



Chapter 41

May 1918

With the Hun on the retreat, the elation of our mid-month return to Ochey felt good, similar to the spirit and camaraderie in the fall of '17. The swift move to regain our old aerodrome brought drama, but the most rewarding sight was seeing French and Belgian citizens reclaim their villages and their homes. The personnel makeup of 100 Squadron kept changing with new faces, but most noticeable was our synthesis as a completely different force. On 1 April, the RFC joined with the Royal Naval Air Service to become the Royal Air Force. Sam Hardy's return with me to the familiar aerodrome provided comfort. Well, mostly.

I swung my leg off the back of the Douglas motorcycle and chuckled as I looked at Hardy's impish grin. "Ahhh, I think it's safer to fly a Fee over hostile enemy territory than to sit on the back of that thing holding on for dear life, Sam!" We had just traveled the twelve miles through woodlands and past farmers' fields, flying over potholes as big as bomb craters, to get to the Nancy café that

was a favorite of our airmen.

We took a table on the Café Impérial patio overlooking the shopping area in central Nancy. “You’re such a baby,” said Hardy. “Squealing and whinging at every turn and over every bump.”

“Ha! I’m as bold as Jack Johnson, only he doesn’t fight lunatics!”

“You need to lean into the curves, Bob. You need to relax. And speaking of Americans—”

“Who’s speaking about Americans?”

“You did. Just then you mentioned Jack Johnson.”

“Oh.” I scrunched up my face in a confused smile—I had used a euphemism out of habit instead of its underlying meaning—as the waitress set our espressos down. Hardy was sizing her up somewhat hungrily. “Sam! She’s someone’s daughter.”

Sam held his gaze on her as she sashayed her way back to the bar. “She sure is. Must be a damn good-looking family, I’d say.”

I waved a hand in front of Hardy’s face. “Hey, get your eyes off her ass. What about the Americans?”

“Oh ya, my point. That jackass Brown who just joined treats us like servants, treats all the mechanics that way.”

“I’ve heard things myself. The fly-boy from Jamestown. Acts like he was the very first English settler in America, that he alone began the colony three hundred years ago. You’d think he was handpicked to lead this war on behalf of the Americans.”

“He’s dangerous, Bob. I’ve seen that type in this war and I saw it at the Boer. All about him. Sweet as pie to the major, then a downright cruel ass to the rest of us.”

I grimaced. “You know I’m flying with him tonight?”

Hardy held up his hands, palms out defensively. “What? Bob, you can’t; you need to say no. This isn’t just a motorcycle ride; it’s a sortie, and a dangerous one across the German lines.”

“I don’t think Tempest would put me in excess danger, Sam.”

“Or the major’s testing you, perhaps. See if you can tame the bloke.”

“We’ll see. I suppose—” Sam’s eyes had wandered away again, looking over my shoulder dreamily. I turned to take in his view. “Sam! She’s beautiful, I know, but we’re due back soon.”

A blissful Hardy pretended to melt into his seat, letting his arms fall to his side in a gesture that meant he was helplessly in love. “Perhaps another Genevie. So sweet, so beautiful.”

“So come back later, maybe tomorrow.”

“I may just do that.”

I felt like throwing a wrench in the works, a little mischief. “Or maybe find a red lamp or even a blue one. Take the edge off?”

Sam stopped me in the tracks of my teasing by pointing to the cobblestone street just in front. “Done that, Bob. Two blocks down and three over.”

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The sortie to the strategic Thionville Railway Station was considered a success, as all aeroplanes dropped their bombs on the building and tracks around it, returning safely. For me it was a failure. I was angry, livid at the cowboy style of flying demonstrated by my pilot, Brown, not to mention his smug attitude about it.

As Hardy placed the chocks against the wheels, I climbed down the port side of the aircraft and onto the grass. I paced away, thinking of all the tough returns I had experienced with Wellsey and the need for the two of us to work as a team, without which we would not have survived. I thought of the misunderstanding with Vic, which was sorted in a civilized manner. Tonight was to be straightforward flying. If we had faced weather issues or enemy aircraft, we could have had a fatal outcome. I was mad, fucking mad.

Brown jumped confidently from the aeroplane, brimming with delight. “What’ya think of that ride, huh, Pitman?”

I raged at him, “I think you’re a bloody loose cannon, Second

Lieutenant Brown! Not fit to fly with 100.”

Grinning, Brown crowed, “Whoa, pardner, settle down a bit. No need for drama here.”

I put my face inches from his, seething. “It’s not drama, you fool. I’m up front in the nacelle without a cozy seat like yours, kneeling as best I can. Standing, balancing in the slipstream to drop our bombs. And you, you decide to have a joy ride on our return.”

Brown rose up, standing over me to intimidate. “No harm done, friend. Let’s say we go have a drink.”

I glared, held his stare for a moment before speaking. “I am not your friend. Clearly you don’t understand. Swerving and side-slipping and diving like that, all for your personal joy. It’s my job to keep us safely—”

The Vicar came over, listening to the exchange. He cut in. “My gunner and I were immediately behind and are equally appalled at your flying.”

Responding to the growing sentiment, he took on an authoritative stance. “I’m a fucking good flyer. Listen to you both—a couple of stuck-up Brits who don’t know that practicing sudden maneuvers makes us more agile, increasing our ability to outfox the enemy.”

“We are bombers, you clown,” spat the Vicar. “If you want to be a fighter pilot, join a fighter squadron where you can fly alone and risk your own life.”

Brown rotated his body toward the Vicar as Hardy moved in closer, clenching his fists. “I attended the best flying school in the US, so you listen—”

“None of us care to listen to your pretentious attitude,” retorted Hardy. “God knows I put up with enough of it in the hangars.”

“You’re an air mechanic; stay the hell out of this discussion. What the fuck do you know?”

The Vicar turned to Brown, teeth clenched and hands curled

into fists. “Stand down, Brown. I’m a senior officer to you, and I order you to your hut. Go sleep it off.”

Brown stared at the three of us, shaking his head in apparent disgust before sauntering across the dark airfield.

“What now?” asked Hardy.

Breathing heavily, the Vicar spoke quickly and decisively. “I’ll speak to the major in the morning. This can’t go on.”

We avoided the mess, as the tone had turned so sour. I lay in bed for a long time unable to sleep, tossing the sortie around in my mind. This was not what I had signed up for. We had enough grief just surviving this war without having to deal with the Browns of the world. I knew a lot of Americans, knew them to be a proud lot, fair, kind, and always jovial and positive. Brown was none of those things at all, which had nothing to do with his nationality.

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Night after night we continued to target the Thionville railway system, as well as its blast furnaces and electric power station, at the border apex of France, Belgium, and Luxembourg to keep constant pressure on the movement of German troops and transport that were protecting nearby coal mining and steel production in the Saar Basin.

The Vicar’s talk with Major Tempest had its effect, as I was assigned the next night to fly with John Chambers, a respected pilot who had joined 100 Squadron back in January. Brown remained flying but with Naylor, a novice lieutenant-observer. Our mission was for twelve aeroplanes to each carry two 112-pound bombs onto the Kreuzwald power station, which was the first sortie inside sovereign German territory. As Hardy and I walked the perimeter of the Fee, I mentioned my anxiety.

“I can’t quite finger it,” I admitted. “I don’t know if it’s the

emotional effect of flying across the German border or whether my courage may be slipping away.”

“You’re not losing your courage. You’ve been outstanding in your service to this squad. Don’t let that Brown affair throw you off.”

I relaxed a bit. “You’re right, yet last night I lay awake questioning my role. Things have changed. You know, having to fly with different pilots each time.”

“You know the reason for that—the increasing number of new replacement pilots that need to build experience.”

“Ha! That doesn’t inspire confidence, as it implies others have either had enough, have been reassigned, or are now POWs!”

Hardy touched my sleeve. “Sorry, Bob. Didn’t mean to cause more anxiety, just trying to help.”

“Oh, I know. It’s not your fault. You are correct; it’s just the way things are now.”

“Chambers is a good pilot. I’ve spent time with him on practice runs. Solid chap.”

I shook Hardy’s hand, appreciating his understanding. “Thanks for the comfort, old friend. I’d better get up there.”

“Good luck, good sortie! Give ’em hell!”

The beautiful moonlight made the ground underneath radiant as we flew north, up the valley and over the rounded peaks of the Vosges while following the silver ribbon of the Moselle River. Meadows and lakes were easily distinguished from the dark pools of forestland. The peaceful scene gave me thoughts about perhaps returning there after hostilities ended, mingling with its French inhabitants, who would want nothing but to exist in peace. While I could imagine the peacefulness of Cissy hiking along with me—dressed in the fashion of the day, of course—on this sortie, I couldn’t shake the foreboding that radiated from my stomach and traveled the lengths of my limbs.

I turned to look at Chambers, who offered a reassuring smile and a nod that signaled we were united. Angling starboard just south of Metz on our course for the German border, I pondered

my apprehension. I felt confident with my flying skills, bombing precision adapted to a science. The old excitement was gone, though, leaving behind an impatience to get the job done and fly home. I wondered if my angst symbolized an unconscious change in my attitude to a kind of defensive preservation.

Crossing the border, we cut the Beardmore for the long, silent glide into the station, wires and planes whistling through the cool spring air. I fought back equivocal thoughts to fully focus on dropping our 112-pounders onto the electrical station. Nine in our sortie were ahead of us, already headed home after dropping their pills, the Hun by now amply warned. Searchlights were swinging wildly across the skies, searching for us while we hid behind our only surprise, silence.

I stood up in the front nacelle, extending my Lewis down toward the intimidating light, holding back until they locked on. The station had erupted in spot fires, signifying where the squad's bombs had hit. As the lights caught hold, I dispensed regular short bursts—*five rounds, release*. I was confident Chambers had the resolve to hold the ship steady in the face of the attack even though I felt dryness in my mouth, anxiety churning in my stomach.

Five rounds, release. I hammered away on the lights as we continued our glide to the target, holding back the bombs to strike at Kreuzwald's heart, its power house. *Five rounds, release.* With its silhouette outlined by moonlight, the large square building finally loomed in front of us, so I let go of the Lewis and, with steady hands and full concentration, grabbed for the release levers.

I heard the pills clank as I yanked up the wires to release them, the aeroplane lurching with split-second uplift when their weight pulled away. As the Beardmore roared to life, we were away, climbing quickly. I turned and took a fleeting look at Chambers. I nervously smiled at him as I grabbed the rear Lewis, pulling it up on its swivel over the top of the plane. I used the gravity created by the upward angle to lean against the wing strut, firing down into the lights.

Steady, Chambers, was my only thought as I balanced precariously

with one foot on each side of the nacelle. As we broke free of the lights, darkness left me standing still for a moment, suddenly aware of my racing heart and quick, short breaths. Facing backward against the slipstream, the red exhaust seemed comforting, a sign of power surging through the black sky. I let my eyes adjust, needing the moment to ensure a safe return down into the nacelle.

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28 May, 1918

My Darling Cissy,

I think about you all the time. In the air and on the ground, you are on my mind. I close my eyes and see us walking along the estuary, absorbed arm in arm in the warm spring air with birds soaring and butterflies flitting from flower to flower.

I've heard from flyers new to the squad that Englanders are able to hear artillery from where you are in the Midlands, from London too. We've done our bit to keep you safe, my love, as the Hun continues his retreat back to his homeland. Do not worry, as we are keeping the pressure up and the enemy's guns will eventually be silenced.

I miss you, and I miss a stable life and routine. Perhaps it is the spring air, or perhaps I'm just getting tired. It has been two and a half years since I left my Canadian home, enough time to wonder how much things must have changed there, how much my sisters have grown, and what this war may have done to Canada. Lest I sound emulous, I try not to compare British men's home leave except to say that most Canadian, Anzac, South African, and Indian soldiers haven't seen their homes for a long, long time.

I know I'm getting tired, perhaps because those of us in the

fight for civilization can smell success, if that word can be used to describe utter horror. Sometimes with expectant success one loses the sharp edge. I wonder if my decision to continue flying into '18 was a good one, wonder if changing to technical service might have been better. Yet I do remain committed to the cause.

I know you don't hold the answers to my questions, and I adore you for letting me sound off in our letters. I'm glad you are getting out with the munionettes, girls whom you've grown close to. I was delighted when you described in your recent letter that during your last football match you were awarded a foul when defending the ball. That shows the grit you bring to the game. I lay on my bed holding that letter thinking about you dressed in knickerbockers and jersey with grime smeared across your face. Against your protests, I do imagine you as adorable!

I miss you, Cissy, and long to be with you, to hold you. Be safe, my darling.

With deepest love,

Bob

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As a weather system blew into the Vosges, we were grounded for a few days. While Hardy worked to entice me to ride on the back of the Douglas into Nancy, I declined to get soaked in the constant drizzle and fog just for an espresso. I told him that his Café Impérial beauty would just have to wait for his dazzling blue eyes. Besides, Tempest had told all flyers to remain close to the aerodrome, an order I decided was not worth defying.

When I entered the mess, the Vicar was comfortably seated in one of two overstuffed armchairs facing the old French filigreed brazier. After stomping the wetness off my shoes at the entrance,

I wandered over to see him speaking quietly to another flyer, one whom I had not yet met.

The Vicar smiled warmly as he said, “Bobby, how are you, old chap? Do come sit down.” He pointed to a third chair, a wooden dining seat. “Bob, I’d like you to meet Howie—Frederick Howard Chainey.”

Before sitting, I shook hands. Chainey was one of those men who held an over-firm grip for an extended period while confidently looking into your eyes without blinking. His were dark brown, a coloring which complemented the rest of his complexion. His lanky frame, defined cheekbones, and longish, middle-parted hair gave him an aristocratic air. “My pleasure, Howie. Just join the 100s?”

“To a degree. Did one sortie a few weeks back; I believe you were just arriving. I went back to Hythe to complete Night Flying Aerial Navigation. Army style ass-before-head kind of schedule. You know, assign the chap, then send him back for training, wot?”

“We’re not the army any longer. Now the RAF, dear boy,” said the Vicar.

“Right,” said Howie. “And Bob, you’ve been around for a while, I hear.”

“Uh-huh. Seems I was one of the few to return in ’18.” I paused to think for a moment. “Say, that a London accent you carry?”

“Of a sorts. Chingford, actually.”

The Vicar lit a *Gitane* as Chainey and I worked through our introduction, the extraordinarily strong tobacco smell filling the area. It was a smell I knew would always remind me of France, of the war. It turned out Howie’s family home was less than three miles from my Walthamstow neighborhood. Our shared Essex background quickly established a bond. Also similar was our infantry action before becoming flyers, he with the Suffolk Regiment.

Talking about Essex took me back to childhood, fond experiences that would always be a safety zone and which brought forth

comparison of memories past. The Vicar sat forward and turned to me in a friendly manner, knowing that if he allowed, I would reminisce all night. “Spoke to Tempest the other night before I set off to bed with this damn cold.”

“Yes,” I said. “Seems he listened since I was partnered with Chambers. It was a solid and safe mission. What a difference.”

“From the one with the American, the one who’s causing issues?” asked Howie.

“Quite,” I said. “The lad Brown. He took me on a joyride that risked both of us. I was hopping mad. No need for that kind of lunacy.”

“What’s his game, then?” asked Howie.

“We don’t know,” exclaimed the Vicar, “and we don’t care. He needs to toe the line before he hurts his observer and himself.”

“Yet Tempest’s hands are tied,” I interjected. “He can’t get new flyers over here fast enough.” I ignored the mess door closing immediately behind me. “Still, we can’t wait for—”

“Ahem.” The Vicar’s finger was jabbing forward from the arm of his chair, a warning that someone was approaching from behind.

Brown was with Larry Naylor, his observer on the last sortie, who evidently looked beyond the foolish flying. “Evening, lads,” said Brown. Naylor held back in a deferential pose, mumbling a greeting.

“Evening,” we repeated in chorus, but Howie only nodded his head.

Brown began to walk away toward the bar before turning on his heel, Naylor following so close as to bang into him. The American looked defiant as he snarled, “You know Tempest has me sitting out the next sortie, whenever that will be.”

We stared, all of us struggling to respond but failing to find empathetic words, so we held back. The Vicar broke the deafening silence. “Does that mean anything to you? Did he explain why?”

“Yes, he spoke of respect for my fellow officers and respect for me.”

I looked at Brown, wondering where his smugness came from,

wondering why in the face of disdain from most 100 Squadron flyers he kept it up. “Do you?” I asked.

Brown swung his head to glower at me. “Do I what?”

“Respect yourself?”

Through clenched teeth, he responded irritatingly, “I told you, Pitman, I was just practicing flying essentials in the event we need to escape enemy aircraft.”

The conversation continued in this manner, Brown checking his temper but not altering his position, certainly not apologizing to me for his recklessness. His arrogance was unbroken, making it unlikely any of us would be willing to ever fly with him again. He was well spoken and held a nice smile, yet there was something in it that on close examination gave away a cunning, better-than-thou attitude. First me, then Dyson—and I suspected Naylor too—as his observers, all saw him as a bully with an unsafe lust for power when controlling an aircraft. I sat there after Howie and the Vicar said good night, thinking about how wars could be lost through such individualism.

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27 May, 1918

My Dear Sisters, Ethel and Hilda,

Thank you for your sweet letters that both arrived today. It is taking more time for them to reach me perhaps because we are increasingly on the move. I am so happy that you are both well and working hard at your jobs. Soon enough Europe and the rest of the world will see peace. I am sure of it.

Papa's latest letter said you two had grown so much, inwardly as well as physically. In that case, I now have two

beautiful young women as sisters that I haven't yet met! Can you believe it is now over two and a half years since I've seen either of you, since we've been able to talk about our lives and laugh with one another?

I think often of the day we will all meet again, when we can enjoy life as free citizens of the world. I know that sounds dramatic, but over here in Europe that is on everyone's mind, at least among our fighting men. We are all tired, tired of the mud and the slaughter and the starvation we see across France and Belgium. It surely has to end soon with one side or the other suing for peace.

Ah, but I am showing sadness when I should be expressing the best for our future. It is out there, my sisters, lest we believe otherwise.

*God bless and love to you both,
Bob*

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The next sortie went as planned on Monday, 27 May with Brown sitting out like a child sent to the corner for some thoughtful reflection. Chainey was a welcome addition as he joined the sortie over to Kreuzwald. With a couple dozen 112-pounders dropped, we knew we had done extensive damage, with a few aircraft actually witnessing the power station on fire.

The next night the squad was assigned to a precision strike on the Metz Railway Station, forty-five miles northeast of Ochey; however, only four aeroplanes were on the raid. As neither the Vicar, Chainey, nor I were included, I decided on a stroll across the field to the hangars after dinner. The dusk sky was dark blue against a bright western horizon.

Hardy emerged from the mechanics' mess with a brimming smile. "Hey, Bob!"

"Hello, Sam. The machines primed to go over?"

"Not tonight. Quiet for me, I'm afraid."

"Hmmm. Thought you might know what's what."

Sam looked puzzled. "In terms of?"

"Well, there are four machines being sent over what is known to be a benign target, but flown by new crew. Chambers and Brown have some experience but limited. And choosing one of your air mechanics to sit observer for Brown? What the devil is Tempest up to?"

Hardy held his palms up in question. "Unusual, I know, but it's only a twenty-five-mile run up the Moselle after all. Surely nothing could go wrong. Perhaps Tempest is testing them."

In a pensive mood, I chewed on my pipe stem as I wandered back to the mess to join the growing festivities of those squadron flyers who had the night off. Howie and the Vicar were playing bridge with Box and Inches, the latter two holding the squadron record for the most sorties flown.

I alternated into the Vicar-Howie partnership, but even with changing tactics, we still consistently lost to the formidable Box-Inches duo. The hours passed with enough ale consumed to mellow everyone, some eventually drifting away in retirement for the night. The flyers that remained witnessed a late-night commotion at the door as an ashen-faced Chambers emerged into the dimly lit, smoky room and was immediately surrounded with curiosity.

John Chambers had been charged by Tempest to be the squadron leader for the sortie. Vic, Chainey, and I had earlier speculated that he might be tasked with watching Brown's flying technique. Chambers explained that the bombing unfolded according to plan, that he had followed Brown over the target and ensured he stayed the course along the narrow corridor just west of enemy lines. We knew others had flown that run countless times in and out of Ochey. It was easy to determine the demarcation line by sighting the string

of nighttime trench bonfires. All you had to do was stay west of them.

Yet somehow Brown and his observer, Private Second-Class Johnson—one of Hardy's air mechanics—disappeared in that corridor. They reportedly just vanished. Chambers had flown up and down looking for evidence of a forced landing but with no success. He reported that Tempest was livid, giving him a thorough up and down, yet we all knew Chambers was not to be held responsible. Night bombers don't fly in formation and are trained to individually navigate themselves to and from the target.

No one in the mess wished one of ours ill, but we had all silently believed Brown was a disaster waiting to happen. It apparently just had. And it was Private Johnson whom we were most upset about, a teenage lad who had no idea of the danger he was put into, nor had the choice to avoid it. Both were gone, and in the absence of a fiery crash, we held on to a dubious hope the team was at least picked up as prisoners of the Hun.

I processed the news with more foreboding, tossing and turning in a fitful sleep filled with dreams and the acting out of terror. Perhaps I was subconsciously fearful of my own vulnerability. My dreams took me back to the Somme trenches, the artillery barrage raining down, being buried alive and not breathing.

I awoke at daylight in a cold sweat with erratic breathing, a headache, and unclear thoughts. I lay there staring at the parallel planks in the ceiling, following their line from wall to peak, thinking about my dreams, the morning quietness allowing me to recall them clearly. I knew I was getting tired, emotionally tired. I kept telling myself that I must hold on for the end of the war, which surely must come soon, and that then I would be released from these horrors.

I arose to face a beautiful spring day, the chirping birds confirming that, with all things considered, life was good. The others had arisen and gone to the mess some time before. I knew what I would do, had to do, if I was to hold onto sanity. I walked to the mess with

a relief that comes with having made one's mind up. I would enjoy breakfast with my colleagues and then act.

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I savored my meal with the other flyers amid small talk but discussed my plan with no one, stifling it inside my overactive mind. I guarded against the possibility that my colleagues could intervene with convincing me of some alternative course of action. After breakfast when the others drifted away, I strode across the grass toward squadron headquarters while working up positive thoughts to portray confidence and commitment for what I was about to do. I entered into a hive of busy activity, aides plotting over maps, sergeants in intense discussion, and the unbroken clicking sound of the telegraph machine.

The CO's adjutant gave a cold, suspecting stare. "Yes, how can I help?"

"I'd like a word with Major Tempest, please."

The adjutant studied me for a moment, not sure how to react to this unannounced intrusion on a busy HQ. "Is he expecting you, Lieutenant?"

I authoritatively squared my shoulders. "No, I am arriving on the strength of his open-door policy, Sergeant."

Locking eyes, neither of us said anything for a few moments. I knew that once in front of Tempest the tone would be conciliatory; I just needed to get beyond this pencil pusher. "Indeed, let me see if he has a moment."

I glanced at the wall maps and looked at piles of documents lying on tables behind the adjutant's desk and the files he was working on. It occurred to me this war was creating reams of documents that would all have to be filed somewhere after it was over. These would be documents the King's clerks would not be willing to part with.

I watched as the sergeant returned, weaving his way past soldiers and aides who took no notice of his presence. “Major Tempest will see you now, Lieutenant Pitman.”

I noted the change to the more formal, respectful salutation, which meant that Tempest was quite open to an impromptu meeting. With renewed confidence, I made my way past the desks, tables, and stand-up hallway meetings to arrive at the major’s office at the rear of the building. “Well, this is a surprise. What brings you in on this fine morning? Not ill, I daresay?”

I saluted and then stood at ease when told to. “Oh no, sir, I’m feeling fine. It’s my mind, really. Just dreadfully tired, nightmares, cold sweats, lack of sleep.”

“That’s expected, Lieutenant. You lads are striking hard at our enemy; I know firsthand how it knocks you down.”

I poured out my feelings with little concern that I was in front of my senior officer, explaining that recent sorties had become increasingly stressful since we were flying directly into enemy country with inexperienced crews. Yet that wasn’t the whole issue—after two and a half years, fatigue was becoming a dysfunctional force. While I knew I was being selfish and knew many soldiers had endured longer terms of service, I wanted a change.

Tempest offered a well-grounded response by acknowledging that the long stalemate on the Western Front was affecting morale, but used the fact that the Hun were being pushed back to the Hindenburg Line to lay out a strong appeal: experienced flyers were needed more than ever.

I smiled to show my confidence. “Major Tempest, it has taken a lot of courage to come forth like this, but in my heart, I know it would be cowardly to carry on by, well, simply burying my concerns.” I looked directly at the major, his empathetic expression giving me the determination to go on. “I believe I would be more valuable behind the scenes, where I could coach the newer chaps, or perhaps serve at Home Establishment.”

The major remained quiet with a look of thoughtful contemplation in his eyes. I wanted to give him space, time to digest what I had just requested, so I busied myself by gazing over to the wall photographs and military paraphernalia.

“I see where you’re driving this, Pitman. Tell me, though—is it this Brown business, is that the dour effect?”

I had hoped that topic would not surface. “Certainly got to me, sir. I as well as many others worried it was coming, but no, my concerns have been developing for a while.”

Tempest seemed pensive as he whispered, “Yet his actions did bother you?”

“Of course, sir. Losing any of our team is of concern. That is why I feel I could better serve the squad as a coach to new flyers, perhaps in a technical role, sir.”

A more authoritative look appeared on the major’s face. “Very well. But I need to weigh the alternatives, consider what is best for the squadron. For now you will continue to fly, is that understood?”

“Yes, sir, with as much dedication as ever.”

“Have a safe flight tonight, Lieutenant. Dismissed.”

I saluted. Passing the smiling adjutant, I left HQ for a stroll over to the hangars for a chat with Hardy, my trusted friend, who I knew would support my initiative but keep it confidential.