BOMBING EAGLES

by ARCH WHITEHOUSE

Editor's Note: This gripping story of Handley Page Bombers is the first of its kind ever written. Arch Whitehouse, the author, is an ex-war Ace whom you all know. He holds an enviable fighting record as a flyer overseas from 1914-1920. At present he is our technical editor of SKY BIRDS and FLYING ACES, as well as the editor of Plane Dope and Happy Landings, our well known departments of last minute flying news. He has handled all types of fighting planes on hundreds of perilous flights. This is one of the finest stories we have ever published. We hope you will enjoy reading it as much as we have.

CHAPTER I

IT IS NIGHT. The inky blackness is strangely pierced by the flaming pennions that stream back the exhausts of two roaring engines out on the wide wings of the Handley Page bombing machines. This is the return trip of an egg-planting raid over Gontrode, the German Gotha base, from where two hours before, the Hun raiders had charged into the air on another of their nocturnal cruises of terror over London and the East Coast towns of England.

A dim figure in the forward cockpit sat huddled up within his Scaarf mounting making the most of what little protection he could get from his flying helmet and imitation fur collar. It was cold, bitter cold, and it required an effort to squirm around now and again in that stiff frigid flying suit to scan the starless sky. He was tired and sleepy, but the tenseness of the raid does not allow a man to relax, for any minute you are likely to whirl around and find a flaming pencil of death signing your ticket.

It comes quickly at night.

The pilot gripped the wheel control with stiff-gloved hands that twitched and jerked. Backward and forward went the wheel. First a little and then back again with a sudden jerk. Over again she came slowly with the monotonous muscle-gnawing grind of guiding the bomber. The bombardment officer at his side edged around to ease his spine and through the grotesque goggles of his tribe, stared ahead to the guiding fringe of flickering flame that lay across Wytschaete Ridge twenty miles ahead. Thirty miles to the rear lay the stinking remains of the blasted hangars of Gontrode, which forty minutes before had been showered with whining sand-colored eggs that had burst with ear-splitting snarls and streams of flame, leaving oddly shaped structures teetering on the edges of gaping holes from which billowed the stench of burnt explosives and rotting canvas.

Now ten miles ahead lay safety and what flying men called home. Ten miles—twelve minutes. But a lot can happen in twelve minutes.

Lieut. Johnny Dobbs stared ahead over his control wheel to the hunched figure in the forward cockpit and treadled his rudder bar to make sure the gunner, 1st. Class Air Mechanic Wilfred Lewes, was not asleep. The aerial gunner shufflled in his turret, glanced around, peered over the top plane and signalled with two fingers, hardly visible in the dim light, that the other two machines were still in the formation.

Lieut. Alfred Condon, dubbed Alf by his mates, turned in his seat and peered down the long fabric-sided chasm of the fuselage. Down on the catwalk between the skeleton bomb racks squatted Sergeant Herbert Mole and Air Mechanic Robert Townley. The Sergeant gripped a short grubby clay pipe between

his half-frozen lips. There was no tobacco in the bowl, of course, but the Sergeant felt a satisfying sense of security with the saliva gummed stem of comfort between his teeth.

The bombing officer flashed his pocket light down the dark runwray in inquiry to which the Sergeant responded with a cheery wave of his short-stemmed pipe. Ordinarily conversation was impossible and Sergeant Mole was too comfortable to scramble to his feet, stagger along the catwalk and make any formal report. He wished Lieut. Condon would move over and keep some of the draft out.

Turning stiffly in his board-like Sidcot flying suit he bellowed into Townley's ear.

"You were better on the toggles tonight, Tarnley. Your'e cotchin' on foine, yer are. I think we 'ad a few 'its and Mr. Condon acted as though W'e gave em a little bit of what 'o. I 'opes w'e blew the blinkin' aerodrome to smithereens, I do. You were good on the toggles to-night."

All this with benevolent nods of his helmeted head which the mechanic-bomber could just distinguish.

"Yus, it's somethink yew 'ave to get used to, Sergeant. Keeping yer feet after they go out is a bit of a trick 'til yer gets used to it. But I'm cotchin' on," agreed Townley, after a reasonable amount of reflection.

YELLLNG AT ONE another in this manner interfered with their comfortable positions and they mutually agreed to brace themselves again and rest against the bomb racks. They were utterly bored with war and everything. Probably they could snatch a few winks before the big bomber rumbled down the aerodrome to the tarmac.

Townley fell into a reverie: He thought of his present war days and contrasted them with the happier days that had gone before. His little family on the outskirts of London, living through the hectic months of the mad convulsion. Their wild days spent feverishly carrying on, and their nights a continual nightmare of terror.

Sudden wild newspaper reports that sprang up from nowhere. Fitful nights of tossing only broken, by the screech of sirens, announcing the coming of the enemy raiders again—the stabs of light searching through fleecy clouds looking, ever looking for the winged talons of the Hun that had released death and destruction. The whine of motor horns, the wail of hastily applied brakes, and the snarl and bark of rapid fire guns on high speed trucks. Then that agonizing silence where the ears are strained for the first hum of the Gotha engines; a silence that throbs with hopes that they never would be heard.

More crashing of anti-aircraft shells and the clanging of automatic jacks as the motor guns are headed off for a more advantageous position. Noise, ear-splitting reports crashes, snarls, dull booms, forever and ever it went on this mad life of terror, at home.

He thought of them husbanding their stores and drawing government coupons for meat and milk. His little son deprived of the food and nutritious diet that was his right. His wife ekeing out the scant income from the Army pay. His sixpence a day which was converted into just a little more by a burdened government that was doing its best to finance most of the Allies in this fight for what the billboards called "freedom."

Still Townley did not grumble. He was satisfied. It was better here in the black belly of a bomber than down there in the mud where men were being blown to atoms by screeching high explosives that buried great chunks of steel in the quivering vitals of humans and battered them into unrecognizable heaps of khaki, leather and flesh. At least he had a fairly warm bed to go back to.

Yes, he was not so bad off—except that it was cold, and he wanted a smoke. He wondered whether he could sneak one in while the Sergeant was dozing.

He rubbed his legs. They were getting colder and he wondered whether taking off his spiral puttees before starting really did help the circulation as the Sergeant had explained. He was not so sure whether it was a wise thing, leaving the puttees back there. Suppose they were brought down and taken prisoners. Wouldn't he look tricky walking about a Hun prison camp with no puttees on?

This business of being taken prisoners had often been an important subject in our Robert's thoughts since he had joined the Flying Corps. He had heard many strange and sickening stories of what the Germans did with prisoners of war. He sometimes wondered how much of it was true. He often wished he had sewn a map inside his tunic in case they were ever brought down. He was never quite sure what he would have done with it if ever he had been offered the chance to make an escape, but he had read such stories in the weekly papers his missus had sent out every so often.

Townley was beginning to hate this night flying.

There was a time when his duties consisted of carrying pails of warm water from the cook-house to the hangars for the radiators. He remembered how the narrow wire handles of the pails had cut into his hands on cold mornings. Then there were the cans of petrol to be yanked from half-opened crates and carried around to the machines. These too were blister-providing instruments of torture, so that when an opening came for a flying job, he jumped at it, leaving two jangling pails in his wake as he trotted off to the Stores to draw his flying kit.

It was O.K. at first, but now it was becoming stupid. He wished he could see something. Sometimes he felt tempted to jab his jacknife through the fabric just to get a look outside. He felt like a rat in a trap—he wished he could go up front and squeeze between the pilot and bombing officer in the control cockpit.

Down the long black tunnel he could see the after cockpit gunner—just his feet. He wished he was there. Anything was better than this. It was all wrong somehow. Here they were over enemy territory with nothing much to show for it except a tiny gash in the floorboards where a splinter of shrapnel had found it's way. The empty bomb racks seemed desolate.

The Sergeant was nodding now. Taking his forty winks before they rumbled down the aerodrome.

A lovely war.

CHAPTER II

SUDDENLY THE RUNWAY LURCHED and a wailing chorus of shrapnel opened on all sides like the sudden booming of a church organ at midnight. The Sergeant scrambled to his feet, grabbing at the rack struts. A lancing shaft of light reached up from somewhere below and blazed its way through the white fabric of the Handley Page's belly, leaving grotesque shadows on the walls.

The infernal *Plomp! Plomp! Plomp!* went on outside. The forward gunner's weapon vibrated and trilled it's staccato snarl down the longerons of the bus and spanked off the racks with a crazy chatter. The rear gun started to bark and then stopped suddenly. A scream echoed down the long alley.

Townley was jerked to his knees and he just managed to grab a strut and save himself from being tossed into the bomb rigging.

"Hey, Sergeant!" he screamed. "They got the Corp, Hey, Sergeant! What the—"

The big ship shivered and jerked in a lumbering swerve. Something screeched its way through the fabric leaving a gash a foot long, and Sergeant Mole toppled down the runway, grabbing at the rack struts and finishing up with a bloody gurgle across the air mechanic. His body quivered twice, but it might have been the lurching of the machine, and then relaxed lifeless.

Townley screamed again and then, with pop-eyes that tried to pierce the black pall of horror which filled the long fabric-lined fuselage, he scrambled from under the prostrate Sergeant Mole and crawled up the cat-walk to the pilot's cockpit, only to be greeted by a drenching of gore from the shattered jaws of Lieut. Condon who was trying to wriggle out of the pilot's cockpit.

The big bomber reeled and careened under the barrage of gunfire that seemed to come from nowhere. Only the streaming blaze of exhausts trailing from the motors of enemy ships indicated the nearness of the vultures that were spitting twin tongues of leaden hatred from the *br-r-r-ripping* Spandaus above.

"Come on Sor. Let me get you in 'ere. 'Ow's Mr. Dobbs. Is 'e 'it?" half-bawled the frantic Townley, yanking hysterically at the gasping bombing officer. He might just as well tried to talk to some one in another machine two hundred yards away.

The catwalk climbed into another crazy zoom and the air mechanic and the officer rolled in a pathetic ball of arms and legs down the runway until they were brought to a halt by the inert body of the sergeant. Again that piercing beam of light illuminated the long tomb-like cavern and Townley yanked his head up to gaze into the blood spurting death-mask of Lieut. Condon.

Boom! Ping! Bang! went the death chorus outside.

"Strike me pink, 'e's gorn!" whispered Townley to himself.

Moving the officer over into a comfortable position with his head cradled under the Sergeant's chin, Townley crawled up the runway again and stuck his head through the cockpit door just in time to see a garish mass of fabric, struts, engines and flame streak earthward just ahead of them.

"Lord luv a duck!" was all the astonished mechanic-bomber could breath over his chin strap.

In the forward cockpit, young Lewes was sprawled across his gun with one arm dangling over the side, like the pendulum of a clock.

Townley snatched his head around to Lieut. Dobbs and anxious eyes over which arched startled brows blazed out their terror. The pilot turned in his seat and gave a nervous twitch with his shoulders as if startled to find that there should be anyone else in the machine alive with him. He slapped the mechanic on the shoulder and pointed ahead to the forward gunner.

With a jerky start, Townley scrambled over the leather seat and dived between the dual controls and up the narrow passageway on his knees to the forward gun turret. Grabbing Lewes' ankles he jerked and pulled him into the short narrow lane of spruce and wire. Then removing his glove he felt through the breast flap of the gunner's Sidcot suit. Tremblings fingers slid through a sticky something pulpy mass where the gunners breast should have been.

That was enough.

"The dirty blighters!" he snarled as he put his knee on Lewes' face and forced his way into the cockpit. The Lewis gun pointed to the sky like a broken weather vane. He snatched at it and gave the black double drum a glancing blow with his palm and then yanked back on the cocking handle. He was ready for the ghostly fire-spitting vultures above.

Dual streams of light curled around the bomber's wing-tip like two fantastic shells racing around a lake of ink. Lieut. Dobbs kicked his rudder over hard and gave Townley a wider arc of fire as the outline of the banking Hun blazed around into full view. It seemed an hour before he could find the trigger guard.

"Yer hellion! . . . . yer dirty whelp! . . . . tyke that . . . . and that . . . . and that . . . . !"

The Lewis gun crackled out a spluttering burst of yellow flame and Townley snarled through clenched jaws that rested on the spade grip of the vibrating weapon.

THE LINE of leaden charged flame traced its way into the wings, cockpit and tail of the phantom ship until it had curled around and under the nose of the Handley Page. Then with his arc of fire cut off he leaned over and saw the glistening black outline burst into flame and slither off into one of the blinding white lanes of light that climbed up from somewhere below. A puff of white smoke plumed as a wing slithered off into the darkness and a tumbling bundle of blaze rocked out of the searchlight's gleam to light its own path down to a charred nothingness below.

Townley's eyes blazed again as he watched stupefied. Something twanged in the back of his head. Madness—terror—hatred—horror; all these emotions raced a crazy gamut from the pit of his stomach to his chin strap.

Rank madness seized him now. Cringing hands swung the gun around in all directions. His teeth chattered and queer growls came from his drooling lips. The muzzle of the Lewis belched fire and steel-jacketed hail in all directions. One wild burst chewed off his own wing-tip. Another bit out the base of a strut. The pilot stirred his controls and swung his ship about in an effort to keep his plane from being slashed off by this madman.

Townley held his fire for an instant and stared awe-stricken at the shattered strut that streamed back from the upper wing. He babbled again and snarled to the black sky above. His gun drew his attention again and he swung it around and blazed away at phantom Fokkers charging in and out of the blazing searchlights. Lieut. Dobbs was pounding on the shiny cowling in front of him in an effort to get the mad gunner's attention, but Townley saw nothing—nothing but fantastic craft charging all over the sky.

Then came that piercing shaft of light again, flooding everything with a drenching brilliancy that showed the ship up in it's stark nakedness. Engines roared, wires shrieked and the madman raged on. The insanity was infectious. Dobbs joined in the mad dance and rammed his wheel forward, sending the giant Handley streaking down the sizzling glare of that silver stripe.

Townley, his ungoggled eyes streaming, placed one knee against the Scaarf mounting ring and pointed his steel muzzle dead into the blaze of light. The jerking of the spade grip alone told him the gun was firing.

Suddenly everything went black. The searchlight had been sprayed with a nickel-nosed hail, but still the Lewis continued to spew its blaze of fire. Then it stopped. Townley wondered where the light had gone. He was almost blind from bleary eyes and cordite gas.

The barge-like bus was pulled out of the dive and Dobbs carefully nosed her around and rammed his throttle handles forward again for the last dash across the line. Shrapnel still whined and screamed but the vultures had disappeared. Only the green and red navigation lights of the other Handley Page above and well ahead indicated that the Mad Mullah had company.

Townley still raged in his turret, but his ammunition drum was empty.

He pounded madly on the black cylinder in fiendish rage. Dobbs again signalled, this time with a pocket flash and the gunner turned and blinked at the winking torch. He nodded in answer to Dobb's beckoning and crawled back over the prostrate Lewes and found his way into the pilot's cockpit

The dim lights of the dashboard showed his tear-streamed face. Drools of sticky saliva trickled out of the corners of his mouth. But there was a more subdued light in his eyes now as the pilot slapped him on the back and indicated a seat by his side.

"Stay here!" he bellowed.

All this in twelve minutes.

THE SO-CALLED seat of the war was below them now. Down there were the same old sights, sounds and smells which, as long as memory lives, will haunt those who were lucky enough to live through. The same old business of pip-squeaks, whizz-bangs, dugouts, wet clay and choloride of lime. The smoke of shells mixing with wet mist. The smell of death in those dark winding ways that led up to the zig-zagging trenches girded with sand-bagged parapets. All down there below.

Townley stared ahead for a time and then relaxed and rested his chin on the cockpit rim to gaze through the blackness of night to where he had once stood, a muddy member of the 15th Division that had scrambled up the blood streamed Hill 70 out of Loos.

He had transferred to the R.F.C. to get out of the mud and filth. He wondered whether he was any better off. Well, there was one satisfaction—he had a dry bed to sleep on when he got back. Some consolation, but it was a hell of a war just the same.

The big ship droned on like a clanking lumbering barge through a black tunnel that had no ending. Lieut. Dobbs still stared out over the forward gun turret to a patch of jet that lay on the graying landscape below—his forest landmark that pointed its apex at his aerodrome two miles to the right. A silver curve suddenly appeared off to the right—the Yser—and the pilot eased back his throttle and nosed her down dead at the forest. Only a few more minutes now and they would be home.

The other Handley blinked its navigation lights a mile or so ahead and soon three tiny daubs of flame shot up from the fringe of the aerodrome. Townley sat up and watched with quiet fascination as the pilot went through the motions of preparing to land. The dials on the instrument board told their interesting tale as they glided down toward the two emergency flares. The engines were shut off and an eerie scream of flying wires replaced the droning chorus of the motors.

Down the long cavern of fabric echoed the mournful dirge of wailing wind. The motors were blipped on again for a moment and then they died down like a gasping fire siren. There was a slight bump, and another, then a groan as the shock absorbers of the under-carriage recoiled into their cylinders. The nose of the ship tilted up drunkenly and the forward gun swung wearily on its cold steel mounting.

The lurching became a slow wabble and the wabble a short creaking bounce. The bounce ended in a shiver and the Handley Page stood still, vigrating gently in accord with the slowly revolving twin propellers.

Flashlights shot out from under the wide black wings. Mumbled inquiries were heard below. Someone opened a trap door at the pilot's feet and a weak beam of light trickled into the cockpit.

Lieut. Dobbs slid through first without a word and walked away around the wing-tip. Townley sat still, wondering what to do. An officer whose blanched face offered a ghastly study in the beam of the electric torch climbed up the narrow step-ladder that had been placed against the gullet of the machine.

"Where's the rest?" he snapped.

"Lewes is up there, Sor—and Mr. Condon is down near the bomb racks on top of the Sergeant. Can I help you?"

"No!—Get out and report to the Recording Officer. Never mind anything here. Get out!—And Townley—see my batman and get yourself a drink."

"Yes Sor," chanted the gunner, feeling for the steps in the narrow ladder.

Someone guided his foot into the rung and he managed to squirm through. Officers and mechanics shot a barrage of questions at him, but he fumbled with his chin strap for an answer. He stood stock still staring up at the Lewis gun poking out of the forward cockpit.

In a minute the rubber soles of Lieut. Condon's flying boots came out of the black hole above and dim figures jostled past Townley carrying a bundle of leather and flesh. Townley never saw the body again.

Next came the Sergeant, holding his seniority even in death. Corporal Sparks, groaning and gargling strange noises, was slid through to a muffled chorus of "Easy there," "I've got 'im," Watch 'is 'ead," and "Gawd, look at the blood!"

After a rumbling struggle in the nose of the bomber they dragged Lewes out and rushed him away. Still Townley stood out on the aerodrome, staring up at the Lewis gun.

The big birds were being towed back into their canvas nests. The wingpins had been pulled and the huge wings folded back, before they noticed him still standing out on the aerodrome—still staring up.

They led him away and put him to bed.

CHAPTER III

IT WAS NEARLY NOON the next day before there was any sign of life from Townleys bed. The orderly officer of the day, making his inspection in offensive formation with a Flight Sergeant, poked the jumbled heap of army blankets with his cane before the trailing N.C.O. could explain that the inert form beneath the pile was that of one of the aerial gunners who had been on the night patroL

"That's Townley, Sir. He was on No.12 last night," explained the Flight Sergeant

"Oh! And is he allowed to sleep in like this?" inquired the amazed lieutenant, who had not been ticketed out of Cranwell very long.

"Yus. He's on flying duty, Sir. It's pretty cushy for him, Sir."

There was no answer to that, and the inspection party stumbled out of the creaking doorway.

The intrusion had been enough for Towniey however, and after the door had closed out popped one half-opened eye that peeped over a mound of bedding to make a preliminary inspection of the surroundings.

The dimly lighted Nisson hut was untenanted except for himself. Along each wall stood a row of knock-kneed beds that had been manufactured out of lumber and broken wing spars salvaged from the hangars. Strips of green canvas suspiciously like that of which engine and propeller covers were made, had been interlaced into some form of support for the straw-filled mattresses that were rolled up at the head. On top of the "biscuits" were three blankets neatly folded and well stuffed kit-bags emblazoned with the owners' names completed the military display. Pretty soft in the Flying Corps.

"Ug," growled the sleepy-eyed gunner.

Then with an effort he withdrew himself from the sheath of bedding and sat with his feet on the gritty floor. Still half-asleep he pulled on his heavy socks and consulted his wrist watch during the operation. Within ten minutes he was dressed, shaved and had piled up his bedding in regimental order.

Through a murky window he could see one of the bombers being trundled out A small tractor chugging in front had dragged it onto the tarmac. The wings were still folded back so that the Handley looked much like a monsterous hawk preparing to spring into flight. Behind a hand-truck nearby stood a group of mechanics dumbly contemplating a pile of long yellowish torpedo-like objects.

"'Ullo," Townley gargled to himself. "Looks like they're going orf on another show. Wonder who's marked up this time. Suppose I might as well go and get a swill of tea and some-think to eat inside me. Gawd! I'm 'ungry."

From the top of his kit-bag he drew a polished tin dixie, a stained tablespoon and a huge jack-knife. With another glance of interrogation out the window, he started for the door and headed for the cook-house where he knew he could find a rank steaming beverage that might be no more than three or four days old.

At the cook-house he was grudgingly furnished with a dixie full of steaming tangy brown mixture and a lidful of sticky porridge. Seating himself on a sack of empty jam tins he sipped the tea and forced down the tasteless cereal.

"They give yer quite a pastin' larst night, didn't they?" inquired the cookie without stopping in his task of peeling potatoes.

"Who?" inquired Townley, blowing into his tea.

"Who?" spluttered the cookie in amazement. "Who? Why the 'Uns, of course."

"Oh. I knows what you are gettin' at now. You means when we was comin' 'ome larst night," offered Townley peering over his dixie and staring into space.

"Yus—when you was comin' 'ome. They buried the blinkin' lot this mornin'. Didn't see 'em but I 'eard the band a'playin' like old. 'Arry. We'll soon 'ave a nice little churchyard all of ower own if this keeps up."

"They buried 'em?" inquired Townley lowering his dixie.

"Yus—they buried 'em—all in a row, they say. Poor old Sergeant Mole. 'E caught a luvly lot, all in 'is chest, they say. And Mr. Condon 'ad fourteen—fourteen mind you, in the middle of 'is back. Wonder who's turn it is next."

"What are you wondering things like that for?" inquired Townley. "You don't 'ave to go out on the raids. You've got jam on it in 'ere in the cook-'ouse."

"Jam on it, is it? I like that from the likes of you. You who only 'as to sit in them 'Andley Pages and drop the bombs orf when the orficer tells yer. You get flyin' pay for just droppin' bombs orf, and yer says we 'ave jam on it. Flyin' pay fer ridin' abart, just droppin' bombs orf, and yer thinks we 'ave jam on it."

"Course yew 'ave jam on it. Cook-'ouse is the cushiest job in the Army. All yew wants to eat and no work to do. Crikey, if that ain't a jam-on-it job, what is?" demanded Townley, slapping the lid of his dixie home with a clang.

"Flyin' pay fer just droppin' a few' bombs," snorted cookie. "I've 'eard of some cushy jobs in me time, but your's takes the biscuit. Your old woman must be ridin' around in a Rolls-Royce, ain't she, with all yer bloomin' flyin' pay. All I can say is that the war 'as done some of you blokes a good turn."

"Look 'ere! My old woman is 'avin' to go to work in a munitions factory, if yer wants to know anythink. The bit she get's out of me don't go nowhere around London, and you knows it. If I 'ad your job, I'd be doin' like you—pinchin' all the soldiers' grub and sendin' it 'ome parcel post. I knows yer, I do."

And with that Townley went outside to clean up his mess kit in a pile of dirty sand behind the mess hut.

CHAPTER IV

LIEUT. DOBBS MET TOWNLEY at the entrance of the hangar. For an instant they stared at one another as if they were trying to remember where they had met before. The mist of a nightmare swirled between them. Finally the mechanic-gunner swished his hand up in a mechanical salute and it was answered with a jerky response.

"Feel all right this morning, Townley?" inquired the pilot.

"Me? . . . . Yes, Sor," stuttered the gunner, startled that he should be thus addressed by an officer. "I've 'ad a good sleep, and I feel as right as ninepence."

"We had a close go of it last night. The blighters—no one saw them until they put No.6 in flames. We were lucky to get away."

"Yes, Sor," agreed Towmley dumbly.

"You did well up front there. A bit excited, but you drove a couple off. They have put you in for a decoration. I hope you get it."

"Me?—A decoration, Sor?—You'er —you mean a medal for me?"

Townley was plainly agitated. He knew he was expected to say something but no reasonable thought would present itself.

"Yes, you did a good job. You got one of them and we are going to keep you up front from now on."

"Up front? You mean, Sor, I'm to be the regular gunner, up front. Why—why, I've never done it before." There was something queer about this decoration and up-front business.

"Well, you were up front last night and you did damn well, I think. As a matter of fact, Townley, you will be up front again to-night. We are going over again with some eggs. Got another report they are to raid England again to-night, according to the Recording Officer. We leave at 11:30, so be on hand."

Townley could only back away two steps, salute, and half whisper, "Yes, Sor."

Five minutes later he was back huddled up on his bed trying to write a letter home telling the missus that he was a hero, that he was to get a medal and that he was to go "up front."

For ten minutes he laboriously scrawled his missive with a pencil moistened with much saliva, and then tore up the sheet and dropped the fragments into the tin stove in the center of the hut. He was not much of a hand at spelling and "decoration" had him stumped so he barged off in the direction of the village where he could redeem himself with a silk embroidered post card in lieu of the overdue letter.

They roused him out of bed at 11 o'clock that night. He had been asleep since after supper. His Sidcot suit lay across the bed and he climbed into it while staring, sleepy-eyed, at the others who were sleeping the sleep of the fatigued. Again, he wondered whether flying duty was all that it was cracked up to be.

On the way to the hangar he drew his Lewis gun and a drum of ammuition.

"So yer goin' up front to-night, eh?" inquired the Armorer Sergeant with a solemn air. "Well, some of 'em come through all right, but most of 'em get's' it quick up there—You don't mind?—Well, it's just as well. You can't help it now. You've been ticketed for an up-front job and you might as well go and have it over with—Oh, of course you'll be back all right.

That's what they all say, and probably you will Don't know as you are worse off than the 'Uns who are going over London to-night. A nice little picnic they are in for, too. Well, we'll see that your missus gets yer wrist watch, in case anything happens."

With this comforting advice battering into his still foggy brain, he went over to the test pit, clamped his gun on the post, rammed on the drum of ammunition and drew back the cocking handle. After fumbling for the trigger guard he finally sent a stream of leaden flame into the pit a few feet ahead. One long burst blazed its way into the churned earthwork. Then a series of short belches and the gun was ready for action.

Other gunners followed in his wake and for ten minutes the pit seethed under a withering dose range fire as the aerial fighting men tested their arms and ammunition. Dim figures moved with lumbering steps back and forth from the pit to the shadows of the war hawks in front of the hangars. The scarlet streaks of flame from the muzzles of the machine guns lit up garish faces that peered from under leathern hoods and flashing goggles.

The small ladders in front of the bombers led up into the throats of the war birds up which clambered these strange humans who disappeared within the gullets with their deathdealing weapons cradled in then-arms.

In his tiny front turret Townley fussed with slow methodical movements, placing his drums on the steel pegs, testing his gun clamp, swinging the mounting and checking his spare parts bag. He stood up and looked around at the muffled activity below.

UNDER THE NOSE of No.11 a group of officers were poring over a map spread out on the parched turf. A small electric torch provided a weak beam of illumination that streaked back from the bluish-white ordnance survey map to the strained faces of the men who were to guide the big bomb-spawning eagles over enemy territory.

Another aerial gunner busied himself in the rear cockpit, screwing on a gun mounting and ramming his knee against the black steel drums that were pivoted on a rack at one side of his cockpit.

The lights on the pilot's dashboard glanced up off the dual control wheels and the oily leather cushions of the control cockpit. In one seat lay a folded map, a heavy revolver and in stark contrast, a clean white pocket handkerchief.

"Hm. Wonder if he expects to shed a tear or two to-night," reflected Townley.

Some indistinct orders were snapped and No.11's engines began to turn over. Short throaty reports and muffled chuggings indicated that No.8 was also being started. Two silent figures appeared through the trapdoor in the floor of the control pit and disappeared down the cavern of the fuselage. Townley wondered who had been selected for the toggles. Next came Lieut. Dobbs with a slip of white paper between his teeth which he pinned to his dashboard. As the flight leader he was supposed to have a compass course, but he knew they were seldom followed to the figures. The Huns took care of that.

Then came Lieut. Mclvor, the latest replacement from the Pool who was to make his first trip with the flight leader. The trap-door closed with a bang as he took his seat. A dismal "All-clear" came up from below.

Mclvor fumbled with a stop watch in the tiny beam of light from the dash while Dobbs tickled the throttle levers of the big Rolls-Royce engines. Again came the spitting and coughing and finally the ear-splitting roar that gradually blubbered down to a steady moan of power. The other machines were vibrating gently to the idling engines awaiting the signal from Lieut. Dobbs in the leading No.10.

Townley peered at the pilot, questioningly, while the engines w'ere being warmed up. Dobbs waved a cheerful hand to his forward gunner and then with a warning pursing of his lips pointed to the forbidden area over his top planes.

The gunner nodded knowingly. This Lieut. Dobbs was a pretty good sort.

The pilot stood up and took a final look around. The rear gunner waved a cheery O.K. and Mclvor was opening a map in his lap. Dobbs' hands were lifted high and waved back and forth. A bumping, a creaking, a roar of engines and the big birds were off down the aerodrome.

The great lumbering Handleys groaned under their weighted bomb racks but finally they lifted their huge tails and rumbled along with frantic bumpings down the long field toward the two emergency flares. Townley, kneeling in his turret, watched through the wings as the other machines followed in wide formation. They had their navigation lights on as they circled for height over the aerodrome. At 3,000 feet they drew together and signalled O.K. with their pocket flashes. The raid was on. Navigation lights were

doused and they kept their positions with the aid of the streaking trails of flame that streamed back from the engine exhausts.

In five minutes they were over the flame-seared deadline of the War. Below twinkled the snarling tubes of terror that hurled brass-nosed venom. A *Crump! Crump!* echoed ahead leaving a curling black spot on the dim dark air trail ahead. Lieut. Mclvor jumped in his seat and glanced anxiously around. Then the Handley churned through the cloud of stench and Dobbs smiled at his bombing officer who was searching for the source of the strange reeking odor. Even Towmley cracked a weak smile.

Off to the right lay the battered city of Lille with its grim stacks stretching in agony to the Sky. On the outskirts of the beleagured mining town, blazing areas writhed in the wrath of both sides. Dumps smouldered and let off occasional spurts of flame. Ahead wound the Lys in its tortuous trail around the northern side of Courtrai and thirty miles ahead was daubed the drab wartime Ghent.

Southeast of Ghent lay the Gotha aerodrome from where an hour or so before the Huns had flown to make their raid on England. If all calculations were right, the Handleys would get there half an hour before the Huns were slated for their return. A shell-pocked landing field would create no little damage to the ships that had managed to fight their way through the barrage of the East Coast defences. In half an hour or so they would be throwing their incendiary bombs and other missiles of destruction on their objective.

TOWNLEY WAS STANDING in his cockpit now, searching the skies above and below for signs of enemy aircraft. Here and there streaked twin flames of enemy exhaust ports as the vultures of defense were climbing for action, but still the three H.P.'s, loaded to their limit with the eggs of eternity, dromed and lumbered on.

Searchlight batteries, having been warned, were streaking their white flaming fingers through the sparse clouds in eager search for the invaders. Archie batteries were taking pot shots at whisps of vapor to get a range for the great expected. Lights were doused below and still the droning above went on.

Mclvor left his seat and took his map down the catwalk and made a final inspection. Checking his stopwatch again he held a short consultation with the bomb-toggle men and ordered them to their action stations.

The machines drew together on a signal from a flashlight and then suddenly spread out in a long line with No.10 leading. A broadsword blade of light flashed up from below and drenched the rear machine in a flood of blazing light. Immediately a salvo of anti-aircraft crashed beneath its wings. A hurried side-slip and the Handley slithered out of the glare. Still the ground gunners pecked away in hopes of winging the elusive eagles in the blackness above.

The Gotha 'drome lay just ahead of them now and they shut off their engines and glided noiselessly over it. They were two miles beyond before the power was opened up again. Mclvor slipped his stop-watch into his bomb-sight timing slot and leaned over the cockpit for action. In the doorway of the fuselage the bomber sergeant stood awaiting his orders.

Mclvor raised his hand and then turned the fingers down at an acute angle. Down went the nose of the machine. Townley in his cockpit could see the others following through a futuristic maze of searchlight streaks, blazing shells and blots of stinking black smoke.

They were low now, dangerously low. The ping and whine of machine gun bullets was plain to the gunners who were taking chance shots at the flame fountains below. The far corner of the aerodrome lay just ahead of the forward turret now and McIvor's hand clenched and was jerked down. The sergeant, watching him like a hawk while trying to keep his feet on the billowing catwalk, slapped the mechanic-bomber on the shoulder and the toggles were pulled releasing two fifty pounders.

A lapse that seemed an eternity passed before the roar of the two missiles was heard and Mclvor, peering back over the lower wing for an instant, nearly jumped out of the cockpit as he viewed the flash of scarlet flames and cloud of flying sod rumble its way skywards. The other two machines followed in drill-like order.

The hangars were just ahead now and the bombing officer, squinting through his wire sights, jerked his arm down again. Before the reports of the 120-pounders were heard the big Handley was curled on a wing-tip and the pilot, bomber officer and forward gunner were given a beautiful grandstand view of the result.

There was a dull booming roar, a flash of flame that streaked up with sharp points to the sky and the corner of a black hangar collapsed and was hidden in a belch of smoke. Out on the aerodrome two more bouquets of flame went up and then a generous splash of fire cracked out on the roadway beyond the hangars.

Pencil lines of hissing blue sparks seemed to crawl up from everywhere, tracking strange designs. Flashes of anti-aircraft gunnery blazed away like ill-timed

electric signs. Then the Handley Page gunners went into action on two scouts that skimmed into view from some where. Townley saw them first and his chattering gun, piercing a line of fire, gave the rear gunner the direction. He waited a second or two until one dove and then zoomed up to present a garish white belly, over the big tail of the bomber.

"P rat-t-t-t-t-t-t tat tat," went the rear turret gun and the enemy scout slid up into a stall, floundered back like a winged grouse and nosed down to crash with a sparky blast on top of one of the hangars.

"Gawd! Just a few like that got 'im," observed Townley. He was learning something about this aerial gunnery business. It only takes a few—in the right place.

No.10 was back into position again for another glide across the aerodrome. Mclvor was standing in his cockpit eyeing the blazing hangars. Down went the nose of the bomber and down went the bomber officer's arm. Two more fifty pounders were released from within and a few seconds later the eggs exploded with their searing yellow yelks lighting up the glazed scene of battered disorder.

The blazing shed was in line again and down went Mclvor's arm—but it came up again, both of them, and he twirled in his cockpit and sprawled over the edge. Before the pilot could make a move toward him, he had slid over the side and vanished into the darkness below.

CHAPTER V

THE PILOT SLEWED THE MACHINE around again and nosed up over the smoke and sparks of the burning hangar. Almost on his tail came another lumbering Handley and Dobbs felt relieved. But where was No.11?

Circling the aerodrome Dobbs could see the third machine corkscrewing its way through the smoke and searchlight beams to make its final charge. Down went its nose and there was a perceptible upward jerk as the big bombs slid out of their racks. They roared out on the tarmac just in front of the hangars.

A red light streamed up from Dobbs' cockpit for reformation. Townley was blazing in short jerky bursts at a Hun diving on No.8. The rear gunner was pecking away at a machine that was attempting to take off from the aerodrome below. No.11 was swirling around to get back into formation, with both front and rear guns blazing away at something that neither Dobbs nor Townley could see.

Then came the surprise packet of the night.

Out of the black sky blazed a group of bobbing lights. The flashing of propellers indicated twin-engined machines. Guns spewed in all directions and the mad moment was on.

"Cripes!" gurgled Townley. "The bloomin' Gothas are back already!" Down they streamed on the Handley Pages that were fighting to gain the safety of their formation. Townley blazed away with a drumfull at the first and saw it nose-dive head-on into the ground. Another roared up to take its place. The Handleys slithered into a fighting circle and every gun was spurting lead. Below the blazing hangars lit up the sky and they fought like madmen in a dimly lit barroom.

The rear gunner of No.10 picked off another machine that spun off in a flat skither and disappeared. Out of the black velvet sky came more machines as if by magic. They spawned lead and fire in all directions.

The Handleys were holding their own and were gradually working their way back from the glare of the aerodrome and the streaking searchlights, when suddenly another flaming torch was ignited, nosed frantically up to the sky and then writhed down into a spin a roaring mass of metal, fabric and splintered spruce.

No.11 had gone down.

The rear gunner on No.10 was adjusting his drum on a hot gun to tackle a diving scout when a streak of flame apurted out of the fire tunnel of a Gotha above, bit into his cockpit and crumbled him into a battered heap. He quivered twice and curled up against his drum rack. His gun squeaked on its mounting and pointed aimlessly to the sky.

Townley watched it all in amazement and then turned with stark terror on the Hun scout that had completed its fire-spitting dive. Townley managed to get in a short burst and then saw the scout crash into the tail of a Gotha below.

There was a blinding flash of an anti-aircraft shell and when the smoke had cleared the Gotha was swirling around in a dreary flat spin and a tumbling crate of fire revealed the path of the wingless scout.

The two Handleys screeched around again until their wing-tips almost met and they nosed down for Dixmude a few miles ahead. The searchlights played on the skies hoping to pick out the invaders, while the Gothas swirled in ever-widening circles. Above

a lone scout droned, firing white lights to attract reenforcements.

Townley watched the Fokker above, his Scaarf mounting adjusted for firing over the top plane. His teeth chattered as he watched the twisting vulture between hurried glances at the pilot. Dobbs was gripping the control wheel and staring ahead as though his goggled eyes were held in a vice. His shoulders twitched and the empty seat beside him held the half-open map which laid there like the calling card of a ghost.

"Are you all right, Mr. Dobbs?" yelled Townley.

There was no answer. You don't hear anything when a Fokker is diving on you from above.

THEN IT CAME. That fan-shaped blaze of leaden spray pinged into the wings and fuselage for a minute that seemed a year. Townley's gun blazed back in answer but the gunner cringed behind his spade handle as he drilled the line of fire back at the Fokker. He hung on his trigger, allowing the Lewis to sing its staccato song hoping that the burst of bullets would halt the Hun ship.

Suddenly the scout disappeared completely and in its place appeared the twin-tail of the Handley. Townley stared over his top plane amazed. What had happened? . . . . Mr. Dobbs! . . . . Our tail! . . . . What the matter?

The Lewis gun stopped its chattering and the gunner peered under his gun mounting arm. There in the pilot's cockpit sprawled Lieut. Dobbs—all over the controls.

That was it . . . . They were diving . . . . Something had happened . . . . Mr. Dobbs was hurt somehow.

Townley wondered what had happened. Then he went into action.

Down went the gun mounting with a clang. Down went Townley with a slobbering gurgle. Digging in with his rubber toed flying boots he forced his way up the passageway between the forward turret and the pilot's cockpit. His head came through to bump against the control column. He looked up into the face of Lieut. Dobbs and received a blubber of gore all over his helmet.

"Get back Sir! Get off that wheel!" he blubbered. "You are putting us into a dive. Get orf it, I say, Sir!"

He forced his shoulder into Lieut. Dobbs' chest and managed to force him back from the control wheel. Another frantic yank and he was shoved over into the other seat. Gradually the ship climbed into an even keel.

Townley was in the pilot's seat now with the strange wheel between his hands, but could not make much headway.

Finally he realized that there was something about a rudder bar to attend to. Where was it? Oh yes— there it was. You put your feet on it. That's better. The throttles were fingered and he found that they could be used to advantage by moving them backward or forward.

So this was all there was to this flying business, eh?

He was still tinkering gingerly with the controls when something blazed into view alongside of him. He jumped in his seat and searched for assistance. Then he noted that it was the other Handley Page, taking its position alongside of him for the return home.

"Home?" he reflected. "Home. That was it. How about getting home? Where was home? Where was the aerodrome? Who was going to land this damn thing anyway?"

For an answer Lieut. Dobbs quivered in the bombing officer's seat and rolled into a shapeless heap on the floor of the cockpit. Down went the nose of the bomber again and Townley had to yank him away from the control column. The officer reclined in a grotesque attitude with his back to the side of the cockpit and his feet under Townley's knees.

The amateur pilot began to feel the solitude of his unenviable position and he banged on the cabin to attract attention from the toggle men down the fuselage. No answer.

"What the hell!" roared Townley. "Am I the only one left on this damn barge?"

With the solitude came a haunting fear, and with the fear a touch of terror. He went up in the air. Flying all alone. Night flying too. He had to get down—somehow. What did he know about landing a ship? Where the devil was that bomber sergeant? He ought to know something about this flying business. Bombs! Machine guns! Dead pilot! . . . . Everybody dead! . . . . Mclvor tumbled out! . . . . Fokkers! . . . . Gothas! . . . . No pilot! . . . . All alone! . . . . What a war!

CHAPTER VI

THE OTHER HANDLEY PAGE worked its way into the lead and Townley drew his throttles back and fell into line. No.8 knew the way home at least. After that all he would have to worry about was getting down. That's all.

He remembered hearing snatches of conversation between the pilots in front of the hangars.

"Shut her off and let her glide in," they said. "If it looks bad, take it on a wing tip."

He was close to the tail of the leading ship now and someone in the rear turret was frantically waving him back. He could just see the outline of the upraised arms, but he did not heed them. For one thing Townley did not intend to get lost on the way home.

"All I got to do is follow them and do just like they do," he reasoned within himself.

The Handley ahead nosed down and Townley nosed down after it.

Suddely two ground flares sparkled up just ahead.

"That must be the aerodrome," mumbled Townley, keeping his nose almost on the tail of the leading bomber.

Down they went again and Townley had to draw his throttles all the way back to keep from ramming his forward gun turret into the elevators of No.8. Down they went into an easy glide just over the emergency flares that streamed up.

Then something went wrong. The machine ahead was almost down and slowing up fast. No.10's nose was well over No.8's tail and Townley remembered: "When it looks bad, take it on a wing tip."

And he did.

Over went the control wheel and down went the wide wing. A scrawnching crack, a snarling tear and the big bomber curled around in a crazy lurch. There was a dull roar below. A wing slipped back to the fuselage and an engine charged from its bearers and buried itself in the turf just ahead.

That was all. No.10 was home.

Townley just sat there and waited. His cockpit was slightly aslant and almost resting on the ground. A spinning undercarriage wheel whirled on a twisted axle, almost within arm's reach. He drew himself into a corner and stared glassy-eyed, at the huddled figure of Lieut. Dobbs.

They lifted him out of the pilot's cockpit and attempted to question him, but all he would reply was, "Mr. Mclvor fell out and Mr. Dobbs is 'urt, but I followed No.8 'ome and took it on the wing-tip."

"Gawd! And she was half full of bombs, too," ejaculated a putty-faced mechanic.

TOWNLEY DIDN'T SLEEP much that night. Two sick bay orderlies were detailed to sit up with him and keep him under the blankets. He raved and raged for an hour or two, drawing muffled curses from the other inmates of the hut.

They told him everything was all right and he laughed.

Just before dawn he relaxed and fell into a twitching sleep. The two orderlies left him. They figured he would be in shape for the next patrol if he got a little rest.

At noon the orderly room sergeant tip-toed in with a yellow slip of paper. Without a word he laid it under Townley's chin. His tip-toeing was not sufficient however, for Townley recognized the step, peered over the corner of his blanket pile and watched the non-com close the door.

He turned over again and tried to go to sleep but the yellow form tickled his ear. He flicked at it nervously and heard it glide to the floor. He grunted and wondered what it was. Probably orders for the next patrol. He grunted again and peered over the edge of his bed. There on the floor lay the slip of paper.

It was an official looking missive, neatly typewritten. He screwed his eyes at it and started to transcribe it. The official government seal at the top fascinated him and he tried to spell out the Latin phrase around the coat of arms. Then he came to a line that looked suspiciously like his own name. He read on.

1984 1st. Class Air Mechanic Townley, Robert
—4th. Squadron R.F.C,
B. E. F. France.

DECORATIONS: It has pleased His Majesty to award you the Distinguished Conduct Medal for exceptional bravery and devotion to duty while acting as an aerial machine gunner on night raids over enemy territory. This award will be made at the next public investiture held at Buckingham Palace, leave for which will be granted immediately. In the meantime the decoration ribbon may be worn on present service uniform.

(Signed) Lockhart, E. V. Major General.
Commanding Third Wing.
R.F.C.

"Gor bli' me. I'm going 'ome," whispered Townley to himself. And then he fell asleep.