

I stared out of the train window and watched as the countryside passed by. It looked so calm and prosperous and peaceful. But why shouldn't it? The war was half a continent and a full ocean away in either direction.

Chip slumped into a seat across from mine. "I found this in the club car," he said. He had a newspaper in his hands. "It's yesterday's *Toronto Daily Star*."

"What are the headlines?"

He held up the front page. Under the date—September 2, 1943—the large black type read ALLIES SLICETHROUGH SICILY! and beneath that was a photograph of a Tiger tank rolling past a destroyed building.

"We've been gaining ground, especially since the Americans entered the war, but the Germans still have a lot of fight in them," Chip said.

"A lot less fight than if they hadn't tried to take on Russia as well," I said. "It's just a matter of time, now, until we invade France and start taking it back."

"Yeah, and with our luck, it will probably all be over before we're even old enough to enlist."

"Hard to say," I muttered.

"Don't get me wrong," he went on. "Of course I want the

war to be over, to beat the Nazis ... but still, I don't want to miss my chance to be part of it."

"You're preaching to the choir, buddy," I said.

"Just think—we only have to put up with one more year of boarding school before we can enlist together next summer, when we both turn eighteen ... like we promised we would."

This was getting harder. Chip had been my best friend forever, and I couldn't help feeling like a bit of a rat. I took a deep breath.

"What if I told you that I can't keep that promise?"

"What are you talking about?" Chip looked puzzled. "You're the only person I know who wants to enlist even more than I do. Is it your mother? I know it's hard on her, what with your father and all."

My father was a Spitfire pilot, and he'd been shot down and taken prisoner. It was terrible knowing he was a prisoner of war, but at least we knew he was safe, and the monthly letters we received confirmed that.

"My mother's not so crazy about the idea either," Chip admitted. "But you know, Robbie, you will be eighteen, an *adult*, so really, if you want to enlist, she can't stop you."

"It's not that she'll stop me," I said. "Actually, she'll be far too late to even try to stop me."

"What are you babbling on about?"

We were less than thirty minutes out of Toronto now. I'd put it off as long as I could—but that just made it harder now.

"What if I told you ... I won't have to wait a year to be part of the fighting?" I asked.

"I'd tell you to quit kidding around."

Even if I told him, he wasn't going to believe me. I reached

into my pocket and pulled out the papers and handed them to him.

“What are these?”

“My enlistment papers.”

“Your *what?*” he yelled.

Heads all around the car turned toward us.

“Keep your voice down,” I hissed at him. “Those are my enlistment papers. I joined the Royal Canadian Air Force.”

“That’s not possible. You’re not old enough!”

“Keep your voice *down*,” I said again.

“Oh . . . sorry.”

“You’re holding the proof in your hands. Remember last month when I went down to Toronto to see my sick great-aunt?”

“I remember. I thought it was kind of odd. You don’t even like her very much.”

“I don’t, but I needed an excuse to get away.”

“So you didn’t visit your great aunt?”

“Of course I did, but that wasn’t the only reason I went to Toronto. I went down to enlist.”

“If you wanted to enlist, you could have just gone down to Kingston. It’s so much closer to home,” Chip said.

“That’s *why* I didn’t. I wanted to go someplace where I was less likely to bump into anybody who knew me,” I explained.

“Besides, I had other business to take care of.”

“But I don’t get it. Even if they didn’t know you, they would still know from your ID that you’re only seventeen and not eligible to enlist.”

“*I’m* only seventeen, but not my brother.”

“Your brother is eleven years old, so how would that help?” he asked.

“Not my *younger* brother, my *older* brother.”

“You don’t have an older brother!” Chip exclaimed. “You’ve got one brother and two sisters, and you’re the oldest kid in your family.”

“I am the oldest, but I wasn’t the firstborn. My parents’ first child, David James McWilliams, was born a year earlier than me. He only lived a few days, but he was born and baptized, and I used those papers to enlist.”

I opened the papers to show him the name. His eyes widened in shock as he read. “Robbie, you can’t just—”

“Please,” I said, cutting him off. “It would be better if you called me David. I need to get accustomed to my new name.”

He took a deep breath. He wasn’t happy about this. “*David*, I just—”

“No, that’s wrong . . . far too formal. How about Dave, or maybe Davie? Yes, that’s it, Davie! You’re my oldest friend, so you’d probably call me Davie!”

He reached across and put a hand on my shoulder. “Robert,” he said very formally, looking me straight in the eyes. “Even if you *did* manage to fool some 4-F recruiting officer with thick glasses and bad eyesight into believing that you’re eighteen, how long do you think it’ll be before your mother finds out that you’re gone?”

“I *am* gone—to boarding school.”

“And she’ll find out soon enough that you’re not there. How long before the headmaster contacts her to ask why you’re not in attendance at school? Do you really think old Beamish is so daft that he won’t notice you’re not there?”

“He knows I’m not there. That was the other business I took care of when I was in Toronto. I went to the school and explained to him that I wouldn’t be able to attend this year

because of financial issues . . . you know, what with my father being a POW, and things being hard for my mother and all.”

“And he believed you?”

“Well, I think he believed the letter from my mother explaining everything.”

“Your mother wrote a *letter*?”

“Of course not, you idiot! I wrote the letter and forged her signature.”

“I don’t know if that’s insanity or genius,” Chip said.

“They say there’s a fine line between the two, and I hope I’m standing on the right side of it.”

“But what about letters between you and your mother?” he asked. “You know the first time she writes to you—her son who’s in school—she’ll know something is wrong.”

“Aren’t you in charge of the mailroom as part of your punishment for that prank we played on Mr. Henderson?”

“A prank that only I got caught doing and . . . Oh, I get it, so I can intercept the letters! Is that what you’re saying?”

“Exactly. The headmaster won’t be bothered by what he doesn’t see. What he doesn’t know won’t hurt *me*.”

“But as you might recall, I’m only being punished the first few months of the year. What happens after December?”

“I was sort of hoping you could do something else wrong and get the punishment extended until the end of the school year.”

“You can’t expect me to deliberately try to get into . . . Wait, that’s probably going to end up happening one way or another, isn’t it?”

“Of course it will. I’m simply counting on you to get in your usual amount of trouble.”

“Without you there, it just won’t have the same magic to

it, but I'll do my best," he said with a grin. "Now, that just leaves one problem. What about your letters to your mother? It's not like you can send letters postmarked from England, and I know she's not going to let you go a whole school year without writing."

I reached over and unsnapped my valise and pulled out three envelopes. Each was stamped, addressed to my mother, and contained a letter. I turned one of the envelopes over and opened up the flap.

"You see here, this number I wrote in pencil?"

"Yes."

"I've numbered the letters one, two, and three. You just need to mail them to my mother in that order. One each month for the next three months. Just erase the little number, seal them off, and send them. Each letter talks a little bit about how wonderfully the school year is going, how much I'm enjoying classes, and in October I'm going to be coming down with a cold and will have to miss a rugby game ... I'm going to be terribly disappointed."

"You are definitely moving to the genius side of the line, my friend! But what then? What happens after the third letter is mailed?"

"By then I'll be in a place where you can send me letters, with her letters to me inside, and I'll send you back letters with a new letter to her tucked inside that envelope. And of course, in your letters, you'll give me enough information about school and events that I'll be able to fill in the details in my letters to her. I think I have all the bases covered."

"And if Mommy decides to come and pay you a visit? Won't she be in for a nasty surprise when you're not there?"

"Chip, my mother hasn't been able to come to Toronto

since my father enlisted. She's stuck at home looking after my brother and sisters. She's lucky if she gets a chance to go over to the neighbour's for coffee."

"I guess you have all the bases covered for the school year, but what about in July when you're supposed to return home?"

"I'm going to be writing my mother throughout the year explaining that if I do extremely well in school, there will be an opportunity for me to stay on during the summer and be a paid tutor for some of the younger students. She's going to be so proud of me!" I beamed.

"And after that?"

"And after that I'll be eighteen, and I'll just tell her I've enlisted, and there will be nothing she can do about it. She'll know I'm in the air force, but she won't know that I've already been there for ten months."

Chip shook his head slowly and a smile came to his face. "I'm jealous! And I must admit that I'm a little bit hurt that you didn't bring me in on the plan before this."

"I'm sorry, Chip. I just didn't want to drag you too far into this. There's going to be hell to pay if this gets out, and I didn't want you to be implicated too deeply. I want you to at least try to plead ignorance."

"Ignorance has always been my best defence! But you're right—I know the military needs everyone who can to enlist, but I imagine they're not very understanding about people enlisting under a false identity. You could be in really big trouble."

"I'm just hoping that by the time they find out I'll be such a hotshot ace pilot that they'll be happy to look the other way, because they need pilots so badly."

He reached out his hand. "My congratulations, sir. You've thought of everything."

"I tried. Which leaves me with one more favour to ask of you." I reached into my valise and handed him a fourth envelope. "Inside is a letter from Headmaster Beamish confirming for the air force that I've completed my junior matriculation, graduating with both high honours and distinction."

Chip opened the envelope and took out the letter. It was typed and had the headmaster's signature at the bottom. "This is official school stationery. How did you get this?" Chip asked.

"This summer when I was in Beamish's office and told him I wasn't returning to school, I got rather choked up. He turned to get me a handkerchief, and when he wasn't looking, I pinched a couple of sheets."

"I think you're wasting your time wanting to be a pilot. You should be a secret agent."

"I'll take that as a compliment. Just pop it in the mail so it's clear from the postmark that it was sent from the school. Okay?"

"I'll do whatever I can to help out. You can count on me."

"More than anybody else I know. You're a good friend," I said.

"And at the end of the year," Chip replied, "when I turn eighteen and enlist, maybe we'll even end up in the same unit."

"That could happen. Of course, I don't know if we could be friends," I said.

"What do you mean?" He looked a bit shocked.

"Well, by then I'll be a full-fledged ace, and you'll just be a *sprog*."

“Sprog ... What’s a sprog?”

“New pilot, fresh out of training, wet behind the ears, with no combat missions to your credit!”

“Oh, yeah? Well, I’ll still be a sprog who’s big enough to box your ears!” Chip growled.

“Oh, sure! Try hitting a superior officer and see where that gets you! Time in the can and—”

“Next stop, Union Station!” the conductor announced as he walked down the aisle of the car. “Next stop, Union Station, Toronto!”

“That’s our—I mean, *my* stop,” Chip said. “I wish we had more time to talk.”

“We do have a little more time. I’m getting off here too,” I said.

“Your training is in Toronto?”

“Not my training, my *train*. I have to meet up with the rest of the fellows who’ve enlisted and catch the train from here. You can walk me to my platform.”

2

The train shuddered and then came to a stop. We both got up and shuffled down the aisle along with everybody else, dragging our luggage with us. I'd been told not to bring much with me, just what I could fit in my valise, but Chip had everything he'd need for a year at boarding school, including his tennis racquet, lacrosse stick, and winter coat and boots.

"My train leaves from platform four in about an hour," I said.

"Where are you going to?"

"Brandon, Manitoba."

"Manitoba! I've heard about winters on the Prairies. You're going to freeze to death!"

"Not likely. I'm only there for basic training, about a month, so I'll be long gone before winter arrives."

"Long gone to where?"

"That's the question. I could be assigned to any one of the air training schools across the country, depending on how well I do."

"What do you mean?" Chip asked.

"Some of the schools are for pilots, others specialize in training navigators, or bomb aimers, or wireless operators."

"Oh, you'll be a pilot—no question! You know more about airplanes than anybody I ever met."

“Knowing about them doesn’t make you a pilot.”

“Yeah, I guess ... but I can see you flying ... Spitfires, like your father.”

“I can only hope.”

We made our way through the crowds on the platform, jumped down onto the tracks, and crossed over two more sets of tracks to platform four. There were only a few people there—a woman with a child, and an old man at the far side—and none of them looked as if they might be on their way to report for training.

We both tossed our bags up and then climbed up onto the platform.

“You sure you haven’t missed it?” Chip asked.

I looked at my watch. “It’s due in less than thirty minutes.”

“Thirty minutes ... so you still have time to change your mind.”

“It’s too late for that.”

“As far as I can tell, it won’t be too late for thirty-*one* minutes.”

“No. Maybe the train isn’t here yet, but that ship has already sailed. I’ve got a boarding school that isn’t expecting me and a recruiting officer who is. What do you think will happen if David James McWilliams doesn’t report for duty?”

“Not much, I’d guess, since he’s already been dead and buried for eighteen years.”

“But when they do come looking for *him*, they’re going to find *me*, and that’s where the trouble will begin. I have no choice.”

“I guess you’re right. Stand up straighter,” he said, poking me in the side.

I straightened up. “I’ll stand at attention when I need to.”

“You need to all the time. You’re kinda short, you know.”

“Thanks for pointing that out. Real nice.”

“I’m not trying to be nice or not nice. I’m just trying to tell you that you need to stand up, throw back your shoulders, and try to look older.”

“I started to grow a moustache.”

“You what?”

“I started to grow a moustache,” I repeated.

“I don’t see *anything*.”

“See?” I turned my head slightly to the side.

“Oh, yeah . . . there it is. It should come in good—in about four years.”

“It’s coming. It’s just that I’m fair haired and it’s harder to see.”

“*Impossible* to see without a microscope. Between that peach fuzz and the baby face, you hardly pass for sixteen, let alone eighteen.”

“Lots of people don’t look their ages. I have the papers to *prove* I’m eighteen. Once I grow a moustache, nobody will question me.”

“Forget about growing a moustache—maybe you should just try to grow a few inches taller.”

“That could happen,” I said defensively. “My father told me he wasn’t very big until he hit twenty.”

“Your father?” Chip said. “Your father is big.”

“He’s not that much more than six feet tall.”

“Yeah, but he’s big, you know, lots of muscles, and I can’t imagine he ever had your little baby face, even when he was born.”

“This isn’t the sort of support I was hoping for.”

“I’m sorry. You’re right. You just have to understand that

this is all sort of sudden. Thirty minutes ago we're heading back to boarding school together, and now I'm waiting for you to board a train to go to air school."

"It does take some getting used to," I agreed. "I've been thinking about this for a long time, and I enlisted a whole month ago, but in some ways, it didn't actually seem real to me until I told you."

I looked down the platform. It was starting to get more crowded. There were men—some looked not much older than me—either standing on their own or with a girlfriend or wife. Some of them even had kids with them. Those men were a *lot* older than me.

"I'm going to miss you," Chip said.

"To be honest, I expect I'm going to be too busy to miss *you* very much."

"I understand. But you'd better write, a lot, and not just the letters to keep your mother in the dark. You write and tell me what's really happening, all the time."

"Now you sound like my sweetie or my wife. You're not going to try to kiss me goodbye, are you?" I asked with a smirk.

"I might *kick* you goodbye if you give me any more of your lip."

I held up my hands. "No more. I need you too much."

I looked down the tracks. There was a train, smoke billowing from its stack, making its way into the station. Its brakes squealed, and the engine spewed out excess steam as it slowed down and slid to a stop alongside the platform.

"I think this is it," I said. For some reason, just then I was finding it kind of hard to breathe.

A soldier—no, an airman, I could tell by his light blue

uniform—was standing in the middle of the platform, and he started calling out names from a list he was holding. For each name, a man came forward, bag in hand, and reported in, and his name was ticked off the list. The names were in alphabetical order, so I'd be somewhere in the middle.

There were lots of hugs and kisses and tears before each man climbed onto the train. Then, one by one, windows opened as men who had already boarded leaned down and kept talking or clasped the hands of their loved ones still on the platform. I suddenly wished my mother were here, or my brother or sisters, or that I had a girlfriend who would be broken up by my leaving. All I had was Chip. Still, I imagined that was better than just standing there by myself.

“McWilliams, David James!” the airman yelled.

“Okay, I'm off,” I said to Chip. “Take care of those letters for me.”

“I'll take care of everything at this end. Just don't go getting yourself killed.”

“Not planning on it.”

“Good luck, old chap.” Chip held out his hand and we shook.

“And good luck to you. I hope you can survive another year of old Beamish at your throat.”

“I hope he can survive another year of *me*.”

“McWilliams, David James!” the airman yelled again, louder this time. He was sounding annoyed.

“I'd better go.”

I grabbed my bag and hurried down the platform, dodging around the people still waiting to be called.

“McWilliams, David James, reporting for duty, *sir!*” I said.

The airman looked me up and down. He appeared none too happy. I threw my shoulders back and tried to stand taller.

“See these stripes on my shoulders, McWilliams?”

“Yes, sir.”

“That makes me a sergeant. You don’t call me ‘sir’ because I’m not an officer. I *work* for a living. Understand?”

“Yes, Sergeant.”

“Good. Now get on the train with the rest of the acey-deucies.”

What in the name of all things holy was an acey-deucey?

“You waiting to be carried up the stairs?” he yelled.

“No, of course not, Sergeant!”

I jumped up onto the steps and climbed aboard the train. The car was already crowded with men, those at the windows looking or leaning out. I stopped and was bumped from behind.

“There are seats in other cars! Keep moving!” somebody yelled from behind.

I squeezed by and went through the door leading to the next car. It was far less crowded, and another airman—another sergeant—was barking out orders to keep moving. I didn’t hang around for more directions—and I definitely wasn’t about to call him “sir.”

The next car was even more sparsely populated. There was another airman—he only had two stripes, a corporal—and he was giving the orders.

“These seats will fold down into beds at night—upper berth and lower berth—so pair up in twos!” he called out.

I looked around. Men were starting to partner up. I really wished Chip were here with me.

“Do you have a partner?” a man asked. He didn’t look that much older than me, but he stood a good six inches taller and

was bigger all over. I thought maybe he was a farm boy; he had the kind of build that you get from baling hay or pitching straw all day.

“No,” I answered, shaking my head.

“Do you want the top or bottom bunk?”

“It doesn’t matter to me.”

“In that case, how about I take the bottom and you take the top.” He held out his hand. “I’m Jim Casey.”

“Good to meet you. I’m—” I stopped short just as I was going to call myself Robbie. “I’m David McWilliams, but my friends call me Dave.”

“Good to meet you, Dave. My guess is, before this is over, we’re going to need all the friends we can get.”

“I think you might be right.”

The train shuddered forward a foot and stopped, and I stumbled, grabbing the back of the seat to keep my balance. It then started slowly pulling out of the station.

“Looks like we’re getting going,” Jim said. He slumped down in his seat.

I went over to the window and searched for Chip. I couldn’t see him amongst the mass of crying, waving people on the platform. Maybe he’d already left.

“Wife or girlfriend?” Jim asked.

“I’m a little young for a wife,” I said.

“Figured if you were old enough to fight, you were old enough to marry. One battle is as rough as the other.”

“Just a friend who came down to see me off, but I think he’s gone. You?”

“I said goodbye to my mother and girlfriend this morning. I didn’t see any point in them coming down here to shed more tears.”

I guess that made sense, and there really wasn't any point in Chip waiting around any—

“There he is!”

Chip was standing on a bench, so he was head and shoulders above the crowd. He had one hand above his eyes and was trying to peer into the cars. I opened the window, leaned out, and waved as we chugged by.

“Be safe!” Chip yelled.

“You too!” I called back before I realized just how stupid that sounded.

I turned and watched as we picked up speed and left him farther behind. I kept watching as he got smaller and smaller, but he kept on waving until finally he jumped down from his perch and disappeared into the crowd.

I sat down in the seat opposite Jim's. This was all happening. This was all real. I was leaving behind everything I'd known. I suddenly felt very small and very alone.

“Here.” Jim was holding out a small silver flask.

“What is it?”

“Whisky. Have a shot.”

I hesitated.

“Don't worry, it's good stuff. No rotgut.”

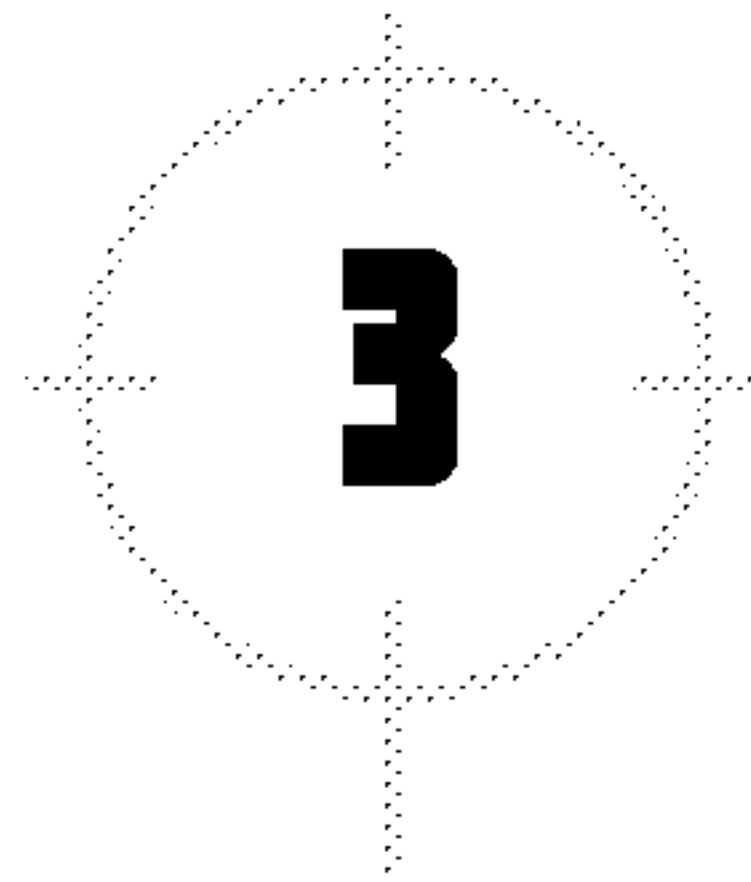
I took the flask and tipped it back and took a little sip. It tasted awful and burned all the way down my throat. I handed him back the flask.

“Probably not the best you've ever tasted,” he said.

“But not the worst either,” I lied.

He held the flask up. “To new adventures and new friends!” He tipped it back and took a big slug.

Maybe I didn't like his whisky, but it was good not to be so alone. To new adventures and new friends.



“Not much to look at,” Jim said.

“Nothing but fields of wheat since we left northern Ontario, except for Winnipeg . . . I wish we could have gotten out to look around.”

“I wish we could have just gotten off the train for good. Two days is too long to be riding the rails.”

“It’s been a long time,” I agreed.

The motion of the train had made Jim sick—not the best thing for somebody who wanted to be a pilot—but I’d actually enjoyed the ride. I’d never been west of Toronto before, and I would have stayed awake the whole time if I could have.

“Not much longer, at least,” Jim said.

I looked at my watch. “Less than ten minutes.”

The sergeant had come through twenty minutes ago to tell us to get all our gear packed and be ready to disembark in thirty minutes.

“It’s so empty out here,” Jim said. “Hardly any people at all, just a few scattered houses in the distance.”

“I think that’s why the training school is out here, so it can be away from everybody.”

“Makes sense,” he agreed.

Over the two days, I’d gotten to know a lot of the other

guys. There were over three hundred men, and they could be divided into two groups: older guys, some even in their thirties, who were married, with kids, and younger, single guys, some not much older than me or Jim. Jim was only nineteen, but big enough to easily pass for a year or two older. Once the train had gotten underway, the two groups quickly separated, with people even shifting their sleeping berths so they would be on different cars of the train.

Both groups had done a lot of loud talking, card playing, shooting craps, and drinking. Especially drinking. Jim wasn't the only one with a flask. Bottles seemed to materialize out of nowhere, and I got the feeling that some people had brought along more booze than they had clothing. I'd even heard that a couple of guys had almost been left behind in Winnipeg when they'd dashed off the train to run to the liquor store to replenish their supplies.

I'd had a couple of sips from Jim's flask, but nothing more. Neither of my parents were drinkers, and there wasn't any alcohol in our house. It had never really appealed much to me, and now, after spending two days on a train with some guys who couldn't hold their liquor or their tempers, I was even less tempted to take up the habit.

There'd been more than a few arguments, and at least twice, when push came to shove, a couple of guys were ready to have a set-to. The nearby presence of the sergeants and the calmer heads of others kept things from heating up any further.

The other thing that seemed to occupy time for a lot of the guys was gambling. I'd seen them trying to play craps—dice—but the movement of the train kept interfering with the rolling of the dice, but they still played, trying to

compensate for the train's movement tipping the dice one way or another. Instead, there were lots of card games going on. I'd never played cards before—at least not for money—and a lot of bills were on the table.

My money—my *parents'* money to pay for my year in boarding school—was safe, squirrelled away in a sock at the bottom of my bag. I felt bad about even having it, but I had to take it with me. It would have been pretty hard to explain to my mother why she didn't need to pay tuition for my schooling that year. When this was all over, I'd just give them back the money. Besides, it wasn't bad to have a little extra cash, just in case.

When I wasn't looking out the window at the scenery, I just stood off to one side and watched the games being played. I'd found that was the safest place, because some of the guys got antsy when you stood behind them, as if they thought you were giving signals and helping somebody cheat them.

I'd already been asked about my age. It wasn't just that I was younger, I really *looked* younger. A couple of the older guys had been giving me a hassle about being so young when Jim walked by. He just told them that guys like me and him were brave enough to “enlist as soon as we could,” not like some “lily-livered zombies” who had to be drafted. Calling somebody a zombie was about the worst insult you could give, and for a few seconds it looked as if Jim had only helped me get into a fight. But then they'd smiled and laughed and offered us both a drink from their flasks.

I knew I had to start doing things that would at least make me *seem* older. The moustache thing wasn't going to work. Other guys had had to shave a couple of times during the trip,

but I could practically have used a face cloth to wipe away the peach fuzz that was starting to form on my upper lip.

I thought about taking up smoking, but trying that for the first time might even make the situation worse. What if I started to cough when I lit up or, worse, turned green and threw up, the way I'd seen some guys do? The thick haze of smoke that hung in the air was almost enough to make me feel sick, and a couple of times I'd had to go outside between cars to catch some fresh air.

I felt the train start to slow down, and I could see a few small houses out the window. We were obviously on the outskirts of Brandon. As we continued to slow down, more and more houses and even stores appeared, until we finally pulled up to the station. There was no elevated platform here, but there were trucks—RCAF trucks—waiting beside the tracks.

The train shuddered to a final stop. It would be good to get my feet back on solid—

“Move it, move it, move it!” screamed one of the sergeants. “Do you men think this is the start of your vacation? Get your butts off this train and onto those trucks, double time!”

There was a mad scramble as men jumped to their feet, grabbed their bags from the luggage compartments, and pushed forward to get off the train. I wedged myself in behind Jim and joined a stream of men flooding down the aisle and out the door, leaping to the ground.

The tailgates of the trucks were down, and we tossed our bags in one truck and climbed up. There were benches on both sides, and we plopped down on the hard wooden seats. It filled up quickly, and then a couple of airmen lifted the tailgate and slammed it closed with a loud thud that shook

the whole vehicle. They then pulled the canvas flaps closed, blocking most of the view. I felt a little claustrophobic, stuffed in with twenty other men, sitting shoulder to shoulder, my knees almost touching the person facing me. Quickly it started to get hot and stuffy in there.

“What are they waiting for?” somebody asked. There was a hint of both annoyance and anxiety in his voice. Maybe I wasn’t the only one feeling uncomfortable.

Almost on cue, the engine started and the whole truck began rumbling. The little bit of fresh air that had managed to get through the opening in the back was replaced by exhaust fumes. The truck started forward and we rocked from side to side. The ride wasn’t smooth, but at least we were leaving behind the smell of the exhaust.

“Anybody have any idea how far away the camp is?” somebody asked.

There were mumbled responses that varied from “Wouldn’t think too far” to “An hour or two,” so really nobody had any idea. It didn’t matter. We were going wherever they were taking us, and there wasn’t anything we could do about it short of jumping out of the back—and judging from the increasing speed of the truck, that wasn’t much of an option either. I just knew that the faster we drove, the faster we’d get there, and that was fine by me.

I caught little glimpses of the world as it passed, of houses and stores. Paved roads gave way to hard-packed gravel. Behind us was another military truck, and when we hit a curve, I could see a second and third and fourth before the turn blocked my view. Since there had been three hundred of us on the train and each truck held around twenty men, there had to be about fifteen vehicles in this convoy.

The truck's brakes squealed, slowing it down dramatically before a sharp turn, and a cloud of dust was kicked up—by us and whatever vehicles were in front of us. I was suddenly glad the flap was almost completely closed. The road—the dirt road—was much rougher, and we rocked and bumped our way along slowly. I gripped the bench with both hands to stop myself from bouncing off. Finally we came to a stop.

Almost instantly I could hear doors opening and men yelling. Our flap was pulled back and then the tailgate opened up.

“All of you out, out, out!” screamed an airman.

Again we jumped to our feet and we scrambled out of the trucks, moving awkwardly, bumping bodies and bags as we leaped to the ground.

“Form up in two, I repeat, *two* rows!” screamed a sergeant. “Tallest in the back and shortest in the front!” He looked at Jim. “You're in the back, Stretch.” Then at me. “And you, son, are definitely in the very front row ... We might even want to start a special row just for you!”

A few people started to laugh.

“The rest of you button it up. I'm not here to amuse you!” he screamed. “Is there anybody here who thinks I'm amusing?”

Everybody shut up quickly, put their heads down, and tried to assemble into rows. It wasn't that easy a task as two rows of about a hundred and fifty men each kept shifting and squirming, trying to fit everybody in. Men bumped into each other and exchanged a few unpleasantries.

I settled into the middle of the front row—almost directly in front of three sergeants standing there glowering at us—

and Jim was directly behind me. I would have liked to have been behind him so I could be completely hidden.

“Come on, double time!” yelled the sergeant—the one who had insulted me. “Come on, *ladies*, how are we to expect any of you to learn to fly if you don’t even know how to stand in two rows?”

Finally, after what seemed like forever but was only a few minutes, we were all standing in our rows.

“Attention!” came the order.

Immediately all bags were dropped to the ground and we stood at attention.

“At ease,” came the next order, and we relaxed—at least slightly.

“Good morning, gentlemen! My name is Flight Warrant Officer Crowley.” He started pacing in front of us. “I have been asked by our commanding officer to welcome you to Manning Depot Number Two, situated in *beautiful* Brandon, Manitoba. He would have welcomed you himself, but he is *far* too busy and *far* too important to *waste* his time on a bunch of raw recruits. And if I do say so myself, you are one of, if not *the* most pathetic group I have ever had the misfortune to greet!”

I knew that some of them—after two days of drinking, gambling, and not sleeping or shaving—did look pretty rough.

“I knew that as the war went on, we’d find ourselves *scraping* the bottom of the barrel, but in this group I see men who might actually be the *barrel* itself!” he yelled. “Or in some cases, if not the bottom of the barrel, only recently out of the crib!”

He suddenly stopped and spun around right in front of me. “Just how old are you, son?”

“I’m eighteen, sir . . . I mean Flight Officer!” I yelled back.

“I see that you already know I’m not a ‘sir,’ but you’d better get it right. It is Flight *Warrant* Officer! Do you understand that, son?” he demanded.

“Yes, Flight Warrant Officer!” I answered.

“Do you all understand?” he screamed.

“Yes, Flight Warrant Officer!” came back a chorus of replies.

“Only officers are to be addressed as ‘sir,’ although you will salute anybody who outranks you, and gentlemen, *everybody* outranks you! You are the lowest of the low, aircraftman two, an acey-deucey.”

So that’s what that meant.

“While there may be a lower form of life on this planet, it has not yet been found by science. You will salute *everything*. If you pass a cow or a pig, you should salute it because at this point it is making a larger contribution to the war effort than you are! Am I understood?”

“Yes, Flight Warrant Officer!” people yelled.

“Manning Depot is your first stop, one of over two hundred schools scattered throughout the world that make up the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan. In total our schools graduate over three thousand airmen each month. Hopefully more than a few of you men will surprise me and actually graduate. By a show of hands, how many of you want to become pilots?”

My hand went up, as did almost every hand around me.

“What a shock that the acey-deucies all want to become pilots. Well, gentlemen, and I use that term very loosely, you are probably not aware of this, but most of you will *not* become pilots. And do you know why?”

I didn't think he was looking for an answer, but I was sure he was going to tell us.

"Because while it may seem that flying is magical, airplanes do not fly on magic. You there, boy," he said, pointing at me once again. "Do you still believe in the Easter Bunny, or Santa Claus?"

"No, Flight Warrant Officer!"

"How about pixies and fairies? Do you believe in them?"

"No, Flight Warrant Officer!" I bellowed, trying desperately to make my voice sound louder and deeper.

"Even this little baby, not long from the crib, who not long ago couldn't sleep Christmas Eve waiting for Santa to bring him a shiny new bicycle—even *he* knows there's no magic. We can't all just become pilots and sprinkle pixie dust on the wings to make the plane fly. For a plane to fly, it needs ground crew that can fix the engines and fuel the aircraft. It does no good to fly a plane if you don't know where it's going—it needs navigators. There's no point in knowing where you're going if you don't have gunners to protect the plane along the route. There is no point in being protected and knowing where to go if you can't do something when you get there—that's why we need bomb aimers. *All* of these jobs are equally important, and over the next four weeks we will determine just which of those jobs is right for you!"

He could say what he wanted—I *knew* what I was going to be, and there was nothing he could say that would convince me differently.

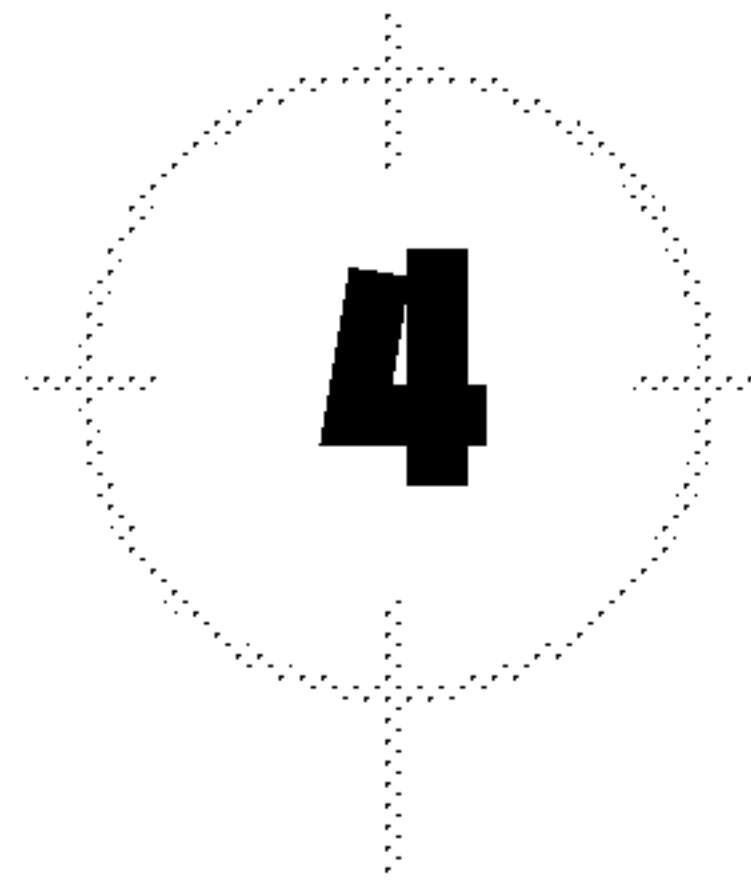
"I know what's going on in your heads," he said. "You figure I don't know what I'm saying, that you're going to become a pilot."

I had the strangest feeling that he *was* reading my mind.

“And that’s what all of you are thinking. But I’m right and you’re wrong. You’d better get that straight right now, because you’re going to soon find out that I’m *always* right and you’re *always* wrong.”

The other two sergeants nodded in agreement.

“When you are dismissed, you are to go inside the barracks, find an empty bunk, drop off your bags, and report back out here for an initial orientation meeting. You have ten minutes to do that. I repeat, *ten minutes*. Not eleven, not twelve, *ten*. Dismissed!” he yelled.



We stampeded into the barracks. The ceilings soared overhead, the floors were bare concrete, and there was a strange odour.

“What is that smell?” I asked.

“I think it’s two smells,” Jim said. “Disinfectant, maybe bleach, is one smell, and it’s there to cover up the other smell, which, as a farm boy, I’m very familiar with. It’s manure.”

“Manure! But why would it . . .” I let the sentence trail off as it all made sense. I realized what our barracks had actually been.

We were being housed in a building that used to hold livestock. In the centre there was a large open space extending up thirty or forty feet, probably where the show ring or arena had been, and there were hundreds and hundreds of bunk beds that had taken the place of the animal stalls. They’d removed the bars and boards and replaced them with beds, but the smell still lingered. We weren’t going to be sleeping in a barn but in a gigantic cow palace, a place where animals were exhibited at a fall fair.

Most of the beds were already in use, but we came to a whole section where the beds were unmade—blankets and sheets and pillows piled up at the end. We grabbed a bunk bed and Jim dropped his pack onto the bottom bunk while

I tossed my valise up onto the top. For a second I thought about all that money in the bottom of my bag, but really there wasn't time to do anything about it.

We got back outside in time to see that a line had already formed. Two airmen stood at the front, handing something out. We had no idea what it was for or about, but we knew enough to join in at the end, which quickly expanded as other "acey-deucies" settled in behind us.

"Gentlemen!" a sergeant yelled as he walked down the line. "You will receive a checklist when you get to the front of the line. On that list are seventy steps that you must complete before the day is out. Each of these steps is necessary and important. You can start at step number one and work your way through the list sequentially, but all that is important is that you complete all of the steps, not the order of the steps. Upon completion of each step, it will be duly initialled by the responsible airman. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Sergeant!" we all yelled back.

"If at the end of the day, you do not have your list completed and initialled, then you can safely assume you will be punished accordingly. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Sergeant!"

We got to the front and the airman handed lists to both Jim and me, and we walked away. I looked down. The steps included getting our uniforms—that was steps one through twelve—having medicals, eye examinations, injections, and picking up equipment.

"What for goodness' sake is a housewife?" Jim asked.

"Well ... I guess it means a wife or—"

"No, no, it's on the list ... number thirty-seven: Pick up a housewife."

I really didn't know what to say about a housewife, but I was starting to think it might be nice to have my mother around.

"Are you two lost?" a sergeant bellowed in our faces.

"No, Sergeant, not lost, just thinking," I replied.

"Thinking? *Thinking!*" he screamed. "You're an acey-deucey! You are not allowed to think! You are not even *capable* of thinking! Follow the list, double time!"

We both jumped and ran off, not even knowing what direction we were heading but needing to get away from the sergeant as quickly as possible. Jim stopped and grabbed a guy who was walking by carrying a uniform.

"Which way are the uniforms, buddy?" he asked.

"Big building straight ahead, then turn hard to starboard."

"Thanks."

"Yeah, thanks," I echoed.

I knew that starboard was right and port was left. I remembered that because *left* and *port* both had four letters.

We weren't going to waste any more time. We ran to the building, bounded up the stairs, almost crashing into men coming out, and hung a tight right. We bumped into the back of a line of men waiting. Ahead I could see that people at the front were being issued their uniforms. We shuffled forward until we were next in line to be served.

"Size?" the airman behind the counter asked.

"Small."

He looked up at me and smirked. "We'll do the best we can. You might have to use the housewife to do some alterations."

"She'll do that?" I asked.

"*She* won't, but *you* can, with the things *in* the housewife."

What was that supposed to mean?

The airman handed me my uniform: a pair of blue pants with matching jacket, shirt, tie, socks, and an RCAF wedge cap. The airman took the sheet and put his initials beside the appropriate lines to show that I'd been issued each part of my uniform.

I shuffled sideways to the next counter, where boots were being distributed.

"Size seven," I said.

"Is that adult or children's size he's taking?" the airman two over said loudly, and his buddy beside him at the counter laughed.

I'd just about had enough. And I knew enough about both bullies and being smaller to know that this had to stop now.

"My feet are big enough to kick your butt!" I said.

The laughter stopped—as did all the other sounds around us. Nobody was talking or joking around any longer. Everybody was watching. A couple of the airmen between the two of us stepped aside. The guy who had made the comment wasn't much older than me ... but he was bigger.

"What's wrong, buddy? You can't take a little friendly joking around?" he asked.

"Get it right, you *aren't* my friend."

The man chuckled nervously. This wasn't what he'd expected.

"We both came here to train to fight the Nazis," I said. "I'd rather we don't have to fight each other ... but I will if I have to."

"No offence, kid, I was just—"

"I'm *not* a kid. I'm an aircraftman two, an acey-deucey, just like you." I stepped forward and held out my hand. "David McWilliams."

“John McNabb,” he said as we shook.

“My friends call me Davie. Starting from now on, you can call me Davie.”

John smiled. “I get Johnnie. Pleased to meet you, Davie.”

The corporals behind the counter brought back some boots—a pair for me and another pair for Johnnie. I noticed that my new friend’s boots didn’t look much bigger than my sevens.

I started to try on the boots.

“Keep moving!” the corporal barked. “If they fit or don’t fit, it doesn’t matter. You asked for sevens and that’s what you got.”

The corporal initialled my sheet and we quickly moved off again.

“What’s next on the list?” Jim asked.

I looked down at the sheet. I didn’t like the look of it. The next five spaces simply said *Inoculations*—shots.

We followed behind the men leaving the area carrying their uniforms and newly issued boots. I looked at Jim’s new boots. They were so enormous I wondered if they’d even fit in the cockpit of a plane. Actually, would *Jim* fit in a cockpit?

Of course, I’d never been in the cockpit of a plane, but I knew from my father—who was big, but not nearly as big as Jim—that it was a very tight fit for him. Could Jim even be a pilot? But wait, there were other planes . . . Surely he’d fit in the cockpit of a Lancaster or another big bomber. Any plane that could carry twenty thousand pounds of bombs could certainly carry Jim.

We entered another room and immediately joined the back of another line. At the front of this line were four or five women—the first women I’d seen here—dressed in white

nurse's uniforms, and they were giving the inoculations. Each man stopped in front of each woman and received a shot in his left arm.

At first it didn't look too bad, but the closer I got, the more I could see, and hear, the reactions. The men were trying to be brave, maybe especially because they were standing there with the other recruits and in front of a group of women, but I could see their pained looks, and some of them jerked or even yelped a little bit. Of course, anybody who reacted that way was instantly razzed by the guys standing around him.

I was going to work hard not to react even if I had to bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself. I'd been smaller than everybody else my whole life, and I'd learned that meant I had to be just about the bravest, the one who complained the least.

Getting closer, I felt the sweat start to drip down my sides. At least it was where nobody could see it. I brushed my hand against my forehead just to make sure there was no sweat running down my face.

"Roll up your sleeves!" a corporal yelled.

Why was everything yelled here—did they think we were all deaf?

"If you're right-handed, roll up your left sleeve to get the shots!" he called out. "If you're left-handed ... well, you should be able to figure that out yourself!"

I rolled up my sleeve and sidestepped until I was standing directly in front of the first nurse. Without exchanging so much as a word or losing a second, she pulled out an enormous needle and jabbed me in the arm! I felt the pain shoot up my arm and into my head, and I grimaced—but nothing more.

“You only get one from me,” the nurse said. “Keep moving.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said as I moved sideways.

“You’d better not be calling *me* ma’am,” the second nurse said.

I glanced up. She looked as though she wasn’t much older than me! She gave me a wonderful smile.

“Then what should I call you?” I asked.

“Nurse Johnson,” she said, sounding very formal, but her smile got even bigger.

“Hello, Nurse Johnson. I’m ready for my shot.”

She was holding a hypodermic needle in her hand. She was ready too. I turned slightly to reveal my shoulder and she leaned across the counter and placed a hand against my arm, lifting it up.

“This isn’t going to hurt at all.”

“I bet you say that to all the guys.”

“Just the ones I like.”

I looked away from the needle and up into her eyes. Even her eyes were smiling and friendly. I felt a little pinch and some pressure, but no pain.

“There, was that so bad?”

“It’s over?”

“I told you it wasn’t going to hurt. Didn’t you believe me?”

“Yeah, sure, I guess.”

“It’s not very gentlemanly to question the word of a lady,” she joked.

“I wasn’t—”

“Move it along, this isn’t a date!”

I spun around. The sergeant was standing right behind me, so close I could feel his hot breath against my face.

“Yes, Sergeant!” I yelled back. I offered an awkward salute,

and as I brought my arm up, I realized that it was already hurting where I'd gotten the first shot.

"No salute, remember—I work for a living!"

I quickly moved over to the third nurse. She was neither young nor friendly looking. She actually looked like somebody who wasn't going to care if the shot hurt or not. She pressed the needle against my arm and slipped the end in. There was nothing but a little pinch—even less than Nurse Johnson's.

"That was really good," I said.

"Some things get better with experience," she replied. "But don't think that means I'm going to be dating you, either."

I burst into laughter along with everybody else—including the sergeant!

"We got ourselves a lover boy here!" the sergeant bellowed. "Don't let his age fool you, gentlemen. You'd better lock up your wives, daughters, and mothers!"

"And which one of those do you think I am?" the nurse demanded, faking annoyance.

"I'd be proud if you were any of those to me, but I think wife would fit the best," he said, bowing gracefully from the waist.

"You are a charmer, Wilbur," she said.

"*Wilbur?*" Johnnie, who was standing just over from me, said loud enough for everybody, including the sergeant, to hear.

"You think that's funny?" the sergeant said as he stuck his finger into Johnnie's face.

"No ... of course ... of course not," he stammered.

"Don't you mean no, *Sergeant?*" he bellowed.

"Yes, Sergeant!"

"Or do you think you should be calling me by my first name?" he demanded.

“No, Sergeant!” he replied.

The sergeant—Wilbur—mumbled a few more words under his breath and walked away, shaking his head.

Johnnie looked over at me and Jim. “I really got to learn to keep my mouth shut.”

Again everybody laughed. The sergeant glanced over his shoulder, and for a split second I thought he was going to come back, but he kept walking.

“You might be the first aircraftman who washes out before he has a chance to put on his uniform,” Jim said to him.

Johnnie opened his mouth to say something and then thought better of it. He closed his mouth, mimed turning a key to seal his lips, and then pretended to put the key in his pocket. Almost at the same instant the fifth nurse jabbed him with a needle. Unprepared, he let out a little scream and jumped off the ground, which triggered more laughter.

The fifth needle went into my arm and the fifth set of initials was recorded. I was now officially inoculated. Once I was trained to fly, I could be sent overseas.

“I didn’t know you were such a ladies’ man,” Jim said.

“You know what they say: good things come in small packages.”

“They also say you can’t get too much of a good thing.”

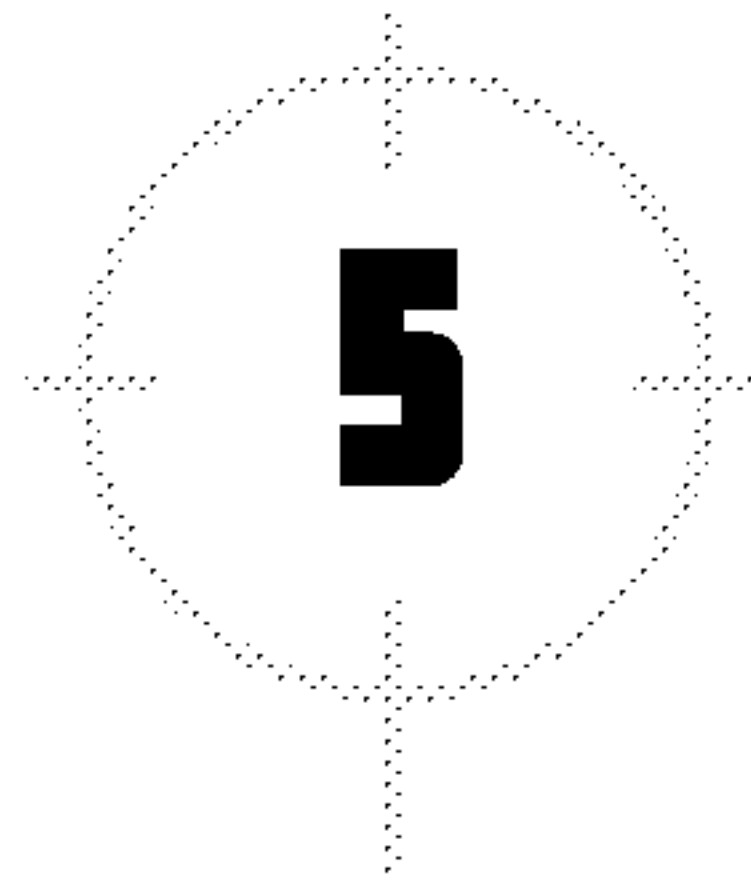
I looked back at Nurse Johnson. She was certainly very pretty. She had such a nice smile and beautiful eyes and . . . she was batting them at the next recruit in line, and laughing, and she took his arm and leaned in close as she gave him his shot. I watched her then do the same thing to the next aircraftman in line. Either she flirted with everybody or this was just her favourite technique for giving somebody a shot.

“Let’s keep moving,” Jim said, giving me a little push forward.

I willingly complied. I was just grateful he hadn’t noticed her flirting with anybody else. Being thought of as a ladies’ man wasn’t the worst reputation to start off with. It sure beat the heck out of being made fun of for my size.

Up ahead was a door with a large red cross and the word MEDIC written in block letters. I looked down at my list. I was suddenly afraid we were going to get more shots behind that door. I was relieved to see on the sheet that it was only a physical and an eye exam.

I opened the door and froze in place. Standing in front of me were a bunch of naked men in two rows!



Jim bumped into me from behind, knocking me forward. I turned around. His expression showed he was as surprised as I was. Had we wandered into the wrong place, or—

“Remove your clothing and place it with your newly issued uniforms in the back cubbyholes!” a corporal yelled. “Then assemble in rows for your physical examination!”

Both of us, as well as Johnnie and a couple of other guys, walked toward where the corporal was pointing. Men were already there, some undressing and others, who I assumed had finished their examinations, getting re-dressed, but this time in their uniforms!

I picked out a cubby at the end of the row, a few away from anybody else. This was not feeling very comfortable at all.

I placed my uniform in the cubby and then sat down on the bench and pulled off my shoes, not bothering to untie them. Next came my shirt and pants. I was so grateful that I had on new underwear. I stood up and wiggled out of them, placing them on top of my other clothing.

I felt a sudden rush of embarrassment. Where was I supposed to look? Where was I supposed to put my hands? Jim was already walking toward the back rank. I didn't want to lose him, so I took my list, put my head down, and started walking.

A corporal appeared right in front of me. There was a

confused look on his face. “Acey-deucey, are you afraid of catching a cold?”

“What, Corporal?” I asked.

He pointed down. I was still wearing my socks! I lifted my leg, reached down, and grabbed one, pulling it off, and then the second, while hopping, almost stumbling, but still keeping my balance. I tossed them back at my cubbyhole and they both went in!

I joined a row of six men, Jim on one side of me, Johnnie on the other. In front of us was another row of equally naked men standing at ease—although I didn’t imagine anybody was feeling much ease or comfort.

Standing there in the buff, on the concrete floor, with a breeze blowing in through the windows at the top of the walls, I wished I could have kept my socks on. I shifted slightly from foot to foot, which I noticed other people were doing as well. I had to fight the urge to hold the sheet of paper with my list directly in front of me in a vain attempt at a little bit of privacy and dignity.

There was no conversation, and as I risked a glance around, I saw that everybody else was staring at the ground in front of them. I obviously wasn’t the only person finding this less than comfortable.

A man—equally naked—came through a door at the front. It opened from a small cubicle, and inside was a man wearing a laboratory coat. I guessed that was the doctor.

A man in the first row was called forward and ushered through the door. The aircraftman in the second row stepped forward to take his place. There were three other doors, and I watched as men moved in and out of those as well, until finally it was my turn.

I walked into the little cubicle, nervous, but grateful not to be standing out in the big room any longer.

“Name?” the doctor asked as he took my list from me.

“McWilliams . . . David, *sir*.”

I liked the fact that the last name was always said first in the military. McWilliams *was* my last name and I wasn't going to stumble over that. But I was worried that I might accidentally blurt out Robert or Robbie instead of David.

“Do you have any medical conditions?” the doctor asked.

“No, *sir*.”

“Are you on any medications, do you have any allergies, or have you had any medical operations?”

“No, *sir*, to all of those.”

As he was asking the questions, he was looking in my ears with a light and poking me in my gut and sides with his fingers. I assumed he wasn't doing that just to irritate me or amuse himself.

He took the stethoscope that was around his neck, placed the ends in his ears, and started listening to my heart. Well, at least that's what I figured he was doing, because he was moving it all over my chest area. He circled around and started to tap me on the back and sides.

“Okay, son, you've passed your physical,” he said, and he handed me back my sheet, with a dozen new sets of initials on it.

“Thank you, *sir*.”

I walked back into the waiting area, where fifteen or twenty pairs of eyes glanced up and then returned their gaze to the floor again. I made my way back to the cubbies, and I can honestly say that I'd never been so grateful to be pulling on my underwear. I reached for the rest of my clothing and then

stopped. I wasn't supposed to be putting on my clothing—I was supposed to be getting into my new uniform!

I slipped on the pants. Bluish-tinged wool—the colour of the air force. It was rough to the skin, but it felt good to put them on. It wasn't just about being allowed to get dressed at last; it was about *what* I was getting dressed in. This was the beginning of my new life. Once I'd put on the uniform, I was no longer a seventeen-year-old kid escaping boarding school; I was an acey-deucey . . . an aircraftman second class.

“Hurry up! People are waiting for your spot!” the corporal screamed, and I jumped back into action.

I pulled on the shirt and buttoned it up, then I pulled on the pants. They were a bit loose, which I figured was better than too tight. I followed up with the socks. I stood up. The pants were a bit long, the cuffs dragging on the ground, but once I put on the boots, I figured they'd be fine. I slipped my foot into the first boot. It was a bit tighter than I would have liked, but it fit. I did the same with the second boot and then tied the laces.

Now for the final touch. I took the wedge cap and placed it on my head. I adjusted it, trying to find a comfortable place where it would fit and sit.

“Here, let me help you,” Jim said.

I hadn't even noticed him there. He was dressed—although his pants ended a good two inches above the tops of his boots. I thought about asking him if he was expecting a flood, but I decided I was the last person in the world to bother anybody about their height.

He took the cap and adjusted it so it was sitting more off to the side of my head.

“That does it. Now you look like a proper acey-deucey.

You might even want to go back to see that nurse. You know what they say: women love a man in uniform.”

“Maybe later. What’s next on the list?”

“Eye examination. I’ve never been one for school, but that’s one examination I’m pretty sure I can pass.”

Jim asked a corporal for directions, and we hurried away only to once again find ourselves at the back of a long line. This was really starting to become a pattern. As we waited, there was a lot of good-natured conversation, laughter, and jokes. Everybody looked pretty proud of their new uniforms, and it seemed as though we were all standing just a little bit straighter, a little taller—even me.

I shuffled forward with the line as one by one each man had his eye exam, until it was my turn, right after Jim. I handed my sheet over to the corporal in charge.

“Close your left eye,” he said, “and use your right eye. Can you read the third line?”

“Sure. L ... E ... F ... O ... D—”

“Are you blind, son?” he demanded. “That’s not the third row.”

“Sure it is ... Oh, wait, do you mean the third from the top or the bottom?”

“The top.”

“Sorry, I was counting up from the bottom. Do you want me to read the bigger letters first?”

“Forget it. You only needed the seventh row and that’s the eleventh. Can you do the same with your other eye?”

I read the letters out easily. “Do you want me to do the bottom line as well? I can do it if you want.”

“No need to test your eyes any further. You’ve got the eyes of an eagle.”

I wanted to tell him that was what a pilot needed, but I stayed quiet as he handed me back my list, complete with more initialled spaces.

“Thank you, Corporal.”

I joined Jim, who was waiting at the door.

“Next up is grooming,” he said.

“Grooming? What does that mean?”

Jim removed my cap and ran his hand over my scalp, making a buzzing sound, and suddenly I got it: we were going to have our hair buzzed off! I guessed that wasn't the worst thing. But then again, if I couldn't grow a moustache to change my appearance and look older, I wasn't sure that cutting off my hair would help much either. I'd still look young, but now with no hair.



I turned over on my side and my arm screamed out a reminder of the injections. I shifted again to relieve the pain and make my arm go back to simply feeling numb. Then I sat up in bed and slowly brought my deadened arm, which felt like a piece of lead, up to my head to run my hand over the stubble where my hair used to be. Gone were the long locks, and all that was left was prickly to the touch. At least my cap fit better now.

All around me in the darkness were hundreds and hundreds of men. Judging from the snoring, most of them were sound asleep. I was tired—no, I was exhausted—but I couldn't seem to drift off. It had been such a long day, such a different day, from the injections to the medicals, the issuing of the uniforms and the “housewife.”

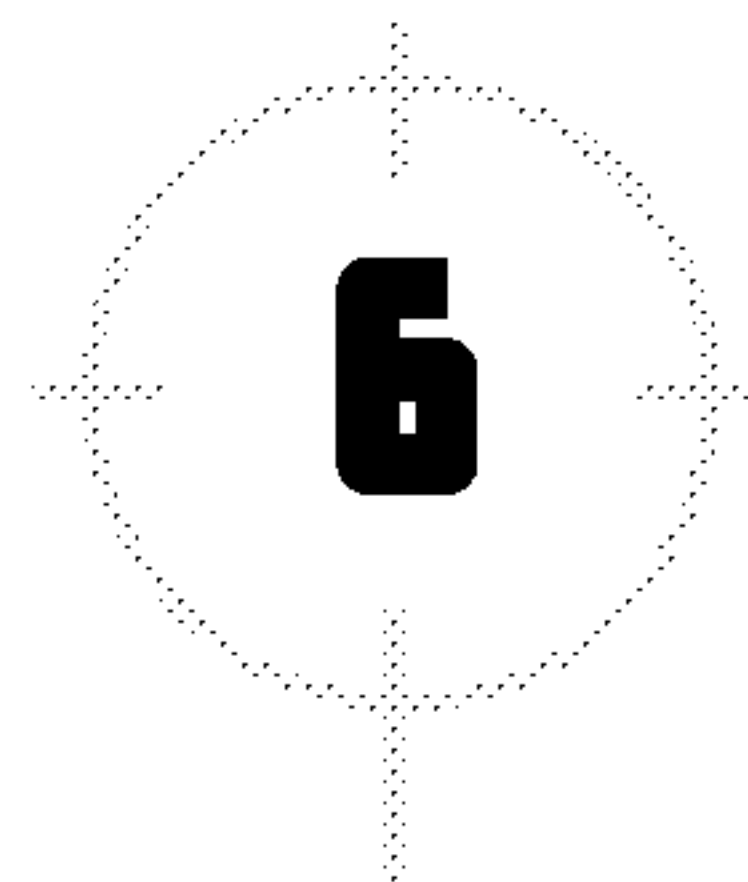
What a disappointment to learn that a housewife was

only a box containing polish for our boots as well as buttons, needles and thread, and other things we'd need to keep our kits spic and span. I'd already put mine to good use. Before we turned in, Jim had let down the cuffs of his pants, giving him another inch of material, and I'd taken mine up so they wouldn't drag along the ground.

I couldn't help thinking that my mother would be pretty amused if she heard about me fixing my own pants like that. Then, strangely, I thought about what that would look like in a letter home.

Hello Mom, just wanted to tell you about fixing the trousers of my air force uniform ... Oh, by the way, I've run away from boarding school and am now in the air force ... Say hello to everybody at home ... Lots of love ... Your son who was called Robert but now is known as David.

Maybe I was getting a little punch-drunk from not having slept. I rolled over on my side, my left arm to the top this time, and tried to think of something that would help me get to sleep. My mind's eye focused on that nurse—Nurse Johnson. She was very pretty, and even if she did flirt with half the men on the base, I was still part of the half she flirted with. I wondered what her first name was. Probably something pretty. Maybe I'd even find out.



October 1, 1943

Dear Chip,

First off, I apologize for the delay in writing. I had planned to write to you much sooner, but I have found myself so exhausted every night that I've been too tired to put pen to paper. Some evenings I've been too tired to even pick up a pen, let alone have the mental capacity to put words together in a manner that approaches normal grammar and spelling. But enough of my sorry excuses. Having spent years in school and hearing a variety of your oh-so-clever reasons for not completing assignments, I must bow before the master.

After you receive this letter, I would like you to mail off the first letter to my mother. PLEASE, make sure it is letter number one. She would be rather confused to receive the second letter, in which I detail the party for All Saints' night and the Hallowe'en costume I wore.

She would be most shocked, I imagine, to see the costume I actually am wearing—my air force uniform. I would also imagine that there is a good chance she wouldn't recognize me. Not only have I lost all my hair to a very close buzz cut, but I've managed to gain ten pounds during the past four weeks. I do believe I could walk right past her—or you—and she wouldn't even recognize me.

My weight gain is rather shocking since our daily regimen involves morning calisthenics, a regular five-mile run, a strong belief that we should always run about at double time, and a diet of chores that includes kitchen duty, mopping floors, and keeping the grounds well tended. They have a saying here: "If it's on the ground, pick it up. If you can't pick it up, paint it. If you can't paint it, salute it." I do a great deal of saluting. My rank—aircraftman second class—means that everything and everybody is superior to me, and they waste little time in pointing that out to us.

I have never walked—or, more precisely, marched—so much in my life. I had no idea that flying a plane and fighting Hitler would involve drills. Over and over we practise until thirty or more of us can move, turn, and stop in unison. I feel more like I've joined a dance company than the military. I think the plan is that if we're ever shot down over occupied Europe, we can march all the way to Berlin in a precise military manner. Then, upon our arrival, Adolf will be so impressed with our drills that he will admit the inferiority of his so-called Master Race and simply surrender.

I hope school is going well for you. With my absence, I would suppose that Headmaster Beamish no longer needs to divide his time between us and is focusing his great insights and wisdom more directly on you. What a delight that must be. I hope you have been keeping your nose clean and staying out of trouble—while still initiating enough mischief to keep yourself confined to the dungeon (a.k.a. the mailroom).

I mistakenly thought that by enlisting I could escape the drudgery of school work that I had left behind. That has not been the case. While you slack off or fall asleep during class, I am compelled to not only go to class but pay full attention! Some things, such as studying the parts of an airplane, the physics

behind flight, and regulations seem to make sense and are fascinating. Other areas, such as history and mathematics, are just as boring as they were when I was sitting beside you. The only difference is that I dare not drift off or I'll have a corporal or sergeant bellowing in my ear. Apparently, becoming a non-com (that's short for "non-commissioned officer") involves losing the ability to speak in a normal voice. All corporals and sergeants yell at all times. I can only picture what life must be like for their poor wives!

For what it's worth, I have scored extremely high in all aspects of mathematics, and the staff sergeant who is the instructor says I have "a knack" for finding my way around a map. I think that might come in handy—I would imagine that it's always best for a pilot to be able to find his way both to the target and back home at the end.

For the privilege of working like a dog, I am rewarded with the princely sum of \$1.10 each day. For me, with nobody to support and nothing really to spend it on, this goes a long way. For others, especially those who have a wife and children to support back home, or an "itch to scratch," be it booze or cigarettes or gambling, the money doesn't go far.

Technically it is illegal to drink on duty or while on the base, but it often seems easier to find hooch than water. As for smoking, there are far fewer of us who have no use for the weed than those who smoke. I still regard it as a rather filthy habit, and I am unsure how some of these men—who can't seem to go more than an hour or so without a ciggie—will manage during a long flight. Do they plan on stepping out onto the wing for a puff?

I am also writing to inform you that my time here at Manning is at an end. These four weeks have passed . . . as have I! I am being transferred to a flight school! I am, according to military censorship rules, unable to tell you exactly where I am going, but

the postmark on my next letter will probably give you a good idea of my destination.

A number of men who have become my friends are coming along with me. Closest are Jim, whom I met on the train ride, and Johnnie. Jim is a big farm boy who has nothing but good words for everybody he meets—although I wouldn't want to be the one to get him mad. Johnnie reminds me of you. He's finally—after numerous punishment details on KP peeling potatoes—learning to keep his mouth shut. Still he's bloody good entertainment, and it's always interesting to see what new trouble he's going to find himself in. As I said, he does remind me very much of you.

I had better be signing off. Best wishes to you and your family, and my thanks for all your help.

*With fondness,
Davie*

7

“Does anybody care to make a small wager on who might have scored the highest in our latest examination?” the instructor asked as he held the tests up in his right hand.

“Can I put my money on McWilliams?” Johnnie asked.

The instructor cocked his head to the side. “Don’t you have enough faith to want to bet on yourself?”

“I haven’t been to church enough in my life to have *that* much faith,” Johnnie replied, and a roar of laughter erupted.

“Settle down, everybody. The last thing we want to do is encourage him. He is right, though. Top marks on our orientation quiz go to McWilliams. Let’s give him a hand.”

The boys started to clap and cheer and whistle. Jim leaned over and gave me a slap on the back.

Our instructor put the paper down on my desk. A big fifty out of fifty was marked in red pen at the top right corner. “Not only did he have top marks, he had perfect marks!”

Again there was a round of cheers.

“As for the rest of you,” he said as he continued to hand out the papers, “there were some good marks, some passable marks, and some who did so poorly in understanding the concepts of orientation that I am surprised they were even able to find their way into this room to take the test in the first place!”

I looked over at Jim as he received his paper. He looked at it, nodded his head, and turned it so I could see the mark: 32/50. Navigation—and mathematics in general—wasn't his strength, but he made up for it by studying hard.

“You have now been here two and a half weeks,” the instructor said. “Today is the halfway point in your time at the Initial Training School. While some, like McWilliams here, have taken full advantage of the time and training, others have been less, shall we say, dedicated. You may have noticed the empty chairs in the room today.”

I *had* noticed, and wondered if there was a touch of the flu going around—or maybe the kind of flu that came in a bottle the morning after a night of drinking. A few of the guys always indulged way too much.

“Those empty seats belong to those members of your class who have washed out of the program.”

Everybody now did a serious scan of the room, trying to figure out who was still there and who was gone. Instantly I picked up a couple of the missing faces, because I'd already figured out who was on the edge. Everyone who had passed basic training at Manning—and that was almost everybody—had made the trip to flight school together. We'd left Manitoba behind and were now in Saskatchewan, stationed outside Regina. But the training was getting harder—especially all the math—and it looked as though they were whittling our numbers down already.

“Some of those men might yet become ground crew. Others simply do not have what it takes and have been asked to consider enlisting in something that requires less ability ... perhaps army or navy.”

There were derisive hoots from the back of the room.

We all knew which branch of the military was the best—although I wasn't about to mention that to any sailors or soldiers unless we clearly outnumbered them.

“That does not mean that those of you who remain are in the clear,” the instructor pointed out. “Some of you are hanging on by the skin of your teeth.”

I wasn't certain, but I thought he glanced at Johnnie. Johnnie didn't seem to notice.

“Does anybody care to venture a guess as to why some of you are doing better in your studies than others?” he asked.

“McWilliams hasn't been out of high school that long, so he's used to taking tests?” one of the men suggested.

“McWilliams looks like he should still *be* in high school,” the instructor replied. “But some of you have recently graduated from university and are not doing as well. Which, I might say, tells us something about the quality of our institutions of higher learning.” He paused. “Since no answer is forthcoming, I'm going to provide it myself. The difference is that while some students are here studying, doing additional reading, and peppering their instructors with extra questions, some of you are drinking, gambling, and sneaking out to carouse and get into fist fights.”

This time he did look directly at Johnnie. Johnnie was sporting an only slightly faded black eye. He'd told the commanding officer he'd received it falling on a wet floor. I didn't think the CO—or anybody else for that matter—believed him, but they couldn't prove anything different, especially since half a dozen guys claimed to have “witnessed” the event.

Technically, we were allowed out on leave only on Saturday nights, but that hadn't stopped some of the guys from sneaking off base for a little excitement. Last Thursday

six or seven of the guys, including Johnnie, had climbed out of a window after lights out, *borrowed* a truck, and gone down to the Hotel Saskatchewan in downtown Regina.

Apparently the male population of Regina didn't think too much of the fly boys in training. Maybe women liked a man in uniform, but the local men didn't feel the same way. Farmers were classified as essential workers—they were needed to work on the home front to avoid food shortages—but some of them were pretty touchy about the fact that they hadn't been able to join up, and they didn't take kindly to the guys in uniform coming in and flirting with their lady folk. I'd seen a few of them around the town and they were big, strong-looking guys. And from what Johnnie told me, when the locals and the fly boys mixed it up, there were some cuts and bruises on both sides, but the fly boys got the worst of it. Johnnie had been in more than a few of these dust-ups. At least he'd been able to get away before the military police showed up, and he'd always made it back to base without being caught . . . so far.

“If any of you feel that your training here is getting in the way of your social life, you will not succeed. You might as well grab a rifle and join the army. And as you slog through the mud, sleep in foxholes, and eat army grub, I want you to look up in the sky as our planes fly overhead.”

He pointed up as if he were really watching a plane fly by, and we all looked up as if we could see the plane he was imagining. In my head, though, I *could* see it. Obviously, it was a Spitfire, and just as obviously, I was in the cockpit.

“And when you see that plane, remember what *could* have been . . . if you had been prepared to work.” He chuckled to himself. “You are all now to report to the Link Trainer.”

There were a few cheers from the men.

“For some of you, this is the closest you’ll ever get to flying,” the instructor said. “Scoring well on tests is necessary, but not enough. If you can’t fly the simulator, you won’t be getting the chance to fly the real thing. *Dismissed!*”



We gathered in a semicircle around the trainer. In front of us was such a strange little contraption. With its stubby little wings and lack of propeller, it looked more like a cartoon drawing of a plane than a real one. And of course, it wasn’t a real plane. It was a flight simulator.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen,” the sergeant began. “This is, of course, the Link Trainer, a flight simulator named after its inventor, Edwin Link. He saw the folly in putting raw recruits up in real airplanes. Up there,” he said, pointing to the sky, “a mistake most often translates into three things: a lost plane, a dead instructor, and a dead recruit. Instructors and aircraft are far too valuable to waste.”

He didn’t mention the recruit, which of course said what he really thought about wasting one of us—not a great loss.

“And that is why we would never dream of actually allowing any of you at this stage to fly a *real* plane. But in this flight simulator, down here, a mistake means nothing.”

That was easy for him to say. A mistake or two down here would translate into washing out as a pilot. I knew that. I also knew that all the work I’d been putting into learning the physics of flight wouldn’t mean anything if I couldn’t actually fly.

“While it certainly looks different on the outside, the controls on this simulator—the yoke, the rudders, and the control panel—are almost identical to those used in actual

aircraft. Having flown both Harvards and Gypsy Moths, the two most common training aircraft some of you will eventually be allowed to fly, I can tell you that this handles in a very similar way.”

All the training aircraft were painted bright yellow to make them more visible in the sky—and on the ground if they crashed. There was no need for them to be camouflaged to blend into the sky because there was no enemy there to hide from.

“This trainer uses a complicated series of pumps and valves to simulate real flight. When you pull back on the yoke, it will climb. When you push it forward, it will descend. The floor pedals do control the rudders, and in conjunction with the ailerons, you can turn and bank as you would in a real plane. There is nothing, I repeat, *nothing* in this cockpit that you have not been taught, studied, and been tested on. If you did well on your tests, you technically know how to fly a plane.”

I felt reassured. I’d done well on all the tests—top of the class in virtually everything—and understood not just the controls but the physics and laws of aerodynamics that allowed flight to happen. I knew that a skid would happen if I used too much rudder and not enough ailerons. I knew a sideslip would take place if I banked too hard and too fast. I knew the minimum airspeed that had to be maintained to avoid a stall. I knew the techniques inside and out. I guess the next question was whether or not I could put them into practice.

“There is, however, one significant flaw with this and any other simulator,” the sergeant said. “Up in the sky, it’s just you and your instructor, or perhaps just you. Those minor

mistakes you make are just between the two of you, or you and God. Down here, with your entire class standing and watching and with your instructor bellowing out orders, everybody knows everything you do wrong. Now, do we have a volunteer to start?”

Hands went up all around me. I wanted to try it, but I was in no rush to be the very first person to—

“McWilliams, do I see your hand up?” he asked.

I startled in response. “No, Sergeant.”

“Don’t you want to become a pilot, son?”

“Yes, Sergeant.”

“In that case, I think it’s time that you got into a cockpit and took the yoke. After all, being good with a pencil and paper doesn’t mean you’re going to be good in the air. McWilliams, you’re our first *volunteer*.”

The military had the strangest definition of “volunteer.” Reluctantly I stepped forward and was offered words of encouragement and a couple of pats on the back. Carefully placing one foot on the stubby little wing, I lifted the other over the side and stepped into the cockpit. I held on to both sides, slipped in and onto the seat. I was in the cockpit of a plane . . . well, the fake cockpit of a fake plane, but at least it was a step in the right direction.

The cockpit was surprisingly large for such a little plane—not really spacious, but big enough for me. I wondered, though, how it would be for Jim with his long legs. I put my hands on the yoke. Gently, carefully, I pulled it forward and then pushed it away. It glided effortlessly. Next I moved my feet, making sure they were on the two rudder pedals. I pushed first the left and then the right, and they responded.

“Turn the trainer on!” the instructor bellowed.

The machine began to hum. It jerked a little and then rose a foot or so higher as the valves filled with air. The dials also came to life. There were a lot of dials. I knew that, and I knew what they were for, but still I felt a mounting sense of panic. I could feel sweat starting to roll down my sides.

“Okay, McWilliams, you’re live. Take control of the aircraft!” he yelled.

Slowly I pulled the yoke toward me and the nose of the plane rose up, the pitch increasing as I continued to pull back. I glanced over my shoulder and saw the elevators—the little flaps on the back wing—respond the way they would on a real aircraft, rising up.

“Level it off!” he called out.

I pushed the yoke back and the pitch decreased until I was “flying” level. So far, this had been pretty easy.

“I want you to bank left!”

I depressed the left pedal—left rudder—and at the same time turned the yoke slightly to the left, causing the left aileron to drop and the right one to rise. The simulator dipped to the side as if I really were turning the plane!

“Harder bank! Tighter turn!” he yelled.

I pushed harder on the pedal, more rudder.

“Watch your yaw!” the instructor bellowed. “You’re starting to skid!”

Right, I was applying too much rudder and not using enough aileron! I gave it more and the little plane banked harder. It tilted even farther until my left side was pressed against the wall of the cockpit.

“Good, good, now level it out!” he called.

Slowly I did the opposite of what I’d done to get into

the bank. I pushed down on the right pedal to create right rudder and turned the yoke to the right, this time doing it harder to try to avoid a skid in the other direction, and the plane responded.

“Watch your pitch!” he yelled.

In turning the yoke, I’d pulled it toward me as well, and I hadn’t noticed that I’d started to climb. I pushed it back a few degrees and felt the difference as the nose dipped.

“Climbing while turning can produce a stall if you don’t increase the throttle at the same time!” the instructor called out.

I hadn’t even thought about the throttle or the airspeed. I looked down and around. The throttle was just off to the right, and beside it was my airspeed indicator. Apparently I was flying at just under 180 miles per hour.

“Time to bring her in for a landing,” he called out.

I was already running level—no pitch, no yaw, and no bank. I slowly pushed the yoke forward, and the front end of the plane tilted downward the way it was supposed to. This was all going very well.

“Enemy aircraft coming up behind you at five o’clock!” the instructor screamed as loudly as he could. “Take evasive action, quick, quick, quick!”

I pushed down hard on the right pedal and cranked the wheel to the right, while at the same time pushing the yoke forward to dive and pick up airspeed to escape! The little plane rocked and banked violently to the right as it responded to the controls.

“Well, that does it!” the instructor said. “Turn it off!”

There was a pause, and then the simulator hissed and sagged and levelled itself off, no longer responding to my

attempts to control it. I reluctantly let go of the yoke. It had felt good in my hands.

“Let’s give McWilliams a little round of applause!”

I climbed out, feeling elated and embarrassed.

“That was a very successful flight,” he said. “At least until he crashed the plane.”

I *what?* I turned to him, looking for an explanation.

“Did you think to look at the altimeter at any time during that flight?” he asked loudly.

I hadn’t. I’d been so busy with the other controls that I hadn’t even looked for it!

“When you decided to avoid that enemy attack by diving, you were certainly able to gain airspeed . . . at least until you slammed into the ground. You started that dive at less than three hundred feet. That would have been a superb move at three or four thousand feet. Now, who’s next?”

I climbed off the wing and dropped down to the ground as others raised their hands, each wanting his turn at the controls.

“You did well,” Jim said to me under his breath.

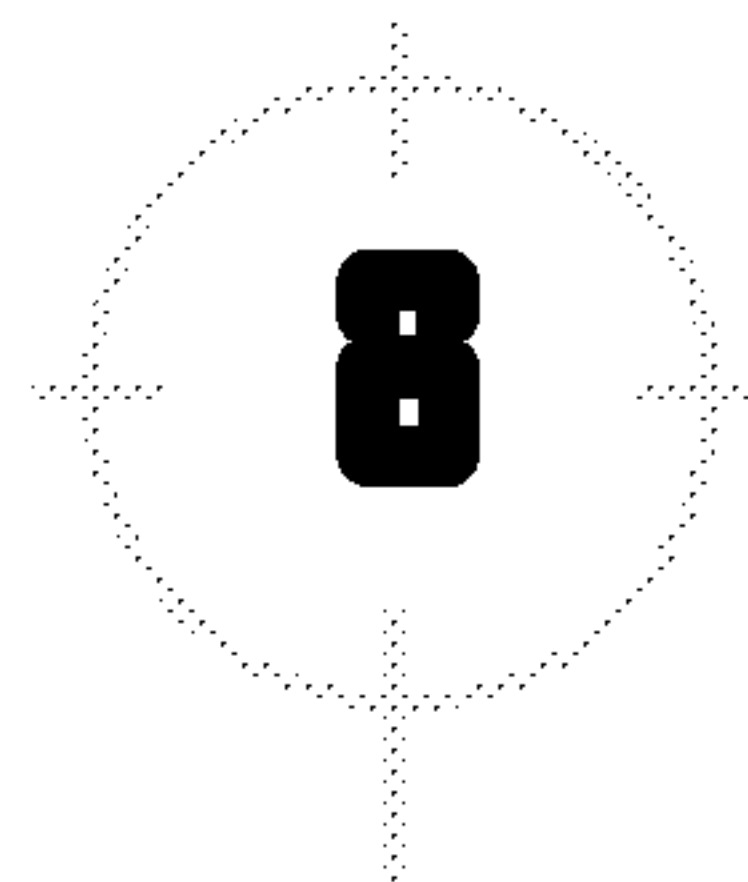
“I crashed.”

“Of course you crashed. He wasn’t going to let you land without crashing, no matter what you did,” he whispered.

“Do you really think so?”

“He wanted to make you an example. The next time will be different. You’ll see.”

“I hope so . . . And thanks.”



I sat on my bunk, my back against the wall, holding a flight instruction manual workbook. To anybody watching, and there were a couple dozen of the guys all around, it looked as though I was studying. But behind the manual, hidden from prying eyes, was the pad I was going to use to write a letter to my mother.

It wasn't like I was ashamed or embarrassed to be writing to her; people wrote letters home all time. It was just that if anybody saw the letter, I wouldn't be able to explain why I was writing about things that were happening at my boarding school.

These letters were necessary, but not necessarily easy. I felt bad lying to Mom, which seemed strange since my entire life these days was nothing but one big lie that I was keeping from her. Somehow, though, it seemed worse when I had to put it all down in writing. But there was no choice: in order to keep the big lie away from her, I had to keep up all the little ones.

October 15, 1943

Dear Mumsy,

I'd like to start off by apologizing for how short this letter is going to be. I'm neck-deep in work, and you'll be happy to know

that I'm taking my studies more seriously than I ever have in my entire life!

That certainly wasn't a lie. My teachers had always accused me of not "applying" myself. Nobody was saying that here.

My marks, particularly in all of the mathematics areas, have been top of the class. My instructors have been using me as an example to motivate the other students.

Again, I was just telling the truth. My marks were also tops in navigation, orientation, and general aircraft flight dynamics, but I wasn't about to tell her that or try to explain it.

Given my newly discovered aptitude with numbers, I'm beginning to think that I might want to pursue accountancy, or something in the financial field, at university. Perhaps I could become a banker. Never bad to be around money!

As well, while I wasn't truly thinking much about accounting, I was starting to figure out an excuse for why I wouldn't be coming home in June.

If my mathematics marks continue at this level, I've been assured that I can enrol directly in an accounting class upon graduation this year. I know that it would mean not coming home for the summer, but I have been given reason to believe that I might even warrant a full scholarship for the program! That would simply be too good an opportunity to pass up, and it would help prepare me for university!

“Anybody for a little craps?” Johnnie asked.

I looked up, surprised to see him standing there. I’d been so lost in the letter that I hadn’t noticed him coming. He was shaking a pair of dice in his left hand.

“I think I’ll pass,” I said.

“You can’t still be studying,” he said, shaking his head, a look of utter disgust on his face.

“I want to know where everything is the next time I get into the trainer, so I can be a better pilot.”

“Didn’t you see me up there?” he said. “I was the class ace.”

“You were pretty good,” I admitted.

It had been reassuring to me to watch as the instructor forced recruit after recruit to crash the simulator. After the third or fourth crash, it became clear that he wasn’t letting anybody get out alive the first time. Clearly his greatest worry wasn’t that we’d lose confidence but that we’d be too cocky.

Some had crashed almost immediately, while he’d had to work hard to make some of the others burst into flames. One of the hardest was Johnnie. Somehow his lack of interest in the classroom, theoretical part of flight hadn’t hindered him in his handling of the simulator. We’d heard instructors talk about “natural pilots,” and I was beginning to think that Johnnie was one of those—assuming he didn’t wash out tomorrow by flunking another test or getting caught coming back in through the barracks window at four in the morning.

“And do you know the reason why I was so good?” Johnnie boasted.

“I was thinking blind, dumb luck?” Jim said. He got up from the lower bunk, where he’d been lying down, and the whole bed shook.

“I wouldn’t rule that out completely,” Johnnie replied. “But I think it has to do with all the craps I play.”

“What?” I said.

“I gotta hear this,” Jim said. “Explain.”

“Well, if you think about it, flying is all about hand-to-eye coordination. And in shooting craps, everything depends on coordination in the wrist movement.” He shook the dice in his hand and then mimed throwing them.

Jim and I cracked up at that, but it didn’t seem to bother Johnnie at all, because he had a grin a mile wide.

“That’s priceless, Johnnie. Next you’ll be telling us that having a good belt of whisky makes you a better pilot too,” Jim taunted him.

“Maybe it does. Good pilots are relaxed pilots, and maybe a shot or two relaxes me.”

“And chasing the local ladies? Are you going to explain how that makes you better at flying?”

“That one’s easy. My pursuit of the honeys has resulted in me having to take evasive action on more than one occasion.” He paused and pointed to his eye. “Not to mention that it’s given me combat experience!”

Both Jim and I—and everyone else listening to Johnnie’s routine—broke into laughter again.

“You’re wasting your time becoming a pilot,” Jim said. “You should be on the radio with Jack Benny and the other comedians.”

“I guess there’d be more money in that, but I’m in this for King and Country. At the rate I’m training, and with all these sacrifices I’m making to become a good pilot, I might become the greatest Canadian air ace since Billy Bishop!” he trumpeted, and there was even more laughter. “Well, how

else can you explain it? You certainly can't think it comes from any book!" Johnnie exclaimed.

Before I could react, he reached up and snatched my book, letter and all, out of my hands. The book he took away, but the letter fluttered to the ground.

"Give me that!" I screamed.

Before I could even think to react, he grabbed the letter from the ground. "Let's see who Davie here is writing to! Maybe the ladies' man has got himself a girlfriend!" he said as he danced away.

I jumped down to the ground and tried to take the letter, but he fended me off with one arm and started to read.

"Dear Mumsy' ... Mumsy? ... Shoot, he's writing to his *mother*."

Before Johnnie could get any further, Jim reached over and swiped the letter back and handed it to me. Thank goodness.

"Might as well let him have his letter back," Jim said, "especially seeing as we're not sure you can actually read."

Johnnie just laughed. "Well, fellas, while you're wasting your time writing letters and studying books," he said, slapping the workbook with his free hand, "I'm putting mine to good use to become a better pilot, according to my own patented training system. Now, are you interested in playing, yes or no?"

"I'll pass. When I finish my letter, I'm going to study," I replied.

"I think I'll play some craps," Jim said. "He might just have something there. No other reason I can think of for him to be any good in the air."

"That's what I like to hear!" Johnnie chirped. He tossed

the book to me and I caught it. “As for you, don’t wear your eyes out studying, and send your mother our *love!*”

“Yeah, right.”

I climbed back up onto my bunk. I smoothed out the paper, which had gotten a little crinkled in the exchange. The very bottom of the sheet had also been ripped. I thought about starting over, but that seemed like too much effort. It was best just to continue with this one.

Of course, with things going the way they are in the war, even though I’m eager to begin training as an accountant, university will probably have to wait a little longer.

There was no need to say any more, because we’d argued about it often enough. She also knew that by summer, she wouldn’t be able to stop me from enlisting. Besides, I really couldn’t let her sidetrack me. My only hope of all of this *never* being discovered was to continue to write to her from overseas next year, after telling her I’d enlisted on my eighteenth birthday. She wouldn’t have to know that I’d really enlisted a whole eleven months earlier. And even though by then I’d be flying in combat, I’d just pretend that I was still in basic training. And on the bright side, she’d be less worried thinking I was still in training and not yet flying missions. So, in a strange way, I was lying to make it easier for her. That was how I had to think about it.

Back to the correspondence. A letter from Chip had arrived and it contained the sort of tidbits that would keep the boarding school illusion alive. Even better, his letter contained correspondence that my mother had sent to me at school, so I was able to work some realistic details into my letter to her.

I don't know if you had a bad storm last week, but we certainly had one in Toronto. A couple of trees on the school grounds were hit. One was split right down the middle as if it had been struck by a giant with an axe. The lightning and thunder were so bad that it practically shook me out of bed.

I was so sad to hear about Mrs. Henderson. She led a long life and I know she'll be remembered fondly by all who knew her. Please send on my condolences and my regrets at not being able to attend the funeral.

I said a silent thanks to Chip.

He'd also written to tell me that he was slogging away in school and getting the best marks of his life. Maybe what our teachers had always said was right: we were a bad influence on each other. He also promised, though, that come early December, he'd stir up enough to keep himself stuck in the mailroom.

Please send my love to the girls, and even to Scotty (just kidding, little brother). I miss you all and love you all very much.

Your loving son,

I stopped myself, in shock. I'd almost written *David*, the first stroke already made. I could easily fix that. It would have been so much easier just to write *McWilliams*.

Robbie.

There, that did it. Now I'd put the letter in an envelope, address it to my mother at my home address, and put it in a bigger envelope that I'd mail to Chip. Of course, I'd write

him a letter as well. It was good to have one person in the world with whom I could be honest.

“McWilliams.”

That startled me! It was a corporal standing beside my bunk.

“CO wants to see you in his office.”

“He does? Do you know what it’s about?”

He pointed at the two stripes on his shoulder. “I know you might find this hard to believe, but the commanding officer generally doesn’t share his thoughts with me. I’m more his clerk than his best buddy.”

“Oh, yeah, of course, sorry,” I mumbled.

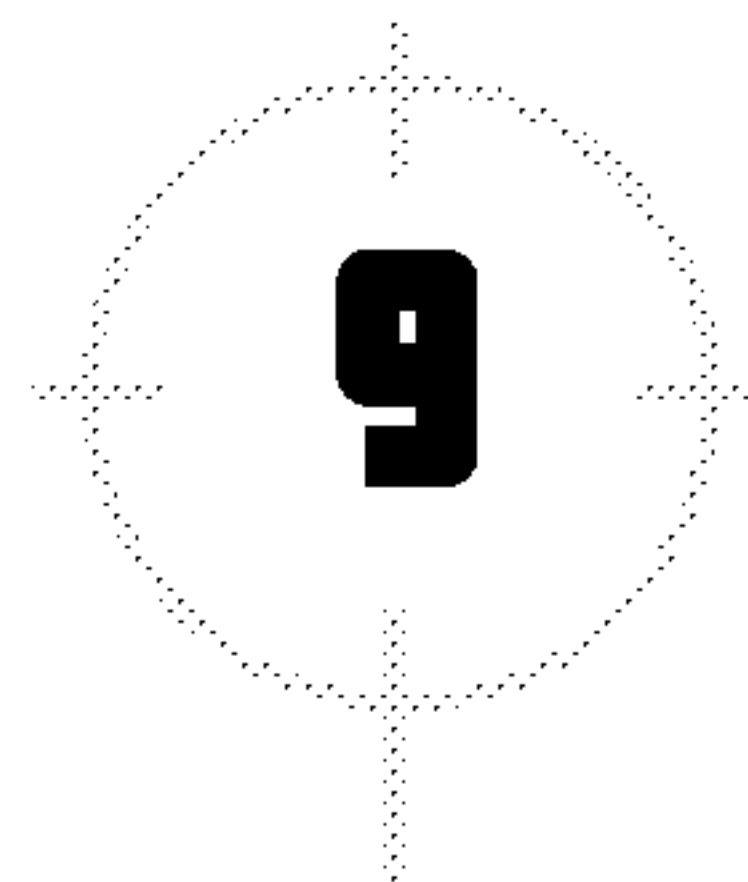
“But if you want, I’ll just go back and ask him, you know, to make sure it’s something important enough to make you want to come and see him ... I’m sure he’ll understand.”

“That’s okay,” I said as I jumped down from my bunk.

I started off and suddenly remembered that my letter was sitting up there on the bed. What if it blew down or somebody picked it up and looked at it? I ran back and grabbed it, stuffing it in my pocket.

“He did say on the double, so I wouldn’t keep him waiting if I were you!”

“No, Corporal!” I replied. I started off, running at what could only be called triple time.



As I ran to the CO's office, I started to get worried. Why would he want to see me? Had I done something wrong? Or worse, was he sending me home? I'd heard that every candidate who washed out had been personally informed by him, and— No, that was just crazy. I was doing better than anybody on the tests, and maybe I'd crashed the Link, but so had everybody else. There was no reason he'd be sending me—

Outside the office, I skidded to a stop. There *was* a reason. I'd been found out. It had to be that. He knew who I was—and who I *wasn't*. For the first two weeks at Manning that was all I'd thought about, but since then it had been nothing more than a passing idea. I just figured, if they hadn't found out yet, they weren't going to—unless, of course, my mother had somehow stumbled onto my plot and contacted the authorities.

I stood there, frozen in place, paralyzed by the thought that I'd been discovered. Part of me wanted to go back to the barracks, gather my stuff, and climb out the window that Johnnie always used for his escapes. But I knew that was even crazier. If I had been discovered, there was no place to run, and certainly no place to hide. And if I hadn't, there was no point in keeping the CO waiting.

The waiting area outside his office was empty. The corporal who had come to get me, his clerk, who usually sat at the desk outside the door, wasn't back yet, and the door to the inner office was closed. I thought about taking a seat and waiting until either the corporal returned or the door opened, but I was too anxious to sit there and stew.

I knocked on the door.

"Come!" came the reply from behind the door.

I opened it, stepped in, and saluted. "You wanted to see me, *sir!*"

He returned my salute. "At ease, McWilliams. Take a seat."

"Yes, *sir!*" I replied sharply, and sat down in the chair right in front of his desk.

"Cigarette?" he said, holding out a package with two cigarettes poking out.

"No, thank you, *sir.*"

"Don't you smoke?" he asked.

"No, *sir.*"

"Do you mind if I do?"

His question caught me by surprise. "No, of course not, *sir.*"

"Good."

He flicked open a fancy silver lighter and lit his cigarette. He inhaled deeply and then let out a big puff of smoke.

"I've got to tell you, McWilliams, that I have a lot of respect for you men who don't waste any time in enlisting. Do you know you're the youngest man in the program?"

"Yes, *sir*, I thought I might be." Actually, since I was only seventeen, I was completely certain I was the youngest person who'd ever been through this training school.

"And despite that, your marks have been nothing short of excellent."

“I have good instructors, sir.”

“Everybody here has the same instructors. Some people just have more of what it takes.”

Obviously, I wasn't being washed out, nor had I been discovered. I could feel my shoulders relax, and I realized that they'd been somewhere up around my ears.

He picked up a manila file folder that was on his desk. “Your marks in all areas have been excellent ... radio transmission, friend-or-foe recognition, basic airmanship, regulations, weaponry, and the dynamics and physics of flight ... all excellent.”

“Thank you, sir. I've been working hard, sir.”

“But in some areas they are even better than simply excellent. Your marks in mathematics, understanding of compass directions, navigation and orientation, and the use of maps have been, without exception, without error. You are not only the top student in your group of aircraftmen, you are, in fact, the highest-scoring trainee we have had in the four-year history of this program!”

I tried to stay formal and focused, but I couldn't stop myself from smiling. “I didn't know that, sir.”

“I imagine you didn't. What you also didn't know was that the test you were administered yesterday for navigation was different from the one given to every other student in your program.”

“It was? But why would ... I mean no, sir, I didn't know that.”

Come to think of it, it had seemed like a very hard test, and I'd wondered how the rest of the class had done.

“If I may ask, sir, why would my test be different?”

“The purpose of any test is to probe the ability of the person

taking it. You are, no doubt, aware that you have received perfect marks on all examinations focused on mathematics, navigation, and orientation.”

I did know that. I was proud of that.

“We felt that the tests designed to measure the achievement and knowledge expected of recruits at your level of experience and training were not gauging your true potential. So we decided to alter your test. Did you notice that the mathematical formulas necessary to determine navigational goals were omitted from your paper?”

“Yes, sir. I just assumed they were omitted from all tests, since it is important to have those formulas committed to memory.”

“Most of the navigators now engaged in theatres of combat don’t have those formulas memorized,” he said. “They have cheat sheets to help them along.”

“I figured in the heat of battle, it would be better to just know the formulas and how to apply them.”

“And can you do that? Just write them down and apply them?”

“I can write them down, but I don’t need to. I do the calculations in my head.”

“You did the calculations for this test in your head?” he asked. He sounded very skeptical.

“Well ... yes ... yes, sir.”

“Unbelievable,” he muttered under his breath. “I want you to know that your instructor not only omitted those formulas, he also asked you to apply factors such as wind speed and payload weights. Were you surprised or confused by that?”

“A little surprised, sir, since we hadn’t studied those things, but not confused.”

“Why not?”

“I had done a little extra reading,” I admitted. “But really, it’s just common sense.”

“It’s far from common!” he exclaimed. “And we tested you further by asking you to plot your final destination through a multi-course route with mid-air corrections for an *exact* arrival time.”

It had been a hard test. It was the first time I’d doubted myself, wondering if I had the right answers.

“Would you like to know how you did?”

I nodded.

“I have that test right here,” he said, tapping his finger against a paper on his desk. He picked it up and handed it to me. Across the top in red pen it read 100/100!

“Those questions that you answered were taken directly from the final exams given to navigators before they are assigned to a flight crew, and you achieved a perfect score! That is an incredible accomplishment.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Son, what you’re accomplishing is very admirable, but not surprising.”

He reached down and removed another piece of paper from the folder on his desk. I caught a glance and recognized the letter he was holding. It was the letter *I’d* written on school stationery, the one I’d given to Chip to mail for me from school.

“Your former headmaster, Mr. Beamish, described you in superlatives. He had nothing but praise for you, as a student and a person.”

“That’s good to hear, sir.”

“He writes that you graduated at the top of your class, were student president, a class leader . . . Very commendable.”

Maybe I had laid it on a bit thick. If he knew who wrote that letter, he'd have a very different opinion of me at this moment.

"He also mentioned that you want to be a pilot."

"Yes, sir."

"Your father was a pilot."

"My father *is* a pilot, sir."

He looked confused. "Wasn't he shot down ... He is a prisoner of war, isn't he?"

"Yes, sir, he was shot down and he is a prisoner of war, but he still is a pilot."

"Ah, yes ... of course ... I meant no offence," he apologized.

"No offence taken, sir."

"Your instructors have every confidence, and I agree, that you have the skills and aptitude to become a bomb aimer, a flight engineer, a pilot, or a navigator."

"I hope to become a pilot, sir."

"I know, son, following in the footsteps of your old man ... Very admirable. I think we all know that you could be a pilot."

"That's why I'm here, sir."

"And that's what makes this so hard for me to tell you." He paused and looked up at me. "Son, sometimes we don't necessarily get what we hope for."

My mouth dropped open. After all that he'd said, after all the work I'd done, somehow I was still being washed out! How was that possible?

"We know that you have the skills necessary to become a pilot," he went on. "In fact, *many* of the men who come here for training are capable of becoming pilots. But not many of

them can become navigators. Navigators are the brains of the operation. You are being reassigned to navigator training.”

“But I don’t want to become a navigator!” I shouted out before I could stop myself. “I mean, sir, that I respectfully request that I be reconsidered to become a pilot.”

“Son, it’s our job not only to determine the path that is best for each recruit but, more importantly, to determine what is best for the air force. There is a desperate need for navigators.”

“I thought pilots were in short supply too . . . sir,” I said.

“Pilots are ten for a penny. There are many men here in training who have the ability to become pilots, but very few would have the aptitude to become navigators, and quite frankly, I’ve never seen anybody with your ability. Because of that, you are being transferred directly to advanced training.”

“Advanced training?”

“Yes. When we told them about your test score, they were only too happy to fast-track you. You must be happy about that.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, although I certainly didn’t feel, look, or sound happy.

“Son, I know you’re disappointed, but I want to be honest with you. I know that you could be a good pilot, but right now, at your age, nobody is going to give you that opportunity. You can’t go into battle without the full confidence of your men. You’re just too young to win the trust of the flight crew of a Lancaster.”

“I don’t want to fly a Lancaster. I want Spitfires.”

He shook his head. “There wouldn’t be much chance of that either. Spitfires are too valuable to give out to just anybody.”

He got up from his seat, circled the desk, and sat down on the edge directly in front of me. He put a hand on my shoulder.

“Son, this isn’t about what you want or what I want. If I had my way, I’d be over there flying missions. This is about what’s needed to defeat the Nazis. We need you to become a navigator. Do you understand?”

I nodded my head. “Yes, sir . . . I just know I could be a good pilot.”

“I know you could too. I’m going to do something. I’m going to write a recommendation that upon the completion of your first tour of duty as a navigator, you be allowed to transfer to Elementary Flying Training School if you still wish to become a pilot.”

“You’d do that?”

“Most certainly. And ten or so months from now, you’ll be older and have gained more experience—experience that will serve you well. I’m going to put my recommendation in writing. I’ll keep one copy on file, give you one to take with you, and send the third directly to the group captain where you’ll be assigned.”

“Where will I be assigned?”

“Somewhere in England.”

“England!” I exclaimed.

“You’ll be taking the train to Halifax, where you will board the *Queen Mary*, leaving port in four days’ time.”

My mouth dropped open.

“You’ll be shipping out tomorrow, so you have tonight to pack your gear and say your goodbyes to your classmates.” He paused. “And of course, since this is all so sudden, we’ll allow you the opportunity to make a long-distance telephone call to inform your family of your reassignment.”

“My family ... yes, that would be good,” I mumbled.

“I’ll have my clerk make that call right now. It would be an honour to speak to your mother and pass on my personal congratulations.”

“Um ... that won’t be possible ... We, uh ... we don’t have a telephone at home,” I stammered, trying madly to think of an excuse. “Money is tight, what with my father being gone. But there is an uncle I could call ... my uncle Chip.” Chip needed to know what was happening so the letters wouldn’t come here again. “He’s not really an uncle but a close, close friend of the family. I could call him ... tomorrow ... if that would be acceptable, sir.”

“I’ll make arrangements with my clerk for you to make that call first thing in the morning. You’ll have to see the clerk tomorrow anyway. He has to make up your transfer papers and travel arrangements.”

“Thank you, sir. I appreciate that, sir. I just think it would be better for my uncle to tell my mother ... You know how mothers worry.”

“I know how we all worry about our children. I’m glad my son is still too young to enlist, although he’s only a year or so younger than you.” He picked up a picture from his desk and handed it to me. “That’s my wife, Betty, and our children—my daughter, Lorraine, who’s twelve, and our son, Graham. He’ll be seventeen on his next birthday.”

He was basically my age, and he looked older than I did. I wondered when the picture was taken. I handed it back to him.

“My wife is entirely opposed to the idea of him enlisting. She says she doesn’t want her baby going off to war. I tell her he isn’t a baby, but truth be told, I’m not that crazy about it

either.” He looked up from the picture and directly at me. “How did your mother react when you told her you were joining the air force?”

“She wasn’t too happy.”

“I understand that. The very worst part of this job is sending young men off to . . .” He let the words trail off. “Son, it’s hardest when the men are as young as you. I know—we all know—that some men who go off to war don’t come back. It’s difficult for me to live with the fact that I’m making arrangements to send you into combat, knowing that that decision may very well cost you your life.”

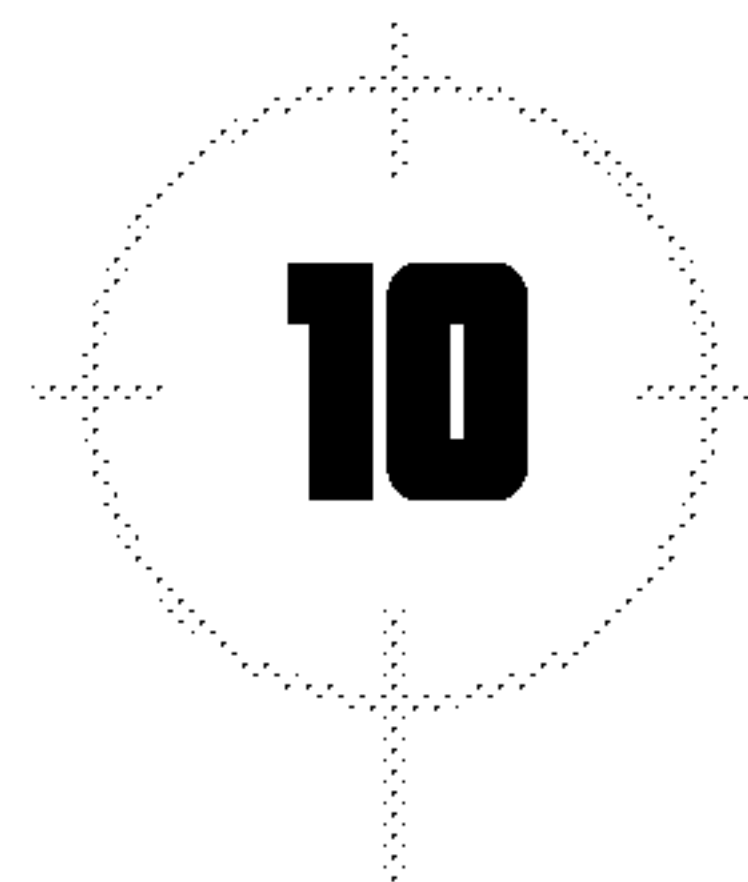
“I’ll be fine, sir. And besides, it wasn’t your decision. It was mine. I enlisted because I want to do my duty.”

He stood up. “I’m sure even if your mother didn’t approve of you enlisting, she’s still proud of you.”

I could only hope that would be the case.

“I want you to know that I’m proud of you.” He stood up and offered a salute. “Dismissed . . . Leading Aircraftman McWilliams.”

I stood up and returned his salute. He then reached out and shook my hand.



I looked anxiously up and down the platform. Where was Chip? The train was going to leave in a few minutes, and if he didn't show up soon, I'd miss him completely. I stood up on the step of the car so I could get a better view of the whole platform. It was filled with soldiers, sailors, and flyers, either standing together in groups or separately with their families or wives. It looked as if the whole armed forces were on the move and passing through Union Station today.

The only people I'd had to say goodbye to were my new buddies at Manning, especially Jim and Johnnie. True, we hadn't known each other that long, but all things considered, it almost felt as though we'd been through a war together already. Goodbye was a firm handshake, a pat on the back, congratulations on my success, a few jokes about meeting up again on the "other side of the pond." No one wanted to make a big deal out of goodbyes in the military—there were too many of them.

It was impossible to travel—impossible to go anywhere—without bumping into somebody in uniform. We weren't a big country—Canada's population wasn't quite 12 million, compared with more like 136 million in the United States—but I'd heard that almost a million of us were in the armed forces, fighting against the Nazis.

In the crowded station, with everybody coming and going, maybe Chip couldn't find the right platform or find me. There were so many men in uniform and we all looked the—

“Chip!” I screamed.

He looked up, scanning the crowd. I waved to him. He saw me and waved back. I jumped down and ran toward him, dodging people on the platform. I threw my arms around him and gave him a big hug.

“My goodness, my man, let me have a look at you!” he exclaimed, and stepped back. “You've gained weight.”

“Ten pounds.”

“And have you grown? You look taller.”

“It's more the thick boots,” I said, lifting one of my feet for him to see. “I think it's more likely I've been worn down!”

“So how does it feel, you know, going overseas?” he asked.

“Great . . . good.” Chip was the one person who knew the truth, so it didn't seem right to lie to him. “Actually I'm a little scared.”

“If it was me, I'd be a *lot* scared. Me and you sitting around our dorm at school talking about going over to fight is a whole different thing from actually shipping over.”

“I know. It's really happening.”

“Honest, Robbie—I mean Davie, sorry—part of me is jealous beyond words. You get to join the fighting, while the only battles I'm waging are with my history teacher.”

“From your letters, at least it sounds like you're getting along better with Beamish these days.”

“I *was* getting along with him.”

“Was? What happened?”

“For starters, I'm skipping class today to meet you.”

“I’m so sorry! I didn’t think of that!” I exclaimed.

“Not to worry. I had to do something. He was threatening to pull me out of the mailroom early because I’d been doing so ‘bloody well’ in my studies. Can’t have that, old man. Going AWOL should keep me in the doghouse—and in the mailroom—for the rest of the year.”

“Thanks so much, Chip. I really appreciate the sacrifice you’re making.”

“You appreciate *my* sacrifice? You’re the one going off to war! So, tell me, is it true—do the ladies love a man in uniform?”

“You know me. I’m not the type to kiss and tell.”

“You’re not even the type to *kiss*! But don’t worry, some nice woman will eventually take pity and go out on a date with you.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“No problem. That’s what friends are for. So, you said they’re making you a navigator.”

“Yeah. I’ve been assigned to a Lancaster group.”

“Lancs! How exciting. That’s one beautiful bird! You’ll be raining down death on Hitler’s factories and forces!”

“Assuming I can find my way to the bomb sites. But I’ll try to be the best navigator I can be ... for now. I’ll be able to apply for transfer to flight school after one tour.”

“How long will that take?”

“Between six and twelve months.”

“So, technically, I could enlist and become a pilot as quickly as you,” Chip said. “Who knows, you might even be *my* navigator.”

“Sorry, I’m afraid I’m not acting as the navigator on any plane where you’re the pilot.”

“Well, maybe I don’t want to fly any plane where *you’re* the navigator. You might land us in Berlin, for all I know.”

“I might, assuming you didn’t crash before we got there.”

He gave me a playful punch on the shoulder. “You know I’d be proud to have you either as my navigator or flying the plane beside me in formation.”

“I know. And there’s nobody I’d rather fly with.”

This was all getting far too maudlin and emotional. I pulled out the letters I’d written on the train. “Here are the next three letters for my mother.”

“Why so many?”

“I’m going into a theatre of combat. All my letters back are now subject to being opened, read, and censored, so I can’t risk pretending I’m still in school.”

“I hadn’t even thought of that,” Chip admitted.

“I’ll still write to you and tell you what I’m doing and where I’m going, but I’ve got to figure out a way to get letters through to you for you to send to my mother.”

“Maybe you could hide a letter inside a parcel.”

“No good. That would only make a censor more suspicious. Parcels are sent overseas to military men—not back home from men in uniform.”

“I hadn’t thought of that. There must be some way to get a letter through.”

“I’ll try to think of something. In the meantime, I’ll still write letters to my mother for you to pass along, but they’ll say very little, nothing that would suggest either that I’m in the air force or that I’m in boarding school. Just make sure she gets these letters when she’s supposed to receive them.”

I took one of the letters back and opened the flap. In light

pencil strokes I'd written the date it should be mailed. "This one is particularly important. This explains why I won't be home for Christmas."

"I was wondering how you were going to explain that one."

"I'm hospitalized. Nothing too serious, a bit of pneumonia, not life-threatening, but I'm in quarantine. Always at least a slight risk that it could be TB, so there's no point in her coming to see me. You are going home for Christmas, aren't you? You could deliver it by hand?"

"Of course, although now you're making me feel guilty."

"Don't. None of this would be possible without you. When you deliver the letter, could you please give my mother and sisters a big hug for me, shake my brother's hand and tell him to listen to our mother, and . . . tell them all that I love them?"

"You can count on me."

"I *have* been counting on you."

"How long before you're in England?"

"I arrive in Halifax tomorrow evening and then head straight down to the *Queen Mary*. She sails the next day, and it's a four- or five-day passage, depending on the seas and the route she takes."

"I've heard that Hitler has a bounty out on that ship."

"I heard that too. A quarter of a million dollars and the awarding of the Iron Cross to the U-boat captain who sinks her. But that's why she's so fast and well protected. We'll be fine."

"Yeah. The only danger you'll face is from seasickness."

"I'm sure you're right. As soon as I've settled in, I'll write you a note, tell you my mailing address—although I might not be able to tell you exactly where I'm stationed because of censorship issues."

“I understand. I’ll wait for your letter and take care of these”—he held up the envelopes—“until then.”

“All aboard!” the porter yelled out.

I felt a surge of electricity shoot up my spine. This was it.

“You keep yourself safe,” Chip said as he offered his hand and we shook.

“I’ll try.”

“Don’t just try—succeed. By the time I get over there, I want to make sure I’ve got an old hand who can lead me around and show me the ropes.”

“I’ll do my best.”

He let go of my hand and saluted. I awkwardly saluted back.

“I’d best be going,” he said.

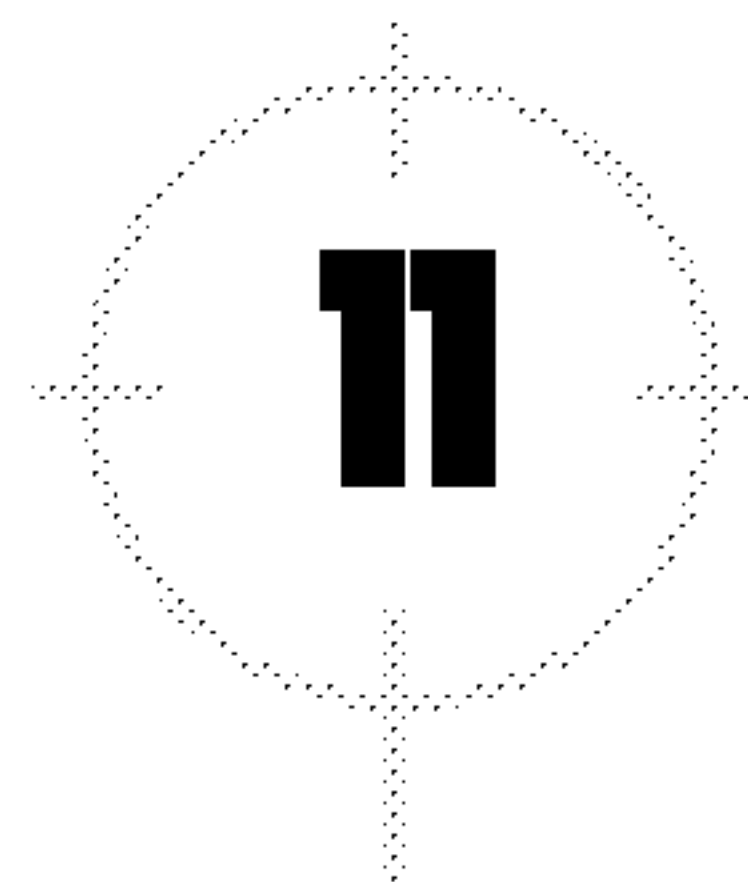
“Yes, don’t want to keep old Beamish waiting.”

I could see there were tears in his eyes. I wasn’t far from tears myself.

“Godspeed, old chap,” Chip said. He turned and walked away.

“Thank you,” I said under my breath. “Thank you for everything.”

I grabbed my bag and hopped up onto the first step. From that vantage point I could see all along the platform. There were so many men saying their final goodbyes and getting ready to board the train. Others were already aboard and were leaning out of windows; arms reaching down met arms reaching up so that a final bit of contact could take place. I couldn’t help but wonder how many of these goodbyes would be for the whole war. Or forever.



“We’ve sighted land!”

I looked up from my reading. It was one of my bunkmates, Campbell. Twelve of us—ten soldiers plus me and Campbell, the only two in the air force—shared a small stateroom, with four triple bunk beds. I put down my manual—it was an advanced text on navigation—and jumped off my bed. It was a long way from the very top. It seemed to be my destiny always to be on the top bunk. I was just hoping the bunks wouldn’t be four high the next time!

Two of the other guys had gotten off their bunks as well, and the four of us went out into the corridor. There was no door to close behind us because all of the stateroom doors had been removed to make more space. The only doors that remained on the whole ship were either waterproof doors or those for the few staterooms that carried high-ranking officers or dignitaries. I’d been told that Winston Churchill, England’s prime minister, had travelled on this ship. I figured *he* hadn’t slept on the top bunk of a triple bed.

We entered the stairwell. It was bare concrete. All of the carpeting had been stripped away—too much of a hazard if the ship caught fire. We climbed the stairs, level by level. We were eleven floors below deck. Low-ranking servicemen got the lower floors. I guess I shouldn’t have complained—at

least we had a room. Other men were sleeping in bunks that had been placed on the Promenade Deck or, even worse, in the swimming pool! It had been drained, of course, the way the whole ship had been drained of all its finery. I could only imagine what it would have been like with all the expensive china, crystal, tablecloths, and fancy chandeliers it had before the war.

At each turn we passed another group of men either playing cards or shooting craps. Gambling wasn't allowed—officially—but there were pots of money visible at all of the games. Of course, I hadn't been involved with anything like that. I'd tried to keep to myself as much as possible. Besides, the CO at flight school had given me advanced navigation textbooks and flight manuals for the Lancaster before I left, and I swore I'd have them practically memorized before I reached the base. I was going to be the youngest, the least trained, and the most inexperienced person there, and I knew I'd have to work harder than everybody else if I wanted to show I belonged . . . which, of course, I really didn't.

We made our way out onto the deck. The air was cool—no, it was *cold*—but it still felt very good in my lungs and on my face. I could taste the salt in the air, but at least the ride was a lot smoother now. For the first two days, we'd experienced rough seas and a lot of men had been under the weather. That wasn't so bad for those of us in the army or the air force, but it was a bit embarrassing for a sailor to be hanging over the railing throwing up into the ocean.

The whole starboard railing was lined with men. Obviously that was the side for viewing. We walked along, looking for an opening.

The deck, which once would have held deck chairs, was

lined with lifeboats—enough to accommodate the 16,000 passengers who now filled the ship beyond any capacity the designers had ever dreamed of or planned for. I'd gotten to know those boats well. Every single day of our passage had been marked by two exercises: a lifeboat drill and an abandon-ship drill. I knew these activities weren't just a way to pass the time but something that could save our lives. Just like with all the drills they made us do in basic training, they wanted us to be able to act quickly, without thinking, if the need arose.

Above us, on the upper deck, were the armaments that had been added to the ship. There were six three-inch, low-angle guns, two dozen single-barrel 20-millimetre cannons, and four sets of two-inch rocket launchers on the stern. It was an impressive array of weaponry. Of course, it was all designed to defend against an attack from the air or from surface vessels, and neither of those was what we needed to fear. The only real dangers were those that were unseen—the U-boats that could be anywhere beneath the waves. The best defence the *Queen Mary* had against U-boats—other than the escort vessels—was her speed and camouflage. The *Queen* had been painted navy grey, and her nickname was the Grey Ghost because of the way she'd been impossible for the U-boats to find as she sped across the ocean, changing course continually, zigzagging so no U-boat could get in front of her.

We found an opening at the railing, and the four of us squeezed in. On the horizon was the coast. It was far enough away that we couldn't make out much detail other than some colours—greens and greys and browns—but close enough to be reassuring. It looked as though we were paralleling the shore, but it was impossible to judge distance. We could be five miles out or we could be thirty.

“Looks like the *Queen Mary* got through again,” Campbell said.

“Don’t count your chickens until they’re hatched,” a sailor just over from him said. “We’ve still got a lot of ocean before we reach port.”

Instinctively I looked down at the water and scanned it for periscopes. That had been my habit during the entire trip whenever I was on deck and at the railing. All I’d ever seen were rolling seas and the outlines of our escorts and other ships in the convoy. It was reassuring to see them now, even closer than usual.

“I wouldn’t imagine any U-boat captain would be crazy enough to come this close to the mainland,” Campbell said. “It’s not just the escort vessels in our convoy but all the reconnaissance flights going over. He’d be seen the first time he poked up a periscope.”

“Do you have any idea how hard it is to see a periscope?” one of the sailors asked. “It’s one bloody big sea and one tiny little tube sticking out.”

“What would it matter?” Campbell replied. “The *Queen Mary* makes thirty knots at full steam. Are you telling me there’s a U-boat that can hope to match that? She’d just outrun it.”

“Do you think the U-boat is going to ram our ship?” the sailor asked, barely hiding the contempt in his voice. “And do you really think the *Queen Mary* can outrun a torpedo?” He and his friends began laughing. “Good thing we don’t take advice from the *air force* about subs,” he said with disdain.

I had a pretty good idea where this was going to end. There had been lots of little skirmishes during the passage. You put this many men in too small a space and don’t give

them anything to do, and you've got the basic ingredients for trouble. Then add in alcohol, gambling for high stakes, and members of the army, navy, and air force all mixed in together, and you're almost guaranteed trouble.

I did a quick head count of the crowd. Most of the men around us were army. They were the guys in khaki uniforms, and they were by far the majority on the ship. The rest of the men were mostly sailors—in the navy blue uniforms. This sailor had two buddies and there were a couple more navy blues down the way. The sailors were probably the worst for fighting. I looked around for the lighter-blue air force uniform, but aside from me and Campbell, there weren't any fly boys to be seen. Maybe Campbell would just let that comment go past without—

“Good thing the air force is there to watch over you from above,” Campbell retorted. “Without us, you and your little bathtub toys would go down the drain.”

Great, just what we needed—a skirmish this close to the end of the voyage. The sailor came forward and I stepped between them.

“Look, boys,” I said, “how about if we agree that the navy and the air force work together to keep the convoy safe. It's a partnership, right?”

The sailor looked down at me and scowled. This was not going to end well. Maybe I should get in the first punch before he got in the last. No, maybe not just yet. I decided to give it another try.

“I just don't want any Nazi looking through his periscope and seeing us fighting amongst ourselves. How about if you sailors join us members of the air force for a drink to celebrate reaching England?”

His scowl dissolved into a look of thoughtfulness.

“I’m buying,” I said.

He broke into a big smile. “Why didn’t you say so!” He slapped me on the back. “We’d be honoured to share a drink with the fine gentlemen of the air force.”

He offered Campbell his hand and they shook.

“As long as we don’t have to spend any more time with army grunts,” the sailor said.

A couple of the soldiers standing nearby heard his words and reacted.

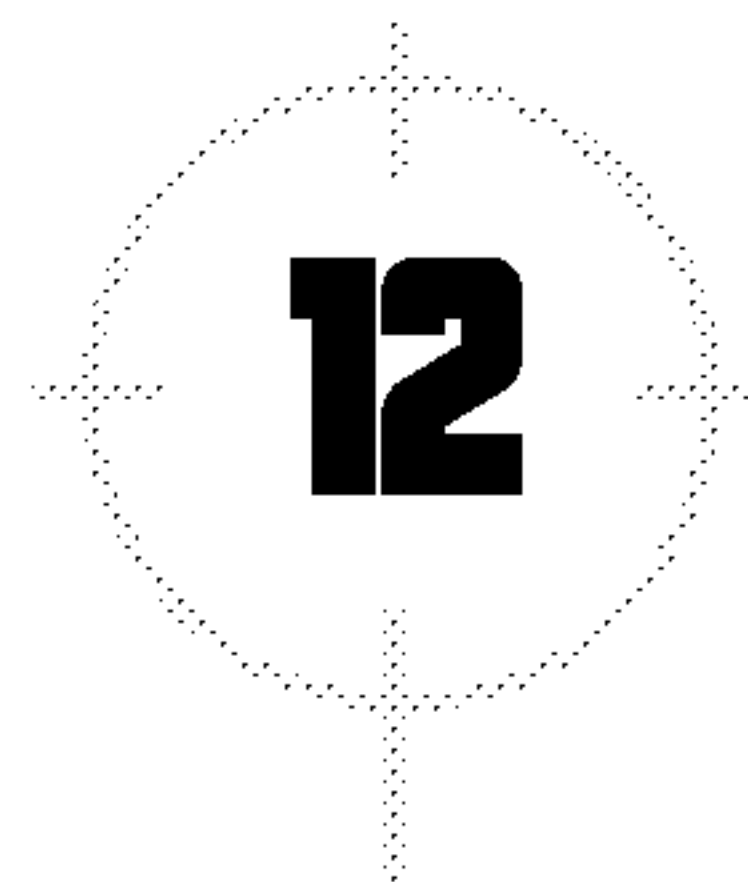
“Yeah, no army, just members of the two *elite* branches of the military,” Campbell said. “If we want the army to come, we’ll just whistle like we’re calling a—”

“I think there’s room at the table for everybody,” I interjected. I pulled out some money. “Would you gentlemen like to join us?” I said to the soldiers. “My treat, so we can hoist a glass to toast the successful crossing of the Grey Ghost.”

“Thanks,” one of the soldiers said. He turned to his friends. “Come on, boys, the drinks are on the fly boy!”

Seven or eight soldiers broke into smiles and cheered. I wanted to say that I’d only invited a couple of them, but that would have started a fight for sure. Besides, lots of men had spent most of their pay on alcohol; I’d just be the first to do it without drinking anything himself.

“Let’s go, boys,” I said. “He’s right, the drinks are on the fly boy.”



“Leading Aircraftman McWilliams reporting for duty, sir!” I said, snapping to attention.

“Have a seat,” the CO said without looking up from the clutter on his desk. He had a thick English accent, a thicker moustache, and eyebrows that matched. He looked as though he was old enough to have kids older than me.

I looked around. The only seats were already occupied with piles of paper. Carefully I scooped up some of the papers and placed them on the floor and sat down.

My new commanding officer—Group Captain Matthews—continued to work. I looked around. The walls of the room were filled with maps of Europe, charts, and the names of pilots and their crews. I started to count. There had to be seventy or eighty bomber crews stationed at this base.

Group Captain Matthews looked up at me from the work on his desk and his eyes widened in surprise. I knew what he was going to say next.

“How old are you, son?” he asked, sounding incredulous.

“Old enough to fight, sir.”

He chuckled. “That wasn’t the question, son. How old *are* you?”

“Eighteen on my last birthday, sir.”

“Well, that would make you nineteen on your next

birthday, which would still make you the youngest person on this base.” He shook his head. “We’re desperate for navigators, but I was hoping for somebody who had more experience than simply being able to find his way home from school.”

“I understand your concern, sir, but I won’t let you down.”

“It’s not me I’m worried about. You have never been on a combat mission.”

“No, sir.”

“You can tone down that ‘sir’ stuff as well. Please, not so often, or at least not so loud. We’re a little less formal here at the front.”

“Yes, sir . . . I mean, yes.”

He let out a big sigh. “Okay, let me look at your transfer papers.”

He started shuffling papers around on his desk, moving piles from one side to the other, but it didn’t look as though he was having any luck. I glanced down at the floor to the papers I’d just moved. On the top of one pile was a manila folder, and in large letters the label read *McWilliams, David*.

I picked it up. “Is this what you’re looking for, sir?”

He took it. “Yes, it is, but why did you have it?”

“I didn’t. It was here . . . on the floor.”

“Oh, good. At least it was somewhere in my office.” He opened the file up. “Oh, goodness, it says here that you’ve not yet even completed your training as a navigator.”

“No, sir. They said I’d receive my final training here, sort of on-the-job.”

“Wonderful. So instead of sending me a navigator, they sent me somebody who might someday grow up to be a navigator.”

“Sir, I will work hard to become the best navigator you have.”

He chuckled. “I like that confidence, but may I suggest that you don’t make that claim in the presence of the other navigators?”

“I’ll try to remember that.”

“Well, for better or worse, you’re what we’ve got. Ask my clerk to bring you to the supply room to be issued your flight suit, chow down in the mess hall, and then report to the briefing room at nineteen hundred hours. I’ll assign you to a navigator who will supervise and coordinate your ongoing training.”

“Thank you, sir,” I said, jumping to my feet and saluting.

He gave me a little wave that was sort of like a salute. “And don’t be late. We’ll be in the air by twenty hundred and over France within three hours of that.”

“I’m going out with the crew tonight?”

“I don’t know any other way to train and test you.” He paused and looked at me as though he was deep in thought. “You seem a little surprised.”

“I guess a bit ... I just didn’t think I’d be going out so soon.”

“The faster we train you, the sooner you can be on your own. The war isn’t waiting for you to be trained. Now get moving, you only have forty minutes.”



The briefing room was filled with pilots, flight engineers, bomb aimers, and navigators. There was a lot of loud conversation and laughter going on as the men milled around the room. I sat in the back, quiet, trying not to be noticed.

Captain Matthews was at the front with his senior officers. He'd be leading the briefing.

I adjusted my new jacket—my flight jacket. It was leather and had a thick lining. I felt very hot and wanted to slip it off, but all the other men were wearing theirs and I didn't want to stand out. Besides, I felt pretty proud to be wearing it ... proud, but maybe not worthy ... at least not yet.

All my clothes, right down to my felt flight boots, were designed to guard against the cold. We'd be flying at around fourteen thousand feet and the Lancasters weren't heated. A couple of guys had mentioned to me that it was so cold up at that altitude that I'd be able to see my breath. They joked that if you "bought it" up there, at least you could "see" your last breath.

"Okay, men, let's settle down!" Group Captain Matthews yelled out.

Instantly the room went completely silent. The men took their seats and opened up their flight journals. Everything was now business.

"Gentlemen, I would like to begin with a review of yesterday's raids. As you are aware, we joined with other squadrons in a mass assault involving 208 planes. The pathfinders did a first-rate job in marking our targets, and the aerial photographs taken by the recon units indicate that our barrage registered significant success."

"Does that mean we don't have to go back at those yards tonight, Skip?" one of the pilots asked.

"Looking for a new challenge, are we?" Matthews replied.

"I'm just starting to feel like I've been there so often, the enemy should invite me down for a spot of tea."

"And with the amount ofarchie they were throwing up

at us, you could have practically walked down to the ground to get that tea,” another pilot said, and there was a lot of laughter.

“The anti-aircraft fire was, as always, heavy,” Group Captain Matthews agreed. “Of the eleven planes lost, seven of those were due to ack-ack. The remaining four planes were taken down by enemy fighters.”

I’d already heard that three of those planes were from our squadron.

“Any word on our men?” an officer asked.

“Parachutes were seen exiting from *two* planes.”

What he was saying was that the men in the other plane didn’t get out, so they were dead.

“We have not received word indicating anything further on the men who parachuted from their planes. However, these days many more of our downed airmen are being assisted by locals and by members of the Resistance and have managed to avoid capture. At this point, we simply assume that no news is good news.”

It had been three weeks from the day my father had been shot down till the day we received word that he had been taken prisoner. We would never have conceived that my father being taken prisoner could be “good news,” but it was. It meant that he was alive, and that’s all that mattered.

I’d often thought about what it must have been like for him—being shot down, captured, and brought to a POW camp, where he’d been living now for the past two years. None of it seemed possible or real. I guess I wanted it to stay that way.

“Which reminds me, please make sure that you have your escape kit with you at all times!”

I had been issued mine. It was a small package that contained a silk map of France, a rubber water bottle, a few French phrases—Lord knows I wished I'd paid more attention in French class—a file, a compass, and some foreign currency, mostly French francs and German marks.

“I know that some of you are superstitious and feel that if you keep the escape kit on your person, you are somehow jinxing your plane. We are flying in Lancs, not on broomsticks, so there is no place for magical thinking. Keep the kits with you.”

There was a little bit of grumbling around the room.

“That was not a suggestion,” Group Captain Matthews boomed.

I was struck with a strange thought—of getting shot down and ending up in the same camp as my father, of he and I becoming bunkmates. That wasn't the family reunion either of us would have expected or wanted.

“We will be in the air by twenty hundred hours.”

Matthews was leading the raid. He was no “penguin,” which was the term given to squadron leaders who didn't fly in missions even though they had wings.

“There will be full fighter escort for the initial two hundred miles and they will be waiting for us upon our return. It will be a full circus tonight.”

I leaned over to the officer beside me. “What's a circus?” I whispered.

“A circus is when we have a mix of bombers and fighters. A rodeo is when the groups operate alone.”

“Thanks.”

Matthews continued. “We will be taking a vectored course with two mid-flight course corrections. Your naviga-

tors have already been given that information to make plot changes. Please make these changes in unison. Our best defence against enemy planes is to stay together. We may not be in a tight formation, but being in the same area is essential.”

He used a pointer to show the flight plan and the two course changes leading right to the target.

“Expect heavy anti-aircraft fire, as always. Once you’ve dropped your cookies, scramble out but try to remain on course. Stray planes present the easiest targets for enemy fighters. Your return route is direct and, as I said, full fighter coverage will escort us home as soon as we’re in range.”

Fighter planes had limited fuel capacity, so they weren’t able to stay with bomber missions that went deep into enemy territory.

“What’s the weather looking like?” somebody asked.

“Slight headwinds, which certainly will, of course, become tailwinds to aid in our escape, unlimited visibility, high ceiling, and, as we all know, almost a full moon tonight. There will be no place to hide but, by the same token, no place for enemy fighters to hide either. We should be able to see them coming, so gunners, eyes fully open for the entire mission, because we are counting on you.

“I’m going to be leading tonight’s mission. Accompanying me will be the newest member of our squadron.” He gestured in my direction. “McWilliams, stand up.”

I slowly, awkwardly, got to my feet. Every eye was on me. I felt so self-conscious. I figured I knew what they were all thinking.

“He’ll be riding a few flights to get up to speed as a navigator before he’s assigned to a crew. Do whatever you

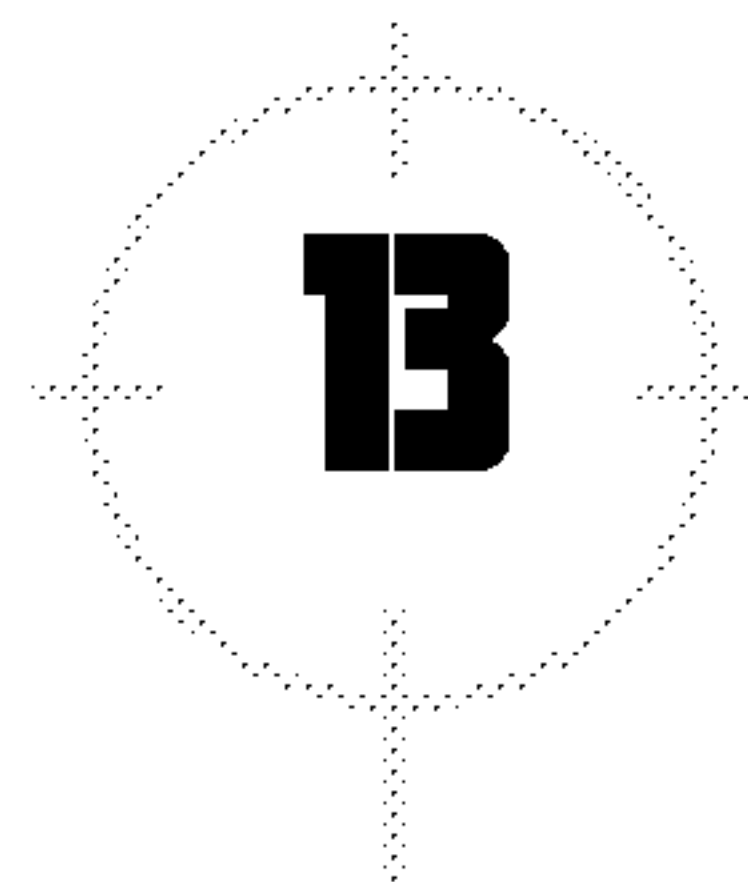
can to show him the ropes and make him feel like a member of our squadron.”

“Good to have you aboard,” one of the airmen said.

“Welcome!” said another, and there was a round of applause.

I nodded my head, gave a little wave, and settled back into my seat.

“Dismissed, men.”



I stood in the cockpit behind Group Captain Matthews and the flight engineer as they were going over their pre-flight checklist. Matthews was behind the yoke and the flight engineer was to his right, where he could monitor the gauges.

“We’ll start with the inner starboard tank,” the flight engineer said.

Despite having been introduced to him just ten minutes earlier on the tarmac, I couldn’t remember his name.

“Check,” Matthews said. “And then switch to the inside port fuel tank.”

“Will do, Cap.”

I looked down past the flight engineer’s feet and could make out the outline of our bomb aimer. His perch was underneath the controls in the very nose of the plane in a little glass bubble. I wasn’t afraid of heights—I *liked* heights—but still, staring down through nothing but glass held in place with a few strips of metal seemed a little much even for me.

Directly behind me, the navigator—Mike—sat at a little table, his maps and charts spread out in front of him. Behind him, past a little curtain, I could see both the wireless operator and the legs of the top gunner, hanging down from his turret. Lost from view at the very back of the plane was the tail gunner. His turret was a bubble like the bomb aimer’s.

I turned and looked down the tarmac. If I'd wanted to, I could have counted two or three dozen planes, all waiting, preparing, getting ready to go into battle. There was something so incredible about being here in the middle of it all. *I was here*. I was going to take part in what I'd read about, heard about, watched on the newsreels. Maybe I wasn't going to be the pilot—heck, I wasn't even going to be the navigator—but I was finally going to strike a blow against the Nazis. It felt good, and unreal, and amazing, and unnerving.

I was feeling hot. Between my sweater, leather jacket, life jacket, and harness, I was sweating. I knew it was supposed to get cold up there, but I couldn't imagine I'd need to wear the wool hat and gloves I'd been issued. Actually, for the navigator, wouldn't gloves make it difficult to do the calculations?

Anxiously, absently, I played with the straps of my harness. My parachute—which would be hooked to the harness if needed—was just off to the side in a neat pile with those of the pilot, flight engineer, and navigator. The other crew members' parachutes were closer to where they were stationed—and by their escape hatches. In an emergency, they wouldn't be able to travel the length of the plane to retrieve anything. A few seconds could mean the difference between life and death . . .

Death. I let that sink in a little.

Tonight, on this mission, people could die. People *would* die. That was all but guaranteed. I knew in some theoretical, abstract way that it could even be me, but the lack of reality almost protected me from thinking any deeper.

“Is this your first bombing mission?” Mike asked. He had a thick accent—not British, maybe Australian or South African.

“This is my first time in a Lancaster.”

“Really? What were you flying in before?”

“A couple of different things.” I didn’t want him to know that those things were small planes piloted by my father.

“The Lanc is a good plane,” he said. “Very stable platform. She flies so gently, it’ll practically rock you to sleep.”

“I don’t think I’m going to be doing any sleeping.”

“Good. Maybe that means I can catch a few extra winks along the way.”

“You don’t actually fall asleep, do you?”

He laughed. “Not likely. But I do close my eyes and think about being somewhere else ... usually someplace that’s warm and sunny.”

“Contact!” Matthews said.

One of the engines—the outside starboard—flickered, sputtered, and then puffed out a cloud of smoke and came to life with a tremendous roar.

“Contact!” he yelled again.

The outside port engine responded and the noise increased.

Matthews and the flight engineer repeated their words and actions until all four engines were firing. The noise was unbelievable and the whole plane shook.

“Purrs like a kitten, don’t she?” Mike yelled over the din of the engines.

“Sounds more like the roar of a lion!”

“Nah, it should sound more like music to your ears. It’s when you *don’t* hear the engines that you need to get worried!”

The plane jerked slightly, rocked, and then started to roll forward. I looked out through the canopy, past the pilot and

flight engineer. In front of us were two other planes already moving down the tarmac, taxiing into position for takeoff. I turned around. Behind us, the other planes were falling into line. This was all becoming more real by the second.

Mike had put on headphones and handed me a pair. I slipped them on and the noise was partially blocked out and—

“We can talk on the intercom,” Mike said.

“Good . . . good.” I was relieved that I could hear him so well despite the overwhelming noise of the engine.

“Just not too much chatter,” Captain Matthews said, cutting in. “And definitely no singing.”

Almost instantly, a voice started singing and two others joined in until there was a choir chirping out a song that I didn’t know. I wondered how the captain would feel about the men disobeying his order not to sing. I looked up. He was one of the choir members. They finished the song and there was silence.

“There’s the signal,” Matthews said.

Mike leaned in closer to me. “The Aldis lamps on the runway turn green when we’re good to go.”

“Okay, boys, hold on to your hats!”

I stood up and leaned against the flight engineer’s chair so that I could see everything inside and outside the plane.

With his right hand Matthews pushed all four of the throttle controls forward and the noise of the engines became even louder. The plane started to pick up speed. The tarmac wasn’t nearly as smooth as I’d thought it would be, and the whole plane was shaking and vibrating. The ride got even bumpier as our speed increased. It felt like either the fillings in my teeth would fall out or the wings would fall off. Faster and faster, but we weren’t getting off the ground. The

end of the runway was up ahead and beyond that some trees and a church ... Why was there a church steeple at the end of a runway?

I felt a rush of anxiety. Were we going to make it? Was the plane going to lift off or were we going to crash into the forest or—

All at once the ride became incredibly smooth and we were gaining elevation! We soared up and the trees passed below, and then the church steeple vanished beneath us. We were quickly gaining altitude—much faster than I'd expected.

I stumbled, almost tumbling over, grabbing on to the back of the flight engineer's seat to stop myself, as the plane banked sharply to the right. Below us I could see the barracks and the runway and other planes taxiing out to join us. Matthews levelled the plane out, taking us on a long circular path around the field. We joined into a formation with those already in the air, marshalling for those still to come.

"This is beautiful," I said quietly.

"That it is," Matthews replied.

"Sorry, sir, I was just talking to myself."

"You'll have to learn to do that in your head." He paused.

"How are the gauges looking?"

"Engine temperatures are within the normal range. All systems are go," the flight engineer replied.

"Excellent. That's what I like to hear, old chap. Okay, crew, we're going to give it a go tonight. I want everybody to stay sharp, stay focused on the task. Understood?"

There were grunts of agreement coming back through the headphones from different places in the plane. I'd stay sharp too, although I wasn't sure if I was anything more than luggage at this stage.



I looked out the canopy window. We were in a sea of Lancasters, with planes surrounding us on all sides. I knew there were two hundred planes on this mission, but it seemed as if there were thousands. They filled the sky in all directions, illuminated by the stars and the bright moonlight, until the edges of the formation were swallowed up in the darkness.

Along with the bombers were the escort fighter planes. Most were Spitfires—the type of plane my father had flown. The type of plane I hoped to fly someday. As they darted past, they seemed so fast and nimble and small compared with the big, lumbering Lancasters. It was good to have them along, but they only made me realize how vulnerable we would be to enemy fighter attacks. They just zipped between us, so much faster, and they were able to manoeuvre, turn, climb, and bank much more quickly than we possibly could. I wondered how much longer they'd be with us before they had to turn back.

I knew, from the conversations I heard on the intercom system, that we had passed over the English Channel and that below us was occupied France. So far we hadn't encountered any enemy aircraft or anti-aircraft fire—not that either was expected at this point. Anti-aircraft fire would be placed around target areas to offer protection from the bombing, and enemy fighters wouldn't attack until our escorts had turned back.

“Course correction coming up, right?” I asked the navigator.

“Soon. You have a knack for this. Any visuals below that you can make out?”

I shook my head. The last thing I'd seen with any clarity was the white cliffs of Dover, and since then there'd been nothing.

"It's hard at night, especially when everything is blacked out. When the runs are during the day, you'll see more. No matter how much you trust your maps, your memory, and your mathematics, it's always good to take a reckoning off landmarks."

"He's telling you the truth there."

I thought it was the flight engineer talking.

"Same as my job. Read your dials, but use your head."

It *was* the flight engineer. I had to remember to find out his name.

"I've seen engineers so focused on their dials that they didn't notice an engine was on fire because the heat indicator said everything was fine."

"I'll try to remember that ... There's so much to remember," I replied.

"He's doing a tremendous job!" Mike said. "I think I'll leave him to do the job himself. Anybody mind if I step out for a smoke?"

There was laughter over the intercom.

"Come on, Mikey, you know there's no smoking close to the aircraft. Don't want to go setting off the oxygen tanks," somebody said over the intercom.

"I suppose that's the end of my other idea—to light a bonfire to warm my hands," Mike said.

There was more laughter, but I would have welcomed the bonfire. It was so cold now that I was able to see my breath, and I'd put on both my wool cap and my gloves.

"Okay, everybody, not only shouldn't we be lighting fires,

but it's time to extinguish all lights," Captain Matthews said over the PA. "We're about to lose our fighter coverage."

Mike dimmed the light over his table and we were plunged into darkness. The only faint light came from the dials on the instrument panel. Slowly my eyes adjusted and I was able to see outlines.

"Are the bombs selected and fused?" Matthews asked.

"Yes, sir, Cap. Bombs selected and fused. If you like, we can drop them right here and return to base immediately."

There was more laughter.

"I'm afraid that would set a record for creepback," Matthews said.

I'd heard about creepback—a plane dropping its bombs well short of the target to escape the flak.

"I think we'll stick with the original plan and drop them on target instead of over the French countryside."

"Affirmative on that, Captain. Just like to give you options."

"I wish I had the option of longer fighter coverage," the captain said, "but there they go."

I stood up so I could look out the canopy. Off to the starboard side and up about forty-five degrees, I could make out the outlines of two Spitfires. The first one climbed high above us while the second waggled its wings—waving goodbye—and then dove sharply and disappeared.

I looked all around. There were no more Spitfires to be seen. I could still see the outlines of lots of Lancasters, though. Those close and to the port side, the side with the moon, were almost shining and shimmering in the moonlight, while others, farther away, were just dark shapes in the night sky. It was reassuring to know we weren't alone, and we certainly weren't defenceless, but this was where the dangerous part

of the mission began. This was when the enemy fighters would be coming up after us.

“Time for course correction,” Mike said. “I want you to change bearings ... fifteen degrees north.”

“Roger that,” Matthews said. “I’m also changing altitude ... climbing to eighteen-five ... I see some cloud cover we can climb into.”

I felt the plane slowly bank at the same time as it began its climb. It was a gentle, smooth course change. I could only barely feel it, and a hand against the navigator’s table held me in place

“Feeling okay, kid?” Mike asked.

“I guess so. Anything I can do to help?”

“Go to the back for a while. Make sure the tail gunner is staying sharp ... Even keep an eye out. Watch below and behind, because that’s the most likely direction of attack.”

“Sure. No problem.”

I started to walk toward the back, but he grabbed me by the arm and stopped me. He pointed to the floor, and for a second I didn’t realize what he meant. Then it clicked in. I reached down and picked up my parachute.