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The Designer's Notebook: A Letter from the Cockpit

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[This letter came into my hands following the death of Lady Cecilia Hawkins in the autumn of 2004. It appears to have been written by her brother, Lord Earnest Hawkins, to their father, the Baron of Brampton. Earnest was a pilot during the Battle of Britain.]

610 Squadron, Auxiliary Air Force
RAF Biggin Hill

August 16, 1940

Dear Pater,

Well, I know that writing letters with secret information in them is strictly forbidden, but the events of the last few weeks have been so extraordinary that I simply must make some kind of a record for posterity, just in case I don't make it through. I'll give this to you by hand the next time you're down this way, and that way it won't have to go through the censors. Please put it away somewhere safe – perhaps the family vault, where nobody would think to search – and that way even if the Hun overrun England (which God forbid) they won't get their paws on it.

Yesterday was bloody awful. I know I shouldn't swear, but no other word will do. Huge aerial assault from the Luftwaffe – all over England, they say, although the news about these things is always sketchy. Several heavy raids here, but we got up in the air straight away and gave as good as we got, or better.

However, I'm getting ahead of myself. The circumstances here are so different from what I was led to expect in training that I'm completely amazed... and baffled that our instructors could have got it so wrong.

These aircraft are simply incredible. You know how I struggled with celestial navigation during training. It's no picnic trying to fly a damaged plane, take star sightings, and calculate a course to a blacked-out airfield all at the same time. Well, I'm happy to say that we don't have to. The boffins have come up with navigational aids that I've never even dreamed of. To start with, there's a sort of mechanical map that always shows you where you are. It never gets damaged, and it's never wrong. And if that weren't enough, there's a device that *always points in the direction of the nearest enemy*. Don't ask me how it works – it's positively unbelievable. It's a jolly good thing we've got it, though, because I can't turn my head enough in the cockpit to see clearly. And there are lot of other things that simply seem like magic: buttons that suddenly change your altitude, or pull you out of a spin, or even land the plane for you. If Jerry ever gets his hands on one of these kites, we could be in real trouble.



***Their Finest Hour: The
Battle of Britain***

I know you never much cared for that science fiction I used



The History Channel: Battle of Britain

to read before the war – 'awful rubbish,' you always called it – but I swear if you saw some of this new gear we've got, you'd think again. Aerodynamically, they're a doddle, not nearly as tricky as everyone said at flight school. It's almost as if we're flying an aeroplane from the future, not 1940. It makes flying and fighting with them a dashed sight easier than I had any right to expect.

The planes are sturdier than I anticipated, too. We were told that it doesn't take much to send one home – a bullet through an oil line or the cooling system and it's goodnight, sweetheart, time to hit the silk. But it seems as if I can be positively riddled and keep on flying. (Sorry, you mustn't read that bit to mama, I'm sure it would give her palpitations.) But the truth is I've never been wounded yet, no matter what happens to my plane. Whether it's luck or

Divine Providence I couldn't say, but I'm heartily glad of it!

Our maintenance johnnies are nothing short of brilliant. My Spitfire is always spotless, never a scratch or a leaking drop of oil anywhere. And not only that, even if she takes a few bullets during a sortie, they always patch her up perfectly for the next mission – not the slightest sign there was any damage at all. All the planes are in tip-top condition, and operating at their maximum specifications all the time. There's never any wear and tear except during battle itself, of course. You can be sure that your boy is being looked after very well by our ground crews – rather eerily well, in fact.

Then there's another rum thing: the weather. I would not have believed there could be such a difference between our home up in Lincolnshire and down here in Kent. Anyway, it's ideal flying weather most of the time: good visibility, few clouds, light winds, very little rain. The clouds are a bit odd, though: in the air they don't look the way I expected them to from the ground. And when you get in among them the plane actually seems to stutter and slow down, especially if there are a lot of us all flying together. It must be some strange meteorological phenomenon that they forgot to tell us about.

We don't fly any night missions, in spite of the Heinkels and Dorniers that have given our cities such a pasting after dark. I suppose somebody must be flying them, but it's not us.

That's the good news, and if it were the whole story I should be happy as Larry. But it's not all beer and skittles by any means. I've had the most appalling bad luck with my wingmen. I don't have any choice about who they are; they're just assigned according to some rota. Somehow I keep being given wingmen who are still wet behind the ears and I've lost no less than three of them. I swear it's nothing to do with me. They just don't seem to have any tactical sense. They don't obey orders or follow the correct procedures, and the moment we get into a scrap they lose their heads completely. It's all I can do to look out for myself and my own mission, much less wet-nurse them as well. Poor fellows. I do feel badly about it, but honestly, what can I do? I'd rather not be given a wingman at all.



Microsoft Combat Flight Simulator

And that leads me to the strangest part of this whole war. I've never even seen my quarters. We very nearly live in the planes themselves. I expected to eat in the mess with the other chaps, but I find that I'm so busy and exhausted that I can't even remember them. I just spend all my time in the crate. I almost feel as if I'm a part of the machine now, scarcely human. I don't want to get out of the cockpit. It's a very odd sensation: as if the only world that's real is this tiny enclosed space, and the sky, and the enemy. The ground is just something to look at through the

windscreen.

Everyone always talks about the sense of camaraderie in war – the bonds that are forged between men sharing danger. I know that's the way it was for you during the last one. And yet... I feel strangely isolated, as if I were fighting this war alone. I can hear the other chaps on the radio, but I don't see them. We don't play cards, or have a smoke together, or go out to a dance and meet the local girls. It's scramble and fight and land and scramble and fight again, endlessly. Even during bad weather, when Jerry's quiet and there's nothing to do, I find myself sitting in the cockpit.



Rowan's Battle of Britain

Sorry, pater, I don't mean to sound maudlin. Stiff upper lip and so on. It's just that... well, I believe this business is going to expand into another world war, perhaps even bigger than the first. The lights are going out all over Europe once again. There will be death, and horror, and madness; there will be bravery, and gallantry, and sacrifice; there will be heroes whose deeds go unsung and cowards treated as heroes for deeds they did not do. And I – I am somehow apart from it all, alone in my aeroplane. I know that Mr. Churchill is giving brilliant speeches in the House of Commons, but I cannot hear them. I know that across our beloved land the defenses are being made ready, and I cannot see them. I know that somewhere the men back from Dunkirk are recovering from their wounds, and I cannot shake their hands and thank them.

I fight for England, but I have no sense that England is fighting for me.

Give my dearest love to mama and little Cecilia.

God send us a speedy victory.

Earnest

[Earnest Hawkins fought on, racking up kill after kill in the Battle of Britain until one day, without warning, his entire universe vanished in the middle of a routine patrol. His controls froze, and the last thing he saw was a great blue rectangle, shutting out the world like a screen.]

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