

## The Gunner's Choice

It was 06.45 hours and already the sun was high in the sky. The grease-monkey said, "It's almost an hour since the first kite landed. We've lost another."

Hardly had the words been spoken when in the distance the faint roar of an over-worked motor could be heard approaching the desolate, treeless waste which was serving as a base for the R.C.A.F Tiger Squadron in North Africa. The propeller of one engine was motionless. The pilot made a direct approach and landed.

It was the missing plane, K for Katie. Her port wing had been badly riddled, and that engine had been put out of action.

One by one the crew descended the ladder. They were silent. Their faces were grim and pale. As they touched down you could tell that they were praying to some God that they might never have to fly again. Then came Jim, the tail-gunner.

"The dirty rats --- dam them anyway." Then he broke into a half-cry; it was apparent that his nerves were cracking. But he grabbed himself, sobered up and said, "I like the short trips."

The gunner's fear was easily explained. He had sat in the tail-turret while the fighters approached. One had opened fire beyond his reach; yes, he had to wait until they got within his range. He realized that at any moment, his own ship might be blown to pieces. But on the precise moment he had blasted one of the attackers from the sky, damaged another and so had won the battle. All this happened as the boys were returning from a bombing mission over Messina, Sicily in late July 1943.

When the gunner's wife learned that he had been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, she realized the hell which he had come through in order to gain this coveted award. Proudly she telephoned to her friends and told them how Jim had won the D.F.C. and her hopes that he would soon be coming home for a leave. Her joy was soon dampened however, because shortly after this she received a letter from him telling her that he had passed up an opportunity to take a ground job and ended it off by,

“you know dear, somebody has to do the flying. The experience which I have had may be of some help to the kids who are to take our places. I don’t want to be in a job where I have to say, ‘well this is the way I used to do it;...I want to be in a job where I can say to the those kids, ‘We’ll do it this way.’ It may be hard for you to understand, but believe me, I feel that I have to do it this way.”

She cried when she read this paragraph because she knew what this meant. Her young brother had written home to his Mother, “I’ve finished one tour and now I’m likely to be made C.O. of our squadron. If my luck holds out ...” A neighbour boy, Bill Smith, had written, “I’m as lucky as the devil. They’ve tried to get us three times, but each time we’ve won. The skipper says that with me in the tail, they can’t beat us.” In both cases these were the last letters written by the boys.

As she held the letter in her hand, she had good reason to say to herself, “Is this what is going to happen to Jim?”

Day after day passed by. Week after week passed and still, she got no indication that her prayers might be answered. But daily she was reminded of the fate which she feared lay ahead. “Our bombers were over enemy territory last night” seemed to be the opening sentence to the CBC morning newscast. Then in a somewhat modulated tone, the announcer would add, “Five of our aircraft failed to return.”

Oh, there were so many things which remained a mystery to her. Did she know the tail-gunner in one of those missing bombers? Was Jim still with the Tiger Squadron? If so, why had he told her to change his address to simply, ‘RCAF Overseas’? Was he still flying, or had he gone to the training school which he had told her about sometime ago? The invasion of Sicily had been completed for several months; hence the question, where was the Tiger Squadron?

Not until late February ’44 did the public gain any knowledge as to the whereabouts of the Tiger boys. At that time, a public relations officer issued a brief statement to the effect that the old squadron had been reunited with the other units of No. 6 (RCAF) Group in England. Further, for some time it had been bearing its full share in the battle ‘softening up the Fortress of Europe.’

This was not an easy battle. Jerry's anti-aircraft units and fighter squadrons were certain to make a number of kills every time the bombers went out. Throughout Bomber Command, crews came and went at an alarming rate. Soon the boys who had to do the flying developed their own theory as to the possibility of their escape from the horrors of death. Sometimes they would look up to the sky and again they would look down at the ground and quietly say, "The Gods must be with you, or you are beat."

After the first few days of the invasion had passed the strain on the bomber squadrons slackened and the morale of the crews rose considerably. There was still a lot of tough fighting to be done, but why be pessimistic? Some argued that the war was going to be over by Christmas. However, Jerry wasn't thinking along these lines. In late December his army struck. The boys who had to face him, whether it was on the land, in the air, or in the sea had to strain every effort to hold off this last desperate power-play.

By mere coincidence the day that the censor released this news, Jim's letter of December first reached home. For the first time he wrote something about his work. Apart from this slight change this letter was little different from the others which he had previously written. It had started off in the usual manner.

*"My dearest Jean,*

*Had a few minutes to spare, so decided to drop you a line. Yesterday I celebrated an anniversary. It was exactly two years ago since I arrived over here. Do you know how I celebrated it? I put in my last five hours of training on these old kites. Now I'm all set to get back into action – and do you know the best part of it? The CO has been able to fix it up for me and I'm heading back to the old squadron. Of course [...censored...] furthermore, if I'm lucky after I have made a trip or two, I'll have all the qualifications to become the gunnery officer. ("Yes, if you're lucky," repeated Jean to herself, "if you are lucky. Oh Jim! ... Dick wrote home to Mummy, 'If I'm lucky ...' Bill Smith wrote, 'I'm as lucky as the devil...! Oh Jim.") But remember dear, I don't want you to be worrying your head off. The trips are getting shorter and are pretty easy now. It is nothing like the old days.*

*Guess that this covers most of my activities for the present. Oh, I almost forgot, I have finally succeeded in buying in a new bic [sic]. It's really a beauty. Bye-bye for now, with all my love, Jim*

*P.S. Tell Betsy that I'm the best cribbage player in the squadron and will take her on in a game the first night that I get back."*

Weeks went by before Jean was to hear from Jim again. He had been writing regularly but somewhere along the line his letters were being held up. She found it difficult to understand. But little did she realize that during this time, Yorkshire, the base of the Canadian boys, was covered with snow and under normal circumstances all kites would have been grounded. However, due to the emergency almost nightly the boys were taking off with their deadly loads of destruction.

On January 28<sup>th</sup> the take-off time was 21.35 hours. The engines of the big bombers were warmed up and at 21.34 hours 'K for Katie' moved up to the end of the runway. At the exact moment the green light was flashed from the control tower. The skipper eased off his airbrakes and the huge monster started down the tarmac. At the quarter way mark he lifted the tail. At the three-quarter way mark he bounced her and lifted her. The engines faltered. There was a crash and the whole area was lighted up. When the plane plowed into the ground the two thousand pounder had gone off.

The medical officer and his assistance searched amongst the wreckage. They picked up a hand, the odd leg, and a foot. That was all. Then the little orderly shouted, "Hi, Sir, there's a turret away over there." The doctor removed a dazed gunner. He was still alive when they reached the hospital. At four o'clock the next afternoon he began to move his fingers; later he moved his head. Then he opened his eyes and a pretty nursing sister was leaning over him.

"Tell ... tell my wife ... I don't like ... the short trips ... the short trips ... either ..." his voice sunk, and he shut his eyes.

That evening another letter was written to Jean. The nursing sister wrote, "Jim has asked me to write and tell you that he doesn't like the short trips either. With rest and care he'll be alright in a few days.

-Lyman A. Roberts, RCAF 424  
Bishops University, Lennoxville, 1946