



WINGS OF THE LANCER

by ARCH WHITEHOUSE

*Through Flaming Skies, Bob Shawn and
Butts Brian Trail a Boche Butcher!*

THE PILOTS of No. 17 Squadron, A.E.F., were doing swell until "The Lancer" appeared on the scene. They were flying Spads, which were fair and reasonably effective against anything Jerry had—until the Lancer turned up flying that damned black triplane.

There is a law of compensation somewhere in the book, and eventually it worked; for after six Yanks of No. 17 went west, Bob Shawn came up from the Pilot's Pool. After that, while he never knew it, the Lancer was a marked man.

Had you told Bob Shawn that, he would have laughed at you. He had seen too much war to have any theories. He probably had had his share of religion in his early days, but it's dollars to doughnuts that he was

now a disciple of Fate. You know if there's one with your number on it, you'll stop it. Otherwise you might just as well sit on the end of a pier at Atlantic City and hope to be torpedoed. About as much chance.

THEY wanted Bob to take "A" Flight's streamers the day he got there, but Bob only sniffed and said something about wanting to look the front over for a week or so. They liked him for that, because he had been flying for several months with a British R.N.A.S. outfit up behind Dunkirk.

He didn't like it when they poured the R.N.A.S. into the R.F.C., and formed the individual service of the Royal Air Force. Neither did anyone else for that matter, but Bob took the opportunity of transferring over to the Americans. At least that was the excuse he gave, even though it seemed pretty thin at the time.

The tip-off might have been found in a remark he made one night to one of the new kids who was pulling the hero-worshiping gag on him. It was young Butts Brian, a new England lad who had been dragged up on tradition and glorious history. Bob saw it coming and stopped him hard in his tracks.

"Listen to me, you young devil!" he snapped suddenly out of nowhere. "There's only one guy in this whole war who means a tinker's damn to you. That's yourself. If you must go mooning about, making pals of people, go take a squint in a mirror, and you'll find out who counts in this racket."

"But you can't ignore teamwork in formation," young Brian argued.

"That's a different thing. You'll stick in a formation, even if the guy you are backing up is the worst rat in the outfit. That's patriotism, and there's a devil of a lot of difference between patriotism and friendship."

"I don't get you," the youngster persisted, obstinately.

"No? Well, let me tell you one thing. Be as patriotic as you like, but don't go nuts about any one guy in the outfit. You can live with him, sleep with him, fight with him and go over the line with him—but you can't die with him; and when he dies—goes West—you can never make it up. Something inside you goes, and you can't replace it. You can get a new leg or a new arm that will work, somehow. You can get someone to pick slugs out of you and patch you up again, but they can't bring that guy back to plug up the hole he leaves if he goes West!" Shawn stopped, abashed at his own intensity.

"So what are you trying to get at?" young Brian asked.

"That's all, kid. Just take care of yourself."

"What about the Lancer? Don't you think you could get him—if you had someone you could rely on? Someone you could be sure was behind you when things got hot, and you saw a chance to get him?" young Brian asked, hopefully.

"The Lancer, eh? So that's it! You're going grandstand now, and get the great Lancer, eh? You young fool!" Shawn raged. "That's just what they want you to do. They're waving a red flag at you and you'll bite; and while you're biting, someone slips in from behind and cuts your elevator cables away. That's *Herr* Lancer, himself!"

"Then you won't go after him?" Brian persisted.

"I won't go ramming my snoot into trouble, trying to! He won't come over our side and he never attacks unless he has a big bulge. He's got the cards stacked before we climb into our pits."

Young Brian felt that the world had toppled all about him. His hero had feet of clay. He would not go after the Lancer. This was a hell of a war!

It was fully a week before Bob Shawn actually saw the Lancer. He did several mid-day patrols behind Len Osgood and assisted materially in bringing them all back. There were two quirks in the flight: young Butts Brian and Waldo Spines, a tall, gangling lad who was far more interested in crap games than he was in formation flying. Shawn knew he would make a great pilot if he got by the first three weeks.

Butts avoided Shawn after that dose of cockeyed advice and mooned off on his own, but if the truth be known, Shawn kept more than an ordinary weather eye open for young Brian when they were churning back and forth beyond Conflans.

He knew that his law about making a friend was not holding, somehow. And yet, there was that business up at Dunkirk that continued to hound him.

THEY ran into the Lancer and his mob one late afternoon. Nothing much to it at first, except that Osgood made the mistake that Shawn knew he would.

They were about seven miles over, waiting for a flock of DH.9s to return from the Jerry back areas. There should have been more than six Spads of course, but they were not overloaded with ability back at the Third Wing and they figured six would be plenty. They would have been, except that out of seven D.H.s that were returning, only three had gunners left alive in the back pits.

Shawn spotted the Jerry triplanes first and flipped a Very signal to Osgood. He caught young Brian's eye and held his fist up and Brian edged in closer, in spite of the snarl he gave Shawn in return.

Osgood had a one-track mind. He was up there to get the bombers through and any Jerry in the air promised opposition, so he planned to wipe out the opposition before it went into effect. This theory is sound under all circumstances—except the one you are facing at that time. Had Shawn been in the lead, he would have lain doggo and waited to see just what the Jerries were doing. After all, they might have been waiting for a returning mob, too, and in that case they would have avoided action until they saw that their own ships were in actual danger.

"Take it easy, Osgood," breathed Shawn. "They're too far over to play around yet. Think of the wind, man!"

But Osgood was out to show he was a leader. He wheeled over without signaling and almost wiped out his own wing-man. They cleared in time and tried to gather the scattered formation, but it was too late. The Lancer had seen the break—and took it.

In about three minutes there was no one left in the air but young Brian and Shawn. Spines rammed a Jerry triplane trying to get across to Osgood, who was already in flames. The Lancer slammed across from an acute angle and picked out Alf Norton and sent him down in a flat spin. Shawn stood his Spad on its tail and climbed like mad. Young Brian cursed and followed him up, one eye on the lone streamer that fluttered from Shawn's tail. He was trying to figure out whether he was protecting Shawn's tail, or huddling to him for safety. At any rate it worked out okay, for Shawn came down on three tripe and split them wide. Brian poured a wild burst into the triangular pack and managed to nail one black helmet cold. He should have watched that, but he was air-blind by now, and to this day Butts Brian does not know that he scored.

Shawn screeched around and tried to find another Spad that was still on even keel. Osgood was a black curling streak now, probably jumped. Spines was huddled under a cracked dash without any winds. Norton was still flat-spinning, wondering what the hell had happened to his joystick. Bartley Norwich was as dead as a doornail in a Spad that was doing the most perfect falling-leaf ever seen on the Western Front.

"Come on, Brian!" screamed Shawn. "Get the hell out of this!"

The DH.s were just below them now, heading for

the line opposite Nancy. Shawn swept past young Brian's nose and waved him along. The Jerries were reforming behind the Lancer, preparing to go down just once and get a last smash at the bombers.

He watched Brian pour a long wild burst across the sky at the Lancer, and laughed. At eighteen cents a cartridge Brian was running up the war budget plenty—and getting nothing for his dough.

Shawn blew a Very light and headed him off again, finally drew him out to get behind the bombers. He saw Brian start down for him and then gasped. The Lancer came across from nowhere and rocketed down for the youngster like mad.

"Look out, Brian!" Bob screamed, but the kid was riding his cockpit high and grinning, little realizing what was hurtling down from above.

Three things flashed through Shawn's mind as he nosed around and ripped the Spad up to get a bead on the diving tripe. One was: "How did that Fokker get up there so fast?" The second was: "Those queer center-section struts." And the third: "So this is the Lancer, eh?"

He managed to draw the Lancer out and took most of the burst intended for Brian. The Spad wavered under him and almost stalled, but he pinged a short burst at the German and made him twist. Then he saw the long gold lance design painted along the black body of the triplane. It had flame-tipped wings near the golden head.

And then Bob Shawn saw something else. Something that had escaped the eye of every other man in No. 17—

Bob Shawn went crazy!

THEY tell about that fight to this very day, whenever men of No. 17 get together with the old-timers of that DH. outfit. They tell how a man with a lone streamer on his tail cleaned up seven Fokker triplanes over Blenot in almost as many minutes. They recall his insane fury as he slammed burst after burst into the Hun, with another Spad hugging his tail as though it were tied there with steel wires. They recall his last frantic effort to get the eighth, but it seemed to go up the sky chute as though drawn on some invisible mechanism. They remember his trying time after time to get up there after that last triplane, only to fall back time and again into a stall like an exhausted eagle.

Bob Shawn and Butts Brian won the D.S.C. that day. Had they died, they probably would have received the Medal of Honor.

Young Brain knew he had been in a fight, but for the life of him, he could not repeat one word of it, or stick it down on a patrol report. For two days he went around in a daze, trying to find Bob Shawn. He had not seen him after they had landed. He recalled something about Bob racing for the Operations shed and leaving a few minutes later in a Staff car.

There were no patrols for "A" Flight until they could get more Spad fodder, and pilots were going West nearly as fast as DH. observers. Butts Brian mooned about like a lost sheep, watching "B" and "C" attempt to carry out the cockeyed orders from Wing. Sometimes they came back with as many as four machines, and once only two reported in.

Still no news of Shawn. Butts Brian wondered about him, but strange to relate, asked no questions. He watched the Ferry pilots bring up the new Spads and listened while the Armorers tested the guns and synchronization gears. Still no news of Shawn. Butts took it out on two Jerry balloons that afternoon and came back feeling better. Before it was dark he heard a new machine landing and went out to investigate. There was something queer about the motor—a raspy, sandpaper hiss to it.

Bob Shawn came out of the darkness and grabbed his shoulder, twisted him around and marched him back again.

"What's the idea?—Where you been?" demanded young Brian.

"Never mind. We're gonner get the Lancer—you're gonner get the Lancer tomorrow. Understand what I am saying?"

"I heard you, but it don't make sense, after what you said the other day," young Brian rapped back.

"Wash out all I said the other day. You're gonner get the Lancer tomorrow. D'yer understand?" Shawn insisted.

"Sure—but what's the game? What's the plan?" Brian wanted to know.

"I drive him down in front of you, see. You knock him off—because I can't. Get it?" Shawn asked him.

"But the swine goes upstairs like a kite. How the hell you gonner get him?"

"The same way he does! I'm wise to that bird, Brian. But you get him, understand?"

"We're pals?" husked Brian hopefully.

"Pals?—er—well, you did a neat job the other day, kid. But you don't get what I'm driving at. You'll see, tomorrow."

"Do you ever drink, Shawn?" asked young Brian.

"Why?"

"For the first time in my life, I feel like getting drunk."

"Let's go. The major's got some cognac in his desk. Office supplies, kid."

THEY poured Bob Shawn and Butts Brian into their cages at midnight—completely blotto, but strangely happy.

It was dark when the call guy roused them out and put petrol cans of icy water on their ammo-box tables. They both sloshed into it and combed their hair. They took long swigs of hot coffee and rammed great spoonfuls of sticky porridge in their mouths and then they bolted outdoors.

There were two planes on the cab-rank warming up. Shawn helped young Brian into his cockpit and repeated what he had said the night before: "I'll drive him down on you and you get him, understand? I can't! That's all."

"Switch off. Gas on," muttered young Brian, fumbling for things.

"You damn fool, your motor's running," hissed Shawn. "Pull out of it, kid!"

"Sure. It's running. Funny, I didn't realize it."

"Go ahead. I'll pick you up over the field. Wait for me," Shawn ordered.

Brian nodded and rumbled away into the darkness. He took off with a mad roar and disappeared. Shawn wandered along to his plane, climbed in, bawled at the mech to steady the wing tips and chased after him. The new machine climbed like mad and was soon behind young Brian as they raced for Conflans, and the Lancer's sector.

Young Brian turned and looked back for Shawn, eased back for his pal to take the lead position. Then for the first time he saw what Shawn was flying.

"What the?" he gasped shoving his goggles up and rubbing his eyes. "Where the hell did he get that?"

Bob Shawn was flying a Sopwith with British markings on it!

"Cripes! I thought they had washed them out! Landed too fast for average pilots to put down. Where the deuce did he get that boiler?"

Shawn waved at him and eased into position.

None of it made sense at first, but as the cool air bathed the cobwebs away, young Brian remembered something about Shawn having once been a pilot with a R.N.A.S. outfit up behind Dixmude. They flew triplanes.

They sat over Blangy le Sec for half an hour and finally saw the exhaust streaks of the Fokkers below crawling across the field. The Lancer and his gang were coming up after them. Brian did not get it.

He was trying to figure Shawn's sudden change of attitude about the Lancer. He was actually out after an individual. This was not patriotism.

It was madness!

He sensed that the Sop tripe was climbing beautifully. Fie tried to keep up with it, but Shawn signaled him to keep his level. The Sop shot up and they churned back and forth toward the line and drew the Lancer and his mob after them.

"So I'm bait, eh?" young Brian growled. "So that's your game, eh, Shawn? You use me to get that guy, eh? Well, I'll show you!"

The Fokkers came up, wheeled and turned away, but Shawn held his position. They came back, this time with about 500 feet to the good, and charged. Young Brian stuck it and waited until they were almost on top of him, and then yanked up and over and split them up. The Lancer came in from above, poured a burst at him and zoomed away like a fiend. Young Brian tried to get his nose on him and blast away but the angle was too sharp, and he slipped back on his tail.

Two Fokker tripes were down past him in flames! Shawn had scored already.

Brian eased around and skipped out of another burst from a yellow triplane and then raced to get under Shawn's British job. The Lancer pounced on him and let drive with a burst that battered into his wing tip. He looked up for Shawn, but Bob was climbing and getting set. Young Brian tried to flip through, but his ailerons were out and he wound up in a flat spin. The Lancer spat at him and zoomed up.

BRIAN saw Shawn start down, flip a burst at the Lancer. There was something strangely familiar about them now, but Brian couldn't figure it out then. He was fighting his rudder to get his Spad out of the spin.

The Lancer zoomed and tried to get away, but Shawn stayed with him and held his position. The Lancer, a tall, lean-cheeked devil went white. For the first time he realized what he was up against. The triplane was out-climbing him. He blew a signal cartridge and sent his men scattering.

But Shawn had him cold now. He climbed with him and pecked away, driving him to the left and to the right. The Lancer tried to turn and stand on his

tail again, but a burst from Shawn's guns splashed into his flippers and the stick went heavy. He nosed down gently to feel her out and Shawn charged. There was no hope now. The Lancer screamed, squirmed and tried to get away.

"Here he comes, Brian. Now it's your turn. You can outdive him!" Brian was circling gently looking for the others but they had scattered. He ducked as the Lancer flashed over him, and for the first time realized that the Lancer's ship had the same center-section struts as Shawn. It made no sense, but he lunged at him as he passed his nose. The Lancer continued to dive and young Brian nosed down after him with a chuckle.

HE LET the Spad have every nag in the Hisso, plunged headlong down at the frail tail of the black triplane, and poured the lead to her. The black tripe nosed over the vertical and the Lancer gave his rotary all she had.

Rat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat!

Young Brian finished his belts and continued on. There was a low crack below and a set of narrow wings slammed past him and almost knifed his outer struts away. There was another crack and he swerved to the right and just cleared again. A bullet-fuselage raced away into the morning mist and hit with a terrific thud smack in the brewery yard at Conflans.

The way of the Lancer!

They staggered back, wing tip to wing tip, and rumbled in.

They were welcomed by a Fourth of July celebration of Very lights. The Sixth Balloon section had seen the Lancer fall, and phoned through. Brian rattled down, rolled a few yards, ground-looped and ripped a wing tip off. He sat there and watched Shawn come in at eighty. "Get the wagon!" Brian breathed. The Sop hit, bounced, fluttered, dropped to her knees and bit in with the prop. There was a cloud of dust and tattered turf, and the tripe eased over on her back, slashed at the ground with her rudder.

Brian leaped out, ran over and released Shawn's belt and let him drop forward on his face.

"That's the only thing wrong with these Limey jobs," spluttered Shawn. "You can't land 'em."

"But they can climb, baby!"

"That's what I figured the other day when I tried to get that guy before," said Shawn. "Then I saw his center-section struts and I knew what he was flying."

"But you said you were never going after the Lancer until he came over our side," young Brian said.

“I know, but you see, I saw something else beside those Sop struts. That tripehound had a letter painted under her belly. The Lancer had forgotten to daub it out when he painted it black.”

“A letter?”

“Yeah—a letter ‘B’. It once stood for Barney. Barney Boyne, my pal in the R.N.A.S. We enlisted together and he went West—somehow. I recognized Barney’s Sop tripe that swine had taken over, to keep upstairs out of trouble.”

“Cripes! They are alike, except for the center-section struts, when you see them in a dog-fight,” young Brian husked. “So we’re through, eh, now that you have revenged Barney?”

“Not after the way you stuck, kid. You and me are partners, from now on, and if you go West—I’ll—I’ll punch you right in the nose!”

“Shake!” said young Brian. “My initial is ‘B’ too, remember.”

“I was thinking of that all the way back!” laughed Shawn.