

CASUALTIES

By Sandra Dempsey

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ISBN: 1-930961-83-9

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CAST: one female

(1942. JIMMY has been posted overseas on operations as a pilot in r.a.f. bomber command.¹ SHIRLEY, his mom, comes out of her house onto the porch, and cranes her neck skyward to check for air force training aeroplanes)

SHIRLEY

It wasn't so long ago when all the skies were full of was birds and clouds. It used to be you could stand out here and really hear the quiet.

But that was before the war came; before the aeroplanes came. Now the skies are filled with trainers of every description, at all hours of the day and night. They've all got a student pilot and an instructor inside. There's even more inside with some of the bigger aircraft. Mostly it's the student pilot who's got control. And you can always tell just by watching them stuttering and dippy-doodling all over the place, trying to learn to keep the things smooth and doing what they're s'posed to.

¹ R.A.F.: Royal Air Force (British)
(American USAAF: US Army Air Force)

Night time, too. You'd think if whoever's in charge was smart enough to figure out how to make men fly in the sky, they'd a' paid more attention to the birds they were tryin' to imitate. Most birds don't fly in the dead dark of night. Birds don't much fly in the pourin' rain or in icy snowstorms. An' most birds *don't* do their fighting in the air; they do battle on th' ground just like all the other wild things. They're smart enough t' know th' odds are stacked too much against them.

Men, on th' other hand, particularly men at war, they seem to lose hold o' their common sense when it comes to flyin'. They're wanting those boys to fly when it's so dark they can hardly see th' controls in front of them...t' fly in weather so bad even dogs shouldn't be out in it, and to not only take on the enemy up there in th' middle of nothing, but to *defeat* him, too.

We were pretty quick to learn to recognize all the different signs. The difference between the innocent little two-wing beginners and that ear-splitting whine of the big advanced trainer. The terrible, gurgelly sound an engine makes just before it floods with oil and sputters the eerie whooshing crackle when it bursts into flame. The horrible cold silence of an engine that suddenly just cuts out completely, and then counting, just like you do after lightning, waiting forever, 'til either the thing struggles back to life, or the horrible muffled crash comes when it dives straight into the ground.

They never ever talk about it, but one time Ed told me even in the Great War, they called it *meeting your shadow*. An aeroplane's always got a shadow, even at night, from the moon or from the stars. And the closer an aeroplane gets to the ground, the bigger its shadow gets. The faster a falling aeroplane drops, the faster it converges on its own ghost image. And the moment when both meet, when both become one, that's the moment of impact, shadow and machine, pilot and death.

If any of them ever admitted to praying before they fly, and most of them never would, that's what they'd pray for, *Please God, don't let me meet my shadow.*

(If props and effects are used, the paper boy's bicycle bell rings and a newspaper is thrown onto the porch. SHIRLEY stops dead, then rushes back to the veranda, drops her basket and grabs the paper. SHE rifles through it until SHE finds an item and scans it quickly. once done, SHE is relieved, and then catches herself, suddenly aware and ashamed of what SHE has just done)

I can't help myself. I know it's not right, but I have to do it. As soon as I hear the paperboy's bicycle bell, my heart stops

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