aircraft,” Hunt announced. “That’s all they want. Five. I’m leading.” He quickly picked four experienced crews. They took off at six-fifteen.

Already the light was poor. To the east it was worse: black with thunderstorms. They crossed the

coast at Lowestoft. It was their last sight of land for almost six hours. Before long the wind was gusting so badly that Hunt opened out the formation, to avoid collision. They flew with their navigation lights on. Hunt knew that his five were only part of a large force of bombers—eighteen Hampdens and nine Wellingtons—all aiming for the same spot on the map. The longer they flew, the greater the risk that two machines might try to occupy exactly the same spot at the same time. Each with a full load of bombs. He put it out of his mind.

Once, in the fading light, he thought he saw aircraft far to the north. Then cloud blotted out the dot.

The rest of the trip was a matter of increasing misery and fatigue. The Hampdens bucketed through a succession of storms. The rain made a racing skin on the windscreens and the pilots flew by instrument. Always the wind was violent, and without doubt it was changing direction. The observers were navigating by dead reckoning: we are flying on *this* compass bearing at *that* speed so, allowing for such and such a wind, we must be *here*. The storms made fools of the compass and blew the predicted winds to buggery. The Hampdens slogged on. With luck they ought to strike Germany somewhere in the hundred-mile gap between Denmark and Holland.

Perhaps they did. The light was so poor and the weather was so thick that none of the bombers made a landfall. Nobody found Germany, let alone Wilhelmshaven, let alone a pin-thin, blacked-out warship.

Hunt gave up the search after three hours. His arms and legs ached from the endless struggle to keep the Hampden on track. He had long since lost contact with the others. He got a course for home from his observer and steeled himself for another three hours of this wretched, bruising flight.

The last of his Hampdens touched down at ten minutes to midnight. Some of the gunners were so stiff with cold that they had to be lifted out of the aircraft.

The crews went to interrogation, then to supper, then to bed. Rafferty and Bins strolled to the Mess for a nightcap.

“At least we didn’t lose anyone,” Rafferty said.

“Hell of a long way to go for nothing, sir. Suppose that German fleet was making twenty knots when it was spotted. Could be two hundred miles from Wilhelmshaven by now.”

“You won’t mention that to the chaps.”

“Of course not. The brighter ones know it anyway. They had plenty of time to work it out for themselves, didn’t they?”

4

After a late breakfast, Hunt called a meeting of the crews who had taken part in the operation. He wanted to pool their information. It made a small pool.

Nobody had seen anything. Even if they’d seen a ship, in that lousy weather nobody could have told the difference between a German cruiser and a Swedish freighter. The Bristol Pegasus engines had performed well, thank God. But on such a long flight, navigation had been a mix of faith, hope and guesswork. And the Hampden was an icebox, especially for the gunners. Two hours made them stiff as wood, three hours turned them numb, after four they were in pain, after five ... They couldn’t remember how they felt after five frozen hours. They couldn’t remember much of anything.

“None of the other squadrons made contact,” Hunt said. “Not a wasted evening, however. Valuable

training, jolly valuable.” He saw that they were not convinced of this. “We got thrown in at the deep end. ~~A night op in stinking weather with orders to hammer the Hun in his backyard, and the war not a day old!~~ You chaps came through with flying colors. All right, that’s all. Carry on, except Pilot Officers Silk and Langham.”

The others left. Hunt picked up two buff files and flicked through their contents. “Luck,” he said. “Do you have any views on luck? You should. It’s lucky for you two this war came along when it did isn’t it?”

“Sir?” Langham said.

“You’re what, twenty-two? Not many jobs out there for a pair of sacked bomber pilots with no ability except farting about.”

Silk blinked, twice. Otherwise he showed no emotion. He was taller than average and strong in the shoulders, as a good bomber pilot should be. He had dark hair and a clean-cut, open face, the kind that old ladies looked for when they wanted to be helped across a road. Hunt had seen many fools or liars or both with clean-cut, open faces; he disliked Silk and distrusted him. Silk was too well-tailored, his collars were a little too crisp, the thrust of his tie a fraction too dashing. His hair was wavy, which was no crime, but it had a rich, burnished glow that made Hunt suspect excessive brushing. Long ago he had written in Silk’s file: *Is this man a bloody fop? Where’s his handbag?*

“If you get kicked out, you’ll vanish,” Hunt said. “Into the army, probably. Lose your commission of course. Infantrymen. Brown jobs, that’s what you’ll be. Because why? Because we don’t need clowns in the Royal Air Force.”

“Certainly not, sir.”

“Shut up, Silk. Last June, on a navigation exercise, you flew a Hampden under the Tamar railway bridge in Plymouth.”

“Chaps in Fighter Command do it all the time, sir.”

“Don’t bring my squadron down to the level of those playboys, Silk.”

“No, sir.”

“In May, a Hampden beat up a point-to-point in Northamptonshire. Some clown flew around the course and jumped half the jumps. That was you, Langham.”

“Sir, I explained—”

“You invented a bunch of lies. One reason the RAF has always been short of funds for fuel and armaments is clowns like you make idiots of themselves in front of MPs at point-to-points.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And there’s more. Look here: tedious complaints of aircraft playing silly buggers. No proof, but I know it’s you two. And horseplay on the ground, too. God knows that Guest Nights can get a bit wild but you, Silk, had to pick a fight *with an air commodore*.”

“He challenged me, sir.”

“He was *drunk*, Silk. Pie-eyed. Why didn’t you run away?”

“Matter of honor, sir.”

“Matter of a broken arm.” Hunt’s left foot kept kicking his desk. “That man couldn’t play bridge for six weeks. *Six weeks*. Didn’t stop him signing snotty reports on this squadron. And as for your record of alcoholic excess, Langham ...” Hunt glanced at him. Peculiar pair. Silk looked too young, Langham too old. He reminded Hunt of the jack of spades. Black hair, dark eyes, an obvious shadow where he’d shaved. Pity he didn’t act his age. “I haven’t forgotten your obscene behavior with the barmaid and the snake.”

“Allegedly obscene, sir. Case never came to court.”

“Only because Group Captain Rafferty plays golf with the Chief Constable.”

“She was an exotic dancer with a python, sir. They got into difficulties and I tried ...”

“Bunkum. Now listen. If this squadron hadn't had such bad luck with accidents, I'd have kicked you out months ago. And I'd dump you now if it wasn't for Adolf bloody Hitler. What gripes me is you've both got ability. Silk, you should have made flying officer long ago.”

“I'm satisfied with my rank, sir.”

“I'm not. War is good for promotion. Pull your fingers out. You could be flight lieutenants in a year. But for Christ's sake keep your snotty little noses clean. Now buzz off.”

Another pilot who had taken part in the operation, Tubby Heckter, was hanging about outside the building, playing with the adjutant's dog. “Cozy chat?” he said.

“Pixie offered me fifty quid to marry his ugly sister,” Langham said.

“He tore you both off a strip. Thought so.” They headed for the Mess, booting an old tennis ball for the dog to chase.

“The Wingco's trouble is he doesn't understand us,” Langham said.

“What a shame,” Heckter said. “What doesn't he understand?”

“Oh, our modesty. Our humility.”

“Not his fault,” Silk said. “He's thicker than us, that's all.”

“He can't be,” Heckter said “You're one of the thickest blokes on the squadron.”

“I'm not thick. I may be dense, but I'm not thick.”

“Yes, you are, Silko. You're as thick as fog. Pug Duff said so.”

“Pug Duff? Dear little Pug, who trained with us? If I hadn't let him sit on my lap he'd never have got his wings. Pug is my biggest fan.”

“You pinched his girl,” Langham said. “He tried to kill you with a hockey stick.”

“Well, my smallest fan, then.”

“You can tell him how much he loves you,” Heckter said. “He's been posted here. He's in the Mess now.”

Pug was a nickname. He got it when he was five, on his first day at school, in the playground. He started a fight with a larger boy. Briefly he had the better of it, using fists, knees and feet with a rare ferocity, but he soon exhausted himself. His lip was split and his nose was streaming when a master arrived, grabbed each boy by the ear and dragged them apart. “Enough!” he roared. Duff kicked him on the shins. The master released the bigger boy, who was in tears, and cuffed Duff so hard that his nose sent a splatter of red across the asphalt. Duff tried to punch him in the stomach but his reach was a good twelve inches short. “What a pugnacious child,” the master said. After that, Duff was called Pug.

He was always short for his age, and always getting into fights; perhaps he tried to compensate for size by anger. Usually this kind of behavior gets worn smooth by the friction of the family. Pug Duff had no immediate family. His father had died ingloriously one night in 1917, sitting in a cinema in Amiens when it got hit by a bomb from a German airplane whose pilot was lost, and tired, and decided to jettison his bomb and go home. Captain Duff was in the cavalry, so his death made no difference to

the war. It made a huge difference to his widow. She lost her will to live, and the influenza epidemic did the rest. By 1919, young Duff was an orphan at the age of five.

Aunts, older cousins, grandparents all took their turns at raising him, shunting him around England like a small, scruffy, wrongly addressed parcel with too much unpaid postage. He was a foul-tempered little brat. Why not? Wherever he went, nobody wanted him and nobody loved him.

But there was enough money in his mother's will to send him to boarding school, and that was a great relief to everyone.

He went to Wellington. It was a muscular school where they prepared boys for the Army, and Pug found plenty of fights without looking for them. Being small, he usually lost. After a year or so he calmed down. Sheer physical strength, he realized, proved nothing. The way to dominate was through success. He worked hard and put his rivals in their stupid place. He didn't have a great brain but he got the most out of it. His short body expanded through ruthless exercise; when he was fifteen his chest was so wide that his shirt-sleeves reached his knuckles. Then, abruptly, the money came to an end and with it, school.

He was standing on a railway platform, waiting for a slow train to a dull job with a reluctant uncle when he saw a poster advertising the RAF School of Apprentices at Halton.

Duff found a home in the Royal Air Force. For the first time he knew the solid reassurance of total security. He stopped worrying about his career, clothes, food, health, pay, religion, sport. Halton organized all that. In return it demanded that Duff learn what made airplanes fly.

"Forget your air commodores," a sergeant instructor said to Duff's class of apprentices. "Forget your group captains, your wing commanders, your squadron leaders." No light shone in their eyes. They had been in uniform only a few weeks, and anyone with rings around his sleeves was god. "Forget your drill corporals," he said. That was different. Drill bloody corporals had been marching them up and down and across and around the parade bloody ground, cursing them, hating them, drilling all the individuality out of them. Forget drill corporals? The apprentices cheered up. "And for why?" the instructor said. "Because none of them can do what this little beauty can do." He was standing beside an aero engine, a Rolls-Royce Kestrel, cut away to expose its workings. "Nobody, from drill corporal to air marshal, can get an airplane off the ground. Only an engine can make it fly. He turned the propeller and they watched the slow march of the pistons. "Suck-squash-bang-shove. Make that happen a thousand times a minute, and your airplane will climb to ten thousand feet while the drill corporal's still polishing his buttons. *What is the purpose of the Royal Air Force?*" he shouted. "*Why does it exist?*"

"To fly airplanes," they chanted.

"Never forget it! If you're not helping get an airplane off the ground, you're not earning your pay. The Royal Air Force exists to fly. No other reason."

Pug Duff did well at Halton. Later, he applied for pilot training and did well at that, too. Eventually he got his commission. The public-school background helped: the RAF liked a chap who knew how to speak and which knife and fork to use. He had strong arms and legs. The RAF made him a bomber pilot. By the time he reached 409 at RAF Kindrick he was already a flying officer: one rank ahead of Silk and Langham.

They found Pug Duff eating peanuts in the Mess anteroom.

"There must be some mistake. You can't have been posted here, Pug," Silk said. "409 is a top

squadron.”

“Clerical error, I expect,” Langham said.

“Silko owes me ten bob from two years ago,” Duff said, “and I got tired of waiting. Also, Air Ministry wants to improve the standard of flying on this squadron.”

“Oh dear.” Langham signaled for drinks. “Poor Pug has lost his mind. How sad.”

“Look under the bed,” Silk suggested. “Offer a reward.”

“Talking of losing things,” Duff said. “I hear you two were out for hours and hours last night but you still couldn’t find Germany. Or was it Europe?”

“No, it was Germany we couldn’t find,” Langham said. “We probably shan’t find Norway tonight, and tomorrow night we’re not going to find Luxembourg. Or is it Spain?”

“I think it’s Ireland,” Silk said. “But it doesn’t matter.”

“Good God,” Duff said. “You’re a pretty useless lot, aren’t you?”

“We share the work. I’m pretty, and Tony’s useless.”

That ended the usual courtesies. They moved on to the eternal topics of pilots: the peculiarities of aircraft and aerodromes, the styles of leadership of COs and station commanders, the ups and downs of men they had trained with. Eventually Duff went away to freshen up before lunch.

“Pug looks awfully keen, doesn’t he?” Langham said.

“To tell the truth, I could scarcely see him,” Silk said. “I think he must have shrunk in the wash.”

5

This was the second day of the war. The storms had cleared the North Sea and moved on to soak Scandinavia. The same Blenheim crew that had spotted a battlefleet near Wilhelmshaven was sent on another reconnaissance and, amazingly, found yet more German warships, this time at anchor in Wilhelmshaven harbor. Once again, Bomber Command went into action. 409 Squadron was not required to take part.

The attack was made in daylight. It was briefly reported by the BBC.

A couple of days later, Pixie Hunt heard all about it from a visiting wing commander called Faraday, an old pal, now on the staff at Group HQ.

“Command sent fourteen Wellingtons and fifteen Blenheims,” Faraday said. “Quite a strong force.”

“Twenty-nine bombers should make a mess of something,” Hunt said.

“The Wellington packs a punch. The Blenheim’s too lightweight for this sort of job. Anyway, five Blenheims cocked up their navigation and never found the target. Low cloud.”

“Still leaves ten Blenheims.”

“True. Those ten actually found a couple of battleships and a cruiser. Cloud was so low they had to attack from five hundred feet. No good. Bombs bounced off the decks like ping-pong balls. Meanwhile, heavy flak. *Very* heavy flak. Flak knocked down five Blenheims.”

“Five out of ten,” Hunt said. “I see. And the Wellingtons?”

“Most never saw a damn thing and came home. But six Wimpys plowed on, found a battleship at Brunsbüttel, bombed it, missed it. Two kites didn’t return.”

“So we sent twenty-nine and lost... seven?”

“That’s one way of looking at it. Another way is to calculate our losses as a proportion of aircraft that actually attacked.” Faraday got a pencil and did the arithmetic. “Seven out of sixteen is 43.7 percent.”

Hunt could only stare.

“Don’t expect to read about it in the papers,” Faraday said. “And don’t be surprised if operations are a bit quiet for a while. If my guess is right, Command is having a good think.”

“Yes. Very likely.”

Faraday got up to leave. “Oh! I nearly forgot,” he said. “The Danish government has complained that a Wellington bombed the town of Esbjerg. Killed two civilians. Esbjerg is one hundred and ten miles north of Brunsbüttel.”

“Poor show.”

“Quite. And the next bomber to stray over Denmark can expect several large Danish shells up its ass.”

Faraday was right: Bomber Command had a good think about North Sea operations and losses, and whether one was worth the other.

Meanwhile 409 Squadron did nothing but train, and fly the occasional shipping-search patrol. The only ships they met were British destroyers, which fired at them. Apart from that, the crews saw no action. They soon grew bored. When war was declared everyone had been tense, eager, nervous, expecting massive air attacks and quick retaliation. All this hanging around made a mockery of courage, skill, the aggressive spirit. In mid-September, when Poland was obviously finished, Hitler agreed to the Roosevelt Rules. So now nobody was going to bomb anybody's mainland. The war was flop.

Yet 409 was kept on stand-by. Nobody was fighting, everybody was getting cheesed off. Something had to be done. The Wingco made Pilot Officer Silk the squadron entertainments officer.

"I don't care what you do as long as you brighten them up," Hunt said. "Give 'em something to look forward to, something to talk about except bloody Poland."

"Yes, sir. Is money available?"

"Within reason." The Wingco hunched his shoulders. "What's that stuffed up your left sleeve?"

"My handkerchief, sir."

"Silk, isn't it? Some sort of clever-clever trademark, I suppose. I don't like it. Makes you look like a ponce. I don't suppose I can stop you poncing around the station, but at least you'll do it properly dressed, without bits of haberdashery hanging off you. And listen, Silk."

"Sir?"

"Entertainment does not include pornographic cabaret acts with naked dancers and reptiles. Understand?"

"That was Langham, sir, not me."

"Don't argue. Get cracking. If I see you standing still I'll know you haven't got enough to do."

Silk went in search of Tony Langham and found him soaking in a bath so hot the steam rushed out of the door. Langham had just landed after a four-hour patrol over the North Sea. "Fucking ice all over the kite," he said. "Fucking squall line. Bounced about like a rubber fucking ball. Took her up to fifteen thousand. Fucking heating system failed. Instrument panel froze fucking solid. Icicles in the fucking oxygen tubes. Turned for home, got shot at by the Royal fucking Navy, so naturally my observer gave me the wrong fucking course, we made landfall at Berwick-upon-fucking-Tweed, and now I think I've got frostbite in the goolies."

"Just another day in the office, then." Silk sat on the bath stool. "What color are they?"

Langham submerged his head and blew bubbles, and came up. "One's green and one's blue," he said.

"That's pleurisy. My aunt died of it. Look here, the Wingco's made me Entertainments Officer. What shall we do?"

"Hold a dance, of course. Best way to keep the troops happy is let them get their hands on female flesh."

“We haven’t got a band.”

“You’re bloody useless, Silko. Get me a phone, I’ll get you a dozen dance bands, all assorted colors. Where’s your initiative?”

“My wicked stepfather cut it off when I was seven.”

“Chuck me a towel.” Langham stood up. “The trouble with your family was the wrong father got shot.”

Silk nodded. He admired Langham for his candor, his readiness to think the unthinkable and speak the unspeakable. Very UnEnglish. Very refreshing. Langham was right, of course; Silk had often wished his stepfather dead and his real father alive instead. Completely irrational, he knew that. Especially when the stepfather was rich.

“If he hadn’t paid my fees at Clifton,” Silk pointed out, “you and I would never have met.”

“Yeah. The old bastard’s done his good deed, it’s time he went.”

“A bit hard on my mother.”

“No, it’s not. What do you care, anyway?”

Right again.

Silk’s real father had been shot dead in an ambush in County Cork. This was back in the Twenties, after the Irish Free State was set up. There was a civil war of a peculiarly Irish kind, tangled and merciless. What in God’s name was ex-Captain Silk, previously of the 2nd Royal Dublin Fusiliers, doing down there? Making money, somehow. That was all his wife knew. She was in England with a four-year-old boy and, after the funeral, precious little money.

She remarried fast. The market was alive with young war widows; it was no time to be seeking Prince Charming. She accepted a widower, Beresford Cronin QC, fifty-one, specializing in patent law. Later he became a judge. At the age of ten, young Silk got taken to watch his stepfather in court. Counsel spoke at a slow dictation speed and Judge Cronin wrote down every word, using an ordinary steel-nib pen, which scratched and scratched. Silk thought the law was worse than school.

On the other hand, school was better than the gray, passionless respectability of home, especially when the boy was old enough to be sent away to Clifton College.

At first the place scared him. It was too big, too hearty, and he didn’t understand the unwritten rules, so he hung back, took no risks, and was ignored. He wasn’t unpopular; just ignored. Tony Langham was in the same year, and Silk envied him because he was good-looking, athletic, free-spending and popular; but Silk was too nervous to speak to him. Most of the time, Silk felt both ravenous for friendship and incapable of it. One day, halfway through his second year, he was sprawled on the grass in a gloomy corner of the school grounds, chewing a thumb, brooding, his eyes damp with tears, when Tony Langham walked up and said: “Can you give me five shillings?”

Silk shook his head.

Langham poked him with his boot. “Why not?”

Silk shook his head again. Langham poked him harder. “Speak up, dummy.” Silk turned away. Langham said, “If you won’t speak up, you can cough up. Five bob.” Another prod.

A rush of rage overcame self-pity. Silk jumped up and punched Langham just below the breastbone. Langham crumpled and sat, too badly winded to speak. Silk was astonished, then afraid, then—as Langham slowly revived—proud of his strength.

Langham wheezed and spat. “Bloody hell,” he whispered. Threads of saliva fell from his lips.

“You started it.” Silk was beginning to regret that punch. It would have been nice to have had

Langham as a friend. Now he was an enemy.

“Half a crown would do,” Langham said, still wheezing.

“What’s it for?”

“Buy an airplane.”

Silk laughed. The more he looked at Langham, the funnier he was. Langham couldn’t laugh but he grinned a bit. In the end they went off together and contrived a letter to Silk’s mother, all about a broken fountain-pen and imminent exams. A postal order for ten shillings came back. They bought a model kit of an SE5a and spent the change on ice-cream sundaes.

Building the plane took three weeks. The SE5a was one of the best fighters flown by the Royal Flying Corps, a single-seat biplane with a machine gun fitted on the upper wing so that its fire would clear the propeller arc. The kit was ambitious. The frames and stringers for the fuselage, the ribs and spars for the wings, every part of the tail unit, had to be cut from sheets of balsa. Bits broke. Silk and Langham argued over the meaning of the plans. They cut their fingers; ran out of glue; assembled items wrongly and had to start again. But when the fighter was finished—doped, painted, gleaming—its making had built a bond between them. For the first time in his life, Silk felt worthwhile.

On a day when the rest of the school was watching a cricket match, they sneaked out with the SE5a. There was a perfect place to fly it nearby: the Downs, a mile or more of parkland. “Here?” Silk said, but Langham was carrying the model and he kept saying there was a better place further on.

After fifteen minutes he stopped at the edge of the Downs, where the Avon Gorge fell sheer for a couple of hundred feet. “This is a fat lot of good,” Silk said. He had to look over the wall, it was irresistible, and his guts clenched at the depth of this huge, airy canyon, with seabirds wheeling far below. “Watch!” Langham called. As Silk turned, Langham launched the plane into space.

The image stayed with Silk for the rest of his life: that splendid little fighter, bright in the sunlight, whirring away into the terrible void, sometimes bucking as the breeze caught it but always sailing the air, as balanced as a bird. He watched every dip and turn the SE5a made until it crashed into an old quarry face a quarter of a mile away. When he looked around, Langham was watching him with a small, crooked smile.

Silk chased him until his lungs burned and he stumbled and fell. Langham sat on his heels a safe distance away and made a daisy chain.

Eventually Silk said. “You can’t do things like that.”

“Yes you can. Anyone can do anything. You can do something about your rotten haircut, for instance.”

“Three weeks’ work. And you deliberately crashed it.”

“Didn’t it look marvelous? A mile high, it looked. I’m going to learn to fly.”

“You’re potty. You’re cuckoo.”

“Well, cuckoos fly.”

“Mine’s a perfectly good haircut.”

“It looks like a perfectly good lavatory brush. And your shirts don’t fit and you can’t tell jokes and whenever a girl comes in sight you go cross-eyed. I bet you can’t dance.”

“Go to hell.” It was a word Silk had never used aloud before.

“You can’t swear properly, either. Look: come and stay with me in the holidays and my sisters will teach you the foxtrot.”

This was all too much and too fast for Silk. “Why?” he asked.

“Oh ... because. I’m thirsty. Let’s get some ice cream.”

Langham, and Langham’s sisters, showed Silk how to live. He discovered a taste for good clothes. He discovered a sense of humor. He discovered that girls were no threat, which doubled the pleasures of life at a stroke. And above all, he discovered that almost nothing was worth taking very seriously because he was intelligent enough and handsome enough to stroll through life with little effort.

After Clifton, he had strolled into the Royal Air Force, into a commission, into Bomber Command and now into a war. No doubt it would be risky but it would also be fun. And there was always Tony Langham for good company.

Perfect.

Langham got on the phone and found a dance band: Joe Buck and his Buckaneers. “Can’t do this week,” the bandleader said.

“Are you all booked up?”

“All canceled, is more like it. Bloody government’s gone and shut down the dance halls because of the emergency. That’ll teach Hitler a lesson, won’t it?”

“But if you’re canceled, why aren’t you available?”

“Sax, trumpet and bass are working night shift in the munitions factory. Clarinet’s gone to Sheffield for his medical. Trombone’s on ARP duty. I can do you piano and drums.”

“No, I want the lot. How about next week?”

“Maybe. I’ll need some petrol for my van. This rationing’s bloody murder.”

Langham went to tell Silk and found him very chipper. “Sergeant Collins has a brother-in-law who’s a theatrical agent,” Silk said. “I’ve booked a troupe of Russian jugglers and a comedian and a hypnotist. What have you got?” Langham told him. “Bugger,” Silk said. “No dances, by order? We’d better go and see the group captain.”

Rafferty let them talk while he signed letters.

“Where is your band coming from?” he asked.

“Bury St. Edmunds, sir,” Langham said.

“And who will the men dance with?”

“We thought nurses from the hospital—”

“Definitely not. The country is in a state of national emergency. This airfield is at a state of high alert. Security is paramount. The last thing I need is hordes of civilians wandering around here.”

“Suppose we find a hotel, sir,” Silk suggested. “Book the ballroom.”

“And suppose the Hun attacks while half my personnel are elsewhere, doing the Gay Gordons. What then?”

“How about a variety show here, on the station?” Silk said. “With performing artistes?”

“Such as?”

Silk checked his notes. “Um ... well, Boris Blatsky, sir. He’s a hypnotist.”

“He’s a Russian.”

“Oh. Is he?”

“No Bolshevik is going to infiltrate this base.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, sir,” Langham said, “but it appears that you won’t allow outsiders in, and

vice versa.”

“You got that right,” Rafferty said. “Goodbye.”

Silk reported this development to the Wingco. Someone had just landed a Hampden and retracted the undercarriage when he meant to pull up the flaps. It was easily done; the two levers were next to each other; but still, it meant a very bent bomber. “Don’t bring me your little problems,” Hunt snapped. “I’ve got enough of my own.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Use your brain. You’ll find it underneath all that Brylcreem. And for Christ’s sake don’t go pestering the group captain. There’s a war on.”

Silk and Langham found a quiet corner of the Mess and got some beer and made a list of entertaining ideas that would not conflict with the war. Spelling bee. Whist drive. Boxing match. Amateur dramatics. Chess tournament. Guess-the-weight-of-the-cake competition. “That’s gambling,” Langham said. “Illegal on an RAF station.”

Silk crossed it out. “LAC Barber had an idea. Debates on important issues of the day.”

“Such as what?” Langham said. They drank some beer while they wondered about that. “The most important issue for me is my popsy,” Langham said, “and will she or won’t she let me have my wicked way with her.”

“Well, we could debate that.”

“The Wingco might not like it.”

“The Wingo’s not going to get it.” They clinked tankards to celebrate the old joke. “LAC Barber does the *Telegraph* crossword every day,” Silk said. “He reckons he knows lots of important issues. I’ll tell him to go ahead and arrange a debate. I can’t organize it, I’m flying tomorrow.”

It was a routine training flight. They took off at noon, the Hampden roaring and creaking under a full load of fuel. Not a bad day. Plenty of cloud, mostly high, and a steady wind from the southwest. They stooged around the North Sea for an hour and a half. An air pocket was waiting for them like an open manhole. The first Silk knew of it was when the Hampden dropped five hundred feet, hit the bottom of the down-draft and found clean, reliable air. Everyone got badly shaken. The compass was spinning slowly, endlessly, as if searching for something that was always escaping. The fuel gauges registered zero. Silk climbed above the cloud. Now they could see the sun. He flew toward it until his observer reckoned they were over the East Coast. He went down and everyone saw surf and sand and the unmistakable beaky shape of Flamborough Head. Evidently the winds had not been steady; the Hampden had been blown far to the north. “Find me a railway line and I’ll Bradshaw us home,” Silk said.

Bradshaw published train timetables. Since flying began, lost pilots got out of trouble by Bradshawing: flying low enough to read the names of railway stations. But before anyone found a line AC1 Connell reported smoke in the upper gun position. Silk landed at the first airfield he saw: RAF Staxmere. He was taxiing toward the hangars when a tire burst.

The smoke turned out to be a short circuit, easily mended, but the wheel had suffered when the tire burst, and replacing it took time. The light was fading when they took off, and the night was black when they landed at base. Silk—wary, sweaty, hungry, and ripe for a large drink—was given a message. Wing Commander Hunt wished to see Pilot Officer Silk in the camp cinema as soon as possible.

LAC Barber, a tall, red-haired pay clerk, was making his final speech in favor of the motion when Silk got there. The place was packed. Langham was standing at the back. “This chap’s hot stuff,” he

whispered. He gave Silk a duplicated slip of paper. *The motion is: This House believes that Nazi tendencies at home are a greater threat to English democracy than Nazi aggression abroad.*—

“... are tantamount to powers of slavery,” LAC Barber said, and was warmly applauded. “Rights which the ordinary Englishman won with Magna Carta and which he has preserved ever since, at risk of life itself, have suddenly been swept away by a government that panics at the first whiff of gunshot!” The audience liked that too. Silk looked around: all the airmen and NCOs seemed to be present, and a few officers. “Now we have imprisonment without trial!” LAC Barber cried. “Who killed habeas corpus? Not Hitler!” The cheers made Silk flinch. “The State can arrest anyone for doing anything the State dislikes! The State can seize any property it wants! The State can suspend any law it finds inconvenient! Search any home! Commandeer any goods! For any reason it thinks fit! And we can do nothing, for we have no rights. Don’t take my word for any of this. After all, I might be a Fifth Columnist.” Loud laughter. “Read it for yourself! It’s all in the Emergency Powers brackets Defense close brackets Bill, as a result of which you cannot go to a theater, you cannot go to a concert, you cannot go to a dance hall, because that Bill has closed them down! Now that I come to think of it, even holding this debate is probably contrary to the Emergency Powers brackets Defense close brackets Bill. If Mr. Chamberlain gets to hear about it, we shall all be in the Tower tomorrow!” That produced a barrage of cheering. “To fight a war against tyranny and fascism, this government has given itself all the powers of a tyrant and a fascist. Therefore I urge you to vote for the motion: that Nazi tendencies at home are more dangerous than Nazi aggression abroad.”

LAC Barber sat down to thunderous applause.

Someone tugged at Silk’s arm. It was the Wingco. “Come with me,” Hunt said. They went outside. “Is this your idea of entertainment?” It wasn’t a question; it was a charge.

“They seemed to be enjoying it, sir.”

“That display is probably treasonable. It’s certainly contrary to good order and discipline. You’re not an Entertainment Officer, Silk, you’re a disaster. You’re sacked.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And where the hell have you been all day?”

“Yorkshire, sir. We had a flat tire.” There was a pause. In the darkness, Silk realized the Wingco suspected he was being facetious. “Honestly, sir. You see—”

“I don’t care. There was a time, Silk, when I thought you were a prat. I see now that I flattered you.” The Wingco strode away.

Silk had a quick bath and got dressed and went to the Mess. Tony Langham was drinking with a bunch of pilots and observers. “The motion was carried,” he told Silk, “by a hundred and seventeen votes to three.”

“Good God. Well, Pixie’s taken the job away from me. Was all that stuff true? What LAC Barber said?”

“Every word. Where’ve you been all day?”

“Oh, *bollocks*,” Silk said.

Langham shrugged. “You always were a bad loser, Silko. Remember the maiden flight of the SE5a. You behaved very badly then, I thought.”

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