

“Navigator, how long until we’re over the target?” Group Captain Matthews asked.

Mike motioned for me to answer.

“Six minutes, sir,” I replied.

“Has Mike gone out for that smoke?” Matthews asked.

“Still here, Skip. Just letting the kid earn his wings.”

“Any lights up front?” Matthews asked.

There were pathfinder planes that would hit the target before us, flying low and dropping flares first to mark the target and then firebombs to light it up.

“Negative, Skip.” It was the bomb aimer.

Hanging there in the bubble at the front of the plane, he had the best view. I started to wonder, had I given us the wrong heading? I knew that one degree off projected over a couple of hundred miles would cause us to miss the target by ten miles, and we’d made five different course changes under my direction.

“Mike?” the captain asked.

“We’re right on course. The kid is bang on. I’ve already had him plot our return path.”

“And you’ve confirmed everything?” Matthews asked.

He sounded concerned. I didn’t blame him, because he wasn’t the only one who wondered about my abilities. I

wasn't willing to trust the safety of the crew to me without my calculations being double-checked. Chip joking about me landing us in Berlin still stuck in my head.

"Confirmed, plotted, and marked. The kid is a natural."

"The jury is still out on whether he can be a navigator or not, but I'm thinking of making him into my personal good luck charm. We're almost over the target and no sightings of enemy fighters the whole trip. How often does that happen?"

"Not very often—certainly not often enough," Mike replied.

"This is starting to look like a milk run!"

"We have archie! I repeat, we have archie to the port side!" the bomb aimer yelled out over the intercom. "It's set for about twelve or thirteen thousand!"

"I see it," Matthews announced. "I'm going to put a little distance between it and us."

I felt the plane climb and bank simultaneously. At the same time there was a loud explosion and the whole aircraft shook. There was another explosion and another, and the plane shuddered.

Mike leaned over so his mouth was right by my ear. "This isn't so bad. Once the flak starts, it's a guarantee that no fighters are in the area!" he yelled over the sound of the engines. "Let's just drop our cookies and get out of here."

"I see the markers!" the bomb aimer yelled out.

It was essential to have the target marked, but it also marked *us*—where exactly we were heading. Everybody on the ground, all the anti-aircraft gunners, and the planes they could send up to intercept us—all knew we were coming. I guess that didn't really make much difference, though.

Between radar and a cloudless, moonlit night, they probably knew anyway.

“Forward . . . one minute . . . level it out.”

The plane came out of the bank and flattened out.

“Opening bomb doors,” the flight engineer announced.

I heard the hydraulics and felt the plane slow down slightly as the open bomb doors caused more drag. I knew that once the bombs were dropped we’d be so much lighter that we’d be able to fly faster and climb more quickly—and we’d need that if the fighters did come up after us.

I stood up so I could look out through the canopy. All around us the sky was starting to fill with black puffs, exploding anti-aircraft fire, and powerful searchlights were sweeping the sky looking for us. Up ahead, the flak looked thicker and closer together, and that’s where we were flying—where they knew we were going to be flying. Despite the bitter cold, my whole body suddenly felt a rush of heat, and sweat started pouring down the inside of my shirt.

“Two degrees to port . . . a little more . . . steady. Flat and level . . . Release the bombs on your mark.”

“Roger that,” Matthews replied.

“Roger, Skip. Twenty seconds to release,” the bomb aimer replied.

He started counting down. I counted down in my head along with him, wanting him to count faster so we could release them quicker. Up ahead was more and more flak—and we were flying straight for it!

“Bombs away!” the bomb aimer called out.

The flight engineer pushed a lever forward. “The cookies are away!”

At the same instant that I heard them being released, the

plane jumped up. I'd known that would happen, but I was surprised by how violent the leap upward was.

"Bomb doors closed," the engineer said.

"Evasive action! Hard to port!" the bomb aimer yelled. "Hard, hard, hard!"

It was almost as if the plane heard him and responded immediately. I wasn't ready for the quick response and tumbled off my chair and rolled across the floor. The engines whined and screamed as we turned, and then the plane suddenly dipped and dove! I rolled *up* the wall of the fuselage, rising almost all the way to the ceiling! The plane flattened out and I fell back down, luckily landing on the pile of parachutes.

Mike reached over and grabbed me, pulling me toward him. "Grab on to the table!" he yelled. "Wedge yourself underneath so you won't go bouncing around!"

He held on to me until I could get my legs locked around one of the legs of the table.

"Climb, climb, climb!" the bomb aimer yelled. "Get elevation—flak directly ahead. Hard to port, hard to port!"

The plane banked and climbed at the same time—a surefire way for an inexperienced pilot to stall or sideslip or . . . But I didn't have an inexperienced pilot—the squadron leader was at the controls of this plane.

There was a thunderous explosion and the plane shook violently. Had we been hit? Should I grab my parachute? I looked over at Mike. He wasn't moving. He wasn't even reacting. He was completely calm. In fact, was there a little smile on his face? He had his head down and was studying the charts in front of him. That made no sense. How could he be so calm?

Mike looked up. He gave me a thumbs-up and broke into a big grin. He leaned forward. “Quite the ride ... It’s almost over ... Just hang tight.”

The plane levelled out once again. The engines were loud, but they weren’t whining anymore—there was a purring to them—and there was no more flak. Were we out of it?

“Clear, open sky ahead,” the bomb aimer announced.

“Confirmed,” Matthews agreed. “Clear sailing. All eyes external. Report Lancaster positions and ready for possible attack. What does it look like out there?”

“Scattered, very scattered formation.”

I didn’t recognize the voice but knew it had to be the wireless operator.

“We have planes port and starboard ... scattered elevations and directions.”

“Time to get this formation back into shape,” Group Captain Matthews said. “Mike, give me a bearing and elevation.”

Mike instantly barked out a different bearing than the one I’d calculated. Had I been wrong? No, it was because the evasive action had spun us off course and he’d had to recalculate—something he’d done in the middle of all that chaos, the dips and banks and climbs amidst the barrage of anti-aircraft fire. When I’d been panicked, he’d been working, doing his job. Could I have done that job with all of that happening? Did I have what it took to be the brains of the plane?

There was a gentle turn as we banked to starboard, back toward the route I’d originally plotted.

“This is group leader to squadron pilots and navigators,” Captain Matthews called out. “Let’s re-form and tighten up, on my initial bearing and elevation. Let’s get ready and ready

fast. The way that flak stopped so suddenly, I expect we're going to have visitors soon. All eyes open. Gunners be awake, be aware, be active."

Mike leaned forward again. "Every plane had to take individual evasive action to avoid the flak, so they're scattered across the sky. Until we get back into a tighter formation, we're more vulnerable to enemy fighters."

"So once we get into formation, we're safe?"

He chuckled. "Safer, not safe. Go back and ask Sparky if he knows how many planes were lost."

"Planes were lost?"

"Planes are always lost. What we don't know is how many. Go—he'll know."

Hesitantly I got up from the table, reluctant to leave, fearing that a sudden change in direction would throw me across the plane. Then I remembered: Captain Matthews was going to be flying flat and straight to allow everybody else to re-form around him. At least that was the plan, unless we were attacked by enemy fighter planes. I'd better hurry.

I moved through the plane, one hand steadying myself against the wall. Sparky—which seemed to be what every wireless operator was called—was busy working, listening on his headphones and tapping out a message in Morse code to the other planes. He looked up at me.

"How many planes?" I yelled.

He shook his head. "None yet ... No enemy fighters yet."

"No, no, how many of our planes were ... were ..."

I let the sentence trail off, as if asking the question would somehow increase the number.

"Eight ... seven ... I don't know for sure. There are reports of at least five being downed, and others that haven't

reported in or—” He stopped and his eyes got big and his expression even more serious. “We have confirmed enemy contact. A dozen echoes on the fishpond so far.”

I knew that “fishpond” was the nickname for radar, and “echoes” meant there were planes on that radar.

“Where are they?” Matthews called out over the intercom.

“Climbing from the stern and port . . . four o’clock . . . five o’clock . . . gaining quickly.”

“Does anybody see them?” Matthews inquired. “Anybody in any plane, do we have a visual?”

“Affirmative!” came a voice I didn’t recognize. “We have visuals coming at us from below . . . dozens of them . . . dozens!” he screamed.

“Gunnery be alive!”

At that same instant there was an explosion of gunfire! I spun around and saw the tail gunner swivelling in his turret, firing his gun! Then, from above, the upper gunner began firing, his legs spinning as he rotated his turret, spent cartridges being spat out and falling to the floor like rain, bouncing and rolling around. The air stunk of cordite, the smell of gunpowder.

I stood there paralyzed with fear. I didn’t know what to do or where to go. I wanted to find someplace to hide, but there was no place to hide.

“Bandits, bandits, coming in from the front, diving on us, diving!” a voice cried out.

The feet of the upper gunner spun around as the turret swivelled and he readied himself. His movement unstuck me and I ran back to my spot by Mike. His head was down; he was working on a formula for a course correction.

He looked up. “Help provide another set of eyes.”

I heard the words, but I didn't understand what he meant.

"Go forward!" he screamed, motioning to the front of the cockpit. "Look for enemy planes!"

"Oh, yeah."

I pushed past his table and brushed the curtain aside so I was standing right behind the pilot and flight engineer. Up above me—all around me—was the open glass of the canopy. If I was looking for someplace to hide, this wasn't it. Here, I was completely and utterly exposed.

I looked around. I could see the darkened images of Lancasters all around us. Dozens, no hundreds of planes flying in formation. But I couldn't see any—

A tiny plane zipped between two of the bombers just over to our port side, and red tracers streamed from its guns while the guns from three Lancasters spat fire back at it, bullets forming a path from their guns out into the air. The plane twisted and turned and sped by so fast, it was as if the bullets couldn't even catch it! It was untouched, but its bullets didn't seem to be hitting their targets either, as we kept on flying steady and level.

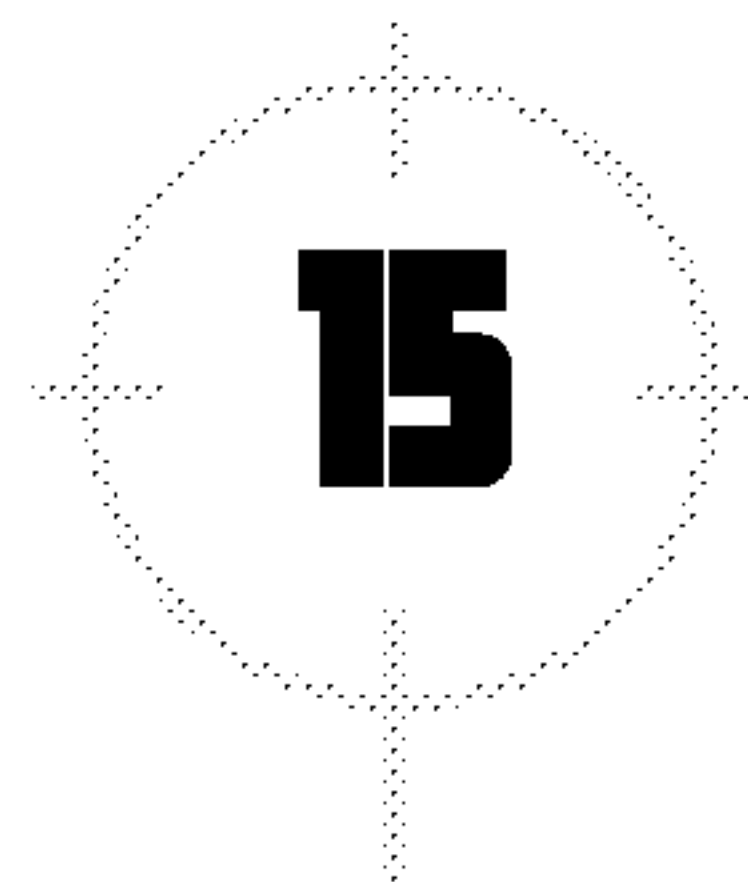
"There! There!" I screamed. Directly in front, flying straight toward us, was another fighter, and its guns were blazing! Red tracers came flying out from overhead—our upper gun was firing at it! Our plane dipped and the fighter flew overhead, so close that I could see the rivets in the bottom of his wing!

Involuntarily I leaned back and almost fell over.

"Close ... a bit closer than I would have liked," Matthews said. His voice was so calm, so matter-of-fact. "Good eyes, Davie! You really are a good luck charm."

I didn't feel so lucky. All I felt was my heart pounding, my

legs shaking, sweat pouring down my sides, and I thought there was a chance I might throw up. I wanted to sit down, I wanted to curl up into a little ball, but I couldn't. I grabbed on to the canopy to steady myself and began scanning the sky again.



The wheels screeched as the plane touched down and then bounced slightly back into the air, causing my legs to jam into the bottom of the table. We raced along the tarmac, and the roar of the engines and the rattling of the runway diminished as we slowed down until we were merely rolling, taxiing toward the hangar.

The two gunners were out of their turrets now, and Sparky was off the wireless, and they were all standing together. I couldn't hear them over the engines, but they were laughing and smiling. It was so strange ... they were acting as if nothing had happened! Or maybe they were just so relieved that it was over. I was relieved too, but also numb. Mike was packing up the maps into a leather carrying case.

Finally the engines stopped, so suddenly that I was startled and then relieved. I unplugged my headphones and took them off. Now I could hear the voices and the laughter. The hatch popped open and they all climbed out, parachutes in hands. I stayed in my seat. I felt so drained that I wasn't sure my legs would hold me up.

“How you doing?” Mike asked.

“I'm okay. I'm okay.”

“You did well. Didn't he do well, Skipper?”

Matthews held out a hand. “Congratulations on your first mission. You performed admirably.”

“I didn’t do much.”

“You got us back home,” Mike said. “Kid can plot my course any time.”

“Thanks.”

“Come on, everybody, let’s get some breakfast before the debriefing,” Group Captain Matthews said.

I slowly got to my feet. My legs felt like rubber and I hoped nobody noticed that I was wobbly and shaking—just as I hoped nobody had noticed the tears that I’d already shed. There hadn’t been many, and I’d instantly brushed them away, but I couldn’t stop them from coming. I’d been so relieved, so grateful, when the first Spitfires appeared and chased the last of the enemy planes away that the tears had just come.

For almost two hours we’d been repeatedly attacked by enemy fighter planes. They swooped by, attacking from above, below, behind, and straight ahead. Sometimes it had been only a few planes acting independently, and other times it had been a whole formation coming in. Our gunners had inflicted some damage. I hadn’t seen it, but I’d heard over the radio that we had downed two, with a third being a probable kill.

But they weren’t the only kills. I’d watched from the canopy as a Lancaster was strafed by enemy fire and then burst into flames, spun to the side, and plunged. It disappeared from my field of view before I could see if any of the crew had escaped. And that wasn’t the only plane. I’d heard chatter over the radio and knew that at least another three planes had been shot out of the sky—another twenty-one men who wouldn’t be coming back this morning.

There was a truck waiting by the plane. We climbed into

the back, where our other three crew members were already waiting. Mike banged on the back of the cab to signal we were in, and the truck lurched forward, exhaust fumes spewing out and into the back. It brought back memories of that first truck ride on the way to the Manning Training School. Was that only two months ago? It seemed like years ago, when I was so much younger.

Everybody in the truck with me seemed so happy. The conversation was full of laughter and discussion around a football game scheduled for later that day between our squadron and another one and what they hoped to get for breakfast. My stomach was so upset I didn't know if I could eat, or keep it down if I did.

The truck came to a stop, but my stomach didn't. It seemed to be getting more and more upset and ... I was going to throw up!

"Let me through ... please," I pleaded as I pushed through and jumped off the truck, almost tumbling over as my feet hit the ground.

I ran on wobbly legs, almost falling over, until I reached the side of the building and then rushed to the back. I wanted to get out of sight before I vomited. The convulsions got so bad I doubled over and started heaving—loudly and violently. The chocolate and beef jerky I'd eaten during the flight came flooding back up, flowing out and down my face and onto my boots and the ground. I heaved again, and the little that remained came out. I struggled to get my breath, and my whole body was flushed, and I felt light-headed. I stumbled a couple of feet and dropped to my hands and knees. The grass was cool and wet with dew. I brought one hand up and held it against my forehead. The moisture felt good.

There was a hand on my back and I looked up. It was Group Captain Matthews.

“Feeling better?” he asked.

I wiped my mouth with the sleeve of my jacket. “A little bit ... I’m ... I’m sorry.”

“Sorry about what?”

“About this ... I just ... my stomach ... it was too much.”

I paused. “I don’t know if I can do it.”

“Do what? Have breakfast?”

“I don’t know if I can do that either. But I meant fly ... I was just so ... so ...”

“Scared?”

I looked down, away from him, and nodded my head in agreement.

“I’m scared every time I go up.”

“You?” That caught me totally off guard. Then I realized why he’d said it. “I appreciate you trying to make me feel better, but I was up there. I saw. You weren’t scared.”

“When that plane came directly toward us, I almost screamed. If you’re not scared when something like that happens, you have to be delusional, psychotic, or in extreme denial, and none of those apply to me.”

“But you didn’t look scared. You didn’t act scared. Nobody did.” I was thinking about Mike’s calm demeanour and about the flight engineer monitoring the panel controls while bullets were flying all around us and enemy fighters were buzzing by.

“How we act and what we’re feeling are different. You handled it well.”

“This is handling it well?” I asked.

“Son, this was your first mission. I have men—grown men

with wives and kids—who still bring up before or after or during each mission. Men, brave men whom I would trust with my life—men whom I *have* trusted with my life—who break down in tears, who wake up from a deep sleep in a cold sweat, screaming out in fear.”

“Great. Is that what I have to look forward to?”

“Maybe you do.”

That wasn’t the reassuring answer I’d expected.

“I just don’t know if I can handle it.”

“I don’t know either,” he said. Again, a brutally honest answer, but not the one I’d been hoping for.

“What I do know is that you acquitted yourself well. I’m not one to blow smoke up your skirt. You followed orders, you reacted promptly, and, quite frankly, you saw that oncoming fighter before I did. If you hadn’t . . .” He shrugged. “Maybe there would have been one less plane heading home and somebody would be writing a letter to my wife.”

He reached down and offered me a hand, helping me to my feet. “That’s the hardest part of this job. It’s my responsibility to write to inform the family about the fate of their loved one. Today is a good day—I only have fourteen letters to write.”

“*Fourteen* . . . that’s how many died?” I knew that meant only two planes had gone down—at least, two from our squadron.

“I don’t know yet for certain, but I believe there are eight confirmed deaths.”

“How do you know that?”

“One plane went down without any sign of parachutes. From the other they saw six parachutes deploy, but the seventh was a Roman candle.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“His chute was on fire, burning as he was plummeting to the ground. Poor bugger—better to just die right away than have to wait for the impact.” He shook his head sadly. “The fate of the other six men is unknown. We hope that they made it to the ground, and after that we can only hope they manage to avoid detection and capture.”

“My father was captured.”

“Your father?”

“He was shot down over France and captured ... He flew Spitfires.”

“Ah, that explains your desire to become a pilot.”

How did he know that I—

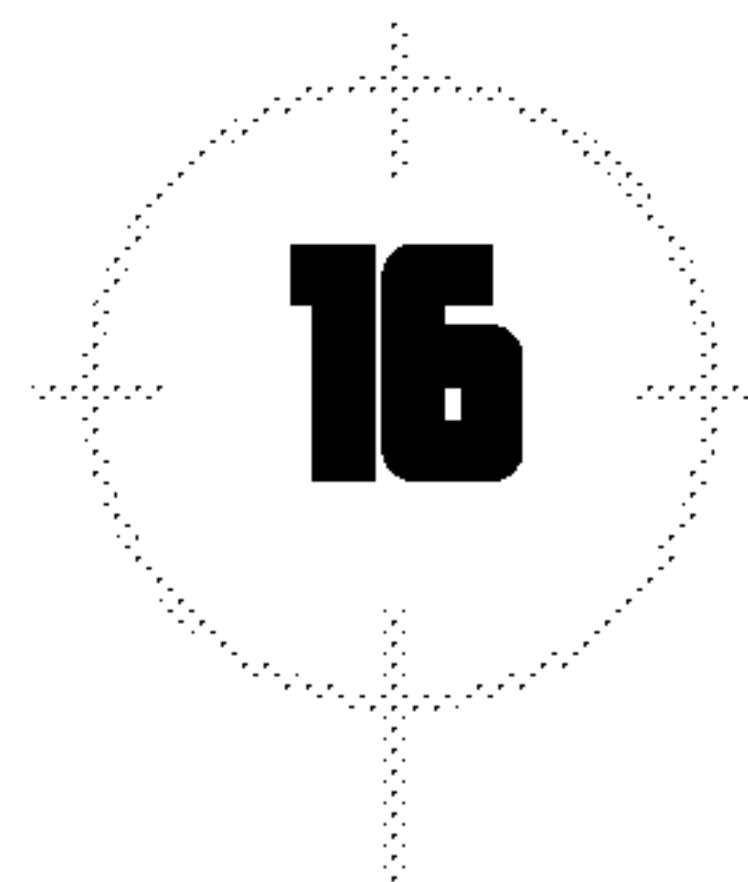
“There was a letter in your file. We’ll honour that request, even help you along that path.”

“But after tonight I’m not sure I can ever be a pilot. Or even a navigator. I just ... just ... I don’t know how people can do that ... you know, come off the plane and talk like nothing happened ... just joking around.”

“That’s the only way they can do it. The only way any of us *can* do it. We get off the plane and we have to put it behind us. There’s no point in talking about what just happened, no point in looking back. Instead, you look forward to something, even something silly like a football game, or a night on the town ... or breakfast. Do you think you could handle a little grub?”

“Maybe a little.”

“Start with toast, dry, and then maybe some cornflakes. Don’t even think about bacon or eggs until you’ve lined your stomach.” He smiled. “Come on, kid, time for breakfast.”



I stepped out of the pub and into the cold, clean air. It was good to get away from all the smoke, not to mention the noise. After a few pints of beer, men who would never have thought of singing not only started to warble but somehow believed they were the next Frank Sinatra or Bing Crosby. I stayed under the overhang of the building to keep dry, out of the rain.

It had been raining all day. Sometimes it hadn't been much more than a light drizzle, but then it would come down in buckets, which meant our mission for the night had to be cancelled. This was the third night in a row without us going up. The night before, it was the weather over our target that had been stormy, and we were called back just before we got into the planes. The night before that, we'd been halfway across the Channel when a storm had blown over the target and they'd scrubbed the mission and recalled the planes.

Rather than being grateful that they were out of harm's way for another night, a lot of the men were snarly and upset, and there'd been a number of arguments and a couple of fist fights. I guess there was too much built-up adrenalin, and when it wasn't being used for the mission, it had to get out some other way. I knew the whole thing just left a bad taste in my mouth—unfinished business, as if we hadn't done our

job. Tonight wasn't quite as bad because we'd suspected all day that the mission was going to be scrubbed. If we weren't going to finish, it was much better not to have started in the first place.

"Hey, buddy, got a smoke?" It was a soldier, and he had two friends with him. Judging by his accent he was British, but in the darkness it was impossible to make out the unit insignia.

"Sorry, I don't."

"Come on, just one. It's not like I'm asking for the world."

"I don't have any," I repeated.

"Yeah, right, not one ... sure," one of the others said.

His words were slurred and I could smell alcohol on him—on them ... or was it coming from me? I'd had a couple of pints myself.

"I don't smoke," I said.

I turned and started to walk away, but someone grabbed me and spun me around.

"Bloody air force blokes think they're better than everybody else," one of the soldiers growled.

"I don't think I'm better than anybody," I said.

"You bloody well better not!" he snapped. "Where are you from?"

"Seventy-two squadron."

"Are you being smart with me? Where are you from with that stupid-sounding accent?"

This was looking worse by the second. They stood between me and the entrance to the pub—where there were almost a hundred men from my squadron.

"Hear that, boys? He's too ashamed to tell us where he's from."

All three laughed.

“I’m from Canada.”

“Hell, if I was from Canada, I’d be ashamed to admit it too!” he said, and this was followed by more drunken laughter.

“The only shame is that we have to come all the way over here to save you Brits because you’re not man enough to take on Hitler by yourselves!” I snapped.

The words were out before I could think of the consequences, and almost instantly I regretted them.

“You saying you’re more man than us, you little twerp?” one of the soldiers demanded.

Before I could answer or apologize, he pushed me and I almost tumbled over, slipping in the mud before regaining my balance. I backed away slightly as they seemed to fan out and surround me.

“I think the three of us is going to show you who’s a man and who ain’t!” he said as he pushed me again.

We were now standing in the middle of the muddy lane in the rain. Maybe I could run, or take a swing and run—they were too drunk to catch me. Instead of fists they’d only be able to hurl insults and . . . No, I wasn’t running from them, not after what I’d been through. I wasn’t going to win this fight, but I wasn’t going to run away from it either.

I put up my fists. They seemed thrown for a split second, and then all three started to laugh. I was going to make sure I wiped the smirk off the face of the first one. I wouldn’t be getting in the last blow, but I was delivering the first one for sure.

“The little fly boy thinks he’s man enough to take on the three of us!”

Just then a voice came out of the shadows. “Well, he must

be more man than any one of you, if it takes three of you to fight him.”

We all turned in the direction of the voice. A man stepped out of the shadows of the building. He was a flyer—a flight lieutenant! And he looked familiar. He was from my squadron.

“Don’t let me disturb you,” the flight lieutenant said. “I just wanted to have a closer look at what’s about to happen.”

“We was just having a little fun with ’im,” one of the soldiers said. “We wasn’t really going to fight him.”

“I didn’t think you were going to fight. After all, there are only *three* of you. I figured that you’d have to go and find at least another one or two. It usually takes at least four soldiers to take on one flyer . . . especially if that flyer is Canadian.”

I recognized his accent—or lack of accent, to my ears. He was Canadian too.

“So you boys are really not going to like what’s happening next,” he continued. “You’re going to have to fight two of us. Me and the kid.”

“We can’t fight you!” one of them exclaimed. “You’re an officer. We’d be thrown into the stockade if we fought an officer.”

“Then you do have a problem, because I’m going to be fighting you, and it’s going to be very one-sided if you don’t fight back. Tell you what, don’t think of me as an officer, just your superior in every way possible.”

All three looked confused now.

“If it’ll help, since I am your superior officer, I’m *ordering* you to fight us.”

“What?”

“You are hereby *ordered* to engage us in fisticuffs.”

“We can’t do that,” one said, and the other two nodded in

agreement. Now they looked more confused than they did drunk ... and they were pretty drunk.

“Are you disobeying a direct order from a superior officer?” he demanded.

“No, sir. I mean, you can’t order us around—we’re in the army.”

“Well, you’d better make up your mind. Either I am your superior officer and you have to obey my order to fight, or I’m not your superior officer and you should feel free to fight us. Which is it? Hurry up, make up your mind! Either way, I see an easy fight in my future!”

They looked at each other, then at the ground, and sort of shuffled their feet in the mud.

“I haven’t got all night to stand here in the rain and argue with three army idiots, so what will it be?” He turned to me. “What do *you* think we should do about this?”

I knew at this point all they wanted was the chance to disappear into the darkness. And with one word, I could let that happen and we could pretend that none of this had happened.

“Well?” he prompted me.

“I don’t know about them, sir, but you are definitely *my* superior officer, and you did order a fight ... so ...”

I drew back my fist and popped the mouthy one right in the face, and he tumbled backwards into the mud! There was a second of silence, maybe disbelief, before the second jumped forward and took a swing at me. His fist missed, only brushing my face!

The flight lieutenant jumped forward and connected with a solid shot, and I could almost feel the punch as I heard the crack of his knuckles against the guy’s jaw.

Before I could react, the third soldier lunged forward, wrapped his arms around me, and we tumbled over backwards into the mud, him on top of me, his weight forcing the air out of my lungs. I tried to push him off, but he was bigger and heavier. Then the flight lieutenant grabbed him from behind and tackled him into the mud!

I tried to get up, stumbled, fell forward, and connected with the guy, but this time I was on top of him. Our arms were all tangled together and he flailed away, trying to get free. I held on tightly so he couldn't get a good shot, and I drew back my head and head-butted him in the face! He groaned and instantly stopped fighting. I jumped up. He lay there in the mud, rolling around, his hands covering his face, which was gushing blood. It looked as though I'd broken his nose.

The flight lieutenant was back on his feet and sparring with the other two. He was outnumbered, but he wasn't being outfought. I leaped forward then, bashing into one, who tumbled into the second, and all three of us collapsed in a pile in the mud. Instantly I was yanked to my feet by the flight lieutenant, and the two of us stood overtop of the other two. They didn't seem particularly anxious to get up.

"Get your friend and get out of here or you'll need somebody to carry all three of you!" the flight lieutenant yelled.

They started to get up.

"No!" he yelled. "You crawl over there and get him. You even *try* to get to your feet before that and we'll knock you back down!"

On all fours they crawled through the mud toward their friend, doing their best to keep an eye on us at the same

time. When they got to his side, they climbed to their feet and helped him up. He was still clutching his face as if he was afraid his nose might fall off. I felt bad, but not too bad. Then, one on each side of him, they limped off into the darkness.

“That wasn’t exactly what I expected when I stepped outside for a breath of fresh air,” the flight lieutenant said.

“Me neither.”

“We might want to go back inside before they decide to come back with some friends.”

I hadn’t even thought of that! I started for the door, but he grabbed me by the arm. “Your cap,” he said.

“Oh, yeah.” I bent down and picked it up out of the mud. It was filthy!

“You might want to wash that before you put it back on. Come on.”

We hurried back into the pub. It was smoky and loud, but warm and dry and, more importantly, safe.

We took a few steps in and noticed that everybody was turning to look at us, and some of them were even pointing. I looked at my tag-team partner. His uniform was covered with mud and his face was filthy. I looked down at my own uniform. No surprise: I looked like a pig that had been wallowing in muck.

The noise died down as some of the men stopped singing and talking and stared at us, obviously wondering what the hell we’d been up to. Some of them were even laughing.

“Can I have your complete attention, please, gentlemen?” the flight lieutenant yelled out, and the room became completely silent. Now every eye *was* on us.

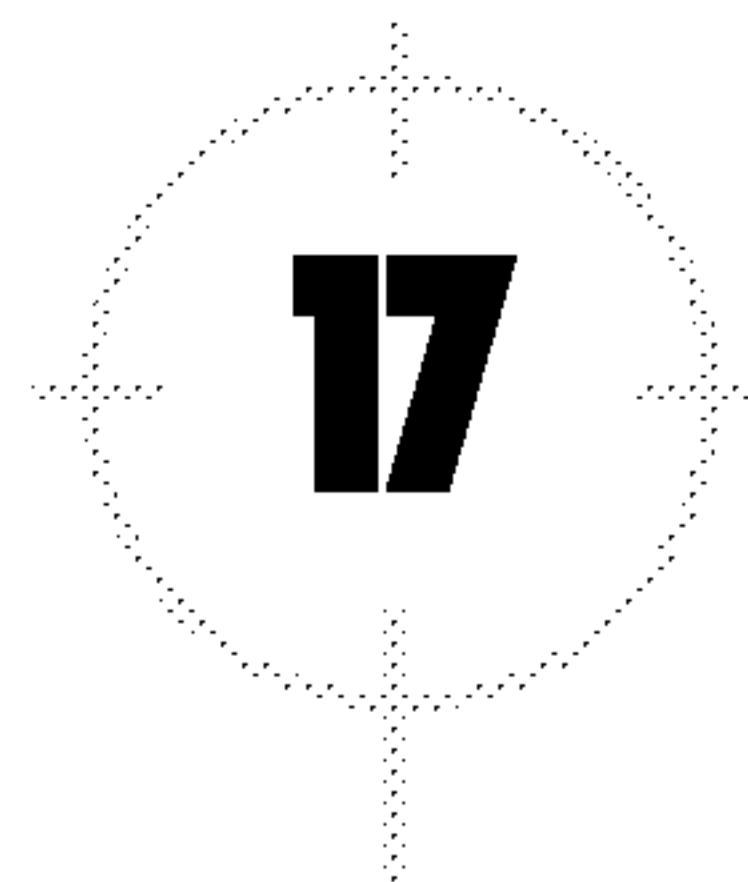
“We had a slight, shall we say, *incident* with three members of the army,” he called out. “The kid here settled things

nicely. All three ran off with bruised egos, and one with a busted nose!”

There was a huge cheer from the crowd.

“I think we should all raise a glass in his honour in a toast to defeating the enemy—whoever they might be!”

Every man in the place lifted his glass and they cheered even louder! I felt so embarrassed. It looked as though I was going to be the hero of the hour, whether I deserved it or not. I didn’t know what to say or do. I just gave a weak little wave and a little smile to go along with it. Who was I to argue with my fellow fly boys?



“Time to get up.”

“I don’t want to get up ... Can’t I just sleep a little longer, Mom?”

There was laughter and I suddenly realized why. Not only was I not being woken up by my mother, I wasn’t even at home. I opened my eyes. Why was it so bright, and why did my head hurt so badly, and who were these men standing all around my bed? For an instant I thought they were soldiers coming to get me, and then I realized they were all in air force uniforms, and one of them was the flight lieutenant.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

I tried to sit up and my stomach lurched slightly. “I’m good ... I guess ... except for my head. I must have gotten hit harder than I thought.”

“The only thing you got hit with came out of a bottle. You were really slugging it back last night.”

It all came back to me in a rush. People had kept on coming over, offering congratulations, a slap on the back, or a handshake, and most of them bought me a drink. I couldn’t remember how many drinks I’d had. I couldn’t even remember the end of the night.

“I guess I had a little too much to drink.”

“You passed ‘a little too much’ a little bit before midnight. You probably have a hangover,” the flight lieutenant said.

“I think it would have hurt less if somebody had actually hit me with the bottle instead of letting me drink what was inside,” I groaned. That was apparently pretty funny, because it made them all laugh.

“Have you never had a hangover before?” one of the other men asked. He had what I’d come to recognize as an Australian accent.

I started to shake my head, but that made it hurt even more. “No, never,” I said softly.

The flight lieutenant leaned over my bed. “So, you’re probably wondering why you’re waking up with a flight crew standing over you.”

“I *was* wondering ... but I was just glad it wasn’t a bunch of army grunts.”

They laughed again, and the loudness hurt my head.

“Do you remember any of us?” he asked.

I looked around from face to face. They all smiled and they did look familiar ... but I certainly didn’t remember any of them by name.

I shook my head. “I don’t remember much of last night.”

“You do remember me, don’t you?”

I nodded. His name was Blackburn ... I thought maybe Jed was his first name.

“The fight I remember. Being told it was rude to turn down a drink I remember. After that ...” I shrugged.

“I guess you remember the important parts, Davie.”

For a split second I almost didn’t remember I was Davie.

“You might be wondering why my crew and I are in here,” he said.

“My head is hurting too much to wonder much ... But yeah, why are you here?”

“I just came from the CO. I asked and he agreed to assign you to be my navigator. That is, if you’re willing to be assigned to my crew.”

That kind of woke me up! “Of course ... if he thinks I’m ready.”

“He said you were ready.”

I’d been out on five missions, and on the last three I had done all the mapping and charting. Mike had just sat back and watched.

“I hope I’m ready, sir.”

“The first thing you have to know is that we’re pretty informal on this crew. It’s Jed, not sir. Second, maybe you’d better get to know the members of my crew when you’re sober enough to actually remember who they are. Sometimes I feel more like a zookeeper than a pilot.”

Three of them suddenly started to make animal noises. One was barking like a dog, another imitated some sort of jungle bird, and the third was mooing.

“I said zookeeper, not farmer,” Jed said to the man who was mooing.

“When I was growing up, we was so poor that my papa would take us to a barn and tell us that we *was* at a zoo,” the man who had been mooing replied.

“You can see that our maturity level is somewhat questionable. Join us for breakfast and we’ll talk about everything.”

I started to get up and stopped. I really didn’t need an audience to watch me dress. “Can I have a little privacy?”

“You can, but first we have to tell you how to get dressed,” another one of the crew replied with a thick Australian accent.

“I don’t understand . . . I know how to get dressed.”

“But you probably don’t know the *right* way,” he replied, and they all laughed.

I was quickly going from confused to worried.

“To be part of this crew, you have to do everything *right*.”

“I always try to do that.”

“Not try, mate, *succeed*. Everything has to be *right*. Everybody on our crew always puts on their pants right leg first.”

“And then your shirt, right arm in the right sleeve first,” another man added.

“And then you put on your right sock and right shoe before either left sock or shoe goes on. Do you understand?”

“Sure. You like things to go in a certain order.”

“An *exact* order. We believe if we all do it the same way, it protects us from harm.”

The fact that I *did* understand showed that I’d been here too long already. I had quickly learned that men in the air force were just about the most superstitious people in the world. Almost everybody had a lucky charm or a superstition, or needed to do things in exactly the same order or eat exactly the same food before every mission. Part of it was just plain crazy, but in other ways it was ordinary human nature—trying to get control over something because there was so much that was beyond your control.

“Okay, I understand. *Now* can I have some privacy?”

“Come on, lads, let’s leave him to get dressed,” Jed said, and they all filed out of the room—making more animal noises as they left.

I climbed out of bed. I was already in my skivvies and undershirt. I grabbed my pants and went to slip them on

and stopped: I had put my left leg in first. I pulled it back out and went right leg first. I finished putting them on and then grabbed my shirt—right arm first. Next, right sock and shoe, left sock and shoe, and I finished with my jacket—of course putting my right arm in first. I wondered if I should wash the right side of my face first and brush the teeth on the right side of my mouth first. I decided not to do either until after breakfast, and after I'd asked them about those important procedures.

The mess hall was packed and noisy, a little steamy, and it smelled of breakfast. This morning, that smell was not only unappealing, it actually made me feel a bit nauseous. I looked all around. There they were, at a table in the far corner.

“Hey, Davie!” one of them yelled, and three of them waved. I waved back and went over.

“Here, take a seat,” one of them offered, pulling it out.

“And drink this,” a second said as he pushed a mug in front of me.

“Thanks.”

I took a sip and gagged and coughed as it went down the wrong way. One of them slapped me on the back.

“What is this?” I asked, holding the mug up.

“Strong tea and a little hair of the dog.”

“What does that mean?”

“Best thing for a hangover is a little bit of the hair from the dog that bit you,” Jed said. “There's a wee bit of whisky in there. It'll help your head.”

“Really?”

“He knows what he's talking about,” one of the others said. “He can vouch for that from experience.”

“In *his* case, lots of experience!” another of the crew

chimed in, and they all laughed. “You’ll see for yourself once you’re part of our crew.”

“But before you make that decision,” Jed said, “there’s one more thing you need to know: we’re part of the pathfinders group.”

“Pathfinders!”

One of them pointed to the little patch on his shoulder. The pathfinders were the crews that went in first to mark the target for the main bomber group.

“But I don’t have that much experience as a navigator,” I said.

“We heard you’re a natural.”

“But if I don’t plot the perfect course, the whole mission would go wrong.”

“Not to worry,” Jed said. “That part of the job generally falls to the finders—the first planes in, which drop flares. We’re the second group, the markers. We follow closely behind the planes that do the very initial drop of flares, and we lay down incendiary bombs to really light the place up for the main bomber group.”

“You just have to get us close, and then I look for those flares,” one of the men said. “Then it’s bombs away.”

“And we do fly in a formation of between three and six planes, so you will have some additional help to locate the flares,” Jed said. “Some people think our job is more dangerous than the others, but I don’t agree. It’s true that we come in at a lower altitude and with a much smaller formation, but generally the ack-ack fire is less because they don’t have as much time to get ready for us, and by the time they do scramble fighter planes, we’re already away from the target.”

“I was just wondering—your last navigator ... did he ... die?”

“He finished his tour and was sent home,” Jed explained. “So, are you in?”

I stood up. “McWilliams, David, navigator, reporting for duty—” I almost said *sir* but then remembered. “Reporting for duty, *Jed*.”

“Letter from home?”

I looked up from my bunk. It was Jacko, the wireless operator for my crew.

“It’s from my best friend, Chip.”

“He didn’t enlist?”

“He’s not—” I almost said he wasn’t old enough. “He’s not through his school year. He failed a grade, but come June he’s going to enlist for sure.”

“Good to hear it. Nothing worse than a bunch of idiots and cowards sitting at home. Hardest part is they just don’t know what we’re going through. They watch those newsreels and read the papers and they think they know what it’s like.”

“They couldn’t. Nobody could if they weren’t here. I’m here and I still don’t believe it sometimes.”

“I thought that was just me!” he said and laughed. “Anyhoo, enough of reality. I’m heading down to the town for a pint in the pub. Do you want to come along?”

“I’d better write back.”

“Now you’re just making me feel guilty. I owe a letter to my parents, and all three of my girlfriends.”

“*Three?*”

“Well, those are the three back home. You wouldn’t expect me to write to the two here in town when I can just pop in

and see them any time I want.” He laughed again. “I’ll hoist an extra pint for you when I’m down there.”

“Please, do that.”

I hadn’t had anything to drink—not even a sip—for two weeks. Not since that eventful evening. I figured there was a chance I was never going to drink again after that.

I ran my finger down the page, looking for the spot where I’d stopped reading. There it was.

We’ve already had snow—twice—but so far it hasn’t stayed on the ground. You may want to mention something to your mother about the unseasonably cold weather. I’m sure the weather is better in England . . . well, at least warmer, but I imagine wet and foggy.

I have some good news: I’ve been assigned to the mailroom for the remainder of the school year. Old man Beamish told me how “disappointed” he was in me since I’d shown “so much promise” this year. Apparently he was convinced that you were the only impediment to my becoming the headmaster’s prize pet.

For what it’s worth, it’s not nearly the same here without you. Not nearly as much fun. I can only imagine the good times you’re having and I want you to promise me that you’ll save me at least a little piece of the war. Remember, no fair winning it before I’ve had a chance to get into the action! Save some of the fun for me!

I shook my head slowly. Fun . . . was that what I was having? Going up in a plane and having people shoot at me, trying to kill me, while I dropped bombs on them, trying to kill them. Getting to know men, not knowing if or when they might die, but knowing that each night, each mission, would be the end of somebody’s life, that it *could* be the end of my life. Yes, this was *such* fun.

Here I was, only seventeen, but each night I was as close to death as a ninety-year-old man. No, closer. How could I tell that to Chip? What could I write? What *should* I write? I went back to his letter.

I've started to write home to my mother to tell her about all the people who are sick at school. You know our mothers talk, so I'm helping to set the stage for "somebody" to get pneumonia and not be able to go home over Christmas. In the meantime, you just keep yourself well and healthy. I'm going to need a good pilot in about ten months, so get your wings before I get there!

*All the best—your best friend,
Chip*

I set his letter down. I'd been putting off writing. I needed to write something to my mother, and to Chip. I picked up a pen.

Dear Chip,

Thank you so much for your letter and for all your support—both for what I'm doing over here but also what you're doing back home to make it all possible. It's all pretty exciting over here. Since my last letter I've been assigned to a full-time crew as their navigator. They're a bunch of great guys, from all over the world.

Both the wireless operator—Jacko—and the bomb aimer—Drew—are from Australia. They're a little on the crazy side, which is to say they remind me of you! Our flight engineer—Scottie—is a Kiwi. Funny how New Zealand and Australia

are so close together but the people are so different. Somebody told me that the Australians are more like the Americans and the Kiwis are like Canadians. Scottie is very calm, even when all hell is breaking loose around us. Our tail gunner—Sandy—is from England, and the top gunner—Glen—is an American. He's been on more missions than anybody in the whole squadron. He volunteered to fight the Nazis two years before the U.S. got into the war. Surprisingly both of the gunners are smaller than me! It's a real advantage to be small when you're wedging into a turret! And though they may be small, they're both scrappy. If somebody bothers one of them, he has to fight both of them. Actually if anybody bothers anybody on the crew, they have to fight all of us. Finally there's our skipper. He's Canadian and from B.C. He's married and has a kid almost my age. He's a good pilot, and I'm lucky to be flying with him because he keeps the whole thing going.

So far I've been with them for six missions. Combine that with the five missions I did in training and I'm almost one-third of the way to being finished my tour of duty. If you don't hurry up, I'll be gone before you get here!

I looked down at the words I'd written. Those were all the things I was supposed to write, and while none of it was a lie, I wasn't really writing what I felt. Maybe I owed Chip more than that.

I know this all sounds pretty glamorous, but I think about being back in school a lot. I never thought I'd miss my old school, old friends, and even old man Beamish so much. Please be sure to give him a hug and a kiss on the top of his bald head for me the

next time you see him. That should either result in you being permanently transferred to the mailroom or being made the class valedictorian.

I do miss having you around—you are my best friend. I'd like to say that I wish you were here, but I'm so glad that you're not. I know this seems romantic and exciting from a distance. That's how I saw it. And it is exciting—if excitement means not knowing if you're going to live or die from day to day. People do die. Not just people, but people I've known, people who have become my friends. I'll never forget the last conversation I had with the first man I knew who died. I'll never forget his face.

I'm not saying that I'm sorry I did what I did to enlist. I know that what I'm doing—what we're all doing—is important. We are fighting against an evil that needs to be defeated. I'm prepared for what may happen, but I don't want this for you or anybody else. I'm here to do my job, to try to end things as soon as we can so that you won't have to come over here. Nothing would make me happier than to have this over before you get a chance to enlist. Actually that's wrong—nothing would make me happier than to have it end today. I'm sorry if I sound like a killjoy, and I hope you understand.

I know I've already asked a lot from you, but I'd like to ask for one more favour. If something happens to me, I want you to promise not to blame yourself for helping me. This was my idea. You are my best friend, probably the best friend I'll ever have if I live to be ninety, and maybe that's why I'm so glad that you're over there and not here.

Time passes so strangely here. It seems impossible to believe that it was only a few months ago I left. Sometimes it seems like three years and sometimes it feels like another lifetime ago. I guess in some ways, it is another lifetime ago.

This is the last letter you'll get from me before Christmas, so I wish you a very happy Christmas and all the best in the coming New Year.

*Your good friend,
Davie*

I had one more thing to add, something that would explain the letter I was enclosing for my mother, just in case the censor got suspicious.

P.S. Somehow when my brother Robbie sent me his last letter, it mistakenly included a letter he intended to send to our mother. I've enclosed it—could you please give it to him to forward to her?

The plane banked sharply to starboard as Jed responded to my latest course correction. I knew without looking that the other planes would be following our change, but I got up to look anyway, holding on to the table as I stood. I looked out of the canopy to the sides and behind, and I could make out the darkened outlines of the other five planes in our formation. The plane levelled out. We were going to come in over the target travelling east to west; the finders had come in north to south, and we wanted to confuse the gunners who would be throwing flak our way.

“What’s our altitude?” Jed asked.

His voice, as usual, was calm, and that always made me feel calmer. He wasn’t just our pilot, he was like everybody’s older brother—or in my case, like a father.

“Forty-two hundred feet,” Scottie replied, looking at the instruments.

“I’m going to drop down another three hundred feet.”

“Drop down a few more and we can shake hands with the ack-ack gunners,” Scottie joked.

“I heard the gunners are all female, so maybe a pretty Fräulein would give me a little kiss,” Jacko chipped in.

“That would be fraternizing with the enemy,” Jed said.

“Although it’s probably better to be kissed by their lips than by their flak!”

The anti-aircraft shells were set with a proximity fuse to go off at a certain altitude. It was probably a pretty safe bet that nobody would set them to explode at *under* four thousand feet. We could still get hit, even have a shell go in the bottom and come out through the top, but it wouldn’t explode. That made it only slightly less dangerous and deadly.

“Any sign of flares, Drew?”

From his perch in the nose cone, he had the best view of the ground below. “Nothing yet, Skip.”

“We’re still three miles from the target,” I answered—wondering if they were doubting my course correction.

“Nobody is questioning that we’re on target,” Jed said, putting my unspoken concerns to rest. He was always able to say the right thing.

“Wait!” Drew cried out. “I’m seeing some flares just off to port ... What are tonight’s colours?”

“They dropped pink pansies,” Jacko called from the wireless station. “Look for pink pansies.”

“Are they pink?” Jed asked.

“No, I don’t think so. White, definitely not pink ... They must be decoys.”

The Germans would put out their own flares to try to confuse us—make us think that the target was someplace else so we’d drop our bombs and then cause the whole squadron to miss the mark as well, dropping on the false target that we’d marked. The bombers coming in at nineteen thousand feet in the dark couldn’t possibly see the ground. They looked for fire—the result of our incendiary bombs—and dropped their loads right on top of that.

“There they are!” Drew called out. “Straight ahead.”

I looked past Jed and Scottie, through the front of the canopy. There before us were pink pansies, a few scattered in a line and then hundreds of bright pink flares. Down below on the ground I knew there were German soldiers desperately scrambling around trying to extinguish them before we could use them for our mark. It was too late. They weren't going to see what hit them.

“Opening bomb doors,” Scottie said.

I listened for the hydraulics.

“Sixty seconds,” Drew said. “Correct three degrees starboard.”

“Roger that, will release the bombs on your mark,” Jed said. “We're staying low and level.”

“Where the heck is all the flak?” Jacko asked.

Almost as if the gunners on the ground had heard his question, there was a series of explosions and the sky lit up! Bright searchlights started sweeping the sky, looking for us.

“You happy now, mate?” Jacko asked.

“I'd be happier if I was sitting beside a fine young Sheila.”

“They can both be deadly.”

“Everybody off the com except Drew,” Jed said.

The flak was well off to the side and above our position. They were lighting up the sky on the same course that the finders had taken; they'd heard our engines but expected us to come in from the same direction. They'd correct that quickly.

“Ten seconds,” Drew said. “Keep it level if you can.”

We were almost over the target. I looked down through Scottie's feet into the bubble that contained Drew. His darkened silhouette was visible, and beneath him I could see some of the pink pansies. We were coming right over them.

There was a thunderous crash that made the plane shake and bounce, and the whole sky lit up so brightly that my eyes lost focus for a second.

“Hold her steady, will you, Skipper?” Drew called out. “Releasing in three ... two ... now!”

“Bombs away, bombs away!” Scottie yelled.

I felt the bombs drop and then we shot upward! We were suddenly surrounded by light, and flak was exploding just over our heads. They’d adjusted the timers but not enough—we were still beneath the explosions.

“Flak to the port! Hard to starboard!” Drew shouted.

Almost instantly we banked hard to the right and dropped down even farther to gain speed and defy the gunners. I looked out through the canopy. We’d banked so hard that I could make out the ground below and saw the first bombs hit! The entire area lit up brightly. Below was a rail yard filled with freight cars and locomotives, and I could see that some of them were already ablaze. Beyond them were small houses and a gigantic cathedral, and from this height I could see that the steeple was in ruins. And then I saw the river and the bend that showed on my maps. That was the bearing I’d use for the next mark.

We flattened out, but we were still descending, using gravity to increase our speed. The faster we could get away, the better the chance of avoiding enemy fighters—or at least avoiding them for longer.

“Wow, you should see it from here!” our tail gunner yelled out. “We really lit it up down there ... It looks like a barbecue!”

“Then we did our job well.”

“Give me a new heading, please, Davie,” Jed asked.

“Change course to northeast, twenty-two degrees.”

“Are you taking us home or to Berlin?” Scottie asked.

“Have faith. If you don’t expect it, neither will they.”

“Okay, everybody, follow my bearing. Tighten up and expect action,” Jed ordered.

I looked out through the canopy. On the port were two planes, but where were the other three? I scanned the sky, looking for a visual, but couldn’t see anybody else. The Lancasters were big but the sky was bigger, and in the dark it was easy to get lost.

“Jacko, where is everybody?” I asked. “Are they following?”

“I’m getting readings from four other planes.”

“Four?” Jed asked. “Where’s the fifth?”

“Sorry, Skip, it took fire, there were flames . . . I saw it go down,” Glen said.

“Did you see chutes? Did you see anybody get out?” Jed asked.

“I didn’t see anybody, but when you banked, I lost sight. They could have bailed.”

I knew—everybody knew—that at this altitude you only had seconds to get out, and if that didn’t happen you were going to go down in the plane. I pictured the Lancaster spiraling down and the crew scrambling to get on their chutes, fighting against gravity and the force of the plane, desperately trying to get to the emergency hatches before . . . before it was too late.

“We got company coming!” Jacko yelled out. “Ten, maybe twelve blips showing on the fishpond. Coming too fast to be anything but fighters.”

“Any visuals from anybody?” Jed asked.

“You won’t see anything yet,” Jacko said. “They’re still

over two miles away. High, maybe seven thousand feet to the southeast . . . not on an intercept course . . . at least not yet.”

“Let’s make it harder for them to find us,” Jed said.

The plane dipped and we descended even more. I grabbed on to the table and pulled myself down until I was wedged underneath.

“We’re slightly over two thousand feet,” Scottie said.

“Tell me when we get to fifteen hundred.”

“I’ll give you readings every hundred feet in case you decide to level out before that,” Scottie replied.

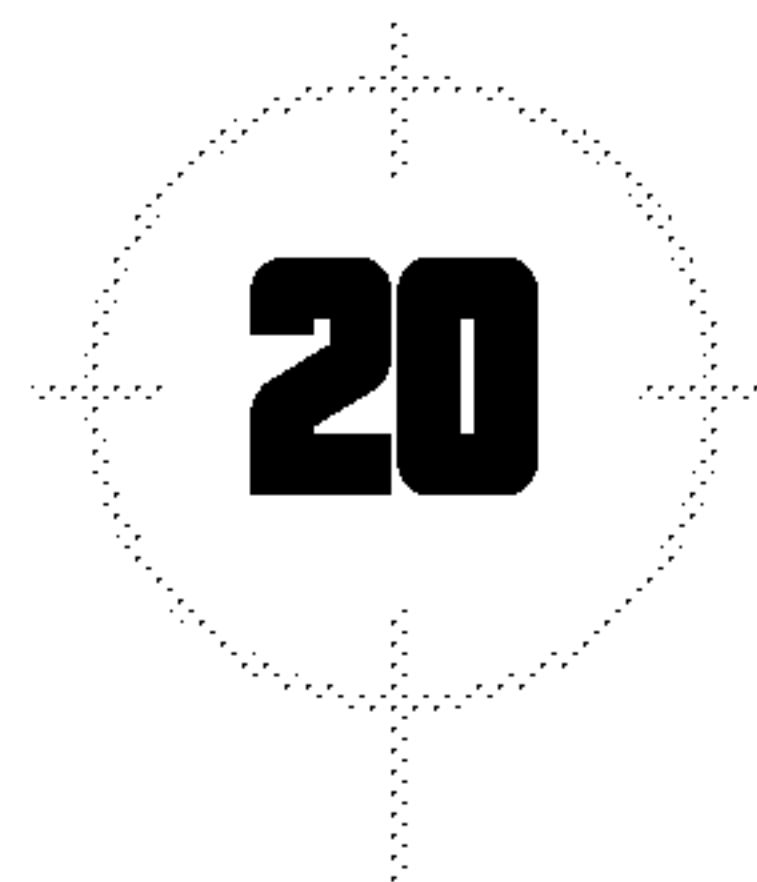
I guess that was his way of saying he would have preferred a little more altitude. Jed had used this technique before. Dropping down not only gained speed but made it difficult for us to be tracked by radar. As well, if we did encounter fighters, they would always be coming from above, where we at least had a gunner.

There were advantages to the strategy, but there was also one terrible danger. At this low altitude, there was almost no time to bail out if there was a problem. Parachutes needed at least five hundred feet to be effective, and there would be only a few seconds before we dropped to that height. I reached out with my foot and hooked my parachute and pulled it toward me until I could grab it with my hand.

“Where are the bandits?” Jed asked.

“They’re circling back, waiting for the main formation.”

I felt a wave of relief wash over my entire body. We were safe. At least, safer for a few more minutes. But this was no time to relax. I pulled the blackout curtain and turned on the little reading light. It was almost time for another course correction.



The sun peeked over the horizon, and from behind us came a warm glow that lit up the canopy.

“It appears that we’ve lived to fight another day,” Jed said. “That is one beautiful sunrise!”

“Any sunrise you’re alive to see is a beautiful one!” Glen replied. He had left the top gun turret and was standing beside me in the canopy, right behind Jed and Scottie.

“You boys know that the most beautiful sunrises in the world are in Australia. And that doesn’t seem fair since we already have the most beautiful women as well!” Jacko added over the intercom.

“And the most boastful men!” Scottie said.

“Pure jealousy from a man whose country has more sheep than women!” Jacko yelled.

“Compared to some of your Aussie women, the New Zealand sheep look mighty pretty.”

“Spoken like a true Kiwi. And we’re not boasting. It’s just the facts—nothing but the facts!” Drew added from the nose cone of the plane.

I didn’t want to get caught in another battle between the Kiwi and the Aussies, but I thought they were both wrong. I didn’t know about the women, but I knew the best sunrises were in Ontario.

In the morning light I could clearly see the rest of the Lancs in our formation. I only wished there were six planes in the formation, not five. I'd avoided asking which plane was missing—which men. I could have found out by looking at the numbers on the sides, but I didn't look. What did it matter? Whichever plane had gone down contained seven men I knew. Each plane held at least one person I called a friend.

Instead, I looked out at our escort. For the last hour we'd been accompanied by a formation of six Spitfires. They were spread out, above and off to the port side, there to provide support, watching for enemy aircraft. Their appearance was almost a guarantee that no fighters were going to try to attack. We were as good as home, and that was why Glen could come out of the gun turret. We were being watched and protected by the Spits now.

Those Spitfires were beautiful beyond words. They were graceful, nimble, and so agile. I still dreamed about piloting one of them, but I'd been thinking more and more lately about taking the controls of a Lancaster.

Then there were the times I just thought about flying nothing, finishing my tour and going home. I missed so much about being there. Not just the people, but the smell of the air, even the snow and cold. The closest I got to Canadian winter weather was being up in the Lancaster, the temperature so low that my fingers got numb. But up there the shaking was only partially because of the cold. I was still afraid every time I went up.

Jed had said that anybody who *wasn't* afraid shouldn't even go up because he was obviously too crazy for combat. Of course, that wasn't just a joke. Some men did crack up. They

were so afraid that they couldn't go up anymore; they just couldn't do it.

Two weeks ago, one of the pilots had been forced to abort his mission and circle back for a landing because his flight engineer had "lost it." He started screaming and yelling about how he knew they were all going to die on that mission. They'd tried to calm him down, but he just got worse and worse, and finally they had to restrain him because he was trying to get into his parachute and jump. Once they landed, they took him away to see the medical officer. They said he was given medication and then taken to a hospital for "rest."

The thing was, that mission had been particularly deadly. Four planes from our squadron hadn't come back. Maybe he really did know something, and by doing what he did he'd saved his own life and the lives of the members of his crew.

I knew it was strange even to think that way, but what with all the superstitions and things that we all did, who was to say who else was crazy? How crazy was it to climb into an airplane and drop bombs on people while they tried to blow you out of the sky?

I looked up and saw in the distance the glimmer of the Channel. Underneath us—about eight thousand feet below—was the French countryside. From our height it was all so calm and beautiful that it almost took my breath away. There was no hint of the war that was taking place down there, no signs of destruction, or of soldiers or tanks or anything related to war ... So peaceful looking. Of course, from far enough away, appearances could be deceiving—the same way that looking at the war from North America was so different from seeing it up close.

We'd be back at base and eating breakfast in less than

sixty minutes. I could almost smell the bacon and eggs. I was hungry. The food always tasted so good after a mission. In fact, everything seemed different after a mission. As bizarre as it sounded, somehow even colours looked brighter. I wasn't sure if it was because our senses were still working full time to keep us alive or simply that we were so grateful we *were* still alive.

“Davie,” Jed called out, “are you ready for a little time behind the yoke?”

“Always ready!”

Most types of bombers had a pilot and a co-pilot, so if something happened to the pilot there was still somebody to fly the plane. But the Lancaster had only the one pilot. They'd found that if a pilot was hit by flak or strafed by machine-gun fire, in most cases the co-pilot was killed as well. So they figured, why waste a second pilot?

With the Lancs they had a policy of giving other members of the crew some supervised time behind the yoke, just in case there ever was a time when the pilot was disabled. That usually involved splitting time among the flight engineer, the navigator, and the wireless operator. But ever since they'd found out I was hoping to become a pilot, I'd taken most of the time. In fact, Jed had made sure there was extra time, and he'd also spent hours and hours with me on the ground, either in the mess hall or in the cockpit, teaching me all about the Lancaster. I did know how to fly this plane ... well, if flying it didn't include taking off or landing, or changing directions too fast or sharply, or taking evasive action or ... I guess you might say I could fly it a little.

Jed slid to one side and I slipped in beside him, first getting my feet on the rudder pedal and then taking the yoke. I still

felt my palms get all moist. I was nervous, but nothing like the first few times I'd sat behind the controls. I was more frightened to take the stick then than I'd been when they were hurling flak up at us and it was exploding all around the plane. At least if we'd all died then, it wouldn't have been because I'd screwed up.

Jed got up and stood behind me. The controls were all mine. I pushed the yoke forward and the plane responded, dipping a bit. I always did that when I first started flying because I liked to have the feel of the plane, to make it respond to my hands on the controls. I pulled the stick back ever so slightly to level it off again.

The Lancaster was what they called a muscle plane. The yoke and the rudders were manual and working them required serious muscle. You could often tell a Lancaster pilot by the way his arms were developed. Eight hours behind the yoke was really hard work, almost like lifting weights. I knew that after fifteen or twenty minutes, I would start to feel it in my arms.

I glanced over at Scottie. He was sitting there monitoring his instruments. He looked very relaxed. I was glad that he felt comfortable enough with my flying to be relaxed. Or at least if he *wasn't* confident, he was kind enough not to show it.

"Squadron leader, this is Spitfire leader," came a call over the radio.

I looked over my shoulder for Jed. I didn't see him. I turned the other way. He wasn't there either.

"He's in the back, talking to Sandy," Scottie said.

"Can you go and get him?"

"Why?"

"They want to talk to the squadron leader!"

“When you’re in that seat, you’re the squadron leader. Ask them what they want.”

“This is Spitfire leader to squadron leader,” the voice called out again. “Do you read me?”

At that same instant a Spitfire appeared just off our starboard side. He was close enough that I could see his face.

“Answer him,” Scottie said.

“Um ... hello ... Spitfire leader ... I hear you.” I deliberately didn’t identify myself as the squadron leader.

“We’re about to break off our escort. You’re home free from this point,” he said.

“Okay, sure, thanks for your help,” I replied.

“It was our pleasure.” He gave me a thumbs-up. I waved back and he wagged his wings and then banked sharply and disappeared beneath us. The other Spitfires broke off their escorts too, dipping, climbing, and banking, leaving us.

“I guess we’re on our own,” I said, “which means we should probably have our top gunner back in his turret.”

“We’re almost home,” Glen replied.

“Better do what the skipper wants,” Scottie said. “You might outrank him, but as long as he’s in the captain’s seat, he’s in charge.”

“Yes, sir, Captain McWilliams, sir!” Glen said.

I couldn’t help but laugh, but I kept my attention on the job of flying. I listened for the engines, turning my head first one way and then the other. There was a slightly different tone coming from the port side ... at least I thought there was. I looked at the engines. There was nothing visible, certainly no smoke or fumes.

“Scottie, can you check the port engines? Is something happening with one of them?”

“No need to check. The outside port engine is running rough. I suspect that one of the propellers is damaged.”

“Damaged?”

“Probably took a piece of flak. I won’t be able to tell until we land, unless I turn off the engine now ... Do you want me to do that?”

“I’m not that curious.”

“We could fly with two engines if we needed to,” Scottie said.

“Let’s hope we never need to.”

The white cliffs of Dover were looming on the horizon. I looked for one particular cliff—it had a peculiar coloration pattern—as my marker. From this altitude and in daylight, I could find our way home simply by landmarks, so there was no need for me to navigate a course. From the pilot’s seat I could do it all visually.

I banked slightly to one side to correct my course. The other planes in the formation responded similarly. I wasn’t just piloting us home, I was directing the entire formation. Unbelievably here I was behind the yoke of a Lancaster bomber having come back from a bombing mission over Germany, while what I should have been doing was trying to finish high school. I wished my mother and father could know about what I was doing. They’d be so proud of me ... Or no, they wouldn’t. They’d be worried and upset and mad as hell. And who could blame them?

“Davie, are you in there?” Jed asked.

I started slightly. “I’m here,” I said quietly, hidden in the darkness. I brushed away the tears with the back of my hand. I was so grateful for the darkness, and for the fact that I didn’t have to share a room now.

“Were you sleeping?”

“Not sleeping, just resting my eyes a little.” I was trying to make my voice sound normal, but it wasn’t quite right.

“Being up all night can really play havoc with your sleeping schedule. Are you coming for dinner? They’ve done up a nice roast for Christmas Eve.”

“In a bit.”

“Don’t leave it too long or there’ll be nothing left. You know the boys can eat.”

“I won’t be long.” My voice definitely sounded off.

“You know, Davie, it’s better to be with other people than by yourself at times like this.” Jed took a step into my room.

“Mind if I turn on the light?”

“Sure . . . of course.”

The light came on, catching me wiping my eyes again, and I tried to pretend I was just shielding them from the brightness.

He took the chair from my desk, spun it around, put it down right in front of me, and sat on it backwards.

“How are you doing?” he asked.

I shrugged. “I’ve been better.”

“It’s hard to be away from your family any time, but Christmas is the hardest.”

“It is hard.” I sat up on the edge of my bed.

“I don’t mind telling you, I’ve shed a few tears today,” he said.

“Really?”

“It’s not a sign of weakness, you know, just caring. You’ve been crying?”

“A bit,” I admitted.

“It’s natural. I know I miss my wife and son tremendously. This is my third Christmas away from them.”

“That’s rough . . . rougher, I guess . . . It’s not like I have a wife or kids.”

“You’d better *not* have kids yet!” He laughed. “But I’m sure you must be missing your family.”

I nodded my head. “A lot.”

“Who’s at home?”

“I have a younger brother and two little sisters, and of course my mom.”

“It must be pretty hard on all of them, what with you and your father both being gone.”

“This is his third Christmas away too. I know how much harder he has it than me, so I shouldn’t be complaining.”

“We all know there’s no point in complaining . . . Stiff upper lip, as the English say.”

I was a bit guilty about feeling so sorry for myself—lots of people were far worse off—

“But you know, we’re not English,” Jed said. “And it takes a strong man to realize that he might not be so strong *all* the

time. You have a right to feel a bit blue. You know what made me feel better today ... well, a little better?"

"What?"

"I just finished writing home. I try to write to them as though they're right here in the room with me and we're just having a little talk. When was the last time you wrote home?"

"A week or so ago."

"Maybe it's time to start a letter. I bet your mother would really like to hear from you."

I nodded.

"It'll make it seem like they're closer." He got up and put a hand on my shoulder. "You're a good kid. I'd be proud to have you as my son."

I felt the same about him—as if he was kind of a second father. He was more than my pilot, my crew member. He'd been there to take care of me from that first night outside the pub.

"I'll make sure to save you a good piece of roast beef and some Yorkshire pudding."

"Thanks."

"But I've got to be honest with you—if you take too long, I may eat your pudding myself. After supper a few of us are heading into town for a Christmas Eve service. Are you going to come along?"

"I'd like that. If I was home, we'd be going to church."

Jed smiled and left the room. I got off my bed and brought the chair back over to the desk and sat down.

I'd write, but I wasn't sure what to write about. It was different for Jed—he could tell his family what he was doing, what his days were like, talk to them as though they were sitting right there with him. There was no way I could write

a letter like that, because my mother didn't even know I was here.

Instead, I'd have to make up things about being in school, and how I was getting over the pneumonia that had kept me from coming home over Christmas. It would give her some comfort, but how was it going to make me feel better to write her a bunch of lies? Maybe it was time I told the truth.

I pulled a pen and some writing paper out of the desk drawer.

Dearest Mother,

I am writing to you on Christmas Eve—my first Christmas apart from my family. I know that this must be as hard for you as it is for me. I'm feeling a great weight of sadness. This is not simply because I miss my beloved family, but also because I feel tremendous guilt over the manner in which I've deceived you and everybody else. I'll try to explain my actions as best I can.

I clearly remember the reasons behind my decision—although they have such a dreamlike innocence to them when I think of them now. I felt that I had an obligation to serve—for King and Country—to help stop the Nazis. I believed in the just cause of this war and that we needed to defeat our enemies.

It was also, very much, a personal decision. I think in the back of my head, I believed that by coming over here not only could I be closer to Father, but I might also, by my involvement, help to bring him home sooner. I know, in hindsight, that this thinking might seem rather juvenile—and in fact many of the thoughts and beliefs that brought me here could be described as those of a silly boy.

My decision was made in a rush of youthful exuberance. It was all a sort of game—a game in which I would need to fool

everybody so I could be shipped overseas—and beyond that, the war itself, from afar, I saw as simply glamorous and exciting. The danger I imagined was abstract and merely added to the excitement. The only threat I could imagine was to our German enemies. I could not conceive of dying, or being injured in any way. I felt invincible.

While I have been gone slightly less than four months, I feel that many of these immature and juvenile thoughts have left me. I am no longer a boy. I feel so much older. I think about things I would never have dreamed of before. I spend time contemplating life and death and the meaning of both. Death is in my thoughts because it is my constant companion.

As strange as it may sound, this has made me appreciate life more than I ever did before. I think I took things for granted—a beautiful sunrise, the support of a friend, and the love of my family. Perhaps when everything can be lost in the next few moments or days, you truly learn to value what you have.

I know this is not a game. This is not play. This is deadly serious. Lives are taken and lost. I have seen people I know die. I can't really know of the deaths that have taken place below as a result of my actions, but I have seen the devastation that we cause. I console myself by hoping and praying that it is only enemy soldiers who have perished—although I know that they too have mothers and wives and children who love them. In all likelihood some of those innocents have also perished by our actions.

Sometimes I think about what my life would be like if I had never started along this path. I have thought about—really fantasized about—simply snapping my fingers and undoing all that I have done, waking up in a bed back home. Then I realize that even if I had that magical power, I would not be able to use it. I have set out upon a course and must follow it to the end. I cannot

abandon my friends and my crew mates. This is my place. This is my life. I am part of something important, vital, and necessary. We are fighting against a terrible evil, and this is now my place.

If you receive this letter, it is because I am not coming home, because I have been killed or captured. I need you to know how much I love you. You have been the best mother a boy could ever have and I beg your forgiveness for the sadness I will have caused.

With great love,

Your son,

Robert

I took the letter, folded it, and slipped it into an envelope. I sealed it and wrote my mother's name across the front and then added, *Please send to my mother in the event of my death or capture*, and placed it back in the drawer.

It was done, and it did make me feel a little bit better. At least she'd know the reasons why I'd done this and she wouldn't blame herself.

I left my room and heard voices—singing. As I hurried down the hall, the voices got louder and stronger. I stopped at the door of the mess hall, stunned. The lights were out and the whole room was filled with candles, and all of the men, hundreds and hundreds, were on their feet, singing "Silent Night." Many of them were standing with their heads bowed. Others were holding hands and swaying ever so slightly to the music. The singing was simply beautiful. I stepped into the room and joined in the song.

Silent night, holy night,

All is calm, all is bright,

*Round yon Virgin Mother and Child,
Holy infant so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace,
Sleep in heavenly peace.*

My voice caught and I knew I was going to start to cry. I tried to choke back the tears, but I noticed that all around me men were crying. So I let the tears flow. I didn't know if I could have stopped them even if I'd tried.

I stomped my feet and rubbed my hands together to try to drive away the cold. We hadn't even got up to cruising altitude yet, but the plane was already freezing. We'd been told that it had snowed last night—not at our base in England but in the territory we'd be flying over—and thank goodness the cloud cover still remained. Nobody wanted to fly in a storm, but clouds gave us someplace to hide from enemy aircraft and gunners on the ground.

Below us, the French countryside—invisible from this height and in the darkness—was supposedly coated in a fresh layer of white. I imagined it must look very pretty, with most of the visible destruction of war covered up. I used to think that someday I'd come back and see it—either after France had been liberated or maybe even later, long after the war was over. Right now, though, I was happy to have a lot of distance between me and the ground.

It was wet and drab back at our base—typical English wintertime weather. No snow, just lots of rain and drizzle that turned the earth into grey, grimy mud. It just didn't seem like Christmas without snow. There was almost always snow on the ground back home at this time of year, and I couldn't help picturing what their Christmas morning must have been like: fresh white snow, smoke rising from the

chimney, the house all decorated, and us sitting around the Christmas tree, sipping hot apple cider, taking turns opening presents, my brother and sisters squabbling ... Even that would have been music to my ears.

“Davie, do you have that course change plotted?” Jed asked over the intercom.

“Got it plotted. Stay the course for another”—I looked at my watch—“eight minutes.”

“Good, just making sure you’re still awake back there.”

“I’m awake.”

“I don’t want any of you falling asleep,” Jed said.

“That would be almost impossible with all this chattering going on,” Jacko replied. “Could we at least talk quietly? My head feels like it’s going to split in two.”

“A little too much celebration?” Jed replied.

“A *lot* too much celebration. That’s what happens when they give us a couple of days off.”

We hadn’t flown a mission on either Christmas Eve or, technically, Christmas Day. It was a small respite from the war for both us and the people on the ground. It was sort of odd and sweet all at once—taking a day off from war to honour the Prince of Peace.

It had been three in the morning on December 26 by the time we got in our planes and up into the air. We’d been delayed partially by the storm on our route, but it was also a late-start mission. Missions were flown at different times, often the later the better, because the gunners below went to sleep, lulled into thinking their site had been saved that night. As it was, we would now be over our target before first light, find the flares, drop our bombs, and get out before the sun rose.

We were in a formation of six. Ahead of us were three more planes, the finders, and behind us was the main body of the squadron, over a hundred heavy bombers from squadrons across England. I found myself humming “Silent Night,” but this was not going to be a holy night or a calm night. On the other hand, we were going to drop enough incendiaries to make it bright.

“Are the bombs fused and selected?” Jed asked.

“Fused and selected, ready for drop,” Drew replied. “Our very own Christmas presents for the Krauts.”

There was chuckling over the intercom from different people in different parts of the plane. I pictured the bombs. The ground crew had “decorated” them, painting on bows and inscriptions like *Do not open until Christmas* and pretend name tags that read *For Hans*.

“Waiting for your mark to—”

“I’m getting echoes on the fishpond!” Jacko screamed out. “Coming hard and fast, coming from the ground . . . north by northeast . . . fifteen degrees.”

“How many?” Jed demanded. “How many do you read?”

“Nine . . . no, ten . . . no, twelve.”

“Can you determine their course? Are they on intercept?”

“I can’t tell . . . maybe . . . I don’t know . . . Wait, they’re breaking off into two groups . . . no, three.”

I knew that could mean they were heading in different directions for different targets, or it could also mean they were going to come at us from three directions.

“This is flight leader to formation,” Jed said over the radio. “We’re going to take some evasive action. Follow my course and altitude change. Davie, give us the course change *now*.”

I read out the course change, and could already feel us

gaining height. As I was giving the last coordinate, the plane started to bank sharply.

“What is their distance?” Jed asked. His voice was—as always—calm.

“Less than a mile and closing,” Jacko reported. “They’re breaking off into pairs, but at least a few pairs are on an intercept course. They’re coming after us.”

“This is flight leader to squadron. All eyes open, prepare for contact.”

There was nothing I could do as a navigator except add an extra set of eyes. I stood up, pushed aside the curtain, and stepped into the cockpit. I suddenly felt much more exposed. I *was* more exposed. All above me was the glass of the canopy. Anxiously I looked around, but I could see nothing but the black night sky, some thin clouds above, and more open sky with twinkling stars. I couldn’t see anything that mattered.

“Closing from the back,” Jacko screamed loudly.

“Tail end Charlie, be aware,” Jed said over the radio. “Expect—”

“We have contact!” screamed a voice over the radio.

I looked back in time to see an enemy fighter plane zip past the last plane in our formation, bullets streaming out of it. More bullets were making their way toward it as our gunners returned fire! Then a second fighter appeared, and a third and a fourth! All four ducked and dodged between the Lancs before disappearing into the darkness.

“Anybody hit? Any damage?” Jed asked.

“Affirmative. This is CF8 and we’ve taken fire!” a voice called out. “Some damage to my elevator, I think. The controls are floppy.”

“Can you maintain—”

Tracers streamed by our starboard wing. A fighter came up from below and streaked by us, and our guns started firing, the pounding sound of shells, and I saw bullets chasing after it and—

“I got him!” Glen screamed, and at the same instant black smoke erupted from the engine of the fighter.

There were flames coming from the plane, allowing me to follow him as he slipped to the side ... He slowed down ... He was stalling. Jed banked sharply to port and the enemy vanished from my view, but he was going down, the pilot maybe already dead. That plane wasn't going to be worrying anybody anymore.

“Aircraft on the port quarter!” Glen yelled. “Coming fast and—”

“I see him!” Sandy screamed, and he began firing.

I saw tracer bullets flying through the air, and then saw and heard and felt as they tore into our port wing! The enemy plane disappeared, with bullets from Glen chasing after it.

“He missed the engine—I think,” Jed yelled.

“More planes, more fighters, closing from behind and—”

There was an explosion and sparks flashed, and the whole plane staggered and shook. I had to grab on to the roof support to stop myself from tumbling over. There was a rush of air and the navigator's curtain blew in the breeze. Part of the canopy had been shot out! The plane started to dip violently and I was thrown forward into the back of Scottie's seat. He was covered with blood and the side of his head was gone.

Panicked, shocked, my stomach lurching into my throat, I tried to push myself away, but I couldn't. I was held in place by gravity as the plane continued to dive.

I yelled, “Jed, Jed, Scottie’s been—”

But Jed was slumped forward over the yoke, a gash in the side of his head, blood seeping from a wound in his neck. We were going down!

My mind froze, as if I couldn't understand or believe what I was seeing, what was happening. Scottie and Jed were both dead or dying—at the very least unconscious—and the plane was going down. I had to do something, grab my parachute or—

Drew had been at his position in the nose cone, but now his head appeared beneath Scottie's inert body, and he started to push past him to get up and into the cockpit. There was a look of complete shock on his face and he was covered with blood as well! He was struggling, trying to climb up as the plane continued to scream down—we were gaining speed as we dove. If we didn't get out of it soon, we were all going to die! We had to level out if we were going to have even a chance of getting to the escape hatches. That was our only hope, and every second counted.

“Help me!” I screamed. “Help me!”

I grabbed Jed from behind and he yelled out in pain. He was alive! For a split second I stopped—I didn't want to hurt him—but then I began again. I had to pull him off the yoke or we were all dead.

Jed was big, and both his weight and the momentum of the plane made it almost impossible to dislodge him. Drew, who was still trying to climb up from below, wedged himself

against Jed and started pushing him. As we hauled him back, I reached over and grabbed the yoke, yanking it as hard as I could with all my might, trying to pull us out of the dive.

There was so much force, so much momentum, that I couldn't pull it back. I strained with every inch of my being, every ounce of my strength, and slowly the plane started to react. The dive lessened just a bit, and then more and more. It was working. I kept pulling back until we were in a controlled descent, and then finally we flattened out.

"What's happening? What's happening!" Sandy yelled over the intercom from the tail of the plane.

"We've been hit! We've been hit!" Drew screamed. "Jed, Scottie—they're hurt!"

"Should we bail?" Jacko hollered.

"Affirmative!" Drew yelled. "Affirmative, get ready to—"

"No!" I screamed. "Do not bail!"

Drew glanced over at me. He looked crazed, panicked.

"Not yet! Help me get Jed out of the seat!" I yelled.

He didn't react, although I knew he must have heard me.

"Now, Drew! I need your help *now!*"

He started to pull Jed over and the whole plane began to bank to the port side.

"No, no, from the back!"

I kept one hand on the yoke and with the other fumbled around with Jed's safety harness until I undid the clasp. At the same time Drew unlatched the back of the pilot's seat, which folded down. He wrapped his arms around Jed's waist and pulled him. Jed was screaming in pain. At least we knew he was still alive, but for how long? There was so much blood.

As soon as Jed was clear, I dropped down into the seat, slammed the back up, and settled my feet onto the pedals.

We were out of the dive and flying flat and level. The plane was now under my control. Out of habit I pushed the stick forward and the plane dipped slightly. I pulled back and levelled us off.

“This is Davie!” I called out over the intercom. “I’m at the controls!”

“Are we bailing? Are we bailing?” Jacko asked.

“No, not yet.” I tried to make myself sound calm. I *needed* to be calm. “Jacko, are there any more fighters on the radar?”

“What?”

“Are there more fighters? Are we still in contact?”

“No, nothing, nothing ... they’ve left us for dead! We need to bail out!”

“I need you to stay calm,” I said. “I need everybody to stay calm. Glen and Sandy, stay active. Keep your eyes open in case somebody is coming looking for us. Jacko, I need you in the cockpit, please.”

I looked over my shoulder at Drew. He was hunched over Jed, whom he’d spread out along the floor.

“Drew, how is he? ... Is he ...?”

“It’s his arm. A major artery was cut, but I’ve applied a tourniquet. The bleeding has almost stopped.”

“And you—where were you hit?”

“I wasn’t.”

“But the blood—you’re covered with blood.”

“It’s not mine.”

Scottie ... I looked over. I saw again the gaping wound on the side of his head. Blood was splattered all over the canopy. His uniform was stained and soaked.

“Oh, my Lord,” Jacko said as he appeared over my shoulder.

“I need you in the flight engineer’s place,” I said.

He hesitated for a split second and then responded. He undid Scottie's harness and eased him out of the seat. I tried not to look as his body flopped to the side, brushing against my leg. I held firm so as not to put pressure on the right pedal. Jacko slipped into his seat.

"I need to know our altitude, heading, and approximate position."

"We're at almost two thousand feet. We have enough height to bail out!"

"We've got time and altitude. What is our position?"

"What does it matter? We're somewhere over occupied France, so what does it matter?"

"It *does* matter. I can get us closer to home before we bail."

"Are you sure?"

"The controls are good and—" Just at that instant my eye was caught by flames on the port side!

"Fire in one of the port engines!" Glen screamed from the top turret.

I looked over. The inside port engine was on fire. I had to put out the fire!

"Jacko, do you see the four lights on the far right of the console?"

"Yes. Yes. One of them is red."

"That's the engine temp for the inside port engine."

Instinctively I reached over to the side. I pulled back the throttle controlling the disabled engine—there was no point in feeding it fuel—while at the same time I pushed forward the throttle on the remaining port engine to compensate for the loss of power on that side.

"Right below it is a switch. There's a safety cover to protect it. I need you to flip it up and then push the

button. It's the fire extinguisher for that engine. Do you understand?"

"Yes . . . yes, I understand."

My eyes shot from the engine to him, and then, as he hit the switch, back to the engine as a stream of foam shot out. The flames died, as did the engine. We were now flying on three engines.

"I still need that heading."

"What?" Jacko questioned.

"The heading, give me our heading! What direction are we going?" I realized I wasn't sounding calm anymore.

"Oh, sorry. North by northeast."

"Okay, I'm going to have to bring us about. Everybody hold tight."

I executed a smooth, long bank, making sure not to stall or slow down or lose any altitude. We didn't have enough height to play with.

"Watch the compass. Let me know when we're on a heading of exactly three thirty degrees south by southwest, okay?"

Jacko didn't say anything.

"Do you understand?" I screamed.

"Understood, yes . . . We're coming around . . . almost due north . . . now northwest . . . Okay, still coming, coming—"

"Just tell me when we're on the right heading," I said, cutting him off. "Drew, how is Jed doing?"

"The bleeding has stopped, but he's lost a lot of blood. He's barely conscious. I'm going to give him some morphine. He's in a lot of pain."

"Is there any chance he'll be able to jump?"

Drew didn't answer—which was an answer. Of course

he couldn't jump, and even if he did and somehow survived the landing, there'd be no way he'd get the medical help he needed to live.

"Glen and Sandy, keep your eyes wide open. We have no radar and no wireless right now to warn us. If they're coming, they're going to be coming from above, so keep your eyes high."

"Okay, coming up to the mark," Jacko said.

I started to pull us out of the bank.

"And now!"

I levelled the plane out. "Okay, we're about two hours, maybe a bit longer, from the coast. I'm going to hold us steady until then. Jacko, I need you to go back on the wireless, try to find a navigation beacon, get some air support, and let them know what's happening."

"Sure, mate." He got up from the seat.

"Drew, have you given Jed the morphine?"

"Just finished."

"Good. I need you to go below. We have to lighten the load."

"You want me to release the bombs?"

"Yes, it'll let us gain speed. The faster we get home, the faster we can get Jed help."

"Home?" he said incredulously. "What are you talking about? We have to bail out. We're down to three engines, and the captain is gone!"

"He's not *gone*. He's here and alive and I can't just leave him. He has only one chance, and that chance is me being able to land this plane!"

“What’s our altitude?” I asked Drew.

“Forty-nine hundred. Still directly on course.”

“Good, thanks.”

We were flying just above an extensive bank of clouds that extended below us for hundreds of miles. I wanted to be in clear skies but have a place to hide if we were attacked. The plane was crippled and there was no way I had the skills to pilot any meaningful evasive action. We were nothing more than a limping, injured duck, easy pickings for any enemy fighter that happened upon us.

“How are you doing?” Drew asked.

“I’m fine, but my arms are tired. *All* of me is tired.” I paused. “The controls are slow and floppy.”

“What do you think is wrong?”

“We might have taken some damage to the tail ... maybe the rudders, maybe the elevators. Once it’s light we can do a visual inspection.”

“That won’t be too long. And if we do have to bail, it’s better in the light.”

“Better, but still ... How’s Jed?”

“I’ll check.”

He got out of his seat and I felt even more alone and scared.

“His breathing is shallow, but his pulse is strong,” he said

when he came back. “He’s unconscious, but that might have more to do with the morphine than anything else. I think he’s comfortable.”

I was so grateful he was still alive, but I knew that left me with no choice. I hated to admit it—even quietly to myself in my mind—but if Jed had died, I could have abandoned the plane. I didn’t want to hit the silk, but really, could I land a Lancaster? Wasn’t I just going to kill him and me both when we hit the deck? Did I really think I could—

My attention was caught by a line on the panel. One of the lights was red.

“Drew, the light on the console—is that an engine light?”

“It’s engine four.”

“Outside starboard. Can you tell what’s wrong with it?”

“I’m not a flight engineer, but it looks like it’s running too hot. The temperature gauge shows it’s running much higher than the other two engines.”

“Can you see any problem?” I asked as I peered out of the window at the engine.

“I can’t see anything. It’s not on fire, I don’t see any—No, wait—there’s some smoke coming out ... not a lot, but some, definitely some. What does that mean? What do we do?”

“I don’t know. Maybe we should ... maybe we should ... reduce the power to that engine, not run it as hard. Does that make sense?”

“I guess so. We can run on two engines if we need to ... right?”

“Yes, we can fly with two engines. I read that in the manuals.” I paused. “Have you ever seen a Lancaster flying with only two engines?”

“No, but if the manuals say we can, then we can.”

“Okay, then let’s throttle back a little on that engine and add some throttle to the inside starboard.”

I put my hand on the throttles. With my fingers I pulled the throttle back on the one engine while simultaneously using my thumb to increase the throttle on the other. I felt the plane’s attitude change and I compensated with the yoke to level us out and—

“It’s on fire! There are flames coming out of the outside engine!”

Without saying a word, I reached over and flipped up the cover and hit the fire extinguisher. I watched as the foam streamed out, smothering the flames. The plane suddenly slowed and slumped. I thrust forward the throttles on the two remaining engines, pushing them past the gate until they were almost all the way to the wall.

“We’re still flying,” Drew said.

“You sound surprised.”

“Aren’t you?”

“A little.”

“Jacko, can you update us on position?” Drew asked.

“I can give you a rough plotting. I wish we had a navigator to do it right.”

“So do I,” I agreed.

“I think we’d better keep him up front,” Drew said. “If you want to take the flight engineer’s spot, I’ll try to plot a course.”

“Let’s just keep a few of us in spots where we know what we’re doing,” Jacko replied. “I have a pretty good reckoning at just over one hundred and thirty miles from the coast.”

“At our present airspeed we’ll make the Channel in about twenty . . . no, twenty-five minutes,” I said.

We were almost home. A short skip across the Channel and then we’d be over England. When the crew bailed, they’d be in friendly hands—they’d be safe. Then it would just be Jed and me in the plane when I tried to bring it down.

“We have company!” Jacko yelled out. “Echoes on the fishpond!”

I started us down toward the clouds. We couldn’t outrun anything, but I had to hope that we could dive into the clouds and play possum and—

“It’s Spitfires!” Jacko yelled. “It’s Spits! It’s our guys! I’ve got them on the radio—patching you through, Skip!”

I felt such a rush of relief that tears came to my eyes. I tried to snuffle them back. I pulled back on the yoke to keep us above the clouds. I was happier to be able to see where we were flying.

“This is Spitfire leader to Lancaster pilot.” It was a distinctly English accent.

“This is the Lancaster pilot. You won’t believe how happy we are to hear your voice.”

“We’re rather pleased to speak to you as well. We’ll make sure you’re safe and secure all the way home.”

I wished he could take me all the way to my real home—in Canada.

“Does anybody see them?” I asked over the intercom.

“Nothing,” Glen said from the top turret. “Still too dark.”

“I’m starting to see the sun coming up behind us,” Sandy added. “It’ll soon catch us, especially at this speed.”

“That’s the only thing I’m happy to be caught by,” I said.

It was almost light and we were under the protection of

our fighters. The coast was almost in sight and we'd soon be over the English countryside and safe ... Well, at least some of us would be safe.

The light from the rising sun started to stream in through the top of the canopy. I could see now that there were multiple holes in the canopy, one smaller panel of glass was shattered, and blood was splattered all along the starboard-side window. Drew had done his best with material and adhesive tape from the first aid kit to cover up as many of the holes as possible. His repairs had blocked off some of the air entering the cockpit but didn't completely stop the flow of bitter, freezing wind. My whole body was cold and numb. I flexed my fingers repeatedly, trying to keep them supple and able to work the controls.

In the growing light I could now see members of our escort. There were two Spitfires off our port side, just ahead and above, and another pair high and off to the starboard. We were now safe from enemy attack.

"Glennie, Sandy, you can stand down."

"Thanks, Skipper."

Skipper—that was so familiar and so strange at the same time, because they were talking to *me*.

The sunlight had completely caught up to us. Daylight had arrived. I hoped that the rays would start to warm the cockpit a bit. I could also get some warmth by dropping down to a lower elevation, but I needed to do one thing before that.

"Spitfire leader, this is Lancaster pilot requesting a visual inspection."

"Affirmative on that request," he replied.

The lead Spit dropped back and dipped until he was sitting no more than fifteen yards off my port wing.

“I would imagine you’re aware that you’re only running on two engines,” he said.

“We did notice that,” I replied.

“Just thought I should mention it. There are also numerous bullet holes in your wing and some other marks visible on the main fuselage.”

He reduced his airspeed and dropped back again until he was sitting right off our tail.

“Do you have full rudder and elevator?” he asked.

“It’s a bit sluggish.”

“I would imagine that would be the case since your right rudder is full of holes and it appears that part of your elevator is no longer attached to your aircraft.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“You’ve done remarkably well, chaps, to get this bird home. Ten more minutes and you’ll reach the coast, and then another fifteen and you’re over friendly territory. I want you to fall in behind me and we’ll lead you home.”

“Appreciated.”

The Spitfire came back alongside and the pilot waved. I waved back. It did feel reassuring to have somebody else not only by our side but plotting the course, and now leading the way.

“Lancaster leader, are you planning on attempting a landing or looking for a place to bail?”

“Both,” I said.

“Both? I don’t understand.”

“We’re going to have crew members hit the silk before I attempt to land.”

“Not quite the vote of confidence I’d want from my crew if I was the pilot,” he answered.

“That’s the problem. I’m not the pilot. I’m the navigator.”

There was a pause at the other end. “Please, say again that message.”

“I’m the navigator.”

Again there was no instant response. “Have you ever landed a plane?” he asked.

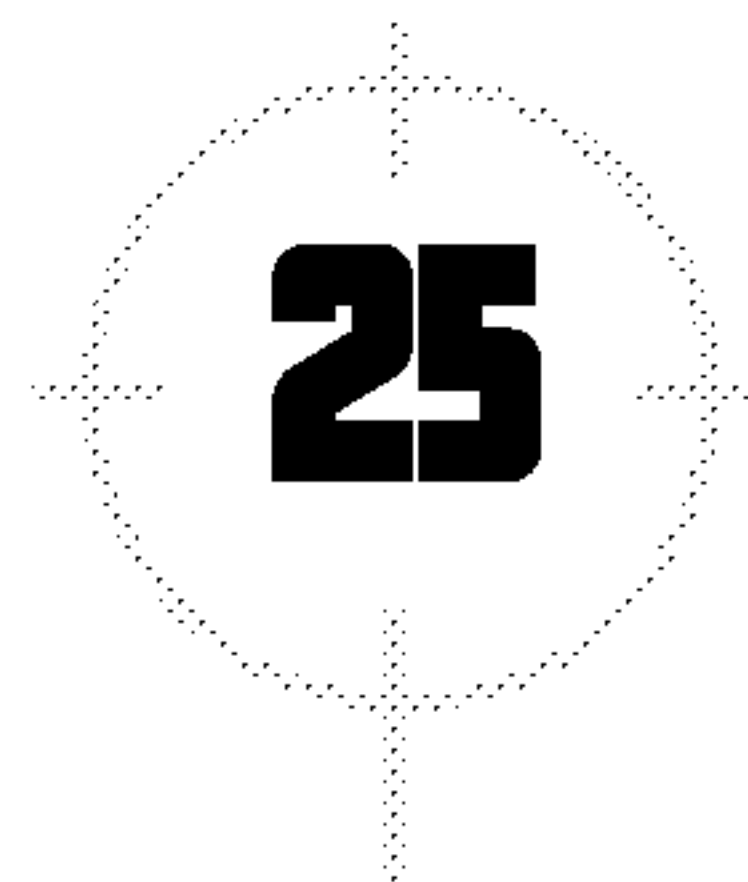
“Negative.”

“Lancaster, um, pilot, would you consider having all crew members including yourself bail out and abandoning the craft?”

“Negative. We have an injured crew member who is not capable of abandoning the plane. I have to attempt a landing.”

“Understood . . . and respected. Please stay on my tail and I’ll get you home.”

I was glad he understood and glad he respected the decision, but really, what choice did I have?



I made a big circle of the field. I could see the runways, the buildings, the trees alongside, and in the distance the village and the Anglican church, its spire rising high into the sky. It was all so familiar, all so good to see. I thought of all the times I'd flown back in after a mission—twenty-three times before—and how welcome a sight it always was. This was what I had been silently praying for the whole return trip, all I'd wanted, just to get back here. But now that I was here, I knew I was much more than simply at the end of my journey. I was possibly, simply, at the end.

“This is control tower. Preparations on the ground are complete.”

I knew all about the preparations. On our last pass I'd seen the heat and meat trucks—the fire trucks along with six waiting ambulances. One was for Jed. The other five were for the rest of the crew.

“You are clear to have crew begin evacuation. Commence on your next pass.”

“Affirmative.”

I turned to Drew, still sitting in the flight engineer's seat.

“Altitude?” I asked.

“Fifteen hundred feet.”

Right behind me, Jacko, Glen, and Sandy were all standing,

chutes attached to their harnesses, ready to jump. Drew had his chute beside him on the floor, ready to hook onto his harness.

At their feet was Jed. He was quiet and comfortable, the morphine dulling the pain, his vital signs strong, the bleeding stopped. Jacko, who had received first aid training, thought he was stable and was going to make it—assuming I could get him down to the ground. Scottie's body had been moved to the back and covered—wrapped in his parachute, out of respect.

“Okay, I'm going to bring us around again, right over the field,” I said. “Get ready to jump.”

Jacko put a hand on my shoulder. “Skip, thanks for what you did . . . You got us back home.”

“Yeah, without you we would have gone down over France, one way or another,” Glen agreed.

“I was just doing what had to be done,” I said.

“Maybe we should all stay with the plane,” Sandy added.

“No, you shouldn't!” I exclaimed. “I need you all to leave. All of you, now . . . please.”

“I think he's just afraid to join the Caterpillar Club,” Jacko said. “Come on, mate, I'll promise to hold your hand all the way down.”

“We're coming around in less than thirty seconds. You all have to get to the door.”

There were three slaps on the back and then Drew got up from the flight engineer's seat. “Your wheels are down and locked.”

“Thanks. Thanks for being there beside me,” I said.

“Thank *you*. I'm alive because of what you did.”

“I just want you to *stay* alive. Go now, please.”

He reached over and offered me his hand. I took one hand off the yoke and we shook.

“I’ll see you on the ground,” I said.

“I’m counting on it.”

“Okay, *go*.”

He clipped on his chute and rushed toward the hatch.

I levelled out of the bank and brought us in flat and slow. I kept it straight the whole length of the field. When I’d cleared the field, I banked to avoid the church steeple at the end of the runway. And as I made the bank, I caught sight of a chute! And then a second and a third and . . . where was the fourth? I banked harder to keep the chutes in sight. There were still only three. Had the fourth chute malfunctioned? Had somebody plummeted to the ground?

“Hey, Skip.” It was Drew!

“What are you doing here?” I exclaimed.

“I decided to stay with the ship.” He sat down in the flight engineer’s seat. “I thought you might have a better shot at landing this crate with the help of a flight engineer.”

“But you’re not a flight engineer.”

“Yeah, and you’re not really a pilot, but I won’t mention that again if you don’t mention that ‘not a flight engineer’ stuff again.”

“Drew, you have to jump.”

“I’m not going anywhere, mate, and I don’t think you can make me, unless you’re planning on leaving the yoke and trying to toss me out.”

“Look, I appreciate what you’re doing, but—”

“This is the control tower,” came a voice over the radio. “We have three on the ground, all good. Wasn’t there going to be a fourth?”

“Negative, control tower,” Drew said before I could answer. “This is the acting flight engineer. We felt it was better if we had both a pilot and a flight engineer.”

“Affirmative on that. Winds are coming from due north at eleven miles per hour, with gusts to fifteen. Be aware of crosswinds and you are cleared for landing.”

“Roger that,” Drew replied. He turned to me. “So, let’s go down and say hello to the guys.”

I needed to bring us around in a big, big circle, lose about a thousand feet, and head straight into the runway from the east. I pushed down hard on the yoke. The controls had become increasingly sluggish, but the plane still responded and we started to descend. Up ahead I could clearly see the lane formed by the green path-indicator lights. I put us right in the middle.

“Eight hundred ... seven hundred and fifty ... seven ... You have to get down lower or we’ll have to make another pass.”

I pressed down even harder and we dropped faster.

“Good, there’s the steeple, straight ahead.”

The runway lined up perfectly with the steeple. It was an obstacle when we were taking off in that direction and a marker coming in this way.

“Five hundred ... four-seventy ...”

“What’s my airspeed?”

“One-eighty ... Do you want me to throttle back?”

“No, no, I don’t want to stall it out, better to come in fast.”

I suddenly realized that I was drifting off line for the runway. I turned the wheel and worked the rudder and we adjusted, but too fast and too far! My heart rushed up into my throat and I pressed back the other way to self-

correct until my nose was right in line with the centre of the runway.

“You never landed a plane before, right?” Drew asked.

“Well ... sort of ... once.”

“Sort of?”

“It was a Link Trainer.”

“At least that’s something.”

“Not really. I crashed it.”

He laughed. “Is it too late for me to jump?”

“What’s our height?” I asked.

“One hundred and ninety ... A little late, but don’t worry, I know you can do it.”

“Yeah, right, thanks for at least pretending.”

“No pretending—I’m betting my life on it. Ninety feet ... eighty feet ... sixty ... Pull up your nose and get the rear wheel to hit first.”

I adjusted the elevators and the altitude changed. I reached over and pulled the throttles back, reducing the fuel, reducing the speed, and the sound of the engine diminished.

“Come on, Davie, nice and easy, just clear the fence, you can do it.”

We cruised in, barely above the fence, and then the runway was underneath us, and we hit against the deck hard and I bounced out of my seat. I pushed the yoke forward and the plane jerked and tipped up, the tires screeching against the pavement before it righted itself!

“Throttle down, throttle down!” I screamed.

Drew grabbed the throttles and pulled them back, and I squeezed the brakes and the plane started veering off to the side of the tarmac. I squeezed harder on the other side to bring it back in line, but it wasn’t working! We rumbled off

the pavement and onto the grass, and the whole plane started bouncing and pitching so much that I thought it was going to get airborne again. I squeezed the brakes so hard I thought they were going to break off, but it was slowing down at last, more and more. Finally, the Lancaster came to a stop. There was complete silence.

I looked over at Drew.

“I’ve seen better landings,” he said.

“What?” I asked in disbelief.

“You’re supposed to try to keep the plane *on* the pavement. I’ll forgive you this once, but I expect better things of you the next time.”

He started laughing and I joined in. It was either that or start crying.

“He’s expecting you,” the clerk said as I walked into the office.

“Thanks.”

“Just go right in,” he said. “By the way, that really was some fine flying.”

“Thanks.” I’d been hearing that a lot, but to me it still seemed like simple dumb luck that I’d been able to land that plane.

“You should be very proud of what you did, regardless,” he went on.

What exactly did *that* mean?

I stopped in front of the CO’s door. Even though I’d been told to go right in, I knocked and waited for a response.

“Come!”

I opened the door, walked in, and closed it behind me. “Reporting as requested, sir,” I said and saluted.

He waved back a reluctant return salute. “Sit. Did you manage to get any sleep?” Group Captain Matthews asked.

“A little, sir,” I replied as I sat down. “I kept getting interrupted, men coming around to congratulate me.”

“Well-deserved congratulations. That plane was so beaten up that it was a miracle you were able to get her back to base to begin with. I have no idea how you managed to fly it with almost all of your elevator missing.”

“I knew it was missing a piece in flight, but I would imagine

that most of it fell off when I hit the deck. It was a pretty hard landing. It wasn't exactly textbook, sir."

"Any landing that you can walk away from is a good one."

"Speaking of walking away, sir, can you update me on Jed—I mean, Flight Lieutenant Blackburn?"

"As you know, after he was stabilized, he was transferred to the hospital at district headquarters for surgery."

"And is there word on him yet, sir?"

"There is." He smiled and I felt my heart melt. "He's going to pull through."

I suddenly burst into tears. "Sorry, sir, I'm just so ... I shouldn't be ..."

"It's all right, son. Tears of joy and tears of relief and maybe even some tears of gratitude."

He got up, circled the desk, pulled out a handkerchief, and handed it to me.

"He's alive because of you, son."

"I had help, sir, lots of help."

"You were the one behind the yoke. It seems you got your wish to be a pilot sooner than you thought you might."

"Yes, sir."

"I guess you're used to doing things a little earlier than you should, aren't you?" he asked.

"Umm ... maybe sometimes, sir."

"Definitely sometimes. I was hoping you could help me with a little problem, a little confusion I'm experiencing."

"If I can, sir." I wasn't sure what he could possibly mean by that.

He picked up a piece of paper from his desk. "Late yesterday I received a cable from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. It concerns a missing boy."

“A missing boy?” I repeated, my voice cracking over the last word.

“It says the *boy*—and he is a *boy*, because he’s not yet eighteen—was discovered missing by his mother. Apparently she went to visit him at his boarding school—she’d heard he was sick. But he wasn’t there.”

All of the blood drained from my face, and I felt a rush of fear that was worse than anything I’d experienced in the plane.

“And by the strangest coincidence, this boy has the *same* last name as you. And even stranger, he has the same mother and father as you. Wouldn’t you say that was an incredible coincidence . . . Robert?”

I was caught. There was no way out. “I’m so sorry, sir. It all just . . . just happened.”

He shook his head. “I don’t know whether I should preside over a court martial and throw you in the stockade because you’re a fraud, or decorate you because you’re a hero. The problem with the latter is that I’m really not sure what name to put on the medal.” He paused. “It *is* Robert, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir. David is my—”

I was interrupted by loud noises, yelling coming from the outer office, and suddenly the door burst open and in walked Drew, Jacko, Glen, and Sandy.

“Sorry to disturb you, sir!” Jacko yelled out. “But we need to talk to you.”

“All four of you get out immediately!” he ordered. “This is not the time or place.”

“Afraid it is both the time *and* the place,” Jacko replied. “We came here to tell you that Davie here is a hero—that none of us would be standing here if it hadn’t been for him!”

“I believe I’m fully aware of what he did, but there are things that—”

“No disrespect, sir, but we want you to know that we are all equally responsible for the trouble Davie is in,” Drew said.

“How do you know that McWilliams is in trouble?” Group Captain Matthews asked.

“There aren’t many secrets on this base, sir. We heard that Davie was in trouble, sir,” Drew replied.

“And we’re all responsible,” Jacko added.

“Do you even know what he’s in trouble for?” the commander asked. He turned to me, holding out a finger.

“And not a word from you!”

“Well, sir, there’s just so much, I don’t know where to begin,” Jacko said. “But what we do know is that he’s a genuine hero and he needs to be given a medal!”

“Robert, would you like to explain it to them?”

They all looked at each other.

“Robert? Who’s Robert?” Glen asked.

I raised my hand. “I’m Robert.”

“And you should know that Robert is not only not who he claimed to be, he is not the age he claimed to be. He is just seventeen years old.”

All four men looked shocked.

“He enlisted under a false name while underage. Do you know what that means?” the commander asked.

“That the air force needs more seventeen-year-old pilots?” Jacko guessed.

For a split second the commander looked as though he was at a loss for words.

Jacko pushed on. “Sir, I appreciate—I think we all appreciate—that regardless of the circumstances that brought

Davie—I mean Robert—here, what he did makes him a hero.”

“Yeah, you can’t throw him in the stockade!” Drew said.

“I wasn’t planning on throwing him in the stockade.”

“That’s more like it!” Jacko exclaimed.

“But I’m about *this* close to tossing *you* in detention,” he said, holding his finger and thumb just a fraction apart.

Jacko shut his mouth and looked down at his feet.

“Robert is not going to be jailed,” the CO said.

I felt a rush of relief.

“But he’s also not going back into a plane,” he continued.

“Instead, he will be going back to Canada, to Toronto, to complete his school year. And when he turns eighteen years of age in July, he *will* re-enlist and be sent to flight school, where he will be trained to become a pilot.”

“I’m going to be a pilot!” I exclaimed.

“Not just a pilot, son, but a *Lancaster* pilot. At the time of your qualification as a pilot, you will be reassigned to this squadron, where you will be expected to complete the remaining six missions of your tour.”

“That’s . . . that’s incredible, sir!”

“There is no need to call me sir anymore. You are no longer a member of this squadron, or, for that matter, a member of the Royal Canadian Air Force. You and your medal are going home.”

“Thank you! Thank you so much!”

“I don’t know if you should be thanking me. You may have faced enemy fighters and flak over here, but you’re about to go home to face the music . . . and your mother.”

“Do you think you could just throw me in the stockade instead?” I asked, and everybody broke into laughter.

“Now, I want all five of you to get out of my office before I throw *somebody* in the stockade.”

Everybody scrambled for the door.

“Wait!” he called out, and we all froze. “Robert will be flying home tomorrow evening. Until then, you four are responsible for him.”

“Of course, no problem, we’ll take great care of him!” Jacko answered. The grin on his face was a mile wide, and the CO must have noticed.

“Yes, you’ll take wonderful care of this seventeen-year-old *boy*—a boy who is too young to drink—and you’ll return him to this office by fifteen hundred hours tomorrow afternoon. Understood?”

“Understood, sir,” Drew said.

I went to leave and then stopped. There was one more thing I wanted to do before I was kicked out of the air force. I turned to Captain Matthews.

“It’s been an honour to serve under you, sir,” I said, and saluted.

He stood and returned my salute. “And it’s been an *honour* to have you as a member of my squadron, McWilliams. You are dismissed . . . And don’t let me catch you here again until you’re actually, truthfully, and genuinely eighteen years old!”