



Stories for the Train

Tales on the go

0:8:00

St Joseph of Cupertino

By L. L. Anbach

The sky was full of smoke. It was burning all down the river. There was a Me109 immediately below me and I dived at high speed. Too fast, almost overshoot. I fired a short burst at point blank range, then turned away violently to avoid a collision. The Hun followed me round and locked onto my tail. Bullets thudded through the fuselage behind me. I still had the momentum and a tighter turning circle. I came up and round, eyes bulging, head swimming from the G force, and fired burst after burst of tracer into the underside of the 109. He rolled and made a sharp turn to port, briefly silhouetted against the fire and smoke engulfing London. As I pulled away flames began lapping around the Me's engine. The German pilot instinctively pushed down into a steep dive. The flames spread to the cockpit. I could see the pilot's hands beating at the flames as I followed him down to check the kill. A series of thuds came from the starboard side. I started scanning the sky. The thuds got nearer and turned into footsteps...

I awoke with a start. A senior officer was walking briskly down the corridor towards me. He was a thin athletic type with the restless eyes of a fighter pilot. I needed this man's support to go on flying, to keep on killing Germans. Hugh Scott, my squadron leader, had

warned me that he was not an easy man. And Scott clearly no longer wanted me in his team. He'd said more than once that the squadron had to fly and fight as a team, supporting each other. There had been many references to cricket, and to 'playing the game'. I knew little of cricket and of British notions of fair play. I was sure the Germans didn't either.

The Group Captain waiting opposite climbed nonchalantly to his feet. I shook myself awake and struggled to an untidy salute. The man I had come to see, my Sector Commander, greeted me warmly.

'It's Ted Roth, isn't it?' he said, as he shook my hand.

'Yes Sir, Flight-Sergeant Tadeus Hroth, 309 Squadron.'

'I hear you've downed five Jerries. Well done.'

'Well, four and one probable, Sir.'

The Commander nodded, then turned to the Group Captain and said 'You must be Douglas-Smith. I expected you at 0900.'

'Yes, old boy. Sorry I'm late' he replied, not sounding remotely sorry. 'Breakfast late at the hotel. Usual thing, half the staff called up.'

'An appointment is just that. And you address me as 'Sir'. The Commander was clearly annoyed.

'Whatever you say, old boy' drawled Douglas-Smith, 'Is there any chance of tea? I'm parched.'

The Commander's manner became distinctly chilly, austere even. He motioned the Group Captain into his office; I hung back, but he turned and beckoned me along. 'No, no. You're on time for *your* appointment. The Group Captain will just have to share with you.' Douglas-Smith shot me a venomous look as we settled in the tiny office.

I checked the weather from habit. Ten tenths cloud and heavy rain. I didn't think the Luftwaffe would be flying. I studied the Commander as he selected a file from his in-tray. He held my future in his hands. He was alert, in control; there was a determined jut to his chin. An orderly appeared and delivered three teas and the weather forecast.

'Rain easing shortly, Sir, clear by evening. Jerry'll be up tonight.'

'Thanks Sam.' Turning to me, the Commander said 'One moment, Flight, while I have a brief word with the Group Captain here.' I nodded and smiled sweetly back at the Group Captain's grimace. You could tell he was thinking 'a sergeant *and* a bloody foreigner!'

The Sector Commander read from the file. 'You're the Station Officer at RAF Warmwell, in Dorset?'

'Yes, old boy, and we've been flat out since your fighter chappies arrived last month. Damn crowded what with the old Blenheim squadron and the two PRU Lysanders. Not to mention the crew of the local Chain Home site.'

'Yes. Do you agree that the *primary* function of an airfield is as an operational base for aircraft and their crews?'

The Group Captain nodded, uncertainly.

'Why then are 602 Squadron living in scout tents and cooking their own food?'

Douglas-Smith bristled. 'Your oiks complained their barracks were too far from their planes. They wanted to move the Blenheims, but they've always parked there.'

'If my Hurricanes don't get airborne within minutes, there won't be any Blenheims parked there, or even an airfield. And why isn't the officer's mess kept open throughout the day?'

'Your bally pilots are incapable of being on time for meals. I warned them twice. They should eat breakfast and lunch with the rest of the airfield staff. I can't keep the cooks there all day.'

The Sector Commander sighed and closed the file abruptly.

'Listen carefully Captain. In case you hadn't noticed we're at war. The preservation of this country, *including* your precious airfield, depends on 'my oiks' being in the air and ready whenever the Luftwaffe appears. And no-one has told Hitler of your quaint ideas about fixed mealtimes. From now on you will ensure that the mess is manned, open and ready to serve food night and day. Night and day. And you will move the Blenheims away from the dispersal huts so the Hurricanes can do their job properly and promptly, or you'll find yourself the mess sergeant counting spoons for 98 Squadron in Reykjavik.'

Douglas-Smith was on his feet, protesting.

'I report to the Air Ministry, not Fighter Command, and... '

The Commander cut him short. 'I've spoken with the Air Ministry, and they are as furious as me. Warmwell is to be run for the benefit of the aircrew, not its precious Station Officer. DO I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR?'

'Sir' The word was jerked out of him.

'Dismiss.'

Douglas-Smith gulped, went to say something, thought better of it, and stormed out, the back of his neck a bright puce. With a faint smile the Sector Commander turned to me. He was an austere, self-

disciplined man; you could easily mistake him for a bank manager or head teacher. But there had been no mistaking his fury with Group Captain Douglas-Smith.

‘Now then, Flight...’

‘Yes, Sir’ I swallowed, grinning nervously. My turn in the firing line. I sent a silent prayer to Joseph of Cupertino, patron saint of aviators. *‘Please, please, let me go on flying, go on killing Germans.’*

‘This can’t go on, you know.’

My heart sank. *St Joseph, where are you?*

‘You’re an experienced pilot, in fact you’ve flown more combat missions than the rest of the squadron put together. You know the importance of supporting your flight. You were supposed to be ...’ the Commander referred briefly to his notes, ‘supposed to be Mackenzie’s wingman, but were not with him when he bought it’. And your Squadron Leader tells me that it’s not the first time you’ve left the patrol on your own. If the Squadron is to operate as an effective unit, we can’t have its members wandering off on a whim.’

I’d been chasing a Junkers 88 that was lagging behind its formation, when young Bobbie Mackenzie was bounced by two Me 109s. He’d been lucky to survive with one broken leg and two cracked ribs. Hugh Scott had been livid. ‘I told you to nursemaid him, he’s barely out of short pants!’

The Sector Commander was reading from my file. ‘Polish Air Force regular, flew to France when the Germans invaded, flew with the French until their surrender, and then back to Blighty with the remains of 133 Squadron. That needed some initiative, I imagine.’

I nodded, afraid to speak.

'Initiative's precisely what Hugh Scott's complaining about. He needs his squadron to stick together – you know as well as anyone that individual fighters will not stop these mass bombing raids. He won't have you in his squadron.'

My heart sank even lower. 'Look Sir, as you know, in a dog fight it's every pilot for himself. And I do my best to support the new boys, but they're so slow, so unaware. Combat experience is often dearly bought – ask Mackenzie. He won't forget to watch for Huns in the sun next time.'

'Hmm. If *there is* a next time for him. Your English is excellent. You didn't learn that in Poland, did you?

'No Sir, I lived with my Scots grandmother in Aberdeen for three years after my father died.'

'I too have a Scots grandmother – her teachings make me naturally parsimonious, *especially* with my pilots.' He glowered at me. '*Oh, come on, Holy Joseph, whose side are you on?*'

'So, you flew Spitfires in France, but Tangmere is all Hurricanes' mused the Sector Commander. 'How do they compare?'

This was easier. This was pilot talk, not a headmaster's interview.

'The Spitfire's a wonderful plane, a delight to fly, so responsive. And the eight Browning SMGs give terrific firepower. But ...'

'Go on, Flight.'

'In a spin the Spits can be lethal for novice pilots, and they're not that easy to land. The Hurricane doesn't test its pilots like that. And I prefer the fabric cover on the Hurricane's fuselage to the metal-coated Spitfire – cannon shells just go straight through without exploding.'

‘But Hurries don’t have the wing strength of the Spits, and so have a larger turning circle, and the Spitfire’s bubble canopy gives better all-round visibility.’ The Commander was clearly enjoying being devil’s advocate. He was well known for his love of the Hurricane.

‘With the cockpit open on the Hurry you have even better visibility, and you can bail out more easily – if you have to.’

‘You know you’re not supposed to fly with the cockpit slid back’ he admonished, but his eyes were smiling. Could St Joseph be doing the trick?

‘Look, Sir, there’s lot of things I’m not supposed to do, but I always take the fight to the Jerries, and...’

I broke off as a squall of rain battered the office window. We both watched the rain. It looked as if it was easing, and the cloud ceiling lifting. I could tell he shared my thoughts – we should be flying shortly.

‘OK Flight, let’s wrap this up. You’re an excellent pilot, and we need every pilot we’ve got. But you’re a loner, incapable of working in a team. You’ll have to quit the Squadron.’

I was utterly shattered. *Holy Joseph, why have you abandoned me?*

As he was speaking, he began changing into the flying kit hanging on the wall behind him.

‘But I do need you to go on shooting down the Luftwaffe. I’ve agreed with Squadron-Leader Scott that you’ll continue to fly with 309, *not* as a part of the squadron, but as their ‘guest’. That means you’ll be on your own, but still flying and fighting as before.’

A wave of relief ensnared my tongue. He cut short my garbled thanks.

‘There’s one condition’ he said, pulling on his flying boots. ‘I know you fighter pilots dream of one-on-one fighter duels, but that’s *not* what we need. What you must do is shoot down *bombers*. It is imperative to stop the bombers. Or there’ll be no airfields, no aircraft manufacture, no aircraft and no command of the sky. And the war will be lost.’ The Sector Commander looked me squarely in the eye. ‘So, promise me - avoid fighter duels at all costs.’

‘Yes, Sir, I promise’. I would have promised anything to keep flying, but I could see he was deadly serious. I thought of my mother and sister dead in our bombed-out house. ‘I will, I will’.

‘Right, then, what are you waiting for? I want you back at Tangmere in time to meet the next wave of bombers.’ I saluted, thanked him again, but he was already striding down the corridor, shouting for his Hurricane to be readied.

I left his office and read again the name painted neatly on the door – Air Vice Marshal Sir Keith Park, DSO. Back in Tangmere, Squadron Leader Scott met me outside the briefing hut. ‘How did it go?’ he asked, his eyes smiling.

I considered briefly, mentally thanking St Joseph, and replied, ‘It was a walk in the Park.’