

Who Will Ever Know?

A Remembrance Day Story

“Glazer!”

If he’s responding, I’m not hearing him over the choking howls of the twin Rolls-Royce Merlin engines and the ripping of the wind through the gash in the fuselage behind me. Maybe the intercom’s down again.

“Glazer!”

“What Gord? I’m still back here!”

“You know the Lord’s Prayer?”

“You’re kidding. Every morning in school. Every Sunday in church. Of course I...”

“Then let’s say it. I don’t know if this bird’ll get us home.”

“What? Say again Gord.”

“I’m saying I don’t know if I can keep this plane out of the water. The rudder’s jammed, or close to it. Bloody hard to move! Flaps, same. Port engine’s losing power fast... No! It’s finished. Look at the smoke!”

“I see it, Gord!”

“Starboard engine might get us there, Glazer. One good leg and a prayer might do it. Let’s say the prayer! What else can we...”

I can hear him, just barely. The static of the intercom is making his quiet recitation sound like a distant radio preacher. Not a very convincing one. I’m joining in.

“...hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come...”

Let me tell you what’s going on, right now and right here.

By right now, I mean exactly that. It’s fifteen minutes after two in the morning, Friday, February 26th, 1943.

By right here, I mean our circumstances and location. My navigator and I are in a badly damaged Bristol Beaufighter. We’re flying south across the Malta Channel of the Mediterranean Sea, toward the island of Malta and our squadron’s base. My navigator’s name is Jack Glazebrook. He’s eighteen feet directly behind me, in the seat under the navigator’s canopy. My name’s Gordon Bullen. I’m the pilot. I’m in the

narrow cockpit up front. We're both members of the Royal Canadian Air Force assigned to Royal Air Force Squadron 272. Jack's 25. I'm 22.

The Beau's a beast of an aircraft. Its oversized twin engines make it look like an American football lineman, and it bristles with weaponry: rockets, machine guns, cannons, bombs, torpedoes, in different configurations depending on the mission. The description of the plane that fits best, I think, is that it's a two-crew heavy night fighter. What it gives up in agility to the smaller and lighter Spitfire, it takes back in brawn and firepower. The Ten Gun Terror, as the British newspapermen like to call it.

But all that's not much help to us right now. Our objective tonight had been to strafe enemy airfields on Sicily – an “intruder mission”, in the words of the brass, against Italian Royal Air Force and Luftwaffe aerodromes. The two year-long bombing campaign by German and Italian forces had flattened Malta, literally, but somehow the tiny colony had held its nerve. Now, as the tide of the war is turning, Malta is the Allies' stepping-stone to Italy and southern Europe, and our squadron's crews are among the first wave of airborne invaders. Liberators, some would say.

The flight north from our base earlier in the night had been uneventful. Keeping a close lookout for enemy fighters and double-checking systems and gauges kept us absorbed across the fifty-mile gap between Malta and Sicily. Even so, as it always did, a powerful undertow of apprehension broke unevenly through the veneer of our routine, an unpredictable, clutching current of deep-in-the-gut foreboding. Fear, to speak plainly about it.

Glazebrook had put us right on top of our designated target, one of the airfields in the patchwork of fields near Gerbini. On our first strafing pass we attacked what we were pretty sure was an aircraft maintenance shop. It was difficult to tell because of our speed, even with the light of a three-quarters moon.

The explosive staccato of the six, wing-mounted machine guns is always bone-rattling, no matter how many times you've fired them. That first strafing pass was no different – a shallow dive, thumb hovering over the trigger, quick touches of the controls to align the sights and then the deafening, rapid-fire clatter of the guns. I was quite sure I saw the chain of bullet strikes cut parallel tracks up to the shop, slice through its walls and across its tin roof. We were past the airfield in no more than seven seconds.

On our second pass we ran the length of the landing strip and directly over of what looked like three net-covered planes at the far end. We lay down a jagged path of cannon fire, each heavy recoil of the cannons causing the plane to buck and shiver. Our airspeed stuttered down nearly fifteen knots in response.

As far as we could tell, we'd hit one of the planes. It was hard to know exactly. We thought we saw the bright flash of a direct strike, twice, but there was no time to survey. We carved a tight arc back for a final strafing pass. We machine-gunned two trucks parked on a road to the side of the landing strip, and then climbed steeply away.

Glazebrook had set us on a course to Sicily's southeast coast and the shortest distance to the sea. The smell of spent gun powder crowded into the fuselage, an unwelcome reminder of our deadly purpose. I tried not to think too much about the people that might have been killed or wounded in our raids, tonight's or any other. Maybe someone was in the maintenance shop. Maybe it wasn't a maintenance shop at all. Maybe it was a mess hall and the cooks bunked there. Maybe a mechanic was cowering behind one of the damaged planes and was killed by debris. Still, it's hard not to feel righteous, frankly, or at least justified. Duty-bound, in any event. We're fighting a war we're forced to fight. We're certain of this.

About a mile from the coast we had made out the dark, curving line of a freight train. It wasn't moving and its locomotive was in a tunnel, hidden and protected, but its freight cars were exposed. We had a few cannon rounds left and a safe reserve of fuel. At our pre-flight ops meeting, we'd been told to be opportunistic.

I twisted around in my seat and looked back to Glazebrook. He nodded and flashed me a thumbs up. I banked the Beau into a steep, attacking dive and set its nose on the sides of the freight cars. I held that angle for as long as I dared before triggering the cannons. We felt the hammering of the recoils first and then a second later the tight sequence of the heavy caliber bullets striking the ground and then the train. We couldn't see well enough to know how much damage we'd done, and we had delayed our escape to the coast long enough.

We had thought we were home-free, but we were wrong. We were about to cross the coastline when we were hit by a barrage of flak. The first starburst grazed the tail and rudder. I thought the hit we took was no worse than the one we suffered the mission before this one. The second burst was much worse, hitting the plane's port engine and tearing out a small hole of the plane's midsection on the port side about half-way between Glazebrook and me. Our plane was very badly damaged.

"...thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven..."

We finish the prayer together, fading off into mumbling near the end, the intercom's static overtaking our voices.

"Jack, if you want to bail, I can hold this thing together at least long enough."

"No dice, Gordo. You don't bail, I don't bail. Anyway, we bail...then what? No one's going to find us out here. No one's even going to try!"

It's true. We knew of downed Allied airmen lost at sea much closer to Malta, even in sight of land.

"Then we'll have to ride this wounded bird home, Glazer."

“Let’s do that. Let’s do that!”

The plane is settling into an uneven pattern of lurching to starboard and then begrudgingly slouching back as I coax it with what’s left of my controls. All I can do is try to keep it flat enough and straight enough to stay airborne. Smoke is still streaming off the port engine, although less intensely. Maybe we’ll make it home after all. Landing will be dicey.

“Glazer! As long as the intercom keeps working, let’s talk instead of wringing our hands and filling our skivvies. You know what I mean? Distraction from the action.”

“Poetic! Sure. Can you keep this machine out of the sea and talk at the same time?”

“Don’t know. I’ll sure try. How about hometowns? You go...”

“Sure. Hometowns, eh. OK. Saskatoon. I know you’ve been there. It’s not a big town, for sure. A pretty river runs through it. A pretty river valley. The prairie people make it what it is, though. Really friendly. The best people around.”

“I believe that!”

“You bet. They’ll know your name the minute after they meet you, Gord, then they’ll use it every chance they get, Gord, and they’ll never forget it, Gord. Good, good people to make up for the wicked winters, Gord, as my uncle says. And pretty, young girls fresh off the farm, Gord. Farm-fresh girls, Gord. How about that! Excited to be away in the big city and excited to meet flashy fly-boys like you, Gordo. Your turn. Hey, you there Gord?”

“Yeah here. Funny. I’d fall out of my seat if I wasn’t strapped in so tight. OK. Hometowns. West Vancouver. Well, all of Vancouver. Is there anywhere more...more spectacular? That’s right, spectacular! Answer me that. Anywhere more peaceful? Especially now. I’m telling you, I miss it so much. I miss the city. I miss my parents. I’m their only one. I told you that, right? They might be missing me too.”

“Might be...”

“The ocean. Mountains. Right up behind our house. You’ve been to Stanley Park, Glazer? It’s fantastic. A forest right in the middle of the city. Vancouver’s tough to beat. When I put a ring on some lucky girl’s finger, that’s where you’ll come to visit. And we’ll have enough kids for a rugby team.”

“King of the neighbourhood. That’ll be you. King Gordo the First! And his beautiful queen...”

“I even like the rain.”

“Come on. You’re joking. The rain?! What other strange things do you like that I don’t know about? Hey, and speak up!”

“Yeah. Pork and beans, Glazer! I like pork and beans out...”

“Straight out of the can. Makes two of us. Alright, what else?”

“Here’s something. The sweet spot. You know, the sweet spot on a tennis racket or a cricket bat...that one spot that the ball just flies off. No shudder. No vibration back up into your hands. Just power. It feels like...”

“I know exactly what you’re talking about. I’ve connected with the sweet spot of a baseball bat a thousand times. But a cricket bat? You play cricket, Gord? This I didn’t know.”

“I do. Great game. Most of the time at a place called Brockton Oval in Stanley Park, the park I was just telling you about. A cricket bat’s sweet spot in my hands. A baseball bat’s sweet spot in yours. Perfection, even if it’s only for the second the ball connects!”

“Yeah, Gordo! Perfection. Like taking a sidarm shot in lacrosse that freezes the goalie and almost punches a hole in the back of the net. Or like catching a called-strike fastball that ends an inning. Steee...rike!!”

“Ouch! I’ll take your prairie boy’s word for that. Or like when you smile at the prettiest girl in the room and she smiles back. Just for that instant, everything’s right with the world. Only a quick smile from her, but one full of promise.”

“You got it, brother! A different sweet spot. But what would you or I know about any of that?”

“Yeah, not a lot, Jack. You’re right, I guess. But a whole new frontier to explore! You with the future Mrs. Jack Glazebrook waiting patiently at home. The incomparable Eve!”

“Incomparable! Wow. That’s a big word for such a young...Wait! What was that!? On our tail, Gord! On our tail!”

The explosion from the starboard engine rips shards of the cowling and engine parts into the fuselage, exposing the front midsection of the interior of plane. The wind is clawing its way through the cockpit and navigator’s station, spitting out everything that’s not secured. I can see the ocean’s smoked-glass surface past the twisted skeleton of the starboard prop and engine. A hail shower of bullets slashes down through the navigator’s canopy and then instantly forward, piercing the full length of the plane’s topside.

I try to reach ahead to grasp the yoke, but my shoulder is numb. I try to slide my legs ahead to reach the rudder pedals, but my legs are numb too. I’m being pressed down, as if crushed, and suddenly in

blinding pain. I can't move...anything. Paralyzed. And the plane is pitching down, nose first. A river of blood spills from under my seat and races forward in forked streams.

"Glazer! Jack! Glazebrook!"

"Gord, I can't. I can't. I..."

The plane is falling now. Twisting. Spiraling. Moaning.

"We're going in, Jack! God please! Please! Who's ever going to know!?"

I can't tell if it's Jack's screaming or my own. I think both. Death screams. A discordant duet of pain, anguish, terror...loss. Mostly loss. Mostly loss.

Postscript

Pilot Officer Edwin Gordon Kingsley Bullen, 22, of West Vancouver, B.C. and Warrant Officer Class II Jack Kenneth Glazebrook, 25, of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, were lost and presumed shot down over the Mediterranean Sea, Friday, February 26, 1943. Their bodies were never recovered and the wreckage of their Bristol Beaufighter was never found.

The sacrifice of these two young Canadians, and the sacrifice of thousands of other Commonwealth airmen who died during World War II in Mediterranean theatres and who have no known graves, is commemorated by the Malta Memorial. 303 of these airmen were Canadians. The memorial is outside the main entrance to Valleta and is easily identified by the gilded bronze golden eagle that caps its tower.

This short story is an account of the last mission of Gordon and Jack, as imagined by Gordon's relatives, Brian and Patrick Bullen.