

Without Benefit of Bullets

By Major George Fielding Eliot

Out there in the sodden soil of that Allied tarmac a German two-seater had landed, and its engine was still ticking over. Yet Pat Magee, first to reach the enemy plane, found both cockpits empty—and in the soft mud there was no mark of footprints leading away from the deserted ship

“CURIOSITY,” muttered Pat Magee in the homely idiom of his Western birthplace, “is supposed to have killed the cat. Still an’ all, I’d like to know what those two Germans are doing over there.”

Magee was flying early patrol, ten thousand feet above the silvery loops and turnings of the River Theure, whose winding course was about the only landmark he could see on the dark earth beneath him. He had to be careful about his navigation, for the graceful curves of that French river were so much alike, so symmetrical, that they were very deceiving to an unwary pilot, especially as the sun had scarcely begun to lighten the eastern sky, and patches of thick mist still shrouded a goodly portion of France.

But just at the moment Magee was not worrying about landmarks. He was watching two German ships over to the eastward, deep in German territory. They were certainly Germans; their outlines against the graying sky were enough to tell Magee’s trained eyes that much. One of them was flying much higher than the other, almost directly above its consort, in fact. The high-flying plane was circling slowly, while the lower one was flitting about in a queer, jerky sort of way—now flying in circles, now climbing in a wide spiral, now banking to right or left, now doing a leisurely “fishtail” flight.

Magee’s patrol was almost over, his gas almost out. He ought to be on his way home. But the curiosity which was his outstanding characteristic held him in its grip.

“I’ve gotta have one close look at those guys,” he told himself. “Can’t make out what they’re up to.”

He swung his Nieuport toward them and increased speed a little. Apparently they did not see him coming; the queer maneuvers continued. As he approached, he studied them through his glasses.

“Well, I’ll be damned!” he said suddenly, to the unhearing sky.

The lower plane had banked a little, giving him as clear a view of its upper side as the light permitted. And it certainly looked to Magee as though both its cockpits were empty.

“Can’t be. I’m seeing things,” he told himself.

Before he could verify his astonishing observation, both planes turned sharply away and dived off to the east. They had either seen him coming, or had suddenly decided to land.

Magee, looking down, saw that fog was blowing in on the wings of the morning breeze. He would have to go home, and go quickly. It went to his heart to leave a mystery unsolved, but there was no help for it.

“I’ll see those Germans again,” he assured himself.

He worried about those empty cockpits all the way home. He was still worrying when he came down through the fog to a very nice landing on his own tarmac. He worried all through breakfast, answering with grouchy monosyllables any remarks which were addressed to him. Damn fog, anyhow! Couldn’t see a thing, not even if he went up again right away.

The sound of a motor came from outside. Funny. Nobody up. Maybe it was some Frog pilot who’d lost his way.

The door burst suddenly open, and an excited mechanic yelled into the messroom, “Sir, there’s a German plane sittin’ out on the tarmac!”

Magee was nearest the door and was first out in the rush that followed. He could see the dim outlines of a plane; they grew clearer as he dashed across the sodden field.

A German plane—a two-seater, with white wings, big black crosses, and a fat, clumsy-looking rounded fuselage. The engine was running very slowly—just ticking over.

Where was the pilot? The observer? Nobody was in sight.

Magee never stopped to remember he was unarmed. He put a foot on the step and swung himself up to look into the forward cockpit. It was empty. So was the rear cockpit.

That was damned funny. Maybe the Germans had discovered they’d landed in the wrong place and had taken leg-bail. He looked again at the soft earth. The wheel and skid tracks of the ship were plain enough; so were his own footprints.

But—there were no other footprints near the plane. And the ground was muddy.

Magee felt the hair rising on the back of his neck. What sort of black magic was this?

He dropped to the ground and looked the plane over. There came to him suddenly the conviction that this ship was the very one which he had seen an hour before, flying with empty cockpits. It was exactly similar in type and appearance. It must be the same one.

Behind him, other pilots and a mechanic or two had gathered, staring and muttering. They couldn't understand—nor could Magee. There must be a man hidden in that ship somewhere. Magee was determined to find out.

IN the grip of a curiosity that would not be denied, he swung himself up again and into that forward cockpit.

There were certainly a lot of gadgets in these German planes—all sorts of brightly polished gimmicks of bewildering variety. There were also the usual stick, throttle, instrument dials, rudder pedals, but there seemed to be a lot of wires connected to the stick itself, and brass rods attached to the rudder pedals.

“Get out of that, Magee,” came the voice of a flight leader. “Leave things alone till the Intelligence people get here.”

“But I've gotta see—” began Magee.

Then he heard the increasing hum of a low-flying motor. He looked up.

Directly overhead, the mist was thinning at the capricious touch of the morning breeze. Magee saw wings, dark against the gray sky. On those wings he could make out the faint trace of black crosses. Another German ship!

Without the least warning, the gentle idling tune of the motor of the mystery ship in whose cockpit Magee sat rose into a thunderous roar. The ship began to move under the drag of its prop. The pilots and mechanics yelled in astonishment, the flight leader loudest of all.

“Cut that out, Magee!” he called out. “Shut down that engine!”

Magee lifted both hands above his head. “I haven't touched a thing!” he howled back.

The ship was moving faster, right down the field into the wind. Then through all the clamor of the accelerated motor, Magee heard—right in the cockpit—an eerie sound, like the high whirring of a vampire's wings. The stick moved slightly, and the ship's tail came up,

just as though a pilot sat at its controls. Magee gaped in horrified astonishment.

He could have jumped out, of course. But, being Pat Magee, and curious, he stayed where he was, conquering the cold fear that gripped his heart. He'd see this through.

The plane was certainly gaining flying speed. He could feel it lift beneath him. Again came that weird sound—almost a whine, as of some ghostly phantom eager for his blood—and the stick moved toward him. The rumble of the undercarriage ceased. He was flying—or rather, this terrible, pilotless ship was flying with him.

“Kidnapped, by God!” muttered the awed Magee.

The plane climbed steadily up through the mist. Peering anxiously upward as the mist thinned, Magee could make out the slowly circling, all but hovering wings of the other German ship. He wondered if it, too, was pilotless. It seemed to be waiting for the ship he was in. Magee looked again at the wonderfully complex fittings of that eerie cockpit, then felt the ship change course slightly as the rudder bar was moved by some unseen force.

Who—or what—was flying this ship?

Into Magee's mind flashed scraps of all the wild tales he had ever heard about ships flown by the ghosts of their dead pilots, of spectral ships upon which it was death for any airman to look, as the Flying Dutchman of ancient legend had been death to mariners.

But he fought down the panic that surged up madly on the heels of these ghastly thoughts, and forced himself to calmer consideration.

This was a German ship. That much was certain. Then why had it landed on an American field?

Magee looked down, and his imagination immediately supplied the answer. The only landmark clearly visible through the drifting vapor was the meandering River Theure, faintly gleaming in the growing light, like a silver ribbon tossed carelessly aside by some maid of France. Misled by the tricky curves of the river, the devils or ghost-pilots or whatever they were, directing the flight, must have mistaken the American field for some German field located similarly with reference to some other curve of the Theure, and landed their ship thereon. Then, discovering their error, they had taken off again.

Magee felt a little better. If the ghosts—or devils—could make one mistake, they might make others. Their supernatural powers were not infallible. He might beat them yet.

He fell to examining the controls. They were all secured by wires and rods; yet everything was there—stick, rudder-pedals, throttle.

He wondered if he could fly the ship by hand, if he pulled those wires and things away. Or would some clammy, phantom arm reach down for him out of the mist and fling him overside? Grimly he told himself that the only thing to do was to try.

Setting his teeth, he laid hands on the wires attached to the stick. Nothing happened. Emboldened, he yanked them free with a couple of vigorous jerks. The stick now worked freely; the plane answered his movement of it.

With a few kicks he broke the connections of the rods holding the rudder-bar; he pulled free the wires from the throttle. Everything worked. Magee was flying the ship.

His spine still crawling with imminent apprehension of some spectral vengeance, he looked upward for the other ship. There it was, some distance above him, not yet clearly visible through the mist.

Magee resolved to climb closer for a better look at it. He wanted to find out whether it, too, was piloted by ghosts. And scared as he was, he made himself do it.

He eased back the stick and started climbing at a steeper angle. As he did so, he glanced at the machine gun and swore softly. No loaded belt depended from the breech. He was without means of defense if the other ship attacked him. But perhaps a machine gun would be little use against Things which could fly planes without pilots, anyway.

There came a sudden buzz and crackle, and a wicked flash of bluish flame succeeded by a shower of sparks. Magee jumped, instinctively raising his hand to cover his eyes. Then he realized that the sparks were leaping from the ends of two broken, outflung wires as they swayed together in the slipstream.

What fiendish business was this? Why, this plane might explode beneath him at any instant!

Another whirr, and a hellish blaze of fiery particles sputtered out from those broken wires. The mist was getting much thinner. Magee could see the other ship very plainly, silhouetted against the sky as it was. It was perhaps three hundred feet above him. Snarling, he opened the throttle wide and zoomed straight at it, his engine roaring.

The big ship sideslipped suddenly, recovered, then slithered away to the left in an awkward move that was neither dive nor slip.

Whatever Thing was at its stick, Magee's sudden onset had at least frightened the pilot.

He hurled his ship in pursuit, discovering at once that it was faster and easier to maneuver than the other ship.

The snaps and crackles became insistent, incessant, frantic. The loose wires fluttered in the wind, shooting sparks madly as their ends touched. Foot by foot, flying directly behind the other, Magee overhauled it. And suddenly he became aware of the pale oval of a human face, looking back from the pilot's cockpit in terror as the ghost-ship came astern.

MAGEE'S heart gave a great thump. Here, at least, he was pitted against a human enemy—and one who was obviously scared to death. There came to him the swift realization that against this man he needed no guns, no ammunition. He had at his command a more terrible weapon than any tracers—fear.

Magee laughed wickedly. It was good to frighten this enemy pilot as he himself had been frightened.

Like an aerial Nemesis he closed on the larger ship, still uneasy, but with that malicious glee growing in his heart. The sparks crackled and snapped in the misty dawnlight. Suddenly the tail of the pursued plane flew up. It was diving—diving away, down into the mist, diving madly as though a legion of winged demons flew upon her track, diving in panicky flight.

Magee followed, first in a swift dive, then in a tight spiral as the hand of the altimeter began to go back. A thousand feet—getting pretty low. Eight hundred—five hundred—he shut off his engine, let his ship glide, peering earthward for some chance glimpse of a landmark through the mist.

Crash! He heard the other ship hit with a sound as of a collapsing building. There appeared no red glow of flame through the murk, however. He glided a little lower. What was that straight band across the dark blur that was the earth? A road? Another band crossed the first; a broken church tower loomed, dangerously close.

Magee, recognizing this last, knew where he was; the tower was the shell-shattered remnant of the church of La Cloche, still some two kilometers inside the lines. The road was the highway from La Cloche to Gervisy; it was a wide one, without the usual roadside poplars.

There might be traffic, of course, but Magee had to find out what had happened to the other ship.

Down he went through the damp and clinging fog, down toward the road—a cross-wind landing, a reckless, foolhardy thing to do. His wheels hit the pavement with a nasty bump; the ship bounced, slewed round as the wind got under a wing, partially straightened under Magee’s skilful handling and skidded to a stop with a series of bouncing jolts, the last of which was provided by one wing tip smashing into a big four-wheel-drive truck which loomed suddenly in the fog.

Amid the profanity of the driver, Magee hopped hastily out of the half-wrecked ship and ran toward the truck.

“Did you hear another ship crash?” he demanded.

“Over there,” the driver pointed to his left. “Along that side road somewhere. Say, mister, you got this road blocked. The M.P.’s will—”

The rest became indistinguishable mumbling and was lost as Magee sped for the crossroads

He could see better every minute; the sun was gleaming wanly through the fog, the mist was rising from the fields. Here was the crossroads. He swung left. Ahead he heard shouting, the wail of a siren, the clatter of a motorcycle. He saw something dark in a plowed field. There were soldiers around it, and they were lifting out a limp figure from a mass of wreckage. He caught snatches of words.

“Easy there—easy. Here’s a surgeon. Here, Doc, this way. He’s still alive, poor devil—”

SOME two hours later, Pat Magee was ushered into a large office, many miles from the scene of the crash. Behind a desk, looking very grim and forbidding, sat a most august personage indeed. Flanking him, a spectacled Intelligence officer had just finished talking. At a little distance, his bandaged head resting in his hands, a thin, grizzled man, wearing German field-gray, sat in an armchair, staring moodily at the floor in the silence of despair.

The august personage cleared his important throat. Then he spoke, in the heavy accents of those who need not speak twice to lesser beings.

“Hm! It is clear, Lieutenant—ah—Magee, that you have rendered a very great service indeed to your country. The experiments which you brought to an end might, if perfected, have placed a most dangerous

weapon in the hands of the enemy. *Hrrmmph!* If I understand you correctly, Colonel Jarvis, this plane was entirely the invention of this German officer here? His own creation?"

Before the Intelligence officer could answer, the German lifted a haggard face and stared out of eyes from which the light of hope had utterly departed.

"It was—my own," he said in a hoarse croak.

"Then," suggested the august personage with a smile of satisfaction, "no one else is likely to be able to take up the work of developing it where you were—ah—interrupted?"

Slowly the other shook his head. "It was my own," he repeated. "No one else understands—nobody. Now it never perfected will be—but it is as well!" His voice rose sharply. "It is accursed, I tell you! A damned thing! It turned on me—its maker—"

It was plain that the German understood nothing of Magee's part in the affair. He had seen no human presence in that cockpit, high up in the misty morning. He only knew that his own creation had turned upon him. His mind had no room for anything else.

Magee glanced at the staff colonel. "What was the thing, anyway, sir?" he asked in a low voice.

"Radio control," the colonel answered. "We've known for some time that the Germans were working on something of the sort. He controlled the plane you got into from his own plane, flying above it. All those wires and rods attached to the stick were worked by little motors in the back of the fuselage, which were in turn operated from the control-plane entirely by radio impulses."

"Well, I'll be damned!" muttered Magee. "I thought it was ghosts—or something."

The German officer shuddered as he sat there staring at his captors.

"It fired at me with machine guns when it no ammunition had!" he wailed, his face still drawn with the horror of it. "It is my curse—"

Magee remembered the sparks from the broken radio-wires and almost laughed outright. This frightened Boche had mistaken them for tracers! The august personage was murmuring something about promotion and the D.S.C. Magee was suddenly very happy. Curiosity was some use, after all. But he was also conscious of a wave of heartfelt pity for the poor German inventor.

“It is my curse!” the German repeated. “The curse of my name! I might have known—” He buried his face in his hands again and was silent, his shoulders shaking convulsively.

Magee glanced again at the staff officer; his face mirrored an unspoken question.

The colonel’s spectacled eyes flickered from Magee to the broken German and back again. He gave a slight shrug.

“His name,” he said softly, “is—Major Frankenstein.”