

“3 Squadron STORIES”

JACK LUSBY • 1913 - 1980

A Flying Fragment

IT WAS HARD on Mick Mooney that, near the end of his tether, he had to break in the rustiest bunch of pilots he'd ever encountered. Being the oldest, rustiest, and one of the slowest to get going, I was able to study him at uncomfortably close quarters.

It was said that his long and colourful Hurricane career included a Battle of Britain bullet in the head. This was hearsay.

Perhaps because planes and ships were scarce, or front-line losses temporarily few, odd times saw groups of aircrew mouldering in reserve or transit camps dotted round the world and, it seemed to them, forgotten. Via the back lanes of the East our small party moved slowly and spasmodically to Egypt.

There, after only three months to get acclimatized and say hello to old friends, who'd trekked round the globe the other way, we were told to fly.

'Hurricanes or Kitties – whichever they have when you get there. Be ready in half an hour.'

We reached our 'drome at midnight, packed like pigs in the back of a truck, dog-tired and stiff with cold.

'Out, bods!' cried a sing-song English voice.

It was a hard, white night. Scattered, pagoda-like, EPI tents squatted moon-hazed in the sand. The 'Out, bods' voice said, 'Three to a tent, chums, wakey-wakey 0430 hours.'

I chucked two blankets on the ground and passed out.

Waking grunts and snarls revealed that the other numbered hipbones in the tent belonged to Steve and Hawkeye. The new boys comprised Australians, Englishmen, Canadians, plus one, Rafe, who'd made his way to this RAF 'drome from Texas. Most were sergeant-pilots, and, in age, retired schoolboys.

The 'drome was a big claypan. Sustained by what passed for tea at an ME RAF station we gathered flying-gear and started walking to the Flight tent nearly a mile away. The ground was spread with thick white fog and its surface was treacherously greasy.

A prairie voice said, 'After all, when you get right down to it, in what way is this any different from Miami?'

Someone said, 'The things they don't tell you in books!'

We heard on either side the reluctant stuttering of cold Merlins. Occasionally, silhouetted against the fog, we saw the ghostly, humpbacked shapes of sleeping Hurricanes.

'Easy, easy,' said Rafe, 'or we trip on an erk in the dark.'

The English fitters and riggers *did* seem jockey sized. They could be heard rumbling batteries about, shocking their winged charges into a fury of wakefulness. Exhaust fumes lit figures clinging limpet-like to cockpits in icy, fog-swirling prop-blasts. You felt the brittle pre-dawn tension of any wartime 'drome.

A blot ahead became the Flight tent. It was formed by three jointed EPIs. Inside some Irving-jacketed fellows turned and looked us over. They were young, quiet, and looked tired. Operational men, instructing for a 'rest'.

There was a muttered, 'Your turn, Kim.'

One of them hooked his elbows on the 'chute-bench and kept looking at our faces, harsh-lit by a hanging globe. He threw his cap back on the bench. Lank, bleached hair topped a healthy brown face; a horse-kick scar circled one of his amber eyes, which had the round, unblinking look seen in some 'old' fighter pilots. Medium build, a policeman would have said. Outside it was still dark. A soft Canadian voice ruffled the silence.

'I'm Kimber. Here we teach you to fight and shoot; to use an airplane as a weapon, not an airborne automobile. I guess you all know by now if you hold it wrong it kills *you*. We've got about a week to teach you all we can. No time for horse-dung on your part or ours. Out there,' thumbing the west, 'it's really grim. The tougher we make it here the longer, maybe, you'll last. I hear most of you haven't flown in a long time. Here's where you catch up. You'll find it's like riding a bike; you just don't forget. In a week you'll be flying rings round *us*; and that's the way it should be.' But he seemed humbly aware of the gap he had to bridge between our knowledge and his.

From outside came the fog-muffled but sustained and unmistakable sound of an aircraft committed to flight. A glance ricocheted among the instructors. They straightened and strode out and we followed. The noise churned around in the distance and we heard a groaned, 'Not again, Mick, not again.'

Cat's-eyes head-high in the fog grew to twin moons, and, when we uncrouched, the tent still breathed in the turbulence. Again the Hurricane's landing-lights spread at us rocking as wing-tips were lifted over ill-seen obstacles.

'Urrrr, Mick, ye don't have to do it,' burred a voice near by.

Soon we heard him taxi-ing.

'Who was it?' asked Hawkeye.

Kimber sighed, 'The Squadron Leader, seeing if the fog's cleared for flying.'

As the fog thinned, a couple of circuits in two-seater Harvards gave us a bit of the feel back. I heard a heart-warming Australian voice in the earphones: 'Give her a burst for luck on the home turn – go for a fast-wheeler – tell Flight next gent please.'

After breakfast a languid, droopy moustached and fashionably unkempt type was nursing a dachshund near a Hurricane. He beckoned and indicated the cockpit, assuring the animal that this would only take a minute. Sitting among the unfamiliar gadgets, I listened to the cockpit drill. It wasn't much trouble, eyes shut, to put a hand on this and that. Then the dachshund-fancier said, 'Don't be more than an hour old boy. Oh, and the Squadron Leader's watching.' Then he went away.

Gear on and back in the aircraft, the situation still seemed unreal. A battery was trundled under the nose. A voice in the cockpit screeched the, 'All clear, contact,' routine and I saw gloved fingers press the maggie buttons. The thing started without the slightest hesitation, and off went the erks and battery. Looking around I saw other props spinning and ground crews trotting on to wreak more havoc among the atrophied pilots. Hell, it *must* be fair dinkum. And 'the Squadron Leader's watching'.

Brakes off, my machine gambolled along to take-off point like a cocker promised a walk. Round the forty-four gallon marker drums and into wind. Nothing for it but to push the throttle and hope.

Taking over from the Hurricane a few minutes later I rediscovered the Suez Canal by some masterly pinpoint navigation and sneaked furtively along it wondering if there was any way of landing invisibly. Unable to move the lever, I'd been beetling around the sky, wheels-down. And since the same handle worked flaps, I could only look forward to a slightly spectacular, high speed, flapless arrival. With no gatecrashing on my part, a meeting with the fog-dispersing Squadron Leader seemed imminent.

As the Hurri slowed to about sixty, a utility overhauled it. The driver's face seemed mottled with rage; his mouth was opening and shutting. Unable to hear him, I waved in, 'See you later' fashion and parked.

Carrying the 'chute over the sand to the Flight tent I could hear someone screaming as if in unbearable pain. It was Squadron Leader Mick Mooney. He was screaming at me.

I walked up to him and stood still, wincing.

He was slightly built, dark, and a thin Hollywood moustache writhed like a snake along the violent contortions of his upper lip. The nose was small, sharp and hooked; the eyes opal-black in wrinkled slits of skin. He was perhaps thirty. That's all I saw the first time. Suddenly his voice dropped to a comparatively soothing level.

'How long since *you* flew?'

'Getting on for a year, sir.'

'No excuse for assuming the Hurricane has a fixed undercart. Overheats the motor. Looks bloody awful ... *Do you expect every — in the RAF to fly wheels-down so YOU can stay in formation?*'

'No, sir.'

'What did you fly?'

'Wirraways, sir.'

'Wirraway? Wirraway? What is it? Some half-feathered marsupial?'

With that Mooney turned and walked into the tent.

Shortly my dog-nursing adviser came out looking somewhat unsettled. He made quite a speech.

'It's all right, you know. I've just lost a strip, too. "Careless instruction." Please don't do it again. At least you did bring the plane back; somebody's vanished with one. Probably hocked it in Cairo.'

The Squadron Leader is taking five of you up now; formation takeoff. Do remember that release-tit on the undercart lever.'

He made for the nearest sandbag and sat on it.

It was nine o'clock.

In the tent Mooney said to us, 'We fly Hurricanes hood open and goggles off. Better vision. We also like your *eyes open!* Wing tip clear of the next man's, able to move forward or back and level with his roundel. Form up at takeoff point in the order you get there. Now *get cracking!*'

When we faced up at the barrier Mooney was waiting with all the patience of a fire engine at traffic lights. I found myself next to him, and he stared at me with what could only have been recognition. Up went the thumbs and we were racing. Some gremlin got in front of the throttle lever and risked a hernia. I trailed lengths behind on takeoff.

The rest of the flight was uneventful. Pansy, practice stuff; it steadied the flying a lot. Mooney swept the formation gracefully round to land like a matador spreading a cape.

I heard it as my feet hit the sand.

'Put that bloody parachute *back!*' Mooney was standing near his plane fifty yards away aiming the words like bullets.

Signing at the Flight he spat out, 'You can't overtake the leader on takeoff; he's watching you and progressively opening the throttle. This time open *yours!* Aeroplanes *want* to fly, *but you've got to help a little bit!*'

At the last moment I had to switch to another machine, the heaviest, faster four-cannon job. It had a lot more power for takeoff. There were just the two of us. Determined not to be left behind again I shoved the throttle lever forward with commendable enthusiasm. The look on Mooney's face as I sailed past him and soared alone into the dust-haze will live with me forever. Back there no doubt he was 'progressively opening the throttle' until it came out by the roots.

I waited in a gentle turn. He came sliding up on the inside like a wide-finned, sand-coloured fish and led. Just above a low, thin cloud-layer Mooney signaled 'Line astern'. In this position behind and a shade below, you look as though the leader was pulling you on a short string. The still air caused not even the usual gentle lift and

sway of one plane in relation to another. We were as if fixed in space forever.

In a flash he was upside-down. He hung there for a moment studying my reaction, then plummeted from sight. As he screwed down, my heavier plane seemed to be catching up. The thin cloud-screen whipped away, the canal twirled up, streamed by my shoulder, flecked with felucca sails and went. Dust-haze, white flicker of cloud, blue sky and, thank God, Mooney. I came to heel like a guilty pup who'd almost lost its master.

Again he rolled, dived, pulled out and rocketed into the face of the sun. His black silhouette dissolved in the furnace. I found him right beneath me like a shark under a fishing-boat. We must have looked like a biplane. Then he skidded to one side and did a brace of beautiful rolls. Struth, I thought, the man must be happy! He'd damn near led me into the ground.

Mooney darted for home. As I was closing up for landing he shied violently sideways like a startled horse. I edged back alongside and we landed. On the ground he shouted, 'Blast you! Out here *never* join up from astern – come in from the beam so we know what you are! You'd better get some lunch.'

Rafe was standing in the sun, hand-talking excitedly to Steve and some Canadians. The pilots' universal pantomime, infuriating when abused, can describe almost anything that happens in the air. Rafe's hands converged with a smack and separated, fluttering groundwards. The inevitable, 'who was it?' brought, 'Couple English fellers in a practice dogfight – man, you shoulder seen it. One baled out.'

The 'drome was now hot and dry. Walking to lunch Hawkeye said 'This time yesterday we were busy swatting flies at Almaza.'

Wacker said, 'Yes, flat out trying to fill in time!'

Some of the lunchtime babble: 'They found the type who disappeared this morning, about thirty miles away.'

'OK?'

'Dead as a doornail – force-landed wheels down in soft sand.'

'Oh, bloody bad luck!'

'Been up with friend Mooney?'

'Not yet and not anxious. Believe he put an Aussie through it this morning.'

'Don't worry. Puts everyone through it in turn.'

‘Yes – if you don’t stick in like a dart you’re OK.’

About sundown a group of us, feeling justifiably weary, stood watching the last formations washing off speed before landing. Hurricanes came shoaling in shark-like over the sand; sank into the dusk and lost shape.

The beer tasted good. Even the food seemed palatable. The tension was off.

In the dark next morning Mooney performed his tent-high fog-churning chore and stepped into the Flight tent.

‘Start with you again,’ he said. ‘Individual attacks with film. Come in from five hundred yards out and a thousand feet above. And for God’s sake *fly!*’

We climbed, levelled, separated, and I turned to wait for him. The day exploded over Egypt in a kaleidoscopic broken-egg vastness of cloud and air. A black speck raced towards me along the rim of a mile-high blood-red cliff of cumulus. The world pitched on its side, streaked past the cowlings, steadied, and there was Mooney far too small in the ringsight. I fired the camera-gun, broke away and climbed. Must be quicker next time.

After half an hour of this we dived to breakfast.

Armourers took the film, and I rather hoped they’d lose it. Mooney shouted, ‘Out of range and no deflection! *Get in close!* You don’t hit ’em when you’re pointing at ’em. Be here after breakfast and *bloody well get it right!*’

Rafe said, ‘Jeez, you must hate that guy.’

‘No, strangely enough,’ I said.

‘Strangely enough, I *do!*’ said an Englishman, with curious intensity. He was a tall bloke standing, bareheaded, in open battle jacket and shorts. His long, thin face was expressionless; and the reddish colour of his tight-kinked hair showed in the skin and flecked his eyes. He said no more.

Later Mooney was squatting, head bowed, on a sandbag. Faded cap, bulky fleece-lined jacket, spindly drab-clad legs. A white pup sat between his shoes and he was patting it. Suddenly he twisted and shouted back into the Flight tent, ‘Where’s my bloody utility?’ The pup scuttled away.

A sergeant came out and said, ‘Transport’s fixin’ it, sir.’

‘Fixing it or mucking it?’ He raced into the tent and grabbed the telephone. ‘Transport? Bring back that bloody truck or I’ll drive a Hurricane tail-up where I want to go! Get your bloody fingers out. *I’ve had you, Transport!*’

He crashed the phone to the table and ran to the nearest plane. The motor burst into life and the tail swung and lifted as he raced down the mile-long road to the administrative section. I sat and waited.

A plane had landed and taxied to a stop near by. I recognised the pilot as the red-haired Mooney-hater. He was said to be eccentric. Some fitters gathered expectantly. The pilot rose in the cockpit, stood rigid and announced at the top of this voice, ‘Once again man has defied Nature.’ The show was over.

Some of the erks were staring upward. A plane was spinning high in the sky. A sergeant growled, ‘Now then, lads, ain’t y’seen ’em doin’ that before?’ They still looked up. Kimber, inside, sensed something and came out. ‘Goddam it man, pull *out!*’

Mooney, who had returned unnoticed, said, ‘He can’t, or he would,’ and went back into the tent.

Black smoke rose a couple of miles out in the sand and Mooney was saying on the phone, ‘I’ll tell you, sir, when we know who it was,’ when a Hurricane came in and landed very fast. When it taxied we saw a third of one wing was missing. It was Steve who climbed out. He was sweating and shivering.

He said, ‘Me and Wacker – did he get *out*, Freddie?’

I said, ‘No.’

Mooney said, ‘No; you seem to have won. See the MO, then see me.’

To me he said, ‘Up Jackson – let’s get some dung off our livers. *And this time come in close!*’

I found myself shouting, ‘I’m doing my best! I’ll show you “coming in close!”’

Mooney’s smile was like the Mona Lisa’s.

A Canadian sergeant-instructor waiting near my plane said, ‘Take it easy; makin’ guys mad’s his technique.’

The first attack was far too close. The plane suddenly overflowed ringsight, windscreen, and filled most of the view ahead. I wallowed in Mooney’s wash before striking solid air and breaking away. My plane got the bit in its teeth and bored in each time as though bent

on gnawing Mooney's tail off. When the cine-gun ran out of film we landed.

Mooney screamed, 'You came to within *seven feet!* Are you trying to *mate 'em?*'

'Anything for variety,' I said.

No comment.

After lunch Mooney flew with the Eccentric; the post-mortem was a delight to hear.

'I propose to cite you as listless, slow, consistent only in unreliability, and without a vestige of natural ability.'

'But, sir, nothing detrimental, I hope!'

That night in the crowded film hut there was some beautiful demonstration stuff by Kimber – bead stuck like glue ahead of the target's spinning prop while the cloudy backdrop whirled and raced. My own film was frightening to watch. The target turned its tail into the camera and hurtled at us, filling the screen with belly and tail before it flicked from sight.

The film interpreter said, 'God! You could count the rivets!'

There was another exclamation and someone said, 'That was the Squadron Leader. He's gone.' Each pilot's films were run off to expert comment such as, 'Deflection about right – slightly out of range – that's better – bad button-stabbing – longer squirts, please.'

The Eccentric's reel, after showing the usual whirling emptiness of sky with occasional views of aircraft, concluded with a screen-filling close-up of the stolid face of an armourer.

After a moment of stunned silence the interpreter said, 'Surprise ending!'

Back in the sergeant's mess the senior WO answered a knock on the door and returned with the Squadron Leader, dapper and polished, black hair close-brushed and shining.

Tombstone asked, 'Like a beer, sir?' Mooney dragged up a stick-and-canvas chair and sat down.

The Eccentric rose gracefully and carried his drink to the trestle bar. There, feet crossed, and comfortably hooked by his elbows, he stared back at us. A hanging bar-light glowed on the fiery hair, narrow forehead, high nose and cheekbones. The rest was shadow.

Mooney sitting low in the chair, looked steadily at him, deadpan

and rigid. I had a curious feeling that the Eccentric stood, remote, to better *concentrate* on Mooney. His attitude had a bone-pointing quality.

Tombstone came back and whacked beer on the table; and the honest sound was welcome.

Mooney said smoothly, 'Ah! Quick work, Tomson – looks a nice drop. Luck!'

Turning my way he said, 'That was extremely dangerous today. Strike the happy medium. Smoke?'

More instructors came in and joined the growing circle. Flying reverted to its proper status – 'a piece of cake'; child's play.

An Englishman tossed in a suggestion for a list of fineable offences to be posted in the Flight. From fifty-ackers for a landing or taxi-ing prang to ten for 'goddam' or 'son-of-a-bitch'.

Rafe said, 'Yeah, and fifty for "a-a-actualleh!"'

'What price breaking a neck?' shot from the figure under the bar-light.

There was a noticeable sprinkling of DFCs and a couple of DFMs on the instructors' khaki tunics. Affecting eye-trouble, Rafe jumped in with, 'So many goddam gongs here a guy could hammer out the Anvil Chorus!'

Steve's laugh startled me – he'd been unnaturally quiet for a kid who laughed easily.

Mooney turned on him. 'Hear you've some damned good songs, Hampton. What about it?'

The usual all-in singsong developed from tentative 'da-de-das' among the more cautious to full-throated competition, ending in husky good nights and sleep.

One morning was cloudless and perfect for shadow shooting. We did this in pairs using the four-cannon machines. You dived at the other man's shadow, and the spurts of sand showed where your shells were hitting. Burton, an English pupil, went with Hawkeye. Hawkeye returned alone and reported Burton crashed while shooting.

Mooney, writing at a trestle-table, grunted, 'Probably selected his own shadow and pressed home the attack.'

Thwaites, of the dachshund, picked up a piece of cloth, walked to the roster-board and looked inquiringly at Hawkeye, who nodded. Thwaites erased Burton's name and went to the telephone.

About an hour later, Lofty, who did everything with a flourish, turned an ordinary run-of-the-mill forced landing into an arrival to write home about. When the engine cut he dropped the wheels and tried to reach the 'drome. Skimming a distant sand hill, he hit a nearer one and bounced two hundred yards on to the runway. No damage. Lofty had already established a formidable reputation for luck at poker, craps, and the Gezira races; so naturally, Mooney was flying and not available for immediate comment.

He was giving the Eccentric a last-chance test in individual combat. On the joystick were two buttons, one camera and the other guns; and it was important not to confuse exercises. After this one Mooney treated his languid opponent to a brilliant, if vitriolic, discourse on deflection.

He was saying, 'Well, what the bloody hell *were* you aiming at? Certainly couldn't have been me!' when he noticed a rigger at attention beside him. 'Well, what do you want?'

'Sergeant Smithers, sir; he just found a bullet hole in your tail-plane, sir.'

Mooney swung back to face the Eccentric who didn't miss the trick. 'Certainly couldn't have been me,' he said.

Mooney knew when to be silent.

In the mess afterwards I heard a whisper that the Eccentric a-actually was really rather hot. Just didn't want to be in it. Someone had seen him doing things when he thought no one was looking. And that a few days ago he'd forgotten himself and pulled off a wizard bit of flying, then deliberately mucked it up. Rafe voiced a wish that in his own case this process could be occasionally reversed. The man from Texas provided the following morning's chai-time entertainments.

'Ambitioning' to ultimately join a Yank unit, he'd 'organized' a Kittyhawk. Landing the first time, he was travelling so fast that when he tried to put the flaps down nothing happened. He touched down at some speed, hurtled across the 'drome with fire-tender in pursuit, saw a sandbank and date palms coming at him, took off again and barely cleared them. He went round again and this time got in nicely.

As we picked up our tea-mugs again Kimber said, 'God send me back to the war where I'm safe.'

'Touching on that,' said Thwaites, 'Mick intends to give the hundred-and-nine a whizz round after lunch.'

The captured Messerschmitt 109 was a neat little job; and half the fuselage seemed engine. It heated quickly on the ground and was started up at take-off point. Mooney got in and went. The cooling system blew up and an oil-pipe burst. With cockpit full of fumes and oil, the ME came over at about a hundred and fifty feet, leaving a snowy trail of glycol.

Mooney, half-blinded, and with little control, was a trier. He skidded round and reached the runway via a gap between some tents and a parked Tomahawk. The Messerschmitt crouched steaming with fury; and Lofty said, 'Must be a one-man dog.'

Mooney drove to the mess.

Before breakfast on our second-last day the Eccentric stood facing Mooney on the sand between their planes. We could hear Mooney's voice, pitched high.

'That was a bloody stinking gutless imitation of an attack! Your breakaway a perfect example of straight and level flying! Aren't you *game to do it?*'

What the Eccentric said we don't know. Mooney seemed about to spring; then turned and came towards the tent. The Eccentric just stood out there staring after him.

During that afternoon vapour trails marked the high, blue ceiling of the sky; and, looking up, we saw a pinpoint star of fire.

Mooney burst out '*Burn, you bastard, burn!*' and watched it down the long air lane to the horizon. Some Arab workmen also watched; and asked, 'Inglezi?'

Mooney blasted them. 'How the bloody hell should *we* know? *Escut! Yallahimshi!*'

He strode off, his small black shoes jabbing the sand.

Thwaites said to Kimber, 'Saw him cannon-firing at a camel today, all directions. Arab chappie scuttling around seeking safe side of the beast.'

An Australian instructor laughed. 'Believe he'd spend his last leave with a saucer of milk and a waddy – killing cats.'

I said, 'Oh, I dunno – saw him one day patting a pup.'

'Probably interrupted him,' said the Eccentric. 'Anyway, he shan't kill *me!*'

There were curious glances at the speaker; the chatter had ended on a wrong note.

Trudging over a sand hill in the dark next morning, pilots saw a plane, wing-lights ablaze, rolling along the surface of the low fog.

‘Aha! The act’s improving!’ exclaimed someone unseen.

This was the day of the ultimate demonstration.

The crew of the Nazi JU88, briefed to scan the port, had no thought of meeting Mooney in the final frenzy. The 88’s four-Messerschmitt escort, too, must have been surprised. Mooney had attained the suicidal recklessness which sometimes accompanies the limit of fatigue.

In a bloodshot mackerel sky the four school Hurricanes weaved in loose patrol formation at 15,000 feet, Mooney and this three charges – Lofty, the Eccentric, and myself. It was the hour when, ‘Lo! The hunter in the East has caught the sultan’s turret in a noose of light.’

At the sight of a simple, stupid minor accident Mooney had led us off downward in a silent fury. In the bracing upper air the camouflaged, light-bellied planes performed a wobbling quadrille. I was singing with the engine, ‘First lady forward; second lady back.’

Our leader, just ahead, rolled violently, and wings vertical, skidded high above. Beneath him streaked a three-pronged, black-crossed shape and a Hurricane shrank in vertical pursuit. They faded chameleon-like into the emptiness below.

My head almost whanged the cockpit edge; it surprised me that the plane was diving and dodging.

A Hurri was plunging abreast of me, barrelling. Beyond it another was simply standing on its nose. And hurtling past us dived the four Messerschmitts. Sleek darts with a flash of sun on them.

Intent on removing the threat that was Mooney, they’d left their run too late. As my controls glued stiff with speed I saw an orange-coloured shooting star below.

The radio crackled in my ears, and this time I got some words ‘– get ’em on the way up.’

The Eccentric turned away; he was pulling out. With the anticipation of a veteran he cut the corner of the German’s dive and zoom. I followed, with a momentary impression that he’d done this thing before; and sand, sea, and sky all misted into blackness.

With vision clearing and face back in position, I saw one of the gnats, rocketing after Mooney, trailing smoke. As the Hurricane behind it pulled away an ME followed with the inevitability of a shadow. I heard myself screech something on the radio.

We all winged over in a curve of flight that seemed as pre-ordained as the path of planets.

A Hurricane like a humpbacked projectile came firing on a tangent, and I hastily took thumb off cannon-button. The Eccentric's German shadow staggered, flipped over, shedding pieces from a wing-root and vanished. Something struck my plane with a terrifying 'Crack!'

Desperate shove on rudder-pedal, stick in corner, and I spiralled in a maelstrom of confusion. I lifted hard against the safety-harness and slammed back with a spine-buckling jar. The goggles dropped down over my eyes and I snatched, left hand from throttle, and pushed them off.

There was a taste of bile, smell of petrol, blackout, sight again. Going straight up.

Comparative calm, and an even keel restored, with no apparent damage, I did some overdue looking around.

To my left an ME nosed shell-like from the depths, turned, levelled. Above, a Hurricane poised, falcon-like, careening, whirled, and with split-second fury struck.

A black-crossed wing spun feather-light in a dust of smaller fragments. Flame blossomed in the air below; then the sky was empty.

I flew home feeling that I'd sat out an exhausting film.

On the 'drome:

'Freddie! Were you in that do? Here, have a smoke!'

'Light it for me. I was there – and that's about all.'

'Lofty's back – boy, you should see his kite!'

'They reckon Mooney got an eighty-eight, and an ME went off smoking.'

'On a training flight!'

'Probably arranged the whole thing.'

Oh, fair go!

Kimber came into the circle with Lofty. He said, 'OK? Well, what did *you* see of it?'

'A bloody awful collision – Hurricane rammed an ME.'

'So the ack-ack says on the phone. See who it was?'

'No.'

'The long red guy – pounds to ackers,' said Rafe.

I said, 'Well, he shot one down, I think.'

With the phone filling in the gaps, the picture fell together: the JU88 skimming the desert, burning like a torch; the doomed rear-gunner still firing point-blank at Mooney. In the vengeful skyward chase two MEs hit, and the collision.

Someone suggested that whoever rammed the German had been hit mortally; nothing to lose. A German had baled out OK.

My plane seemed to have been struck by a bit of another aircraft.

A Hurricane screamed low across the 'drome, flashed over us, zoomed, and circled to land.

A dozen voices: '*Mooney!*'

The prop stopped spinning and the pilot shed his headgear. We saw the red thatch of the Eccentric. It was the first time we'd seen him laughing.

(‘A Flying Fragment’ first appeared in the *Bulletin* in 1953. It was republished by Oxford University Press in *Australian Short Stories: Second Series* (1963) edited by Brian James and in *Short Stories from the Second World War* (1982) edited by Dan Davin.)