

# Preface

A normal RAF fighter squadron in war consisted of about 24 pilots, a mixture of officers and senior NCOs, who came from all walks of life, even if their education was more or less similar.

Although usually very good friends and worthy colleagues, there were inevitably some members who were less popular than others, with personalities that caused friction or who were simply 'different' and did not readily mix.

Although they lived and fought together, very often it was only for weeks or months, so that the characters of some squadron members remained enigmas, at least until a much later date, sometimes even for years.

Moreover, there was always the question of personal advancement - in short, service politics - and it was often the case that 'strings' were pulled, occasionally with far reaching results.

This story is an extreme case of personal ambition and preferment.

## An Introduction by the Author

I have never spoken or written of these events before, possibly because it has always disturbed me even to think of them. In fact, it was only a recent obituary in the *Daily Telegraph* that brought them again to the fore and caused me to recognise that to record the facts would probably help me cleanse my mind of some very sad and upsetting incidents.

Having just returned from a lengthy holiday in Malta, my wife and I were sitting at the breakfast table, when she drew my attention to the obituary page in her newspaper.

‘Lookee here! It says here that that chap Inverclyde\* has just died. Wasn’t he the one you had some dealings with a while back?’

Inverclyde! My heart gave a hop, but I managed to control my feelings and response. ‘Died! That *is* a surprise! Does it say what he died of? He seemed well enough when last I saw him.’

My spouse read on silently, then shook her head. ‘No, it just says that he died suddenly, that’s all.’ She looked up at me. ‘Why do you ask?’

I remember returning a grim smile. ‘I just can’t imagine the Inverclydes allowing anything to happen to any one of them unexpectedly or by accident. Even the grim reaper hasn’t a free rein when dealing with that collection of rascals.’

My wife put on a disapproving face. ‘That’s not exactly a sympathetic remark to make about one of your wartime mates.’

I sniffed. ‘My love, my long standing association with that mob, dead or alive, has never been sympathetic, particularly the one we’re speaking of.’ I added sourly, ‘If any one of them jumped off a cliff or poisoned himself, I would never accept it absolutely at face value. Either there was some hidden horror behind it or it wasn’t true. The whole crowd of them are – were – fixers to a man. I doubt that we shall ever get to the bottom of precisely how, and of what, this one died, believe you me.’

I recall noting a brief glance of frowning surprise on my wife’s face, but she made no reply and after giving a dismissive shrug, she returned to her reading. But I meant every word of it. Every single word.

*\*For obvious reasons, this is not the actual name of the person or his family!*



# Jonathan Kerr

Although by no means the central character in this tale, it is probably best to start with me, as I am – or was – the link in that unhappy chain of events, now so long ago.

I was born in Lancashire during the First World War, in 1916, to be precise. My father was in the Royal Naval Air Service at the time, but two years later, as a member of the newly named No. 208 Squadron, Royal Air Force, then fighting on the Somme in France, he was tragically killed when the engine failed in the Sopwith Camel he was flying.

Although I don't ever remember seeing him, somehow there remained a legacy of flying within our family circle and as I grew up, there always existed the idea, if not the belief, that I, too, would take to the air in some capacity as soon as I came of age. Not surprisingly, therefore, in 1934 I took up a cadetship in the Royal Air Force College, Cranwell and, after a most agreeable two years there, was granted a permanent commission as a pilot in the General Duties branch in the summer of '36. Shortly after, I was posted to No. 41 (Fighter) Squadron, then based at Catterick in Yorkshire, where I was introduced to that splendid little aircraft, the Hawker Fury.

I have the happiest recollection of the 12 or so months I spent there. Most of us junior officers lived in mess in those days and, as young bachelors, besported ourselves among the local squirearchy at weekends or drove our open-topped sports cars down to the fleshpots of faraway London (if we had the means) to dine at the Ritz and the RAF Club, or sample the murkier and less wholesome delights of the Coconut Grove. Yes, life was good in those halcyon times when Britain knew she was Great, and to a young chap like myself, with no family or other personal commitments, being a pilot officer in an RAF fighter squadron was just about the best possible way of earning an honest crust. So thought I, anyway.

Alas, for me it was not to last for long, as it was on one of my fairly infrequent dashes up to the 'big city' that an accident occurred that was to change the course of my career and, indeed, my future life and those of others.

It was, I will never forget, on a particularly brutish Friday night in winter that I was driving pretty fast down the A1 in the area of Wetherby to meet a favourite girl-friend of mine in the West End's Cafe Royale. It was about 5pm and miserably dark, with drizzle heavy enough to make driving difficult, when I was suddenly confronted by two blinding headlights which appeared magically from behind a large and lumbering vehicle travelling north. I had no time to evade and I was hit, squarely and massively.

Thank the Lord, I had no recollection, either then or later, of the crushing impact or of the pain of my injuries; I remember only the hiss of tyres on the road immediately before the accident and lights suddenly disappearing as though at the touch of a switch. After which – oblivion.

It would not add to this tale to give a blow by blow description of what happened to me over the next seven months. Suffice it to say that I was badly knocked about, my beautiful car reduced to scrap, and that I finished up permanently disabled.

I never went back to my squadron, needless to say, having lost my medical flying category and, deeply depressed, I came almost to the point of asking to be invalided out of the Service. However, at the last moment, the date being February 1939 and with Hitler threatening to invade Poland, I was persuaded by friends in the Air Ministry to stay on until they found some worthwhile task for me to do. Until they made up their minds (they explained) and in order to assuage my almost suicidal bouts of frustration and bitterness, I was invited to conduct an inspecting role at one of the many RAF Volunteer Reserve flying schools up and down the country that were hastily training young embryo pilots in preparation for the then anticipated conflict. Thus it was that I found myself once more in Lancashire, the county of my birth, and something of an onlooker in No. 17 Elementary and Reserve Flying Training School, situated on the outskirts of Manchester.

Unknown to most of us then, it would be a mere seven months before the Second World War commenced, a period for me which, surprisingly, turned out to be a time of interest and comparative contentment. I sat on interviewing boards, lectured on every subject from navigation to aero-engines, and generally helped out in all but the flying instruction. Moreover, I met a number of people, old and young, who grew to be close friends in the months and years ahead, one of whom was Jonathan Kerr. Kerr was an 18 year old student pilot at the time and a person who attracted me greatly from the moment I first met him – nothing in any way ‘beastly’, as we used to say at school; it was just an agreeable affinity.

Particularly do I remember our initial encounter.

Having for some reason been kept late on the airfield one Saturday evening, I came across Edward Lowe leaving the aircrew locker room having just finished flying. Edward, an elderly retired short-service officer, was a part-time flying instructor. He was also a nice man, quiet and undemonstrative.

I remember saying, ‘You’re working overtime, Edward. Care for a quickie in the Airport Hotel before you leave?’

Lowe had smiled. ‘Thank you, no. I’ve had a trying afternoon and would like to get my feet up. I’m getting old, I fear.’

I was about to make some jocular reply when a tall young man came in our direction.

‘Good night, sir.’ He addressed himself to Lowe. ‘And thank you for your patience. I think I’ve got it now.’ A sudden broad grin. ‘It’ll be all right next time – just you see.’

I saw Lowe give a pale smile as he nodded in reply. Then he turned to me as the boy hurried away. ‘I wonder! A nice enough kid, but no guts, I fear.’

I found myself suddenly and quite irrationally disappointed. ‘No guts!’ I echoed, ‘How sad. Who is he?’

'His name's Kerr. Jonathan Kerr. He just can't get the hang of landing and is on the doubtful list.'

After making a few sympathetic noises, I turned over the boy's name in my mind. Kerr! Unable to land! Poor chap. How disappointing for him if he were suddenly to be rejected or remustered, particularly when the battle was so obviously in prospect.

Ah, me! Little did Lowe, or indeed I, know at the time how things would turn out.

Over those final summer months of 1939, I saw Kerr occasionally but only from a distance and at weekends. As he continued to be with us, I concluded that his landings had ceased to be a problem and I heard no more of any difficulties arising from his flying. He seemed a pleasant youth, unobtrusive for the most part but always with a smile and courteous to a fault. His performance was occasionally referred to as 'so-so' in the instructors' crew room, but usually nothing more than that. When his ab initio period of flying was concluded, I guessed he would be assessed as 'Average, but under confident.'

Then suddenly Hitler was in full voice again, August was over and war was upon us.

We had all been called to the town centre in Manchester on the morning of Sunday, 3<sup>rd</sup> September, where we listened in silence to Prime Minister Chamberlain's sombre words over the wireless '...this country is at war with Germany.'

War! It seemed so unreal and casual a statement. War! All of us standing there in lines. Properly at ease. Listening. Silent. No bombs. No sirens, even. Nothing. The whole nation seemed to be holding its breath.

Moments later, shuffling relaxation set in, accompanied by a few almost sheepish laughs and expectant chatter. What now? What would happen to us? And when? The air suddenly became electric. All 60-odd students were naturally expecting to be posted immediately to the dozen or so Flying Training Schools scattered throughout the country, in order to complete their flying instruction before being thrust into the breach. But where? And when?

But there were no immediate answers. No orders. No information. Nothing.

After half an hour or so of hanging about and indulging in light-hearted banter and speculation, a telephone bell was heard in the distance after which the Commandant, in his service dress hat and looking very solemn, came out to address us. His raised voice: everyone to be sent home, was the message he passed on to us.

Sent home! Disbelief and an audible groan, plus a wave of irritation. We had come here to fight and die, for God's sake, not to be sent home! There was a war on, wasn't there?

With the others, I experienced a terrible feeling of anticlimax. What a damn silly business! Moreover, it suddenly crossed my mind that I was now out of a job. Disabled, I wouldn't be fighting. I was redundant.

With everyone drifting away, I caught a glimpse of young Kerr in the distance. In his stiffly-new sergeant's uniform, he was walking off with friends, his kit bag on his shoulder. I had a hollow feeling that they were all moving out of my life forever and I watched them disappear with a powerful sensation of loss – slowly and in groups, their voices and laughter dying away into the Sunday noontime silence, until finally there was no one left on our small parade square and I was left standing there. Alone. Infinitely sad. In spite of being the only permanently commissioned officer in the place, I felt I just didn't belong.

It is history now, but nothing much happened in Western Europe during the next eight months of the so-called phoney-war, until the early summer of 1940, when the Germans launched themselves against France and the Low Countries and the prospect of England being invaded suddenly became a real possibility.

Following the outbreak of war, I had been ordered back to London and had killed time in the Air Ministry doing not very much, when I was jerked into action the following April, being posted at a moment's notice as adjutant to a newly forming fighter squadron in Lincolnshire. Meanwhile, I had been promoted to flight lieutenant in the New Year list so that it was with a light heart that I hurried northwards by train. At last! Another stripe on my sleeves and a real job to get my teeth into.

I arrived to find that, apart from the normal station personnel, the airfield was deserted – no aircraft, no aircrew or airmen, no transport, no anything – other than a vacant office in one of the vast, empty hangars and a brace of telephones. I even had to find my own chairs!

But not for long as, within hours, everything and everyone began to arrive at once and I was almost overwhelmed by a flood of breathtaking activity – messages, signals, orders, instructions, problems, new faces by the score, transport, equipment, the lot. And it was one new face which surprised me most of all – and gave me the greatest pleasure. That of Jonathan Kerr.

I came across him sitting rather forlornly in the anteroom of the officers' mess when I arrived for tea on my third day in harness. Seeing me approach, he rose to his feet, relief and pleasure all over his face.

'Hello, sir! This is a surprise. Are you part of the squadron I'm supposed to be joining? I was beginning to think I'd come to the wrong place.'

I shook his hand warmly. 'As we're likely to be the only squadron on the station, I suspect you're one of us, in which case, you're the first pilot to arrive. In fact, I haven't received your posting notice yet. And don't call me sir, by the way; I'm just the adjutant, not the head man. And what about that new uniform!' I dug him playfully in the ribs. 'When were you commissioned?'

Kerr grinned bashfully. 'Only last week. At the end of FTS at Montrose.' He looked around almost furtively. 'Tell me, what do I do now? Where do I find the Commanding Officer?'

I took him by the arm. ‘For the moment, you do nothing other than have a cup of tea with me, after which I’ll show you round.’

For the next week or so, things were chaotic. Eighteen Spitfires were flown in, ones and twos; every morning saw new faces at the entrance to my office and our new Commanding Officer arrived, a chap called Malcolm Bradley, whom I remembered from Cranwell— he had been on my senior entry and I thought, a trifle resentfully, that had I been sound in wind and limb, well... But there was no point in getting upset about it; I was alive and in some respects more than lucky.

Frankly, I was not exactly ecstatic about Bradley’s appointment; although I did not know him well, I remembered him as being somewhat overly smooth and the sort of nakedly ambitious young man who was likely to do most of his fighting in the Royal Air Force Club.

Having been given six weeks to reach operational status – no small task as most of the younger pilots were Volunteer Reservists, some of whom had been trained on biplanes and had never even sat in a low-winged monoplane such as a Spitfire – we flew with a will, amassing over 1,000 hours in less than a month. Jonathan Kerr more than pulled his weight and came to be quite highly regarded among his colleagues, although neither Bradley nor his flight commander, a rather taciturn South African named ‘Pete’ Retief, thought much of him initially – Kerr was so immaturely good-looking and almost pathetically eager, I suppose an element of envy and competition festered somewhere deep in their subconscious. On the whole though, everyone got on pretty well and there was a quite admirable squadron spirit abroad when, on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1940, we became operational and deemed fit to take on the enemy.

Almost immediately, and somewhat to our surprise, action came our way, with young Kerr being involved in rather dramatic circumstances. His section of three intercepted a Dornier 17 reconnaissance aircraft some 20 miles out into the North Sea, but although they shot it down, Kerr’s Spitfire was hit by return fire and after struggling to get his aircraft back to land, he was obliged to ditch some five miles off the Yorkshire coast.

Inexperienced as he was, he attempted to land wheels-up in the water – he should have baled out, of course – whereupon his Spitfire immediately sank like a stone with him still in the cockpit. Surviving the violent shock of hitting the sea and with his hood still closed, he watched the water go from green to black as he struggled, without success, to jettison the canopy, so that after some moments he really thought his number was up. Then, by some miracle, it lifted clear and, freeing himself from his straps and parachute, he was brought to the surface like a cork by his Mae West when he had all but given up hope. After that, he spent more than an hour in the drink before the local Air Sea Rescue boat found him and hooked him out, pretty well waterlogged and more dead than alive – fighter pilots didn’t have personal dinghies in those days. After a day in hospital, however, he was able to return to the squadron, vowing never again to attempt to ditch a Spitfire.

The incident, needless to say, enhanced his reputation no end; he was credited with one third of an enemy aircraft destroyed, after which Bradley became quite friendly and

even the miserable Retief took a less jaundiced view of him. Other than sustaining a nasty gash on his nose and forehead where his head had hit the gunsight, he seemed remarkably unaffected by his ordeal, which delighted me personally in view of the disparaging remarks made about him the year before and by others more recently within the squadron.

For much of July, the squadron flew intensively on training sorties or sat about endlessly at 'Readiness' in dispersal. The tempo of enemy action increasing down south, nothing much seemed to be coming our way further north other than the occasional reconnaissance aircraft off the coast, which had our chaps racing about here and there, miles out to sea and mostly without success.

Then, without warning, we were despatched to an airfield close to Zeals in Wiltshire. At 9am, we received the movement order, by noon we were on our way!

Our arrival in the south-west coincided with the commencement of the so-called Battle of Britain, although no one at the time referred to it as such. In our area, the Luftwaffe was attacking targets around Bristol and more particularly, Southampton, Portsmouth and the coastline beyond. Strangely, although the Huns came over in droves, control in our sector was so indifferent that the squadron missed a great deal of the action and apart from two major engagements, did not have any great success. Yet again, on his first interception, young Kerr was both successful and unfortunate, once more being hit by return fire from some Junkers 88s he was attacking, obliging him to crash-land on a hill not far from Salisbury, his engine having seized. On that occasion, he was damaged quite nastily about the shins when his legs struck the underside of the dashboard, after which he was again carted off to hospital so that he was absent for almost a week, returning to the squadron and hobbling about painfully for some days thereafter. Even so, his enthusiasm for flying and combat remained undiminished and he soon became his cheerful and unassuming self.

It was, I recall, during his brief period of convalescence that we were ordered into the London area, to a grass airfield in Essex, a little beyond Epping Forest. We flew up there immediately – right into the maelstrom of the Battle of Britain proper! The squadrons in that sector had taken a terrible beating and, much reduced in numbers, were glad to hurry away northwards to re-equip and recuperate. Pitched into action immediately, we suffered our first casualties that very afternoon. And there were more to come.

It was shortly after 8am on the day following our arrival that the air raid sirens commenced their mournful dirge. As the bulk of the squadron on duty raced off the ground towards the south to climb feverishly into a clear sky, Malcolm Bradley and I, together with Retief, Kerr's South African flight commander, who happened to be in the mess at the time, jumped into Bradley's staff car and roared down to our dispersal area. We were about half-way there when around 30 Dorniers sailed overhead and the bombs began to fall.

Sitting in the back of the car and with the enemy directly above at around 15,000 feet, I neither saw the bombers nor heard them before the ground ahead began to rise up in huge eruptions of flame-centred filth and whirling debris, the explosions and

blast positively stunning. As the sticks of bombs came marching in our direction, our car was caught by a wall of noise and blast which picked it up as though it were no more than a toy and turned it over. In an instant, the front of our vehicle was blown in and we were deposited on our back, the roof screeching like a Dervish amid a shower of glass and sparks as we ploughed ahead on the concrete of the perimeter track. Words cannot describe the shock of it all.

In a matter of seconds, the bombers had gone, leaving the whole airfield looking like a crushed and motionless animal that had just been run over on the highway. For several minutes it, and we, all lay there, inert and pathetic, a huge cloud of filth and dust hanging over us like a malevolent, motionless shroud. It was an unforgettable experience, not least of all the pervading stench of explosives and the silence that followed.

Jammed claustrophobically in the back of the car, I was terrified that I might be burned to death. I was conscious and seemed to be comparatively unharmed but was all too aware that the two in front were crumpled and bleeding and showing every sign of being badly damaged. It was a very nasty moment.

After what seemed an age, fire-engines and an ambulance arrived, our car was righted unceremoniously and the three of us released, though not without difficulty. Retief was badly injured about the head and chest, his face a mask of blood, but Bradley, though cut and bleeding, was complaining mostly of a damaged leg. All three of us were rushed to sick quarters where we found ourselves in the midst of a dozen others who had also been injured. There were, in addition, some five or six who had been killed, but we did not see them at the time, which was a relief. The shock of it all was immense.

The squadron did not come back to our airfield that day as it was out of commission, obliging them to land at North Weald, some ten miles away. Unable to operate from where we were, the rest of us followed later that afternoon, and within hours we had all taken up residence on our new station and in more spacious and comfortable surroundings. Except for Bradley and Retief and several other pilots who had been shot down or damaged in combat, we were almost back to normal. One way or another though, it had been an exciting week.

By early September, we had settled into our new abode and action was at its height. Malcolm Bradley remained in command but in name only as his injuries prevented him from flying. However, Retief had been posted away, having been too badly damaged to enable him to continue, and a new flight commander was posted in from one of the London based Auxiliary squadrons.

Meanwhile, Jonathan Kerr went from strength to strength, having learnt – as he put it – to duck when the cross fire came in his direction and not to attack bombers bull-headed up the backside! Adding together some he had claimed himself plus those he had shared with other members of the squadron, he had shot down at least eight enemy aircraft by 15<sup>th</sup> September and before the end of the month had been awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC), the first in the squadron. He was delighted, of course, as indeed was I, both of us agreeing that as he had crashed or damaged three or four Spits in the process, he could only now justifiably claim that he was

in credit. He really was an inspiration to everyone; first into the air whenever there was an opportunity to seek out a lone intruder, always in the forefront of any action and seldom returning after combat without having achieved something of note. The airmen worshipped him and not only for his prowess in the air. By mid October his tally of victories had risen to 14 and he was recommended for a bar to his DFC which, within a week or so, he was duly awarded.

As we moved into October, the mass bomber attacks having ceased during daylight, combat over Kent and Sussex developed into running battles between our own squadrons and roving bands of German fighters. Although our Spitfires could cope quite adequately with the enemy, those of our brother squadrons equipped with Hurricanes had a harder time as the performance of their aircraft was somewhat inferior to that of the Messerschmitt 109s. Young Kerr continued to excel and his tally of the enemy mounted slowly but regularly so that as winter approached he had been credited with 20 victories and had been awarded a second bar to his DFC. An experienced operator by this time, he was a section leader and very highly regarded by everyone in the squadron and many of his seniors beyond, including his own Station Commander, the Air Officer Commanding 11 Group, Air Vice Marshal Keith Park, and even 'Stuffy' Dowding, the Commander in Chief (C-in-C), Fighter Command. But, throughout, and in spite of the honours heaped upon him, he maintained a quite extraordinary degree of self-effacing modesty and his maturity, enthusiasm and devotion to duty were quite remarkable, bearing in mind he was still barely 20 years of age.

Meanwhile, as Malcolm Bradley was still on the injured list and often absent, and because, I suppose, I was an ex-Cranwell cadet and the only permanent commissioned officer on the squadron, much of the control of the unit seemed to gravitate into my care until I began to be regarded as rather more than just the adjutant. And it was in this quasi position of authority that I suddenly found myself involved with Retief's replacement, Kerr's new flight commander.

Flight Lieutenant Hugh James Campbell-Orde DFC was a nice enough chap. About 23 at the time, he was a good-looking boy in a slightly effeminate way, an aspect enhanced by fair, slicked-down hair which curled rather girlishly around his ears – quite contrary to Air Force Regulations – and a uniform service dress that he had obviously designed himself and had constructed in Saville Row. In those days, the Auxiliary squadrons were given to such eccentricities as brightly coloured linings to their tunics, shirts that were slightly different, and dark blue, rather than black, ties. Orde's rig-out, however, went rather further even than that – he called himself Orde, by the way, not his fully hyphenated name – but his squadron colleagues took it all in good part, chaffed him occasionally, and simply accepted him as a bit playboyishly different.

I have to admit, I never really took to the man; it seemed to me that he was never fully 'one of us.' He spent a lot of time on his own in and beyond the officers' mess and was frequently in London, although I have to say he was always available for duty when needed and as he came to us wearing the ribbon of the DFC, it was clear he had at least seen some action and done well. All in all, he and I got on well enough I suppose, although I seldom felt I had his wholehearted support. He was always a man

apart, courteous, slightly off-hand, hardly ever taking part in our sometimes riotous horseplay in the mess and in the local pubs, always that little bit different. Somewhere, I suspected, he led a more arty-crafty existence, probably in the seamier salons of the West End.

My first encounter with him and his family came about in quite an unusual way. In order to counter recent low-flying attacks by the enemy on some local coastal towns, we occasionally had two aircraft at ‘Standby’; that is, sited on the end of the runway, the two pilots involved sitting in their cockpits for two-hourly stints, all strapped up and ready to go.

On one such day, Orde was out in his aircraft on the far side of the airfield when my telephone rang. A rather superior sounding female on the other end instructed me to take an urgent call – not asked, I noted! – and after a few seconds, a different, rather gruff and demanding voice came on asking to speak to Flight Lieutenant Campbell-Orde.

I replied civilly that that would not be possible at the moment as he was on the other side of the airfield – I did not explain exactly what he was doing as I did not consider it was required of me.

The voice, clearly miffed, bit back unpleasantly, ‘Then can’t you send for him?’

Immediately nettled, I said that I could but that I wasn’t prepared to. He was on duty, I was in my office miles away and that was that. In any case, who was it asking?

There was the briefest of silences. Then the same truculent voice: ‘What is your appointment and your name?’

Now thoroughly bloody-minded, I replied that I had no intention of explaining who I was and what I did. If the caller wished to speak to Flight Lieutenant Orde, he would have to do so in the mess or when he was off duty. There was a war on, didn’t he know, and this was an operational RAF station, not some London restaurant or night club.

After that, there was a further ominous silence, after which I heard the telephone being replaced rather noisily.

Two days later, I was summoned to the Station Commander’s office; he was brief and to the point.

‘I’ve been instructed by the C-in-C to investigate the circumstances in which a member of your squadron refused to cooperate with a Minister of the Crown and a member of the Cabinet. Was that you?’

My mouth fell open, after which I was obliged to swallow.

‘I really don’t know, sir. Can you explain?’

‘Indeed I can. Lord Inverclyde, who, as you well know, is a member of the Government, apparently asked to speak to his son, but you, apparently, would not allow him to do so. Is that so?’

I felt my back stiffen, after which I described the circumstances in careful factual terms but in a tone which reflected my outrage.

My senior eyed me severely. 'Were you rude to the man?'

'He was rude to me, sir, I was merely direct. I didn't know who he was.'

The head man sighed heavily and shook his head.

'Between you and me, you were speaking to a person who is a tyrant in his own domain and can be a perfect bastard with everyone else.' He paused whilst I waited apprehensively. 'Then, I'll ask the C-in-C to take no further action but I advise you to be more careful with outside callers in future, otherwise you're likely to be cut off in your prime.' After that, he gave a grim smile. 'Probably you were not aware that your Flight Lieutenant Orde is his youngest son. I didn't know that until I was told.'

Later in the mess, and still more than a little ruffled, I cornered Orde and explained what had happened. He was genuinely amused and surprised. 'Did he really do that? The old rascal! He can be a perfect brute when he wants to. If I were you I should forget about it.'

And that was that.

We flew hard throughout October, the squadron being airborne, on average, three times daily against high flying fighter bombers and it was on 21<sup>st</sup>, as I recall, that we had a bad day and lost two aircraft and their pilots, one of whom was JK.

It was a shock for the whole squadron, not least for me, as Kerr had flown almost 150 sorties against the enemy since the beginning of July and seemed almost indestructible. It happened during the afternoon and we heard from Sector almost immediately that two of our aircraft had gone down over Kent, one on fire, both pilots taking to their parachutes. Later, the news came through that one of them, our most senior NCO pilot, had been badly burned and the other – Kerr – had apparently been wounded and was in Ashford Hospital. Four days later, he returned by road.

Being told he was back, I drove up to sick quarters and found him sitting in a chair, his head liberally covered in gauze and sticking plaster. For the first time ever, he was not his courteous and cheerful self.

As he showed no inclination to speak in front of the medical staff, I left my interrogation until we were together in a separate room. He was not at all happy.

I sipped my tea. 'So... how bad is it?'

He frowned, insofar as he could. 'I'm more annoyed than bothered. I've a mass of bits of cannon shell and Perspex in my face and shoulder which'll take months to remove.' Touching his head tenderly, he gave a wry grin. 'It's pretty bloody painful too,' which was about the first time I had ever heard him swear.

'How did it all happen?'

‘Happen!’ He gave an explosive snort. ‘More to the point, why did it happen?’ Then, after a longish pause, ‘We were high up in the Canterbury area when we came across about 20 109s in two groups – bombers and escorts. When they saw us, the leading group dropped their bombs and turned away. I was leading our back four and was well below the level of the escorting flight of Huns, whom I had no intention of attacking as they had a clear tactical advantage and were moving about a good deal faster than we were. But... for some insane reason, our chaps in front launched themselves at the bottom formation of 109s and, as I was supposed to be protecting them, I had to follow, knowing full well we were going to be mobbed by the Huns above. And, of course, we were. The first thing I knew, there was a bloody great bang around my ears and I saw Sergeant Rankin falling past me in a ball of flame and black smoke. After that, I returned to earth by jumpsack, praying hard that I wouldn’t get shot on the way down.

I told him quietly, ‘You needn’t fret. Rankin’s all right, though nastily burned. But we won’t see him again for some time, unfortunately.’

Kerr relaxed, relief all over his face. ‘Thank God for that! Nothing worse than being knocked down needlessly. Poor chap! I’m so sorry it happened – to him especially. Such a good bloke.’ He was frowning deeply.

At that point, instinct warned me to cut the interview short. Kerr just didn’t want to talk about it. He was obviously very upset and clearly wished to reserve judgement on an incident he found deeply irritating. I had never seen him like that before. He suddenly looked very much older than his 20 years, his lips a tight thin line, his eyes fierce. And it was then that I knew there was more to it that Kerr would reveal, then or later. But what, I wondered? And why?

With Jonathan Kerr away on leave nursing his injuries, I might have given his shooting down rather more thought, had it not been for a sudden and totally unexpected call from the Air Ministry. Fearful that it was related to my tetchy exchange of words with Orde’s irascible father, I asked rather apprehensively what it was all about. A male voice on the other end responded by assuring me not to worry as it was nothing dramatic; all I had to do was to report to room such-and-such the following day.

Still mildly apprehensive, I drove into London and presented myself at Adastral House. After filling in the usual pink form, I was escorted by a very off-hand elderly messenger along some seemingly endless corridors until my companion knocked on a door and announced me before turning on his heel and vanishing.

Inside was a stoutish lady in spectacles making tea, plus a face I immediately recognised as belonging to a member of my entry at Cranwell some five years earlier. I noted too, not without a flash of envy, that he was wearing the rank stripes of a squadron leader.

Surprised to see him, I exclaimed, ‘Hello! What are you doing here? Have you anything to do with this?’

My erstwhile colleague responded with a grin, ‘Nothing at all, old sport. It’s my master who wants to see you.’ He winked. ‘Nice man, really. Better than he looks. Do you want a cuppa, by the way? You may be here for quite some time.’

Even more surprised, I said that I would and we settled down agreeably to chat about old times.

I asked, 'Which department is this?'

My companion replied comfortably, 'It wouldn't really help if I told you. Just wait and see.'

At which point, a buzzer went and I was ushered into an adjoining room by my friend, who remained with me, closing the door behind him and seating himself in a corner.

The man who greeted me was a Group Captain, rather elderly and not at all impressive, who looked like a retired schoolmaster about to serve me two ounces of wine gums in a sweetshop. He moved about, slightly bent and in a leisurely manner, before sitting down in front of me with an exhausted whoosh of breath. 'Have you had a cup of tea?' Then, when I nodded, he smiled and looked at me steadily for some moments.

'Your squadron is doing pretty well, I see.'

I agreed, cautiously.

After that, we talked in a general way about what was going on in the world and the successes of some of my colleagues. Especially about JK.

'He's really quite a chap, is that,' the Group Captain observed with an admiring shake of his head and a sudden lapse into the North Country idiom. 'So young, too.' Then suddenly: 'And what about this Campbell-Orde feller? How well d'you know him?'

Slightly startled by his change of tack, I replied carefully, 'He's decent enough, I suppose. I don't really know him that well.'

'He's been with you about eight weeks, I understand?'

'About that, yes.' I attempted a smile. Then: 'Can you tell me what this is all about, sir?'

My senior became slightly less benign. 'You'll know in a minute. Meanwhile, you're aware, I take it, that he – Campbell-Orde – spends a lot of his time in London?'

I nodded, sensing a return to formality. 'Yes, sir.'

'And that his father is a Cabinet Minister?'

'I do now, yes. I didn't until recently.'

'Did he tell you?'

I put on a rueful face and described the little contretemps I had had with his parent.

The other nodded. 'So you know how the noble Lord can be a difficult person to deal with.'

I didn't think it was worth replying to that one, but just pulled a face.

‘Right.’ There was a pause and the Group Captain put his fingers together. ‘Now we come to the part when I shall have to insist that you exercise discretion, in short, that this conversation is regarded as entirely private. Do you understand what I’m saying?’ The voice was suddenly quite sharp.

I tried to smile but didn’t quite succeed. ‘I don’t think I do, but I dare say I shall in a moment or two.’

My smile was not returned and the other began to choose his words.

‘Your young man Orde has a woman in town, and not a very respectable one. Did you know that?’

I replied carefully, ‘I rather suspected he might have a girlfriend there, but that’s not unusual, surely?’

‘The one he has is unusual.’ The Group Captain sounded faintly annoyed. ‘Very unusual. In fact, she is a high-priced whore. A rather nasty piece of work, in short.’

There was a silence and I suddenly found myself uncomfortable. I didn’t want to know about Orde’s love-life, for God’s sake, nor did I want to know anything about his girlfriend, prostitute or not.

Then the GROUP CAPTAIN was going on.

‘This lady – quite attractive to look at, incidentally, but a good deal tougher and older than our young lover believes – is part of a shadowy group whose interests are ambiguous, to say the least. She’s of indeterminate extraction, despite her English-sounding name, and she is an opportunist who is so fond of the good life that she’s prepared to garner little jigsaw pieces of information to sell to the squalid circle of spivs, degenerates and con-men whose company she keeps – pillow talk, I believe it’s called. Her association with Campbell-Orde is not at all by accident, and with him in an active fighting unit and his father in Government, he is a doubly attractive target. In short we have a rather serious security problem on our hands, one in which blackmail is a real threat.’

There was a tangible, fairly ominous silence in which the GROUP CAPTAIN and I looked at each other and my erstwhile Cranwell colleague bowed his head in the corner as though wishing he were somewhere else.

I said, not because I didn’t suspect the answer, ‘I don’t quite see how I fit into all this.’

Again the thin smile. ‘You do, I think, but I’ll explain further, after which I’ll ask John here to take you aside and fill in the details.’

A pause. ‘First, we want you to warn him off – in your own way, of course. Then, if he doesn’t respond – fully – we’ll resort to other methods until, one way or another, we’ll put an end to it. And to them – him and her.’

Again, another silence, in which I felt myself swallowing, waiting for the dry voice to continue.

‘Why you, you ask? Let me explain. It is vital that this whole business is kept very low key, between you, Orde and no one else. His father doesn’t know and must not be let into the miserable secret, otherwise all hell could break loose. At all costs, the girl must not know, otherwise she and her mates would go to ground and we don’t want that. Your immediate seniors – your squadron and station commanders, for example – for reasons I will not enlarge upon, must be kept out of it. It must not, repeat not, become an official enquiry, otherwise it would then be public knowledge in no time and that must not be allowed to happen. Only you must be involved.’

The Group Captain then very elaborately smoothed out some papers on his desk before continuing. ‘And after you’ve done your bit, you will not be required any further and you will not speak of it to anyone else. Anyone! At any time! Understood?’

I found myself nodding. ‘I think so, yes. But what if he takes offence and ignores me – which is more than likely? How will I know I’ve succeeded?’

‘You probably won’t. But we will.’

Another silence, whilst I thought it over. ‘I really don’t like this, sir. This is surely not a job for me? Why can’t you simply invite him here and tell him yourself? Or get someone more senior?’

Across the table, the man’s eyes narrowed and became quite flinty. ‘That’s our business, not yours.’

A short pause. Then, when I saw I was getting nowhere, I felt myself surrender. ‘Well, in that case, one more question, sir: when does all this warning business start? And do I report back to you, or what?’

Once more, the thin smile. ‘It’s already started, dear boy, and you’re not required to like it. But John here will give you the details. And don’t forget, mum’s the word.’

The Group Captain then stood up, and picking up his cup of tea, turned away. We didn’t even shake hands.

And that was that. I was led out by my Cranwell acquaintance and spent more than an hour being fed information which had my eyes growing wider by the minute with wonder and concern. Did people really behave so treacherously in war? Our own side? Here in London? I felt a sudden flood of adrenalin-fed anger. The bastards! The unpatriotic scum! Living off the fat of the land and sabotaging our war effort, whilst chaps like Jonathan Kerr were getting themselves killed and wounded every hour of every day. Suddenly, a battle I never knew existed, a secret war of shadows, lies and deceit, was being revealed to me as lurking in every unsuspecting corner and among the most ordinary of people. I’d explain to Orde, all right. I’d bloody well explain to him!

I returned to North Weald disturbed and resentful. Why on earth had I collected a job like this; it wasn’t my responsibility to get involved with fifth columnists or the love life of chaps like Orde – and a fat lot of thanks I would get for it, too! And how was I to approach him? – look, old son, I hear you’re getting in deep with a tart who is also a suspected subversive. How did I know? Well, I couldn’t give him exact

details of who and why, simply that what he was doing had to stop – or else! And how would I react if the positions were reversed? As I drove back to the station, I became increasingly unhappy.

In fact, on arriving back, I found I had a respite to calm my nerves as I learned that Orde had taken a few days leave and had left the station that afternoon. That he was probably even then in the arms of his lover, breathing vital secrets into her pearly ear, didn't make me feel any better. And I was all on my own, wasn't I? I couldn't confide in a soul.

It was four days later that I cornered him in our apology for a bar – bars were not permitted in officers' messes in those days – and suggested that we might have a private chat in my room. He seemed rather startled but agreed and after dinner we repaired to my tiny abode in one of the outside huts adjacent to the mess where he lowered himself into my single cane chair whilst I sat on the bed.

I started off, 'Look, it's no wish of mine that I have to speak to you like this, but I have been asked to and you may take it that everything I say is gospel and is official.'

Immediately, I saw surprise in his eyes, followed by just a hint of frowning amusement. But, other than remarking, 'How intriguing,' he made no comment.

I then spelt out the gist of my message and watched his face stiffen and his smile tighten into a look of dark resentment and disbelief. When I had finished, there was an unpleasant silence.

His first question, quietly put, was, 'Who put you up to all this hogwash?'

I said, 'I can't say, because those concerned want to keep it unofficial. They took the view that if you decided to get upset about it – and they thought you might, because in affairs of the heart anything can happen – all sorts of people, including your father and certainly your girlfriend, might become overtly involved and they wish to avoid that for about a dozen very good reasons.'

Orde's eyes and voice remained coldly unfriendly. 'I see. So, am I to understand that because they say so, through you, and on no evidence other than what they allege they have, I'm to give up part of my private life? Tell a girl I happen to know and admire very much to disappear, just like that? With no explanation? No anything? If that's the case, that's nothing less than grossly insulting to me and slanderous of her and her friends. Who the hell do they think they are? – whoever they are. If they have something to say, why can't they tell me face to face? Give me an opportunity to tell them they're talking nonsense?'

To a degree, I saw his point, but I stuck to my brief.

'Look old chum, in war none of us have private lives. I'm not sitting in judgement on you but I know that if you force them into making it official by kicking up a fuss, it'll go hard with you. They'll get their way sooner or later as there's a lot at stake. According to them, you're associating with some pretty nasty types and it has got to stop. They're not spoofing and if you don't do as they say, they'll have your guts for garters, believe you me. You can choose to ignore their warning if you wish, but if you

do, not only will you suffer personally but others, including your father, could become involved, with all sorts of repercussions.'

For some moments, I watched Orde working it out in his mind, his face a mask of controlled emotions. Then suddenly, he stood up and made to leave. Reaching the door, he turned and looked at me directly. He said tightly, 'I'd be happier if I thought that you personally didn't have something to do with all this. You're a bit of a bastard, you know, and always have been since my arrival here. Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that you're a cripple and can't take part in the war.'

And on that wounding note he disappeared, banging the door behind him and leaving me feeling like a piece of chewed string.

Strangely, that was the last I heard of Orde's love affair; if the whole business ended to the satisfaction of the Air Ministry, no one took the trouble to tell me, and Orde certainly never mentioned the subject again in my presence. My relations with him remained coolly formal and I don't think anyone in the squadron ever became aware that an incident so dramatic had ever arisen.

With winter upon us and the weather unremittingly miserable, the enemy stayed at home, except at night, and the tempo of daytime activity reduced considerably. Malcolm Bradley was finally posted away just before Christmas and JK, who had returned to the squadron a week or two earlier, was made flight commander and promoted to flight lieutenant. He was delighted, of course, as indeed he was entitled to be as he was still only 20 years of age. Then in January, the squadrons of Fighter Command suddenly found themselves on the offensive and attacking targets on the Continent of Europe instead of defending our own coastline.

These first offensive sorties were not universally approved of; our chaps in their short-range Spitfires and Hurricanes did not take kindly to escorting slow-motion Blenheim bombers as, operating well into enemy territory, at much slower speeds than was normal and with little freedom of action, they almost always found themselves at a very considerable tactical disadvantage. Furthermore, when operating in pairs at ground level against targets of opportunity well into France and Belgium, not only did they soon learn that they did not have the fire power to inflict much damage on the enemy, they discovered too that they were highly vulnerable to German 'flak' from the ground. Over a period of several weeks in February 1941, many highly valued pilots were lost in furtherance of a policy which appeared to the more sceptical of us to be more for political than military ends, and it was when engaged on one such escort sortie against a target in the area of Amiens that Orde did not return. He was heard to say over the R.T. that he had an engine problem, after which – nothing.

Naturally, his loss was felt by everyone; even in a fighting unit such as ours, in which casualties were a frequent, if not daily, occurrence. Death or injury is not something to be borne lightly by comrades, even when it happens to someone who is not universally popular. I was sorry to see him go, naturally, although there was more than a possibility that he might still be alive and a prisoner of war. It might even be that, with good fortune and the help of the French, he might engineer his escape.

That February was also notable in that it was the month in which Jonathan Kerr was awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO), the first in the squadron and a decoration acknowledged as being for the highest quality of leadership and outstanding devotion to duty. For a person of his age, it was quite remarkable, as indeed were the shoals of congratulatory letters received from scores of his colleagues and seniors, from the Commander-in-Chief downwards, at that point, his tally of victories in combat was 22, so that, his enthusiasm for action seemingly unimpaired, there appeared no end to the heights to which he might ascent. I was quite overjoyed for him and I have to admit, I often said a silent prayer for his safety whenever he took off – this was the sort of young man the nation simply could not afford to lose.

That spring turned out to be a time especially memorable for me as, partly I suspect in celebration of Jonathan's latest decoration, he approached me rather shyly one day and asked if I would like to accompany him home to meet his parents and family. It was only in Hertfordshire, he explained almost apologetically; we could spend a weekend away from the tedium of the mess and the atmosphere of service life and find time to walk a bit across the hills around Dunstable and beyond. Delighted by the prospect, I agreed, and shortly after, we set off on a two day break.

The Kerr home was a modest affair, not far from Whipsnade Zoo, his parent's northern folk transplanted by the needs of war. His father was some sort of area official on the LMS Railway whilst his mother was cast in the mould of the ubiquitous northern housewife, endlessly smiling, quietly efficient, and the unquestionable lynchpin of the household – she and her husband were probably in their late 40s at the time. There was also a younger brother away at University College of Wales in Aberystwyth, and a kid sister, Hannah, who was an absolute charmer. About 12 or 13, with flaxen hair which she wore in plaits down her back, the girl had the sweetest smile imaginable. That she adored her famous brother was plain to see; she followed him around like a dog wherever he went, frequently touching him affectionately and from time to time goading him into scuffles, during which they wrestled like puppies on the floor, rolling around squealing with merriment and yelping with simulated hurt. It was all very touching.

We didn't do much except talk and walk the ridge of hills from Dunstable to the west, watching the clouds cast their drifting shadows over the Vale of Aylesbury and beyond, the patchworked countryside green and pleasant with the promise of spring. I found it deeply restful and could have happily stayed for a month.

I remember it especially, too, as it was only six weeks later that Kerr, like Orde, did not return from an offensive patrol, again in the Amiens area. Attacked at altitude by a superior force of German fighters, he was hit and seen to go down streaming a white pencil trail of smoke. He did not speak of his difficulties over the R.T., apparently, so there was no telling whether he had been killed or wounded, badly or even slightly. No one saw him bale out.

That same afternoon, I had to go through the motions of reporting his loss and the delightful family, whose hospitality I had so recently enjoyed, learned by telegram that

their son and brother was 'Missing in Action.' The following day, I took the squadron staff car and drove the 30-odd miles to their home in Hertfordshire to find them stricken into tearful silence. It was a terrible, unforgettable experience.

About a month later, I left the squadron, having being given an acting rank and posted as Squadron Leader (Administration) to a station in Lincolnshire accommodating a Spitfire Operational Training Unit (OTU). Lincolnshire again!

I did not mind leaving. Jonathan Kerr's loss had upset me to the point where I just had to get away, although I daresay there were other factors too. Whatever the precise reasons, I departed, stunned by sadness and nostalgia, relieved to be rid of the sight and the atmosphere of places we had lived in and enjoyed together – the dispersal hut, our rooms in the mess, the ante-room with its enveloping black arm chairs and roaring coal fires, the library and snooker tables, the very walls that had reflected the sound of his voice and his laughter.

After more than a month, when repeated investigations had elicited no information that he had been captured and was a prisoner of war, I began to come to terms with the likelihood that he might be dead. But even then, the thought of it was almost impossible to accept. He was not a person who ought to have died, a golden youth who should, or even could, be killed. For me, his going remained a gaping wound.

And it was whilst such bitter thoughts continued to deaden my mind that I happened to see the signal informing the Chief Ground Instructor of the OTU that Flight Lieutenant J. Campbell Orde, DFC, who had recently escaped from France, having been shot down earlier in the year, would be touring all OTUs giving details of his experiences. Incredibly, Orde's good fortune only served to accentuate my feelings of loss and resentment. Why Orde and not Jonathan? Why him? Why that smooth, irritating toffee-nosed bastard and not my worthy and gallant friend? Why? Why?

Orde turned up a week or so later, and whilst it was no part of my job to attend his talk, I slipped into the back of the lecture hall whilst he was speaking.

I must say, he did it well. He had a dry, rather matter of fact delivery and his slightly off-beat humour made it all the more appealing. He had suffered a coolant leak, he explained, and knowing it was only a matter of minutes before his engine overheated and seized, he had left the formation he was leading and chosen a suitable open flat area in which to land wheels-up. His Spitfire fairly heavily damaged, despite a reasonable landing, he had time in which to evacuate the aircraft and destroy the IFF equipment – an absolute must and the first task of any pilot landing in enemy territory – before running like a rabbit and diving into the nearest ditch he could find. From there, he had wormed his way into a wood for the night, and feeling reasonably chipper the following morning, had edged his way by degrees across some fields until he was some distance from his crashed aircraft. There, later that afternoon, he had made contact with some women farm workers.

At first, they showed no signs of wishing to help him but later, with his more than adequate French, he persuaded two of them to bring him some food and provide him

with a bicycle, which they did that same night. With his stomach full, using the bike, and with a message of guidance and introduction from a local doctor, he travelled south some 20 kilometres, and after ensuring the coast was clear, sought out the family whose name he had been given. After that, it was comparatively straight-forward; as members of the local escape network, they took him in tow, provided clothes, and in the course of a month, escorted him to Paris, of all places, where he laid up for a while. Then, it was the long journey south-west by train, bicycle, on foot and even by donkey cart until he reached the Pyrenees, which proved to be one of his sternest obstacles. With patience, however, and with local assistance, he eventually crossed into Spain and made contact with British Consular authorities, who negotiated his passage to Gibraltar, whence he returned to England sitting in the bomb bay of a Wellington bomber. All fairly uncomplicated, it seemed.

At the end of his talk and after he had answered questions for almost an hour, the lecture hall cleared and I walked forward to greet him. He seemed mildly surprised to see me and after I had congratulated him on his escape and also on his lecturing technique, we chatted agreeably about this and that. He seemed composed and very much at ease with himself.

I said, 'You made it all sound so easy. I'm surprised you were not damaged when you landed?'

'I was lucky, yes, despite the aircraft being knocked about a bit. That initial break was the vital ingredient; I was fortunate to get well away from the crash before the Huns appeared to pick me up; I saw them arrive from the edge of a wood about a mile distant. I think they expected to find a body in the cockpit.' He then went on to add a few details to what he had already described.

I said, 'You know that Jonathan Kerr was shot down some weeks after you.'

'So I've been told.' He showed no emotion. 'And nothing's been heard of since, I hear?'

'I'm afraid not.' I couldn't keep bitterness from my voice but he didn't seem to notice, nor did he express regret.

As we walked towards the exit, I asked, 'And what happens now?'

'To me, you mean? Oh, I do this for another four weeks, then I'm off to America for a three month lecture tour. 'P' staff wanted to post me on a staff appointment to some dead and alive place in Wales, but I knocked that on the head pretty smartly. I told them it was America or nothing and fortunately they saw the light.'

'You mean you twisted a few arms?'

He smiled in my direction with the derisive twist of the lips I knew so well. 'You could call it that. After all, there are more ways than one of killing a cat.' The smile broadened. 'What?'

I experienced a sudden stab of contempt for the man and found myself eyeing him coldly. I remember thinking: this man offends me; this is the person who remarked about my being a cripple and unable to fight. Unable? Or did he mean unwilling?