

Wings Over Summer

Chapter 1 – Saturday 24th August 1940

The bomber exploded in a blossom of orange flame. Jack's Spitfire shot into the rapidly expanding fireball, then out into clear blue sky, miraculously untouched by any of the hurtling debris.

His body ached. He craved rest. But tracer rounds flashed overhead and a blow to the kidneys made him flinch in expectation of worse to come.

'Fool. Never relax.'

He smashed the stick hard right, pulled into a tight turn and looked over his shoulder.

A Messerschmitt 109.

'Pull, Jack, pull.'

And he did, fighting to remain conscious as the g force mounted. Only when his Spitfire began to vibrate like a car driving on cobbles did he ease the back pressure a smidgen.

'That's it, Jack. That's it.'

He was flying *on the buffet*, turning at the maximum rate.

The German was trying to do the same. But his Messerschmitt shuddered, stalling again and again. It was losing lift, and speed, dropping back. The hunter was becoming the hunted.

'Hold it there, Jack. Hold it there.'

As he closed on the 109's tail, his thumb stroked the gun button.

'Another few seconds.'

Just as he was about to fire, the 109 rolled hard left.

'Bad choice, Butt.'

Arms aching, Jack reversed his own turn and pulled his gunsight ahead of the Messerschmitt.

'Try this for size.'

He fired a two second burst. The 109's engine cowling belched a cloud of white vapour.

'And this.'

The cloud ignited. Writhing tongues of flame licked the enemy fighter's fuselage and canopy. It rolled on its back and pitched into a steep dive. Jack checked his rear view mirror and followed, his thumb still poised over the gun button.

But the 109 had become a flaming meteorite.

Jack's mood changed. Through the flames, he caught glimpses of the other pilot, struggling to release his canopy.

'Come on, come on. You can do it.'

Just as it seemed the German's efforts had failed, the angular perspex cover flew open. The man emerged, but wreathed in fire, tumbling through the air, arms and legs flailing.

Jack levelled, grimacing as he watched pilot and aircraft in their fiery descents. No parachute appeared, and the smaller object soon became a tiny dot. It had disappeared from

view long before the Messerschmitt hit the green fields of Kent in a billowing mushroom of oily black smoke and flame.

He looked around. Thirty seconds ago, the sky had been full of wheeling and diving machines. Now, nothing but a few decaying vapour trails.

Any sense of achievement had long since evaporated. He felt tired, deflated, horrified at what he'd just done to another young man; horrified also that he'd have no hesitation in doing the same in a few hours' time.

Oblivious to the beauty of the shimmering orange globe hanging in the early morning haze, Jack sighed wearily, turned his Spitfire through 180 degrees and began a slow, lonely, descent towards Biggin Hill.

One hundred and fifty miles away, Alex stood in front of the hall mirror.

Over the last three days, he wasn't sure what had been worse, his mother's raw emotion, his father's exaggerated displays of manly indifference or his own futile attempts to smile and be his old self.

Although the photograph on the table was only 15 months old, the tall, blond-haired, boy in the picture no longer existed. He'd grown another inch, ditched his school uniform and become an RAF officer, a pilot who'd already lost three friends to flying accidents.

If that wasn't enough to banish the innocence of schooldays, he was also steeling himself for the greatest challenge of his life, something he dreaded but was drawn to in equal measure. Was he man enough to face what lay ahead?

'You look very smart, son,' his mother said.

Despite his anxiety, Alex's chest puffed with pride. The wings above the left breast pocket of his newly-tailored uniform of soft blue barathea still dazzled him.

His father opened the front door.

He'd tried to dissuade them from accompanying him to the station, but they'd insisted. And, as they stepped out into the warm sunshine and set off down Gravel Hill, he was glad they were with him.

Carrying a battered brown suitcase each, he and his father walked either side of his mother, towering over her. It was market day and they stopped every few yards to exchange pleasantries with some acquaintance or other, his parents finding some excuse to draw attention to his wings, just in case the person had failed to notice. Not that that was likely. Everyone in Ludlow must know their son was a Royal Air Force pilot, and soon to be a fighter pilot.

At the station, carriage doors slammed. Self-consciously, Alex eased himself clear of his mother's embrace.

'Just you be careful, son,' she sobbed, dabbing her eyes with a small white handkerchief.

His father, standing stiffly at her side, shook his hand. 'Oh, he'll be fine, won't you, Alex?' The voice seemed to have lost some of its earlier confidence.

'Of course, Dad. I'll be fine.'

Trying to look more relaxed than he felt, he turned his back and boarded the train. It pulled away almost immediately, leaving no time for the things he really should have said. Hoping they knew anyway, he leaned out and waved until his carriage entered the tunnel and the smoke drove him back inside.

Jack undid the third button and slipped his hand under Gwen's blouse. His excitement mounted as he stroked over her breast, delighting at its softness through the smooth, silky material of her slip. Her breath caught as he reached the hardening bud of a nipple. Cupping his hand, he....

'You'll be joining B Flight.'

He screwed his eyes closed and tried to stay with the daydream. Her breasts...

'Your flight commander will be Flight Lieutenant Waters.'

It was hopeless. The more he tried to shut out the words, the more impossible it became. Giving in to the inevitable, he sighed, opened his eyes and drew his wiry frame up the battered leather armchair.

Ten yards away, towards the end of the dispersal hut, two young men stood to the side of the Adjutant's desk. Jack surveyed them with a mixture of curiosity and pity while the fatherly administrator, George Evans, a moustachioed veteran of The Great War, bombarded them with the minutiae of squadron routine, details that would soon lose all significance in the confusion of daily life, and death.

Like Jack, both were sergeants, three chevrons adorning each arm just below the shoulders of their off the peg uniforms of coarse blue material. One was about Jack's age, early 20s, while the other looked no more than 18. But most importantly, each wore a pilot's badge on his left breast.

The Squadron badly needed replacements. Yesterday, a new boy who'd stood in the same place had failed to come back.

The Adjutant mirrored his own thoughts.

'I'm afraid you won't get much time to settle in before you're in the thick of it.'

'That's fine by me,' sprouted the younger sergeant, looking round self-consciously to judge the effect of his bravado.

Jack tried not to be too cynical at the parade ground smartness and enthusiasm. It could have been him four months ago.

'Good, that's the ticket', George encouraged. 'But I'll try and keep their hands off you for the rest of the morning at least.'

Jack felt a nudge at his elbow and looked across at a scruffy individual reclining wearily in the battered armchair next to his.

'Pound to a penny they don't last the next three days, old boy.'

He was inclined to agree. It would be a minor miracle if both the new arrivals survived their first week, and it wouldn't be unheard of for both of them to fall by the wayside. But he tried to be a bit more positive.

'Oh, give them a break will you, Binky. We survived, didn't we?'

'Suppose you're right, my fine Welsh wizard, but we seem to be falling fast at the moment.'

Not for the first time, Jack was struck by the contrast between his harsh Barry accent and Flying Officer Clifford Binkman's cut glass delivery. He decided not to mention how close he'd just come to adding to the growing list of casualties. If the 20mm cannon shell that had embedded itself in his seat armour had exploded... But he was surprised at his friend's public display of pessimism. He was usually so upbeat.

'Still, mustn't dwell on things must we? Onward and upward and all that.'

Binky's attempt to reassert his usual optimism sounded decidedly half-hearted. Jack looked on with genuine concern as the handsome young Cambridge graduate slumped back in his chair and closed his eyes.

Roused out of his own torpor for the moment, he watched George Evans lead the two new pilots through the door to the adjoining locker room. He ran a hand through his unruly black hair - must find time for a haircut - and looked around.

The wooden hut was a mess, the air thick with blue cigarette and pipe smoke, the flaking cream paint largely hidden behind heavily laden shelves, groaning clothes hooks, and more posters than it was possible to read in a morning. Seven or eight leather arm chairs lined each side wall. All contained recumbent figures dressed in a variety of flying kit, most with their feet resting on a line of cluttered low tables running down the centre of the room. To one end, behind the Adjutant's desk, half a dozen camp beds were occupied by more prone figures.

At this time of year, no-one wore the bulky flying suits provided. They preferred to fly in their uniforms, some in their blue jackets, some just in shirt sleeves. Trousers were mostly tucked into high leather flying boots, although a few wore ordinary uniform shoes. And all wore silk scarves, not as sartorial statements, but to prevent their collars shrinking and throttling them if they ended up in the sea, or chafing as they turned their heads, trying to spot the enemy.

Over shirt or jacket, they wore Mae West life preservers. A few, like Jack, were lucky to have the German equivalent, greatly prized because they inflated when you hit the water. The RAF version had to be blown up, not easy when treading water in wet clothes, incredibly difficult if injured, and bloody impossible if you happened to be unconscious.

They looked a rag-tag outfit, but they had been up since 4 am. The first scramble hadn't come until 7.30, about an hour later than usual, and the second was now long overdue. Grateful for the respite, most were sleeping, trying to sleep, or pretending to sleep, much as Jack had been a few minutes previously. Others played cards or dominoes, and a few were reading; although, if you watched them for long enough, you noticed that not many pages were turned.

At the far end of the room, just outside the offices of the squadron and flight commanders, was the Ops Desk. Sitting atop it, amongst a jumble of paperwork, was the device that ruled their lives: the big black Ops Phone.

Its ring could send some round the back of the hut to be sick. At the least, its strident alarm set their hearts racing, and Jack didn't believe anyone could sleep beyond its first ring. He certainly couldn't.

Grimacing at the sight of the telephone orderly removing a grubby forefinger from his nose, he sank back and tried to resurrect the memory of his last few hours with Gwen.

The phone rang.

The 12 Mark I Spitfires of No 646 Squadron Royal Air Force climbed out of the haze into the bright blue of another beautiful summer day. At that moment, Jack would not have wished himself anywhere else in the world.

The aircraft surrounding him were all elegant curves, sunlight glinting off rounded perspex canopies and camouflaged metal surfaces. The nine to his front were in vics of three, the wingmen sitting just to either side of the tailplanes of their section leaders. Red Section sat 150 yards ahead, with Yellow 50 yards behind them, then Green, just 50 yards

ahead of his own propeller spinner. Over his shoulders, behind the aesthetic sweep of his Spitfire's elliptical wings, sat the two wingmen of his own Blue Section.

As sometimes happened on such occasions, he was overwhelmed, reduced almost to tears. Who wouldn't feel privileged to be surrounded by such machines at such a moment in history?

And all were piloted by men he was proud to serve alongside. Even where differences in rank or character made friendship impossible, there was a strong sense of camaraderie. They were all intent on protecting the towns and villages below them from an enemy that had already laid waste to much of Europe. Jack knew. He'd seen it with his own eyes.

The CO's confident voice crackled in his headset. 'Bastion, this is Dragon Leader, passing angels one two.'

'Roger, Dragon Leader. This is Bastion. Maintain heading. One hundred plus bandits, angels one five, approaching Dover.'

Good, Jack thought. Plenty of time to get above them.

Height was all-important. They could convert it to speed, diving down on the bombers, firing a short burst and climbing again to dive in a second time, all before the enemy fighters intervened. At least, that was the theory. In practise, before the second attack, and sometimes before the first, they were likely to be bounced themselves.

In the Spitfire to Jack's rear right, Pilot Officer Johnny Thwaite stared straight ahead, as if in a daze.

'Blue Two,' he admonished gently, gesturing his wingman to keep his eyes moving.

Johnny had only been with them five days and seemed to be finding it all too much.

'Roger, Blue Leader. Sorry.'

Such a lonely, timid, voice. Jack felt sorry for the young man, but he had to buck his ideas up. It wasn't just his life that depended on it.

Pilot Officer Piers White, sitting out to the left, was much more competent, and confident, although he'd only been with them a few days longer than Johnny. Acting as weaver, he was manoeuvring at the rear, quartering the sky for the enemy while the rest of the Squadron concentrated on holding formation. Arse-end Charlie was a position of trust, but a vulnerable one; they were usually the first to be attacked.

As expected, Piers's head and eyes were in constant motion. Good. At this time of day, he'd be paying special attention to the area to his right, to the south, looking with watering eyes for the Hun in the sun. Jack gave him a thumbs-up. The young man returned the gesture, his eyes creasing above his oxygen mask in what Jack knew was a broad smile.

'Bastion, this is Dragon Leader,' the CO's voice broke in again. 'Tally-ho, tally-ho, one hundred plus bandits, eleven o'clock, slightly high.'

'Roger, Dragon Leader. Remember, priority to the bombers, and watch out for Snappers. Good luck, Bastion out.'

Jack gestured his two wingmen to keep their eyes moving. The rest of the Squadron would probably be looking towards the bombers, oblivious of anything else, such as roving enemy fighters. But even he couldn't resist a quick glance to the left.

'Cripes!'

It was 100 plus all right, in a formation several miles long, stepped up in waves from front to back, the larger silhouettes of the bombers shepherded by groups of the smaller Snappers – single-engined Messerschmitt Bf 109Es.

Until a week ago, the German fighters would probably have been high above, ready to dive down, spitting death and destruction from their nose-mounted machine guns and wing-mounted cannons. But in the last few days, they'd been flying close escort to the bombers, weaving around at a similar height, and there seemed to be many more of them. They'd forfeited the element of surprise, but made it harder to get at the bombers, as Jack had found earlier that morning.

He looked away to quarter the sky. The CO had taken advantage of the sun, climbing them to the south and turning above the rear left quarter of the enemy formation. Ideally placed.

'Dragon, line abreast, line abreast, go.'

Jack eased Blue Section to the left of the Squadron, set his engine rpm to 2650, pressed the emergency boost override, switched his reflector sight on, set his gun button to fire, lowered his seat a notch and tightened his seat straps.

'Not long now, Jack.'

He often talked to himself. It might seem daft, but it helped him stay calm. Not that he didn't feel the familiar butterflies as the moment of combat approached. Ignoring them, he looked to left and right, giving his section a confident thumbs-up.

Piers looked relaxed, but Johnny made even his nod of acknowledgement seem hesitant. Too late for any more encouragement though. The nose of the CO's Spitfire dipped.

'Dragon, here we go chaps. Good luck all.'

Alex looked out of the carriage window at the rolling green countryside of Herefordshire. He tried to recall the scene 18 months before, during his first journey to London.

More barbed wire this time. And more uniforms. But otherwise, not much seemed to have changed. Perhaps that was what the war was really about; making sure people out here wondered what all the fuss was.

He still couldn't resist looking at his reflection, admiring the wings on his chest. He'd never felt like this, so proud of anything he'd done, of anything he'd possessed. He also enjoyed the way other people looked at him, with a sense of approval he'd never experienced before. He was tempted to undo his top button and declare himself a fighter pilot, but that would be too much. He'd done nothing yet to earn such a display.

And would he make a good fighter pilot?

His 13 hours of Spitfire flying on the Operational Training Unit had gone well. The aircraft was a delight in the air, but a handful to land and manoeuvre on the ground. And the cockpit was a bit cosy for someone of his stature. But he could fly competently in formation, and knew some basic tactics, although they'd been given little weapons training, so he had no idea whether he'd be able to shoot down enemy bombers, let alone fighters. Most importantly though, he had no idea how he'd react to combat.

As they steamed into Abergavenny, the countryside became more rugged, almost threatening, the sombre hills mirroring, or precipitating, darker thoughts.

Would he fall prey to cowardice?

Until he answered that question, he didn't deserve anyone's admiration, and he certainly couldn't undo his top button.

Dragon were diving on the rear of the formation of twin-engined Dornier 17 bombers. Jack picked one to the rear left and wound the type's wingspan into his gunsight. Looking around again, he felt exhilaration and pride. They may be vastly outnumbered, but their Spitfires couldn't look more heroic, bobbing gently up and down like cavalry chargers racing over the turf.

The bombers started to grow menacingly in his windshield. Flashes of tracer streaked ahead of some of the other Spitfires.

'Far too early,' he tutted.

Getting in close was the key, as they'd learned over Dunkirk. But it took nerve, and none of them had been taught much about gunnery.

He held his fire. They had only 14 seconds of ammunition. There was no point in wasting it. Taking a last look round, he saw the 109s to the left break towards them.

'Dragon, Snappers left, 10 o'clock.'

They'd also been spotted by the bombers. Deadly rods of light arced towards him, setting out slowly, but speeding up as they approached, and then flashing past. In a few seconds, the sky was full of them. He tried to forget the swarm of invisible but equally deadly machine gun bullets accompanying each brightly glowing tracer round. It wasn't easy.

Much of the fire was coming from the upper turret of his chosen target. He felt the usual twinge of fear in the pit of his stomach, but waited for the bomber's wingspan to grow until it touched the two vertical lines of his gunsight - 250 yards. Even then, he still waited.

'Until... Until...Now.'

At about 100 yards, he pressed the gun button.

The firing of the eight, wing-mounted, .303 machine guns assailed his senses. A loud pneumatic hiss and metallic clattering were accompanied by tooth-rattling vibration and the acrid smell of cordite. His ammunition sparked on the Dornier. Bits flew off its slim fuselage and wings. It grew to fill his canopy.

'Bloody hell, Jack!'

He pushed the stick forward. The Spitfire rocked violently, but flew straight on. Just as he was about to raise his arms to cover his face, its nose dipped and it dived under the bomber's looming tailplane and out of the turbulent slipstream. The negative g caused his engine to cough and forced his head up into the roof of the canopy along with all the dust and debris from the cockpit floor. As the engine recovered, he shook himself and looked around.

Nothing on his tail yet, but a 109 was closing on Johnny.

'Johnny, break, break, Snapper on your tail.'

There was nothing else he could do. He watched just long enough to see the young officer turn right, but oh so lethargically.

What next?

The battle was raging, the sky full of jinking aircraft, trails of vapour, smoke and flame. A Dornier and a Spitfire were falling. His earphones were filled with swearing shouts and screams of pain.

Shutting out the sounds, he pulled out of his dive, welcoming the return of positive g. Another quick look round. Every second aircraft seemed to be a Messerschmitt, but there

was still nothing on his tail. The bombers held formation 500 yards above. He picked one, another Dornier, and climbed towards it. Tracer spat at him from its lower gun.

‘That’s not very friendly, is it?’

Waiting until he was well inside 250 yards again, Jack pressed the gun button. His rounds smashed into the bomber’s left wing and fuselage. The left propeller wound down and the gunner fell forward over his gun, its barrel pointing uselessly upwards.

Using the last of his excess energy, he banked to the right to fly under the bomber’s belly, so close he could see oily smudges flowing back from individual rivets and fastenings. Once clear, he reversed the turn to look down on his prey.

The Dornier was dropping from the formation, smoke trailing from its left engine.

‘Now what, Jack?’

The bomber may have been mortally damaged, in which case, there was no use in expending more time and energy in pursuit. But it could also be trying to sneak home at low level, something he couldn’t allow.

A stream of tracer threaded towards him from the rear upper gun.

‘That does it.’

He rolled in for a rear quarter attack, aiming a long burst at the right wing and front fuselage. The Dornier’s perspex canopy shattered and a finger of smoke and flame appeared from under the cowling of the right engine.

They were both dropping below the mêlée now, and Jack realised his enemy was probably beaten. As usual on such occasions, he felt an immediate change of mood.

Now the Dornier posed no personal threat and seemed highly unlikely to make it across the Channel, his murderous intent gave way to concern for the safety of its crew. It was a fragile change. If the aircraft recovered, or its guns started firing, he’d have no hesitation in giving it another burst of machine gun fire. But, for the moment, he willed any surviving crew members to escape what was rapidly becoming a burning wreck.

‘Come on lads, get the hell out of there.’

Flames from the burning engines licked along the fuselage. But the aircraft still seemed to be under control. Somewhere in that metal oven, a very brave man was wrestling to keep his aircraft stable enough for his crew to escape.

A pair of legs appeared in the bottom hatch.

‘Yes, that’s it.’

A body dropped into the air. Thinking back to the morning, Jack held his breath, but after only a short wait, he was relieved to see the billowing silk of an unfurling parachute.

‘Come on the rest of you?’

Another pair of legs appeared.

‘Yes.’

But, as the shout left his lips, the bomber rolled onto its back and settled into a steeply spiralling descent, wreathed in smoke and flames. The pilot had lost his battle for control. Jack pictured the scene in the bomber and winced.

He watched the plummeting fireball for a short while, but saw no more legs, or parachutes.

‘Quiet’ the young officer said, adjusting his sling and fixing the two sergeant pilots with piercing blue eyes.

Startled at their guide's sudden intensity, the NCOs obeyed without question, realising as they did so that a hush had fallen. The groundcrew, until now working noisily on the few aircraft not in the air, had fallen into silent inactivity, eyes turned expectantly to the south east.

The unmistakable sound of a Merlin engine signalled the impending return of the Biggin Hill fleet – the Hurricanes of 32 Squadron and Spitfires of 629 Squadron had scrambled soon after 646. The sergeants sensed excitement in those around them, but also concern, a feeling that intensified when they heard a loud backfire.

'There it is,' a lone voice shouted as a Spitfire appeared over the hedge, streaming white vapour.

NCOs barked orders, and there was frenzied activity as tradesmen rushed to ground equipment and fuel bowsers.

'Sorry chaps,' the young officer said, never taking his eyes off the stricken aircraft. 'Better leave it there. I'd just about finished anyway.'

'Thanks, sir. I think I got most of it,' the younger sergeant piped up, trying to maintain his earlier bravado. He stepped out of the cockpit and followed the other two down the wing.

The older sergeant jumped to the ground and wondered whether he should help the officer. But the young man, probably no more than 18 or 19 years old, leapt to the ground unaided, gingerly supporting his left arm with his good hand. He winced in pain, but quickly recovered his composure and led them the short distance to the group of chairs outside the dispersal hut. There, he turned, and the two sergeants followed suit.

The officer was finding it hard to believe that, until a few days ago, he'd been part of the tableau unfolding before them. The sergeants were only too aware that they soon would be.

The backfiring Spitfire touched down and was chased across the airfield by a fire truck, an ambulance and a three-ton lorry carrying two lines of bouncing men. In other circumstances, the similarity to a scene from a silent movie might have evoked laughter, but not today.

The aircraft came to rest, and, as the various vehicles disgorged their occupants, its propeller slowed to a stop. After a short delay, the canopy was thrown back and the pilot stood up and waved. At that point, the ambulance crew lost interest. They jumped back in their vehicle and drove away. The vapour had cleared, but the fire crew kept their hoses pointed at the engine, and the occupants of the three-ton truck milled around.

The two sergeants looked at one another. They were just about to break the nervous silence when the sound of more Merlin engines drew their eyes back to the south east. The noise level rose steadily until a gaggle of Spitfires and Hurricanes appeared, some overhead the airfield, others landing on the runway and the grass to either side.

It all looked pretty chaotic, but as each aircraft reached the end of its landing run, it turned unhurriedly left or right and taxied towards the dispersal pens, and the waiting groundcrew. The Spitfires weaved extravagantly from side to side as they lurched across the grass.

'You can forget most of what they taught you at the OTU,' the young officer said, looking earnestly at both of them in turn. 'But you better remember to weave the nose when you taxi. After the raid last Sunday, an NCO from the other side of the airfield taxied

straight into a bomb crater. Wrote his kite off. Made him very popular I can tell you. The old man's hearing the charge today.'

The two NCOs were unsure what to say in reply, but their discomfort was short-lived. The officer pointed.

A Hurricane trailing sinister black smoke crossed low over the hedge. It landed heavily, bounced into the air and crashed down again, slewing to the left. Its undercarriage collapsed and it careered sideways, sending up clods of earth and a cloud of dust. When it came to a halt, flames rose from the engine cowling just ahead of the cockpit. The canopy was open, but the pilot's head was bent forward, resting on the instrument panel. They watched in horror as the fire intensified and still he failed to move.

Other aircraft landed to either side as the fire tender, ambulance and more three-ton trucks threaded their way towards it. Soon, the burning Hurricane was lost to sight in a ring of vehicles, but a pall of smoke rose ominously above the tarpaulin cover of one of the trucks. After an agonising delay, the ambulance drove away towards the far side of the airfield.

Meanwhile, the Spitfires of 646, Dragon Squadron, had been taxiing towards the small group of watchers. They were nearing their E pens – roofless oblong sanctuaries, with high blast walls on three sides, and a central wall dividing them into two protective bays.

Two groundcrew met each Spitfire, grasped the wingtips, walked alongside for a short distance and helped turn them through ninety degrees and halt, their tails pointing into the opening of a bay.

Propellers wound down and stopped to the accompaniment of loud backfires, while clouds of smoke belched from stub exhausts lining engine cowlings. More groundcrew gathered along the leading edges of the wings and the aircraft were pushed back into their pens, accompanied by much arm-waving and shouts of 'Brakes on', and 'Brakes off'.

Slowly, the pilots stepped out of their cockpits. All seemed to take a few moments to look round, before waddling down the wing, jumping to the ground, taking off their parachutes and hanging them over wing or tailplane. After brief exchanges with their groundcrew, they walked with varying degrees of urgency towards the pen nearest the dispersal hut, 50 yards from the onlookers.

A flight lieutenant leaned against the end of a blast wall, smoking a pipe and holding a clipboard. Probably no older than 40, he looked positively ancient compared with the young men that soon surrounded him. They all seemed to talk at once, some using their arms expansively, others laughing noisily or hooting in derision. Somehow, despite the press of bodies, the unflappable flight lieutenant managed to give each a little time, writing calmly, and occasionally tapping the clipboard with the stem of his pipe as if making some point, or seeking clarification.

One by one, figures left the group and made their way towards the dispersal hut. A few nodded at the young officer and sergeants as they passed, then either walked into the hut or flopped into the chairs in the fresh air. All were grubby, their faces sweat-stained, bearing marks where oxygen masks had fitted around noses and chins. To a man, they looked weary.

Most of the pens were occupied now, groundcrew moving purposefully around the resident aircraft. But the sergeants noticed that one pen was empty. Two men stood outside, heads turned to the south east.

It was just after 12.30pm.

Jack threw his gloves into a seat and turned to face the young man he'd followed into the dispersal hut, now perching on the edge of the Ops Desk.

'I'd seen Johnny with a 109 on his tail, so when I saw a Spit going down, I thought it must be him, until just now that is. I hope it wasn't Binky. He hasn't come back yet, has he?'

'No,' the officer replied, running a hand through his curly brown hair and preening his short moustache.

Flight Lieutenant Mike 'Muddy' Waters was the same age as Jack, 22, a Cranwell-trained officer with six months' front line experience, and already a flight commander.

'But there were other squadrons about, Jack.'

'Yes I know. Just have to wait and see. Could do without the loss of experience though, couldn't we?'

'I know. There's not many of us old stagers left.'

Yet again, Jack found it incredible that anyone could think of him, of them, as old stagers. Binky had said as much earlier. He hoped his friend's sense of foreboding hadn't been prophetic. When people began to believe something bad was about to happen, it often did.

Muddy continued, 'I'll speak to the CO and pick someone to take Binky's section. Just in case. And I think we'll have to take one of the new sergeants as well.'

'I thought you might say that. Poor bastards. Did you see them? They're looking shell-shocked already.'

'I know. I was hoping to leave them 'til tomorrow. I've had a look at their reports and neither of them has more than 15 hours on type. But what can we do? I'll take the older one.' He broke off to look at a piece of paper on the desk. 'Thomson, Sergeant Thomson. Not that age makes any difference up there.'

He looked at Jack, adopting a more sympathetic tone. 'How's Johnny Thwaite coping?'

Before Jack could answer, the CO came into the room followed by a noisy group of pilots, all jostling one another playfully, full of banter, as if they'd just come back from an enjoyable football match.

'Okay, Muddy. I suppose we'd better have a little chat,' the Squadron Commander said as he swept past the Ops Desk and disappeared into his office without breaking stride.

'Right, sir.' Muddy leapt playfully to attention, winked at Jack and followed the CO, closing the door behind him.

Squadron Leader Gerry Parr was their third CO in as many months, and the best. He was enthusiastic without being reckless, and he had good tactical awareness, unlike his two predecessors, who hadn't lasted long, partly because of their weakness in that area. Unfortunately, they'd taken some good men with them.

Jack would never understand why they brought in squadron commanders with little or no front line experience. Some had flown nothing but a desk for years. Why not promote the best flight commanders? It was the same with tactics. Why persist with old-fashioned vics of three, when they knew the Luftwaffe's pairs or 4s were much more efficient? But then, being only a humble sergeant, he wasn't paid to decide such things. It all seemed daft though, if not downright dangerous.

Anyway, Squadron Leader Parr was good. Jack just hoped he managed to stay healthy. They could do with some continuity.

His musing was ended by the sight of Johnny Thwaite walking into the hut. The thin, fair-haired, young man looked pale and distracted, almost stumbling, as if in a daze. There was no doubt he was trying, but he just wasn't cut out for this life, either physically or temperamentally.

Not for the first time that day, Jack felt both pity and concern. And right now, the young man needed support. But, although Jack was his section leader, he didn't think he was the best person to step in. He looked around and made eye contact with Piers, sitting on the edge of an armchair.

Unlike Johnny, Piers seemed to be revelling in the challenges of combat. He was also an astute young man, and Jack had to do no more than raise an eyebrow and nod towards Johnny for the other to nod in return and move off.

He watched Piers intercept his charge and turn him round to walk into the fresh air. 'Come on, old boy, let's find the NAAFI wagon and get a cup of tea.'

Nicely done, Jack thought. And I hope it works, because I don't think the day's over yet!

He jumped as the Ops Phone rang.

Aircraftman Hopkins reached for the large black handpiece, raised it to his ear, listened intently and put it back in its cradle. 'The NAAFI wagon's been delayed over the other side. Should be here in about 15 minutes.'

He ducked as a large book sailed over his head.

The phone had rung another half dozen times for relatively trivial reasons before Jack moved outside to try and escape its harsh trilling. He was unsuccessful. Even though its ring was now much quieter, it wasn't the volume that set his nerves on edge; it was the expectation, the fear of what its message would be.

It was hard to explain. Once airborne, he felt fine; more than that, he felt as if he was where he should be, where he belonged. He didn't forget the dangers. He just accepted them and got on with the job in hand.

But that wasn't the same as saying he wanted to go into combat. On the ground, waiting for the phone to ring, hearing it, then he felt fear.

There was another reason for moving outside today though. He was watching Piers and Johnny, sitting together on the grass, a little removed from the rest of the group. You wouldn't exactly describe it as an animated conversation, but they were talking, and Piers had even managed to get Johnny to smile on occasion.

It was strange how two people of similar age and background could react to events so differently. They were both 19 and boyish in appearance, but Piers, dark haired and handsome, looked relaxed and self-assured. He used his hands expressively and smiled frequently, whereas Johnny, although less ashen than before, still looked tired and strained, especially so when the phone rang.

Eventually, Piers clapped his friend on the back, rose and walked away, throwing a parting remark over his shoulder. Spotting Jack, he responded to another minimalist head movement and walked over, squatting on the grass next to his section leader's chair and lighting a cigarette.

‘He’s alright I think. He’s just having trouble sleeping and, well let’s face it, none of us knew what to expect did we?’

Piers raised the cigarette to his lips and Jack was surprised to see a slight tremor in his hand. There was also an underlying tension in his face that he hadn’t noticed before.

‘No. You’re right, but thank you. I thought it would be better if one of his friends had a chat, rather than me bumble over and put my foot in it. And how are you feeling?’

‘A bit tired actually, but,’ and he smiled disarmingly, dark eyes holding Jack’s in a firm gaze, ‘I’ll be fine.’

Jack believed him.

‘Okay. Thanks again. I think you’ll be arse-end Charlie for the next scramble as well, so just be ready. Keep those eyes moving.’

The arrival of lunch provided a chance for Jack to have a few words with Johnny, without making either of them feel too uncomfortable.

Afterwards, he remained concerned. The young man was edgier than Piers had admitted. But was it enough to take the matter further, to recommend resting him? If he did that, no matter how careful he was, he risked labelling Johnny as LMF – lacking moral fibre – and that would be grossly unfair. He just shouldn’t have been sent to a fighter squadron.

After agonising briefly, he decided to give the young officer another chance. So, he confined himself to offering a few gentle words of advice, before returning to his chair to shut his eyes for as long as the Luftwaffe would allow.

After several minutes of unproductive musing on the absence of Binky and the rest of the day’s events, he managed to drag his thoughts back to Gwen.

It had been just over a week ago, the second night of his 48-hour pass. He’d picked her up from her parents’ house on Barry Island, overlooking the docks. They’d known one another for years, been going out for three of them, and he knew that everyone, including Gwen, was expecting an engagement announcement soon.

She looked stunning, a Welsh beauty, raven hair falling down in waves to frame a face with a complexion as smooth and white as porcelain. She was wearing a white blouse, a dark skirt and heels, the combination serving to show off her curvy figure, at least until her mother intervened.

‘Don’t forget your coat. It’ll be chilly later.’

He’d tried to engage in some preliminary petting in the cinema, but to no avail. Gwen had been too determined to resist all but an arm around her shoulders and a few furtive pecks on the cheek.

‘Stop it, Jack. There’s too many people.’

So he’d manoeuvred her to somewhere much quieter: on the beach just in front of the western shelter on Whitmore Bay.

‘Come on, Gwen, it’s not cold. Let’s put our coats on the sand.’

‘All right, but not for long. I don’t know what’s got into you tonight.’

The war and the stark realisation of his own mortality; that was what had got into him. So many things he wanted to do before he died, and top of the list at that particular moment was make love to Gwen.

‘Look, Gwen, it’s a beautiful night. Come down here and look at the stars.’

He lay unthreateningly on his back, hands behind his head. It was a beautiful, starry night, the headlands to left and right silhouetted against the dark sky, their gun installations silent for the moment, their barrage balloons grounded.

‘It is lovely,’ she said in a soft tone, and he pictured her lips, sensuous and curved, free of lipstick but cherry red nonetheless.

He heard her lie next to him. ‘Why can’t you just work on the docks like your dad did?’

Because I joined the RAF, and I’m fighting in a war, he thought tetchily. She’d been asking a lot of similar questions in her letters.

‘I know, dear, I know. It’s just the war.’

He leaned over, placed an arm around her waist and kissed her before she could make further comment. Slightly to his surprise, she yielded to his embrace and he prolonged the kiss. Her lips were as soft as he’d imagined. He edged his hand upward. She tensed, but didn’t resist. His confidence grew and his heart raced.

He stroked her breasts through the thin material of her blouse. She emitted a contented sigh and her lips parted. He felt the tip of her tongue.....

Bugger!

There was no ignoring Hopkins’ shouts and the accompanying ringing of the ship’s bell, a memento of some vessel the Squadron had sunk in the last war.

‘Dragon scramble, one hundred plus bandits, angels fifteen, North Foreland. Dragon scramble.’

For the third time that day, Jack found himself racing across the grass.

As Alex’s train approached Paddington, concerns about his bravery or lack of it were eased into the background. Like many a Shropshire lad before him, he was marvelling at the sheer size of the capital. They’d hit the outskirts miles back. Hereford, Newport, Swindon and Reading were big, but this was something else.

After the visit to the RAF selection centre on Kingsway 18 months before, he should have been more blasé, but he was still overawed. It was a shame he wouldn’t get to see much of the city this time.

He stepped from the train into the grubby grandeur of Paddington station, slightly discomfited by the crush of people squeezing along the platform and into the main concourse. He’d have preferred to take a taxi, or walk, as he had on his last visit, but time was tight, and he found himself at the top of the steps leading to the Underground. After a slight hesitation, he plunged down.

The journey was pretty amazing. The unremitting crowds of people; the size of the brightly tiled spaces and pedestrian tunnels; the steeply sloping escalators and the depth to which they descended; the rush of air as the trains approached, and the screech as they halted alongside the platform; the jostling throng exiting and boarding; the crush once inside; the whirr of the motors; and the jarring acceleration that shot them into the dark at such speed. The whole experience was just so different from the sedate walk through Ludlow a few hours earlier.

And, to his eyes, when he climbed the final flight of stairs to the surface again, he could have been back in Paddington. But it was Victoria, and he set off to find his train.

They pulled out into the sunlight and Alex looked back, hoping that he’d get to visit the city again before too long, maybe even sample some of the night life. To the east, he

noticed swirling white patterns in the bright blue sky, as if a child had scribbled with a crayon. He tried to imagine what it must be like to be up there among – making - those vapour trails. But it was impossible.

His mood darkened again.

‘Dragon, this is Bastion, bandits angels one five, now in your twelve o’clock, approximately fifteen miles.’

‘Roger, Bastion, this is Dragon Leader, still looking.’

No time to get above the enemy this time, Jack thought. It would have to be a head-on attack. Not for the faint-hearted, but often very effective. Most bombers lacked frontal armour, so there was nothing but perspex between the crew and your bullets.

You still had to have energy though. If you met them in the climb, at slow speed, you’d be sitting ducks. The previous two COs had never grasped this fundamental point. Thankfully, this one had. With the help of a switched on Controller, he’d flown some weaving turns to position them with the sun behind, maybe even a thousand feet in hand.

Blue Section was at the rear again, the rest of the Squadron slightly above and ahead. Jack looked out to either side. Piers, weaving gently, appeared cool and confident, head and eyes in constant motion, but Johnny still looked pensive. Perhaps he shouldn’t have given him the benefit of the doubt. Too late now.

‘Okay Blue Two?’ he prodded.

Johnny managed a thumbs-up, but Jack sensed fear and confusion in his eyes. He was pondering whether there was anything else he could do, when he spotted a slight darkening beyond the Spitfires in front, like a fuzzy swarm of bees against the blue sky.

‘Dragon Leader, this is Blue Leader, possible bandits, 11 o’clock slightly high.’

‘Roger Blue Leader, thank you. Looking.’

They all loved the unhurried courtesy with which Squadron Leader Parr completed even the most fraught of exchanges. A great calming influence.

‘Dragon line abreast, line abreast, go.’

Jack felt the usual prickling of anticipation as he positioned his section to the left of the line. By the time he returned his gaze to the front, the nebulous swarm had become a rectangular phalanx of small black shapes. He was just about to make another report when the CO’s voice piped in.

‘Bastion, this is Dragon Leader, tally-ho, one hundred plus bandits, five miles, slightly low. Going in.’

‘Roger, Dragon Leader. Good luck, Bastion out.’

‘So here we are again,’ Jack said as he looked along the line, ‘twelve against a hundred.’

As on previous occasions, the odds did nothing but increase his resolve. Whether others felt the same he couldn’t say, but to his way of thinking, the more there were, the more they could shoot down. The CO obviously felt the same.

‘Dragon, in we go lads. Plenty to go round so don’t be greedy. Good luck.’

The nose of the CO’s aircraft dipped and they followed him into a shallow dive.

Jack could see only bombers, but the Snappers would be out there somewhere, all the more dangerous for not being seen. He looked behind. All clear. They were accelerating, closing at over 500 miles an hour. Things would happen fast.

How could he explain any of this to Gwen, and what would she make of it if he did?

He wound the wingspan of the Junkers 88s into the gunsight and positioned his thumb over the gun button. No tracer yet. The sun was a marvellous ally.

Jack picked a bomber and watched it grow behind the gunsight information projected onto the small glass circle in front of the bulletproof windscreen. Tracer shot ahead of other aircraft in the formation, but he forced himself to wait. Only when his bomber pilot was clearly visible, shouting at who knew what, did he open fire.

His airframe shuddered with the recoil and his rounds hit the target. To prevent his Spitfire doing the same, he pushed the stick. Dust and debris rose from the cockpit floor. The sky darkened, filled with the perspex nose of the bomber. He held his breath.

There was no impact, but a flash to his right suggested that not everyone had been so lucky. Collision was an ever-present danger at such high closing speeds, especially for the overly-brave, or the inexperienced. He turned his head. A Spitfire wing cart-wheeled out of a fireball.

‘Poor bastard.’

But even now, he found himself admiring the elegance of the wing as it dropped alongside the other debris. Whose was it? Surely Johnny Thwaite had been too far away? He jinked to throw off any attacking fighters and spotted his wingman’s Spitfire in a shallow dive to the right. His relief was short-lived. A Messerschmitt 109 was closing on it from behind.

For the second time in two missions, Jack shouted, ‘Break, Johnny, break, Snapper on your tail.’

Nothing. If Johnny had heard the warning, he was frozen into immobility.

‘Damn.’

Grunting against the g, Jack turned sharply right to engage the 109. Luckily its pilot seemed intent on stalking Johnny to the exclusion of all else. Keen not to make the same mistake, Jack looked round. Two 109s sat high to his right.

‘Better turn under them, Jack.’

But what about Johnny?

The Messerschmitt pilot leaned forward as if urging his machine to close more quickly. If he fired, he couldn’t miss the unsuspecting British pilot.

‘For fuck’s sake, Johnny, break right, Snapper on your tail.’

Perhaps the swearing broke the spell, but whatever it was, Johnny’s head swivelled and his Spitfire started a lazy turn to the right. It was far too sedate to throw off his pursuer, but it could buy some time as the Messerschmitt pilot adjusted his aim.

Still the German hadn’t looked to his left, and Jack was closing. He stole a quick glance above him.

‘Bugger.’

The two Messerschmitts were diving. His stomach cramped. He had to turn into them or he was dead meat. Probably too late to save Johnny anyway, and no-one would ever know. At least one of them might live to fight another day.

Disowning such cold logic, he rolled out of his turn and headed for his wingman’s pursuer. The distance was against him, but there was no more time. Estimating the lay off, Jack pressed the gun button.

The Messerschmitt flew into his line of tracer. Belatedly, the German’s head snapped left. Jack’s snapped right, just as his world tumbled.

By the time the taxi dropped Alex outside the main gates of RAF Biggin Hill, he was feeling nervous and lonely. He tried not to show it, but the response of the stick-thin, middle-aged, airman behind the guardroom desk did nothing to raise his spirits.

‘Sorry sir,’ he said, in a rasping, 60-a-day, Cockney accent. ‘We weren’t expecting you.’

Alex wasn’t surprised. He hadn’t known where he was going himself until 48 hours previously. He must have looked disappointed though, because the airman seemed moved to expand.

‘Don’t worry though, sir, it’s not you. We hardly get anybody we’re expecting these days. Especially pilots. Just turn up out of the blue, if you don’t mind the pun, sir?’

Alex smiled weakly, unsure what to do now. He sensed it was too late to arrive at his new squadron, and in any case he didn’t have to be there until 8.30 the next morning. So... His next question was pre-empted.

‘I’ll get a car to take you to the Officers’ Mess, sir, if that’s alright?’

Alex still wasn’t used to receiving deference from anyone, especially someone older.

‘Thank you, that’s very helpful.’

The next few minutes dragged interminably, and he was very glad when the car arrived. And thank goodness for the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force. The young WAAF driver was so much prettier than the leather-faced man in the Guardroom, and she seemed genuinely impressed that he was joining 646 Squadron. During the short drive, her warm smile raised his spirits, and made him blush.

The Officers’ Mess had the look of a large country house. Feeling out of his depth again, Alex waved farewell to his driver and stepped into a cavernous reception area, panelled in dark wood. Another young WAAF stood behind an impressive wooden counter.

‘Sorry, sir, we weren’t expecting you.’

Alex smiled. He sensed he was going to get used to those words.

‘If you’ll give me a minute though, sir, I’ll see what I can do.’

She was short and dark, a similar age to him, with a broad northern accent, possibly Lancashire or Yorkshire, but then again, possibly not. Until 15 months previously, he’d heard little beyond his own Shropshire burr; since, he’d heard a confusing array of accents. But, if it wasn’t Scouse, Brummie or Geordie, he was usually at a loss to identify it with any accuracy.

Putting his cases down, he strolled around looking at the pictures on the walls. Most were of silver biplanes flying past large country houses. They seemed to represent some long distant era, but the Hurricanes and Spitfires had only appeared over the last couple of years.

‘Sir?’

Alex turned. ‘Yes.’

‘I’ll put you in a room with Pilot Officer Barratt. He’s on 646 as well. I’ll get somebody to carry your bags and show you the way.’

‘Thank you.’ He gave the girl a grateful smile.

‘If you’d like to warn in, sir, I’ll go and find somebody.’

Alex took out his pen and wrote in the leather-bound Warning-In Book on the counter. Pilot Officer A E Lowe; warning in, from Dinner 24 August until further notice; Living in; Posted in.

That was it. He'd arrived. He doubted the rest of the process would be as painless.

The WAAF returned with an airman in tow. Without making eye contact or uttering a word, the young man walked towards Alex, picked up the cases, turned about, and set off. Alex thanked the receptionist and made off in pursuit.

Jack was trapped in a violent maelstrom, his body smashing painfully against every metal surface in the cockpit. It felt as if his Spitfire was tumbling through the air like the wing he'd seen earlier. His head and stomach were also spinning in confusion, the motion so disorientating that there were no visual clues beyond alternating light and dark.

Have I been unconscious? he thought. And if so, for how long?

The ground!

Fighting against the erratic g forces, and the urge to panic, he reached up and followed the cockpit arch to the canopy handle. He grabbed it and tugged. To his great relief, the canopy eased back and away.

'Bless you Brummie,' he thanked his airframe fitter for his pedantic greasing and polishing of the canopy rails.

His head was upright now. Glimpses of blue sky and dark earth flashed past. But the motion was still too violent to allow him to focus. Thoughts of the ground galvanised him again. He lowered his hand to locate and remove the seat harness pin.

What if the eccentric motion trapped him in his seat?

He needn't have worried. With the pin out, he shot from the cockpit like a champagne cork from a bottle. He carried on tumbling though, and imagined the ground rushing up to meet him. Keeping his right arm close to his body, he located the D-ring and pulled. There was a tremendous jolt and the parachute webbing dug into his groin.

A new fear. Would his violent motion wrap him up in the parachute lines and stop the canopy opening? But, remarkably quickly, he found himself comforted by a gentle swaying motion, and looked up to see the silk fully deployed above him.

He was bruised, confused and motion sick, but, miraculously, still alive. He was also higher than he'd feared, perhaps 3,000 feet. Even so, at the rate he'd been falling, he'd have been little more than 15 seconds from death. There were a couple of fires on the ground, perhaps the remains of his tumbling tomb, but once again, he was alone in the sky.

The hot sweat coating his body was cooling in the airflow. He shivered and wondered if anyone had seen what had happened. The impacts had felt like gunfire, but the dramatic results more like the aftermath of a collision. And what about Johnny?

'Come on Jack, no time for that.'

About 1,000 feet to go. Better get ready for touchdown. This was his first attempt at a parachute descent - they received no training - but he felt extremely lucky to be given the opportunity, whatever the outcome.

Light wind, so little drift, and it looked as if he was descending into a large field next to some farm buildings. Handy if he broke something when he hit the ground.

There was a large wood to his right, but he seemed to be well clear of it, and he'd be very unlucky to land in one of the trees dotting the hedgerows. There didn't seem to be any other obstacles.

At about 400 feet, he heard voices. Out to his left, a group of ten or 12 men were running towards him. He suddenly felt very vulnerable. Several thoughts collided. Had

German bombers crashed nearby; or could they see the German writing on his Mae West, a gift from Binky; and were they armed, ready to shoot first and make enquiries later?

He beamed a friendly smile and thought about shouting, but decided that his Welsh accent drifting on the air might do more harm than good. Better to hold his tongue until he was safely on the ground. On second thoughts, if he was knocked out and they read the writing on his Mae West....

‘RAF. Welsh. RAF.’

The grass came up fast and hit him hard. His legs crumpled, his chin hit his chest and he fell forward. He was winded, but didn’t seem to have broken anything. After a few seconds, he groaned and rolled onto his back.

A tall bearded man stood over him brandishing a fearsome pitchfork. Before Jack could gather enough breath to speak, the face broke into a broad smile.

‘Don’t look so worried, Taffy, we heard you the first time.’

‘You look a bit lost. Can I help?’

Alex had been ambling uncertainly down the corridor, following the smell of toast. He’d hoped to bump into someone eventually, but hadn’t expected it to be a tall young WAAF officer. As usual in the presence of a pretty girl, he felt himself blush.

‘Oh, Hello. Well yes. To tell the truth, I am a bit lost. I’ve only just arrived and I didn’t expect it to be quite so quiet.’

‘Isn’t always, but it seems to have turned into a really busy day, so the pilots are all over at the squadrons, or airborne of course.’

The voice was pure public school. Alex still felt self-conscious about his own accent, especially the rounded r’s he produced saying words like farm, bar or car. Not that the attractive young lady looked at all judgemental.

She continued. ‘They’re likely to be busy for some time yet I should think. Sophie Preston-Wright by the way. I work in the Sector Headquarters.’

She smiled and held out a pale, delicate, hand.

Alex felt himself blush even more deeply. He reached out and gave the hand a gentle squeeze.

‘Alex Lowe. Pleased to meet you. I’ve just been posted in to 646 Squadron.’

‘Oh well, you’ll soon find out what I mean by busy then.’

He thought he spotted a hint of pity in her tone, and in her eyes. Pretty grey eyes, shining from a thin face framed by short black hair. Why couldn’t he think of anything to say? Not just anything clever, but anything at all.

She seemed not to notice. ‘There were a few of us in for tea and toast, but it’s finished now I’m afraid. And I don’t suppose you’ll get another chance for a while, unless the weather breaks. Never many pilots in the Mess on a beautiful day like today. They’ll be quite late back as well I should think.’

They stood facing each other, Alex still trying to think of something to say.

‘Well, the anteroom is just round the corner on the right, if you don’t mind the smell of toast. Nice to meet you.’

And she was off, walking purposefully up the corridor.

‘Nice to meet you too,’ Alex shouted to her receding back.

He kicked himself for being so tongue-tied. He'd always been the same, but it had rarely seemed to matter so much before. Sophie Preston-Wright was a stunner, about his age or a bit older, and she must be all of five foot nine.

He walked on and looked in on the anteroom. It was comfortably furnished with dark wood coffee tables and plush leather armchairs, but it was depressingly empty, so he decided to retreat to his new room and unpack before dinner.

The ruddy cheeked farmer brushed off another of Jack's apologies for disrupting their routine.

'Don't worry. The lads here are only too glad of the break. Isn't that right lads?' He raised his glass in Jack's direction.

Jack acknowledged the cheers and gap-toothed grins. Most of 'the lads' were about 50 years old, more like a pirate crew than a group of farm labourers. But there was no doubting their contentment at his arrival, and the glasses of home made cider.

And he was enjoying himself as well, despite the discovery of a new bruise every time he moved. Not that he'd moved much since telephoning Biggin Hill. He was beginning to feel quite at home seated in a large carver in the stone-flagged kitchen. It was developing into quite a party.

Just as he was thinking that things could hardly be better under the circumstances, the farmer's short round wife appeared, bearing a plate of bread and ham.

It was always a bit nerve-wracking waiting to meet a new room-mate. Alex looked around at the utilitarian furnishings: two beds, two chests of drawers, two wardrobes, a table under the single window and two upright chairs. He was lounging on the bed that hadn't been covered in clothing, when the door opened. He jumped to his feet.

A young man entered. He was about Alex's age, blond-haired and blue-eyed as well, but several inches shorter, and with his left arm in a sling.

'Oh, hello,' he said cheerily, moving forward. 'Oliver Barratt, but everyone calls me Olly.'

'Alexander Lowe,' and, as they shook hands, 'Alex.'

'Welcome, Alex. I see you've managed to find somewhere to put your things. I hope I wasn't taking up too much room? I've been on my own for a couple of nights.'

'No, no, it was fine.'

'Are you staying or just passing through?'

'Staying I hope. I'm posted to 646 Squadron.'

'Ah, a jolly good choice if I may say so, old boy,' Olly said with a cut glass accent and a smile.

'Yes, the receptionist said you were on 646.'

'I am,' he said, looking down at his sling. 'Although I haven't been much use to them lately.'

'Is it painful?' Alex asked sympathetically.

'Not too bad now thanks,' the shorter man said, his mood darkening a little. 'A bit bloody frightening at the time though, I can tell you. Still, plenty of time for that.'

He looked up, smiling again as he changed the subject. 'What time do you have to report in the morning?'

'Not till eight thirty.'

‘Oh good. That’s when I’m pitching in. We’ll leave a message for Jenkins to wake us both at seven, if that’s all right with you?’

‘Sounds fine,’ Alex replied, relieved that more housekeeping details were falling into place.

‘Then I suppose I’ll have to put up with you being woken at four every morning.’

‘Is it that early?’

‘Fraid so, old boy, but Jenkins’s tea will wake you up, don’t you worry. Then you’ll meet the rest in the dining room and get transport over with them. But you can come with me tomorrow.’

Leaning back and patting his stomach, Jack smiled gratefully at the farmer’s wife. ‘Thank you, Mrs Cleaver, but I couldn’t eat another mouthful.’

He was overcome at their hospitality. While they’d continued to consume Farmer Cleaver’s stocks of cider, his wife had laid on a magnificent meal. And not only for him, but the pirate crew as well. Between them, they must have eaten the couple out of house and home.

The farmer raised his glass for another in what was turning out to be a long succession of toasts. ‘And here’s to Fighter Command.’

The dining room was almost empty and they had a table to themselves. Alex discovered that Olly had been only a few weeks ahead of him in training, and they discussed their experiences, even discovering some mutual friends and acquaintances.

Afterwards, they moved into the anteroom and settled back into leather armchairs, ordering beers from the white-jacketed steward. As the man walked away, Alex looked around, disappointed not to see Sophie Preston-Wright in this room either.

He decided to broach the subject of Olly’s sling. ‘You said you’d tell me how you ended up like that?’

His new friend rubbed his arm. ‘I did, didn’t I? Not a very gallant or glorious story I’m afraid.’

His youthful face became more serious than Alex had seen it to date. ‘It was a week ago, my third day on the Squadron. We’d flown twice the day before on convoy patrols, but hadn’t seen any action. On the third morning, we were scrambled to meet an incoming raid.

‘It’s funny, but if you’re like me, you’ll find that time moves really slowly when you’re waiting, and then it all happens too fast. One minute I was sitting there, then I was running across the grass, then in the air, then somebody shouted tally-ho, and I was heading into my first combat. Trouble was, my brain was still on the ground trying to catch up.’

The steward returned. They took their beers from the silver tray and thanked him as Olly signed his bar book. The man walked away and resumed his station by the anteroom door.

‘Cheers.’ Olly raised his glass and took a sip, before continuing. ‘My section leader says he saw a Messerschmitt 110, but I’ll have to take his word for it. I never saw anything, and it was all over before he could shout a warning.

‘It seems a shell hit my glycol and oil tanks and the engine seized pretty shortly afterwards. I was braced for more, but they only made the one pass, then high-tailed it. Classic fighter pilot stuff.’

‘So I was left with a stationary propeller, while the rest of the squadron carried on regardless. Never saw another aircraft for the rest of the trip. I was going to jump, but apart from the engine, everything else seemed fine, so I decided to stick with it.’

He lifted his sling an inch or two. ‘Might have been better under a broly I suppose. But who knows, could have broken my bloody neck?’

Alex smiled at the familiar jargon, and they both took another sip of beer.

‘Anyway, couldn’t see an airfield, so I picked a large field and headed for that. Went swimmingly until I touched down, wheels up so I didn’t flip over and all that. But I must have been going a bit fast, or landed a bit long, because I hit the far hedge, clipped a tree and spun round. Cracked my arm in the process.’

‘Luckily, there was no fire and I managed to get out. Just a few bruises apart from this. And the kite wasn’t too bad either, all things considered. The farmer was none too happy about his hedge, but you can’t please everyone, can you?’

He patted his arm again. ‘The Doc says I should have the sling off in a few days, and I could be back on ops next week. In the meantime, I nursemaid the new boys. Suspect I’ll be looking after you tomorrow.’

Good, Alex thought. It would be nice to see at least one familiar face.

Jack’s car had failed to arrive on time, and the farmer had opened more cider while they waited. Two hours later, with the vehicle and driver in the lane, they were all a little the worse for wear; all bar the farmer’s wife that is. Jack could see that her patience was wearing thin, guest or no guest.

In the lane, he steadied himself against the gatepost and, with as much formality as he could muster, said, ‘Thank you for your hospitality.’

‘That’s quite alright,’ the farmer replied.

Then, holding his hands up as if it was the first time he’d made the pun that evening, he giggled, ‘Drop in any time’.

Jack made to laugh, but the sight of the farmer’s wife rolling her eyes cut him short. She was unwilling to admonish her husband in front of a guest, but there’d be harsh words once he’d gone, of that Jack was sure.

‘I know, but thank you anyway,’ he persisted. ‘And especially you, Mrs Cleaver, for that marvellous meal.’ He bowed.

The charm worked and Mrs Cleaver managed a smile.

‘Just you keep givin’ it to them Gerries,’ Mr Cleaver sprayed through his bushy beard as Jack ducked into the car.

The couple moved into the lane and waved as the driver pulled away. Jack leaned out of the passenger window and, watching them recede into the gathering gloom, he waved in return.

There was a sudden commotion behind Alex. He turned to see a group of young men streaming noisily into the room. Olly rose from his chair, and he did the same, moving round to stand next to his room mate and face the newcomers.

A few acknowledged Olly and nodded at Alex as they passed the steward, inundating him with impatient orders for beer. They formed two distinct groups.

Olly leaned in towards Alex, 'Some are 646, but most are 32. Don't know many of them. You'll find we're pretty tribal, although I'm not sure whether I'm part of the tribe yet.'

As if in answer, a flight lieutenant with brown curly hair, a neat moustache and a pipe, shouted from the smaller group, 'Come on, Olly, come and join us, and bring your friend with you.'

Olly led them over.

'This is Alex Lowe. He'll be joining us tomorrow.'

There was a chorus of hellos.

'Hello,' Alex said self-consciously as he came to a halt next to the flight lieutenant. There were six in the group, a couple about his age, the others a few years older, but none beyond their early twenties he guessed. They looked dishevelled, their uniforms creased and their faces grubby, the darker haired sporting a hint of stubble. And despite their smiles, they all looked desperately tired, careworn beyond their years.

Was that what being in combat did to you?

He could sense them appraising him, but even as he blushed, he realised it wasn't his physical appearance they were interested in. They were asking the same questions he was asking of himself. Would he fit in? Did he have what it took? He felt the pressure ratchet up another notch.

'Are you coming down the pub, Olly?' one of the younger ones asked, breaking the silence with a marked antipodean twang.

'Not tonight, Smithy, thanks. Going to give the arm a rest.'

'A poor excuse, mate, but I'll let you off just this once.'

Given the time and the way they looked, Alex was amazed they were contemplating going out. The steward arrived with a tray of beer and there was a brief hiatus as they claimed their drinks.

The flight lieutenant raised his tankard. 'Welcome to 646 Squadron, Alex.'

The others, including Olly, followed suit, and Alex blushed in acknowledgement, noting that all but Olly took long draughts from their beers, sighing appreciatively as they lowered their glasses.

They weren't going to last long at that rate.

Formalities concluded, the rest of the group fell into more general chatter. After taking a long draw on his pipe and exhaling reflectively towards the ceiling, the flight lieutenant turned to Alex.

'The CO, Squadron Leader Parr, will speak to you tomorrow if he's got time, Alex, but I'm Mike Waters. I'm going to be your flight commander, for my sins.'

'Pleased to meet you, sir.'

'Never mind the sir, Alex, you're not in training now. Everyone calls me Muddy. You can do the same.'

'Sorry si.. Muddy.' They both smiled.

'How many hours have you got?'

'One hundred and eighty; one hundred and five solo,' Alex said with some pride.

'And on the Spit?'

'Thirteen.'

The flight commander drew on his pipe again, suddenly looking even more tired. He seemed to disappear into a reverie that Alex was reluctant to interrupt, but it lasted no more than a moment or two, and he snapped out of it as quickly as he'd drifted in.

'Well, that's good. Haven't had your reports yet. Probably won't see them for a day or two if past experience is anything to go by. Is there anything you think we should know?'

He took another long draught of beer, and Alex answered as honestly as he could. 'No, nothing really. I had a few problems with instrument flying and navigation early on, but nothing since then. I came out of advanced training as above average, and everything went pretty well at Aston Down.'

'Good. Unfortunately, you'll find we don't do things quite the way they do on the OTU, but you'll soon get the hang of it. Anyway, enough shop for one night. Apologies if I'm not around to say hello first thing tomorrow, but if it's anything like today, we'll probably be airborne when you pitch up.'

He drained his tankard. 'Anyway, good to have you aboard, Alex. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going for a bath before we hit the bright lights. You're welcome to join us if you like. If not, see you tomorrow.'

As he walked out, putting his tankard on the steward's tray, he shouted over his shoulder, 'Transport in thirty minutes.'

The others downed their beers and followed in a noisy gaggle, leaving Alex and Olly standing several yards from the 32 Squadron group. They'd settled into armchairs, as if preparing for a longer stay.

'Where do they get the stamina from? They all look absolutely bushed, and if they've got to be up at four again tomorrow...?'

'I know. I can't keep up, and I'm not flying three or four times a day. Or perhaps that's why I can't keep up. I think they just need to unwind, and it sounds as if they've had a hard day. You're not going with them then?'

Alex shrugged. 'No, I took it as a rhetorical invitation. But I'd certainly like to have found out about their day.'

'I know, but I'm not sure they'd tell you much until you're one of the group. I found that when I first arrived. But I've just discovered that a couple of the chaps are missing, section leaders both of them. And two others bought it this afternoon.'

'I'm glad I didn't ask then. No wonder they go out for a beer.'

'Yes. You'll be doing it yourself in a few days no doubt.' Olly drained his tankard. 'Now, I'm going to have one more before turning in. Would you like one?'

'Well, Sergeant Williams, you've picked up an impressive range of bruises, but I don't think anything's broken.'

Jack had sobered up a fair bit during the drive to Biggin Hill. Driving in the blackout was a sobering thing anyway, being driven even worse, and it had been a slow journey. The Medical Officer's thorough prodding had seen off any residual effects of the cider, apart from a slight headache.

'I think you might be alright tomorrow, but I suggest you get a good night's sleep at least and see how you are in the morning. I'll get a message to the squadron that you won't be in until nine; that'll give you time to get in touch if there's a problem. You'll be bloody stiff if nothing else. Get back to me if you can't face sitting in a cockpit for a few days.'

‘Thanks, Doc,’ Jack winced as he swung his legs off the bed. ‘But I’m sure I’ll be fine.’

He wasn’t sure at all, but a lie in would be welcome and, as the MO had said, he’d see how he felt in the morning.

It was 11 o’clock by the time he got to his room in the Sergeants’ Mess. He lay back and tried to ignore the loud snores and grunts of his roommates.

Was Binky similarly tucked up in the Officers’ Mess, he wondered?

Glossary and Abbreviations

Angels	Codeword preceding height in thousands of feet (eg, angels one five = 15,000 feet).
AOC	Air Officer Commanding – the Air Vice-Marshal commanding a Group.
Bandit	Enemy aircraft.
Buster	Full throttle.
Clock Code - twelve o'clock high, etc	The pilot imagines himself sitting at the centre of a clock face, with twelve o'clock dead ahead and three o'clock ninety degrees right, etc. He reports sightings accordingly (eg, bandits ten o'clock high = enemy aircraft 60 degrees left of the nose and above the horizon).
CO	Commanding Officer.
DFC	Distinguished Flying Cross – Medal awarded to officers in recognition of gallantry in the air.
DFM	Distinguished Flying Medal – Equivalent of DFC awarded to ranks other than officers.
Flight	Dragon squadron comprises two flights of six aircraft – A and B.
g	The effect of gravity on a pilot in a manoeuvre, making him feel heavier or lighter. Pulling 3g would make him feel three times his normal weight and drag blood from his brain. Pushing to 0g would make him feel weightless.
IntO	Intelligence Officer
Line Abreast	A formation in which aircraft fly side by side, their wingtips generally no more than a few yards apart.
Line Astern	A formation in which aircraft fly one behind the other.
MT	Mechanical Transport
NCO	Non-commissioned officer.
OTU	Operational Training Unit

Pancake	Return to base and land.
RDF	Radio Direction Finding – the early name for Radar.
Roger	Message heard and understood.
Section	Dragon’s flights each have two sections of three aircraft (eg A Flight comprises Red and Yellow Sections and B Flight, Green and Blue).
Snapper	Messerschmitt Bf109E.
Vic	A formation adopted by a section of three aircraft, the two wingmen sitting to either side of the tailplane of the leader.
Vector	Codeword preceding the course to steer in degrees (eg vector zero nine zero = steer a course of 090 degrees).
WAAF	Member of the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force.
Wilco	I will comply with your instructions.