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Shot Down Over Libya

"One of our planes is missing, but the pilot is safe," the communiqué said. Here is that pilot's report.

The author of this factual report on Libyan air fighting is an RAF pilot at present in this country for medical reasons—THE EDITORS.

THEY hung a label around my neck which said: "Flying Officer ——. Possible fractured skull base. Concussion and facial injuries. Church of England." I knew this because the medical orderly read the label out loud to me at the base hospital.

I tried to remember just why that label was there, and why it said these things. I tried to ask someone, but no one heard, so I gave it up and just lay still. Then slowly it all came back; not clearly and brightly at first, but a little dimly, as though by moonlight. In the end, I got it all.

Operational Order No. — from Fighter H. Q. Western Desert to No. — Squadron STOP Recco reports large number Italian vehicles parked close together 100 yards north of road 41 miles west of Sidi Barrani STOP Six Hurricanes attack at dusk.

The C.O. wandered in with it in his hand while we were having late tea in the mess tent, and handed it to Shorty, who was in charge of B Flight.

There was nothing unusual about the order—we had had similar ones every day for the last month—

except, perhaps, that the job looked a little easier than most.

Shorty carefully extracted a fly from his tea and flicked it across the room. Then he read it a second time. "Hell's bells, what a piece of cake! Shall I take my flight, sir? We'll have to start right away."

He handed it to Oofy, who stopped picking the sand out of his starboard ear, read it slowly, then put it down and went on excavating his ear.

"I don't believe it," he said. "They never park them close together, but if they have, what a piece of cake!"

Outside, the Hurricanes were waiting, looking very dirty in their desert camouflage, which was just a coat of light-brown paint the color of sand. At a distance they merged into their surroundings. They looked a little thin and underfed, but very elegant.

Under the wings of each, in the shade, sat a fitter and rigger playing naughts and crosses in the hot sand, waiting to help start up.

"All clear."

"All clear, sir." I pressed the button; she coughed once or twice, as though clearing the sand from her throat, and started. Check the oxygen, check the petrol, brakes off, taxi into position behind Shorty, airscrew into fine pitch, mixture control to "rich," adjust tail trimmer; and now Shorty's holding his thumb up in the air. Yes, O.K., O.K. Thumb up, and everyone else does the same.

Six dusty left arms went out, six throttles were gently pushed forward and the six machines moved away, churning up the dust with their airscrews and creating a minor sandstorm in their wake. Six people began to concentrate.

Shorty swung a bit to the right on take-off, but he always did that, and we all knew he always did it, so it didn't matter. Once air-borne, undercart up, adjust the revs, regulate the mixture and start looking.

This business of looking is the most important part of a fighter-pilot's job. You've got to have a rubber neck and you've got to keep it moving the whole time from the moment you get into the air to the moment you arrive back at your base. If you don't, you won't last long. You turn slowly from the extreme left to the extreme right, glancing at your instruments as you go past; and then, looking up high, you turn back again from right to left to start all over again.

Don't start gazing into your cockpit, or, sure as eggs, you'll get jumped sooner or later; and don't start daydreaming or looking at the beautiful scenery—there's no future in it.

And so we, too, started looking. We were flying straight into the sun, which was just beginning to touch the horizon. It looked like a blood orange. Shorty was leading, with two of us close in on either side in v formation, with Oofy weaving about in the rear, watching our tails. I was on the starboard side, next to Shorty, and his wing tip was only about twelve feet away.

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ILLUSTRATED BY JOHN F. GOULD

SHOT DOWN OVER LIBYA

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I could see how the heat had blistered the paint. It was flaking off and showing the shiny steel skin underneath.

It was getting hot in the cockpit. My shirt and pants were dark with sweat, and I smelt like hell. You can't take a bath in four pints of water a day when you've got to use it for drinking as well; at least, I can't, because I'm pretty big. Wonder if Shorty could. But then he smelled, too, and so did the C.O. Jimmy smelt worst of all. He used to come into breakfast every morning and say, "Hell, I smell good today," and nobody took any notice. When he'd eaten his first piece of bread, he'd look up and say it again, and nobody listened that time either. He told us once that he used to have a bath every day before the war, so I suppose he noticed the change more than most. I could see him there on the other side of Shorty every time my head traveled that way. He was smiling at something—heaven knows what. But then, Jimmy was especially fond of ground strafes, and this looked like being a very good one. It certainly ought to be, anyway, unless that recco pilot was seeing things. Those boys don't often exaggerate. Anyway, there ought to be a lot of trucks about. Hope they're not all ambulances.

"Tallyho three o'clock, tallyho three o'clock, tallyho three o'clock, over." I jumped a mile; I always did when someone tallyhoed. It's just a quick way of telling everyone that you've sighted enemy aircraft, and the clock code gives their exact position in relation to your line of flight. The nose of your aircraft is always twelve o'clock; three o'clock is sharp right; six o'clock is dead astern, and so on.

This time it was Oofy; I knew his voice over the R. T. Everyone looked to the right, and sure enough, there, high above us, was a bunch of little black specks moving east along the coast in the opposite direction—Italian fighters on their evening patrol. They hadn't seen us because we were flying low over the land and our camouflage was good. Surprising how difficult it is to see aircraft flying low over the land when you're above them. They'd never see us.

Then Oofy again: "Come on, Shorty, you slob. What are you waiting for?"

And Shorty: "Leave them alone, leave them alone, leave them alone. We've got a job on. Keep your eye on them, keep your eye on them, over."

And so we went on. Shorty was right, of course. Oofy was just a blasted fool. He always wanted to do things like that. He'd buy it sooner or later. He was only nineteen, and keen as blazes.

We ought to be there soon. We were skimming along about fifty feet above the road at about 300 miles an hour, and I could see that Shorty had slid back the glass hood of his cockpit and was craning his neck and staring ahead of him. The road below seemed to slide toward us and shoot past underneath while it was still half a mile

away, and it looked very black. You ought to see that desert road in Libya, the little narrow road that feeds two armies. It's not an ordinary dusty desert track; it's a modern black tar strip which runs slap bang across the desert from Alexandria to Bengasi. It looks funny to see a tarmac highway out there.

And then suddenly, right out on the horizon, we saw a small black splodge, and Shorty came again over the R. T. "There they are, there they are, echelon right, echelon right," and the two machines on the other side, together with Oofy, moved over to the right, so that we were flying in one long line abreast.

Now quick: Trigger button from "Safe" over to "Fire," reflector sight on, throttle full open, airscrew pitch a little finer, and nose down.

The place was stiff with lorries of all sorts, and as we came down I could see the soldiers running about all over the place. They had green uniforms, and I saw one stumble and pick himself up and go on running. I've never seen anyone pick himself up as quickly as that man. I saw another diving underneath a truck which had a large

more on the right. The flashes showed up quite clearly in the dusk. Better have a go at them; they always run when you come down. No, on second thought, lorries are more important. Must get some more lorries, nice fat petrol lorries; they burn so well.

Down once more, squirting lorries all along and watching the bullets making little flashes where they hit the metal, and throwing up spurts of sand where they missed. Time to be going now, up and home. Hell's bells, what was that? Felt like she was hit somewhere. Blast this stick; it won't come back. They must have got my tail plane and jammed my elevators. Can't go up or down; engine seems O.K., though. Height? What is—Five hundred? Johnny tried to bale out from 500 over the camp last week when he came back with his engine on fire, but he hit the ground before she opened. Funny what a big hole he made in the sand. Try the tail trimmer. That's stuck too. Probably be able to pancake down later by throttling back slowly. That ought to be easy. Yes, easy. Should be over our own lines again soon, but it's getting dark.

And then Shorty's voice, "What's the matter with you? I'm just behind."

"Hello, Shorty. Elevators jammed, elevators jammed; otherwise O.K. Think I can make it."

"Good. I'll stay with you."

Then it happened. I don't know what it was that had jammed the elevators on my tail plane, but it had suddenly been shaken loose, and there they were, flapping in the slip stream, completely disconnected. The Hurricane dipped its nose and dived toward the ground, and there wasn't a thing I could do. Pulling the stick back made no difference, but I closed the throttle as soon as possible, in an effort to slow

down the dive a little. I was doing about 250 miles an hour, so I suppose it took, roughly, two seconds to hit the deck, but it seemed a long two seconds. I remember looking down the nose of the machine at the ground and seeing a little clump of camel thorn growing there all by itself, and my stomach felt as though someone were using it as a pincushion for rusty hatpins.

And then I knew I was still alive, because I could feel the heat around my legs, but I couldn't see a thing. I remember trying to get out, and catching hold of my straps and pulling away at them, but they wouldn't come. I couldn't for the life of me remember where the quick-release pin was placed, and all the time the fire was roasting my legs and hands. Maybe that's what stimulated my brain, because suddenly I remembered it. Of course, the pin was just down in front below the chest, holding all four straps together, and all one had to do was to pull it out. I released it and tried to get out again, but there was something else there weighing me down, and I couldn't move. Once more I sat still

and thought, and I could see a lot of red circles going around inside my head, and once more it came back to me suddenly. The parachute. Twist the release and press it in, and now let's get out of this fire.

I didn't seem so strong as I used to be, and I couldn't see a thing, so it took some time to get out and tumble over the side.

Something still seemed to be burning, so I rolled about in the sand to put it out, crawled away from the fire on all fours and lay down.

My face hurt most. I slowly put a hand up to feel it. It was very sticky. My nose didn't seem to be there. I tried to feel my teeth to see if they were still there, but it seemed as though one or two were missing. And then the machine guns started off. I knew right away what it was. There were about fifty rounds of ammunition left in each of my eight guns and, without thinking, I had crawled away from the fire out in front of the machine, and they were going off in the heat.

I could hear them hitting the sand and stones all round, but I didn't feel like getting up and moving right then, so I dozed off.

Then, all of a sudden, there was Shorty, dancing around and yelling like a madman, and shaking my hand and saying, "I thought you were still inside! How did you get out? I couldn't land right by you, it was too bumpy, so I came down half a mile away and ran like hell. Are you all right?"

I said, "Shorty, where's my blasted nose?" and he said, "What d'you mean, where's your blasted nose?"

"It's not here," I said.

I heard him striking a match in the dark, and then he said, "Where's your blasted nose? What a mess! Does it hurt?"

"Don't be a damn fool. Of course it hurts."

And then he said he was going back to his machine to get some morphia out of the emergency pack which we always carry in the fuselage, but he came back again soon and said he couldn't find the machine in the dark.

And then it started to get cold. It always gets cold at night in the desert, and Shorty lay down close alongside, so that we could both keep a little warmer. Every now and then he would say, "You'll look funny without a nose. I've never seen a man without a nose before. They'll laugh like hell." I kept spewing a lot of blood, and every time I did it, Shorty lit a match. And then he gave me a cigarette, but it got wet, and I didn't want it anyway.

I don't know how long we stayed there—maybe four or five hours. And then two or three British soldiers came up and wanted to know if we were Italians.

Shorty said, no, we damn well weren't, and how far were we from Mersa Matruh? I don't remember much more, except that I was shoved about a lot, and someone kept saying "Take it easy." I believe someone had some morphia.

Middle East war communiqué, Cairo: There was little air activity yesterday on either side. A formation of our fighters attacked enemy transport on the ground near Sidi Barrani, damaging a number of vehicles. One of our planes is missing, but the pilot is safe.



"I use the front ones when I want him to back up."

green tarpaulin over it, and a lot of others fell flat on their faces and stayed there, very still.

I sighted about fifty yards in front of a large petrol lorry and pressed the button, and kept it pressed right on through it, so I couldn't miss. Four little sheets of flame burst from each wing, but with your helmet on you don't hear much—just a quick, muffled sort of rattle. You feel more than you hear. The plane seems to pause a little, shakes herself and goes on. I kept it pressed for a couple of seconds for the benefit of the trucks on the other side of the tanker, and then up and around for another attack. Maybe the first one took five seconds, but I wouldn't know.

We'd all got split up now, and I could see someone already going in a second time. There was a lot of black smoke coming from two or three of the petrol wagons, and the little green men were still running around in between the trucks; and then, away on the left, I saw a lot of bright little flashes. They always were quick on their machine guns, these Italians. There were some