

Moon

Over

Midnight

By

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Moon Over Midnight

a Canadian bomber pilot's story

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Author's Note

This is a work of fiction.
However, the missions are based
on actual missions undertaken
by Bomber Command.

All the incidents described
happened in one way or another
and are based on
actual events and the
lived experience of
a Canadian bomber pilot.

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The men and women
of Bomber Command
were forgotten after the war -
no campaign medal
was struck for them,
nor any recognition
given for their
dedication, service and sacrifice.

It was not until 2012
that Bomber Command
received a memorial,
commemorating the
55,573 aircrew who gave their lives
during the 1939 - 1945 conflict.
A mortality rate of 44 percent...

Fittingly, the
Bomber Command memorial,
situated in London's Green Park,
incorporates pieces of aluminium
from a Handley Page Halifax bomber -
the plane flown by the pilot
and crew of this story.

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This story is narrated
in the first person,
as experienced
by the pilot.

There are descriptions of
death, harm, substance abuse
and lewd behaviour throughout.

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One The Flak Club

October 1943
RCAF airbase
Middleton St George, NE England

Evening

“Pooch! Where are you, boy?” Damn, I thought, stamping my feet: it gets so dark out here on the perimeter; not to mention pretty parky as well.

“Come on, Pooch. Find the bloody ball. I’m going to light a cigarette, and if you haven’t found your ball by the end of my first drag, that’s it, we’re off. I can hear the beer calling.”

I slowly lit a cigarette, taking care to hide the spark and flame from my lighter. No sooner had I drawn in on the ciggie, than Pooch, better known to one and all as Boy, came bounding back, ball in mouth.

“Good lad. With eyes like that, we could get you a transfer to night fighters. How would you like that, Pooch? Do you think you'd cut the mustard in whatever it is they fly now? Is it still Defiants? I heard they were as slow as molasses. Or as slow as black treacle in your Brit language.”

I drew heavily on the cigarette, exhaled then bent down and picked up the ball Pooch had dropped at my feet. At the same time, I gave his head a little tussle and placed the ball in the pocket of my flying jacket.

“What say we go for a pint, eh? Have you worked up a thirst? I know I have. But then that’s me: always seem to have a thirst on.” I gave a little laugh. Pooch let out a bark and started to trot off across the grass and away from the airfield perimeter, where we had been playing fetch the ball.

Ten minutes later, as we skirted a hardstanding with the brooding hulk of a Halifax bomber, sitting silently in the dark, I was startled by a shout.

“You, there! Halt! Identify yourself.”

It was one of the airbase guards, Service Police to give them their correct name, doing the usual nightly foot-patrol around the dispersal areas. I knew most of the guards by sight, but this one was new.

“Do you know, sir, I could see the light from your cigarette from way over here? Now, if I can see it down here, what’s it going to look like from up there?” He pointed up at the sky.

I gave a slight cough and replied, in my best Canadian-meets-posh-Brit voice, because as we all know, there’s nothing like a Brit accent for pretending you’re in charge.

“Well, I imagine if I were up there smoking a cigarette, I’d be in a plane and unlikely to be seen by you or anyone else.”

That threw him.

“You smoke in your plane, sir? With all them fumes, bombs, and ammunition?”

I nodded, took out my cigarette packet, and offered it to him.

“They’re American. Lucky Strike. Quite a smooth taste. Here, have the packet.”

“Are you trying to offer me a cheap bribe, sir?”

“Heavens, no. You should report me for wandering around an airfield in the dark with an unguarded light. It is very remiss of me.” All this in my Canadian-meets-posh-Brit-I’m in charge voice.

He took the cigarettes and asked for my name and rank. I gave another cough, more for effect than anything.

“Wing Commander Shuggit. I really should know better.” I gave an embarrassed smile.

The guard snapped to attention and saluted. Give it a bit longer I thought, and you will just be as jaded as everyone else around here. I returned his salute with the worst of bad salutes. Then I told him to carry on. With any luck, I wouldn’t run into him again, at least not tonight, and he wouldn’t bother to make any sort of report. I am not Wing Commander Shuggit.

I stood still for almost a minute as the sound of the guard’s hobnailed boots faded away. Then I gave a low whistle for Pooch and set off in the direction of the Flak Club.

Now, while we have perfectly good officers’ and sergeants’ messes on the base and a fine pub - The Twig, as everyone calls it—that is just off base, it was decided we needed a proper airmen’s clubhouse, the Flak Club, where any aircrew, no matter their rank, would be welcome. Besides, we had developed a nice supply line in booze, liberated, donated, or otherwise from various American airbases.

You see, sometimes when you are coming back from a mission and, say, you are running on fumes and crossed fingers; have battle damage or some sort of electrical or mechanical problem, you need to set down at the nearest and most convenient place with a long enough runway, and if that happens to be a US Army Air Force base, well...

Everyone knows the Yanks have tons of food and booze, and they are always, always, generous, especially as we Canadians are not Brits. There’s a bit of beef between Yanks and Brits, especially over who has the more accurate bombing. We tend to get given a free pass, most of the time, given that we both hail from the same continent.

The Flak Club was situated behind one of the main hangers, in a Nissan hut that was once used as a store. We’d agreed with the base’s previous commanding officer, we could use it as a clubhouse for aircrew. I say ‘we’, but I had little to do with it, and most of

those that did were, well, either dead, prisoners of war, or classed as missing in action—spread one way or another, far and wide across Europe.

Inside the Flak Club, there was naturally, a fully stocked bar. The best-quality American liquor. Brit beer too, traded from the local pub. You know, I'll swap you a case of whisky for a crate or three of beer. We had to source our own, you see: the booze supplied to the messes was strictly, and officially off limits.

To make the place feel and look less like a long, corrugated shed, there were some arm chairs as well as regular chairs and a few tables. Someone had donated a gramophone, and there was also a large wireless. Oh yes, we had somehow acquired a chaise lounge along the way as well - perfect for those wanting to perfect Verlaine's monotonous languor. Finally, a steward, borrowed from the sergeants' mess did the honours behind the bar.

By the time I reached the door of the Flak Club, Pooch was waiting for me. He had his own special tippie: one quarter beer, three quarters water, and just the one bowl - one of us had to stay *compos mentis*, as they say. As for me, I have a rare medical condition, known as hollow legs, so I am informed. Takes an age to fill them with booze but then, I drink to forget, and I have a lot I want to forget.

I opened the door and stepped through into a little porch-like space, closed the door securely behind me, and then pushed aside the heavy blackout curtain and followed Pooch in, making sure, after I had paused to breathe in the ambiance, to replace the curtain.

There is something particular about the smell of pubs, and drinking dens such as this. The aroma of beer, both stale and fresh, mingled with pipe and cigarette smoke: it feels comforting, safe, almost like a warm blanket you can pull around yourself.

It's odd how smells stay with you—not just of pubs and places like this, but of aircraft too.

The lingering fumes of plane fuel, and oil and the ingrained, pungent musk of cordite; all mixed with the ever-present vapour of fear; sweat, and urine—this last from the empty beer bottles the gunners like to piss into during missions, then kicked or knocked over in the height of battle.

The peculiar smell of the oxygen mask was another that lingered; a musty, rubbery, cloth odour, and the metallic flavour of the oxygen itself. This last reminds me, strangely, of scratchy zinc bath tubs... Blocks of soap and sudsy, dirty-grey water, left behind as you step out of the tub. I smiled and inhaled again.

The Flak Club lights cast a yellow nicotine hue. It was almost as if the voltage had been turned down. I glanced around—a few regular faces, a couple of new ones. I ignored them and strode up to the bar. As soon as I'd stepped through the curtain, Jack, the steward, had poured a pint for me with a whisky on the side.

I gave Jack a nod, and took a sip of the beer and then another, slightly longer. It was cold, dark, and bitter - Guinness. I put the glass down and picked up the whisky.

“Have one yourself, Jack. I think it was my birthday today.”

“Many happy returns to you. It won’t be long before you’re as old as me.”

“Just so long as I never end up as old and miserable as the captain of our plane.”

“That’ll be Squadron Leader Jamieson then.”

Jack poured himself a finger-width of whisky, then raised his glass to me.

“He likes to tell me, the captain of our plane, that I may be the pilot, but as the senior ranking officer, he is in charge. I am just his driver. So, I got one of the ground-crew to paint ‘*The Original Omnibus Company*’ on the plane’s nose. He wasn’t impressed; he said he was going to report me for defacing government-issued property! Then he had it painted over.”

Jack gave a laugh and knocked back his whiskey. “He’s always been the same. A permanent rain cloud. You’re not off down to The Twig tonight, then? Or hitching a ride into Darlington?”

I shook my head, finished the whisky, and then the Guinness.

“We did think about taking a stroll to The Twig, didn’t we Pooch, but it would’ve meant getting dressed, and as you can see by my jumper and flying jacket, I like the relaxed look. Besides, I can’t find my blessed shoes—not that I mind wearing flying boots all the time. As for Darlington, Pooch here isn’t so keen on the bus ride. Are you, boy?” Pooch looked up from his bowl of watery beer and gave a bark.

“You and that dog, eh? Like two peas in a pod.” Jack refilled my whisky, then began slowly pouring out another Guinness from a fresh bottle, and as he was doing so, I noticed him give a slight shake of the head. I gave him a quizzical look.

“Nothing to worry about. We got a couple of new blokes, just rolled in today: bomb aimer and navigator. They was asking if you ever came in.” Jack smiled and gave a knowing wink.

I knocked back the whisky and grinned. “Well, I have been known to drop in from time-to-time.”

Jack moved off to serve someone else. I glanced down at Pooch, licking the last drops from his bowl and let out a yawn then felt in my pockets for my cigarette packet, forgetting I had given it away. As I was doing this, a hand reached out with a silver cigarette case.

“Please, have one of mine.”

I looked up. A very smart, well-pressed, newly minted Pilot Officer stood before me: slicked back, black hair, and what I called, the regulation issue moustache—handlebar style. I didn’t have one, I must have been in the wrong queue when they were handing them out; I was what they called an outlier: blond, untamed hair, clean-shaven. On the left breast of the Pilot Officer’s uniform jacket, was the single-winged ‘B’ badge of a bomb aimer.

I took a cigarette from the open case, accepted a light, and nodded my thanks, thinking that may be it. I am not one for striking up friendships. If you want to be polite, you could call me taciturn. I knew a girl back in Canada who told me I was unspeak-to-able. But I think what she really meant was, I didn't speak much, at least not the words she wanted to hear. That was back then. These days, beyond flying and drinking, I have even fewer things to say.

The bomb aimer motioned for his friend to come over - he wore the same single-winged badge but with an 'N' for navigator. He thrust out his hand and probably said his name as well, but I wasn't paying attention.

I placed the cigarette in my mouth, held up my hands, and wiggled my fingers. "No handshakes. I need to keep my hands nimble for flying." Did I believe that? Of course not. I was superstitious, not only about handshaking, but also about being patted on the back, and saying, good luck—all those sorts of things - they just invite misfortune. I could also feel my stomach starting to tense—that awkward nervousness of being in the company of people who gave off an air of being relaxed and socially confident. Not something I was ever likely to be.

"You read that exact, same article as well? Gee, I thought I was the only one, or maybe I'd dreamt it. But, yeah, this doctor said, too much vigorous hand shaking could burst blood vessels and loosen bones!" This from the navigator; the bomb aimer looked sceptical.

The bomb aimer then asked me. "Can I get you another?" He motioned towards my empty glass.

Of course I accepted; after all, my grandmother had always told me, "Accept everything except blows." And she is a very wise, and astute woman.

After a further two rounds; one from the navigator and then one from me, they left, but not before asking; if I were to be in need of a new or replacement bomb aimer and or navigator, would I keep them in mind? I nodded, except it really wouldn't be up to me. I held that part back, though. The navigator then asked, in a by-the-way, kind of moment.

"Is it true you always make it back? Never once have you had to ditch in the sea or bail out?"

I shrugged; technically, that was correct. I looked at them both and nodded. "You know," I said, "swimming's fine if you enjoy it; I don't. Besides, it doesn't matter what time of year it is, the water is always going to be wet. As for bailing out, I know about two words of German and Canadian-French isn't the same as real French. I don't think I'd get far. So, if I can make it back, I will."

They seemed contented with that, bade me goodnight, and left. I asked Jack for another drink, then another, and by the time he started to clean up and jangle the keys, I was feeling very relaxed indeed.

I pulled on my cap, zipped up my flying jacket, gave Jack a rather skewed, one-fingered salute and a thumbs up, then headed for the door with Pooch following behind. We encountered a slight hitch with the blackout curtain—Pooch and me becoming entwined for a good half minute in the heavy fabric— but we managed to free ourselves and exit the Flak Club in a reasonably orderly fashion.

However, no sooner were we outside than the cold night air hit me, and after no more than three or four steps, I tangled my feet and fell into the rubbish bins, to the left of the Flak Club entrance. I made a tremendous racket. Fortunately, I didn't hurt myself and no one came running to find out what the commotion was, especially the guard I had come across earlier. Unsteadily, I got to my feet, picked up the bins and adjusted my clothing. Pooch looked on impassively, no doubt thinking I was stupid for having fallen off my feet.

By the time we reached my room, I was ready for sleep. I kicked off my flying boots, dropped my jacket to the floor, and collapsed onto the bed. But instead of immediately falling into the land of nod, I began hearing the voice of the navigator - the one I'd met in the Flak Club.

"Is it true you always make it back?"

Yes, I always made it back, but that was never the full story...

From the moment we leave the ground, we're up against it; there are times when just getting airborne seems a feat in itself. Then, making it to the target alive, plane intact, or as Strobey our bomb aimer calls it, *aero-intacto*, is quite an achievement.

Beyond simple mechanical, electrical, or hydraulic faults and failures the plane may suffer, there is what is regarded as the occupational hazard - Battle damage.

Sometimes night-fighters, single and twin engined, both with 20mm canon, harry us on our way to the target and after, when we are on our homeward leg. Their sole aim, not unsurprisingly, is to bring us down.

After the night-fighters, and before and over the target area, there is flak. Shell after shell of 50mm and 88mm rounds pumped into the sky; primed to explode at pre-set heights: thick, black ink blots appearing all around, like deadly clouds. The plane shudders and shakes from the near hits. The exploding shells spray the fuselage with metal fragments: shrapnel that will rip into anything it comes into contact with - metal or flesh.

All it needed was one exploding shell to be in the self same piece of sky, at the self same time as you and it was very likely, goodnight and goodbye.

Being in a plane at 18,000 or 20,000 feet that is carrying several thousand pounds of bombs, a few thousand gallons of fuel and some 8,000 rounds of ammunition for the gun turrets, was not the safest of places to be - especially with people firing canon and anti-aircraft shells at you.

There were so very many aircrew who never even got to the target, and of those that did, almost as many again, never made it home. Each of us walks in the shadow of death, stalked by the Grim Reaper and his deadly touch.

So, yes, I always get back, the plane always gets back; some days though, not everyone gets back. And I know, with every mission, I lose a little something of myself in the night skies over Germany and my chances of getting back diminish with each and every mission...

I began my time in Bomber Command, my operational time I should say, as opposed to training, flying twin-engined Wellington bombers. I then converted to the four-engined Halifax, a heavy bomber. The Wellington though, it could take a lot of damage: a real tough plane.

The first time I came back with real, major damage was my fifth or sixth sortie.

We were part of a force attacking the Krupps works at Essen; it was mostly a four-engined mission, but they threw in some squadrons of Wellingtons for variety. On the approach to the target, we were hit quite badly by anti-aircraft fire. The navigator was killed instantly when a chunk of flak shrapnel tore through the fuselage.

We dropped our bombs - more likely off target than on - and then turned for home. On the return leg, we were surprised by a night-fighter; he must have been low on ammo because he only made two passes; once with cannon fire and another with regular guns. Those two short passes though were enough to incapacitate our rear gunner and seriously injure the radio operator. Their injuries were bad but survivable. The night-fighter also managed to destroy the Flight Engineer's parachute as well as a thermos flask of hot, sweet tea we had been saving for the return leg - parachute and flask both having been stowed by the radio operator's position.

Then, if that wasn't enough for the night; one dead, two injured and two, physically unscathed but mentally done in; over the North Sea, almost mid-distance between the Dutch and English coasts - we lost an engine - likely hit by fire from the night-fighter. After a quick check with the crew, we decided to push on and try and make it back to base: the aircraft was flying well, albeit on one engine and we were able to maintain a reasonable height. Besides, although our two casualties hadn't worsened, they were incapable of bailing out and would likely die if we ditched in the sea.

By the time we got back to our airfield and landed, I had nothing left: I was drained and exhausted. I waited for our injured to be removed, then clambered out of the plane and threw up: it wouldn't be the last time.

So yes, I always made it back but that was only ever half the story.

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