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PETER GREGORY KICKED the door of the dispersal hut closed behind him with the heel of his boot. He sensed the iciness of the air outside but was too well wrapped to feel it on his skin. He looked up and saw a big moon hanging still, while ragged clouds flew past and broke up like smoke in the darkness. He began to waddle across the grass, each step won from the limits of movement permitted by the parachute that hung down behind as he bucked and tossed his way forward. He heard the clank of the corporal fitter's bicycle where it juddered over the ground to his right. The chain needed oiling, he noted; the man was in the wrong gear and a metal mudguard was catching on the tyre with a rhythmic slur as the wheel turned.

He could see the bulk of his plane ahead, large in the night, with the three-bladed propeller stopped at a poised diagonal, the convex sweep of the upper fuselage looking sleeker in the darkness than by day. The fitter dropped his bicycle to the ground. He made his way over in the light of a feeble torch which he gripped between his teeth as he helped, with both hands braced against his parachute, to push Gregory up on to the wing. Then he clambered up himself as Gregory hoisted a leg over the side of the cockpit and slithered down inside.

'God, it's cold,' said the fitter. 'My hands can't feel a thing. This north wind.'

Gregory switched on the instrument lighting and settled on to the sculpted metal seat, trying to make himself comfortable on his parachute.

The fitter was talking as Gregory's eyes went over the lit dials. 'My boy's got this cough. I don't know what I can do about it, stuck down here. Oxygen?'

The engine was started and the man was off the wing. He bobbed about underneath, then stood clear as Gregory ran up the engine before signalling him to pull out the chocks that held the plane against the wind. Gregory saw him hold up the torch when at last he straightened and picked up his fallen bicycle; he gave him a minute to pedal his way back to the fug of the blacked-out mess, to sweet tea and cigarettes. Then he opened the throttle and let the little plane creep forward across the grass, bouncing on plump wheels.

When he had taxied to the end of the strip, he turned the plane into the wind and waited. He shivered. With his bare fingers he was able to check the fixture of the oxygen and radio-transmitter leads in his headset. He inhaled the intoxicating smell of rotting rubber from his mask, then pulled the glove back on to his hand and grasped the stick between his knees.

The R/T barked in his ear – someone impatient to get to the barrel of beer he had seen being wheeled in that afternoon. The wind veered a little, due north, between the lines of hooded lamps on either side of the strip; it was making the plane toss like a small boat at anchor. Gregory checked the propeller was in fine pitch and opened the throttle. He moved forward.

Almost at once the tail lifted and he felt the controls firm up in his hand. The engine moaned, and the plane bumped its way down the strip, where the forces of wind and speed first lifted it, then dropped it back to earth. He sensed the wheels come clear, then felt the ground once more banging through his spine as a down-draught forced him back. He began to mutter through clenched jaws, cursing; then with a small inward movement of his fingers eased the stick and felt the earth gone as the plane rose up greedily on the air.

Two red lights showed that the wheels were up and locked away. Watching the compass with one eye, he set the plane in a gentle climbing turn to the left. At about ten thousand feet he ran into moist and choppy cloud, thicker and more turbulent than he had seen about the moon. He feared the plane's jolting movement as he nosed it upward: there was the sense of something else up there with them, another element

bearing down on the clean lines of his flight. His eyes ran along the rows of instruments. Flying by night was a violation of instinct; there were no steeples or bridges from which to take a bearing, no flash of wingtip or underbelly to show the vital presence of other aircraft. The Spitfire pilots' speed and daytime co-ordination were of no use: there were needles in glass jars and you had to trust them. Even when you swore you could feel the brush of treetops on the undercarriage, you must believe the altimeter's finger pointing at 10,000 feet.

As the thudding airscrew churned up the night, Gregory stretched inside his clothes. His feet were cold, despite the flying boots and two pairs of thick socks; he lifted them momentarily off the rudder bars and stamped them on the floor of the plane. Kilpatrick and Simmons had laughed when they came to fetch him to the mess after a flight one day and found him with his feet in a basin of hot water.

He was crossing the coast of England: chalk cliffs, sailing dinghies moored for better days, seaside towns with their whitewashed houses along the narrow streets that trickled down to wind-whipped fronts. When as a boy from India he had been sent to school by the English coast he had hated that wind and the blank sea with its baggy grey horizon.

This was the third time he had undertaken a similar flight, but it had taken him months to persuade his superiors that it was worth the risk. First there was the squadron commander, Landon, to convince; then there was Group HQ to be won over. The Senior Air Staff Officer told Landon he could not possibly risk losing a plane, let alone an experienced pilot, in such circumstances. Gregory was never quite sure what Landon had finally said to convince him.

He shook his head and rubbed his thighs with his hands. Beneath the fur-lined flying suit he wore a serge battledress, roll-necked sweater, pyjamas and a thick wool and silk aircrew vest. If at least his feet had been warm, that might have stopped his body heat from leaking out on to the frozen rudder bars. As the little plane ploughed onwards, the instruments telling their unexcited story, Gregory felt a *frisson* of unearned responsibility: alone, entrusted, above the world. Then he moved the stick forwards to begin his descent.

He had been to the town before the Germans came. A French pilot took him to a bar called the Guillaume Tell, where they drank champagne, then to another where they ordered beer. The evening ended at La Lune, which was a brothel, but the French pilot didn't seem to care about the girls. From Le Havre the squadron moved up the coast to Deauville and played golf.

When he dropped into the cloud, Gregory began to feel the familiar, unwanted sensation of such moments: someone would soon try to kill him. In Le Havre an anti-aircraft gunner, though he didn't yet know it himself, would concentrate only on this murder. When Gregory had experienced ground-fire from British and French batteries, who had wrongly identified his aircraft as German, it had made him aware that the plane was nothing more than a few pieces of airborne metal and wood. Anti-aircraft fire was different from fighter fire, though one thing was the same: a few inches from his eyes was a fuel tank waiting to explode.

Now he could make out the shape of docks, so far, the terrestrial world, beneath his boots; there were minimal lights, evidence of some defensive caution, but he could remember from his study of photographs where the oil tanks were. He put the plane into a leftward banking turn, wanting to gain height and gather himself for the dive. He reached the top of his shallow climb and checked his position, hanging in the icy air.

He was laughing, though he heard nothing above the engine; for one more moment he held the plane level, then opened the throttle and pushed the stick forward. He watched the airspeed indicator moving up: 340, 360. He was coming in too steep: he was nose-heavy, he felt he would go over. Then, when he could see the ground – industrial shadows, bulky darkness – he could gauge where his horizon was. He held the stick steady. Gravity was starting to push his eyes back into their sockets and he began to swear. He could see what he took to be the oil depot and twitched the rudder to align himself. At last there was some response from the ground: he saw red balls of tracer curving through the air like boiling fruit, lazy until they reached him, then whipping past

at the speed of light. Nothing was coming close to him. His thumb stroked the gun button, and when the ground was so near he could almost sense it through his seat, he let the cannon go.

He heard their sound, like ripping cloth, as he pulled the stick back violently to climb. He craned his neck, but could see no gratifying holocaust beneath him, not even isolated fires. When he thought he was out of range of ground defences, he slowed the rate of climb, and felt the pressure slip from his neck and shoulders. He throttled back a little as he headed out northwest towards the sea; there was sweat running down his spine.

He breathed in and dropped the speed again, safe above the Channel waters. He let the plane drift in a circle while he gathered himself and listened, but there was only the chugging engine and the slight whistle of wind through the airframe. His Hurricane carried four 20 mm Hispano cannons, known to their admirers as 'tank-busters', and four 250 lb bombs in place of its regular machine guns. He calculated that he had about half his ammunition left; he could not return to base with it and he could not fire it into the empty sky as he flew back.

He went round once more, making certain of his position, then began to lose height slowly. He pushed through the light cloud and picked up the outlines of the port below: he would flatten out along the harbour wall and fire as he turned to climb.

This time, the tracer started coming up at once, along the path of a weak searchlight. Gregory opened the throttle wider and closed his ears to the engine's screaming. The plane was juddering as he straightened out. He was so low that he could see the ground, and there were no oil tanks in view. He switched the button to fire and emptied the cannon at random in the direction of some parked lorries. Then he pulled back the stick and climbed as fast as he could. He saw the tracer again on his port wing; then the rudder kicked his feet and he knew he had been shot in the tail.

The tracer stopped coming for him. He looked down and saw a foaming black sea of welcome cloud. He started to level

out, then breathed in deeply and blew the air towards the windscreen. He tested the rudder, one way, then the other; it seemed to react quite normally – the blow to the tail had apparently done no damage.

The southern shore of England was ahead. At the airfield, there would be someone waiting for him at dispersal, with whisky if he wanted it. Nothing could hurt him. The others were dead, but he was untouchable.

It had become suddenly brighter. A mixture of elation and indifference to his own safety made him want to roll the plane upward, and he opened the throttle again: 320, 350, the needle said. He adjusted the tail trim: it responded. He pulled the stick back, gently, then harder till he felt the plane was vertical, hanging on the propeller. He pushed the stick over to the right and felt the aircraft go round. He stopped and pushed the stick back. The horizon was upside down in the night. He could see nothing, but he knew how the plane was flying. He pushed the stick forward, then over to the left, and rolled out.

He felt sick. Then he felt worse than sick: he felt disorientated. He did not know which way up he was; sudden clouds were covering up the light of the moon. He pulled the stick back to climb, but felt he was spinning; he was aware of the vastness of space around him and the little box in which he was plummeting.

Bloody Isaac, he was saying into his mouthpiece. Unless he could get a fix by a light or by some static point he did not know which way to push the stick. The tail must be more damaged than he had thought.

The plane bumped as it went into the cloud, and through the floor, though it must have been the canopy, Gregory briefly saw the moon. Craning his neck to keep the light in view, he brought the plane up and round on its axis. His back was aching with the pull and from the effort of keeping the moon in sight as he hauled the invisible horizon to where it should have been, the moon above, the ground below.

He dropped the speed and reset the altitude instruments, whose gyroscopes had been toppled by his roll. Something was wrong; although the rudder seemed to work, the weight

did not feel right. He set his course for the airfield and hoped the wind would let him land. Eventually he picked out the flarepath and brought his speed down to 150, then lowered the wheels. He slowed again for the flaps, turned in steeply and felt the crosswind hammering the plane as he reached up to open the hood. The rudder bars were shivering as the wind ran through the damaged tail; below him, Gregory could see the pale runway lamps as they lurched from side to side. He sank the plane down gently, but it kicked and rose on the wind, out towards the edge of the field. He pushed open the throttle and began to climb again. This time he came in from a different angle and hit the ground hard. He held it down and braked.

He taxied to dispersal, ran the petrol out of the carburettor and switched off. He unstrapped himself and climbed out of the cockpit. As he stood on the wing he felt his legs tremble.

He walked over to the hut, pulling off his headset, running a hand back through his hair. There was the smell of a coke brazier; there was an anxious red face in the light.

‘How was it, Greg?’

‘It was cold.’