

The Day the Plane Came Down

Written by David Stanners

There it was again, on its regular Saturday visit, circling the house, the Tiger Moth biplane, picked out against the blue of the sky by its primrose yellow Flying Training Command livery and there they were, the helmeted figures of instructor and pupil, waving as they meandered over on a clockwise circuit. Teddy had worked in the jewellers in Devizes for just six months before the owner finally got fed up with the shop being packed with soldiers and airmen who never bought a thing and he'd 'had to let her go'. Since then, for one of the more mobile branches of the armed services, the setback had been only temporary as its members had managed to maintain contact throughout the summer by flying over from their base. //

The summer had been as hot and intense as the winter long and bitter. In early April we were still chucking buckets of water down the playground after school at four o'clock to give us a half hour's slippery fun in the morning. Throughout the summer term the hot red brick wall in front of the school swarmed with flies and our knotted hankies had taken a terrible toll. Thanks to the long light evenings the harvest was all but gathered. In the cornfield behind our house we'd watched the uncut square in the centre, sanctuary for rodents large and small, being whittled away by the machine we called a combinder and dwindling until the fugitives in there had decided this was the moment beyond which they could not afford to wait. At that point three or four rabbits and sundry other smaller fry had burst from their thicket. To confuse the pursuers they all took different routes to safety and in no time the waiting dogs, after speeding from one lost cause to another, gave up the chase before pretending disinterest to mope around in the dusty haze sniffing at the rapidly cooling trails. Now the sheaves were drying, arrayed in stooks like thatched hutches in a sea of stubble, no doubt providing food and temporary lodging for more vagrants before being carted away to the stack-yard to await the thresher.

The first two weeks of the school holidays had provided almost enough adventure to last a lifetime with the promise of more to come. This was mostly to be enjoyed away from watchful eyes, along the byways and in the open fields around the village, since the rule of law in the house was as steadily matriarchal as ever. Mother was always needing little tasks done, like fetching in coal, or potatoes and carrots from the clamp against the paddock fence. With her there could be compensations; we boys licked bowls clean when cakes were being made and pounced on the peel as it dripped from her knife when she was preparing an apple pie. However, the twins just riled Robert and me, endlessly playing the only two records they had, Bing Crosby's 'Stardust' and 'Blue Skies' and Deanna Durbin warbling 'The Last Rose of Summer' or 'Oh My Beloved Father' and successfully keeping us out of their world by communicating silently in 'deaf and dumb' or more annoyingly speaking Romany when it was painfully obvious that they were being rude about us from the smirks on their faces. Also, cooperation was very much a one-sided affair as the menacing click of their knitting needles meant that at any time I could be grabbed and made to stand like a clotheshorse, arms akimbo, holding a skein of wool while it was wound into a ball. My usual method of retaliation was to quietly make for the door, leaving a little something behind, and then

rapidly exit accompanied by a shower of shoes and anguished cries of, 'Mother, he's done it again!'

The garden was no place to linger either. Michael was home from technical school, flying bigger and better kites even higher over the paddock. He regularly collared me to keep things airborne while he diverted himself elsewhere for the odd half hour and, since the penalty for failure was usually death, it was safer not to be press ganged in the first place. He'd come back for the holidays waving a brand new air pistol he claimed he'd made in the workshops at school and it hadn't taken me long to find his ingenious hiding place, at the bottom of the rainwater butt wrapped in oilcloth. The gun was instantly reclaimed and in my innocence I'd thought that two days was long enough to let the dust die down. I was soon proved wrong when he lured me onto the handlebars of mother's bike and gave me a terrifying ride round the vegetable garden where the large coal clinkers lining the winding paths loomed like jagged reefs about to claim another wreck. //

The first raid on Marston had come on the very first Monday of the holidays. Jimmy had overheard the boys from the council houses planning it in the playground and passed the intelligence on to me. As I crouched by the World War One mortar in front of the village hall, they appeared in the distance right on cue, moving leisurely but purposefully, one, foot on the tailboard, scooting their battlegon along, one sitting on the box steering and three outriders. I was off like a flash with my clanging hoop giving me extra pace as I pelted down the tarmac lane through the short cut to warn the Marstonites. I was past the church, down through the wood, over the millstream and almost up into Marston before the raiders could have got even to the church, encumbered as they were by their heavy transport and in no tearing hurry, being ignorant of me ahead of them.

The two Marstonites I managed to raise didn't think we defenders were enough for a head on clash, so we contented ourselves with tracking the invaders from behind a dense high hedge. As they emerged from the footpath onto the road we lobbed clods of earth, our own mortar bomb shells, which burst realistically around them. The trajectory of the barrage had them so completely fooled as to its source that after five minutes they were more than ready to beat an ignominious retreat, vowing revenge with vain shouts of 'We can see yer!' This was only going to be the first of many such skirmishes to come during the summer so it was worth winning.

Earlier in the year, at the end of 'War Weapons Week' Jack Cox's big chestnut colt, Captain, led by a land girl, had pulled a hay wagon loaded with the whole school dressed as soldiers, sailors, airmen and nurses, together with Morris dancers and collectors with their tin boxes down to Potterne, back through the village and round to Marston via the mill. Jimmy was dressed as an airman and I wore some old pyjamas dyed khaki and one of dad's forage caps with mum's silver Royal Warwickshire antelope pinned on the side. We all had our photos taken standing in front of the squire's big house.

The result of all this roadwork was that Captain had to be reshod and Jimmy, me and the gang were privileged to form his entourage, running alongside as one of Jack's hands led him to the smithy at the other end of the village. We'd watched in awe as the fire roared in answer to the smith's bellows, marvelled at Captain's stoicism, his only movement the nonchalant flicking of his tail at flies, and winced for him as old nails were extracted, hooves were pared, red hot new shoes doused, raising clouds of steam, put in place amid the acrid stench of fumes and nailed home.

On the Thursday following the Marston raid it was announced that, after spending the whole of Wednesday acting as trace horse, alternately lazing at the gate and then hauling wagons laden with hay up the steep slope out of Jack's Top Field onto the road, Captain was due another visit to the smithy and we were to be allowed to take him there by ourselves. Robert, three years younger than me at five, wasn't allowed to come on the first, more dangerous part of the project, that of catching our horse, so it was just the four of us who set off from our house.

We'd been doing plenty of useful jobs around Jack's farm like holding tails during milking when, if matted, they could turn into cat and nine tails, giving the hands a nasty lash round the ear as they balanced on their one legged stools, heads pressed against the cows' bellies. We'd also been catching Jack's horses for him all year now and were getting quite good at it. It has to be said that the horses themselves were also beginning to know the ropes. The catcher stood offering his pan of oats in his left hand with a halter carefully concealed behind his back and it usually took two or three efforts to complete the exercise.

As we watched from nearby while keeping the other two horses at bay, Jimmy's right arm twitched well before Captain got his nose near the pan but was just wrinkling it in anticipation. He'd shied away round the field on a rocking and gallumping lap of honour, followed by his approving colleagues. The next time Captain got a good mouthful of oats before again beating Jimmy to the punch but then he graciously deigned to be lassoed at the third attempt. We were soon all of us up on our charge's broad back, off down the road and lifting Robert onto a perch high on Captain's neck from our garden gate.

Then began our triumphal progress through the village, past the village hall and the gawping evacuees, sticking to the right hand side of the road to face non-existent traffic. We'd gone past the school and the 'Rose and Crown' when we were able to feign proud indifference as tongues ceased to wag briefly and heads outside the village shop turned to watch the short cavalcade clip-clop by. At the council houses we prudently crossed the road to increase the range for missiles and urged Captain into a short trot until we got to the forge. Again we felt Captain's pain for him and envied him his stoical endurance; then, pleased to be associated with such nobility, we started our journey back. This was made the more enjoyable as Captain, sensing that it was an event to be savoured and, moreover, that the sooner he was home the sooner he would be back at work, acceded to our need for a more measured gait.

On Saturday we'd been told that on no account were we to go near Jack Cox's farm on Monday. Adult logic failed to take account of our state of 'Qui Vive' and there was a buzz of excitement among the senior members of the gang. Our antennae were instantly up and all thoughts of expeditions to Little or Big Sandy or, for that matter, Marston were shelved as we prepared to meet outside the village hall on Monday, at eight o'clock. That morning my suspicions were immediately confirmed when, promptly at seven o'clock, the aptly named heifers, 'Buttercup' and 'Daisy' who had been tenants in our paddock and roomed in the stable for the past year, were driven off towards the farm amid much mooing.

At eight, as I set off ostentatiously in the opposite direction, announcing importantly that we were off to Marston, no one chose to question my choice of footwear, wellingtons in the height of summer. We turned into the path to Marston as the Reverend Harper's big Wolseley Twelve rolled by. If he could see mischief in the making, his smile did not betray it, and anyway, we'd all be in church again next Sunday for his Bible class. The minute he turned the corner we doubled back and were soon through the gate into the field behind our house,

rustling along the hedge, our wellingtons protecting our ankles from the sharp stubble. Beyond the end of the paddock we turned back towards the road and in a convenient cosp pulled down our trousers to take stock. Then, satisfied with our finds so far and that, with any luck, we would soon be adding to a most vital area of knowledge, we scuttled across the road and over the fence into the well-kempt orchard opposite to provision what was to be an important journey of discovery.

The rear access to Jack's yard was past the pigsties and the inevitable moat-like slurry pit which surrounded our favourite source of conkers. Even in a heat wave the deceiving crust on top concealed a quagmire of indeterminate depth and our wellingtons came truly into their own as we edged towards the yard. From our crouched positions behind the fence we could see through strategic cracks the bull chasing a cow round the yard. However, as they both teetered from cobblestone to cobblestone, to our utter disappointment, it quickly dawned on us that we were becoming no more enlightened than before and, after watching two rounds of the yard, we announced our total dissatisfaction with the whole proceedings by standing up and brazenly marching down the path between the farmhouse and the yard onto the road. Our disgruntlement was deepened by the fact that no one in the yard seemed to notice that we were there, or care for that matter. Nor, when we reached the house, did any one remark on the direction from which we came, although, I suppose, we could have come from Marston via the mill.

The war was as remote as ever, not even a distant rumble and mainly registering through the wireless. It was, perhaps, brought a little closer by that big yellow insect buzzing round the house, although in itself the circling plane did little more than cause eyes to be lifted skywards and tongues to still briefly, and then to click off the roofs of mouths. Even its disturbing of the clacking rooks from roosts in Top Field could be produced just as easily by our catapults. The news was constantly droning on about things referred to as 'intruders', sinister German planes that seemed to come over just to see how things were going in Britain. Usually the report was of one that had been brought down or crashed 'somewhere in the south of England'. Now the reality of war was about to be brought closer to home and, for the second time in a week, our quest for knowledge was to suffer a distinct set back. //

Thus on Wednesday morning, when Robert and I left the house, our purported destination was our favourite bathing place on the stream at Big Sandy, using the double blind of setting off towards Marston and then hopping over the stile onto the footpath behind the church. However, after collecting Jimmy's lot from the fields in front of his house, we swept past Big Sandy on our real mission, to investigate the strong rumour of a crashed German plane in fields on the left hand side of the road towards Lavington, beyond the turn off to Potterne where we went for haircuts. More than that, it was supposed to have been shot down by a plane piloted by someone who had been a pupil at the big school in Market Lavington, where the family were thinking of sending me. The brochure we'd been sent showed shining schoolboys standing in front of rows of immaculate Friesian cows. So I might become a farmer.

We emerged onto the road just past the smithy and, for the next half-mile, kept close in to the hedge to avoid being spotted by the guards, ready to take to the fields again to outwit them. Crawling round a bend to where we could see for some distance we were amazed to find no sign of soldiery, not even a Home Guard unit on which to practice our doughty field craft. So, confident of talking our way past any sentry left on duty, we set off openly in single file while occasionally jumping up to look over the hedge.

There was definitely something in the distance on the far side of the field and, by the time we got to a convenient hole in the hedge, we were convinced of our find. It was lying at the end of the deep furrow it had ploughed, propellers buckled, back broken, with its nose buried in the hedge, like a stranded whale, moreover, a toothless whale with gaping holes in its gums where guns had been taken out. As for being sinister, we were unimpressed. Later we would be able to report importantly that we'd walked around it and it looked nowhere near as sinister as the sepulchral tones of newsreaders made these things sound. Nor was it dangerous as, clearly, it was deemed not even worthy of a guard by the authorities.

On Friday evening, our neighbour from opposite, Mrs Early, took Robert and me down to her family's smallholding, way past Jack Cox's farm, near the road to Poulshot. Her son Eddie who was sixteen and dug our vegetable garden for us had taught me to drive the Fordson tractor down there, or at least to steer it while he spread muck from a trailer. This time we were harvesting hay from a field on the other side of the road and were treated to a ride in a magnificent old Rolls Royce coupe complete with dickey seat. Lion hearted and with a lion's roar, even in its twilight years it was the most powerful mechanical aid as, with a huge sweep attached to the front, it pushed the long lines of dry hay to the elevator for lifting up onto the rick.

It was nearly ten o'clock when we passed the Marston Road on the way back, with Robert being pushed along sitting on Mrs Early's bike and me walking. We then found ourselves facing the Home Guard roadblock manned by villagers including Eddie. Not wishing to undermine their authority we'd solemnly produced our identity cards from our gas mask boxes and passed on to their cheery 'Goodnights'.

Now, just when it seemed the Tiger Moth had decided to call it a day, it came back from right to left over the cottages opposite and round behind our house on an anticlockwise course. Then, turning just beyond the vicarage, it crossed the road, veered wide of the rookery and dipped down behind the cottages opposite. We caught a glimpse of it as it flashed across the gap between the Early's house and the barn and disappeared over a hedge into a field two hundred yards away behind the orchard. By the time Robert and I had scrambled into the makeshift landing ground it had taxied back, its tail was against the near hedge and the airmen were standing by with their helmets off. At their question, 'Are Teddy and Claire there?' we ran to get the girls.

We stood a little way off while they talked, probably about the next dance at Devizes Town Hall. One of the flyers had cut his hand as the plane brushed the briars on the way down and he playfully dabbed blood on Claire's cheek. Then they climbed back into the cockpits and the plane revved away down the field, the deep throaty roar of its engine imitating the Early's coupe, bouncing at first and, as its tail wheel lifted, bucketing, reminiscent of Captain at his most glorious. Finally, with a leap over the far hedge, it soared away home for tea.