

No Horizon

(A story)

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A rumour got started that the squadron would convert to Liberators; the rumour persisted; after a few weeks everyone takes it for granted and then a signal arrives from Headquarters saying that the squadron will convert to Liberators effective immediately: four crews to be posted to Nassau, train there for six weeks and then fly four Liberators back and convert the rest of the squadron by September 1.

The Wing-Commander picked Squadron-Leader Foorth from C Flight in Sierra Leone, Flying-Officer Slade, Pilot-Officer Smith-Margetson and Sergeant Rocky Goruk from squadron headquarters in the Gambia. There was much dissatisfaction with this choice, especially Squadron-Leader Foorth, who was called Shit-my-auntie.

Up flies a Hudson from Takoradi, estimated time of arrival in the Gambia, 2300 hours. The Wing-Commander is angry, it's that Angell, he says. Tells us he is coming for spares, What kind of spares does he think we've got? He wants to bind about the conversion, that's what spares he wants; and people stay away from the Wing-Commander. At 2200 hours he asks if the homing searchlights have been laid on with the navy, and there is. a. panic because they have not, several people scurry, and the Wing-Commander goes to bed, and then at 2300 hours 'Hudson B for Bertie comes in across the coast and makes a good landing and out steps Squadron-Leader Angell alone.

The news gets around that the Angell coast-crawled in B for Bertie all the way from Takoradi all alone.

Next morning the Wing-Commander summoned Squadron-Leader Angell to his office and threatened to have him on the carpet for flying a Hudson without a crew, and Squadron-Leader Angell asks why has Takoradi been left out of the conversion? and the Wing-Commander says do not change the subject he says, I might have you court-martialled he says, and Squadron-Leader Angell tells him to stop threatening, it is not a court-martial offence.

What's all this about spares? asked the Wing-Commander. The Hudsons are through now, spares are hard to get and you fly like mad fool down there and wear them out. What are you trying to do, get tour-expired?

Exactly, sir, we want to get back to the bloody war.

Well, you get no spares and you do not get tour-expired before anybody else. Is that clear?

But it turns out that he does get spares: three sets of brake plates, an exhaust manifold, carburettors and spark plugs for Pratt and Whitney engines. And he says he is going to fly his aircrew as much as he likes and get them tour-expired.

Now listen, Angell, Says the Wing-Commander, do not be an ass. I let you run your own show down there, but I have to keep the whole squadron flying.

Angell says nothing.

Party tonight, says the Wing-Commander. With a dance band. It was stuck in transient quarters at Bathurst, so I attached it. You ought to stick around.

But he takes off at noon in T for Tommy, alone again, and the Wing-Commander was glad to see him go. And he did not come back.

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The crews for the conversion were briefed at squadron headquarters and given a send-off; Squadron-Leader Foorth's crew and Flying-Officer Slade's crew and Pilot-Officer Smith-Margetson's crew and Sergeant Rocky Goruk's crew; and the Wing-Commander made a speech telling them how privileged they were, and what a responsibility it was, and then Squadron-Leader Foorth made rather lunatic speech and there was a good party. Then they were flown down the Coast to Liberia and despatched by air from Robertsfield.

The remaining crews were divided, those who were to finish their tours on Hudsons stayed with C and D Flights in Sierra Leone and the Gold coast, those who were to convert to Liberators were posted to the Gambia. These were favoured crews. Two were posted from D Flight in Takoradi: Flight-Lieutenant Thurston's crew and Pilot-Officer Blood's crew

Five new Hudson crews arrived by sea at Freetown and were flown up to the Gambia, all but one pilot, Flying-Officer Langille, he was detained at Freetown.

Why was he detained at Freetown? the Wing-Commander wants to know, but there seems to be no answer.

These crews are rather dim, their papers can not be found and they know nothing about themselves. One of their wireless operators has no pistol and says he was not issued one. Some of them are wearing bush jackets and this puts the Wing-Commander in a rage, bush jackets are not regulation, he says. His name was Hunt and he was a European Englishman, twenty-nine years old, witty, moody, unpredictable, a great party man but never drank so far as was known, and an unusual married kind of man, that is to say, faithful to his wife. He had a few favourites and no intimates. He signalled Headquarters about these new crews: over establishment in Hudson crews he said, and asked to have them posted to Algiers or India, but he was told that they were for his squadron and he must keep them.

More were two flights of Hudsons at squadron headquarters: A Flight was commanded by Squadron-Leader Robertson, but he was new and inexperienced on Hudsons, so it was really run by acting Flight-Lieutenant Boardman; he was one of the. Wing-Commander's favourites and was called Pongo. B Flight was commanded by Flight-Lieutenant Archie Moon, an Australian with a polite accent.

The Wing-Commander called Pogo to his office and demanded to know what's all this about the new crews going to B Flight?

Well sir, we thought the old crews should go to A Flight and be converted first and the new crews to B Flight and well that's how it seemed to us, sir; fair way, of doing it, sir.

I decide all that, says the Wing-Commander. You just keep the Hudsons flying.

O yes, absolutely sir, but I mean it seems fair after all, doesn't it sir?

It works out that the new crews are all attached to B Flight. Not thought to be much good, most of them; poor drinkers in the mess. Not well trained either; one crew crashed on take-off,

pre-dawn, and wrote themselves off and wrote off an aircraft and burned everything up so that there was little to bury and they all went into one grave.

Another crew got lost in a storm, missed their convoy, came back late und put down, with ten minutes of petrol left, on the abandoned Lufthansa runway. Flight-Lieutenant Archie Moon drove over through the bush with a petrol bowser to fly out their aircraft. The afternoon sun blazes, a tribe of monkeys is there before him and he shoots at them with a Verey pistol to drive them away. Pits and bumps all along the runway. He walks its length twice; African workman are sitting at the far end eating some lunch; he taxis the full length to warn them, then at last he takes off and a storm is almost overhead, moving from inland.

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The detained pilot came up from Freetown, Flying-Officer Langille, a school-teacher from Nova Scotia, rather serious, twenty-seven years of age. He had a wife and two small daughters and carried their photographs. Sociable type in the mess, but in a quiet, not very alcoholic, way.

He came into A. Flight office to see Pongo, knocked on the door and behaved formally; it was morning and Pongo is still somewhat drunk and uncomfortable from the night before, unwilling to listen carefully and yet not unfriendly. Flying-Officer Langille calls him sir. This makes him groan.

Flying-Officer Langille wondered if he might be put straight on to Liberators and not have to fly Hudsons any more; said it was on this understanding that he had been passed out of operational training since he had not finished his night flying; I have not been passed for night flying on Hudsons, he says on account of an accident, he says. I came out of hospital on to this draft but I did not want to, but they said I would not fly Hudsons. Hudsons are through, they said.

Pongo pushes his hat back on to the back of his head; it was a commercial topee, rather shapeless and very light. His face is white and wet. Bastards, he says.

I am not a bad pilot, sir, and I like Hudsons but not at night, because you see the last time I flew was at night and I crashed on landings on account of my navigator taking up the flaps I think but I do not know, he was killed, and I spent five months in hospital and then I came straight on to this draft, you see sir.

Pongo says that it would be satisfactory if he might not be called sir.

Flying-Officer Langille begs to be taken seriously.

Pongo explains that Flight-Lieutenant Moon is Langille's Flight commander, why does he not see him? and Langills says well he did, but he sent me to you, sir; he says you have more influence with the Wing-Commander than he has.

No good, says Pongo. The old man does not respond to out-of-order requests, says he. Which yours is, whatever those bastards may have promised you.

But he says he will speak. to the old man just the same and perhaps wangle it somehow, or anyhow wangle something, and anyhow not to despair, because he will be given lots of dual and checked out again, and lots of night dual and not have to do night flying until he has been well and truly checked out.

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Two u-boats were reported, presumed 16 North 21 West coming south and east; at the same time two convoys were on the board, a small one proceeding south near the coast off Dakar and a big important one proceeding north, passing Cape Palmas two hundred miles off shore, and a dry-dock was being towed across the South Atlantic and the Navy is in a flap about the dry-dock, they ask for continuous air cover, say that a third u-boat is suspected in the path of the dry-dock. The Wing-Commander protests lack of aircraft and spare parts, and makes a speech to the squadron, his most important since the invasion of North Africa; and the Hudsons, so far as they can be kept in repair, all down the Coast, fly day and night. C Flight in Sierra Leone reports that it is operating three aircraft on one set of brake plates, and the Wing-Commander publicly curses the improvidence of the Angell.

Then all at once the panic is over, no more u-boats on the board, no convoys, and the dry-dock safely berthed at Freetown.

Flight-Lieutenant Archie Moon loses the toss with Pongo. Come along, he says to Langille, we'll take old S for Sugar, she's got a twisted fuselage they say but she seems a nice old creature to me. We'll have a little aviation, he says, you and I.

Langille explained that he had not been off the ground since his accident and Archie said that it must have been a very unpleasant prang, very unpleasant indeed, he said, but we shall see how you get along with S for Sugar, he said.

Has it got dual controls? asks Langille. This S for Sugar?

O my yes, to be sure it has, dual controls is right.

Why were you not checked out before? asks Archie. When the others were?

Langille asked if he did not remember that he had been kept in hospital in Freetown, giving him a check-over, and I got detained, he says.

O yes, says Archie, I remember now, I remember all about you, but for the time, you know, I forgot.

Well, says he, start her up, then.

They make two circuits and landings, then they fly down the coast a few miles and circle a fishing boat, then they investigate the auxiliary aerodrome at Brikama and make a landing there; grass has grown up through the runway plates several inches deep. Then they flew home and Archie reported about the runway at Brikama.

That is a very good pilot, he said, that Lang, Long, whatever his name is, how does he spell his name anyhow? Very good pilot. Ropey old aircraft, however. Too bad.

S for Sugar was grounded and dismantled for spare parts, and it was not flown again.

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The crews came in from the other flights for the conversion, Thurston and Blood and Johnny and Macpherson, they had all been down the coast for months, and there were reunions in the mess, many parties, the dance band played; and there was a French squadron from Dakar in the mess, attached by the Wing-Commander; they were Baltimore pilots and good pilots and good party men and the Wing-Commander spoke French with them. They flew as second pilots

on the Hudsons, for training, and there was much flying. It was rumoured that the Queen Elizabeth was coming up the Coast, with twenty-five thousand troops. A signal came for an aircraft up north at Port Etienne, Archie Moon requested the detachment and was given V for Victor, an old Mark III to take up, and he was away for ten days, flying every other day.

It was one afternoon that three aircraft were out on a search, that a bad storm came from inland; all three aircraft were recalled; also the flying-boat squadrons at Half Die recall their aircraft, Langille is airborne from Ouakam. He was late returning, the storm is already over the aerodrome when his engines are heard, and Flying Control try to signal him to divert to Brikama; then his engines were heard no longer, much rain fell and the road to Brikama was thought to be washed out; however, Pongo got the Desert Wagon ready to drive over along it. Then all at once an aircraft appears on the runway, water sprays up from its wheels, down goes its nose, its tail seems dangerously high in the air and it can hardly be seen for rain and water; then somehow it rights itself and taxis in. Flying-Officer Langille, The flaps of his aircraft have been buckled by the water splashing up against them and everyone agrees that he has been very lucky and very skilful.

The Wing-Commander wanted to know why he had not diverted to Brikama as instructed.

I tried, sir, and it was worse that way than here, and then was lost, I was flying at one hundred feet and followed a bush road and then there, was kind of a break in the rain, I saw the runway and I turned thirty degrees to port and put down.

Very lucky, says the Wing-Commander.

Langille greed.

Good flying, says the Wing-Commander. Good work, Langille.

Thank you sir, says Langille. Tears came into his eyes and he was not able to speak and the Wing-Commander walks away.

The storm went on all night and did much damage around Dakar up country in Senegal.

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The first Liberator appeared in the circuit and everyone on the station comes out to see it land. Signals have been coming for over a week saying that the four crews have left Montreal with their aircraft and the Wing-Commander has been correcting rumours and starting new ones.

It seemed a larger aircraft and its engines made a deep buzzing noise and it circled the aerodrome further out on a wider circuit than the Hudson and it was painted all over white according to the new directive on sea camouflage.

Flight-Lieutenant Squeaker Tremear put forward the opinion that it must be Shit-my-auntie's aircraft. Squeaker was the engineering officer and the Wing-Commander's most constant favourite and rival of Shit-my-auntie, and it was not known why he was called Squeaker and it was generally felt that he might have been called worse; and yet he was not disliked and his troops liked him, but some aircrew looked down on him on account of the sarcasm he put up with from the Wing-Commander.

The Liberator made a long low approach and for a while it seemed as though it might never land, yet suddenly there it is, speeding down the runway and rattling the metal plates, and

the Wing-Commander speeds after it in his half-ton Ford and Squeaker Tremear speeds after him in the Bedford and Flying Control speeds down and it is not Shit-my-auntie after all but Sergeant Rocky Goruk, Before the landing run is finished a hatch opened on top and out sat a man on the roof with his legs dangling in the hatch.

The Wing-Commander spoke. We shall put a stop to that, says he. That Goruk has been away from discipline too long; he gets on one of these transport flights and he thinks he can get away with anything, says he. I should not have sent him, says he.

Another Liberator appears in the circuit; the Wing-Commander lost interest in Sergeant Goruk's aircraft and then so did Squeaker Tremear, but Flying Control stayed with him and directed him on to a new dispersal, and some of his buddies from the Sergeant's Mess crossed the runway to him and he shuts off his engines and opens his bomb doors and descends with his crew in some triumph. He was a Canadian from the prairies, nineteen years of age, eager and a little arrogant, not lucky exactly but a good pilot and quite well liked. It was a widely held opinion that a Canadian commanding officer would have got him his commission.

Another Liberator appeared and then the Squadron-Leader's Liberator touched down an hour after everyone else, and some alarm was felt about him. But it came to light that his navigator, Flight-Lieutenant Rosie, spent a last hard week-end with his wife, and went to sleep over his charts, and the Wing-Commander thought this was a good joke.

The party in the mess began before supper. There was red infuriator on the table and Van der Hum and Drambuie with the coffee, though very little of either; the band played and the French commanding officer sang a song off key; and there was housie-housie in the Sergeants' Mess.

After midnight Langille went out and across to the Sergeants' Mess. Flying-Officer Slade was there; he was called Cobber and, was considered the best u-boat hunter on the Squadron, and was awarded the DFC for two sinkings and one probable before he got chosen for Nassau; and he was talking with Rocky Goruk, and many sergeants were in a circle around them, and two officers, and Cobber says that the Liberator is a docile aircraft to fly and not responsive and no good for u-boat hunting, not beside the Hudson, and Rocky says bullshit, it's better armed than the Hudson and that's what counts these days, and Cobber says bullshit, if they shoot at you manoeuvrability is what counts, he says, and you might as well fart at them, he says, as shoot those popguns at them.

There was much disagreement with this, everybody likes the fifty calibre Brownings on the Liberators and wants to try them out, and Cobber is asked if he has seen the new directive from Intelligence about circling the u-boat and picking off its gunners and he says yes he has seen it, he says, silly bastards, he says, they want to murder us, that's all that means.

Suddenly the talk breaks up, the singing gets very loud and Langille is on the way over to Operations Room with Cobber; there has been a downpour and the grass is wet. For some reason, says Langille, the singing makes me homesick.

Singing always gets me, Cobber said.

There were two u-boats and two convoys on the board, and Cobber studies it for a long while, then he spoke: Those u-boats know about those convoys, says he, and if I was only on Hudsons again I would get one of them.

Langille wanted to be told how he knew they knew.

Cobber spoke. You got to put yourself in their place, he says. Just imagine you are under water in one of those things, you come up at night to charge your batteries and get a little life on the surface. That's a hunter's life, son: what else do you know about except the convoys?

Ever think you would like to be on a u-boat? Cobber asks.

Langille said he would not like to be on one, not at all. Think of the convoys, Cobber says. Just like flocks of sheep.

Sometimes I get the feeling I would rather be down there hunting than up in the air hunting.

Langille said it must be wonderful to feel that way, but he could not bear to imagine what it must be like under the water, shut in.

You're shut in anyhow, Cobber says. No fear, we are all shut in. What do you think you are, anyhow, hanging up there in the sky in that petrol loaded box? What do you think about that?

Langille wonders if they should not get out of the Operations Room, it has a musty smell, hard to breathe; so they cross the runway and climb into the cockpit of Liberator FL245, Cobber brought it from Montreal, and they looked at all the controls and instruments in the moonlight,

What is the sweet smell? Langille asks.

Don't know, aromatic petrol perhaps, very high octane.

Do you get claustrophobia in this cockpit?

You get over it, Cobber says.

I thought I wanted to fly one of these. Now I know what I really want, I just want to survive and get home.

Cobber asks him if he has a wife. Langille says yes he has.

Any kids?

Two daughters. Yesterday was my oldest daughter's birthday, six years old. I haven't had any mail since I left the UK.

Cobber asked him how long he had been on the Coast and he said four weeks.

It's a long old war out here, says Cobber. everyone survives too long. I got a wife too, he says, and two daughters too, he says; my oldest is just four. Whereabouts you come from?

Nova Scotia.

I had a little girl from Bridgewater. When we were in Montreal.

He sighs.

You got to make up your mind, he says, are you going to live in the bloody world, or not. It's got its compensations.

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A panic was on about the northernmost convoy; two aircraft take off at first light, Langille in Hudson V for Victor, and Archie Moon in Hudson F for Freddie; Pongo takes off in Hudson P for Peter when it has been made serviceable. An hour and a half out V for Victor develops an oil leak in its starboard engine, then the engine catches fire; Langille got the propeller feathered and the fire out; his navigator was Sergeant Gunner Johnson, a young Icelander from Winnipeg; his wireless operators were Flying-Officer Garlick and Sergeant Markovitch; Sergeant Markovitch was Australian, an even-tempered man with a comic tongue, he was the only non-Canadian in the crew; Flying-Officer Garlick was from Toronto. One ship in the convoy was hit and burning. Langille set course for base and left the convoy; he lost two hundred feet at once and the gradually another four hundred and fifty and crossed the coast at two hundred and fifty feet, but he was able to land straight ahead on the runway by putting his wheels down at the last minute and he ran off the end of the runway but did not damage the aircraft.

Squeaker asks why he lost so much height, don't you know how to fly on one engine? he asks. That is a Mark III, the last one in the. Gambia, she ought to keep her height.

Langille explained that his good engine begun dropping revs, so I nursed it, he says.

V for Victor was made, serviceable again and the Wing-Commander air-tests it and he takes it around one circuit and the starboard engine is throwing oil and he brings it right in and pronounces it unserviceable and Squeaker's explanation was heard by many but not by the Wing-Commander, and V for Victor does not fly again for a while.

The ship was towed in eighty miles from the convoy and burned three and a half days in the harbour, sending up a pillar of black smoke, then it sank.

Everyone thought Flying-Officer Langille must be a good pilot and very cool, and he became well liked because although he was not much of a party man and hardly at all a drinker he was not stiff or stand-offish and he was modest and reserved but not cold, but Squeaker thought there was something unlucky about him; no-one else wanted to say such a thing, but once it was said they agreed.

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The medical officer was Squadron-Leader Lord; he was a good -party man and disliked having to stand by for night flying, and he called non-operational night flying night nonsense. He spoke to Archie Moon.

What is all this bloody night nonsense tonight? he says. One bloody aircraft, he says, on Pongo's birthday. There is Scotch whisky in the mess, he says.

Archie explain that Flying-Officer Langille had to be checked out, and I lost the toss with Pongo. And you will be agreeably surprised, says he, because we shall take two circuits at most, Laney or whatever you want to call him being a splendid pilot, and. I shall get detached to Dakar for a night and I shall make my way to Madame Norma's for a grind.

Squadron Leader Lord, he was called Septic or the Septic, wondered why it might not be possible to consider Flying-Officer Langille checked out at night without any nonsense. If he is so bloody good, as everyone says he is.

O gracious no, says Archie. Never do at all, you know. Suppose he were to have a prang in one of our precious Hudsons, think of the court of inquiry about that.

But when he came down again Archie was in a bad state of mind and he goes straight to the mess to the party and refuses to speak to any one until he has made his way to the bar and had a drink, and than he gets Pongo aside and spoke to him and never so frightened in my life, says be, and Pongo pulled at his moustaches and spoke.

O I say! says he.

Have to take a grip, eh? he asks.

He keeps falling out of the sky, says Archie. So I tell him, look at your instruments, I tell him, never mind outside, and down goes his starboard wing and he overcorrects a mile and up goes his nose and the old climb-and-dive indicator is all over the clock, merciful God in heaven!

Pongo looks very serious and wipes the whisky out of his moustaches.

We must get the dual controls in another aircraft, says Archie. Where's that Squeaker Tremear? And we must get an instrument-flying hood, merciful God! I had old P for Peter, no dual controls, just imagine how I was occupied, imagine my feelings, old boy.

He gave a loud laugh.

It was decided that Pongo would inform the Wing-Commander, because he was best at keeping him calm, and persuade him that Flying-Officer Langille should be taken off Hudsons, or at any rate excused pre-dawn take-offs or night landings until he converted to Liberators.

The Wing-Commander's tone was reasonable; however he accepted neither suggestion. He said he knew at they wanted, dual instruction, that's what they wanted to get out of, Archie and :Pongo, both of them, he knew all about it, and :anyhow Langille would have to be checked out at night sooner or later and there was no use kidding oneself, and they were to get Squeaker to fix up an instrument-flying hood and fit it in old P for Peter and the dual controls, and Langille was to get lots of instrument-flying practice, and some of the rest of you while you are at it, he says, because you types fly on George all the time and I bet your instrument flying is awful.

I'll do some too, be says; I know mine's awful.

However, no instrument-flying hood was made or fitted, more Liberators were flown in by Transport Command crews, Squeaker was busy checking them, and he said yes yes yes instrument hood, I know all about it, and nobody really wanted to keep at him, everybody was more interested in the new Liberators really and getting on with the conversion, but as it happened the dual controls did get fitted into P for Peter, an old Mark IV the only one on the station, but no instrument-flying hood.

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A problem arises about the Transport Command crews, they cannot be sent back from an delivery flight by sea, only by air, this is their contract with the Air Force and it is to be observed to the letter at whatever inconvenience, so here are the Transport Command crews, twenty-two civilians and nine officers, and the Wing-Commander allows them the hospita lity of the mess, but they are not officially subject to his discipline except in so far as he is station commander, and there is no prospect of a flight out for them, not for a long while, and they sit in the mess all day and gamble and pay no attention to anyone and neither shave nor wash, and heap money in hundred and thousand dollar bills on their tables, and in many ways become unbearable. So the Wing-Commander has them ordered out of the mess and over to a large Nissen hut in the bush

away from the officers' quarters and the sergeants' quarters and not very near the airmen's quarters either, and their meals are brought to them there and the duty officer of the day has them on his beat and otherwise they are left alone, and they are banished from the Officers' Mess. They complain and threaten the Wing-Commander that they will report him but he did not change his mind, this was how it was to be, and so far as the junior officers could see, as they visited this den on their tour of duty, it was a stable situation, gambling day and night with heaps of dollars, and regular meals, and almost nothing to break the monotony except if one or two of them occasionally shot rats with their pistols.

They were far away but they got on peoples' nerves. Squadron Leader Foorth took exception to them. But Septic did not mind them; he says he is making a study of them, sits in with them, takes notes, and finds them amusing, an interesting phenomenon, he says.

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The Liberators and the heavy rains came more or less together. Sergeant Goruk made the first circuit of the conversion. He takes Liberator BZ830 for an air-test, and takes Pilot-Officer Blood and members of Blood's Hudson crew with him; he was airborne for forty five minutes and Pilot-Officer Blood was allowed to make one circuit and landing and he entered it in his log book as dual instruction and so did Sergeant Goruk, and when the Wing-Commander hears of this he is angry, and so are some others, and Sergeant Goruk says he knows that he has got some kind of a black mark but the hell with it; and Squeaker is in disgrace because he was involved in the authorization of this flight. But after this the conversion was on, but it proceeded slowly because the Wing-Commander and Squadron-Leader Foorth want not to take any false steps. For, as the Squadron-Leader said, it is easier to get into the shit than back out of it

Then the conversion stopped again because the ground under the runway plates got spongy with the rains and it seemed not safe for these heavy aircraft to take off from it. They could hardly get up flying speed. Down goes the Squadron-Leader, down the runway, his engines roaring; then his engines stop roaring, his brakes creak, the aircraft rocks with them and begins to skid, on it goes over the end of the runway and at last comes to a stop in the rough. The Squadron-Leader taxis in very shaken. Eighty-five knots, says he, that's as high as I could get her. Shit my auntie, says he.

Now there is a thing! says the Wing-Commander, and Squeaker puts in his word about the flaps, what about them, sir? he asks. Remember that Hudson when Langille brought it in flaps all buckled? These are valuable aircraft, sir.

Gloom.

The whole schedule seems to have been held, up until. the rains are over.

There is talk of moving back to the old Lufthansa runway and fixing that up, and Works and Bricks are consulted but they say it would take a month to make it fit for Liberators even in the dry season, but in the rainy season, God knows.

Cobber Slade got himself paraded before the Wing-Commander.

Request to be put back on Hudsons, sir There's u-boats coming this way, he says, .I can feel them. Been too quiet for to long and I've been watching the board, and important shipping is on its way up from the Cape, and if there's u-boats out there and I have to sit on my ass here, God almighty, sir!

Nothing doing, says the Wing-Commander. You're on Libs now, and until we get some crews converted you're not flying anything else, and what's more, you four crews-are non-operational until the conversion is completed, too bad but that's how it is.

I've asked to have the whole squadron taken off operations, says the Wing-Commander, and what answer do I get? They don't bloody take us seriously in this war. But I'm keeping you off operations.

Flying-Officer Slade reminded him of the u-boats. They'll be there, sir, says he, and I won't like being here.

You keep your mind on the conversion, that's your business right now.

Flying-Officer Slade asks to know what conversion, but the Wing-Commander does not respond to his question.

The Wing-Commander sends a signal demanding the removal of the Transport Command crews because they are endangering the morale of his station and besides they were restless and dissatisfied, and the rains were getting their spirits down; and in thirty-six hours they were all picked up and taken away by two Douglasses on their way from Brazil, and their departure was watched with envy, and especially by the newer members of the squadron, for they had not yet reconciled themselves to the monotony of the Coast. And all spirits were down, Cobber Slade's u-boats did not appear and there was no flying except for three routine Hudson sweeps and the detachment of one Hudson crew, Flying-Officer Brain's, to Port Etienne. Cobber Slade watched the board for every change but no u-boat appeared.

Flying-Officer Langille was not given more dual instruction in night flying. Pongo authorized himself to give it twice, but the rain washed it out.

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It was decided to carry on the conversion at Rufisque. The Americans agreed to accept a detachment of eight Liberator crews and four Liberators and the ground crew to maintain the detachment. Everyone's spirits go up. Rufisque is on the Dakar peninsula and not far from Dakar and also it is an American aerodrome with an. American PX and this means cigars and high life.

Problem, how are the Liberators to be off the ground at Yundum in the first place? Cobber says he is willing to take one off there and then, any thing would be better than sitting on his ass, God almighty, and anyhow, says he, who knows whether they'll fly or not, nobody's really tried.

His words are understood to be a slur on Squadron-Leader Foorth and through him on the Wing-Commander; however, he is not rebuked and next morning, because there have been twelve hours without rain, he is authorized to air-test Liberator T576; it is now A for Able according to the new service alphabet. Langille asked to go with him and at the last minute he got aboard and Cobber took Pilot-Officer Withers, his new second pilot, and Sergeant Bloss, his old wireless operator from, his Hudson crew; and he held the aircraft on the brakes at the very end of the runway, then he lets go, the aircraft seems to give a leap, but then its acceleration is slow, and at the far end of the runway it hardly seems to be airborne, it drops one wing and then the other, and then at last it is above the trees and making its climbing turn out of the circuit.

Flies like a bird, says Cobber.

It looked awful, they all say. What do we do now?

Easy, says Cobber. Empty out petrol and leave enough to get there and an hour to spare and away we go.

.....

It rained all afternoon and evening. There was scotch whisky in the mess, and a fresh consignment of beer, one bottle per day per officer for nine days, or in fact ten days if you took the lime-juicers into account. No scotch for the sergeants but some gin, no beer for the airman, but some promised for mid-August. It has been rumoured that there is no beer at all at Rufisque for men, sergeants or officers, and no spirits either; however, there is wine in Dakar, and white women, and white whorehouses with white whores.

Langille spends the evening at Cobber Slade's table in the mess; Squadron-Leader Robertson was there for a while, but the talk got coarse and he went away; Smith-Margetson stays on, Thurston, Goodfellow and some others. Squadron-Leader Foorth is there for a while, talking loud, but then he goes off to join the Wing-Commander and Squeaker Tremear on their way to Operations Room.

Langille got talking to Cobber and told him he admired him very much and Cobber said what for, for God's sake? for sitting on my ass? and Langille said no, seriously, and Cobber said all right seriously then, what for? and Langille says well, for being an innocent and yet somehow at the same time so to speak knowing what it was all about.

Cobber laughs and gets up and goes over to the bar and. Goodfellow follows him.

I say he says, that Langille, you're not just going to leave him are you? He's an interesting type, you know.

O yeah, interesting all right, no fear. Good pilot, too.

Why don't you go back and listen to him? Goodfellow asks. He's trying to tell you something, old boy; I think you ought to listen.

You reckon I should? Cobber asked. I don't feel much like it tonight, but Goodfellow said yes, he reckoned, he should go back. Cobber goes and, sits down and looks at Langille. You got a bunch of theories, he tells him. That's because you worry too much, if you didn't worry so much you would not have so many theories, but your head, is going round and round, I can tell to look at you.

Langille admitted that sometimes his head did go round, sometimes it was awful, though it was not really so bad tonight but sometimes, when he got thinking about things in general it got unbearable. Don't you ever think about things in general? he asked..

Yeah, I do sometimes, Cobber admits, but I get off it again as fast as I can.

Langille said the trouble was that sometime he just couldn't, he'd get on it and he couldn't get off it, as for instance, he said, I was duty officer one day and I thought I was feeling pretty good and then I went into that Nissen hut, you know, where those Transport Command types were, and I saw all that money and it hit me, it was like looking over the edge of nothing, you know, and my head got spinning and it wouldn't stop spinning all day. It was awful, like night flying, no horizon.

Cobber tells him to hold on, that's bad, son, he says. don't get carried away by it. After all, when you're night flying, you put the automatic pilot in, then you don't need a horizon.

How do you feel when you are flying? he asks. I mean in general. Do you get any of this bead spinning staff when you are flying?

Oh no, I get scared all right, but that's different. I love the flying, except on instruments, I have never really learned to trust the instruments, but as long as I on even see a glimpse of the ground, I would rather fly than anything. I never imagined it would get me so much.

Cobber said well he'd better get up his instrument flying, that's all.

Well, I do not think it is all, says Langille. I wish I did, because that would be fairly easy, but I do not think it is all.

Goodfellow was sitting backwards on his chair and leaning over the back, and he was listening with great concentration, but the others were restless and noisy. Thurston says when he gets low he goes to see the Septic, and there is a roar of laughter.

Septic was making a study of those Transport Command types, Goodfellow says,. I wonder if he came to any conclusions.

Hey listen, Thurston says, there's no bloody padre out here, is there? Padres are the proper ones for trouble, not septics.

Langille said it was a fanny thing but he was kind of a churchy citizen back home, seemed a long while ago. I :even taught Sunday School once, he says.

Damn it all, so did I! says Cobber.

Somebody remembered that one of the Australian navigators was a Presbyterian parson in civvy life, joined up for air-crew instead of being a padre.

That's a funny thing to do, says Thurston. Why doesn't he have some church parades anyhow? I bet there are some types would go.

Pongo came across and sat down, be wanted to now what all the seriousness was about, seems bloody serious around here, he says; but no-one answers him.

Smith-Margetson spoke. The thing to keep your mind on, says he, is u-boats. Out here. Eh, Cobber? Think of them night and day.

But Pongo says balls, lots of good things to keep your mind on besides u-boats, especially since the nasty buggers have got all this armament, spoiled the whole West .African war, they have.

Squadron-Leader Footh comes over to the table, he has been in an argument with Brain and .Brain has gone to bed sore. Archie Moon comes over and wants to know what's the matter with Brain, why did he have to go to bed sore? and a big argument got started and it was noisy, and Goodfellow sits backward on his chair in the midst of it with a grin on his face.

.....

It is not late, about 0100 hours, a voice can still be heard singing in the mess, a troopship was leaving Bombay, it sang. Langille tucks the mosquito net around his mattress and lies bank on his pillow; Flying-Officer Brain is muttering in his sleep on the other cot; and Langille

became aware that someone was standing in the room between the two mosquito nets and made out that it was Cobber. He sits up in bed. Cobber asks him if he is all right and Langille apologized for having bothered him and says the song makes him feel homesick and that seems better somehow and Cobber says he does not understand that exactly well, maybe he does partly.

You got a funny kind of trouble, Cobber says. I do not remember running into it before but it sounds bad to me. If I knew something I could do for you, I would do it.

I'll tell you something, Langille, says: what if I could be made your second pilot? you remember, you mentioned it once.

Cobber said he did not remember mentioning it exactly.

It was a day or two after you came back. Well, it doesn't matter. But when I am with you I can see what you mean, and could forget about things in general and even home and all that; if I was in your crew I could do that, but when I am by myself I seem to lose the thread.

Do you think such a thing could be wangled? he asks.

Cobber says he would have to think about it, after all he already had a second pilot, young Withers, knows more about the Lib than I do, he says. maybe we could, get him made a captain, but we couldn't do that for a while, not till after the conversion.

But he ought to be a captain, he says.

Langille asks not to talk about him any more, everybody's got troubles, says he, and not just me, and I did not want to bring them up even, I wanted to talk about you I don't know how they got brought up, but anyhow thanks for listening to me, he says. Thanks for talking to me, he says. I think it did me good.

Troubles is right, Cobber says. We are all in big trouble, no bloody fear we are, this war is just the beginning, but what can you do about it? Talking doesn't seem to help much.

Langille said it did seem to help him.

Maybe so. I got to talk tomorrow, got to say good-bye to my black boy before I go to Rufisque. Mahmud. Always cries I wish he didn't do that. You got a good black boy?

Langille says no he really has not, he kind of shares one with Thurston and two or three others, and anyhow he is not used to servants.

Why don't you take Mahmud on? He might do you some good.

Then Cobber went away, but he came back again while Langille was still awake and promised to send Mahmud around in the morning; then he stays on for a long while talking about New Zealand and a ranch he used to work on and Brain wakes up and joins in the talk, but Langille kept dozing off and at last he went right off to sleep.

.....

Three Liberators, A. for Able, X for X-Ray, and E for Easy got away to Rufisque; D for Dog developed a hydraulic leak and taxied back in. Three crews were flown up in Hudson by Pongo and Archie Moon and Langille; forty ground crew and some administrative personnel were driven to the flying-boat base at Half Die and flown up with their kit in a Sunderland.

Pongo decided to stay the night and spend the evening in Dakar with Archie Moon, and why don't you come? he asks Langille. There's nothing on the board and the old man won't care, he's coming in too, but Langille says no he does not think so, but then Pongo says come on, have a go, and it is near supper-time anyhow, they are all in the showers, the cool water splashing on them and drumming on the boards makes them want to sing, and Langille says okay, I'll go, and he begins to sing with the others, very loud.

At 2300 hours they were drinking aperitifs in Madame Norma's, and the Wing-Commander had made up his mind to return to Rufisque and Pongo and Langille and Goodfellow went back with him, but Archie and Thurston stayed on in the hope that they might get girls, Ada and Hildegard if possible.

Pongo remembered about night flying. Good God, says he to Langille I laid on night nonsense for you and me and forgot to scrub it. Oh well, that's how it goes. They sit down under the pines and have a talk. Goodfellow says he likes to hear the pines, it reminds him of a holiday he spent in Italy in 1938, but Pongo says it just reminds him of ants and picnics, he says he does not like picnics, and then he got started on a long story about how he had been working on a girl called Lucy, she said she was a wig maker, said she would make me a wig when I wanted one because I was sure to go bald, and it was at a picnic and the ants kept bothering us, and if it was not the ants it was my wife. The story goes on and loses direction, and Goodfellow says come on lets go to bed, it's past bed-time, he says.

So they go to bed, but Goodfellow and Langille go down to the wash hut and brush their teeth first.

Wizard place this, says Goodfellow. They have even get these special taps for doing your teeth, and Langille says there is something about the Americans. I feel happy here, I feel good tonight, I haven't felt so good in a while.

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Air-speed indicator trouble, that's what it was supposed to be this time; the conversion went on for a few days and Thurston soloed and Squadron-Leader Robertson soloed; Rocky Goruk instructed Thurston and Cobber Slade instructed Squadron-Leader Robertson and then it happens the morning after Squadron-Leader Robertson soloed that Squadron-Leader Foorth has Brain out for dual and Brain is almost ready for solo and he starts down the runway and is over half way down and Squadron-Leader Foorth knocks his hand from the throttles and pulls them back, braces against his seat, puts his full weight on the brakes, shouts at Brain to do the same, they come to a stop beyond the end of the runway in a cloud of dust and Brain wants to know what the hell. So does everyone else. Eighty-five knots, says the Squadron-Leader, that's as high as she would go, isn't that right, Brain?

I forget, say Brain.

But Rocky Goruk admitted that he had got airborne at ninety-two knots in X far X-Ray yesterday and he reckoned it must be the air-speed indicator registering wrong and he was asked why the bloody hell he had not reported it and he replied well bloody hell, and it was generally understood that he had put up another black. But the conversion is held up until the air-speed indicators can be thoroughly checked out at take-off speeds and nobody knows exactly how this is to be done and the Americans can offer no suggestions, never heard of such a trouble, and agree that it might well be dangerous, and for two days no squadron Liberator leaves the ground,

but from time to time one charges down the runway in a test. And Cobber Slade is very browned off and begs to be put back on Hudsons.

The ground-crew are happier than they have ever been, their quarters are good, food good, good movies or entertainers every night and cheap cigars at the PX, cigar-smoking airmen are everywhere

Then came a signal from Air Head-Quarters. A sinking off the Cape Verde Islands, evidence of two u-boats a hundred miles out and expectation of more, perhaps a small pack. The navy asked for all available air cover and Air Head-Quarters requests two Liberators from the squadron for one sortie each, no more to be asked again until the conversion is much further advanced, and the Wing-Commander protests, but the air-speed indicator trouble was hard to explain to Air Head-Quarters and Cobber declared that he would take any Liberator into the air at any time after a u-boat, and the Squadron-Leader said, him too, and off they go an hour before first light with picked crews, the Squadron-Leader in D for Dog and Cobber in X for X-Ray, the Liberator he brought to the squadron from Montreal. And then there was no more talk of air-speed indicator trouble, and that same morning Rocky Goruk flew with Thurston and Flying-Officer Smith-Margetson gave the Wing-Commander instruction in three-engine flying.

Suppertime.

The Wing-Commander said suppertime was time for Cobber and Squadron-Leader Foorth to be getting back. Not a word from them since 0700 hours, he says.

A Liberator came into the circuit and landed and it is Squadron-Leader Foorth, and they have seen no u-boat, nothing; they were on the outer sweep. Another Liberator came into the circuit, then another, and another, all American Libs with desert camouflage.

Now it is dark.

The Wing-Commander and Thurston and Rocky Goruk and some others go down to Flying Control and wait for Cobber. Aircraft can only be distinguished as they taxi in, and they appear in the circuit one after another at ten or fifteen minute intervals, but they are always Americans, coming across from Brazil on the South Atlantic ferry run, a B-25, another B-25, then a B-26, then an American freighting Liberator with a cargo of watermelons from Florida for the GI's at Rufisque. No Cobber. By 2130 hours he had outstayed his endurance, though the Wing-Commander allowed another hour for some prodigy of economical cruising. These Pratt and Whitneys are unusual engines, says he, and the Americans in Flying Control are sympathetic and very distressed and they want to be optimistic. However, they cannot honestly encourage any hope. He's got to be on the ground somewhere, they say, or else in the drink; and the Wing-Commander agrees that he has had his time in the air and he signals Bathurst and Port Etienne and even Freetown in case there might be any news that X for X-Ray has put down anywhere, and he went to bed at last at 0300 hours and asked to be wakened for any news.

No news for twenty-four hours then a puzzling signal from Half Die that seems to say that a Catalina has picked up survivors in a dinghy, but this turns out to have been wrong, the Catalina had received a message from a naval tug by Aldis lamp that the tug had picked up survivors in an aircraft dinghy and everyone thought it must be Cobber Slade or some of his crew, but there was something wrong with the message still, and then at last the tug came into Bathurst and it had pickled up the commander and three crew members of a u-boat and their u-boat was destroyed by X for X-Ray, and they set him blazing and he presses home his attack, and

they fire up into his bomb bay at point blank range while he passes right over them and jettisons his depth charges on them, and then he goes on a quarter of a mile and explodes in the sea, and they four were on the deck of the u-boat with two others, and they survived the attack and got into X for X-Ray's dinghy which was the only thing left on the sea. These waters were full of sharks.

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At last the Hudsons are through. The heavy rains are over and the Wing-Commander has sent a message from Rafisque that the Liberators will be returning in four days, remaining crews to be converted and the squadron to be semi-operational on Liberators forthwith. Hudsons to be flown no more except in an emergency.

Everyone was glad of this decision, yet so many had lost good friends in Cobber's crew that spirits were generally low and not easy to be raised, and besides the whole game of u-boat hunting seemed to have taken a nasty turn; one had known that this was how it was, but not felt it before, Langille grieved for Cobber and Pongo wondered. what was wrong with him, kept a wary eye on him, from a distance.

The rains persist off and on and there is nothing to do at Yundum until the Liberators come back but just sit and wait. Pongo is now officer commanding B Flight. A signal comes to him from Flappy Jack Mungo, the intelligence officer and acting station commander at Port Etienne. Langille was sitting in the mess with a magazine on his lap, it is a rainy morning, no-one else is around. Pongo looked at him, then he went over and spoke.

I say, he says, look at this, Flappy Jack wants a Hudson at Port Etienne, says there's something on, the navy are in a flap about something.

Langille says too bad for him, the Hudsons are not flying any more.

Quite so, says Pongo and he sat down for a while. Damn if that is not like the old man, he says. Didn't bother to tell Flappy Jack about the Hudsons. Now I've got to take a grip.

Langille sat and said nothing and at last Pongo went away; the Desert Wagon started up and Langille could see him through the verandah screen driving over towards the Operations Room. After a while, back comes the Desert Wagon to the mess and in comes Pongo and over to Langille. He spoke.

I say, he says, you have never been up to Port Etienne; there's B for Baker still serviceable, why don't you take a run up and see what's bothering Flappy Jack.

I notice a u-boat on the board, he says.

Langille replied that he had no interest in going and thought he was off Hudsons at last and thought it as much more Pongo's place to be going if anybody at all, but not him, unless of course it was under orders.

Pongo spoke. I had better signal the old man, says he. Hate to do that, though, he says, if there is any way around it.

He gets into the Desert Wagon again and drives over to Operations Room; Langille watched him go. After a while, back comes the Desert Wagon to the mess.

I say, says Pongo, suppose we were to toss for it, what about that? Just a little lark, up to P.E. and back. I'd be glad to go only for the Libs coming down tomorrow.

Langille said nothing.

Come on, says Pongo. Have a go.

Langille spoke. Why don't you order me to go? he asks.

Never do that old boy, Pongo says. Come on, have a go.

They tossed and Langille came to Pongo. That means you win, Pongo says.

Langille says well good for that, and he settled down to his magazine again. Pongo, however, did not go away, he spoke to Langille. Which do you "want to do? he asks.

What do you mean, which do I want to do?

Go or stay? says Pongo, You win the toss so you decide.

Langille stood up. Damn it all, Pongo, he says, what are you trying to do?

He looked at him.

Oh all right, I'll go, he said.

Pongo was pleased, good-o, he said, just a nice little junket, he said, up there and back, Nice aircraft too, B for Baker, nice new Mark VI with these Yaghi aerals. But have a care, he says, the airs cooler up there and you get airborne sooner than you do down here. Kind of takes you by surprise.

Carry an Irving jacket to he says. It gets cold at night.

One of Langille's wireless operators is in hospital with malaria, this is Flying-Officer Garlick; Langille hates to leave his behind, he is the last of my original crew, he says, and he is kind of lucky. However, Flight-Lieutenant Goodfellow wants to go, says he is fed up with waiting around, and when Pongo says what about the conversion Goodfellow says stuff the conversion, and Pongo tries to get him aside but he will not be talked out of it. Langille is pleased that he is coming.

At approximately 1300 hours the rain stops, the runway dries off a little and B for Baker leaves the circuit at Yundum; they fly in and out of bad weather for an hour and then they are in the clear, and at Port Etienne the heat is intense but dry; immediately after sunset the air becomes cool and in an hour it is cold.

Goodfellow's spirits are high, he and Langille and Flappy Jack spend the evening in the mess together with the Medical Officer. The Medical Officer is Flight-Lieutenant Levy, a compassionate, pessimistic English Jew; he has been brought up in great wealth.

The mess is a small room, crudely furnished, there is only Dutch gin to drink and Langille has none but he stays on because the others are friendly and want his company. Their talk is very sophisticated and at the same time sentimental. They talk about Clobber Slade's exploit, there is a rumour that the Wing-Commander will put him up for a posthumous VC. Levy wants to know about the rest of his crew, what will they get, or their families? Or Slade's family, come to that?

His crew knew what they were getting into, says Goodfellow.

Levy asks if Slade was not an unusually determined a-boat hunter.

Fanatical, says Goodfellow.

Levy says he remembers him when he was up at Fort Etienne, he was no good in the mess, spent all his time looking at the board, and there was a u-boat on it and damn if he didn't go out and prang it. Took of an hour before dawn and spotted him at first light, fully surfaced, dead ahead. That's more than just luck, says Levy.

Langille spoke. I admired him very much, he says; then tears come into his eyes and he tries to hide them.

That was absolutely a picked crew on that Liberator, says Goodfellow. Absolutely. I wanted to get on it but Fatty Leblanc beat me to it, he was absolutely the best wireless operator on the squadron, absolutely. A wizard on the radar. Past tense, now

A sortie is laid on for first light next morning, and Langille says he is going to bed, the cold air has made him feel curiously tired.

Has the opposite effect on me, says Goodfellow.

Just as he was dropping off to sleep Langille feels someone giving him a shake, it is the intelligence officer, he says he has a late signal from Bathurst, another sinking, they ask if tomorrow's sortie cannot be changed to a pre-dawn take-off.

Good God says Langille, I am not qualified.

Flappy Jack does not understand. He is a good-natured Scot, fidgetty in manner and earnest.

Langille begins long explanation, going back to his prang; then he stops the explanation and says, I am just not qualified for night flying, he says.

I see. Well, that's that old, boy, eh? and Flappy Jack waits for a moment or two and then goes away.

But after a while he came back.

And he says, when you say not qualified old Boy, he says, do you mean you just can not fly at night?

Langille admitted, that no, it was not exactly that.

Or does it mean that you, have not been officially passed for night flying, does it just mean that, old boy?

Langille replied that well it was kind of half both.

Because I do not understand how they could send you up here unless you could night-fly, because every second sortie from here is a pre-dawn. But however, do not let me push you in the least, old boy, and yet it seems to be a real thing you know, there's a couple of U-boats out there, and the time to be on top of them is at first light. Of course I could send the Catalina, but they have hardly been back ten hours from their last sortie, good lord, that's too short, I could not send them.

Langille asks what he means by pre-dawn.

0600 hours, old boy, that's the latest possible, really; that gives you forty-eight minutes to get out there, before first light, you know.

Langille spoke. That son of a bitch Pongo, he says.

Flappy Jack says he is sorry but he did not get that, what did he say.

I just swore at Pongo. says Largille.

O, says Flappy Jack, good thing to swear at people, does you good sometimes. You are not the first to swear at Pongo, won't be the last either. But what about this sortie, old boy?

I'll go.

I wonder if you should, really; not if you have any doubts at all, you know, says Flappy Jack. I would have to signal Bathurst. And perhaps they should send someone from there. Or perhaps send someone else up here.

I'll go.

Flappy Jack was uncertain what to do, and he says by jove; but then he tells Langille that he is very bucked. really. Of course, he says, I am commanding officer of this station, but I could not command anything if I tried, and really, I must say, I am very bucked really, and he tells Langille to get a good sleep now, and off he goes to get everything laid on.

At 0400 hours, they are got up and there is tinned bacon for breakfast, one of the privileges of Port Etienne, and they eat in silence, Goodfellow has nothing to say, and Sergeant Gunnar Johnson, the navigator, and Sergeant Markovitch, the other Wireless operator, no-one has a. anything to say; and then there is a long:, thorough briefing, Flappy Jack Mungo is a conscientious intelligence officer, and they have been asked to fly direct to 16 North, 18.35 West and do a sweep seaward from there and Gunnar Johnson says it must be at one mile visibility, and he lays on the first leg of the sweep on his Mercator chart and the wind is given as 250-70 degrees at two and a half knots, or in other words zero.

The cockpit light is on when they get to B for Baker, a mechanic was up in the cockpit. Small-small leak in the automatic pilot sir, he says; otherwise she's right. Nice kite this, he says.

There is a heavy coating of dew on the windscreen, the mechanic wipes it off and they start the engines on the aircraft's own batteries and taxi out and run up the engines. Small. flare-path, three paraffin flares along either side of the runway. Airborne 0600 hours, on the dot. Twelve minutes later Goodfellow signals base, X-257, nothing to communicate, and acknowledges the reply, and after that, nothing.

At 1300 hours the Catalina leaves Port Etienne with air-sea-rescue equipment and carries, out a square search at half-mile visibility from 16 North, 18.35 West followed by a sweep, and also Rocky Goruk takes Liberator D for Dog and makes a square search at half mile visibility, altitude four hundred feet, beginning at 16 North, 17.30 West, and a Sunderland on its way from Half Die to Port Etienne is diverted to sweep the area North of Dakar to the limit of their endurance, and nobody finds anything, no dinghy, no oil-slick, nothing.

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By the end of August the rains were mostly over and the squadron was again established at Yundum; five crews were fully qualified on Liberators day and night and on the evening of

September 14 Pongo, Archie Moon and a new RAF pilot who was called Skinless all became night qualified. The squadron was not yet fully operational but since Cobber Slade's exploit many sorties were flown, one successful; Smith-Margetson was credited with one u-boat destroyed, the day Langille disappeared. He was blinded in his left eye by a piece of perspex from the windscreen, and Skinless was his second pilot and a bullet grazed his ear and the number four engine caught fire but it was feathered and the fire put out, and Skinless made the last eighth mile of the attack and then he takes over Smith-Margetson's crew, and is made captain.

Pongo grieved for Goodfellow and wrote letters to Goodfellow's wife and mistress explaining that he had tried to stop him from going with the other crew; and many of the old coasters feel that an era has passed with all the new types around, most of them seem to be ignorant bastards, and the mess seems a feebler place without Cobber and his crew and Smith-Margetson and especially Goodfellow, because he was an older and wiser man than most of them.

Archie Moon put in a word for Langille, said he was a bloody good pilot and it was a bloody shame he had to go out like that, it was as crook a thing as he had seen in this bloody war, and they agreed with him and wasn't it worse than anything else that he had to take old Goodbody with him and Archie says yes, that's the bloody crookedest thing of the lot.

Pongo confessed to Archie what kind of a son of a bitch he had been about Langille and Goodbody and they are already rather drunk so they get very drunk, and then Pongo remembers that he has a pre-dawn take-off and good God says he, and off he goes to find Johnny Bones, his new second pilot, and tell him to stay sober and go to bed early.

A rumour got started that the squadron was to be posted to India; this caused despondency among old coasters, especially those whose tours were only three-quarters expired or so, because a corollary rumour got started that operational time in East Africa would not count, and this seemed too miserable not to be true. To make it all seem more likely and less bearable, news came up the Coast that several of the Takoradi flights were already on their way home after only eight or nine months on the Coast, and some crews who had been left at Sierra Leone because they were low types or irresponsibles and undeserving of conversion to Liberators, these crews had been flying like mad on meaningless sorties and were now tour-expired and on their way home to the United Kingdom, by air, flying Hudsons to Algiers and hitch-hiking from there on tour-expired Halifaxes up over Spain at night.

It all seems very unjust and the Wing-Commander makes no effort to deny any of it and it turns out that he has been posted too and a new wing-commander is already on the Coast, at Air Head-Quarters in Freetown.

The West-African war is over, says the Wing-Commander. Such as it was.

Three Hudsons are left, fit to fly; Thurston gets one, Rocky Goruk gets one and Blood gets one; they are all tour-expired and they fly the Hudsons to Algiers and then hitch-hike home. Squeaker Tremear hands the squadron or to new engineering officer and he flew as far as Ras-el-Ma with Thurston and there he came down with malaria and was stuck for several weeks.

Flappy Jack Mungo went round the bend and had to be sent home. This surprised no-one, and Flight-Lieutenant Levy said had seen it coming for a long while. Too conscientious, he said.

Pongo and Archie Moon tried to locate Hudsons for themselves that might be made serviceable, or even one Hudson, and they got an excuse to fly down to Freetown, but they found none, and besides they were not tour-expired, not quite, so they stayed with the squadron and advised the new wing-commander; he was a friendly, party type and a mad pilot and he liked these two and wanted to keep them, but when the posting to India came through he let them go and gave them a big party and speeches, and they went back to the United Kingdom by sea.