

## ONE

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The sun rose beyond the island. A breath of wind stirred the leaves of the coconut palms that lined the airstrip, their fronds sashaying together in a dance. On the breeze came an odour of raw fish, hibiscus and engine oil: the smell of the tropics. The runway faced eastwards, pointing towards the rising sun like a blade, its surface covered with sheets of pierced steel planking because of the monsoon. Lined up along the airstrip were the sixteen Mark VIII Spitfires of 607 Squadron, the planes arrayed in clusters of four, the backs of their sleek bodies arched against the increasing light so they looked like a school of porpoises breasting the surf. The airfield was deserted except for the sentries guarding the main gate and the duty officer up in the wooden control tower. Sitting in his wicker chair the officer yawned and stretched and looked across at the empty runway. Out of the gloom a figure wearing flying kit emerged from one of the huts and began walking towards the aircraft. It was the pilot of the dawn patrol.

Before the Allied victory in Europe, the squadron had always gone out in pairs and most often in fours, but with the fall of Berlin and the Japanese defeat at Gua-

dalcanal and at Iwo Jima the war, which seemed to have gone on for as long as anyone could remember, was now almost at an end. The once feared Imperial Japanese Airforce was no longer a threat and the main purpose of 607 Squadron's patrols were to support Allied advances in the region and harass any Japanese shipping unwise enough to find itself caught in the open sea. It was only a matter of time until the Showa Emperor and his cohorts around the Chrysanthemum throne capitulated. Or so everyone, including Flight Lieutenant Edward Strickland, liked to think.

The pilot paused and taking a Players from its packet, he put the cigarette to his lips, flicked open a lighter and lit it, enjoying the tobacco smoke that filled his lungs before replacing the lighter and cigarette packet in the top pocket of his shirt. He stood and stared at the ascending sun, its rays penetrating the gold clouds of the horizon, reaching out across the sky like a many bladed fan. It reminded him of benediction at school when the priest held up the monstrance containing the Blessed Sacrament, while they all bowed their heads. It was a moment of epiphany, the sunlight falling in slabs through the tall windows, the clouds of incense dusting the air with myrrh, the pale candles flickering on the altar, the choristers' voices filling the church with song. And now at dawn on the other side of the world here was another, albeit different, benediction. Standing alone on the runway, Strickland bowed his head, but this time before the sun god. He stood up and stubbed out his cigarette and walked towards his plane.

The ground crew were just making their final preparations to the Spitfire, when they caught sight of the tall figure striding towards them. The pair took a step

back and saluted the young officer, who returned the greeting.

“Morning Jenkins, morning Watson,” he said.

“Morning Mr Strickland,” they replied.

“Nice day for it,” said Jenkins.

“Let’s hope so,” answered the pilot.

Strickland ducked down to check the plane’s undercarriage and walked around the back to look at the rudder and the ailerons. Satisfied, he went to the front and inspected the nose cone and the propeller, before rounding the wing and climbing up into the cockpit. He got in and placed his parachute underneath him and sat down. Jenkins, the fitter, helped strap him in while Watson, the rigger, stepped out in front of the aircraft, waiting to guide the pilot out onto the runway. Having done up the harness Jenkins patted Strickland’s shoulder and wished him luck. The officer murmured his thanks and attached the oxygen mask to his face, before pulling the goggles down over his eyes. He made sure the ground flight switch was set to ground; fuel on; brakes on (air pressure sufficient); magnetos on; radiator fully open; RPM lever fully forward and throttle set half an inch open and ready to start. Strickland waved, signalling that everything was correct.

“Contact!” he called.

The rigger looked about and saw the Spitfire was clear.

“Contact!” came the response.

The pilot simultaneously pressed the start button and boost coil and the Merlin engine gave a cough, spluttered into life and began to roar. He checked the dials on the instrument panel: engine revs, oil pressure and temperature. Everything was fine. He opened the throt-

tle gently, watching the RPMs on the rev counter and placing his feet on the rudder pedals, he checked the tail rudder in the cockpit mirror. He glanced at the ailerons on either side, working them up and down with the joystick. Strickland stared at the runway ahead of him, the sun rising above the ocean, the dawn sky framed by his canopy window. The pilot waved away the chocks and opening the throttle a fraction, he released the brakes and pulling the stick back into his stomach, he nosed the plane out onto the airstrip.

Through the whirring circle of his propeller, he could see Watson motioning him on until he was out in the middle of the runway. The rigger stepped aside with a final wave and in his ear phones Strickland heard the officer in the control tower telling him he was clear for takeoff. The pilot thanked him and the voice wished him 'bon voyage' as he opened the throttle fully and eased the stick forward, lowering the nose and feeling the aircraft picking up speed. In front of him the engine growled and smoke belched from the twin banks of exhaust stacks on the cowling, the plane's wheels racing across the steel planking. After three hundred yards the Spitfire left the ground, floating gracefully upwards; an unwieldy beast on land now becoming a winged chariot in the air. Flying with his left hand, Strickland moved the metal lever with his right, raising the undercarriage and a red light with the word 'up' illuminated on the left hand side of the instrument panel. He pulled the RPM lever aft, reducing the RPM for the climb, checked the controls and felt the plane swing briefly from side to side as it rose like a lark into the dawn sky.

After throttling back to climb power the pilot looked down at his compass and took a bearing of seventeen de-

grees east, swinging out across the lightening sea before turning inland and flying back over the flat corrugated roofs of the camp. Beyond the houses the jungle-clad mountains rose up green and massive, the valleys and gulleys filled with a low pale cloud which would soon dissipate. As the sun rose above the mountains patches of forest steamed, the Spitfire climbing all the time as it traversed the dark heart of the island, a thin trail of condensation flowing in its wake.

There were stories the interior of the island contained tribes who had never set eyes on a white man. If they were true, Strickland wondered what these people must think of the great metal birds which roared and swooped above them. Would these people run and hide, or would they drop to their knees in fear, raise their arms in supplication and beg for mercy? It was a strange thought and he hoped they would not be too afraid.

The pilot continued on above the mountains, keeping the canopy open so that he could feel the morning breeze upon his face. He did this out of habit and not simply because he sought relief from the enervating tropical heat.

Some years before during the long, hot summer of 1940, Strickland had a lucky escape above the hop fields of Kent. After a dogfight in which he had shot down a Dornier, he was preparing to return home when he was jumped by a Messerschmitt 109. He had been so excited, shooting down the bomber, his first solo kill, that he briefly relaxed, failing to look in his cockpit mirror as he followed the stricken plane to the ground, ignoring everything he had been taught in the euphoria of the moment. The pilot only realised he had become

the prey when he saw a line of tracer streaking past his starboard wing. Having spent all his ammunition on the Dornier he had none left, but Strickland was sure he could outmanoeuvre the slightly quicker Me-109, so long as he kept low and hugged the contours of the land.

But try as it might the Spitfire could not shake off its pursuer, who stuck resolutely to its tail. In his mirror the pilot could see the yellow nosed Messerschmitt in close pursuit, small flames erupting in its nose and wings each time the enemy fired his cannon. His adversary was no novice and he decided to climb for a thick bank of cloud so as to lose him. The move surprised the German and Strickland had almost reached the mass of cloud when a burst of gunfire hit his aircraft. The plane heaved and shuddered like a stricken horse and flames poured from the engine, the cockpit filling with choking black smoke. After trying the controls Strickland knew there was nothing he could do except bale out and unstrapping himself, he tried to pull the canopy open. But a piece of shrapnel had struck it during the attack and the casing would not budge. With flames now pouring into the cockpit he desperately tried to prise it open, tearing his gloves off in the process to get a better grip on the release catches. In mounting panic he struggled in vain to free the canopy, but it refused to move. He reached down and grabbed the crowbar in the cockpit door, but his hands could not grip the burning metal. With flames licking all around, the pilot pushed the aircraft into a steep dive in a bid to blow the fire out. Instead the steepness of the descent increased the smoke, causing him to black out and the next thing Strickland knew, he was falling free from the aircraft.

Somehow the gravitational forces had pulled the canopy open and he had dropped out, shelled like a pea from a pod as the plane flipped over on its back. As he tumbled through the sky the pilot regained consciousness and reaching for his parachute cord he pulled it, the silk canopy opening above him in a great white bloom. After checking that his lines were not twisted, he looked about. But the Messerschmitt had disappeared and he floated earthwards like some fallen angel. It was only as he descended that he became aware of the pain in his hands and saw that the skin on them was raw and blistered like seared meat. Strickland landed safely in an apple orchard and after convincing a pitchfork-wielding farmer with some forthright Anglo-Saxon that he was not a member of the Luftwaffe but a pilot in the RAF, he passed out again.

He woke up a day later to find himself in hospital, his body swathed in bandages. His face and hands had been scrubbed and sprayed with tannic acid which had formed into a thick black scab, while his eyes had been bathed and then swabbed with gentian violet. He lay there in bed wrapped up like an Egyptian mummy, with two holes for his eyes and another for his mouth. Fortunately Strickland's head and face had been protected by his goggles and helmet and the burns, although painful, were superficial. But his hands were a mess and would require several operations.

Initially the doctors kept him full of morphine to dull the pain, so the days passed in a blur of pale floating shapes and gentle murmurings as he lay mute and bound in his bed. In those first few days Strickland remembered only the whiteness of the hospital ward and the hushed voices of the nurses as they flitted to and fro

like anxious moths. He was mostly delirious and often suffered from nightmares. Either he was struggling to get out of his burning aircraft, or he watched helplessly as another pilot was attacked by an enemy fighter. He would shout and scream at his fellow aviator, but to no avail and could only look on horrified as the plane burst into flames. After one such dream Strickland woke to find three orderlies holding him down as a nurse administered an injection. Eventually the amount of morphine in his system was reduced and the fog that had enveloped him lifted and his mind no longer wandered quite as much as it did. But there was nothing they could do about the nightmares, which continued for some time.

Strickland's parents visited as soon as he was well enough to see them and he remembered his mother being brave as she stood at the end of his bed, trying not to cry. He made some lame joke about being like the Invisible Man and that when they finally removed his bandages there would be nobody there. The surgeon had been kind enough to laugh, but he could see his parents did not find his predicament in the least bit amusing. There was a look of anguish on his mother's face when he announced that he hoped he would be back flying again soon. But the surgeon merely smiled and said he should take each day as it came.

As his strength returned the pilot was able to sit up and talk and he always remembered the kindness and diligence of the sisters who tended the ward. There was one man who had crashed during take off on a training flight, his plane cartwheeling across the end of the runway, blazing like a Catherine Wheel before exploding in a sheet of flame. As the rescue team pulled him from the

burning wreckage it was said the skin on his arms came off like a pair of gloves. It was a miracle the man had survived and like every other burned pilot, he was taken to the same special unit for life saving surgery. The place was much like any other hospital where people came in grievously wounded and either left through the front door, or else in a long wooden box through the back. The only difference with the burns unit at East Grinstead was that there were no mirrors. And when the nurses removed the bandages from the novice's face you knew why. Even the other patients had to turn away, the sight was so terrible. But the medical staff were unabashed. Only once did a nurse faint and she had been new. With or without a face, the young flier was treated with the same care and dedication as everyone else.

Another regular visitor for Strickland was his commanding officer Archie Lambton, a bluff pipe smoking Lancastrian and an accomplished cricketer who had played for his county. He also captained the squadron's XI and the flight lieutenant opened the batting with him. The two of them regularly had a partnership of a hundred or more, the wing commander always chalking up at least fifty. One afternoon Lambton arrived and pulling up a chair, he sat down and told his subordinate that he had some good news. He had recommended him for a Distinguished Flying Cross.

"Whatever for?" the pilot asked, genuinely surprised.

Lambton was somewhat taken aback at this response and began to bluster that he was a valuable member of the squadron, had at least one confirmed kill and had shared in another two, as well as having another probable to his name. Strickland nevertheless saw through the man's blandishments and realised the decoration

was intended as compensation for his injuries. He knew he did not deserve the medal, but his CO plainly did not expect him to take to the wing again. It seemed he would be deskbound for the rest of the war. Even so, Lambton was as good as his word and three weeks later Strickland's DFC was gazetted, his parents proudly showing him the announcement in *The Times*.

In the weeks that followed, the pilot was able to move about and spent much of his convalescence walking in the large grounds of the hospital, enjoying the fine autumn weather. The gardens were well tended and he liked to stroll along the gravel paths clad in his pyjamas and dressing gown, stopping occasionally to sniff the sooty perfume of a rose. He would find a shaded bench and sit and read the latest letter from his beloved Katie. They had been together for almost a year and while he had been uncertain about his feelings for her before, he knew now that she was the one. He felt her absence keenly and could not imagine spending his life with anyone else. Katie was an Italian Scot with raven hair and green eyes and the palest of skin. She spoke with a soft Edinburgh burr and worked in the Operations Room of his squadron at North Weald. She had been unable to visit him at the hospital as only immediate family and the patients' commanding officers were allowed. But they exchanged letters almost every day, the pilot dictating his to a nurse. He soon became adept at signing off with a pen held between his teeth. While the pilot enjoyed receiving Katie's letters, which he re-read often, they were a poor substitute for her physical presence and he counted the days when he would see her again.

Christmas came and went and New Year was notable

only in that the bandages of Strickland's hands were finally removed after the last of his many operations. It meant he could now visit the local pub along with the other walking patients, since he was no longer at risk of infection. On his first visit to the Dorset Arms in the high street, he had been at the bar ordering a round of drinks when he noticed a familiar figure staring at him from behind the counter. He thought it was a ghost until he recognised with a shock that he was looking at his reflection in the large mirror which hung upon the wall. It was the first time he had seen his face in months and as he glanced at his friends carousing around him, he realised how fortunate he was. They too must have seen their own disfigured faces as they took their turn at the bar and yet somehow they had all come to terms with their injuries. Not one of them had ever complained about their disfigurement and Strickland was humbled by their fortitude.

After almost six months at East Grinstead, the pilot was given his discharge papers, returning to his squadron in February. Two brother officers, George Hay and Harry Armstrong, collected him on the day of his release in Armstrong's Morris Oxford. The hospital staff stood on the steps and waved him goodbye, as did the other patients who were allowed out from their wards. The trio set off and leaving the sleepy Sussex village they made their way to London, passing through the bombed out areas of Lewisham and Battersea before arriving in the West End. They had a fine lunch at Simpson's in the Strand where they drank champagne and dined on oysters and roast beef, before setting off for the airfield in the late afternoon. Strickland sat on the back seat with his cap on his knee, his uniform new-

ly cleaned and pressed, the purple and white ribbon of his DFC sewn above the left breast pocket. As they raced through the narrow Kent lanes he felt glad to be back on active service after his weeks of confinement and subsequent rehabilitation, although he doubted he would be allowed to fly again because of his injuries. Along the sunlit verges crocus and primrose bloomed and songbirds flitted in and out of the damp hedgerows. More importantly, he was looking forward to seeing his beloved Katie. Although her letters had been noticeably cooler and less frequent, he was sure that once they saw each other again, it would be just like old times. He wanted to propose to her as soon as possible and had even thought about what type of ring he would buy. There was a jeweller's in Burlington Arcade just off Piccadilly and he had seen the solitaire diamond in the window display.

As the pilot considered sweet thoughts of love, the two men in front chattered away. The blond and ruddy-faced Hay was now officially an ace with five confirmed kills to his credit, while the slighter and darker Armstrong had three. Both of them had a DFC, while Hay had recently been awarded a DSO. Lambton and the young trio were now the only remaining members of the squadron who had flown in France, covering the troops' retreat at Dunkirk. The other eight had all been killed.

The early spring sun was low on the horizon as the car drove through the gates of North Weald airfield and pulled up outside the officers' mess. An orderly came out and took his trunk and Strickland thanked his friends, before going off to the CO's office to report for duty. When he arrived he found the door open and

entering, he saw Lambton's broad back facing him.

"Hello sir," he said saluting.

"Good heavens, it's you, Strickland!" exclaimed the senior officer, turning around and seeing the pilot standing at the door.

Lambton came towards him and the two shook hands warmly, the CO telling him how wonderful it was to have him back. The pilot was right in thinking he would not be permitted to fly, as the wing commander announced he would be working in the Operations Room.

"You'll like it there. Nice bunch. Hargreaves is in charge. There are some lovely girls too," he added with a grin. "So you'd better be on your best behaviour."

"I always am sir," replied the subordinate, hiding a smile. No one at North Weald knew about him and Katie; theirs was an affair which they had conducted illicitly, although neither of them knew why except that it was no one else's concern and its clandestine nature had added an extra charge to their liaison. Besides, people would know soon enough.

Strickland shrugged at the prospect of the Operations Room and knew he could not have expected anything else. At least he was back with his squadron again. He would also be working with Katie and the thought made him smile. Lambton mistook it as a happy acceptance of his new assignment and beamed broadly back at him. Thanking his wing commander and saluting once more, the pilot left and returned to the mess to unpack his kit.

He had just put away his clothes and closed his trunk, when he heard a gentle knock at his door.

"It's open," he said.

Strickland turned around and saw the woman he had been waiting for all these months standing before him. His heart stopped beating for an instance and then love's fingers began to pluck at its strings. Katie, dark haired and beautiful, with a smile on her pale, oval face was there.

Neither of them spoke, they simply fell into each other's arms, his girlfriend crying and kissing him and Strickland passionately returning her kisses and stroking her hair. They held each other in a long embrace until the pretty WAAF pulled back suddenly, looking abashed and adjusting her uniform.

The pilot reached out tenderly but she drew away, hiding her face beneath her dark hair.

"What is it, Katie?" he asked, his voice echoing concern.

The woman said nothing and went and closed the door quietly.

"Let's sit down," she answered, turning her face towards him.

They sat together on Strickland's wrought iron bed, the old springs protesting under their combined weight. The bed where they had so often lain together and made love, Katie slipping out before dawn lit the sky and the song birds woke.

She took the pilot's hand in hers and looked at him, her green eyes moist and guilty.

Strickland knew.

"I'm so sorry..." Katie began, before she broke off and started to cry again.

The pilot felt an overwhelming sense of grief, tempered by his ardent love for the woman sobbing beside him. He had never seen her cry like this before and he

held her tightly as she pressed her damp face against his cheek.

He looked across at the window and beyond the panes; the sunless sky a darkening bruise, the evening clouds threatening rain.

How could this be? How could it be over? Not now, surely? Not when they were destined to spend the rest of their lives together.

Strickland kissed her hair and she raised her eyes to his, her long, dark lashes sodden with tears.

“Is there someone else?” he asked, knowing the answer as soon as he had uttered the words.

Katie nodded miserably, sniffled and turned away.

“We’re engaged.”

There was a knife in the pilot’s heart and he felt its cold blade plunge even deeper at those words. A wound as deep and final as death.

“Do I know him?”

Katie shifted her weight away from him, the bed creaking as she did so. She took a handkerchief from her sleeve, dabbed at her eyes and then blew her nose.

“It’s Wilson,” she answered softly, twisting the hanky in her hands.

The pilot sprang from the bed, as if he had been struck across the face.

“John Wilson!”

The girl lowered her eyes and stared at her lap.

“He never knew about us and still doesn’t. I haven’t told him.”

Strickland was aghast, not only had he been cuckolded, but he had been so by a brother officer.

“But why? We were so in love!”

“Were we? Honestly? I was in love with you, but I

wasn't sure you felt the same."

"How can you say that? You must have known!"

She reached out a hand to touch him, but he angrily pulled away.

"Darling, please..."

Katie looked at him tenderly, wanting him to understand that she had not betrayed him because she had never known the depth of his love for her. He had always seemed so detached and unconcerned. She did not realise that the pilot had kept his distance because he knew that every time he went out on a mission, he might not come back. He felt it unfair to let someone get too close, only to leave them bereaved like so many others. And because of this, she had found someone else.

"Don't be like that. Please. I didn't know. You were always so aloof and distant. It wasn't until I got your letters from hospital that I realised how much you cared for me. ...by then it was too late."

The pilot gasped inwardly as he felt the blade turn.

"When did it happen?"

"He proposed on New Year's Eve."

Strickland clenched his fists and paced the room. He wanted to hit Wilson for all his treachery and cowardice. Wilson was his friend. They had been on countless sorties together during the summer as the Luftwaffe attacked the skies above the south coast, each watching out for the other. And now this.

"Damn him! Damn him!"

He heard Katie's soft voice.

"Please. Come here."

The pilot looked at her, his face clouded: a mixture of fury and unrequited love. He sat down. They said noth-

ing for a time and remained silently on the narrow bed, each with their own thoughts.

Katie saw the pilot's deeply scarred hands and remembered her grief when she heard the news that her beloved had been shot down. She had been desperate to know about his condition and had even asked Lambton, breaking down in tears in his office. The CO's expression had told her all she needed to know. Strickland was unlikely to survive.

After a time she spoke. Her voice sounding vague and alien, as if it came from another world.

"No one thought you would pull through. John was always there for me."

"I'm sure he was!" said the pilot unable to hide his bitterness.

But he knew also that it was not really Wilson's fault. After all, as Katie had said, he had never known about their affair. The pilot was sure he would have done the same, had their roles been reversed.

"Please don't be angry with me. I did love you."

Katie looked at him beseechingly. It was impossible. What did she want? His blessing?

"If only you knew how much I love you."

"I know now, but it's too late. Our love has gone. I'm with John."

"You're sure?"

"Yes," she replied and for the first time during their meeting a smile lit up her face. A smile Strickland had long dreamt about during those long, dark nights in the hospital ward at East Grinstead. And here it was again. Only this time it was not for him.

"I'm sorry, I should go. I just wanted to tell you myself," and the WAAF stood up and began to fix her

skirt.

The pilot looked at her blankly, unable to summon tears or any emotion at all. He felt dead inside. The woman he had loved and would have given his life for, was leaving him forever.

“Will I see you again?”

Katie shook her head and observed him sadly.

“I doubt it. Not for some time. John has been promoted and assigned to a new squadron.”

Wilson promoted? He was a good pilot certainly, but no better than the rest of them and he had not even been in France. Although Hay had mentioned at lunch that he had recently been awarded a DFC. Perhaps in his absence the other man’s star had shone. Plainly, Katie thought so.

“Where’s he being posted?”

“Martlesham Heath. He’s going to be squadron leader. But it’s not official yet.”

The pilot nodded. That explained why neither Hay or Armstrong had said anything.

“You’re going with him?”

Katie assented meekly.

“When do you leave?”

“Tomorrow. John asked to stay on especially. He wants you to be at his farewell party and I had to tell you about us before you saw him...”

“Fine,” said Strickland and he stood up, anxious now for her to go. “I wish you both all the best.”

“I’ll see you tonight then?”

“Of course.”

They looked at each other and embraced awkwardly, with no affection let alone love. He showed her to the door and opened it, watching as she walked quickly

away down the corridor, without so much as a backward glance. She was not his, she belonged to somebody else now.

Later that evening Strickland attended Wilson's farewell party in the mess. It was jolly enough but he left as soon as he could, complaining of fatigue. Everyone understood, since he had only just come out of hospital. But the sight of Wilson standing at the bar with his arm around his former love, was too much for him to bear.

From that day on the pilot put Katie from his mind and went about his work in the Ops Room, ignoring the long looks he got from the other women. He spent the following weeks directing the squadron's aircraft and monitoring enemy formations as they appeared on the radar, the information being played out on a large map in the centre of the room. It was important work, but dull for a young man more used to the thrill of throwing a Spitfire around the sky and attacking and evading the Luftwaffe, than counting the numbers of enemy aircraft and plotting their course. Worse still was hearing the scramble siren and watching his comrades race across the airfield and jump into their planes. It was not long before Strickland decided to try and persuade his CO to let him fly again.

On a cold, bright day in April the pilot left the Operations Room and with the sun breaking through the clouds, he walked across the rain wet parade ground to Lambton's office and knocked on the door.

"Come in," said a genial voice and Strickland entered, closing the door behind him.

The CO was sitting at his desk puffing on his briar pipe, the air thick with tobacco smoke. Lambton was tapping away at a typewriter, the small room resound-

ing to the steady clatter of the keys. He stopped typing and looked up.

“Hello,” he said. “What is it?”

The pilot took off his cap and standing to attention, he hesitated briefly before speaking his mind.

“Sir, I want to fly on operations again.”

Lambton shook his head solemnly and sucked on his pipe.

“No. Absolutely not. You’ve done your bit and your work in the Ops Room is invaluable.”

But his subordinate insisted, pointing out that they were losing as many as three pilots a week and could not make up the shortfall. Instructors were back flying sorties, which meant the new recruits were not getting enough hours in the air before they too had to join a wing. With too many inexperienced pilots flying too many sorties, the squadron was becoming dangerously unbalanced and yet one of its most experienced fliers was grounded because of wounds he received months ago.

Strickland held out his scarred hands.

“I may not be able to open the batting again, but they work well enough to hold a stick,” and he clenched both hands into a fist to prove his point.

His CO looked at them and then down at the piece of paper in his typewriter, knowing that yet another mother would weep as she read that her son was ‘killed in action’ or ‘missing, presumed dead.’ Lambton removed his pipe from his mouth, tapped its contents into the ashtray and began to refill it from his pouch, tamping down the tobacco with his thumb. When he had finished he put it back in his mouth and lit it again. He puffed and ruminated and eventually spoke.

“OK. You have a point. We’ll start you off as an instructor and take it from there.”

Strickland smiled, donned his cap and saluted.

“Thank you sir,” he replied. His CO simply grunted and with his pipe in his mouth, he returned to his typing.

As the pilot reached the door, he heard Lambton’s voice.

“I’m sorry about Katie,” he said.

Strickland turned round. So his CO had known all along. He had recommended Wilson for promotion so that he could be assigned to a new squadron, ensuring that his fiance would leave with him. Lambton’s kindness touched the pilot and he smiled.

“That’s OK sir. Thank you,” and saluting once more, he left his CO to his letter writing.

Within a week the young officer had moved from the classroom to the Miles Master, a twin seated training aircraft similar to the Spitfire. He still was not allowed to fly with the squadron on operations and had to be content with training sorties, until early one morning an enemy attack required every available pilot to man an aircraft. Strickland was hauled from his bed by a maintenance crew with orders from the CO to get airborne at once and to join his wing. Together the squadron managed to beat off the attack although the airfield was badly damaged and several planes on the ground were destroyed. But that night as they sang songs around the piano in the bar, Strickland knew he was back on operations again.

The mountains slid away beneath the Spitfire as it flew out across the open sea, the pilot scanning the ocean

with his eyes as he looked for any signs of enemy shipping. He turned his aircraft due north and watched as the sun rose up into the morning sky, its light a hammer beating down on the flat anvil of the sea, the plane and its occupant a speck in the heavens. Alone at the controls the pilot gloried in his solitude. Instead of the muddy fields of Waterloo or Flanders, his battles were played out amid this empty plot of sky. Not for him the life of an infantryman fighting in the desert sands of North Africa, or slogging through the Burman jungle with rifle and pack. Instead, his arena was one of boundless blue. As a knight and his charger, so the pilot and his aircraft. Man and machine in harmony together.

The pilot continued flying north and headed towards the Carolines, a myriad of islands and coral atolls, which gave some protection to the enemy ships and submarines that plied the area. There were markedly fewer ships these days, but plenty of submarines which were always elusive. At night among the islands they would surface unseen and take on fresh water and supplies, before slipping out to sea again. The Carolines were at the limit of the Spitfires' range, but they were also the most fruitful hunting grounds for the squadron. And so each day the pilot from the dawn patrol would make a sortie, choosing his favourite haunts which he knew his quarry preferred, like a fisherman who knows where the best salmon pools lie. And just like a fisherman sometimes his patience and skill would be rewarded and equally sometimes it would not.

After two hours flying at ceiling altitude Strickland pushed the stick away from him and the Spitfire descended towards the ocean. At 2,000 feet the pilot levelled out and up ahead he could make out the ir-

regular contours of the Carolines along the horizon. In a few minutes he was flying over them, circling the islands that lay scattered across the sea below like a string of pearls on a dark cloth. Each island was a forest of palms and in the heart of some there rose an occasional mountain, usually an extinct volcano. The Carolines had been the enemy's Pacific base from the beginning of the war until 17th February 1943, the Japanese Year of The Sheep, when American carrier planes swooped down on Truk which was home to the Combined Fleet. In the attack they destroyed seventy planes on the ground and sank two auxiliary cruisers, an aircraft ferry, two submarine tenders and twenty-three merchant ships. It was the biggest Japanese loss since the battle of Midway the previous year.

Strickland began to search among the scattered islands and atolls, looking for the tell-tale wake of a ship or a submarine as it ploughed across the blue. He also kept an eye on his fuel gauge, making sure that he did not spend too long in his quest and not leave himself enough to get back to base. Checking his watch the pilot saw that he could spend a maximum of five minutes in the area before he would have to head for home. He searched both port and starboard, dipping the plane's wings from time to time to get a better view.

The waves crashed against the atolls in a ring of white surf, but the pilot could see no wake from any ship. Here and there he spotted the tiny sailing rigs of fishermen, their wooden vessels bobbing about in the ocean like corks. Flying low over one of the boats he saw the fishermen raise their straw hats and wave and the pilot waggled his wing tips in reply as he flew on. Strickland glanced at his watch again and then at his fuel gauge

which hovered at the halfway mark, a minute more and he would have to return to base. He put his foot down on the left rudder pedal and swung the plane to port, as he rounded one of the larger islands for a final sweep.

The pilot had almost given up his search and was thinking thoughts of home, when he noticed a thin white trail cutting through the waves on his starboard side. It was probably nothing more than an outlying reef breaking the surface, but he pushed the stick away from him and dived towards the sea to take a closer look. As Strickland neared the spot he could see the line was too straight to be a reef or a rocky outcrop and yet there was no sign of any ship. It was most strange. Then he saw why and his heart flipped inside his chest like an eel caught in a trap. Just beyond the whirring yellow rim of his propeller blades he could see the distinct outline of a Type C submarine, the letters I-47 stencilled on the conning tower. It must have been at the island he had just flown over and was making for the open sea again. Tensing with excitement Strickland knew he had his prey and shuffling his feet on the pedals, he wheeled his plane round to attack.

The aircraft swept across the sea towards its quarry, the pilot's thumb resting on the brass firing button. Pointing the nose of the Spitfire a little ahead of the submarine's bow so as to give it sufficient lead, Strickland peered through the reflector-sight and fired a burst, the four 20 mm cannons on the wings stuttering in a roar. Small white splashes flayed the water around the submarine as the plane screamed overhead and turned to make another pass. As the Spitfire banked sharply a group of sailors leapt out from a hatch and ran towards the gun on the bow. The pilot levelled his aircraft and

came in for another run, the cannon blasting away and tearing up the water in front of him. But this time the crew were ready and he noticed black puffs of smoke erupting around his canopy as the submarine's 50 calibre gun returned fire. Strickland kept his line and concentrated his aim at the base of the conning tower, the aircraft bucking slightly with each burst. Again he flew low over the enemy vessel, passing just a few feet above, before banking the Spitfire and turning in a wide circle as he lined up for the kill.

The pilot raced across the waves once more, the submarine a sharp silhouette in his gunsight. He pressed the firing button and saw the bullets streaking ahead, knifing the water and ripping mercilessly into the steel hull. The bow gun continued to fire, its muzzle flashing methodically with each round as the Spitfire approached. With a shriek the aircraft hurtled overhead, the gunners frantically wheeling as they blasted away, black puffballs of smoke dotting the sky around the plane as the flak exploded. Suddenly the aircraft lurched and veered sharply to one side and a cry went up from the crew. A trail of black smoke poured from beneath the plane and the gunners began to shout and leap about as they watched the Spitfire yaw from side to side before climbing away.

Inside the cockpit Strickland remained calm as he turned the plane around and headed for home. He knew he had been hit and although the controls were soggy, the aircraft was still manageable and he thought that he could make it back. But the pilot was being unduly optimistic. While the Spitfire still responded to his movements, a quick look at the fuel gauge showed him that it was on zero. The submarine's gun had rup-

tured the fuel tanks on the wings and in the nose and he was doing no more than flying on empty. Strickland searched in vain for an island where he could beach the plane, but none lay ahead. As he looked about for a suitable landing site the engine began to run roughly, the fuel mixture in the carburettor evaporating. With a final cough the engine died, the propeller spinning to a stop. Strickland was too low to bale out and drifting in a silent glide he levelled the plane, flying parallel to the crests of the waves as he prepared to ditch in the sea. As the Spitfire dived towards the ocean, the pilot undid his parachute and tightened his harness straps, bracing himself for the impact. A moment later he hit the surface, the sea erupting in a geyser around him. Water gushed into the open cockpit, his body jerking against the harness as the plane slewed to a halt. The Spitfire was still and the water subsided, the plane rocking gently in the waves.

Strickland quickly undid his straps and removing his sodden parachute, he climbed out onto the aircraft wing, taking the Very pistol and a box of shells with him. He loaded and cocked the pistol before pointing it at the sky and pulling the trigger. There was a sharp retort followed by a puff of smoke as the flare rose in an arc, the pilot watching as it dropped still flaming into the sea. He knew it was unlikely he would be rescued, but it was possible there were friendly vessels in the vicinity and the flare would at least alert them that someone was in trouble. Strickland put the pistol in his pocket and reaching down into the cockpit, he pulled out the liferaft and his heart sank. There was a long tear across the middle, presumably made by a piece of shrapnel. He threw it aside and opening a panel in the fuselage,

he took out the box containing the survival kit which was undamaged. He then inflated his Mae West and sat down on the wing with the box on his knees, his legs dangling in the tepid water.

The pilot undid the top pocket of his shirt and taking out his packet of cigarettes, he put one in his mouth and lit it. The cigarette was damp, but it smoked well enough and he sat there listening to the waves slapping against the aircraft's hull as he pondered what to do. It was doubtful anyone had seen the distress signal and without a liferaft he would be too small to spot from the air. Strickland could see the island was some distance away, probably three or four miles, but he was a good swimmer and thought he could reach it, so long as the current did not drag him in the opposite direction. There was not much of a choice. Either he sat there and went down with the plane, or else he tried to swim to the island. If he stayed where he was, his bones would soon join the pale mass of coral which lay just a few fathoms below.

With a final drag on his cigarette, the pilot tossed the stub away and removing his helmet and goggles and taking off his shoes, the now wingless Ariel slid off the Spitfire into the water. He began to paddle towards the island, one arm helping him swim, the other wrapped around the survival box. He turned around only once when he heard a gurgle and a rush of water and saw his aircraft tip slowly forward and sink beneath the waves. When it had disappeared Strickland turned back again and continued swimming. After a while he abandoned his grip on the box which was hampering him, before pulling out the bulky Very pistol from his pocket and disposing of that as well. With his arms now free the

pilot swam in a breaststroke, his limbs working away in unison, the island rising up tantalisingly from the surf ahead. Every now and then Strickland would rest and try and establish how far he had swum. But each time he did so the island appeared to be just as far away as before and the pilot began to wonder if he was making any headway. After an hour's hard swimming and with the island apparently no closer, Strickland stopped and began to tread water. He realised he was not going to make it, the current was too strong. With the sun burning in the heavens and the waves constantly splashing into his eyes and making them sting, the pilot knew he could not swim any further. Exhausted, he lay listlessly in the surf like a jellyfish at the mercy of the tides. He looked down at his Mae West which was the only thing keeping him afloat. He could stay like this for hours, or even days and then what? To go mad and die of thirst like some shipwrecked mariner or else be eaten by sharks. Surely drowning was preferable? Strickland reached into a pocket and pulling out a penknife he opened it and slashed his life jacket in half, the air escaping with a hiss.