DELPHI CLASSICS

W. E. Johns

Collected Works



Series Fourteen

The Collected Works of

W. E. JOHNS

(1893-1968)



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The Delphi Classics Catalogue



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Version 1

The Collected Works of

W. E. JOHNS



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Collected Works of W. E. Johns



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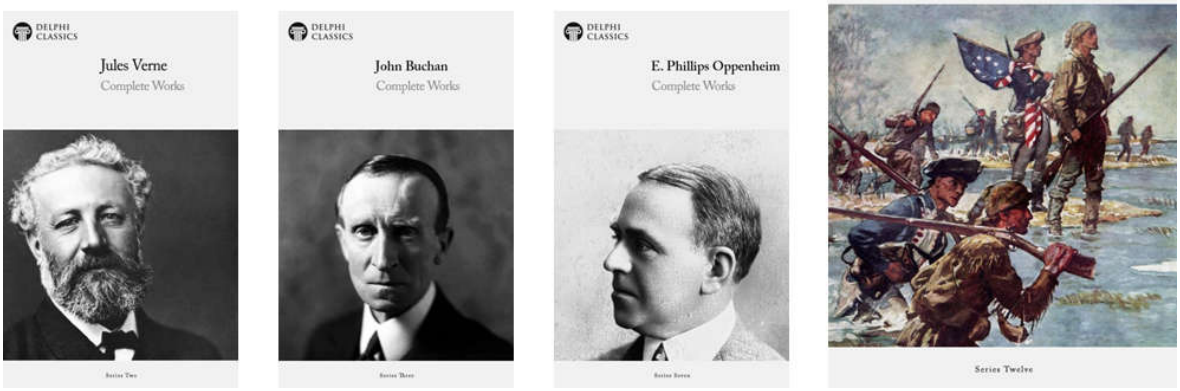
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DELPHI CLASSICS

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Classic Adventure



From classic yarns to pioneering science-fiction, explore the Delphi Classics range of Adventure novelists…

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The Biggles Books



Bengeo, a former village, now part of Hertford — W. E. Johns was born in Bengeo, the son of Richard Eastman Johns, a fabric tailor, and Elizabeth Earl, the daughter of a butcher.

The Camels are Coming (1932)



First published on 7 September 1932 this collection of seventeen short stories introduces us to "a slight, fair-haired, good-looking lad still in his teens, but an acting Flight-Commander" who goes by the name of James Bigglesworth, but is "commonly called Biggles". The first seven stories were originally published (for adults) in seven issues of *Popular Flying Magazine* from April until October 1932. The first six stories in this book were later included in *Biggles of the Special Air Police* published in September 1953 and the last eleven stories were included in *Biggles Pioneer Air Fighter* in November 1954.

Biggles first appears as a teenaged fighter pilot in the Royal Flying Corps during the First World War. He joined the RFC in 1916 at the age of 17, having conveniently 'lost' his birth certificate. He is characterised as a particularly British hero, combining professionalism with a gentlemanly air. Over the course of the series, developing under the stress of combat, he develops from a slightly hysterical youth prone to practical jokes to a calm, confident and competent leader. Johns was himself a First World War pilot, although his own career did not parallel that of Biggles closely. The author's initial war service was as an infantryman, fighting at Gallipoli and on the Macedonian front.

He was commissioned as a second lieutenant in September 1917, seconded to the Royal Flying Corps and posted back to England for flight training: Johns served as a flying instructor in England until August 1918, when he transferred to the Western Front. On 16 September 1918 his De Havilland DH4 was shot down on a bombing raid. His observer, Lieutenant Amey, was killed. Johns remained with the RAF until 1927. Several models on which the Biggles character might have been based have been suggested, including rugby player and WWI flying ace Cyril Lowe, fighter pilot Albert Ball and air commodore Arthur Bigsworth. Johns later stated that the character was a composite of many individuals in the RFC, including himself.

In the first story, 'The White Fokker' Biggles and his squadron set a trap for an enemy pilot who makes a habit of shooting down novice pilots, whilst in the last one, 'The Last Show', Biggles has started drinking heavily to help him get over a love affair and Major Mullen decides to post him home. Yet, Biggles wants to complete one last mission with 266 Squadron…

Of course it wasn't his last mission. Johns continued to write the adventures of Biggles until his death in June 1968. He wrote an additional 97 Biggles books, with a handful being published posthumously; altogether, if you count up the short stories and the full length novels that makes 274 stories in total, aside from Biggles' appearance in other books written by Johns. Over the course of those stories, despite being a little flexible with the timeline, he tracked Biggles from his very early years in *The Boy Biggles* and *Biggles Goes to School* through to his early years as a pilot to his adventures around the world *(Biggles in France*, *Biggles in Spain*, *Biggles in Borneo*, *Biggles in Mexico* etc.). The timings range from stories set in both World Wars, between the Wars and after the Second World War.

Critics admired the stories with one calling them, "rousing yarns of thrills," whilst another said, "Flying Officer Johns knows how to tell a story and each of the 17 episodes in the book are described in a manner which grips the reader". Whilst the quality over such a long running series will naturally vary, even towards the end of

the series critics were calling the books “a thrilling adventure that will be read by all the family”.

The literary adventures gave rise to further Biggles stories; on radio *The Air Adventures of Biggles* was produced and broadcast in Australia from 1945 to 1954. In 1948 Biggles made his debut on the BBC’s Children’s Hour and would appear on the BBC many times over the years. In 1960 the books were adapted for television by Granada, with Neville Whiting playing Biggles through 44 half-hour episodes. And they were the inspiration for the 1986 feature film *Biggles* that starred the marvellously cast Neil Dickson as the eponymous hero.



Possible model for the character of Biggles: Air Commodore Arthur Wellesley Bigsworth (1885-1961) was a pioneer aviator, who had a distinguished military career in the service of the British armed forces.



The first edition

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A front cover advertisement for the 1960 television series, with Neville Whiting playing Biggles



The 1986 film adaptation

FOREWORD



CAPTAIN JAMES BIGGLESWORTH is a fictitious character, yet he could have been found in any R.F.C. mess during those great days of 1917 and 1918 when air combat had become the order of the day and air duelling was a fine art. "Biggles," as I have said, did not exist under that name, yet he represents the spirit of the R.F.C. — daring and deadly when in the air, devil-may-care and debonair when on the ground.

To readers who are unfamiliar with the conditions that prevailed in the blue skies of France during the last two years of the War, it may seem unlikely that so many adventures could have fallen to the lot of one man. In those eventful years, every day — and I might almost say every hour — brought adventure, tragic or humorous, to the man in the air, and as we sat in our cockpits warming up our engines for the dawn "show", no one could say what the end of the day would bring, or whether he would be alive to see it.

Again, it may seem improbable that any one man could have been involved in so many hazardous undertakings, and yet survive. That may be true; sooner or later most War pilots met the inevitable fate of the flying fighter. I sometimes wonder how any of us survived, yet there were some who seemed to bear a charmed life. William Bishop, the British ace, Rene Fonck, the French ace and prince of air duellists, and, on the other side, Ernst Udet, and many others, fought hundreds of battles in the air and survived thousands of hours of deadly peril. Every day incredible deeds of heroism were performed by pilots whose names are unknown, and had the Victoria Cross been awarded consistently, hundreds instead of a few would have worn the coveted decoration.

Nowhere are the curious whims of Lady Luck so apparent as in the air. Lothar von Richthofen, brother of the famous ace, shot down forty British machines; he was killed in a simple cross-country flight shortly after the War. Nungesser, the French champion of forty-five air battles, was drowned, and McKeever, Canadian ace of thirty victories, was killed in a skidding motor-car. Captain "Jock" McKay of my Squadron survived three years air warfare, only to be killed by "archie" an hour before the Armistice was signed. Lieutenant A. E. Amey, who fought his first and last fight beside me, had not even unpacked his kit! I have spun into the ground out of control from 6,000 feet, yet I am alive to tell the tale. Gordon, of my Squadron, made a good landing, but bumped on an old road that ran across the aerodrome, turned turtle, and broke his neck.

Again, should the sceptic think I have been guilty of exaggeration, I would say that exaggeration is almost impossible where air combat is concerned. The terrific speed at which a dog-fight took place and the amazing manner in which machines appeared from nowhere, and could disappear, apparently into thin air, was so bewildering as to baffle description. It is beyond my ability to convey adequately the sensation of being one of ten or a dozen machines, zooming, whirling, and diving among the maze of pencil lines that marked the track of tracer bullets. One could not exaggerate the stunning horror of seeing two machines collide head-on a few yards away, and words have yet to be coined to express that tightening of the heart-strings that comes of seeing one of your own side roaring down in a sheet of flame. Seldom was any

attempt made by spectators to describe these things at the time; they were best forgotten.

It is not surprising that many strange incidents occurred, incidents which were never written down on combat reports, but were whispered "with wrinkled brows, with nods, and rolling eyes" in dim corners of the hangars while we were waiting for the order to start up or for the "late birds" to come home to roost. It was "H", a tall South African S.E. pilot who came in white-faced and told me that he had just shot down a Camel by mistake. It was the Camel pilot's fault. He playfully zoomed over the S.E., apparently out of sheer light-heartedness. "H" told me that he started shooting when he only saw the shadow; he turned and saw the red, white, and blue circles, but it was too late. He had already gripped the Bowden control and fired a burst of not more than five rounds. He had fired hundreds of rounds at enemy aircraft without hitting one, but the Camel fell in flames. He asked me if he should report it, and I, rightly or wrongly, said no, for nothing could bring the Camel back. "H" went West soon afterwards.

What of "T — L—" still in the Service, who was attacked by a Belgian scout? For ten minutes he endeavoured to escape, and then, exasperated, he turned and shot the Belgian down, narrowly escaping court-martial as a consequence. Almost everybody has heard the story told by Boelcke, the German ace — and he was a man to be believed — of how he once found a British machine with a dead crew flying a ghostly course amid the clouds. On another occasion he shot down an F.E. which, spinning viciously, threw its observer out behind the German lines and the pilot behind the British lines. What of the R.E.8 that landed perfectly behind our lines with pilot and observer stiff and stark in their cockpits! The R.E.8 was not an easy machine to land at any time, as those who flew it will bear witness.

Rene Fonck once shot down a German machine which threw out its pilot; machine and man fell straight through the middle of a formation of Spads below without touching one of them! The German pilot was Wissemann, who had just shot down Guynemer, Fonck's friend and brother ace, but he did not know that at the time. The coincidence is worth noting. Madon, another ace, once attacked a German two-seater at point-blank range — his usual method. A bullet struck the goggles off the Boche observer and sent them whirling into the air; Madon caught them on his wires and brought them home. When Warneford shot down his Zeppelin one of the crew jumped from the blazing airship, and after falling a distance generally believed to be about 200 feet, crashed through the roof of a convent and landed on a bed which had just been vacated by a nun. He lived to tell the tale. When it comes to pure coincidence the following tale goes rather farther than a fiction writer would dare to venture. It was told to me by the principal actors themselves shortly after they had been led into the prison camp where I was confined. They themselves were still finding the thing difficult to believe.

It came about through Pat Manley losing his propeller. For the benefit of the reader who is not conversant with air jargon, to lose one's propeller does not mean that it fell off, or anything like that. It is said to be "lost" when it stops turning round.

Pat Manley and Swayze were friends who joined the infantry and came over with the Canadian contingent. They were hit on the same day, went to different hospitals and completely lost touch with each other. A year later Pat, beetling around over the line in a Bristol Fighter, saw another Bristol going down under a cloud of enemy aircraft. He throttled back and put his nose down in a steep dive to join the party; but he was too late and he saw the other Bristol crash in a field.

Perceiving that no good purpose could be served by hanging around, Pat was about to make for a healthier quarter of the sky, when, as previously stated, he lost his propeller. Being very low he was unable to dive to get it back so he landed beside the crash, just in time to see Swayze crawl out. Thus, they were both taken prisoner within one minute of each other on the same field in France.

Here is another story which illustrates the sort of thing that could happen to a pilot in those days. It happened I believe to Carter, who told me the story when we were prisoners of war together. I see he is now commanding the Iraqian Air Force. He was a Camel pilot then, and was so tickled to death one day at finding a column of enemy troops on the march that he could not tear himself away from them.

He amused himself for a time by unloading his 20-lb. Cooper bombs on them, and when this began to pall he came lower and sprayed them with his gun. So fascinating did this pastime become, and so vastly entertaining were the antics of the warriors below in their frantic haste to remove themselves from the locality, that he quite failed to notice the telegraph wires which, as so often happens, accompanied the road on its winding way. He hit the wires at the bottom of a zoom and took them, together with a snapped-off post or two, for a short joy-ride. It was a pity he could not have given the troops a treat by taking them all the way home, but the Camel, not being designed for such work, gave up the ghost and spread itself over the landscape.

The tables now being somewhat turned, his erstwhile victims proceeded to amuse themselves by battering him to pulp with their rifle butts, a comparatively tame pursuit from which they were only compelled to desist by the arrival of a senior officer.

Carter was taken to the same hospital as the men he had wounded, where a state of affairs prevailed for the next week or so that can be better imagined than described!

One could go on with such stories indefinitely, but these should be sufficient to show that, in the air at least, truth is stranger than fiction.

Many of the adventures that are ascribed to Biggles did actually occur, and are true in their essential facts. Students of air history will have no difficulty in identifying them. In many cases the officers themselves are still alive and serving in the Royal Air Force.

Finally, I hope that from a perusal of these pages a younger generation of air fighters may learn something of the tricks of the trade, of the traps and pitfalls that beset the unwary, for I fear that many of the lessons which we learned in the hard school of war are being rapidly obscured by the mists of peace-time theory. In air-fighting, one week of war experience is worth a year of peace-time practice. In peace a man may make a mistake — and live. He may not even know of his mistake. If he makes that same mistake in war — he dies, unless it is his lucky day, in which case the error is so vividly brought to his notice that he is never guilty of it again.

No one can say just how he will react when, for the first time, he hears the flack! flack! flack! of bullets ripping through his machine. The sound has turned boys into grey-faced men, and even hardened campaigners who learnt their business on the ground have felt their lips turn dry.

In the following pages certain expressions occur from time to time in connection with the tactics of air combat which may seem to the layman to be out of proportion to their importance. For instance, he will read of “getting into the sun.” It is quite impossible for anybody who does not fly to realize what this means and how utterly impossible it is to see what is going on in that direction, particularly when the sun is low and one is flying west. To fly into the face of the setting sun can be uncomfortable at any time, but the strain of trying to peer into the glare, knowing that

it may discharge a squadron of death-spitting devils at any moment, becomes positive torture after a time; at least, I found it so.

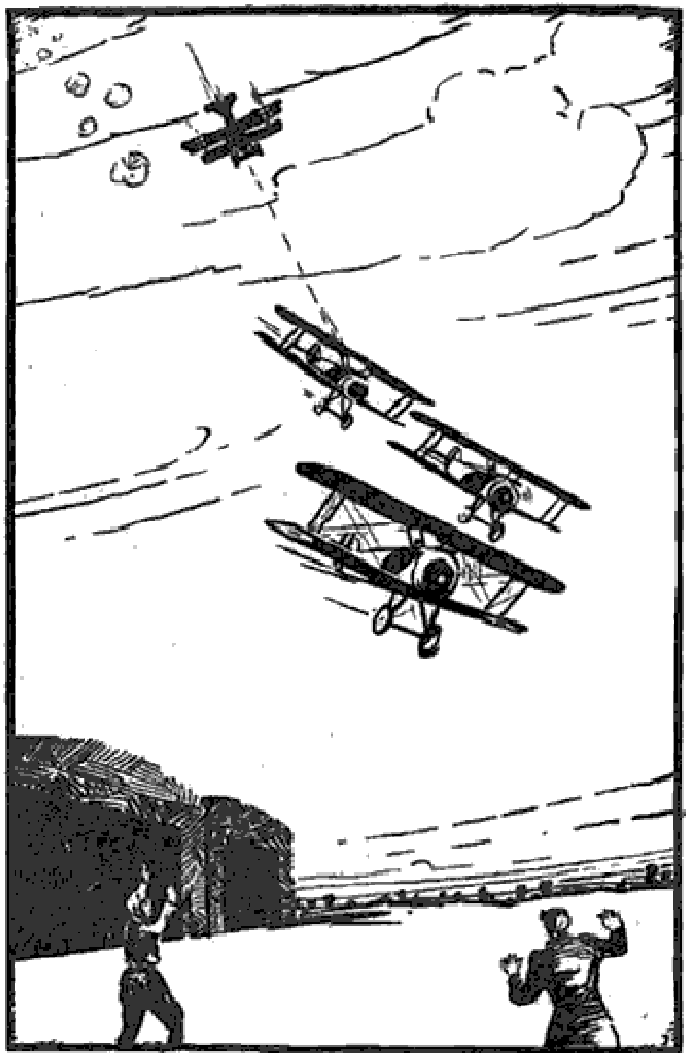
It should also be remembered that an aeroplane is an extremely small vehicle and difficult to see. When one is on the ground it is the noise of the engine that almost invariably first attracts attention, and but for the unmistakable tell-tale hum few would be seen at all. In the air, the roar of one's own engine drowns all other sound, and one is therefore dependent upon sight alone for detecting the presence of other aircraft. This fact should constantly be borne in mind when reading stories of the air, and particularly of air combat.

Constant reference is also made to "archie." Most people know by now that this was not an old friend whom we called by his Christian name. There was nothing friendly about archie. On the contrary, he often bit you when you were least expecting it, but on the whole his bark was worse than his bite. Archie was the war-pilot's nick-name for anti-aircraft gun-fire. During the War archie batteries stretched from the North Sea to the Swiss Frontier; his appearance in the sky was accepted as a matter of course, and dodging him was part of the daily round. After a time one became accustomed to it and ignored it unless it was very bad.

Lingfield, 1932. W. E.J.

CHAPTER I. “THE WHITE FOKKER”

TO THE CASUAL observer, the attitude of the little group of pilots clustered around the entrance of “B” Flight hangar was one of complete nonchalance. MacLaren, still wearing the tartans and glengarry of his regiment, a captain’s stars on his sleeve, squatted uncomfortably on an upturned chock. To a student of detail the steady spiral of smoke from the quickly-drawn cigarette, lighted before the last half was consumed, gave the lie to his bored expression. Quinan, his “maternity” tunic flapping open at the throat, hands thrust deep into the pockets of his slacks, leaning carelessly against the flimsy structure of the temporary hangar, gnawed the end of a dead match with slow deliberation. Swayne, bareheaded, the left shoulder of his tunic as black as ink with burnt castor oil, seated on an empty oil drum, was nervously plucking little tufts of wool from the tops of his sheepskin boots. Bigglesworth, popularly known as Biggles, a slight, fair-haired, good-looking lad still in his teens, but an acting Flight-Commander, was talking, not of wine or women as novelists would have us believe, but of a new fusee spring for a Vickers gun which would speed it up another hundred rounds a minute.



His deep-set hazel eyes were never still and held a glint of yellow fire that somehow seemed out of place in a pale face upon which the strain of war, and sight of sudden death, had already graven little lines. His hands, small and delicate as a girl's, fidgeted continually with the tunic fastening at his throat. He had killed a man not six hours before. He had killed six men during the past month — or was it a year? — he had forgotten. Time had become curiously telescoped lately. What did it matter, anyway? He knew he had to die some time and had long ago ceased to worry about it. His careless attitude suggested complete indifference, but the irritating little falsetto laugh which continually punctuated his tale betrayed the frayed condition of his nerves.

From the dim depths of the hangar half a dozen tousled-headed ack-emmas watched their officers furtively as they pretended to work on a war-scarred Camel. One habit all ranks had in common: every few seconds their eyes would study the western horizon long and anxiously. A visiting pilot would have known at once that the evening patrol was overdue. As a matter of fact, it should have been in ten minutes before.

"Here they come!" The words were sufficient to cause all further pretence to be abandoned; officers and men together were on their feet peering with hand-shaded eyes towards the setting sun whence came the rhythmic purr of rotary engines, still far away. Three specks became visible against the purple glow; a scarcely audible sigh was the only indication of the nervous tension that the appearance of the three machines had broken. The door of the Squadron office opened and Major Mullen, the C.O., came out. He would not have admitted that he too had shared the common anxiety, but he fell in line with the watchers on the tarmac to await the arrival of the overdue machines.

The three Camels were barely half a mile away, at not more than a 1,000 feet, when a new note became audible above the steady roar of the engines. It was the shrill scream of wind-torn wings and wires. Whoof! Whoof! Whoof! Three white puffs of smoke appeared high above the now gliding Camels. Bang! — Whoof! Bang! — Whoof! — the archie battery at the far end of the aerodrome took up the story. Not a man of the waiting group moved, but every eye shifted to a gleaming speck which had detached itself from the dark-blue vault above. A white-painted Fokker D.VII was coming down like a meteor behind the rearmost Camel. There was a glittering streak of tracer. The Camel staggered for a moment and then plunged straight to earth. At the rattle of guns the other two Camels opened their engines and half-rolled convulsively. The leader, first out, was round like a streak at the Fokker, which, pulling out of its dive, had shot up to 3,000 feet in one tremendous zoom, turned, and was streaking for the line. The stricken Camel hit the ground just inside the aerodrome; a sheet of flame leapt skywards.

From first to last the whole incident had occupied perhaps three seconds, during which time none of the spell-bound spectators on the tarmac had either moved or spoken. The C.O. recovered himself first, and with a bitter curse raced towards the Lewis gun mounted outside his office. Half-way he changed his mind and swung round towards the blazing Camel in the wake of the flying ambulance only to stop dead, throw up his hands with a despairing gesture, and turn again towards the hangar.

"Get out, you fool; where the hell do you think you are going — he's home by now," he snapped at Bigglesworth, who was feverishly clambering, cap and goggles-less, into a Camel.

As the two surviving Camels taxied in, a babble of voices broke loose. Mahoney, who had led the flight, leaned swaying for a moment against the fuselage of his

machine. His lips moved, but no sound came; he seemed to be making a tremendous effort to pull himself together. His eyes roved round the aerodrome to identify the pilot of the other Camel. Manley, half-falling out of the cockpit of the other machine, hurried towards him. "All right, old lad, take it easy, it wasn't your fault," he said quickly. Mahoney's lips continued to move as he struggled to speak. "It was Norman — poor little devil! First time over, too — the damn swine — he didn't give him a chance — not a b — —" His voice rose to shrill crescendo.

"Stop that!" cut in the C.O. quickly, and then more quietly, "Steady, Mahoney." For a moment the Flight-Commander and his Commanding Officer eyed each other grimly. Mahoney's eyes fell first. Slowly he took off his sidcot and threw it on the ground with studied deliberation. Cap and goggles followed, leaving that part of his face which they had protected like a white mask.

"Officers in the Orderly Room, please," said the C.O., turning on his heel. Mahoney lit a cigarette and followed the little group moving towards the Squadron office.

"Sit down, everybody," began Major Mullen. "A bad show. I blame no one. Anybody could have been caught the same way. It might have been me, or it might have been you, Mahoney. From some points of view it was a low-down trick; from others, well, it was a smart piece of work; anyway, the fellow was within his rights. He's done it before, farther north; I've heard about it. He did it three times at 197 Squadron, once as they were taking off. He'll try it again, and if he pulls it off again here it's our own funeral. We've had our lesson. We'll get him; we've *got* to get him. You know the unwritten law about having an officer shot down on his own aerodrome? We can't show our faces in another mess until we *do* get him. You know what Wing will say about this. That's all. Go and get a drink, Mahoney. I'll see Flight-Commanders here in half an hour."

* * * * *

An hour later Major Mullen was running over the result of the conference. "I think Mahoney's right," he said. "The Fokker probably came over the line at eighteen or twenty thousand with his engine off. He must have been watching you all the time, Mahoney. He knew that you were at the end of the patrol and hadn't enough juice left to go back after him. All right, then. Mahoney, you'll take the patrol in the morning; come back in the ordinary way when it's over. Bigglesworth, you'll take your Flight to the ceiling. Hang around over Mossyface Wood until you see Mahoney coming back and then follow him home. Stay as high as you can and don't take your eyes off Mahoney's Flight for a moment. If the Fokker comes down, one of you should get him. If he doesn't show up, we'll keep it up until he does. It means long hours, but we can't help that. All clear? Good. Let's go and eat."

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The following morning Mahoney was bringing his Flight back by way of Mossyface Wood as arranged. His altimeter registered 10,000 feet, Often he leaned back in his cockpit and studied the sky above him long and earnestly for a sign of Bigglesworth's Flight, but a film of cirrus cloud far above concealed everything beyond it. Against that cloud a machine would show up like a fly on a white ceiling; his roving eyes searched it, section by section, from horizon to horizon, but not a speck broke its pristine surface. At 6.30 he turned his nose for home according to plan, maintaining his height until he reached the line and only taking his eyes from aloft to see that

Manley and Forrest in the other two Camels were in place. He crossed the line in the inevitable flurry of archie, and started a long glide towards the aerodrome. A cluster of black archie bursts far away to the north showed where some allied machines were moving; there was apparently nothing else in the sky, yet he felt uneasy. What was the other side of that cloud? He wished he could see. Every fibre of his war-tried airman's instinct reacted against that opaque curtain. He flew with his eyes ever turned upwards. Suddenly he caught his breath. For a fraction of a second a black spot had appeared against the cloud and disappeared again almost before he could fasten his eyes on it. Keeping his eyes on the spot he raised his left arm, shook his wings, opened up his engine, and warmed his guns with a short burst. What was going on up there? He was soon to know. A machine, whether friend or foe he could not tell, wrapped in a sheet of flame, hurtled downwards through the cloud into oblivion, leaving a long plume of black smoke in its wake. Mahoney stiffened in his seat. Next came a Camel spinning wildly out of control. Then another Camel, streaking for home, followed by five Fokkers. Mahoney muttered a curse through his clenched teeth and swung round and up in a wide arc, knowing as he did so that he could never get up to the Fokkers in time to help the Camel, now crossing the line at a speed which threatened to take its wings off. A barrage of archie appeared between the Fokkers and the Camel, and the black-crossed machines, after a moment's hesitation, turned and dived for home. Mahoney raced after the solitary Camel, whose pilot, seeing him coming, throttled back to wait for him.

They landed together and the C.O. ran out to meet them. Bigglesworth, the pilot of the lone Camel, was out first. "I've lost Swayne and Maddison," he said grimly, as the others joined him. "I've lost Swayne and Maddison," he repeated. "I've lost Swayne and Maddison, can't you hear me?" he said yet again. "What the hell are you looking at me like that for?"

"Nobody's looking at you, Biggles," broke in the C.O. "Take it steady and tell us what happened."

Biggles groped for his cigarette case. "We're boobs," he muttered bitterly. "Pilots, eh? We ought to be riding scooters in Kensington Gardens. What did we do? We did just what they damn well knew we'd do, and they were waiting for us, the whole bunch of 'em!" He passed his hand over his face wearily as his passion spent itself. He tossed his flying-coat on to the tarmac and went on quietly. "I was up 20,000, or as near as I could get, waiting. So were they, but I didn't see 'em at first; must have been hiding in that damn soup. I saw Mahoney coming, heading for Mossyface, and then I saw the White Fokker, by himself. He wasn't there for you, Mahoney, he was there to get me down. I didn't look up and that's a fact. I saw the Fokker going down and I fell for it. I thought he was cold meat and I went down after him. Where the others came from I don't know. They were into us just before we hit the cloud. The first thing I saw was the tracer, and poor Mad going down in flames next to me. I went after the white bird like a sack of bricks, but I lost him in the cloud. Swayne had gone, so I made for home, and I'm damn lucky to get here. That's all."

He turned and strode off towards the mess. Major Mullen watched him go without a word.

"I'll have a word with you, Mahoney, and you, Mac," he said, and together they entered the orderly room. "We've got to do something about this," he began briskly. "We shall all be for Home Establishment if it goes on. Bigglesworth's going to bits fast, but if he can get that Fokker it will restore his confidence. We've lost three machines in two days and we are going to lose more if we don't stop that white devil."

Bigglesworth entered. “Hullo, Biggles, sit down,” said the C.O. quietly. Biggles nodded. “I’ve been trying to work this out, sir,” he began, “and this is my idea. First of all you’ll notice that this Fokker doesn’t go for the leaders. He always picks on one of the rear men in the formation; you saw how he got Norman. All right. Tomorrow we’ll do the usual patrol of three. Mahoney or Mac can lead and I’ll be in the formation. I’ll pretend I’m scared of everything and sideslip away from every archie burst. Coming home I’ll hang back and the others will go on ahead without me. That should bring him down. If he comes I’ll be ready and we’ll see who can shoot straightest and quickest. If he gets me — well — he gets me, but if he doesn’t, I’ll get him. He’ll have height of me I know, and that’s where he holds the cards. I’ve got an idea about that, too. Someone will have to take every available machine and wait upstairs to keep the others off if they try to butt in. Don’t make a move unless they start coming down; let them make the first move, that should give you height of ’em. I’m having an extra tank put in my machine so that I’ll have some spare juice when he’ll reckon I’ve none left, in case I want to turn back.”

The C.O. nodded: “That sounds all right to me,” he said. “I’ve only one thing to say, and that is, I’ll take the party up topsides. You can rely on me to keep anybody busy who starts to interfere with your show. Good enough! We’ll, try it in the morning.”

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The pink hue of dawn had turned to turquoise when Mahoney turned for home at the end of the dawn patrol. One machine of his Flight was lagging back, and for the hundredth time he turned and waved for it to close up, smiling as he did so. Biggles had played the novice to perfection. Even now, a bracket of archie sent him careering wide from the formation. Mahoney’s roving eyes were never still; slowly and methodically they searched every section of air around, above, and below. Far above them a Rumpler was making for home followed by a long line of white archie, but he made no attempt to pursue it. Far to the north-east a formation of “Nines” was heading out into the blue; high above them he could just make out the escorting Bristols. He gazed upwards long and anxiously. He could see nothing, but he knew that somewhere in the blue void at least one formation of fighters was watching him that very moment. Biggles too was watching; he had pushed his goggles up to see better. Now and then he dived a little to gain speed so that the watchers above might think he was trying to keep in position. They were going home now; if the White Fokker was about today he would soon have to show up. The formation started to lose height slowly; Biggles warmed his gun every few minutes, but still kept up the pretence of bad flying.

They were well over the line now. The two other Camels had dropped to 5,000 feet, but he hung back slightly above them. Once he threw a loop to show his apparent relief at being safely back over his own side of the line. Dash it, why didn’t the fellow come? The two other Camels were nearly a mile ahead when Biggles suddenly focussed his eyes upon a spot far above and held it. Was it, or was it not? Yes! Far above and behind him a tiny light flashed for an instant, and he knew it for the sun striking the planes of a machine, whether friend or foe he could not tell. He kept his eyes glued to the spot. He could see the machine now, a tiny black speck rapidly growing larger. Biggles smiled grimly. “Here comes the hawk, I’m the sparrow. Well, we’ll see.” The machine was plainly visible now, a Fokker D.VII. There was no sign of archie, so he concluded that the Fokker had shut his engine off and had not yet

been seen from the ground. Biggles opened his throttle wide and put his nose down slightly in order to get as much speed as possible without alarming the enemy above. The Fokker was coming down now with the speed of light; a cluster of archie far above it showed that the pilot had cast concealment to the winds. Biggles pushed his nose down and raced for home. Speed — speed — speed — that was all he wanted now to take him up behind the Fokker. How near dare he let him come? Could the Fokker hit him first burst? He had to chance it. At 200 feet a stream of tracer spurted from the Fokker's Spandaus. Biggles moved the rudder-bar, and, as the bullets streamed between his planes pulled the stick back into his stomach. Half-rolling off the top of the loop and looking swiftly for his adversary, he caught his breath as the Fokker swept by a bare ten feet away. He had a vivid impression of the face of the man in the pilot's seat, looking at him. Biggles was on its tail in a flash. Through his sights he saw it still climbing. Rat-tat-tat — he cursed luridly as he hammered at the gun which had jammed at the critical moment. The Fokker had Immelmanned and was coming back at him now, but Biggles was ready, and pulled his nose up to take it head-on. Vaguely, out of the corner of his eye he saw another Fokker whirling down in a cloud of smoke and other planes above. The White Fokker swerved and he followed it round.

They were circling now, each machine in a vertical bank not a hundred feet apart, the Fokker slowly gaining height. Biggles thought swiftly, "Ten more circles and he's above me and then it's goodbye." There was one chance left, a desperate one. He knew that the second he pulled out of the circle the Fokker would be on his tail and get a shot at him. Whatever he did the Fokker would still be on his tail at the finish. If he rolled, the Fokker would roll too, and still be in the same position. If he spun, the Fokker would spin; there was no shaking off a man who knew his job, but if he shot out of the circle he might get a lead of three hundred feet, and if he could loop fast enough he might get the Fokker from the top of his loop as it passed underneath in his wake. If he was too quick they would collide; no matter, they would go to Kingdom Come together. A feeling of fierce exultation swept over him. "Come on, you devil!" he cried, "I'll take your lead," and shot out of the circle. He shoved his stick forward savagely as something smashed through the root of the nearest centre-section strut, and then he pulled it back in a swift zoom. A fleeting glance over his shoulder showed the Fokker three hundred feet behind. He pulled the stick right back into his stomach in a flick loop and his eyes sought the sights as he pressed his triggers. Blue sky — blue sky — the horizon — green fields — where was the Fokker? Ah! There he was, flying straight into his stream of tracer. He saw the pilot slump forward in his seat. He held the loop a moment longer and then flung the Camel over on to an even keel, looking swiftly for the Fokker as he did so. It was rocketting like a hard-hit pheasant. It stalled; its nose whipped over and with the engine racing it roared down in an almost vertical dive. Biggles saw the top plane fold back, and then he looked away feeling suddenly limp and very tired.

A mile away five straight-winged machines were making for the line, followed by four Camels; another Camel was trying to land in a ploughed field below. Even as he watched it the wheels touched and it somersaulted; a figure scrambled out and looked upwards, waving. Biggles side-slipped down into the next field and landed. Major Mullen, the pilot of the wrecked Camel, ran to meet him.

"Good boy," he cried, "you brought it off."



End of Sample