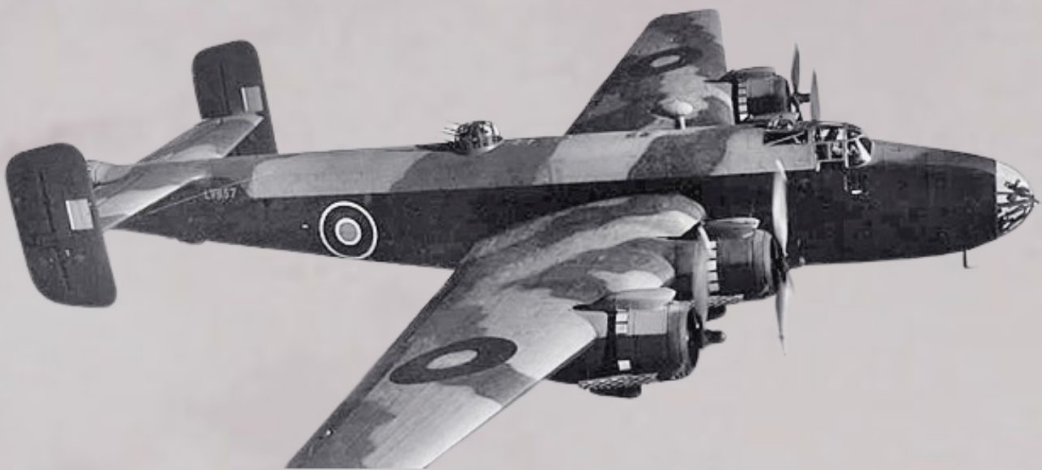


# Moon Over Midnight



Rachael  
Anne  
Long

**Moon**

**Over**

**Midnight**

by

Rachael Anne Long

# Moon Over Midnight

The story of a Canadian bomber pilot

By

Rachael Anne Long

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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.  
The events are portrayed  
as the lived experience of  
an RCAF bomber pilot.

~ ~ ~

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

The reasons for this  
are complex and manifold  
and beyond the scope of this note.

Suffice to say, it was not until 2012  
that Bomber Command  
received a suitable national memorial,  
commemorating the  
55,573\* aircrew who gave their lives  
during the 1939 - 1945 conflict.  
A mortality rate of 44 percent...

\*figure taken from RAF Benevolent Fund website (rafbf.org)

~ ~ ~

Author's Note  
continued...

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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Since 2018 there has  
also been the IBCC,  
International Bomber Command Centre  
situated south of the city of Lincoln  
and which commemorates  
all those who served in  
Bomber Command.

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

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Please be aware -  
There are descriptions of  
death, harm, substance abuse  
and lewd behaviour throughout.

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## 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 of the flint and petrol flame of the lighter. No sooner had I drawn in on the ciggie than Pooch, 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’re 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 walking and 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; I certainly didn’t recognise his voice.

“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.” 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’ll be just as jaded as everyone else around here. I returned his salute with the worst of bad salutes, then 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 - training or otherwise 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 between the main hangers and the admin or ops buildings, in a Nissan hut that was once a barracks then a store. We'd agreed with the base's previous commanding officer, it could be used as

a clubhouse for aircrew. I say 'we', but I had little to do with it. 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 some 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 the poet Verlaine's *monotonous languor*. Finally, a steward, borrowed from the sergeants' mess did the honours behind the bar. And we had a pot bellied stove as well, a large one.

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 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 use for relieving themselves in during missions—the very same bottles that then get 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 taste 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. Jack stores the bottles of Guinness in crates outside, hidden under a tarpaulin. Perfect when there is a chill or a little frost in the air. Not so good when it snows or there is a heavy icing up. Defrosting Guinness on a pot-bellied stove is an art. I put the glass down and picked up the whisky.

“Have one yourself, Jack,” I said I as raised the glass of whisky. “I think it was my birthday today...”

“Many happy returns to you then. 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.”

“Ah, that’ll be that Squadron Leader Jamieson then.”

Jack poured himself a finger-width of whisky and 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 ran a finger around the inside of my whisky glass then waggled it at Pooch's nose. He sniffed at it then sneezed and returned to his watery beer. I popped the finger into my mouth then pushed the empty whisky glass toward Jack.

"Well, as you know, I have been known to drop in from time-to-time as the saying goes."

Jack moved off to serve someone else. I glanced back down at Pooch, licking the last drops from his bowl and let out a yawn then felt my pockets for a cigarette, forgetting I had given the packet 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 to*. But I think what she really meant was, I wasn’t much of a conversationist. At least not the sort of conversation she wanted. 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 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-by kind of way.

“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 quite 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. I 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 any mechanical, electrical, or hydraulic faults and failures the plane may suffer, there is what is regarded as the occupational hazard - Fighters and Flak.

Sometimes night-fighters, single and twin engined, both with 20mm canon, harry us on our way to the target and after 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: even on the darkest of nights, you feel you can see them. 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, the Halibag, 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. Bomber Command planners like to do things like that.

On the approach to the target, we were hit quite badly by anti-aircraft fire, flak. 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 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 a thermos flask of hot, sweet tea we had been saving for the return leg—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.

~~~~~

### **Hangovers and Maintenance**

The next morning (after the night before)  
approx 7am

I guess I ought to consider myself fortunate: I have my own room; it's small with a bed and chest of drawers; a writing desk and an upright chair. In a small side-room is a hand sink for washing and a toilet. A lot of other bases have Nissan hut dorms or wooden huts and at least one American airbase I've been to, has rows and rows of

tents for living quarters. Pretty miserable in winter I'd guess.

I also have a shared batman, a valet. He goes by the nickname of Winco. He's a Brit by birth, but Canadian by parentage. He was christened Winco, short for Wing Commander, because he's more organised and knows more about what's going on than most people. And, if you need something he can usually whistle it up, whatever it is within reason. But get on his wrong side and you'll know all about it.

When Winco put his head around my door, with a cup of tea, I was still asleep. He had to give my shoulder a good shake, more than once, to rouse me.

I stared up at the blurry shape that was Winco's face, waiting for his features to come into focus.

"Heavy night last night, was it? I see you kept your clothes on. Did you think there might be a sudden scramble call? A need to sprint to your plane?"

"Always ready, isn't that the motto?" I wearily offered and pulled myself up and sat on the edge of the bed. Boy did I feel hungover.

Winco handed me the mug of tea and shook his head. "If it's the Boy Scout motto you are meaning, it's 'Always Prepared,' meaning, *always in a state of readiness in mind and body*. Judging by your current state, I would say you have failed."

I looked up at Winco, our orderly corporal or was it corporal orderly?

“With talk like that, I’d say you’ve been listening to Squadron Leader Jamieson.”

“Ah yes, Mr Jamieson. He has been back on base several hours already. Returned from his overnight visit to his wife. He has also partaken of a church service as well. A very pious man is Squadron Leader Jamieson.”

Winco gave a little wink, confirming he was being sarcastic.

I took a gulp of tea and mustered a smile. My head felt as if Pooch’s ball was bouncing around inside.

“I’ll bet he has more church parade hours than flying hours by now!”

“That wouldn’t be for me to comment. Now, if you don’t mind, I will open your window. Unless of course, you need your room to remain smelling like a beer-swilling boxer’s jockstrap.”

That was the thing with Winco: that British childhood he’d had, endowed him with what I think is called diffident understatement? I’m not sure, perhaps it’s just sarcastic politeness? I stood up, thought about stretching but decided against it.

“Where’s Pooch?”

“As I was doing my rounds earlier, I heard him scratching at your door. I let him out, in order for him to take care of



his morning ablutions. By now, he is very likely enjoying breakfast in the mess.”

“You are too good, Winco.”

“Naturally.”

With that Winco left.

I gave my bedding a quick straighten - having slept on my bed last night rather than in it. Next I grabbed a clean shirt; my decidedly off-white, roll-neck sweater was even more off-white than usual; grubby and stained with last night's Guinness and a little vomit. It needed a good wash, as did I.

A quick strip wash in the sink and thirty minutes later, I was in the now empty and post-breakfast mess, collecting a fully breakfasted Pooch.

Outside the mess I chose a bicycle with a basket on the front, popped Pooch in it and off we went, on our way to the dispersal areas where the planes were kept.

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The cycle ride to the dispersal area did nothing to ease my hangover. There was a light frost still lingering but the crispness of the air was beginning to fade into dampness. I free-wheeled up to the heavily-creosoted hut across from the hardstanding where Halifax B. Mk.V, G-for-George was parked—my plane or rather, the plane I piloted for Squadron Leader Jamieson.

In a weird piece of Brit logic the Mk. V was the same as the Mk. II, except for the undercarriage and at some point, so the rumour mill said, we'd get a Mk. III, which I guess would be better than the Mk. V?

The ground crew had built themselves a ramshackle hut; a mix of wood, corrugated iron sheet and tarpaulin—all held together with a generous amount of creosote. Now if there were two things that spoke to me of summer in England, it was the smell of creosote: anything and everything that looked wooden was liberally daubed with the stuff. The other thing was freshly cut grass. But this was October and it could get a bit bleak out here on the dispersals and the hut gave the *erks* as ground crew were universally known, somewhere to take a break; store some essential equipment and, with the small paraffin stove they had acquired, brew up limitless tea.

Of course, that didn't stop them from partaking of the refreshments on offer when the NAAFI mobile canteen came around.

Before I had a chance to lean the bicycle against the hut, Pooch was out of the basket and straight inside. There was always the chance the ground crew had a little treat for him. I tried a little stretch but once again thought better of it and followed Pooch inside.

"Blimey, you look rough. Looks rough, don't he, Pooch."

Pooch wagged his tail in agreement and gave a short bark.

Flight Sergeant Collins was in charge of the ground crew for G-for-George. Anything mechanical, electrical, hydraulic or otherwise to do with the plane and a lot more besides, Flight as he was called by all and sundry, got it sorted with his lads.

Their hut may have been small and half spares store/half tool shed with patched-up easy chairs, a card table, and odd-sized cupboards of necessities squeezed in but it was dry, warm and always welcoming.

A sign on the door read;

Flash Harry's  
No Bed, No Breakfast  
No Credit  
Wings and Prayers to Order

I had a brief chat with Flight, regarding recent repairs to G-George; the number two engine had been running rough on our last mission, losing oil and there had been some flak damage to the tail area. I said I'd do a walk around the plane with him and sign off the repairs, but first I needed to attend to something.

As I left the hut and walked over to the plane, Flight called out after me.

"You'll be needing this." He tossed over a soft flying helmet and face mask.

I caught the small bundle and gave him a thumbs up. At the plane, I lifted Pooch up through the fuselage crew hatch and then climbed in myself. One of the things I liked about the Halifax was its spaciousness. Compared to some other bombers there was plenty of room to move about, from the crew hatch onwards, up past the wings, to the cockpit. But that was where it narrowed and got a little cramped: forward of the engines, the nose area was home to the bomb aimer, navigator, pilot, flight engineer and radio operator - all within a space of roughly ten or so feet.

I clambered into the pilot's position; the seat was the recessed, deep pan style, designed to accommodate a seat type parachute. However, as clip-on chest parachutes were now standard, a thick leather purpose-made cushion often filled the recess. For me though, I preferred to fill the space with an RAF issue, Type K single-person survival dinghy with a thinner cushion on top of that. The dinghy came in a square pack and was designed to attach to the bottom of a seat parachute, so fitted perfectly.

Why did I choose to sit on a dinghy pack? Quite simple; the standard-issue yellow Mae-West life preserver wasn't going to save you. No ifs or buts. If you needed to ditch in the drink, be that the North Sea, English Channel or the IJsselmeer or Wadden Sea, you would need a dinghy.

The plane does have a crew size dinghy but do you really want to be fighting with six other chaps, as the Brits would say, for a place in it? Assuming you can get it out of its storage space, and it hasn't been shot up and

will inflate. And I'm not the only crew member who has a dinghy pack.

This is all moot, though: I have no intention of going down in the drink!

I slipped on the flying helmet, connected the rubbery breathing tube of the face mask to the plane's oxygen supply, held the mask over my face, and breathed in deeply. Nothing clears a hangover like pure oxygen.

Had it not been for Flight giving my arm a push, I would have happily sat there with my eyes closed, breathing in that breath of the gods, for what remained of the morning.

"Here you go," He said. "Man cannot live on oxygen alone. Get this down you. There's no milk, so I put an extra sugar in." He handed me a tin mug of milk-less tea.

I took the tea and slipped off the flying helmet, draping it over the control column. Flight wasn't finished though. He put down his tea and pulled out a paper bag from inside his overalls.

"Don't say I don't look after you." He held open the bag, revealing two doorstep jam sandwiches—one each.

I took one, pulled off some crust and passed it to Pooch, who disappeared into the plane's nose and lay down on the bomb aimer's padded bench. For several minutes Flight and I were silent, working our way through the jam doorstops and sweet tea.

After we were finished, Flight pulled out the little notebook he kept a record of repairs in.

“Ready for a run through?”

I gave a nod.

“We patched up the flak damage around the tail; the control surfaces, cables and connections are all good and working with no damage. The boy, Raymond, replaced the fractured oil-line in the number two engine. I told him to replace the plugs while he was at it. Him and Robbo then ran it up to speed and said it seemed fine, but you’ll want to check it.”

I nodded and pulled out a fresh packet of cigarettes and offered one to Flight.

“Make sure that oxygen is off. Otherwise we’ll be sitting on a cloud each and playing harps.”

I grinned and checked the oxygen was indeed off. I also opened the cockpit window. We chatted idly while we smoked. Flight asked how many missions I’d done with Jamieson? I wasn’t sure.

“I’m thinking it could be six or seven by now, Flight. But all together?” I shrugged, “I did ten on Wellingtons, that’s when I met you, then we all converted to Halifaxes.

I flew two sorties as a fill-in, flying those god awful Mark II’s, followed by I think four or five, with rag-tag crews - you know, put together from left-overs. Then I got picked to be Jamieson’s regular pilot, in this lovely beast of a Mark V. In all, I suppose, I’ve done twenty-six sorties. I

may be missing one or two somewhere—perhaps I did a few more in Mark II's?

“And now you’ve gone and put your name up to be a Pathfinder.” Flight shook his head.

“You know how it is, they don’t send us home like the Yanks do when we’ve finished our tour of thirty ops. Although they only have to do twenty-five! No, we get packed off to an OTU to be a trainer. It’s a break they say and after that, it’s another thirty missions. Can you see me as a trainer, Flight?”

Flight finished his cigarette and dropped the butt into the dregs of his tea.

“I’ve seen you before and after a mission. You ain’t a pretty site, lad. I’d say some time at an Operational Training Unit would be good for you. Get yourself away from front line missions. Maybe you should go for one of the Coastal Command OTU’s. Get some sea air. Put a bit colour into that pale skin of yours.”

I gave Flight a salute, “Yes Dad!”

Flight shook his head. “I seen too many come and go, I have. Get your thirty ops done and have a proper think. Right?”

I nodded. “Now, let’s see about this number two engine then.”

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Start-up procedure for checking an engine was the same as a normal start-up: I sat in my seat and Flight took up position at the engineer's panel behind me. He had already given instructions to one of his crew, Robbo to attach the starting battery and for the other ground crew to turn the engine over by pushing the propeller through two complete revolutions, and also working the priming pump in the undercarriage bay. Only then would the starter and booster buttons on the engineer's panel be pressed. If all was well, the engine would start.

The thing to remember about the number two engine is, the compressor that operates the wheel brakes, automatic pilot and bomb site runs off it. Although there are manual controls for when it fails. Also, unlike the American bombers, where the bomb site can be used to actually control the plane on the bomb-run, the auto-pilot in a Halifax can't be used at the same time as the bomb site—something to do with gyros...

As soon as Robbo gave a thumbs up, I called out to Flight, "Fire her up!"

The number two engine coughed once then twice and fired into life; I let it run for a minute then increased the speed to 1,000rpm, and waited while Flight studied the temperature and pressure gauges for anything untoward. I then opened the throttle to 1500rpm. All still fine. I stuck my head out of the canopy window and listened.

Hmm...



I brought my head back in, increased the rpm to 1,800 and took another listen. Something sounded a bit off. I dropped the revs back to 1,500 then 1,000 and called out to Flight.

“Can you hear that bit of roughness? Listen, I’ll go to 1,800 again.”

Flight took a listen but wasn’t sure. I dropped the revs back again and we swapped places and went from 1,000rpm to 1,500 to 1,800 once more. Flight stuck his head out the window while I moved the throttles back and forth.

“Do you hear it now?” I asked. “It’s not as smooth as it could be. What do you think, plugs or carb?”

Flight wiggled his finger for me to drop the revs.

“I did say to Raymond to change the plugs. We’ll close it down and go and see what he did. He should be here soon. At least it’s running and going well, even if it’s not smooth enough for your liking.” He gave a grin and shook his head, as if to say, bloody perfectionist.

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Outside the plane, we smoked another cigarette while we waited for Raymond, or the Boy Raymond, as he was often called, being the youngest of the ground crew, to cycle back from the stores down by the big maintenance hangars.

“Here he comes,” said Flight, as Raymond, officially known as, Ground Tradesman, Flight Mechanic Engines, Johns, shoved his bicycle round the back of the hut then pulled a small hessian sack out of his overalls.

“Raymond, boy, come here and talk to us about that number two engine.”

“What’s that, Flight? Before you says anything,”

Raymond reached into the sack and pulled out a box of spark plugs. “We didn’t have any plugs here, so me and Robbo cleaned the old ones and then we ran the engine up and made sure it was all working fine. I told Robbo, I’d make a note about it on a snag sheet and go down to the stores this morning and get some new plugs. Have you not seen the snag sheet?”

Flight shook his head. “I’ve got the snag book here, but there’s no loose page tucked into it, like you usually do, for me to make a proper entry.”

Raymond began checking his overall pockets and pulled out a crumpled piece of paper.

“Sorry, Flight, I must have forgotten to do it last night.”

“I bet Raymond, if I went round your mother’s house, the walls would be papered, floor to ceiling with all the Form 700 snag sheets you’ve forgotten to hand in over the last few years.”

“I ain’t been that bad, Flight. It’s only happened probably three times, including this one. At least I ain’t tried to use the snag sheets as fag paper like Robbo here.”

Robbo, sat on the wheeled starting battery, grinned. “If you don’t try, you don’t get to find out.”

“Right then, enough of that, let’s get these new plugs in.”

An hour later, the old plugs were out, new ones fitted, engine cowl replaced and we were ready to try again. It was then that the plane’s flight engineer, Flying Officer Bill Cranston turned up - he refused to cycle anywhere and had managed to get a lift to the dispersal area. Like everyone else, I called him Uncle.

The thing about Uncle was, well a few things actually, he always wore black overalls - somehow he’d got himself a few pairs from a Hurricane pilot at some fighter base somewhere - old issue apparently. And he was bald - thirty, pushing thirty-two and completely bald! He was like an old soul, definitely older than his years. We’d first flown together, maybe on my third or fourth mission, when the squadron had Wellingtons. Now we flew together on a regular basis, as part of Jamieson’s crew.

Uncle was the studious type - almost old school. He believed you should keep your head down, get the job done and always go home with everything still intact, to the wife and little ones. Oh yes, Uncle, like almost all the ground crew and nigh-on half the aircrew, was also a Brit. He liked to tell the story that his old commanding officer had left him behind, as a temporary liaison officer, when they took their twin-engined Whitley’s and

relocated elsewhere, and the station was handed over to the RCAF.

He was only meant to stay, Uncle claimed, until we Canadians were settled in. No one believed him of course. Besides, he was part of us now, an honorary Canadian.

Uncle seemed a bit fidgety this morning, sheepish even and beckoned for me and Flight to follow him into the hut.

He looked at me. "God, you look rough. Best keep out of Jamieson's way - he's in a foul one today."

Flight let out a chuckle. "You should have seen this one when he rolled up earlier - looked rougher than rough, he did."

"This might make you feel worse."

"Out with it, then Uncle." I said.

"It's like this..." Uncle started then stopped.

"Look, I'll just tell you straight. I put in for a transfer to Coastal a while back and it's come through." He shrugged in a sort of, what can you do kind of way.

Flight turned to Raymond, who'd been standing in the doorway and told him to put the kettle on for a fresh brew.

We moved over to the worn, comfy chairs and sat ourselves down. I took out my cigarettes and passed

them round. Uncle was a strict pipe-man and would often just stick his empty pipe in his mouth—more of a comfort thing and this is what he did now.

“When you say Coastal, you mean Coastal Command?”

Uncle nodded.

Raymond lit the cigarette I’d given him on the paraffin stove and slowly stirred the metal teapot that had been liberated from a NAAFI kitchen.

Flight leaned back and blew cigarette smoke into the air.

“Well, he’s beat you to it. I was just saying, when this one gets his thirty in, he should put in for Coastal Command OTU.”

Uncle said nothing. We sat in silence taking in his news while Raymond passed out tin cups of hot, strong tea. Riggers tea, Flight called it; after the old ground crew grade of Rigger, when planes were made with rigged wire, wood and doped fabric.

Uncle put his empty pipe back in his pocket. “I’m done with Bomber Command, especially that bloody tea cake, Jamieson. As soon as he found out about the transfer, he had me in the office with Shuggit, demanding the transfer be blocked. It seems tho’, Coastal needs experienced crew. Shuggit told Jamieson, it was too late to block the transfer.

So, you merry gentlemen, I am off to the coast this very afternoon. At least the wife's happy about it. I phoned as soon as I found out."

I looked at Flight, he knew what I was thinking.

"Aye, you don't have to say owt. It's me own fault for training these lads too well. They can get along fine without me. You know, whenever they were short of air gunners, it was the ground crew they always turned to and, I suspect, it'll be no different now that they be a flight engineer short. It's a funny thing, they can get replacement pilots, bomb aimers and navigators two-a-penny but, engineers..."

At that moment, Robbo walked in.

"NAAFI canteen's outside if you want owt. Blimey, it's like a den of misery in here. What you all looking so mopey about?"

"Uncle's been transferred." Raymond poured a cup of tea for Robbo, to go with his NAAFI bun.

"You not want to go? Or is it a case of jump before you gets pushed. I heard, on the quiet, they're thinking of having a shake-up with the crews. Bet that'll cause a shit-storm."

Uncle stood and shook his head. "No, I-er volunteered for Coastal Command."

"Bombing them U-boats, eh? You gong to be on one of them flying boats?"

“I won’t know until I get there.” He held out his hand and shook each of the ground crew’s hands in turn, then wished them well and left. Uncle was never one for much of a fuss.

I looked at Flight. “He kept that one quiet; probably didn’t want to jinx it. Are you going to volunteer or wait until you get told, ‘You’re aircrew?’”

Flight shook his head. “I can hear it now, ‘You already look after the plane on the ground, so it’s not much difference to do the same in the air.’”

“What about me and Robbo, Flight? And Tony and John?”

“You’ll all be fine, Raymond. You’ll stay together. Tony and John need to go down to the big hangar this afternoon, and help get that absolute pile of shite, P for Peter, up and running—personally, I think they should strip it to the bare airframe then tow it out to the far perimeter and torch it.”

“So we’d like, stay together, the four of us.”

Ground crew, in their own way, were just as superstitious as aircrew; certain ways of doing things, daily rituals, talismans.

“Stop getting yourself wound up, Raymond. If, and it is a big IF, they just might give Robbo here his third stripe and put him in charge.

God help you if they do. He can't tell the back end of a plane from the front." Flight laughed.

Robbo winked at Raymond. "You'd have to start showing me some respect then. Call me, Sir."

"You can stick that up yer arse, straight-a-way."

I got to my feet and looked around for Pooch. Then I remembered seeing him asleep in the nose of the plane.

"Right, shall we go and give this engine a try then? Anyone up for a joy ride, after? A couple of circuits of the airfield. You up for that, Flight? You can get a bit of practice in."

Flight gave me a playful cuff around the ear.

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### **That Old Excuse, NFT**

22 October  
Morning

"Good morning, Control. G-for-George calling. Over."

I paused then tried again.



“G-for-George to Control. Over.”

A voice came through on the third attempt.

“Go ahead, G-for-George. Over.”

“Request taxi clearance to runway for take off. Over.”

“G-for-George, are you a training flight? We have nothing booked. Over.”

“Control, this is for an NFT, a Night Flight Test - engine shakedown. Over.”

“G-for-George, has your navigator mapped out a route. Over.”

“Control, no navigator or route plan. Request clearance for take off and circuits of the airfield, maximum ceiling one, five, zero, zero, feet. Over.”

“Roger, G-for-George. Clear for taxi to runway two-three. Hold for take off clearance. Over.”

“Roger, Control, runway two-three. Wilco.”

I smiled at Flight, standing next to me in the cockpit.

“Here we go then. Is everyone sat down back there?”

Flight headed back, to the area between the wing-spars; the strongest part of the aircraft should we have to suddenly abort take off and pancake or belly land, for any reason. But to be honest, if you had to abort a take

off, you'd want to do it when you were still going down the runway and with the wheels in contact with the ground. Anytime between then and a few hundred feet, especially in a fully bombed and fuelled up plane, you were likely only going one place—straight upstairs to those pearly gates.

Flight returned. "All nice and snug back there. Three of them on the side-bench with their arms interlocked; I told them they'd make a pretty picture. Robbo's sat on the floor."

As we slowly taxied along, Flight undid the fold-away seat on the right of the fuselage. The flight engineer would normally use this seat on take off and assist the pilot with the engine throttle movement. Once airborne the seat would be folded away.

When we reached the holding area, where the taxiway meets the runway, I brought the plane to a halt and contacted Control again.

"Control, Control. This is G-for-George. Request runway clearance for take off. Over."

"Roger, G-for-George. Cloud ceiling five thousand feet. Visibility good. Wind one to two knots. Clear for take off. Over."

"Roger, Control. G-for-George over and out."

I manoeuvred the plane onto the runway, lined up and applied full brakes; set the flaps to take off position and let Flight open the throttles, increasing engine rpm to almost max until the whole plane was vibrating. We

waited a minute, to make sure everything felt and sounded fine, then Flight eased the throttles back and gave me a thumbs up.

I released the brakes and without any bomb load and only quarter-full fuel tanks, the plane almost seemed to leap forward, gathering speed as we hurtled down the runway with Flight operating the throttles.

As the airspeed indicator dial nudged 100 mph, we were airborne. Seconds later, the undercarriage was up and we began a banking climb to 500 feet.

A few minutes later we had completed our first circuit of the airfield and with the throttles eased back after take off, we climbed gently to 1,000 feet and then 1,500 feet.

“You can tell your crew, they can moved around, if they like.” I called across to Flight.

He nodded and stowed away the folding seat.  
“Raymond asked me earlier about parachutes.”

I laughed and called out, “Is he thinking of jumping then?”

Flight flashed a grin and gave the throttles and mixture controls a little tweak.

The thing about a Halifax, any bomber really, is that it is noisy inside all the time, apart from when it is parked up and the engines are off. But even then, the damn thing creaks and groans in the wind. We normally communicate by intercom but, unless we are on oxygen,

I usually have shouted conversations with the flight engineer.

Raymond and Robbo came forward and went into the nose area, where the navigator and bomb aimer usually sit. The other two members of Flight's ground crew, John and Tony, followed them. Quite a feat—four of them squeezed together into such a small space and Pooch too. But then, there was a good view through the perspex nose.

After five lazy circuits of the airfield, and without any issues arising with the number two engine, I started to descend; first 1,000 feet and then, after more circuits, 500 feet. I contacted Control again.

"G-for-George to Control. Over. G-for-George, calling Control. Over."

Control came crackling over my headset earpieces.

"Go ahead G-for-George."

"Control, G-for-George. Request low pass along runway. Over."

"G-for-George. Roger. Confirm low pass along runway zero-five. Repeat, runway zero-five. Circuit left then pancake. Over."

"Roger, Control. Wilco."

I reached out and tugged Flight's sleeve. "Tell your crew to get ready." I made a swooping motion with my hand.

Flight gave Tony a gentle push with his foot and called out. "Watch outside."

At the far end of the airfield, I brought the Halifax around in a gentle, curving bank, flying low over the surrounding fields. I then banked again and lined up the runway, now about a mile or two distant.

The edge of the airfield perimeter was marked by a fifty yard stretch of old dry-stone wall, about a hundred yards from the runway. The wall petered out into hedgerow on either side and served as good boundary marker. There was a time, when we had Wellingtons, a few of us would play chicken—seeing who could graze the top of the wall with the wheels of our lowered undercarriage. But after complaints from the farmer, who grew tired of having to rebuild the wall, we had to stop.

Today though, as I began the run in to the airfield, the undercarriage stayed up. As we neared the stone wall, we were thirty feet above the ground then, over the airfield perimeter proper, I dropped to twenty feet, dipping to a mere ten feet as we reached the mid-point of the pond-flat runway. Real grass-cutter flying. I heard some appreciative whoops and cheers coming from the nose.

This was the sort of flying I enjoyed. It was easy, fun even. A far cry away from mission flying with its angst and dread.

As the leading edge of the wings crossed the end of the runway, I pulled up into a steep turn, gaining height and readying for flying back around and landing.

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As we taxied back to the dispersal area, the inner two engines idling while the outer ones drove us along, Flight gave me a nudge and pointed up ahead. I nodded, having already spotted him: Jamieson, standing arms akimbo, scowling, a short distance from the ground crew hut.

I taxied up to our frying pan-shaped dispersal area, Jamieson and the hut off to the right. Using increased power to the outer port engine, and differential braking, I brought the plane around to the right then moved forward enough, again by throttle and brake control to bring the plane around 180 degrees and line up the nose pointing towards the taxiway. Then just for effect with the parking brake fully applied, and to annoy Jamieson of course, I ran all four engines up 1,800 rpm before slowly shutting them off.

As soon as the propellers stopped turning, Raymond and the ground crew were out of the plane and putting wheel chocks in place. Flight and I made sure everything was turned off and secured. I picked up Pooch and we exited the plane. I then slowly strolled over to Jamieson, with Pooch in my arms. He was scribbling away furiously in his little pocket diary.

“Your tomfoolery will end in disaster one day. And I hope you did not take that dog with you.”

Typical Jamieson, I thought. We didn’t get on, never saw eye-to-eye. I loathed him as much as he hated me. He was a failed pilot of the worst sort—couldn’t get through the course, so ended up as a navigator with a slide rule up his arse, as they say.

“This is a professional air force, not some barnstorming circus act. Less of the airfield buzzing! I have made a note of the incident and would also like to know, who authorised your joy ride?”

I gave Jamieson a perplexed look and, putting Pooch on the ground, took out a cigarette.

“I didn’t need it authorising. I’m the pilot, it was an NFT to check the number two engine.”

“We have been here before. I am the ranking officer and it has always been my crew and my plane. I am the one to authorise such things and we all know, a Night Flight Test is just an excuse for messing around.”

I lit the cigarette, shrugged and walked off. Jamieson started screaming at me, I ignored him. What was he going to do, get himself another pilot? Perhaps but I didn’t care.

I had actually been to Wing Commander Shuggit, yes that one who’s name I’d borrowed, and asked to be moved to a different crew but, he told me; I should stick it out - no one liked a pilot who, unless they were filling

in, kept chopping and changing because they didn't get on with a crew.

I said, that wasn't the case - I just didn't get on with Jamieson. What about moving him?

Shuggit replied, whether he liked it or not, Jamieson's was one of the best crews in the squadron and I had played a part in that. He couldn't go round breaking up crews, blah, blah, bloody, blah. And that was why I put in for Pathfinder Force. I was damned if I was going to be stuck with the likes of Jamieson for a second tour.

I got my bicycle and placed Pooch in the basket. "Well then, Pooch, what say we head to the mess and have something to eat, it must be nearly lunchtime."

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