

Aces Over Ypres

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Prologue

The anti-aircraft shellburst was a tremendous crack of thunder, so close that the zip of passing shrapnel caused the pilot, Lieutenant James St Leger to bank his aircraft hard over. Within seconds the explosions filled the skies. In front of the Avro 504 biplane the sudden bursts of black-hearted smoke were like a fluid minefield. St Leger pedalled the rudder from one side to the other, alternating the yaw as rapidly as he could to confound the gunners' aim.

On the flanks two British Farman biplanes were seeking their own path through the firestorm, chance alone keeping them from destruction. St Leger put the Avro into a steeper climb. The safety of the clouds was no more than five hundred feet above them, less than sixty seconds away. It was their only chance, an escape the German gunners seemed to sense and the rate of fire increased to a terrifying intensity.

The observer, Charlie Sexton cowered behind the rim of the rear cockpit. Each near miss was like a punch, a solid blow that smashed him against the side of the fuselage. The feeling in the base of his stomach was terrible, an expectation that at any moment a searing piece of shrapnel would shoot through the floor and tear into his flesh. He instinctively cried out in terror, the desperate frustration of how he had come to be there fuelling his will to survive, his cry lost in the roar of the engine and the crash of shellfire.

The compacted clouds above them stretched across the sky. Seconds ticked past, bringing them ever closer. One of the Farmans was only fifty yards off their starboard quarter. In the jarring turbulence and smoke-filled sky Charlie couldn't recognize the crew. Like the Avro, the Farman was tail down in a desperate climb. An anti-aircraft shell exploded directly in its path. The Farman punched through the remnants of the airburst. Another explosion erupted beneath it; the concussion kicking the aircraft upwards but the pilot recovered and Charlie urged them on, realizing that St Leger and he were making the same headway in their aeroplane.

They whooshed past a bank of white. For an instant Charlie thought it was another explosive burst but then his heart leapt at the realization that it was the lower reaches of the clouds. They were seconds away.

'Come on!' Charlie roared. 'Come on!'

A shell burst off their port wing, the strike blasting holes in the linen fabric of the lower wing. Charlie barely sensed it, his entire focus on the Farman biplane close by, willing the crew on into the thickening cloud; knowing that the escape of his comrades would signal his own.

Suddenly, the Farman exploded in a massive blast of fire and debris, the direct hit of a nine-pounder tearing out the heart of the aircraft in the blink of an eye, its momentum sending flaming wreckage outwards and up. The Avro was punched sideward by the explosion, knocking Charlie back, the fireball searing the exposed part of his face. His eyes flew open in shock, capturing a horrifying image of the destruction. Then it was gone, whipped from sight as the Avro shot into the clouds, the terrible vision replaced by an impenetrable blanket that instantly numbed the senses.

The sound of explosions fell away, leaving only the roar of the engine at full power as it pulled the Avro ever higher through the cloud. The turbulent air in its depths knocked the biplane from side to side. Charlie sat immovable, stupefied by shock, his thoughts trapped on a single harrowing image, his mind racing with the dreaded question of which crew had been lost now.

He whipped off his goggles. The cold wet slipstream washed over his face and stung his eyes. He had been an observer for only a few short months but for a moment he couldn't remember how he had got there. Instead all he could sense was an overpowering will to escape, to return to where he came from. He had never wanted to join the Royal Flying Corps, to be an observer and fight the war in the skies. Fate had cast him into this world and as he relived the horror of watching the Farman explode he yearned with all his might for a chance to go back to where he belonged.