East to Meet the Enemy

A Novel of World War One Aerial Combat

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This story is dedicated to the airmen who flew and fought during the Great War, those brave men who 100 years ago risked their lives in uncertain aircraft in the world's first major aerial conflict.

Special Thank You

The author expresses his gratitude to his wife, Jenny, who continues to offer encouragement in all his endeavors.

Thanks go to life-long friend Jim Patton who provided input and offered candid suggestions to improve the story.

And a debt of gratitude goes to my parents who encouraged learning.

THE BEGINNING

THE FIRST WORLD WAR—THE GREAT WAR—began on July 28, 1914. Tensions had been growing and simmering across Europe for years and the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand and his wife, Sophia, though not in itself causing the war, provided the spark needed to ignite the battle. Some people on both sides, those with misplaced optimism, assumed the mess would be finished by Christmas and Europe would be cleansed of evil and utopia would reign.

The United States entered the war April 6, 1917.

The United States had no real air force at this time. But the airplane had proven itself in Europe as a valuable machine of war, so the United States Army Signal Corps Aviation Section worked to expand its meager fleet of aircraft and pilots. Among this expansion were Pursuit Squadrons, squadrons of single-pilot airplanes whose sole purpose was to shoot down enemy aircraft and provide protection for the reconnaissance aircraft, those lumbering airplanes that held a steady course as the photographer shot vital pictures of enemy movement. The pursuit pilots got the glory. The fame. The attention. The women. Being a pursuit pilot was the goal of every man who entered through the hallowed gates of aviation training.

The first American air units went to Europe in spring 1918.

Some American pursuit squadrons were lent to the British. And some of them flew Sopwith Camels, a finicky airplane badly outdated by summer 1918. Life expectancy of pilots, especially Camel pilots, was measured in weeks, sometimes in days.

Chapter One

RODNEY WILSON WENT OUT BACK OF THE operations building and got sick. He got sick every time since that first flight over the lines. He couldn't help it. The sight of that flamer did it. He didn't want to be a flamer. Though the Allied fliers did not use parachutes, he'd jump first before he burned. He had heard of the result—a pool of fat and a grotesque, disfigured form that used to be a human being before the gas tank caught fire and the plane plunged, streaking down like a dirty meteor to end up a pile of twisted, charred rubble on the ground with that burned deformed creature amid the debris. The thought turned his stomach.

Wilson was a member of A Flight, 15th Pursuit Squadron, stationed at an aerodrome in northwestern France in August 1918. The squadron, an American outfit, was on loan to the British to help fill out their pursuit wing. The Brits were suffering terribly and replacements couldn't come quickly enough. The new Fokker D.VIIs that were starting to appear were too much for the out-of-date Camels. Wilson and the others, who had been naïve airmen only a few days before, fresh from training and indoctrination and proud to finally get to the action where they could fight the terrible enemy and make the world safe, were just beginning to sense reality. Only since landing in France did they learn first-hand of the odds, learned from the battle-hardened survivors that they could count on only weeks or maybe even days to live.

But there were some who survived, who dodged the bullets, who got lucky, who beat the odds. There were a few, there had to be. There was hope.

Goodlow, First Lieutenant Martin Goodlow, A Flight leader, had flown with the British. He survived. He was leading this flight and he would protect them. Martin Goodlow knew what it took to survive because he had seen intense fighting before, the fighting over the Somme, and got through it without a scratch. And he wasn't the only one. There was a handful, a handful of blessed ones who had survived. It was the hope of every member of A Flight the he would be one of the blessed, he would go home after the killing stopped, go home and resume life where it had halted before the war.

But in the meantime, Rodney Wilson got sick.

Rodney and five of the pilots of A Flight, 15th Pursuit Squadron, had been part of the American contingent that had assembled in England where they were trained by the British—Goodlow met up with them when their training ended. Though they all were pilots, American trained pilots who had spent tedious hours at Fort Hicks in the classroom and hours circling and chasing about the sky over Texas, the British were determined to indoctrinate them to their way of flying and their way of military formality.

The aviators had made a long dreadful trip from Garden City, New York, across the North Atlantic to Europe. The boat was crowded, the sea was rough, and seasickness spread like plague. They disembarked weak and wobbly, joyful to be on land, anticipating a few days of R & R and sprucing up and cavorting about England and meeting the English girls. They had been herded off to a rest camp that proved anything but restful. There was mud, bad food, mud, miserable barracks, mud, British discipline, and mud and more mud. The men had left there weak and wobbly, joyful to go to training. It could not get any worse.

The American fliers were not keen on the British military regulations nor were they keen on British training—after all, they were already aviators. But they had no choice. The British had their reasons. Some of them were valid, probably even life-saving. The more hours and experience a flier could accumulate the more prepared he was for combat flying, so it was only to the fliers' benefit to gain experience. Also many of the machines in Europe were rotary powered. A rotary engine was a circular engine with the piston and cylinder assemblies arranged in a radial fashion

around the crankshaft. But the unique aspect of the rotary was the fact that the crankshaft remained stationary and the piston and cylinder assemblies and their related gear and the propeller rotated around the crankshaft. This amounted to having a huge gyroscope on the nose of the airplane which led to unique handling tendencies. The Curtiss JN-4 Jennies the boys had flown in Texas had stationary V-8 engines. No spinning mass on the nose to induce strange handling. And the Jennies were very stable and forgiving airplanes, unlike many of the fighter aircraft in Europe. So the Americans began training in the Avro 504, a rotary engine craft, yet relatively stable and forgiving. It would lay the ground work for advancement to Nieuports and Sopwiths, in particular the Sopwith Camel.

The Camel was a rotary powered airplane that was especially treacherous due to a combination of design features. Though the docile Jenny could practically fly itself and often times did fly itself despite the awkward control gyrations of student pilots, a Camel, with its designed instability, required constant input from the pilot. The Camel was tail heavy, thus requiring constant forward pressure on the control stick. If the pilot needed to perform a task which required the use of both hands, he had to lock the stick between his knees to prevent the plane from climbing. During a left turn, the nose tended to rise and during a right turn the nose dropped, thus calling for counterintuitive rudder input, both turns requiring left rudder.

The plane, when turned correctly to the right, could out-turn any enemy aircraft in the sky, thus offering the little Camel one advantage. And the plane sometimes had a will of its own, acting in a totally unpredictable manner. Only pilots who mastered the tricks of the Camel, or those who were very lucky, survived. The only problem was that to master the little beast, a pilot had to fly it; to fly it without experience, before mastering its tricks, could be deadly.

Rodney Wilson fit the popular image of the pursuit pilot. Tall, slender, athletic, handsome with a dark mustache and a swagger of confidence. A graduate of an East Coast law school, his father, a well-connected man, had arranged a good job for him at a prestigious law firm. That was spring 1914. The restless young man was not ready to settle down so he went to Europe—London and then to Paris—and settled in to the French way of

life. By fall 1914 he joined the Foreign Legion, that mysterious, glamorous, romantic organization that drew in young men looking for adventure, looking for the world, looking for themselves. But the mystique and romance had been fiction and was wholly displaced by the harsh reality of marching and drilling, marching and drilling until feet were numb and legs ached and mouths parched and then more marching and drilling.

Rodney, in between the marching and drilling, had engaged in combat and had fired his weapon and had been shot at in return. But it didn't seem quite real, an almost harmless game, a game of hide and seek with an enemy that was hidden behind rocks or walls or buildings. He had never really been scared.

After eighteen months of marching and drilling and occasional combat, he left and went home to America, intending to settle in to a respectable job and becoming a respectable citizen. But when the call came to join the air service, the call was too strong, his spirit still too restless, and he found himself marching and drilling beneath the hot Texas sun.

But he was among an elite group, a handful of people, not just in the United States military, but in the whole entire world, who flew an airplane. He had earned his swagger, deserved it, and was obligated to carry it. Marching and drilling and flying.

When he saw that enemy plane go down in flames, for him, combat changed. He was scared. There were no rocks or walls or buildings to hide behind. There was only open sky and the only chance for hide and seek was if there were clouds in which to disappear, but on those cloudless days there was total exposure where opponents danced with each other and went round and round, dived and zoomed, looped and rolled, guns ready, searching for that instant, that brief second in the frantic dance when the enemy was in the gun sight, that instant that was life or death. There was nowhere to hide.

"Hey, Wilson, what you doing back there?" asked Leon VanGleason as Rodney sauntered out from behind the ops building.

"Taking a leak," lied Rodney. "Don't want to wet my Sidcot up there. It'd freeze up solid."

"Come on," said Leon. "We better get a move on. The rest of the flight's out there."

"Hurrying," said Rodney. The two men, loaded with flight gear,

sprinted across the grass field to their waiting Camels where the ground crew stood by. Goodlow's Camel was already coming to life, the engine coughing and catching as the ground crewman retreated from the spinning propeller and a cloud of castor oil blew back in the slipstream.

A Flight was taking the dawn patrol. The clouds, long, dark, and grey hung across the sky only a couple thousand feet up so there was no dawn, no visible dawn with its glowing sun rising slowly over the horizon. The patrol would stay low if possible as it was a risk to try to go through the clouds. Inside that grey mass there is neither up or down, left or right, sky or ground. In moments, a pilot doesn't know which way he's going or if he's right side up or upside down. The senses play tricks. The plane may be turning, yet the senses tell the pilot he's flying level. And rolling out of a turn may feel like a turn in the opposite direction. Acceleration feels like tumbling backwards. The altimeter and airspeed are the only hope—they will let the pilot know if he's going up or down, though not if he's going up or down right side up or upside down. And the mind can become so confused that it can't believe the instruments, refuses to acknowledge what the needles are telling the pilot, screaming to him that the plane is headed down when the mind says it's going up. Then streaking down out of the bottom of the clouds the ground is there, filling the windscreen and then the mind comes to its senses but it may be too late, the plane too low to pull up in time and if the pilot pulls it up too fast the wings crumple up, folding against the fuselage and falling away leaving the rest of the plane and the pilot helpless.

A day like this would be a good day to hang around the quarters, playing cards, writing letters, reading, horsing around.

Rodney and Leon hustled into their Camels, the ground crew helping them in to the cockpits and assisting them in getting settled and fastening the safety belt whose primary purpose was to hold the pilot firmly in place during maneuvers. It did nothing, though, to prevent "camel face," the result of smashing the face into the gun butts in a crash landing. The butts of the .303-inch Vickers guns protruded into the cockpit which made them accessible for servicing in flight, but which offered a double target for a pilot's head when it slammed forward.

They began the starting sequence for the 110 horsepower LeRhone

rotary engines. The pilot made sure the magnetos were switched off so the engine could not start as a ground crewman rotated the prop several revolutions. The main fuel tank was selected, the air pump hand-pumped, the fuel fine adjustment opened, and fuel was drawn in to the engine. Then the ground man called "contact" and the pilot switched the magnetos on. The ground crewman swung the prop while another ground crewman a couple steps behind him leaned forward and held him by his belt to help him clear the propeller when the engine caught.

Castor oil was stored in a tank and drawn through the engine as it ran. The lubrication system was a "total loss" oil system meaning that the oil was consumed rather than recirculated through the engine. Some of it flung out of the engine, coating plane and pilot with a layer of oil and some of it was burned and exited the exhaust leaving a faint cloud behind the plane. Cleaning oil off the goggles was a constant process and if a pilot ingested too much castor oil, the results were not pleasant. Once the engine was started and the fine adjustment was set, the engine speed was controlled by a blip switch on the flight control stick. The switch allowed the pilot to cut ignition to some of the cylinders, thus slowing the engine. While waiting on the ground the engines turned slowly, firing on only a few cylinders, sounding erratic and uncertain like they would shudder to a stop at any moment. On takeoff, as soon as the pilot released the switch and all cylinders fired, power was nearly instantaneous and the engine roared and snarled and the little Camel would bounce and skip across the grass field and leap into the air.

While the plane was on the ground and when it was flying slowly, the pilot had to keep the fuel system pressurized to ensure a steady flow of fuel to the engine. Once airborne and after a certain amount of speed was attained, the wind-driven pressure pump took over the task. The pump and its small propeller were mounted on an inner wing strut, in view of the pilot, so he could determine if the pump was working.

Before allowing the engines full power and taking off, the pilots made last minute preparations, pulling on thick gloves and adjusting collars on the Sidcot flight suits and tucking silk scarves and tugging at leather helmets and engaging in good luck rituals. Flight leader Martin Goodlow

signaled and then opened his engine and the other six planes in A Flight followed, bouncing and skipping and dancing across the turf, tails rising and the main landing gear getting lighter and lighter against the ground until the planes broke away from the earth.

The airplanes jostled and bounced and fell into a loose V formation with Martin at the point, the red and white streamers of flight leader fluttering from the outer wing struts. The flight made a gradual sweeping turn to the east, toward the enemy lines.

The clouds held the flight low. They would not penetrate the clouds unless necessary in pursuit of enemy aircraft. As the flight neared the battle area, lush greenery and peaceful villages faded behind and the battle-scarred earth slid in to view. The desolate countryside looked even more desolate on the grey day, the moon-like landscape devoid of shadows, a flat plain of shattered buildings and splintered trees and pock-marked fields that stretched out beneath the fliers. Then the trenches appeared over the noses of the planes, the deep jagged scars across the desolate earth where men lived like rodents in dirt and mud and plotted and schemed to kill other men in different uniforms who lived the same dirt-encrusted life. Every flier gave thanks that he was not down there.

The fliers of the 15th lived in luxury being billeted in a chateau near the airfield. The area farmers were a source for eggs and milk and sometimes bacon, a delightful change from the constant bully beef of the military. Corporal James LeBleau, the squadron chef, despite his French name, was not a cook and could find a way to render the best, freshest farm produce undistinguishable and uneatable. He was good with the canned bully beef, though, because it couldn't be made any worse. In civilian life, LeBleau was a plumber. Only through the infinite wisdom of the military was he transformed into a chef in charge of keeping dozens of men fed. The two privates, Allen and Jones, who assisted LeBleau, had a much better touch and did their best to get the food preparation done before the corporal could get his hands on it. They had devised a plan to get him out of the mess by sending him on errands to procure food from the area, convincing him that his expertise was necessary to choose the best food and produce. While he was gone, the two privates worked like madmen getting the next meal

ready and when they could do it all before LeBleau returned, the squadron was grateful.

But at the moment, any thought of food—good or bad—and of chateau living were banished from the mind being replaced by nervous concentration on the sky ahead, the enemy sky that at any moment could be filled with the sinister outline of enemy aircraft. As the trenches loomed closer, so did the threat of enemy aircraft—the German fliers seldom ventured over the lines, thus forcing the Allied pilots over to their territory. Today, as most days, the wind blew from the west toward German territory. If a scrap ensued, the planes would drift east, deeper into enemy-held land, and before he realized it, an allied pilot could be so far behind the lines any hope for escape would be gone. In addition to the increased distance to fly home, the headwind would make progress slower, painfully slow in some cases.

Martin waggled his wings, a signal for the formation to tighten up. He believed in a tight formation for protection. Martin Goodlow wanted to protect his men, wanted them all to return to the airfield and eventually return home. He knew the days of the lone fighter pilot stalking the skies seeking the enemy were long gone. Aerial warfare had changed from the image of the valiant, lone knight of the air engaging an enemy one-on-one and fighting until the better man won into a game of tactics and discipline and group effort, each man looking out for the other. While fighting with the British, Martin had seen first-hand the results of headlong daring. The British aviators tended to be bold, charging ahead without a plan, taking foolish chances, not calculating the risk-and-reward odds. He saw a lot of good aerial fighters lose their lives senselessly because of this philosophy. He would not let it happen to his own men.

The six pilots following Martin's lead closed in, the little Camels jostling for position and bouncing and dipping in the air. They were to fly just inside the lines, patrolling for enemy reconnaissance aircraft and shooting them down or driving them away before they could get critical information. The clouds were likely too low for the recon planes and the men secretly counted on the day's patrol to be uneventful. Once in from patrol, they could relax and tend to a late breakfast if so desired, then they would fly

afternoon patrol. The weather lent promise, though, that afternoon patrol would be called. The clouds, the way they hung low and grey and the way the wind blew all indicated a day of worsening weather, weather that would hold men and machines to the ground. And next day, A Flight's first patrol would be mid-morning. A late evening playing cards and drinking beer and roughhousing awaited.

Martin waggled his wings again and pointed to the northeast. Tiny specks floated just below the clouds, dark little forms that brushed and tickled the cloud bottoms and flitted back and forth. The men in A Flight pulled the cocking levers on their machine guns to ready them for firing and scanned the sky behind and above, looking for more enemy aircraft that may be planning to pounce on them. The biggest danger was from the aircraft they did not see and often the enemy used decoys to lure attention away. Though the low clouds made it unlikely there were more planes above them, nothing was taken for granted, was never assumed, for if it was assumed it could mean death. A Flight was not going to meet the enemy head on if possible but try for a rear attack. If the Germans had not yet sighted them, they had a chance of circling around behind them and zooming in for an attack before the enemy could react. Surprise counted.

One Camel turned westward and skittered home, leaving the other six to face the enemy.

Each flier divided his attention between the dark, distant forms and the sky around and behind, eyes straining to find even the smallest dot or speck. A speck off in the distance could grow amazingly fast into an airplane dangerously close. It seemed there was never any gradual change, any slow transformation from a speck, to a tiny airplane, to a larger airplane with more details, then finally to a full-sized nearby aircraft. It always seemed to go from speck to full-sized in an instant. The men watched for this, anticipated the sudden looming image of an Albatros or a Fokker filling the windscreen—all the while watching the rest of the sky for other enemy and watching each other in order to maintain formation.

As the distant enemy aircraft continued to flit below the clouds, A Flight began a gradual rising arc, climbing to where they were scraping the clouds to come in behind and above the enemy. With luck the situation would

continue and A Flight would be behind the Germans though there would be little altitude advantage because of the clouds. The Camels flew in and out of the low-hanging wisps that trailed down from the cloud base, the little airplanes disappearing into the greyness and them emerging again, holding formation, holding their line as they flew toward confrontation, each flier straining and concentrating and continually turning his head searching the sky. Guns were rechecked. Goggles hastily wiped clean. Engine controls checked. Everything in order.

Then they were gone. The distant specks were gone.

The Camel formation seemed to relax as their pilots actually did breathe a sigh of relief. Relief mixed with disappointment. Though they were glad to avoid a fight, they had been so keyed up after spotting the enemy, so prepared to engage in combat, it was a letdown in a sense when the enemy turned away. But they would soon overcome any letdown as their normal senses returned and told them they had avoided being shot at, avoided injury, and avoided becoming a flamer with the gruesome result. Still, they did not let down their guard. The enemy could appear again. They kept up their constant scan, looking above and behind as well as ahead, constantly twisting and turning their heads. The silk scarves, in addition to wiping goggles clean, helped insulate the neck from the rough collar of the flight suit, the silk providing a smooth surface to the skin and thus helping to prevent chaffing. It did nothing for sore muscles, though, and the fliers' necks would be sore from all the twisting and turning.

A Flight continued its patrol up and down along the front searching for the enemy, straining to see more specks in the distance fliting below the clouds, but the sky was quiet and the clouds slowly drifted lower and lower toward the ground forcing the little airplanes lower and when they landed the clouds reached nearly to the surface and rain began to fall. The men dashed to the pilot ready room and stowed their flight kits and filled out reports then headed to the mess hall for late breakfast.

The men sipped coffee and ate potatoes and chocolate and began chatting as the tension from the flight wore off and some lit cigarettes and Martin Goodlow puffed his pipe.

"I'd like to get in to town," said Karl Wilhardt. "I want to get to that

shop that makes the Sam Browne belts. I need one to complete my uniform." If Rodney Wilson fit the image of a pursuit pilot, Karl Wilhardt fit the opposite image. A small, somewhat frail looking, round shouldered, slightly awkward man, he looked to be more at home behind a library desk than behind twin Vickers machine guns. He joined the Air Service because a buddy back home in Ohio had persuaded him that they both should become pilots, dashing heroes of the sky. Karl's buddy washed out. Karl nearly did. He had difficulty mastering flying skills, took longer than most to solo, struggled with landings, and was slow to learn coordination of maneuvers. Only through determination and effort did he make it through primary training but he was nearly brought to tears when told he would fly recon planes, not pursuits. Only because of the understanding and the influence of a primary instructor did he get advanced to pursuit planes.

"You may have a chance later," said Martin. "I think this rain is going to hang on all day, maybe even a couple of days."

"So we're free to do as we please?" asked Karl.

"No leaving the aerodrome, not at this point," said Martin. "As soon as I get official word I'll let everyone know."

"Anyone else need equipment to complete their uniform?" asked Karl. "When we get all in shape, proper dress and all, we need to have photos taken. Maybe even a shot of all A Flight. Or even the entire 15th."

"I reckon that'd be a nice thing to do," said Eugene Lawrence. "The folks back in Missouri would sure like to see us all dressed up."

"Hell, what difference does it make?" asked Rodney. "All that is important is that we have the right gear to fly in. All that spit and polish crap don't mean a damn."

"We're flying officers," said Karl. "We have an image to maintain. And I'm rather proud of what I've accomplished. We all should be proud of what we've accomplished. It wasn't easy to become pilots. And the folks at home are proud of us, too."

Martin puffed his pipe and listened, conversation he had heard before, conversation of the naïve and gullible and uninitiated, conversation that would soon be lost as the realities of flying and fighting became more obvious.

"What happened to Harris?" asked Leon VanGleason. "Haven't seen him since we landed."

"He turned back early," said Martin. "Must have had a problem with his plane."

"Maybe he didn't make it back," said Karl. "Landed in a field somewhere."

"He made it back," said Martin. "I saw his plane in the maintenance hangar."

"Well, where'd he disappear off to?" asked Eugene.

"Who knows," said Rodney.

As the men ate breakfast, the clouds grew even darker and lower and the rain settled into a steady rhythm that gave no indication of letting up, the kind of rain that seems will never end. Flying was officially called off for the day and A Flight was free to go and do as they pleased. B Flight was to remain on the field in case weather broke and C Flight was to be ready to take over standby for B Flight at midafternoon.

The men of A Flight whiled away the time reading and writing and playing cards and Karl and Leon and Eugene went in to town to the leather craftsman, making the trip in a lorry from maintenance.

The afternoon faded into evening when the pilots of A Flight crowded into the officer's mess with the rest of the 15th Aero Squadron for evening meal.

"What are the chances it will be dud tomorrow?" asked Karl. "Looks like the kind of rain that could settle in for days.

Martin Goodlow took a puff from his perpetual pipe, a pipe that was only absent while flying, and replied, "Think there's a fair chance. This does look to be the kind of weather that will hang around for a while. Didn't you get to town today, Wilhardt? You need more days off?"

"Yes, I got to town with the other fellows. Eugene and I found that leather craftsman. He's going to make us some first-rate belts."

"Who's cooking tonight?" asked six foot two-inch Lloyd Harris as he wandered into the mess. Harris was a college athlete, having completed two years of college before joining the air service. He went to school with

the help of a basketball scholarship, but whose course of study in college remained somewhat of a mystery. He could be loud, sometimes critical and overbearing, arrogant and abrasive, and avoided direct questions about his education.

"Bully beef, so take a guess," said Rodney, a tone of sarcasm tinging his voice. "Bully beef and boiled potatoes. I don't think even LeBleau can mess that up—can he?"

"LeBleau could mess up a sure thing with a French girl," said Lloyd. "I thought the air service had good food. That's the reason I joined—for the food."

"What happened to you today?" asked Martin. "You left the flight."

"My engine went dud."

"Did you fill out a report?"

"Well, not yet. I thought maintenance did that."

"You should know better by now," said Martin. "You should know it's procedure."

"Yes, sir. I forgot. I'll get it right after mess."

"I have to have your report as soon as possible," said Martin. "It has to go in with today's paper work. You were supposed to do that right after landing."

"Sorry, I just got distracted."

"As soon as possible. I want paperwork finished by 7:30."

After a short silence, Karl said, "Maybe Butz has a fresh stash of food."

Though the 15th had been in France for only a few days, Edward Butz already had a way of coming up with goods—food, booze, tobacco, chocolate—and no one really knew where it came from and they learned not to ask because he never gave a clear answer. He seemed to be able to conjure things up out of thin air and the men let it go at that because he was generous with the goods he acquired. A stocky guy with a bushy, dark mustache and dark hair that was never quite in place, he was a bit loud yet likable and he was a fellow one wanted to know. He was a mechanical engineering student in college. His fingernails had perpetual grease under them from tinkering with things mechanical. When he entered the air service, he contemplated becoming a mechanic, but college fellows were pilots, not lowly mechanics.

"Where is Butz?" asked Rodney.

"Haven't seen him all afternoon," answered Karl. "He got that lorry lined up for us from Sergeant Smith and we haven't seen him since.

"Probably with the plane, going over it with the mechanics. You know how he is, always tinkering with the thing. He baby sits that airplane like it's a child."

"Hey, here he comes now."

"Hey, Butz, been getting those mechanics straightened out?" asked Rodney.

"Got a cylinder that's not puttin' out what it should. I could feel it. Smith took a look and sure enough, it had wear in it. He and his men are putting a new cylinder assembly on now."

Sergeant Wilfred Smith was head of aircraft maintenance. A gruff, no nonsense guy with a perpetual cigar clamped between his teeth, he growled and cursed and argued and hated officers, except for Lieutenant Butz, but he could work magic on Camels. If it weren't for Sergeant Smith and his mechanics who worked non-stop, seeming never to eat or sleep or break rhythm in their work, the finicky, touchy Camels quickly would become little more than adornment for the airfield.

"Hey, Butz, when you gonna get some more good food to appear? This mess food is gonna kill us."

"My source claims he's dried up. I need to scare up something else. Maybe I'll make a trip into town tonight. I think it's gonna be dud for a couple of days, so a late night out could be in the works."

"A night out sounds keen," said Lloyd. "I'd like a little recreation."

Martin peered at Lloyd through a cloud of pipe smoke.

"Hey, Lieutenant, got a weather report?"

"Not yet," replied Martin between puffs on his pipe. "Soon as I hear, I'll get the word out."

"I need to catch up on my letter writing," said Karl. "I could use a good long evening for that."

"Letter writing?" asked Lloyd. "Hell, you can write letters any damn time. Come in to town with us and live it up a little. Have a beer."

"You know I don't drink."

"You don't do anything. Hell, even VanGleason has a beer with us now and then. And so does Goodlow, here. Come on, we won't hurt you."

"I appreciate the offer, but I'll stay in and get caught up on things."

"Suit yourself."

Martin slapped Karl on the back and said, "Do what you want. An evening out with these fellas might just get you in trouble."

"Thanks, Martin."

The men of A Flight along with those of B and C Flights and the administrative officers of the 15th Pursuit Squadron filled the mess hall, the room resounding with laughter and chatter and clanking of pans and clinking of forks on plates. All places were accounted for—no empty spots on either side of the long tables. The 15th was too new to combat to experience the effects of sitting down to a meal with chairs empty, chairs that the evening before had held fliers, laughing, joking, planning, scheming, full of life and ambitions until an enemy bullet found them or worse yet an accident had taken them. The promise of rain would help put off the inevitable.

"What's on the agenda tonight?" asked Lloyd.

"Café Rouge," said Rodney.

"Ah, yes, the place with the friendly mademoiselles."

"How about you, Karl?" asked Lloyd. "Care to partake of some adventure. I think a mademoiselle would do you good."

Karl blushed a bit and replied. "No, like I told you, it's an evening in for me."

"Yeah, me too," added Leon. "You young single fellows go out and live it up."

"Ah, come on, you can join us for a quick beer," prodded Lloyd.

"Well, maybe. Just for a beer and then I've got correspondence to catch up on. Hey, Eugene can take over for me."

The others didn't reply. Eugene looked down at his plate of food.

"Aw hell, Eugene, come on and join us," offered Butz.

Lloyd shot a sharp glance of disapproval toward Ed Butz. Eugene turned toward Butz and said, "Thanks, Ed, I think I will join you."

"I'll see if I can get a couple of lorries lined up," said Ed. "I think the Sergeant can spare them."

Though the town was only about two and one half miles from the aerodrome and the men sometimes walked the distance or, if they could acquire a bicycle, rode the distance, the trip was easier and quicker and in rainy weather more comfortable in a lorry.

The official call had been made: Forecast weather conditions promised to ground the fliers for at least one day, maybe more. When the fliers got back to the chateau, plans were hastily put together, baths quickly taken, hair combed, and clean uniforms put on. It was to be a night out with no repercussions other than a throbbing headache for those who over indulged. The chateau resonated with the sounds of excited talk and singing and whoops and hollers as the guys readied themselves for whatever mysteries the night would give up. The air was warm and though it was raining, the rain added freshness and an earthy odor that permeated the senses and tinged the atmosphere with promise.

Ed Butz, who had scurried out of the chateau earlier and took Diller from C Flight with him, pulled up in a lorry and sounded the horn and Diller followed right behind in another lorry. Four other members of A Flight piled in—Martin and Karl staying behind—as well as four fliers from C Flight, the men in the back huddling under a tarp in order to keep dry. Diller took the remainder of the fliers, all the men from B Flight. Butz eased the lorry down the muddy road toward town and Café Rouge with Diller following a short distance behind.

The chateau was quiet. Martin Goodlow worked on catching up on reports, including the hastily written discrepancy report from Lloyd Harris, the smoke from his pipe hanging in the air above his head. Karl Wilhardt wrote a letter to his girl in the States, her photo in a frame on his desk. Leon VanGleason would likely return well ahead of the others after having an obligatory drink or two with his fellow fliers and would settle in to writing home or reading. Leon did like a good joke, had a mischievous grin, and reveled in pranks on the others and was sure to pull something just as he was about to leave the café. Three men from C Flight also remained behind, but all the fellows from B Flight were out on the town. B Flight was quickly earning a reputation.

The evening was young when the men of the 15th entered the Café Rogue, the atmosphere inside quiet and relaxed and men ordered beers and

sat around tables and talked and joked and speculated. The quiet relaxed atmosphere would change as the evening wore on, slowly building and growing into a frenzy of revelry as soldiers and fliers sought to escape the fear and horror of combat and women searched for excitement in their otherwise drab lives.

The five men representing A Flight sat together around a table.

"Lloyd, what happened to you today?" asked Leon.

"The engine wasn't running right. Figured I'd be lucky to make it back to the field. Those rotary engines, they're rather finicky."

"They can be."

"Waiter!" said Ed. "A round of drinks, please. Beer."

"Oui, monsieur."

"I want to fight the Huns," continued Lloyd. "If they'll fight. You fellows said they turned and ran today. Just like that first time when Goodlow took us over to see that fight. They turned and ran when they saw us coming."

"They no doubt made a quick calculation of the changing odds," said Rodney. "When they saw seven more Allied airplanes coming toward them, they saw the situation change and broke off the fight. A wise move."

"What are you doing?" asked Lloyd. "Defending the Huns?"

"No, just pointing out good tactics."

"Here come the drinks," said Ed.

The men paused in conversation and leaned back out of the way for the waiter to set down the glasses of beer.

"Thanks," said Ed as he paid the man.

"Say, I thought they had girls here who served drinks," said Lloyd.

"They come on duty a bit later," said Rodney.

"A man talking from experience," noted Leon.

"No doubt," agreed Ed.

"You fellows are just jealous," said Rodney.

"Eugene," said Lloyd, "you've been quiet all evening. Course I can't blame you, being outclassed. How'd you even get in the air service anyway? It's supposed to be only for college fellows. I bet you didn't even finish high school down there in Missouri."

"I was already in the military when the call came for pilots," said Eugene. "I served on the border."

"Chasing that Mexican? Villa? How's that qualify you for the air service?"

"It doesn't. But how does college qualify you? Were you a pilot when you joined the air service?"

Lloyd made no reply.

"Wonder how long the weather will be dud?" asked Leon.

"Not long enough," responded Rodney. "If it was dud for the rest of the war, it'd be fine with me."

"What's wrong, Wilson?" asked Lloyd. "Scared to fight the Huns?"

"Not scared. Realistic. Know what the odds are we'll come out of this alive?"

"No, Wilson. Tell us."

"Not good. The odds are not good. We have, on average, about two weeks to live."

Shock quickly flashed across Lloyd's face. Then recovering, he asked, "How do you know?"

"An RFC veteran told me."

"Aw, he was just trying to get your wind up."

"I checked in to it, the statistics. He was right. Loss rates are high, higher than they ever let on in training. If they really told us the odds, no one would fly."

"You mean all that recruiting talk was crap?" asked Ed. "Huh, hard to believe." He downed another swig of beer.

"Yes, the government has misled us," said Rodney. "All that rah, rah, rah stuff to get us fellows worked up to join the fight. And all that talk about this being the war to end all wars is garbage. Hell, people been fighting since the beginning. Why will it change now? This war isn't going to end anything except lives."

"One thing about it, when we crash the end will be quick," said Lloyd.

"Not necessarily," said Rodney. "Only if we plunge head-long into the ground. If we can do that, we'll be lucky. Otherwise we may pancake in and then burn or linger slowly. I don't want that. I think that if I see there's no possibility of surviving, I'll point the plane straight down. End it quick. It will be so quick they'll be no chance of feeling pain. That's what I want."

"That's what we all want," said Ed.

"What if you're not sure?" asked Leon. "I mean not sure if there's no chance of surviving? You think you can get the plane down alright and make a survivable landing, but still there's doubt, maybe a fair amount of doubt. What then? Head straight down and end it or try to make it? That's when it's going to be difficult, when the outcome is not clearly defined."

"Guess that's a judgement call," said Rodney. "Yeah, it's not always going to be a clear-cut situation. That's going to be difficult. If a fellow's on fire there's no doubt. If he's all shot up and bleeding or if the plane is damaged so much it's nearly uncontrollable, probably better end it.

"A fella can jump if he's on fire," Rodney continued. "Lufbery did that. He was in sight of the field and the men on the ground saw him. Jumped right out of that plane and ended it quickly when he hit the ground."

"I heard he landed on a fence," said Leon. "Impaled by a post."

"Naw, that's just talk," said Ed. "He landed in someone's back yard. Close to the Moselle River. Some think he was hoping to hit the water."

"Well, hell that woulda killed him, too," said Rodney. "He had to be at least several hundred feet up."

"He may have been lower."

"In that case, he coulda landed."

"If there was an open spot," said Eugene. "Maybe the river was the only option."

"Land or water, no difference, he just wanted it to be over quick," said Ed.

"I'll do the same," said Rodney. "If there are no good options, I'll nose down or jump. I'll not be burned alive."

The men drank in silence for a few moments. Then Lloyd turned to Eugene and said, "I still don't understand why they let you in to the air service. That previous experience being a soldier and playing in the sand down in Texas is not a reason to let you join our ranks. You know the air service established most of its training schools on college campuses. And what about those fellows in the Princeton Air Force? So it goes to reason that only college men should be allowed to fly. It takes a certain amount of intelligence."

"Just because I ain't been to college doesn't mean I don't have intelligence. We just took two different pathways to the same place."

"There's a fellow in the 94th named Rickenbacker," said Leon. "He's

an ace, has been for a while. He was a car racer before the war. A bit of a crude fellow and he didn't even finish high school, but he's getting the job done."

"Well, it's not right," said Lloyd.

"Don't let him bother you, Eugene," said Leon. "He's still wet behind the ears."

"Nothin' much bothers me."

"Say, Eugene, how'd you get interested in flying, anyway?" asked Leon. "I doubt you see many planes in Missouri."

"Oh, I saw Cal Rogers when he landed down there around Mexico, Missouri. The Vin Fiz. That was the name of his airplane. He stayed the night there and I was out there early next mornin' to see him take off. I watched him checkin' over the plane and inspectin' everything. Then he had a couple local fellows spin the props to start the engine."

"Did you get to meet Rogers?" asked Ed.

"Naw. I was too shy to even try. But I'd do it now if I had the chance.

"Well, he bounced across that field and then climbed into the sky and I stood there and watched him and watched him until he disappeared in the west. I think I was the last one to leave that field. And I knew right then that I just had to fly. The air service has given me the chance. I couldn't afford it on my own."

"Well, Cal Rogers was a college man," said Lloyd. "And a star athlete, a football player.

"And what about you, VanGleason? You're the old man in this bunch. And you're married, too."

"I am older than the rest of you. And I'm married."

"Well, why did you join the air service?"

"You see, I had it comfortable, had a job my father arranged. He's big in the banking business. I have a wonderful wife, I should have been content, but there were some things I just needed to get away from for a while."

"Waiter! Another round, please," said Ed.

"Anyway, I worked in the bank and one day I met a girl I'd had my eye on for a while. She went past the bank everyday morning and afternoon. Turns out she's a school teacher and she was on her way to school and then

on her way home in the afternoon. Well, one day she came in the bank and I waited on her. She asked about opening an account. Of course I had to ask her name and her address. She came back to open her account and naturally I assisted her. Well, one thing led to another and I started going with her. Molly. Her name is Molly. That's when my life changed."

Leon paused and took a swallow of beer.

"It changed for the good, didn't it?" asked Eugene.

"It did. But you see, my father had it in mind that I marry a girl from a well-to-do influential family and, well, Molly is from a working class family. She came from a small town in the western part of the state. She moved to the city to go to normal school to be a teacher and then took a job right there in the city. Well, a school teacher from a working class family just wasn't good enough for my father. My mother had no issue with her. She took quite a liking to Molly and treats her very well. Father is civil to her, but he still resents her background."

"So why did you join the service?"

Leon thought for a while, seeming to search for the correct words. "I'm not sure I know the entire reason. My life with Molly is wonderful. She's such a delight, a wonderful woman. I hesitated because I didn't want to leave her. We talked it over, a lot, and explored all the angles and she supported my decision to enlist. I think I needed to get away from my father, from the bank. I suppose, too, there was a bit of that idea of being an airman, a warrior in the sky, a knight of the air. The day I left seems like a long ago time"

After a brief pause, Leon continued, "I've quickly come to realize that knight of the air notion is only a fantasy promoted by the press. I just want to survive and return home."

While most of the other men were out, leaving the chateau quiet, Karl sat at his desk in his room and wrote his letter to Lois:

Dearest Lois,

It's raining this evening and rain is expected through at least tomorrow, so we have a reprieve from patrol. Most of

the others are in town, drinking and chasing French women and engaging in whatever other evils they can find. Only a few of us stayed behind. But it is what I wish. I have no urge to cat about because I have you, my dear, and am very grateful and satisfied and long for nothing except for you.

I did venture into town today, though, for business. I want to get a good looking Sam Browne belt to complete my uniform then I shall look the part of a proper flying officer. Appearances are important as one wants to make a proper impression. I went to a shop in town with a first rate leather craftsman who should do a fine job on my belt. I truly hope so, for I haven't been able to find just what I'm looking for as far as shade and construction are concerned.

We did our first scheduled flight over the lines this morning, though the clouds were quite low, and saw in the distance some enemy aircraft. But they turned and ran at the sight of us! So there was no fight. Our flights the first two days here had been on our own side in order that we get familiar with the territory and that we get used to flying with each other and hold formation. We ventured over on the second day, though it was not planned. In the distance, we saw enemy aircraft engaged with our own from another squadron and Lieutenant Goodlow took us over to witness what a fight looked like and to help if need be. The enemy turned and ran when they saw us coming, but not before one of them was shot down in flames. I didn't actually see it get shot down, but did see the trail of smoke headed downward. Not to worry about me, for it seems the enemy is not too willing to fight with us as all we have seen them do is run.

Well, on to more pleasant things. How are your parents? And have you seen my Aunt Mary Ellen? When you do, give her my best. I hope your studies are going well. I think you will make a wonderful teacher and know that any children who would have you for their teacher would be very fortu-

nate indeed. I was sorry to hear of the illness of your uncle and I hope he is better by now. I hope it was nothing serious, such as the influenza that has been going around. I hear it can be dreadful. Please, may you stay well.

I so much appreciate and enjoy the correspondence you have been providing me. It cheers me up so to hear from you and to hear what is going on at home. France is certainly not Ohio and I long for the day I can return. In the meantime, when I get my proper uniform together, I'll have a photograph made and will send you one.

Yours,
Karl

As the evening wore on, the waitresses came on duty at Café Rogue, women and girls who wore short dresses and stockings and carried drinks on trays balanced on shoulders and local girls drifted into the café to meet and mingle and tease the soldiers and fliers. Music began and people danced and laughed and shouted and amid the din in the dim smoky cafe there were quiet conversations tucked away here and there, quiet whispering between an airman and a girl, suggestions, schemes, plans, ideas and promises made for the wee hours. Any thoughts of flying patrol, of quirky Camels, of bully beef, of military rank and discipline vanished from the minds of the fliers, the world of combat a million miles distant, fears and worries non-existent, all replaced with drink and music and dancing and mademoiselles and their promises.

Missing from the action were Ed Butz and Leon VanGleason and Eugene Lawrence each one having slipped out unnoticed at various times to venture off on his own mission.

At midnight, the prearranged time, Ed Butz, who had disappeared into the wet evening to scout and scrounge the edges, the corners, the cubbyholes of the town for treasures, returned to the café to retrieve weary revelers.

The other lorry that Diller had driven was still parked in the spot it had

been in hours earlier. Butz sounded the horn. He waited. He sounded the horn again as if it could actually be heard inside the café over the raucous din. He checked his watch. Ten minutes past midnight. He jumped out and dashed through the rain to the door of the café, opened it and took a quick scan of the scene inside, dimly lit and smoke-filled. He did not see his riders amid the commotion. Back into the lorry and down the road to the chateau he went, anxious to get his cargo home.

Ed backed the lorry right up to the front door of the chateau, peeled off the tarp and began unloading.

"Hey, Butz, what kind of goods did you get?" asked Leon.

"VanGleason, how'd you get back?"

"I walked back hours ago. Just been a few of us here. Been kind of nice, all quiet and all. Didn't take long to get enough of that crowd at the café. The rain quit so I headed back. But I pulled one on old Harris before I left." There was that grin. "He should have gotten the punch line about an hour ago."

"What'd you do to him?"

"Well, he thinks a certain mademoiselle is crazy about him and she wants to meet him at her place. He got a note with an address on it. But it's not hers!" Leon and Ed broke into laughter.

"Some fellow's address, I assume," Ed said.

"Correct."

"Wish I could see the look on his face."

"Me, too."

"Give me a hand while you're standin' here. I got a boat load of stuff. Even got bicycles, eleven Columbia bicycles, all in working order."

"Well, they should help the transportation system here. There's never enough bicycles to go around."

"Think I'll go in to the rental business," said Ed. "Twenty-five cents a bike for the evening."

"Like hell, Butz."

"Just fooling. They're for the whole squadron to use."

"We putting the bikes in here?"

"Naw, let's set them out on the patio."

After arranging all eleven bicycles on the patio, they began to carry the rest of the goods into the chateau stacking them inside the entrance. There were cases of beer, wine, boxes of chocolate, cases of cigarettes, and two crates of vegetables. The entryway looked like a warehouse by the time they were finished.

"There, is that it, Ed?"

"No. Got one more item. Got a motorcycle."

"A motorcycle?"

"A motorcycle. Needs some work, but nothin' serious I'm sure. Guy was glad to get rid of it. He said it didn't run."

"He gave it to you?"

"Sure. It was junk to him. It's a P & M—Phelon and Moore. Odd looking bike, but it will do. The RAF uses them all the time. Here, give me a hand with it."

"Aren't you going to put this over in the maintenance hangar to work on it?" asked Leon.

"Naw. Let's roll it inside. It will make a nice centerpiece in the living room."

"Think the Major would approve?"

"He never ventures over here, so I could care less if he approves or not."

Ed and Leon pulled the cycle from the bed of the lorry, balanced it on its wheels, and rolled it inside the chateau.

"What else you have?"

"That's it for this time. I'll get the lorry back to Smith. Oh, it's startin' to rain again."

Ed pulled up his jacket collar and dashed out to the lorry and drove it back to the maintenance hangar. Diller appeared shortly with the other lorry bringing the remainder of the revelers back, all except for Rodney and Eugene.

Next morning dawned greyer than the one before, the clouds hung low, the rain falling steadily. Martin, Karl, Ed, and Leon as well as the fellows from C Flight who had stayed behind, were up with the dim, grey daylight, cleaned up and headed to the mess. Lloyd was dead to the world. Rodney and Eugene were nowhere to be seen.

"Rodney and Eugene didn't make it," said Ed. "Must have been captured by the enemy. Poor fellows."

"Captured by enemy French women," said Martin.

"Naw, more like Wilson did the capturing," said Ed. "But Eugene? Maybe there's a side to him we haven't seen. That nice, quiet kid seems too shy to even talk to a woman."

"Gotta watch the quiet ones," said Leon. "Some women go for the quiet type. Maybe he found a quiet French girl somewhere."

"Not at the Rouge. There's only one type of woman there," said Ed.

"Maybe he left the café," said Karl. "I mean, maybe he left it by himself and he got lost on the way home."

"Maybe we ought to send out a patrol," said Martin, puffing on his pipe, brow wrinkled in seriousness. A brief moment of silence, they all decided it was a joke and then laughed.

"He'll be alright," said Leon. "He's a lot tougher than you think."

The four men entered the mess and were greeted by an unexpected sight.

"Hi, fellows," said Eugene. "Ya'll are kinda late for breakfast."

"Lawrence! How'd you get back?" asked Ed. "And when?"

"Oh, I been here about forty-five minutes."

"Well, where the hell you been? Have a night with a woman?"

"No. I stayed with a farmer and his wife. They fed me and put me up for the evening. Good food. Cozy quarters."

Martin smiled. The other guys had their mouths open.

"Why?" asked Karl. "Why did they put you up for the night?"

"Aw, I don't know. I was on my way home, walking. I saw the man out tending his animals so I stopped to visit. Me and him both bein' farmers and all. His English was not too good and, well, I don't really know any French, but we communicated. Next thing I know, I'm inside and they're feeding me. And the food was good."

"Better than what LeBleau makes?" asked Ed.

"Of course. Then it started rainin' so they offered for me to say there."

"Well," said Martin, "I imagine you had the best evening of any of us."

As the fellows lingered over coffee, a few of the men from B and C Flights dragged to the mess one-by-one and in pairs, rubbing eyes and

holding throbbing heads and squinting against the light of day, attempting to tidy uniforms as they went, tucking and pulling and arranging and straightening.

About midmorning, as Ed and Leon were playing cards in the drawing room, Rodney Wilson walked in to the chateau fresh and neat, uniform clean and perfectly in place and dry despite the rain and mist, looking like he belonged on a recruiting poster.

"Wilson! Where've you been? Kidnapped by a French woman?" asked Ed.

"No, in order to be kidnapped, one must be unwilling," Rodney replied, a sly smile playing about the corners of his mouth.

"Well, I hope you were kept in good accommodations," said Leon.

"First rate."

"Well, it's encouraging to know the locals will treat us well. Eugene spent the night out, too. Claims he stayed with a farmer and his wife and they fed him and took him in like he was a son. Invited him back, he says."

"Where did the pile of bicycles come from?" asked Rodney.

"Butz," said Leon pointing to Ed.

"Of course. And I assume he is responsible for the motorcycle adorning the hallway."

"Yes."

"Does it run?"

"It will," said Ed.

"What else did you get, Butz?"

"Some wine. A few cases of beer. Chocolate, cigarettes, vegetables."

"Might you spare a bit of that? I know a mademoiselle who would like some."

"Vegetables? Take all you want."

"You idiot! Chocolate. You know damn well I mean chocolate."

"Of course."

"We flying tomorrow?"

"Haven't heard yet," said Leon. "Right now, it looks like this weather could last until fall."

"I doubt that. Maybe a couple of more days, though."

"I suspect. Martin thinks we'll be on the ground for at least another day."

"I could use another day off. This French nightlife is work. Think I'll retire to my room, gentlemen."

Karl and Martin wandered into the room and joined the card game.

"Karl, I didn't know you played cards," said Leon.

"Why do you ask?"

"Well, I thought maybe your religion forbade it."

"I'm not a strict fundamentalist. Jesus did not forbid playing cards. Now, if I were to gamble, He might frown on that. We are playing just for fun, aren't we?"

"Sure, it's just a relaxing game. No wagering. That alright with the rest of you?"

"Fine with me," said Martin. "I'm not much of a gambler either."

"I normally like to put a little on a game," said Ed.

"I bet you do," said Leon.

"Just deal the cards."

Shortly they heard stumbling, staggering footsteps and Lloyd appeared in the doorway.

"Harris!" exclaimed Leon. "Finally woke up, I see. And you look awful!"

"Feel awful, too."

"Hey, what happened to your eye?"

"Some guy. Suppose to be a girl, a woman, but was a man."

"You don't say." Leon tried to suppress a grin, but it crept out slightly, the corners of his mouth turning up.

"Was a man. Big guy. Mad as hell about something."

"Well, what'd you do to him?"

Nothin'. Jus' knocked on a door an, an asked for the girl. Can't 'member her name. But I had an address. Don't know wha' happened."

"Well, you know some folks just get upset about nothing."

Leon turned away and broke into a big grin. Lloyd stumbled off into another part of the chateau.

"What do you suppose actually happened to Lloyd last night?" asked Karl.

"I don't know," answered Leon, "but by appearances, he had an

unusually rough night last night." Leon broke into that grin. "He was still pretty hung over. And that muttering about a girl and a guy who punched him or some such nonsense. I think he's all mixed up."

Martin took a slow drag on his pipe, slowly pulled it from his lips and said, "VanGleason, I think you know more than you're letting on."

That grin.

"That's what I thought," said Martin. "And Butz, it looks like a warehouse in here. Where'd you get all this stuff? And the motorcycle? Is it going over to maintenance?"

"Cycle stays here. Doesn't it add to the décor?"

"Well, the Major…"

"The Major can go to hell. He never comes over here. You know that."

"No, he won't. But we are guests of the French. I think we should show a little respect and take care of this place."

Silence.

"If we get moved, and as the front moves I'm sure we will, we may not have accommodations like this," Martin explained. "We could easily go from this luxury to living in tents. A lot of air units live in tents."

"You don't think we'll be here for the duration?" asked Karl.

"The probability is not good. When I was with the RFC we moved several times. And believe me we never had anything like this. Some of the conditions were miserable. Mud and cold to contend with. I don't care how well you try to seal up a tent, the cold and damp finds its way in. We fashioned stoves out of oil drums, but unless you were fortunate enough to get a bunk near the stove you were cold. And I'm sure I need not tell you how uncomfortable those bunks can be. They're nothing like the luxury bedding we have here."

"Aw yes, bunks," said Leon. "And tents. The so called rest camp was made up of tents. Horrid. Mud everywhere. We had a downpour and the whole place turned to soup."

"At least it was summertime," said Martin. "Take those conditions and add cold weather. Seemed we never could get warmed up." Martin gestured around the room with his pipe. "So enjoy it while you can, gentlemen, but let's take care of it."

"Talked to a fellow that was with the 95th," said Ed. "Said they lived in

tents last spring. Based near Toul, I think. Told him about our chateau living. Said he heard the 95th had moved into a chateau near Saints. Said the boys must be delighted after the time in the tents. So, yeah, Martin's right, we better enjoy this while we can."

"Does put it all into perspective," said Karl.

"So, Ed, you still gonna leave that motorcycle in here?" asked Leon.

"Hell, yes. I can appreciate the accommodations and have my motorcycle here real handy."

"I suppose. Leave it to you, Butz, to come up with an angle.

"Karl, what are you up to today?"

"Need to stay up on my correspondence. Seems I'm always a little behind. I need to write home, write the folks and write to Lois. Lois is my girl at home. And I'd like to get in to town and check on that belt. The man said it could be done today. He's prepared. Said he's made a lot of belts recently."

"Need to quit writing that girl every day," said Ed. "Not good to write every day. You ought to keep her wondering, guessing what you're doing."

"And how would you have such knowledge of women?"

"I've gone with a girl or two in my life."

"I would bet not for long."

"Well, I never found one I wanted to spend much time with. Hell, I ain't gonna waste my time if I know I don't want to marry her. You gonna marry this girl?"

"I plan on it."

"Does she know it?"

"Well, I haven't officially asked her. But I'm sure she feels the same way."

"I hope so," said Ed.

As the four played cards, the revelers from B and C Flights slowly returned from the mess and gradually came to life and became human again, the sounds of laughter and chatter increasing in volume and clarity, the fog of the night before lifting. The motorcycle that had gone unseen in the fog now became clear and some men just shook their heads and moved on, others stopped and stooped down to examine the machine, and others

grilled Ed about particulars. "Where'd you get it? It was free?! Does it run? Did you steal it? I want to ride it."

"Seems you've added quite a conversation piece to the décor," said Karl.

"Yes, it goes well with the luxurious silk and velvet, don't you think? I'll start tearing it down this afternoon, see what it needs. I'm wanting to get it running, kinda curious how a P & M runs. I'm familiar with the Triumph and Indian, but this is a new one to me."

"Don't mess up the floor," said Martin. "I don't think oil goes too well with colors of the fabric in here." He took a puff on his pipe and added, "And it won't clean up well."

"Yes sir, Lieutenant!"

"That's First Lieutenant, Second Lieutenant Butz."

"Aw, just deal."