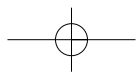
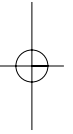
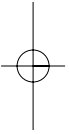


Part one

Lightfoot



One

Kit Curtis was awake before dawn. The small tent that, as flight lieutenant in command of B Flight, he shared with Keeble the intelligence officer was pitched close to a patch of camel thorn that, here and there, pushed its way through the stretch of hard grey limestone that served as the Photo Reconnaissance Unit's forward airfield. Close by was the ridge of Alam el Halfa and, ten miles to the north-west, within sight of the Mediterranean, lay the railway halt named by the Egyptians after a small hill crowned with two stone cairns that rose between the tracks and the sea: El Alamein.

The pink light of the rising sun filtered through the gaps in the tent flap, portent of another day flying alone and high in the desert sky, but for the moment Kit lay under the coarse blanket, shivering from the night cold. Keeble began to yawn and stretch. Then he pushed away his blankets and sat sideways on his bed, rubbing his face with his hands. 'Good grief, who'd imagine you could be this parky in the desert. What's the time?'

'Coming up to six.'

'Ops will have their targets from Wing by now.'

'Low-level stuff over Miteiriya Ridge again, no doubt. Rommel's chaps are well dug in there. Last trip, the flak batteries put on quite a show.'

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‘It’s the same all along the front, from the sea to the Qattara Depression. This is going to be the big one, Kit. There’ll be some fireworks when Monty finally lights the blue touchpaper.’

‘You’re the intelligence wallah, Tom. When is it going to be, do you think?’

‘Search me, old boy. When he believes we’re ready, I suppose.’

‘Is he as good as he seems to think he is?’

‘I certainly hope so. Otherwise we’re in the mire and Rommel will be in Cairo in a week. The word is, he’s already reserved a suite in Shepherd’s Hotel.’ Keeble pulled on his trousers and battledress jacket, his breath showing in the chill air. ‘I’m going in search of a cuppa. Want me to bring you one back?’

‘No, thanks. I’m going to check the kites.’ It was a small tradition in a Photo Reconnaissance Unit that a flight commander did this personally. ‘And then I’ve got to rustle up the chaps. This will be Porter’s first trip.’

‘Cause for concern?’

‘Not really. He’s done a tour on Blenheims, three hundred hours, and appears to have got the hang of Spits. Seems an unflappable type. You know, steady.’

The ground-crews were pulling away the camouflage netting from six of the unit’s ten Spitfire IVs. They were painted a uniform pale blue, emphasising the elegance of the design. It lent the machines an unwarlike appearance, as though decorated on the whim of a wealthy and eccentric aviatrix. At first glance, even in the cold dawn light, the PR Spitfires seemed almost frivolous. But then more careful scrutiny took in the matt roundels, dark blue and red, on fuselage and wings, confirming military purpose and steely intent; to pass unseen above the enemy and record his every move.

Some of the other pilots were already there: Kit was pleased to see it. As B Flight commander he had been encouraging them to take an interest in the work of the ground-crews. The work of a PRU was very different from that of an operational fighter

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squadron: no scrambles; no flying in formation, each man looking out for the other; no sudden and turbulent combat, the sky a confusion of wheeling aircraft, machine-gun bullets and cannon shells, spinning wreckage trailing smoke and fire, with the occasional drifting parachutes but, most often, men trapped in their cockpits, suffering the torment of a long descent enveloped by flames.

Those who had survived another combat sortie chose their own ways to unwind, to release the tension. This did not include, generally, involving themselves in the preparation of their machines. They trusted the airmen who were trained for the task, and anyway – who knew what tomorrow might bring? Life was too short to brood about the complexities of preparing such a machine for flight. A pilot's routine external inspection and cockpit check before take-off were rigorous enough, surely? Why turn yourself into a mechanic? And on readiness, pretending to read the *Daily Mirror*, waiting for the duty corporal to ring the bell that signalled action, you had other things on your mind, more immediate concerns, like whether you had remembered to prop up that envelope by your bed in the billet, where it could be easily seen, or was that rabbit's foot presented to you by the little WAAF driver safely tucked inside the pocket of your Irvin jacket?

For the PR man, as Kit had quickly discovered, there was more time. You had your targets, you devised your own flight plan and dealt with them in whatever order you wished. You flew alone, navigating your way to your objective in silence, sometimes at fifty feet, sometimes at thirty thousand. You did not use your radio-telephone except perhaps when taking off or landing. In distress, away from your base, you stayed silent. To betray your position meant the enemy would be on you in minutes. And there was nothing to be done, no comrade close by to come to your aid. You flew unarmed, your wings stripped of armament. Instead, two cameras were mounted in the belly of your machine,

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recording shot by shot dispositions of enemy troops, tank movements, runways, oilfields, factories, shipping. The cameras were bulky but still lighter than Brownings so your supercharged Merlin engine could power you through the air 50 mph faster than your combat counterpart. That, and vigilance, was your only defence.

It took a cool and steady head, a different kind of courage, the ability to be methodical, determined, thorough. That was why Kit required his flight to take an interest in the ground-crew's work, not to interfere but to understand, so that when the engine faltered far from home, or the controls grew stiff and unresponsive, or some other fault began to show, and your heart missed a beat or two, poised alone above a hostile land, you had a better chance to do something that might, just might make the difference between life and death. But of course such moments for those whose luck, it was said in the mess, had run out, or whose number, it was agreed over a beer or two, had come up, quickly passed into fading memory with no comrades to witness their fate, and no one to hear any last words they might speak over the R/T.

Now, in the half-light, the airmen were already moving over and round the fighters with a quiet deliberation, working through the list of tasks on the daily inspection form. 'Everything in order, Flight?' said Kit.

Flight Sergeant Matthews nodded. 'We'll have the DIs done in thirty minutes, sir. When's the first take-off?'

'Don't know yet. I'm on my way to the flight tent now.' Kit saw Porter, the Blenheim man, and went across. 'All set?'

'Sure,' said Porter, not looking him in the eye, and Kit felt a flash of irritation. The sergeant pilot was smoking a Woodbine, the tip of the cigarette a tiny red glow in the semi-darkness. He looked calm and undisturbed, older than his years, and Kit reminded himself that here was a man who had come through innumerable gatherings like this, preparing for a sortie on a bleak airfield in the faint light of dawn. No excuse for complacency though.

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‘Don’t forget,’ he said, ‘to make sure you get plenty of overlap when you press the tit, so the photographic interpreters can get a handle on things. It takes a little patience, making certain, but you don’t want to come back without the coverage.’

‘Obviously,’ said Porter. ‘Any idea of targets?’

‘Not yet. When you’ve signed your kite’s DI, scoot across to the flight office. Pat Hallam, the ops officer, will have some gen for us by then.’

‘Okay. Seems straightforward enough. Bit ruddy parky though, isn’t it? Didn’t expect that.’

‘Colder still if you get a high-altitude trip. Though the Jerries do their best to keep things warm for us.’ Kit paused, and rubbed his hands. Porter’s cool detachment made him feel uneasy. He wanted to establish at least a vestige of rapport. ‘Remind me,’ he said, ‘where are you from?’

‘Chobham.’

‘Ah yes.’

‘Know it?’

Kit nodded. ‘Just down the road from Fair Oaks aerodrome. I trained there on Hurricanes for a while.’

Porter took a last drag on his cigarette, threw it down and ground it under the heel of his flying boot. ‘We lived a mile away. I used to cycle up to the airfield when I was a kid. That’s what got me started, tinkering around with engines. The Flying Club were a right bunch of toffee-nosed snobs, but one way and another I ended up behind the controls. Turned out I was a better ruddy pilot than the lot of them.’

The engine of one of the Spitfires was being run up by the ground-crew, its note hesitant at first before settling into a healthy bellow, the propeller raising a dust cloud that drifted over them, so they raised their hands to shield their faces. Then the engine died.

In the sudden silence Kit said: ‘This is a different game to the one you’ve been used to.’

‘Obviously,’ said Porter. He seemed to like the word.

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‘Think you’re going to settle to it?’

‘Why not? What idiot would moan about flying Spits for a living? Not that I didn’t get a bit of leg-pull from my mates when I volunteered. Load of bollocks about PRU meaning Pilots’ Rest Unit.’

Kit winced. It was not how he expected a new arrival to talk to his flight commander, particularly an NCO. And so far he had not been addressed as ‘sir’. Such things were important to him, not to be overdone but not ignored either. They spoke of discipline, efficiency and respect between the ranks, foundations on which the service was built, qualities that fostered team spirit, high morale and effectiveness in the air. He would tackle it later, and without equivocation, but now was not the time.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘we’ve all had these nonsenses. You can’t let it get to you.’

‘I don’t.’

‘Actually,’ said Kit, ‘people are beginning to understand what we’re up against. It’s not everyone’s cup of tea.’

‘Doesn’t worry me,’ said Porter. ‘They can think what they like.’

‘Did someone mention tea?’ It was one of the Canadians, his hands in his pockets, shoulders hunched up against the cold.

‘Hello, Cocky,’ said Kit.

‘So what have Wing got lined up for us today?’ said Cochrane. ‘That damned Miteiriya Ridge again, I’ll bet.’

‘Signed off your DI?’

‘Sure have. The boys have really got their fingers out this morning.’ The Canadian’s fair moustache showed white against his tan. He had flown low-level sorties over Tobruk when the seaport fell to Axis forces four months earlier, and had returned with pictures of massed Panzers advancing across the desert in miles-wide ranks as Rommel continued his push towards Egypt. He had also landed with flak holes in his machine.

Now he said: ‘Keen to get weaving, Sergeant?’ Porter had

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arrived by road the day before, giving the others no time to remember his name.

‘Oh yes,’ said Porter. His face was impassive but when he lit another cigarette, his hand trembled very slightly as he flicked his lighter. So, Kit reflected, Sergeant Porter wasn’t quite the man of steel he would have them believe. Nothing remarkable there, of course. Even second-tour men got the jitters.

Cochrane had noticed too. ‘Piece of cake, old chum,’ he said in a kindly tone, but added, ‘as long as you don’t get Miteiriya Ridge.’

‘It’s all the same to me,’ grunted Porter.

Cochrane looked at Kit and raised his eyebrows. ‘Good show, Sergeant. Perhaps we can make sure you get the Ridge every time.’

In the flight tent, by the light of a paraffin lamp, Hallam the operations officer spread out his map on a trestle table. ‘Okay, gentlemen, your targets for today.’ He traced a wavering line running south from the coast. ‘For the new boy, our forward minefields. Concentrations of our forces here.’ His finger stabbed the fabric in a dozen places. ‘The opposition is gathered all the way from the El Taqa Plateau way down here, to Mersa el Hamza in the north, close enough to the sea for Rommel to go paddling. We’ve had reports of infantry movements everywhere, from El Wishka to Bab el Qattara, and armour assembled in strength on a broad front. They know we’re coming but intelligence reports indicate that they don’t think we’re ready to mount an attack. They’re short on reliable gen because the brown jobs have got radio intercepts buttoned up and the Desert Air Force has been doing its stuff, knocking the Luftwaffe reconnaissance types out of the sky. What info the Jerries have gathered suggests to them, apparently, that Monty will not give the green light until the middle of November at the earliest, a month from now. What I can tell you fellows is that they have never been more wrong. A

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lot of important people are depending on you characters to come back with the goods, and a lot of lives depend on it. Now here are your objectives.'

Kit took the list of a dozen names and Hallam stepped back out of the light. The pilots leaned in, like gamblers round a croupier's table, as Kit identified the targets on the map and allocated two or three to each man: El Daba, Deir el Dhib, Tel el Eisa, El Mreir, Tel el Makh Khad . . .

'And Miteiriya Ridge?' murmured Cochrane, close to Kit. 'Our new recruit seems keen.'

But Kit did not smile. 'I'll take that. I know the score.'

There was time for a mug of tea and hash beef and eggs. The sun was higher now, a trembling blood-red globe, and the first flies were gathering, blackening the exposed food in the mess tent. Kit sat at the bare wooden table with Tom Keeble, Cochrane, Porter and Johnny Grimshaw, the flight's free spirit, who had once, beating up his fighter base in Kent, shattered the propeller of his Hurricane on the control tower masts and landed, wheels up, on a runway under repair. Jumping from the cockpit he had been confronted by his commanding officer. 'Good afternoon, sir,' Grimshaw had said. 'Meet Mr Grimshaw, ex-RAF.'

At the court martial he had escaped with loss of seniority and a severe reprimand, and had promised to behave. When he volunteered for photo reconnaissance, his squadron leader had endorsed his application with obvious satisfaction saying: 'At least there, the only neck you'll be responsible for breaking is your own.'

Now Grimshaw stretched out a hand to Porter. 'Greetings, old boy. We haven't been properly introduced. Greasy Grimshaw.'

'Greasy?' said Porter.

'The chaps reckon I'm a bit of a scruff-bag, but I say what's the point of sprogging yourself up in this benighted country? I scrub up all right in Cairo.'

'Yeah, we know about you in Cairo,' said Cochrane. He turned to Porter. 'This is the clot who was told the prossies

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there practised oral sex. "Christ," says our Greasy, "I want to do it, not talk about it".'

'Utter rot, of course,' said Grimshaw. 'I don't need to pay for crumpet. Women flock round me like flies.'

'Correction,' said Cochrane. 'It's flies that flock round you like flies.' He turned to Porter, who was stubbing out a cigarette on his plate. The hot ash fizzed as it burned into the grease. 'So, Blenheims then?'

'Anything wrong with that?'

'Not a thing, brother, not a thing.' A crooked grin. 'Though I've never been much interested in twins myself.'

'Bloody good kites, actually,' said Porter. 'Can't expect a fighter boy to agree, of course.'

'Oh, I agree all right. Keep your shirt on, old sport. Anyway, you're a fighter boy yourself now.'

'Flying a Spit doesn't make me a fighter boy. This is a different game. The aeroplane might be the same, but it seems to me it's no place for tally-ho types. I reckon PR calls for a bit of maturity and commonsense. That's why I chose to get involved.'

'Really?' said Cochrane. 'Well, we're sure as hell glad to have you on board, Sergeant. I know we're all going to benefit from the experience.'

Porter's frown faded. He seemed pleased. 'Of course it works both ways,' he said. 'No doubt there's stuff I need to pick up, but I've got plenty of ideas of my own. I was known for it in my squadron.'

Kit listened in silence, sipping his tea slowly. 'All right, fellows,' he said finally, 'break it up. Time for us to take a look-see at what Jerry's been up to.'

As he walked back to his tent to prepare for the sortie, Tom Keeble fell in beside him. 'Trouble there, do you think?'

'Porter? Yes, a bit of a pain in the neck. I only hope he'll realise he's got to muck in with the rest of us, and do things our way. A few dodgy trips should sort him out. It usually does.'

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‘Still, be a pity if a member of the awkward squad put his oar in just when you’ve got the flight as you want it. The way things are, it’s very much to your credit.’

‘What are you getting at, Tom?’

‘The boys look up to you, you know. A reassuring presence. It counts for a lot, you having been through the mill: France, Malta, in the thick of it, and now here. They’ve all done their bit, of course, but none of them have been in it from the start.’

Kit did not reply, ducking his head to enter the tent.

‘The grapevine says they’ll be raising PR flights to squadron status at some point in the near future,’ said Keeble. ‘How does Squadron Leader Curtis sound?’

Kit turned, his flying helmet and goggles in his hand. ‘I don’t know who you’ve been talking to, Tom, but I’ll take things as they come, thanks. Always have.’

Keeble reddened, aware of the contrast between the man he shared quarters with, somewhat formal and reserved in an old-fashioned way, but always courteous and considerate, and the flight commander – single-minded, uncompromising, with a vitriolic tongue.

‘Well,’ he said awkwardly, ‘I’ll see you at take-off.’

Kit did not reply, and was not aware that Keeble had gone. But for a moment he allowed himself to think about A Flight, twenty miles away at Deir el Munassib, operating independently but, on paper at least, part of the same unit. A Flight was led by Percy Briggs, an amiable pre-war regular, his flying skills only average, his navigation fallible, often returning from a trip with a target missed and a thin excuse. To the junior pilots he was No Pix Percy, but he was well regarded by the senior ranks, lulled by his air of authority and reminiscences about the early days of photographic development at Heston. What Keeble did not know, because Kit had not told him, was that he already knew about the rumours of a squadron being formed. He had been alerted by Percy Briggs himself, in the bar of Shepherd’s Hotel. There,

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downing a whisky and signalling for another, Briggs had dropped a hint or two before the Johnnie Walker did its work, and he began to discuss the possibility as though it was accomplished fact.

‘How do you know all this?’ Kit had asked.

Briggs had tapped his nose, suggesting he enjoyed a confidence with his superiors up the line, and quickly made it plain that he also expected to take command. ‘Job for an old hand, my boy. Someone with chums in the right places, when strings need to be pulled. In a squadron’s interests, of course.’ He had smiled contentedly. ‘Ah yes, everything comes in time.’ Then he had added: ‘And when the time does come, Curtis, I know I can count on you.’

Kit remembered murmuring; ‘Of course, of course.’ But wondering: count on him for what?

Now, he amazed himself by thinking, even for a moment, about such petty considerations, at this time and place. It was a part of him he did not like, this need to compete, to put himself forward, to suggest, even in some subtle way, that he was better than the next man. But for a squadron to pass, almost by default, into the hands of a man like Percy Briggs would be hard to bear. More, it would be unjust. He wondered who he could talk to, on his next leave. Brewster, perhaps, his old CO in France and Malta, now a wing commander doing something with bombers at Heliopolis, just outside Cairo. Hardly playing the game, of course, but what was the alternative? Stand back, and let it happen, and find himself under the thumb of Percy Briggs, who was known to take credit for all successes and was equally quick to blame others for failures?

Feeling a stab of guilt at wasting time, he picked up the little writing board that, once settled in the cockpit, he would strap to his thigh, and scanned the four targets he had listed there in pencil. They were carefully printed in capitals, with precise directions: map references, topographical features, dispositions of flak

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positions, concentrations of Luftwaffe squadrons – the *Geschwader*. The entry for Miteiriya Ridge looked no different from the rest.

Down by the improvised runway Kit waved off his pilots, one by one. Another PR custom, for the flight commander to see his men safely in the air before setting off himself. No stirring sight of Spitfires, throttles on take-off boost, lifting away from the runway line abreast and wheeling in finger-four formation, before making a final pass and rising, armed and vigilant, to meet whatever might lie beyond the clouds. Instead, at irregular intervals, the single PR fighters taxied out and turned into wind, before climbing smoothly away, quickly gaining height and following different courses until, blue on blue, they were lost to sight. From that point only one man knew how a sortie went: the pilot who flew alone, isolated at the controls, ears ringing from the engine-roar, eyes flicking from his instruments to the unfriendly sky, checking his position, ticking off his objectives as he completed his photographic runs. He would not be heard from until, much later, he touched down. Though sometimes it did not happen that way. Instead, just silence, the others waiting for the telephone to ring to say their man had put down at a forward base, held up for some reason or another; short on fuel, ropey engine, flak damage to the controls or peppered by a free-hunt Messerschmitt 109. And when the telephone did not ring – well, that was that. Another man had vanished, fate unknown.

The ground-crew had run up the engine of the Spitfire IV Kit was to fly that day. It was shut down now but heat still radiated from beneath the cowlings. It was quite new, shipped out to Gibraltar on a carrier, then flown across the Straits to Egypt, at 30,000 feet to avoid detection. Kit had not taken the controls of this particular machine before. The flight did not believe in assigning pilots their personal aeroplanes.

He laid his parachute on the port wing, then began to walk slowly round the silent fighter with Flight Sergeant Matthews.

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The usual routine, but rigorous, as carefully carried out as that first time years ago, at flying training. In the air was not the place to spot or remedy a problem.

Kit checked the alignment of the panel screws, tapped the still-hot exhaust stubs with a knuckle, listening for an off-note that might suggest a crack, ran his hand over the surface of the propeller blades and tugged at them to assess the degree of movement. Wheels and tyres, brakes and undercarriage bay – all okay. Now the wings, the leading and trailing edges, top surface, ailerons, flaps – okay as well. Panels all secured. Tailwheel fine. On to the tailplane. Elevators and rudder moving full and free. He crouched down and looked along the fighter's belly, where the recessed twin F.52 cameras were located, facing vertically but very slightly angled to overlap the target and increase the field of coverage. Each was three foot tall with a magazine of film in place, and it seemed impossible that they should be contained in the slim fuselage of a Spitfire.

'Have the technicians done their stuff, Flight?'

'Cameras loaded and ready, sir.'

'Righty ho. Anything else I need to know?'

'Nothing reported, sir. Flying Officer Grimshaw flew her last. No complaints.'

Kit returned to the port side of his machine, made a small adjustment to the position of his parachute resting on the wing, then turned round and shrugged on the straps. He grunted as Matthews helped him pull them tight. Waddling clumsily now, he jabbed the right toe of his flying boot into the stirrup-step near the wing-root, pulled himself up onto the wing and stepped into the cockpit, wriggling down ready for the Sutton harness to be secured. He pulled on his helmet and goggles, plugging in the oxygen and radio leads, strapped the small writing board to his right thigh and pushed a map into a handy space near the hinged door. In front of him, on top of the instrument panel just behind the windscreen, the usual gunsight had been replaced

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with the control box for the cameras. It was odd at first, had taken some getting used to. On his early PR trips Kit, like all those with combat experience, had felt naked and exposed.

Matthews leaned in and helped him secure the heavy webbing of the Sutton. Then the NCO nodded, grinned, raised a thumb and jumped down from the wing.

Kit ran through the familiar cockpit procedure: battery check, radiator flap open, trim controls moving freely. He rotated the fuel tank lever to reserve, for starting, to confirm the flow. He would change it to main feed for take-off.

Outside, the airmen were gathered round the Spitfire, staring up. Twin green lights told Kit that the undercarriage was down and locked. He knew that, of course, but it confirmed the system was active. He scanned the flight and engine instruments, dormant now, soon to spring alive. He looked down at the waiting airmen and gave a thumbs-up, then opened the throttle half an inch and set the fuel mixture to weak. Brakes on, ignition switches on. He pressed the starter button. The engine churned and coughed. The propeller began to turn, in fitful bursts of power, flame and blue-white smoke gouting back from the exhaust stubs. He was sweating in the cockpit. He gave the priming pump two or three strokes to make sure the suction and delivery fuel pipes were full. He felt the sudden increase in resistance that told him they were. Then the Merlin caught, the airframe shaking to its song, the propeller a shimmering arc.

Kit jerked his thumb backwards to the ground-crew. Two men ran to the tailplane and perched themselves on the leading edges, legs dangling. He ran the engine up to take-off revs, stick hard back, brakes on, wheels still chocked, the airmen caught in a storm of sand and dirt and grit, arms across their faces, eyes and mouths firm shut. Again his attention focused on the engine instruments, looking for a drop in revs. It was a careful process, laborious even, no detail missed but it had helped to keep him alive through four years of war. Another check of the flying

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controls, rudder, ailerons, elevator, to ensure they were working to their full extent. He eased the revs and the airmen jumped off the tailplane, running on the crouch, spitting away the filth and wiping their mouths and eyes.

A final look round: cockpit hood locked back, emergency exit door set half-open. You never knew. Mixture rich now. Flaps up. Radiator shutter open. Propeller in fine pitch.

Kit gave the pushing, sideways sign for the ground-crew to remove the chocks and, freed and ready at last, he taxied out and turned into what little wind there was. He increased the throttle, and as the speed picked up there was a bounding lightness to the wheels as they skimmed the ground. He eased the stick forward a little, raising the tailwheel to achieve a level attitude, counteracting the torque of the 1,000-horsepower engine tugging him to the left with a coarse right rudder. He felt the lift beneath the flexing wings, and then the airfield fell away. Undercarriage retracted, he climbed quickly, at 170 mph. The sky was clear, a fathomless, unmarked, pleasing shade of blue, the sky you hoped for on an English summer holiday by the sea, but here lethal, offering no hiding place.

At 19,000 feet he throttled back and set a course for the Miteiriya Ridge. Better to get the tough one in the bag first. No point in snapping softer stuff, and then risk losing the lot to those damned Panzergrenadiers with their towed 37mm guns and heavier 88mm artillery pieces dug in on the Ridge, as deadly to aircraft as tanks. It was the heaviest concentration of batteries on the Front and, as the flight had soon discovered, the gun-crews were damnably good at their jobs, sharp-eyed, alert to the slightest murmur of an aero-engine, quick to pinpoint an intruder's altitude, whatever height it might come in, and adept at loosing rapid salvos of uncomfortably accurate fire. It had earned a reputation, Miteiriya Ridge. When they had first arrived at the Alam el Halfa forward field its very notoriety had appealed to the bolder, newer members of the flight, keen to make their

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mark and establish themselves as Miteiryia hands. Pip Elliott lasted less than a week, but at first Roy Bridger had seemed untouchable, following his own mysterious *modus operandi* – until he too disappeared. That shook the others and Kit, as flight commander, took it on.

Now, he began to gain altitude. He would make two runs across the Ridge, one on a north-easterly course, the other south-east. If he was still alive that would take him neatly towards his next target, a build-up of armour at Deir el Qatami. He already knew from his notes on the writing board what height was required, and what speed, to suit the focal length of the two cameras positioned behind him. Crisp, detailed prints were a matter of pride. When the moment came he would set the time interval on the control box to eight seconds, flying straight and steady, while the cameras recorded what lay below, each lens angled to provide 60 per cent of longitudinal overlap, missing nothing.

He could see the Ridge now, a smudge on the horizon. The dun-grey arid landscape passed slowly beneath his wings. No sign of habitation, a terrain suited only for war, valueless in itself, but its vast expanses the key to victory in North Africa. Soon the Allies and the Axis would be locked in combat on a line of battle that stretched from the waters of the Mediterranean to the immense, dead trough that was the Qattara Depression, the size of Wales, one-third salt marsh and all of it impassable to man, unless he rode a camel.

At 30,000 feet and growing close to his objective, Kit inclined his head to the right and looked back through the teardrop window in the cockpit hood. No sign of a telltale vapour trail that would have the crews of the Junker 88s racing to their positions, or yellow-nosed Messerschmitt Me-109Fs being scrambled from one of the Luftwaffe's Tunisian bases.

But soon enough, he knew, he would be seen, and flak would start to appear, small black puffs of smoke, innocuous-looking with a bright red core, exploding at pre-set heights with a muffled

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crump, filling the sky with keening shards of metal. That was the time to be steady, not deviate from the course, fight down the impulse to weave or climb or dive, not think, not think of anything but the task in hand.

He gulped in oxygen through his mask and narrowed his eyes against the glare, intense even behind the tinted lenses of his goggles. When he widened his eyes again, red blobs floated across his vision, then cleared. He glanced down at his instruments, the routine minute-by-minute check, almost unconsciously done. But always oil pressure first. And saw, with an intake of breath, that the needle on the vertical gauge showed only forty pounds, twenty less than normal. Instantly he throttled back. Oil was running back from the engine, down the port wing root and whipping off the trailing edge. No chance of Miteiriya Ridge now, or any other target. All he could do was try to reach the nearest friendly base or, failing that, bale out and let the machine destroy itself. To belly-land in the desert was not an option. The Front was fluid and a PR machine could not be allowed to fall into the hands of the enemy.

He pushed forward on the control column, to steepen his angle of descent. The engine was still available to him but he wanted to conserve its power, and use his height to put the Spitfire down. Besides, with oil pressure lower still, down to thirty pounds, and oil temperature climbing, the Merlin, if pressed too hard, could seize and, given his location, that would be the end. He reached out for the map stowed near the exit door. Alam el Halfa was out of the question. He needed to pancake now. The map confirmed what he already knew, that Deir el Munassib, home to A Flight and Percy Briggs, was his only hope. He permitted himself a wry smile, imagining Briggs's reaction, if he made it. 'Bad luck, old boy. But I'll get my lads to look at it. Now they *really* know their stuff.'

He completed a gentle turn on a course for Deir el Munassib. The altimeter needle was unwinding, not fast because he was

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using all his flying skill to conserve his height, but fast enough. He was down to 28,000 feet, whispering through the air. He fought against the instinct to ease back on the control column and increase the angle of attack. To tyro pilots it seemed like common sense to extend the glide by flattening out, but in fact, nose-high, an aeroplane's descent was steeper, faster, covering fewer miles and risked a stall. Yet still his gloved hand twitched on the stick. He remembered running low on petrol in his Riley Nine, on a Scottish car rally in 1936, the needle of the fuel gauge on reserve, the checkpoint twenty miles away; recalled the inclination to go faster, cover miles more quickly, when the proper course was to idle along in the highest gear. There was the suspense to contend with too; the uncertainty over whether that checkpoint could be reached or, as now, whether you might survive; the same impatience to know the outcome, of wanting it to be over.

At least he seemed to have the sky to himself; there were no distant black dots, growing more distinct, showing finally as a *Schwarm* of Jerry fighters. His airspeed was down to 120 mph. The oil pressure had sunk past twenty-six pounds and the engine temperature was rising fast, although he had opened the radiator shutter for maximum cooling

After fifteen minutes that seemed more like an hour, he made out marks on the desert floor, regular man-made patterns; patterns that, as he drew closer, became a runway, encircling perimeter roads, a scattering of tents, with here and there a few parked fighters, discernible under draped camouflage nets. Deir el Munassib.

No time for formalities. Only one opportunity to put her down. If he opened up to go round again, the engine would probably fail. He would stall, and spin in, powerless to do more than sit back and enjoy the accident, as a certain American pilot had once said.

He turned the machine to line up with the runway. With the engine on tickover the propeller was windmilling, barely under

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power, rotating in the passage of air. The cockpit hood was locked open, and he could smell burning oil and baked metal. His undercarriage was down, the green indicator lights bright against the dull grey of the instrument panel. He was approaching at 95 mph, controlling his airspeed with minute adjustments to the control column. He lowered the flaps and immediately his speed dropped. He wanted a slow landing, to cut the time it took him to stop and, if something went wrong, to reduce the effects of a crash.

He was closer to the ground now, aware in his peripheral vision of movement to his left, of vehicles setting off from the central knot of tents, trailing swirling clouds of dust. He was flying level, just above the runway, slower, slower with every second, approaching stalling speed, sinking foot by foot. He was holding the stick well back and the aircraft's nose was rising. Stick against his stomach now. Nothing to do but wait. At last the aircraft stalled and dropped the last few feet. He touched down, all three wheels meeting the scrubbed limestone surface simultaneously, a perfect three-point landing.

He allowed the Spitfire to roll some way before gently applying the brakes. The engine was still running, hesitant and uneven, spitting fire from the stub exhausts, and he shut it down quickly, to minimise further damage. Three vehicles had slid to a halt beside him – a fire tender, a battered Morris ambulance and a small Austin saloon. A corporal was quickly on the wing.

'Are you all right, sir?'

'What does it look like?'

'Well, you are and you aren't.'

'That about sums it up.'

'Flight Lieutenant Curtis, isn't it, sir? I recognise you from Helio.'

'What? Oh yes, Heliopolis.'

'Crikey. I can see your problem.' The corporal's feet were slipping on green-black oil.

'See if I saved the engine, will you? I did my best to get her

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down in one piece, but I think it might be cooked. Is Flight Lieutenant Briggs at home?’

‘He is, sir. Sent a car.’

Kit undid his harness, unplugged his oxygen and radio leads, placed his hands on the frame of the windscreen and pulled himself upright. He stepped out onto the wing and his feet slid on the oil, but the corporal caught his arm and steadied him. He snatched his arm away. He was consumed with anger, did not want to be touched, felt an unreasoning impulse to lash out.

Men had gathered round the tailplane, where oil was dripping from the fuselage and creating a widening pool in the dirt. ‘That’s where a lot of it collected, sir,’ said a sergeant, ‘forced back from the engine.’ They had the Spitfire’s engine cowling off. An airman shouted: ‘Looks like a fractured oil pipe, Sarge.’

‘That’s no good to me, Sergeant,’ said Kit. ‘I want a proper report and I want it double quick. Get to it. I need to fly this aeroplane back to Alam el Halfa, with the minimum of delay.’ He knew, when he said it, that he was asking for the impossible. But it was the last small influence he could apply to a thorough-going foul-up. ‘Now where do I find your flight commander?’

As the Austin squeaked to a halt outside the flight control tent, Percy Briggs looked up from some papers he was signing. ‘Hello, Curtis. I thought it was you.’

‘Will you tell your radio chaps to let my fellows know I’ve pancaked? Say I’m otherwise okay, and the kite’s in one piece. I’ll be in touch again as soon as I’ve got some up-to-date gen.’

‘Done all that, old boy.’ Briggs applied a final signature, and laid down his fountain pen. ‘Asked myself what I’d expect in your place.’ He nodded, smiling. ‘Anticipation. Staying one step ahead. Makes for an efficient outfit.’

‘Not up then?’ said Kit, jerking his head skywards.

‘Oh, I do a trip from time to time. But my chaps are pretty keen, you know. They’re more than happy to leave old Uncle at home.’ Briggs cleared his throat, and added quickly: ‘They’re well

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aware, of course, that I wouldn't ask them to do anything I'm not prepared to do myself. But you have to let the young bloods have their head. Besides,' he indicated the papers on his desk, 'I have certain requests from on high to deal with.'

'Really?' said Kit. 'Such as?'

'Can't tell you that, old boy.' Briggs turned the top page face down. 'Cup of tea?'

'You read my mind,' said Kit. 'Anticipation again, I suppose.'

Briggs looked at him doubtfully, but Kit was staring out through the tent flap. On the other side of the airfield men were busy about his machine. Minutes passed, as they drank their tea from tin mugs, and Briggs rearranged his documents. Kit allowed the silence to hang between them.

Finally, Briggs said: 'No more news about this squadron business?' It was less a statement, more a question, probing.

'I wouldn't know,' said Kit. 'The high-ups don't confide in me.'

'No,' said Briggs, recovering himself. 'I mean, there *is* no more news. And not likely to be until after Monty's big push.'

'So you have heard something,' said Kit innocently.

'Stands to sense.' Briggs paused, and changed the subject. 'It's funny, you know. I never thought I'd find myself in a shooting-war.'

'It's what one joins for, surely?'

'Of course.'

'Tell me,' said Kit. 'I'd like your opinion. Do you think our cause is just?'

'Odd question, Curtis, but yes, absolutely.'

'So how do you view our Bolshie chums? Gallant allies now, of course, but they'd still be at our throats, if Hitler hadn't done the dirty on them. What would we have been calling them then?'

'Not quite sure I get your drift, old boy.'

'Let's face it, everybody knows the Russians are doing frightful things to their own people. It's just as much a totalitarian state

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as Germany, but now we're required to turn a blind eye. It all seems rather different to how we started out, after France fell, alone, with the odds against us, and the slimmest chance of victory. Simple then. A very English war, with right unquestionably on our side. I think it suited us extremely well. But now, strange bedfellows, wouldn't you say? At the stroke of someone's pen, an enemy becomes a friend. For the moment at least.'

'You can't afford to be choosy if you want to win.'

'Ah, the pragmatic view. So you'd say God is still with us?'

'Why wouldn't He be? He understands. The greater good, and all that sort of thing.' Briggs shook his head, like a schoolmaster confronted with an ignoramus. 'You've got to be realistic, Curtis. Without the Soviets and Americans on our side, I reckon we'd have been for the high jump, whatever Winston said.' Briggs always used Churchill's Christian name, as though he had a direct line to Downing Street.

'Oh, I'm sure the Allies will prevail,' said Kit. 'Sheer weight of resources dictates that, although the cost is going to be very great. But who knows if it will be for the greater good, in the longer term? The Fascists must be beaten, no doubt of that. But what then? Who will win the peace, if there is a peace? The eagle or the bear? It won't be the lion, that's for sure.'

'You've lost me, old man. I don't concern myself with politics. I just do my duty. Quite honestly, I think you'd be well advised to do the same. No offence intended.' He leaned forward. 'Incidentally, talking of our Yankee brethren, I hear your chum Wolf is in hot water again.'

'Not exactly a chum.'

'Rum sort of cove, if you ask me. Rummer still when you hear what he's been up to. Upset a load of bigwigs on some sort of American junket to help the war effort. Apparently put the fear of God into a bunch of trainee pilots, just when they were about to sign on the dotted. Went down very badly with the powers-that-be.'

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‘Ah, them again,’ said Kit.

The thickset figure of the sergeant had detached itself from the group of airmen and was hurrying across the runway towards them. He came into the tent, his face streaked with grime, breathing hard, and saw Kit seated by Briggs’s desk. ‘It’s as we suspected, sir . . .’

‘I’ll take your report, Sergeant,’ said Briggs.

The sergeant swivelled on his heels. ‘Yes, sir. As we suspected. Fractured oil pipe, tank virtually empty, fourteen gallons gone.’ He glanced at Kit. ‘Me and the lads reckon that was quite a show of airmanship, sir, you getting her down like that.’

‘Thank you,’ said Kit.

‘I’m sure Flight Lieutenant Curtis doesn’t require your opinion about his flying skills,’ said Briggs.

‘No, sir,’ said the sergeant. ‘Sorry, sir.’

‘So what’s the verdict, Sergeant? Did I save the engine?’

‘Fraid not, sir. Metal in the filters.’

‘Damn.’

‘I’ll get one of our chaps to fly you over to Alam el Halfa in the Proctor,’ said Briggs, when the sergeant had gone.

‘Thanks awfully.’ Kit wondered, briefly, if he had treated Briggs quite fairly. ‘Pity about that engine,’ he said. ‘Blasted oil pipe fracturing like that. Nobody’s fault, of course.’

‘Perhaps you’re right,’ said Briggs.

‘There’s no perhaps about it.’

‘Still,’ said Briggs, ‘it might be worth checking out your other engines, when you get back, for signs of fatigue. It’s what I’d do.’ He patted Kit on the back. ‘Just a piece of friendly advice, old man.’

When the Proctor landed at Alam el Halfa, Kit was met by Tom Keeble.

‘Glad to see you back, Kit,’ the intelligence officer said. ‘Thought you were a goner.’

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'The engine is, but at least the kite's in one piece. Percy Briggs swears he'll have it back in commission in a matter of days.'

'He's got some good ground-crew boys over there.'

'Don't you start.'

'Some bad news, I'm afraid. One of the chaps hasn't turned up.'

'Who?'

'Sergeant Porter.'

'Christ, on his first trip?'

'Well, it happens.'

'No reports? Nothing spotted?'

'No, we've drawn a blank. Let's hope he's in the bag.'

'Fat lot of good to me. Not worth his ticket out here. I thought he was taking things too damned casually.'

Kit remembered Porter's easy assurance, smoking a Woodbine as the dawn came up, preparing for the sortie. 'This is a different game from the one you've been used to, Porter,' he'd said, and Porter, shrugging; had replied: 'Obviously.' What else might he have said to the man? 'For God's sake, Porter, don't be so damned complacent. Okay, so this is your first trip. But, for some chaps, it's been their last.' Now he said: 'What about the rest of them, Tom? Did they deliver the goods?'

'The magazines went into the dispatch rider's pouches fifteen minutes ago. They should be at processing already.'

'Without Miteiriya Ridge.'

'No, no, young Finlay was on standby. He covered that, when we heard you were on the deck. Landed full of himself, of course. Pretty good show though, you have to admit.'

'I'll tell him so,' said Kit.

'Another thing,' Keeble added. 'No ops until further notice. Wing says the mosaic's pretty well complete. We've covered every blasted foot of Rommel's territory.'

'Doesn't sound like Wing. They always ask for more.'

'Maybe it's significant.'

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‘Maybe,’ said Kit.

On his way back to the flight tent, he thought about Ossie Wolf. ‘Went down very badly with the powers-that-be.’ Yes, that sounded like Wolf. He marvelled that someone had thought it wise to involve him in some kind of stunt. Call it a morale-booster, call it helping the war effort, call it what you want. Stunt it clearly was, and the only stunts Ossie Wolf could be trusted with were at the controls of a fighter plane.

He also seemed to hear a thin voice in the great void that lay beyond the boundaries of the airfield. A voice from the morning, only hours ago: ‘Seems to me this is no place for tally-ho types. I reckon it calls for a bit of maturity and common sense.’ Sergeant Porter had not been given the chance to prove his point. Obviously . . .

In the flight tent Pat Hallam was reading a transcript of a radio message. He looked up and, without a word, passed it to Kit, who scanned it quickly. ‘When did this come in?’

‘A few minutes ago. The show’s on the road, or will be tonight. They’re calling it Operation Lightfoot.’

‘Appropriate, considering the number of minefields the brown jobs are going to have to pick their way through.’

‘They’ve chosen their time well – one day before a full moon. Gives the sappers a chance.’

‘Thank God I didn’t join the Army.’

‘Absolutely,’ said Kit. ‘Have you caught up with Montgomery’s Order of the Day? Turning point of the war, one of the decisive battles of history, watched by the eyes of the whole world, every officer and man to fight and to kill, and hit the enemy for six, right out of Africa.’

‘Stirring stuff.’

‘Touch facile, though, wouldn’t you say? That cricket analogy?’

‘Oh, I think you’re rather hard on the little man,’ said Hallam. ‘He may be prone to a touch of bullshit, but he makes no bones about what’s involved. In fact, he’s been accused of whipping up

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bloodlust among the men, so they go into battle wanting nothing more than to kill Germans. After all,' added Hallam, 'that's what we're here for.'

'Yes,' said Kit. 'Killing Germans. That's the game.' The game that Ossie Wolf had understood from the start, before the others had begun to realise that these were the rules you played by; when Kit had thought of deeds of arms, acquitting himself well, earning the respect of his comrades, proving his valour against a worthy foe; detesting the regime for which his opponent stood, but respecting a fellow pilot. He remembered a time in France in November 1939, when the squadron was sitting out the Phoney War on its makeshift airfield at Revigncourt, near Metz, not far from the Franco-German border, waiting for Hitler to make his move. A time when Wolf, still a sergeant pilot and with no kills to his name, had raged: 'While guys like you are flying round the fucking clouds like Sir Lancelot looking for the Holy Grail, down below the Krauts will be destroying civilisation. Wise up, buster. There's only one rule you need to remember: do it to him before the sonofabitch does it to you.' But then the American had the advantage on them all. He had fought for the Republicans in Spain and knew the score, before he had escaped to Britain and volunteered to fly for the RAF and continue his fight against the Fascists.

Now men were wiser, tempered by three years of war, and Kit reflected that, while Montgomery might not have approved of Ossie Wolf's language, he would certainly have supported the sentiment.

He remembered the last time he had seen Wolf, stalking down a corridor in the Air Ministry, his crumpled service cap set low over his eyes, his hands deep in his trouser pockets, seeming not to listen to the man at his shoulder, a major in the US Army Air Corps, who appeared to be cajoling him in some way. Ossie had barely paused.

'Hey, Curtis, how you doing?'

To Play The Fox

‘Okay, thanks. Just finished PR training.’

‘Photo reconnaissance? What in hell for?’

‘I’ll tell you some time.’

‘Know where they’re posting you?’

‘Oh, yes. And you?’

‘I’ll tell you some time. Well, see you around.’

‘Yes, as you say, see you around.’

That had been months ago. Now Kit looked at the Order of the Day, held lightly in his hand. It was dated 23 October 1942. Friday, he saw with some surprise. Autumn light would be washing over the green folds of Lynch Down, below the big house on the rim of its valley near Midhurst. His father, despite his stroke, would be with Ben, the Airedale, both of them aged and moving slowly, step for step. The weekend lay ahead, with its small traditions, the old man too frail in this busy season to more than watch a hired man clear the leaves or give the lawn a final cut; then a browse through the magazines and newspapers that had accumulated in the hall, unread; perhaps an English roast, a parody now with the joint no bigger than a child’s ball, but the beef aroma redolent of times past and, perhaps, of better times to come. So the routine went, the weekend preserved like some perpetual holiday, to be anticipated, planned for, a special time although, in reality, for Farve each day passed much as another. It was an illusion made real by custom, that suggested England had not changed so very much.

Pat Hallam was still extolling the fighting spirit of the Commander of the Eighth Army. ‘It’s even been reported that Monty told an officers’ meeting that padres should kill Germans too. One on weekdays, two on Sundays. Everybody hooted, I understand.’

Kit could not laugh, or smile. Death was stalking in the growing shadows of the desert, waiting for the killing game to start.