

Dawn Patrol

Feeling helpless, the nurse's aide rubbed the old man's back as his body convulsed in violent spasms of coughing. He was sitting up in bed, doubled over, with a pillow clutched against his stomach. Gradually, the coughing subsided and he lay back against the elevated mattress. She offered him a glass of water and he took a small sip before he lay back again with his eyes closed.

"Would you like some more water?" she asked.

He shook his head almost imperceptibly while his lips formed a silent "No." She looked at the tired face before her, the bony chin covered with gray stubble that shrank down to an impossibly thin neck, and tried to visualize him as a handsome young fighter pilot in a World War I biplane, but found it impossible. He lay still for a while and gradually drifted off to sleep. She tiptoed out of the room and returned to the nurse's station.

"Rough night for the cancer patient in 314?" the head nurse asked, without lifting her eyes from her papers.

"He's asleep now." the aide replied. "He says he's still coughing up all the oil he breathed during the war. Did you know they used to use castor oil in the airplane engines?"

"I'm sure the cigarettes did more harm than the castor oil." the nurse said flatly. "Still, there aren't many men his age who are still capable of coughing, no matter what they did to their lungs." She put down her papers and looked directly at the aide. "Don't get too attached to the patients in this ward." she cautioned. "You won't last long if you do."

"Oh, I'm not." the aide replied. "It's just that Mr. Johnson has led such an interesting life. Did you know that he slipped into Canada and enlisted in the RAF before the US entered the war? After all these years, he still dreams about flying."

"He's dying." the nurse said quietly. For the first time there was a touch of compassion in her voice.

They sat together in silence for a while. Then the aide tried a different tack. "Did you ever hear of a French pilot named George Guynemer? He was one of the leading

aces of the war, but one day he took off and was never seen again. Mr. Johnson says the French schoolchildren claimed he flew so high the angels wouldn't let him come back to earth."

The nurse stared at the aide for a moment and then turned away, shaking her head sadly. The aide got up and silently slipped away to check on the other patients.

Flight Lieutenant Johnson sat up in bed and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. The first streaks of dawn were barely visible through the window. His orderly was standing beside his bunk, holding out a steaming mug of tea. "Dawn patrol, sir" he said before leaving the room to wake the other pilots. Lt Johnson got out of bed and washed his face in the basin on his dresser. There would be plenty of time to shave after the patrol, but he did put on his uniform before donning the bulky flight suit. He knew some of the other pilots just pulled a flight suit over their pajamas, but he didn't relish the idea of heading off to a POW camp in his pajamas. He didn't expect to be shot down, but it never hurt to be prepared. He made a quick stop at the officer's mess to wolf down a plate of eggs and headed out to the flight line.

The mechanics had already wheeled his Sopwith Camel out of the hangar and warmed up the engine. He made a brief inspection of the rigging, checked the machine gun belts, and climbed into the cockpit. His chief mechanic helped him buckle in while briefing him on the work done since his last flight, and then pulled away the ladder. The mechanics held onto the wings while he ran up the engine. Satisfied, he throttled back to idle and motioned for the chocks to be pulled away. He taxied out to the edge of the field, turned into the wind, and shoved the throttle forward. Rushing across the grass he brought up the tail, and then lifted the plane into the air. Behind him other planes were taxiing out to the field.

He quickly climbed to the rendezvous point and settled back to wait for the others. The sun was just peaking over the horizon, illuminating a nearly cloudless sky with a just a few white puffs on the horizon. Below, the few patches of morning ground fog were melting away, revealing neatly tended green fields and scattered villages. A small black speck quickly climbed up to join him. It was Henderson, of course, neatly slipping into his usual position off the Camel's right wing. Henderson gave him a cheery wave, his

small clipped moustache just barely visible beneath his goggles. The next plane to join them was a surprise. Bob Haskings, still flying the Camel that had collapsed when they were jumped by that German squadron. Bob gave him a casual salute as he took up his position off the left wing. Next came Willy Jones, in that damned single gun Nieuport he always insisted on flying. One by one they were joined by all of Johnson's old friends, some of whom he hadn't seen in years, flying the planes he remembered so well. Last to join the group was Billy Camden, flying the ancient box kite Avro he'd spun into the ground during flight training. Billy had his hands full just trying to keep the Avro straight and level, and the plane wobbled a bit when he risked a quick wave before returning all his attention to keeping the machine in the air. Johnson laughed out loud at the memory of how proud he'd felt when he made his first solo on an identical plane. He gunned his engine to pull ahead of Billy, executed a neat barrel roll just to show off, and then climbed high into the clear, blue sky.

The shrill beeping of the heart monitor from room 314 startled the nurse's aide. She dropped her textbook onto the desk and instinctively reached for the phone to call in the code. Then she stopped. That monitor had malfunctioned once before, and she didn't want to call in another false alarm. She'd better check it personally before calling in the code. Besides, she thought as she walked toward 314. She wanted to give Mr. Johnson just a little more time. Time enough to fly so high that the angels wouldn't let him come back down.