

The magnificent moustache

Remembering the young pilots stationed at Biggin Hill

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Joe became our leader when his elder brother, Billy, shot down three Messerschmitts and crippled a Dornier during the Battle of Britain. Billy was 19 years old and possessed the finest moustache at the Biggin Hill air base. Joe could not wait to become a fighter pilot, too, but he was only 14 and had to make do with a spare set of pilot's insignia, given to him by Billy, which he stitched to his football shirt.

Seeing how envious were his brother's friends, Billy promised to get other sets, offering to exchange them for the best trophy found by one of us in our routine scavenging after bombing raids. As soon as the all clear sounded we escaped our parents, rummaging among the rubble for treasures amid the acrid smell of cordite.

Spent bullets, cartridge cases, and ugly chunks of shrapnel were commonplace. Most prized but seldom found was a piece of bomb casing bearing Gothic script. That would surely win the prize. So much did we crave the pilot's insignia that, careless of the risks, we searched in shattered buildings and entered bomb craters in search of the holy grail.

In the spring of 1942 the minor bombing around the suburbs of Lon-

don by a handful of German planes, which provided the material for our quest, dwindled and Hitler resorted, when the visibility was good, to mass daylight raids on the metropolis. On especially clear and sunny days we took picnics to Walton Heath, from which heights the capital could be seen—a violet-gray haze 30 miles to the north, merging with the Thames, a sinuous ribbon of silver running like a serpent eastward from the city to the sea.

There, amid the scent of honeysuckle and the humming of bees, we watched the thousand-bomber battalion come in over the channel like a cloud of insects. We knew all the air bases, and when Biggin Hill went up we cheered, "There goes Billy. Give 'em the works Billy!"

The fighters rose like gnats, almost vertically, and within seconds were weaving in and out of the mass of bombers as they moved slowly up the estuary to the city. Sitting in the bracken we shouted with glee as mighty planes burst into flames and tumbled smoking from the sky, the crews parachuting into captivity. Each one of us was up there in spirit carrying out great deeds while munching on our sandwiches in the magic of an English spring.

When Billy got leave, and after downing the statutory pints with his comrades in the Fox and Hounds, he brought them home to supper, beer bubbles clinging to his magnificent moustache. His eyes, blue as forget-me-nots, twinkled with humor as he examined our trophies and debated with his friends who was the lucky winner, encouraging the others with promises of more to come.

And then they were gone, laughing and joking, silk scarves flying, back by way of the Fox and Hounds, back to Biggin Hill, young warriors to war.

The woods around Walton Heath are thick with oak and beech and sweet fragrant thorn. Swathes of bluebells fill the air with scent, and birdsong fills the space between the trees. These woods were our territory and we knew them well; we knew the tracks of deer that took us swiftly from one part to another. We could never be lost there.

One heavenly day of blue and gold we were perched among the harebells and the thyme listening for the distant rumble of the planes and straining our eyes to see them among the fleecy clouds high above the shimmer of the sea. But this time they came from a

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more southerly direction, and when we saw them we knew they would fly above our heads. There were more of them too, perhaps a couple thousand. Up went the fighters one by one and the routine clash of gladiators ensued. A crippled Junkers, engine ablaze, turned and limped crabwise over us, German markings clearly seen, escaping the fray, making for Normandy. Flack popped around her but despite our wild exhortations to blow her out of the sky, she disappeared into the haze over the English Channel. We turned our attention to the approaching battle, becoming excited and not a little scared. The markings of the planes and the yellow flicker of the guns could be seen clearly now. Out of nowhere a plane belching thick smoke roared just above our heads. The smoke hid its identity but it was close enough to smell the burning metal and see the pilot tugging desperately at the buckled canopy.

Deafened by its roar we ducked as it disappeared into the woods behind us. There was the crash of timber not half a mile away, and then silence.

We had one thought and that was to reach the plane before the police did. Here surely were prizes for us all, perhaps a German flight map or even an Iron Cross. Nimble as stags we danced through fresh green shoots to where we saw a trickle of smoke weaving its way into the still and silent air.

The plane was lodged between three trees, black and ominous among the soft green leaves. The cockpit hung down like the battered thorax of a dragonfly, its wings buckled and broken in the branches.

Swift as a troupe of monkeys we swarmed up the tree. Joe was first and pulling on a spar to dislodge the cockpit canopy, which clattered to the ground. From within, first the head, then the torso, and finally the arms of the pilot swung out and hung like

a waxen doll, the twisted flight mask still covering his face. His leather jacket was ripped to display not an Iron Cross but the coveted insignia, complete with medal ribbons, of an English pilot. Frozen with horror we stood at different levels, staring at the apparition, like silent mourners at a grave. There was no sound; even the birds were mute.

A breeze then hurried through the wood, jostling the leaves, which chimed like muffled bells. The shattered plane settled in the branches, jerking the hanging pilot and freeing his mask, which swung aside. His blond hair was matted with blood and sweat, and his eyes, open, reflected the deep blue sky into which, unseeing, they stared. Badly bruised and upside down he was unrecognizable, but there was no mistaking the magnificent moustache which, flecked with foam, was not unlike the froth that once adorned it at the Fox and Hounds. **BCMJ**

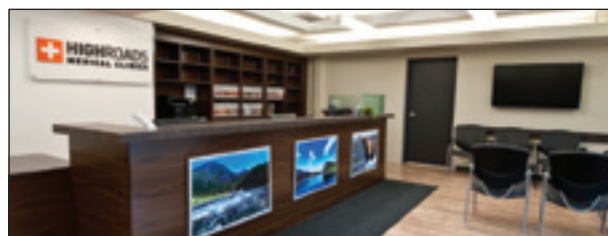
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