

The Silent Invader

Gliders over Normandy

by Thomas Wood, 1995-

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This short story is a work of fiction. Although the events described in this text did occur, all characters are entirely fictitious and any resemblance to actual participants is entirely coincidental.



Dedication

This text is dedicated to all the men who took part in Operation Deadstick, what became known as the raid on Pegasus Bridge, with a particular dedication to those who lost their lives that night and in the following days and months of the Second World War.

1.

As we'd lurched off the ground, bumping around and hitting every groove in the strip as was possible, my stomach felt as if it was going to break through the back of my seat.

The constant low rumble of engines and the enraging creaking from the joins in the framework that had frequented my ears for hours, began to bore into my mind and echoed in my eardrums.

The soft detachment of the tow rope was a blessed relief as the low drone of engines slowly faded off into the darkness, our engines, on their way home.

My co-pilot took his hand off the release lever and looked over to me. He'd yanked it backwards so vigorously that I half expected it to come off in his hand, leaving us in a never-ending circle of being towed around the skies.

I noticed his hand was quivering slightly, but his eyes were fired with determination and excitement. I gave him a flick of a smile.

"Good luck chaps" had sparked a crackled voice over the radio, before our communication line too, was released.

It was a message that did not need an acknowledgement, besides, my full attention was now on my aircraft and my cargo.

All that I could hear now was the creaking as men shuffled around in their kit, itching to get out of the flying coffin they were in.

We lost altitude rapidly as we were released, but as I forced the plane into a snaking motion of left banking and right, we began to descend at a much more graceful pace.

The controls began squeaking as I used my strength to guide the men down to our landing site. I grunted with exertion as my co-pilot fought with the rudder to control our movements.

His head pivoted like an owl on drugs as he scanned the countryside below for some reference points. We would try our best to stay in the air until his eyes, trained as good as a hawk's spotted something that told us where we were.

Momentarily, I helped him. The landscape below was in total darkness, as if an inky blanket had been pulled over the top, hiding everything useful from our gaze.

We were looking for a river. The moon glinted down on the land below but I could see no distinguishing features that I recognised.

My hands gripped the central control a lot tighter as I turned my gaze from the front, a nervous disposition that I had never been quite able to shift. The controls felt warm and were layered with a thick coating of sweat from my hands. I had ditched my gloves just before we were released.

It wasn't protocol or routine, just another of my dispositions, we all had them. I felt closer to the aircraft when I felt skin on the controls, I became an integral part in the construction of the craft.

I once voiced my preference to be able to fly naked if I had been allowed to, an opinion that my co-pilot, very aggressively, did not share.

I turned my eyes to the front again and gazed out of the paper-thin wind shield we had in front of us. A reminder of how basic our cockpit truly was. We couldn't afford to be flying with no engines and heavy electrical equipment. We had the basics.

A few instruments; altimeter, airspeed indicator, that sort of thing and most important of all, the brake lever.

I thought how much like a paper aeroplane we must have looked like. The way we majestically fell to the ground, completely at the mercy of the gentle breeze around us.

I only hoped that we didn't crumple on the ground like a piece of flimsy paper.

I felt like I'd become an expert in landing the silent craft but that was in daylight, there was no one shooting at us and, it was on flat terrain.

I was amazed at how we'd made it through a barrage of searchlights as we'd passed over the French coast. They flickered teasingly across the belly of our aircraft then passed silently over the underside of the Halifax in front.

We flew on, unperturbed by the passing lights.

The ack ack guns however, jostled us about like a bully in the school yard, throwing the occupants of our craft around like ragdolls.

My neck clicked several times as it was pushed from side to side, backwards and forwards as somehow the guns missed their targets.

The singing of the men had gradually grown fainter as the repetitive booming of the anti-aircraft guns had grown dimmer.

Now, we were just left, silently floating through the night sky, like death seeking out his next victim, ready to wreak havoc on the world below.

I felt powerful up in the sky, like a god about to release punishment and destruction on his subjects with no mercy. I began to feel a rage burn up inside me, placing the fear in my mind towards the back.

The whoosh of the wind intensified as we lowered, it almost became unbearable as we excitably drifted.

The inky blanket was lifted as we descended below the clouds.

We were no longer blind. We could see.

2.

From a young age, I'd always toyed with the idea of becoming a soldier, but truthfully, I'd never had the guts to do so. I loved the image of running around with a gun in my hands, taking the life of an enemy who'd murdered and raped, a hero ridding the world of the scum of the earth.

I hadn't liked the idea of being shot at though, or watching my friends die helplessly in battle.

I'd been in the local church choir; my mother had made me join in the hope I would gain a respect for the church instead of throwing hymn books around and passing wind in services.

Every year, from the year I'd first joined, I'd been struck with pride, but also humbleness at the men who shuffled in on the day of remembrance.

They were people I'd grown up around, teachers, postmen and even clergymen. I knew them all by name, I could tell you where they lived and who they were married to.

I bid them a good day every time I saw them about, and they returned it with a broad smile. It was only that one day a year though, that I viewed them as soldiers. As heroes.

Their medals would always clink together and reverberate off the stone walls of the church, as they tried in vain to sit down silently by separating their medals with their fingers. I'd never quite understood their modesty.

My father's own medals never left the house, I only knew that they even existed because I was playing a rather immature game of hide and seek with my sister.

I found a stash containing letters, photographs and a Bible, stuffed nonchalantly into the smallest box possible.

He'd always walked with a limp for as long as I could remember, but I'd never known why, just walking round the park would render him breathless. He relied on his stick everywhere he went, never standing up straight but always leaning on it.

It had a tough job in keeping such a big man like my dad upright.

I never listened to those church services, I stared intently at their chests and marvelled at what each piece of highly polished metal represented.

I dreamed up stories of their heroics, rescuing friends in a hail of bullets and saving children from certain destruction. I wondered how many more medals would have been given out if half of the men who had died had in fact, survived the Great War.

I could never truly compare myself to those men. I never thought I'd get the opportunity to display what little courage and bravery I had, I worked as a butcher's apprentice until a few years ago.

Everyone else was signing up, so why shouldn't I? That was my reasoning. I had more courage in a pack of friends, boys on their own are never confident in anything.

My mother didn't have the exact same outlook, she had paced around the kitchen screaming.

"Your Dad! Look what it did to him! He's never been the same and now you're going!"

There was no talking her down, she'd made up her mind at the outbreak of war that I wasn't to go.

My father sat quietly, in a chair in the corner of the kitchen, ignoring my mother's pleas to join in the rather one sided debate.

He twizzled his stick in his hands, mulling things over, or reliving the nightmare. I couldn't quite tell.

He spoke quietly, but assertively, my mother sat down as he began to talk.

"He must go. It's his duty."

His tear-filled eyes looked up and met my mother's, whose tears had already begun racing to the ground.

The three of us sat there, frozen in a stunned silence in anticipation of what was to come.

"The boy more than likely won't see action anyway" he rasped reassuringly. I could tell he was lying, even if my mother didn't.

The sniffles grew weaker as my mother retreated upstairs, taking her sodden hanky with her. The floorboards creaked gently as I heard her sit in the rocking chair that occupied the corner of their room.

"But, if you do, prepare yourself. It is hell on earth. Nothing will compare to it. You do not look out for your friends, you think you will, but you won't. It's all about survival".

Goosebumps rippled their way over my skin, a chill sent straight up my spine, he had never spoken to me with such sincerity and foreboding in his voice before.

He withdrew a cigarette from his golden case, offered me one, which I declined, before he lit his. The path of his smoke twisted in the air and twirling, rose up, glided in the air for a moment, before dissipating into nothing.

We sat in silence, he finished his cigarette, before dad grunted himself out of his chair and hobbled his way up the stairs.

3.

The slow whooshing of wind passing over the wings continued incessantly as I began desperately throwing my head round in all directions, trying to spot our target.

We had to be perfect, there was no margin for error, we must land within a few hundred metres of our target. Anything more than that and we would render every man in the back of my craft completely useless.

They might as well be killed.

I heard the heavy, wooden and uncooperative door behind me slide open as the men cooped up behind me took a look at the ground below. I hoped that they would give us a hand in spotting our objective but knew that until we hit the ground, everything was down to me and my co-pilot. They were merely passengers in a very heavy object, gracefully falling to the ground.

Some of the boys were expecting children. Some were due quite soon whereas others had found out a few days before leaving. They had been overjoyed.

One by one they had received letters, insisted we should all head out, the pilots included, for a big booze up to celebrate. It would have been rude to say no, not to mention detrimental to their morale.

I wondered if they would ever see their children, some of them, I prayed earnestly, would get to see them grow up, but others, I was not a naïve person, would never see their home again, let alone their child.

I was not normally negative, but the overwhelming tide of pessimism that drowned me was having a dangerous effect on me. I tried my best to flick my mind back to the task at hand. If I could help them land safely, and in the correct place, then maybe they would have a better chance at survival and getting back to their loved ones.

We knew the boys in our kite very well. We, like them, were new to gliders and so the majority of our training was carried out together.

I'd watched with pride as the boys slowly gained more confidence in the glider, to the point where they could smoke, chat and sing. The silence that now engulfed them, and us, was harrowing.

A few splutters from the men and the occasional creak as they shifted around was the only noise that emanated from behind me now.

What struck me was that I hadn't heard a single man vomit. On training, every one of them had vomited at some point or another, right up until our last training flight when the Captain regurgitated his breakfast for us all to inspect.

It was as if the fear, and the feeling of looking death straight in the face, had calmed them somehow. For me, the anticipation of combat was rather overwhelming, something that I both wanted to get stuck in to and feared.

I thought of my father, of all those men sat in that church. They had done what was needed of them in their day, now it was time for me to do the same.

There was so much that could go wrong with our landing, I just prayed that we had released ourselves from the bomber at the correct moment. A lot hinged on that.

The pilot's briefing before take-off had not been as encouraging as I'd hoped on the brink of a big invasion. We knew it was coming, so we were all expecting a ravishingly uplifting and encouraging speech from our commanding officer about how we were all capable of heroics, in the face of the enemy, to carry out our duty and rid this small part of the world of tyranny.

I shuffled my grip on the controls and ignored the dryness of my mouth as I thought of what we had actually received in that tent at the side of that nondescript airstrip.

Wooden poles, no, large wooden spikes, were being placed around our objective in an attempt to stop us from landing there.

I let out a sigh, sickened to the very pit of my stomach as I thought about what might happen if we were unlucky enough to strike one.

My co-pilot and I would be the first ones to be killed as the wooden shaft pierced its way through the flimsy plywood of the glider hitting the ground at speed. The entire craft would likely be split in two as it drove its way through, decimating anyone inside.

The scene of carnage would be unbearable, I almost felt sorry for the enemy soldiers who had to clean up our mess.

Even if we didn't take a large spike to the face, one of the others might, and the noise alone would be enough to give away our position, and enough to raise the alarm before our slaughter.

The holes had been dug and ready for a few weeks now, I'd seen the photographs. I just prayed again that the stakes were not in yet.

I'd done a lot of praying in the last two hours, as if I felt closer to God being up in the sky. I wished I had listened in those church services now, maybe He would have been nicer to me if I had done.

Oh well, there was nothing I could do about that now.

Wiping my brow on my lower arm, I gripped the controls tighter.

4.

The infantry had bored me, I'm ashamed to say it, but I couldn't stand the monotony of training runs, cleaning boots and rifle drill. There was nothing exciting about it, I wanted to be part of the war.

I knew I was safe where I was but the confidence I had gained from the other lads had made me want to push for more.

I was a good soldier, in fact I'd been promoted, but I was a bored one. I'd become a robot, a man with no emotions as I continuously carried out exactly what I was told to do.

I'd even tried to get out of it. I'd put in a transfer request out to another regiment that was in the thick of it in North Africa. I was hauled in front of the CO who practically spat at me as he portrayed how much of a traitor I was to the regiment, but more importantly to my friends.

"I wouldn't want you to be my platoon NCO in battle" he had hissed as I solemnly trudged out of his office.

A few months more of utter tedium and a call went up for men to join the Glider Pilot's Regiment. A few of the lads stuck their names down flippantly not expecting to hear back from them again.

I'd never flown before but the heroics of the Spitfire pilots was well documented. I had watched in awe and amazement as newsreel after newsreel showed little specks in the sky climbing and diving, banking and rolling as they bravely hunted down the enemy planes before blasting them out of the sky.

The feeling of floating in between the clouds, up where the sky is permanently blue, feeling the sun kiss your skin was exactly what I wanted, what I needed.

Shortly after, I had reported for training. I had excelled at learning to fly a plane, finishing close to top while others got the dreaded 'Return to Unit' notice letter. I felt sick at the thought of getting that letter, I would become a social outcast, the leper of my unit. I would be hated.

It spurred me on further. I got on wonderfully with a plane with an engine, without an engine however, I was slightly unsure.

I loved every minute of it in fact. I was one of the first to complete my education on the training gliders and soon after, along with my co-pilot, was shipped off to an aerodrome to begin operational training.

The first time I saw a Horsa was like the first time I kissed a girl. I ogled and marvelled at it for hours before getting inside it. It was all wooden, a massive structure with the biggest flaps possible, to the point that they didn't look like they should have been attached to the craft.

I was infatuated with the thing. The one thing I almost couldn't bear was the fact that it would never be mine. It would belong to me momentarily as we softly descended through the sky but, after landing, it would be taken away never to be used again. In that respect, it was not like a plane at all.

Despite that, with every craft that I clambered into, boots thumping humorously on the flimsy wooden floor, I felt an instant, and loving connection with.

We flew countless training flights, predominantly with concrete blocks strapped to the seats that should have been occupied by soldiers. Maybe they didn't trust us just yet.

Before long, we began to take real, living, breathing passengers. We began to get to know people, our tug crews introduced themselves to us and we frequently went out for a drink together.

Our boys in the back became more positive and confident with every landing, something that we were still learning.

We were issued with strange, tinted goggles that we began to wear on our training landings. They turned the brilliant night of day into a strange dullness meant to be night.

None of us dared take them off, if we were going to have to land at night, we'd need to train as close to the real thing as possible.

Before long, we had the concrete blocks for passengers again as we came down time after time in total darkness.

The training for us pilots was more rigorous than the boys in the back I thought. We trained on our kites, in navigation, in communications and also as a light infantry soldier. We had a tough time, but we were the celebrities on base.

The controls became second nature to us, the Horsas our best friends, our passengers became accustomed.

We were ready.

5.

A small pin prick of brilliant white light poked its way through the darkness that shrouded the cockpit. The torch was masked with tape, allowing the most

minute bit of light out, the rest trying desperately to force its way out, making the tape glow menacingly.

The moonlight was good, but not quite good enough for my co-pilot, but not many things were up to his standard apparently, including me.

I tried not to get too attached to my co-pilot, as we had been instructed, but spending that much time with one person tends to have the opposite effect to what our superiors wanted.

I knew why they wanted us to remain distant, in case one of us was killed, or worse, binned of the course. However, over time I had got to know my co-pilot, we began seeking each other out in the mess before plonking our behinds down next to each other and tucking into another string-filled casserole.

He had an almighty appetite, often eating everything on his plate as well as anything left over on anyone else's. He was a frequent visitor to the NAAFI, even offering to go for other people in return for a small cut of the goods that he picked up for them. It was a business venture that never fully took off, but he was often seen around the base tucking in to some exotic food he had traded with the Yanks.

I often teased him that we would have to be careful on operations as we would need to account for his weight, and I was glad when the notice for this operation came through when it did, as news had just reached us that the NAAFI had taken a consignment of American chocolate bars.

His pockets were stuffed almost immediately and I was quite sure that if he turned out his pockets now, more than one bar would be residing in them, probably all half eaten.

John Chambers was a Cockney, a proper rough, East End lad, and he was proud of it. He was a good friend to have, never taking rubbish from anyone and although he loved American delicacies, he wasn't too keen on the Americans themselves, being known on more than one occasion to throw a solid fist towards the nose of one of our cousins.

He wasn't scared of anyone, or it seemed anything, always acting in the calmest way possible, which was strange for a nineteen-year-old boy.

He hadn't liked the nickname of 'baby face' though, but his objections to it made it stick all the more and so that is how he was affectionately known.

I looked at his face in the silvery light of the moon and the orange glow of torchlight and marvelled at how smooth his skin really was. It was like a desert, no real features of major importance but still something that seemed remarkable.

Not a single hair ever protruded from his chin, either a sign of incredible personal hygiene and discipline or a true indicator of how young these boys really were.

I wasn't much older than John but I was still coined 'Grandad' as I was the oldest glider pilot on base. I didn't mind too much, I felt quite honoured to even be considered worthy of a nickname.

His eyes were trained intently on the focus of the torchlight, never blinking, his vision reserved solely for his stopwatch.

I watched as the second hand ticked round silently, John making a mental note of how long we had been released for. I knew to not interrupt him when we were

on this stage, if I made him get it wrong, I didn't just kill myself, but I would also kill the thirty odd elite soldiers in the back.

All that training, would be for nothing.

I loosened my grip on the wooden controls before gripping them tightly again, making sure the blood supply to my hands was still good, and they didn't cramp up at the most crucial moment.

My hands were cold, as was my whole body, but a film of sweat had settled over every inch of my being.

My stomach churned violently and gurgled as the seconds began to tick by slower on John's stopwatch. He still hadn't blinked.

I scratched at my ear, trying to flick out any dirt that may be laying there, so that I could hear everything that was going on. I tilted my head slightly so that I didn't miss the shout from my co-pilot.

I knew I wouldn't miss it, John had one of the loudest, clearest and most recognisable voices in the entire regiment.

Normally he wouldn't shut up, right now though, he wasn't saying a word.

I waited for his signal.

6.

I was the oldest in our group of pilots, not by much, eighteen months at the most, but I was still the least confident and went into myself at most opportunities.

Our first night of leave after completing our training was spent near to base as we'd all agreed to go out to a dance together before our next phase of training began.

I ended up sitting with John, nursing a half pint and rolling the glass around the table. John didn't much like going to these dances, he already had a girlfriend back home and didn't like the idea of even looking at another girl, so spent much of his night looking down the bottom of his glass.

The others had spotted their prey almost immediately as we walked through the door, and had moved in shortly afterwards, leaving the girls with little choice but to pair off with them for the night.

I did not care for such barbarity when it came to searching for a mate. I very often ended up leaving the dance with John, heading back to base with nothing more than a headache after listening to the incessant music at the table.

John nudged me and nodded his head in the direction of the door and we headed outside together to gain a brief respite from the music.

He whipped out his cigarette holder and twizzled one in between his fingers before sticking it in his mouth. He then turned the open box to me, the mirrored gold reflecting the moonlight onto my face.

He knew I didn't smoke, but he always offered me one, whether it was some kind of joke to him I didn't know but he just couldn't seem to help himself.

We stood in silence as the smoke spiralled its way into the night sky, intertwining with other streams of smoke from around us.

“Your old man was in the first one, wasn’t he?”

The village hall was quite a nice one here, untouched by German bombs, the hall opened out onto the village green, where a small pond had been added to commemorate the loss of life in the first war.

The water was stagnant and had a thick layer of mould on it, the fish, who I was told used to live in there, had died years ago.

“Yeah, lied about his age too”.

He flicked his cigarette across the green, almost reaching the pond and we both took that as the signal to take a slow walk back into the hall.

As we shuffled in reluctantly, I took a look around, catching the gaze of a girl.

We looked at each other briefly, a sweet smile flicked across her face which I returned, but I quickly found my face burning up and turning a bright shade of red. I held her gaze a moment longer before trotting to catch up with John.

She was quite small, probably only coming up to my chest if we stood side by side, but had something about her where I knew her presence regardless of her size. She had wildly green eyes, which I seemed to lose myself in completely in that brief moment that I shared with her.

In those eyes, I could see everything I’d ever dreamed of, an entire future of two people who would never meet again.

Her skin was soft and smooth, her cheeks a brighter shade of pink to the rest of her, making her smile seem warmer and more inviting somehow.

She wore a pale pink, floral dress that flapped around her shins as she stood in the gentle breeze of the English countryside, a pair of faded green gloves and small handbag completing her outfit.

I’d never before taken this much notice of what a girl was wearing.

I’d only looked at her for a short time, maybe two seconds, but she was ingrained in my mind, I couldn’t shake her. She was like a fly in my brain that night, buzzing around in my head, refusing to leave.

I saw the back of her as she left the dance early, I’d missed my chance.

Soon after, I made my excuse to John and, obligingly, he came back with me to the base.

“You’re quiet tonight mate” he said in between anecdotal stories of childhood stealing and bust ups.

I had nothing to say, I felt miserable that the only girl I’d ever felt a connection with had left, I’d never see her again. I’d never get that future with her and all we’d got was a momentary look at each other.

7.

Like a mischievous teenager sneaking in stinking of booze, the Captain snuck up on us silently. The first we knew of his presence was when he spoke.

His accent was rounded and he spoke well, enunciating every letter. His voice was normally soft and calm, raising his voice only when he needed to, but tonight it was strained, tense.

"How much longer gents?"

He knew exactly how much longer it was, he'd been on all the training missions that we'd done a hundred times before.

His breath was still clean, he hadn't thrown up so far tonight. But there was still time for him to let his nerves get the better of him.

He had no reason for asking, he was just a terrible passenger, he needed to be in control at all times.

"Sit down!" I barked, not thinking of the possible consequences.

I could sense John smirking as I did it, he felt exactly the same as me. It felt good, two lowly staff sergeants being in charge of an officer, being able to shout orders to a Captain, especially one who was about twenty years our senior.

Being a young man and being able to tell an older man off, gives such an overwhelming sense of power and jurisdiction that made me feel invincible. I decided there and then that I would go for a commission when I made it home, I could get quite used to bossing people around and telling them what to do.

The extra money and better food was also a bonus too. Maybe John should consider it, he could buy more chocolate.

While we were in the air, we were in charge of everyone, including the Captain. As soon as we'd landed on the ground though, we were soldiers, the Captain would resume control of us and probably make us suffer for my outburst.

As I thought about what lay ahead once we hit the ground, I took a tighter grip on the wooden control with my left hand, and pushed my right hand down the side of my seat.

I felt comforted as I felt the cold steel of my Sten gun, loaded and ready to fire the second we touched down. I only hoped we'd make it long enough to use it.

The fortified silence was interrupted by boots thumping their way back down the plane as the Captain skulked back to his seat remorsefully.

I didn't feel sorry for him, he didn't have to wait long after being released to do his job, all he needed to do was let us do ours.

The pin prick of light that illuminated the cockpit in a dull orange suddenly flicked off, subjecting us to the darkness of the night once more.

The stopwatch was packed away hastily and rather noisily before the compass was slotted in gracefully into John's breast pocket.

He looked across at me, his impossibly soft face almost reflecting the moonlight of it and shining onto mine like a mirror.

His eyes seemed to glow as he excitedly shifted in his chair, he was really fired up. The quivering in his hand was all but gone and a new bravery had poured over him.

"Go"

I took the controls and sent the plane into a steep dive as John fumbled around strapping on his helmet.

"You have control"

"I have control" came his acknowledgment.

I plonked my helmet on my head. It was a standard paratrooper's helmet, the same as all the men in the back. When we landed, we looked identical to them, we fought the same as them, we just had a little extra responsibility beforehand.

It was a dark khaki, pretty uncomfortable to wear, and had a mesh netting pulled over the surface of it.

If I felt like it, I could pull some foliage out of my surroundings and attach it to the mesh, making me blend in a little more and avoid being sniped at.

That was the theory anyway, but when the foliage growing around the target was moss and mould, I thought I'd pass.

How a little bit of green would camouflage me against the backdrop of a huge steel bridge was beyond me.

I pulled the strap on tight, to the point where it had begun pinching the skin. It wasn't comfortable, in fact it couldn't have been more uncomfortable, but at least I knew it would stay on when my head inevitably crashed into the wooden structure around me.

"Brace for impact!"

The sound of boots thudding as they slotted comfortably on the benches in front of them, forming a rather amusing looking tunnel throughout the back of the aircraft thumped its way to my ears.

Our invasion was about to begin.

8.

Our wedding day was amazing. It had been a quick decision really, but I knew it was the right one. We'd been on a few dates after the dance; cinema, walks, that sort of thing and from there everything blossomed.

That first kiss was everything, it was all I could think about for weeks afterwards, I just wanted to see her again so we could recreate that moment. We'd walked for an hour or two around the fields and hills surrounding the base and sat down on the top of the hill that overlooked the town.

It was a perfectly blue day, not a single cloud in the sky, a perfect day for flying. The sky was a brilliant shade of blue and we sat, hands behind us, propping ourselves up and marvelled at it.

The sky was mesmerising as we observed bird after bird, flap by, swooping down into the village. The weather was clear, but still chilly. The February air was biting, biting in particular at Christine's arms, her light hairs pricking up and catching the breeze.

I threw my jacket around her shoulders as we walked back down the hill, my arms clamping the jacket down as it flapped in the wind.

She stopped and turned to face me, and as we kissed my grip loosened on my jacket and it began to slide off.

"Too cold to not have this on", she chuckled as she bolted down the hill yanking me along by the hand.

I proposed at the bottom of that hill.

I don't know what made me do it, I felt compelled to. I had no ring, no romantic speech like an American movie, I had nothing but raw emotion. The strange thing was, I hadn't regretted my decision in the slightest.

I'd fallen in love in that brief momentary glance at the dance, the smile that she gave me was one that made me dream of a future and now, that future seemed one step close to reality.

The wedding was small, in her church in the town. My family made it as well as hers and after introducing themselves to each other, the vows were exchanged.

My mother sacrificed her wedding ring so Christine was able to have one for the day, we would replace it in a few months' time, hopefully when the war would be nearing an end.

I wore my uniform, it was easier that way, and cheaper. The other boys from the regiment provided a guard of honour for us as we ecstatically walked out the church.

Christine wore a plain white dress, with a small rose attached to her chest, she looked the most beautiful that I had ever seen her.

She wore a simple veil, one that she preferred to keep swept back, leaving her face uncovered. That veil now sat proudly on the window ledge of our home, making sure that all the passers-by know that we were newlyweds.

We had a week-long honeymoon in Bournemouth, a luxury provided by Christine's father, and we spent the week cooped up in a small chalet on the coast, enjoying the British September rainfall. We didn't mind though.

We spent every day outside as if it was unbearably hot, as long as we had each other's company, it didn't matter what the rest of the world, including the weather, was doing.

I was one of the fortunate one's on base. I had my wife and now my home nearby and so I was able to sneak home to my wife on an evening pass.

Shortly before Christmas, I cycled my way off the base, bid a cheerio to the sentry, and headed home.

Christine was sat by the door, fire roaring, waiting for me.

She didn't even bother to say 'Hello' to me.

"I went out today", her eyes began filling with tears and she tried breathing in between little sobs.

Throwing my beret on to the table, I lurched towards her and gave her a hug.

She broke the hug and looked into my eyes, with a wry smile spread across part of her face.

"We're having a baby" she sobbed and squeezed me tight, burying her head into my chest.

I stood, open mouthed for a moment, blinking several times, double checking I was still awake.

I began to wheeze, which turned in to a wheezy sort of laugh. Tears streaming down my face now too, we stood for an hour or two in our front room, giggling and chuckling to each other.

I was going to be a father, I couldn't quite get my head around it, a smaller version of me, fused with my favourite person in the world, would be joining us.

I sobbed for days afterwards. In between my sobbing, the boys took me out for a drink. I had joined the group of men who had wives and girlfriends expecting.

I couldn't believe it.

Then the due date came through.

The sixth of June 1944.

9.

Although we were hurtling towards the ground at one hundred miles an hour, the lives of many men in the back, many who were married, some expecting children of their own, I could not get the thought of my own family out of my head.

All leave was cancelled, even for those whose wives' were expecting that very week. All communication was restricted, only that was considered of paramount importance to the upcoming mission was granted.

I wasn't going to know before we left whether my wife was going to have a little boy or a little girl. She may have already given birth, there was no way of me knowing.

I thought of Christine, alone in our house, preparing to give birth without her husband. She would be in such pain and I wouldn't be the first person she would see on the other side of that pain. I felt incredibly depressed at the thought, and for every second that I thought about it, my limbs seemed to get heavier.

I sighed at the prospect of other people getting to hold my child before their father held them. I longed to be there, waiting till the early hours before being told I was allowed in. I fantasised over it several times in the matter of days I had to stew over my own emotions and frustrations.

I wanted to be the first man to pick up my baby girl or little boy and cradle them for hours, talking to them, letting them know how lucky they truly were to have such a loving, caring and beautiful person like their mother.

I needed to see Christine, to tell her how proud I was of her, of how far we'd come together already and tell her how much I loved her. She needed to know that even if I wasn't coming back, I had our future mapped out already, every little detail and that it was just this war that had paused all of that.

I always kept my letters from Christine in my inside pocket, but tonight, we had no identification, nothing that could give away who we were, where we were from or what we would go on to do. Hopefully, if all went to plan, we would be sent home in a few weeks in readiness for the next time our services were required.

I tapped my inside pocket as a gesture, a comfort to me that she was always there with me, my real co-pilot.

I would explain to my child about their father, how he was an utterly useless man, who forgot birthdays, anniversaries and barely remembered to feed himself. I just wanted an opportunity to explain to them why their father wasn't there to greet them into the world and that he would try his best to get to see them as quickly as he could.

I dreamed about being the one to teach them to read and write, I would take hours out of my day to do it, or give up working just to spend extra time with them.

The future that I had seen in that young girl's eyes at that dance was happening, but it was all happening in my head. It was going to occur without me.

The more I thought about my absence at the birth of my child, the more I thought about the possibility of my permanent absence. This was another thing we had been instructed not to do, but it is only natural for a man to think about the things he loves most in life in the face of death.

I knew I was in the same situation as every man in this plane, and the other two that flew by our sides, but I couldn't feel compassion for them, I had my own feelings to worry about.

I found myself praying again, praying that I would at least do my job to the best of my ability and, if it was God's plan, to lead me to the other side to watch my child grow up, like a normal father.

To make totally sure that God would hear my prayer, I would need to play my part. I needed to focus wholeheartedly on what I was about to do, and not place my life, or the lives of those in my plane, in jeopardy.

I needed to forget about my family.

I pushed them to the back of my mind.

10.

I wrestled with my wooden, oversized, overweight bird as it plummeted to the ground. I tried in earnest to keep the plane airborne for as long as possible, preventing gravity from taking its inevitable victim just yet.

Trees became visible as we raced past, much too quickly for my liking, they were all merged into one great blur as they zipped past my windows, threatening to bring down the whole plane with a glancing blow.

John and I sat in total silence now, struggling and sweating to bring down our craft at the correct landing site.

I could sense a few pairs of eyes behind us boring into the back of my head as they watched intently as these two men, responsible for all their lives, fought with a force of nature to stop a speeding log from killing them all.

I swore I could also hear a few prayer beads clicking in between someone's hands, a few of the lads had had them on the training flights, as they rasped out the Lord's Prayer or Hail Mary's or whatever they wanted as we moved closer to hell.

Suddenly, our target appeared at our eleven o'clock, as if someone had suddenly plonked it there, John needlessly pointing it out to me as we scurried towards it.

Its tall, imposing, grey structure looked odd over the rest of the landscape. The futuristic design of the bridge somehow didn't fit in with the rest of the aesthetics of the village, as it somehow glowed in the moonlight.

The moon lit up everything that I needed to see. I could see where we were about to pitch down for the night, still coming in way too fast.

The frame of the plane creaked like I'd never heard it before as it wrestled with the speed and the way in which I was forcing it to stay airborne much longer than it wanted to. This Horsa had been put to work, it had done well, it was my favourite one yet.

Just a few more seconds Horsey, just give me a few more.

I willed it to give me more time, as if I was on a marathon, in the last straight, ready to give up. I found myself rocking backwards and forwards trying to give it a physical helping hand, pushing closer and closer to the finishing line.

It kept going for a few seconds more.

As I grunted and strained, I felt the nervous faces behind me, darkened by the paint smeared across them, all stare at me, praying for me.

We still had the speed, but we didn't have the height, I would start to see the individual grass blades before too long.

The river was now racing past us on the left, the glistening moonlight bouncing off it and flashing around my eyes. I tilted my head slightly so as to avoid the glare, the thing I needed the least right now was a headache, I already had one of those.

"Too fast!" I shouted like an absolute mad man, "we're going to need the chute!"

John grunted some sort of reply, but it was too late now if he was actually disagreeing with me. If we didn't use the chute, we would plough straight into our target, which wouldn't exactly be ideal at one hundred miles an hour.

John readied himself.

I fixed my gaze across the river now and watched as the tower loomed closer towards us, I would hold my breath from now on.

The water tower passed us, quickly.

I let the wheels of the Horsa just kiss the French countryside, trimming just the very tops of the daisies that I imagined to be there. A low, soft rumble echoed around the cabin as they slipped and slid over the cold surface.

"Stream!"

I was a machine, I had no emotions now, just doing what was necessary.

John released the chute out of the back and instantly I preferred the option of clattering into tonnes of heavy steel at speed.

The chute deployed and lifting the back end of the craft back into the air, like a child lifting a mouse up by its tail, my head was sent flying forwards as the rest of my body seemed to want to go backwards.

John didn't need any instruction, he jettisoned the chute immediately and as we slid along the ground on our belly, there was nothing else I could do but become a passenger as we ground to a halt.

We scraped over rocks with an almighty racket and sparks began to spray up in every direction as our bodies seemed to convulse with the rocking.

I felt every bump as we crashed over the holes where the anti-glider poles should have been, I made a mental note to thank God for that one.

I let out a sigh of relief, almost followed by a torrent of vomit, which I suppressed.

After a steady hissing as we glided over the ground, silence ensued once more.

We had come to a halt. No gunfire, no shouting, no guns pointing in our faces as we sat helplessly in our beloved wreckage. Just total silence.

The invasion had begun.

