

Scars and Memories

Fiction by Rob Davis

Flying Officer John Terrence Webster, RAF, woke up with the pleasant remembrance that today there would be no night flying test; no main briefing, no stomach-churning wait, no bumpy ride out to the aircraft in that squeaky crew bus, and most of all, no dark trip over Germany.

Of course the crew had meant to keep in touch after their tour on Lancasters was successfully ("Succstressfully," Gabby had declared) completed. But when the parties had finished, the farewell handshakes were done, and the rest of the boys had taken off for yet another raid on the German capital, Webster's crew had dispersed with such speed that he was never quite sure where they had all gone.

Gabby had been posted as an instructor to a Heavy Conversion Unit, as befitted his record as a wizard navigator. After a month of flying with sprog pilots, one of the more ham-fisted ones had sent himself and his Halifax bomber into the wide waters of the River Trent, and nobody had survived. Tom Chance, Webster's crack bomb-aimer, elected to go straight back on ops and was posted to the Dam Buster Squadron. On a low level raid on the Dortmund-Ems canal his Lancaster was caught by energetic flak and blew up with the bombs still on board.

Harry Beadle became a technical instructor at the busy flight engineer's school at St Athan in Wales, and he wrote irregularly, declaring that "...it's a bloody shame, Webby. The lads these days seem to know damn all when we have to send them out. I'd rather have them for another three months, but as you know, there's a war on." Once they had met in London when their leaves had coincided, and it was a bit grim, because as the months progressed, more and more of their contemporaries were falling in the dark night battles over Germany, and a quiet talk about "Whatever happened to old so-and-so?" was all too often answered with "He got the chop over , poor old sod." So having seen it himself at particular first hand, Webster was well aware that there was a war on.

Jacko and Denny, Webster's gunners, were both still flying as instructors at the same conversion unit in Lincolnshire. Webster wrote once, but he had never achieved much of a rapport with the two Sergeants, Australians who had teamed up at Gunnery School on the Isle of Wight and who had never parted company since. He had heard a buzz that their mad antics often landed them in disciplinary trouble with their CO, but that was nothing new. Their Liverpoolian wireless-operator had disappeared completely, and Webster's letter to his parents' address had gone unanswered.¹

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Flight Lieutenant John Terrence Webster, DFC, RAF, dutifully completed a training course at firstly Flying Instructor's School at Lulsgate Bottom, Bristol, and then a six month stint teaching sprogs how to fly Stirlings and Halifaxes. His very fibre ached for the feel of a Lancaster again but he stuck it out, watching the sprogs make the usual and not so usual mistakes, and wondering how long some

¹ In 1990 Webster discovered that the wireless-operator, a multilingual Oxford graduate, had been approached by the Secret Service to work with them on extremely dangerous duties, well behind enemy lines. The man survived the war but was not allowed to resume his former identity, and his disappearance had been carefully stage-managed.

of them were going to last on ops. To this thought he closed his mind, and when his six months were up, reported to the Commanding Officer.

"Well, Webby, that's it then. You've put up a bloody good show here, I'm damn sorry to see you go. I suppose there's no chance that you'd stay on as an instructor? I need good blokes like you."

"No, thanks very much, sir. I've quite enjoyed it here, though. Nice change."

"Any idea what you want to do? I can probably pull a few strings for you. D'you want to back on heavies?"

"I'm not really sure, sir. Is there any choice about it?"

"I got word that they're looking for good instructors to teach Army types how to fly gliders." He caught Webster's expression. "H'mm, not your cup of tea, eh? Must say, I wouldn't fancy it much either - bloody ham fisted Pongoes, don't trust 'em an inch. What about Mosquitos?"

"That sounds more up my street, sir."

"Light Night Striking Force are always asking for experienced ops chaps. Or would you rather go on photo-recce?"

"I don't mind, sir. Mosquitos sound fine to me. I suppose that'd be in Cambridgeshire somewhere."

"Yes, I should think so. Look here, Webby, sit tight for a day or so and I'll ring up old Frenchy Hallington down at Group HQ. I'll have a word with him and see you again in a couple of days. Do you want a spot of leave? See your family? I'm sure I'd have something definite sorted out for you by the time you came back."

So armed with a five day pass, Webster travelled by train through the night to his parents' house in Leicester, arriving just after lunch on a Saturday afternoon. His father, a bespectacled accountant, was out on Home Guard duty when he arrived, but his mother, having had no warning, was delighted to see him and lost no chance to show off both him and his DFC ribbon to enthusiastic neighbours.

"Such a shame, dear. I was so looking forward to the Investiture. I would have liked to have met the King and Queen."

Webster's medal had arrived in the post, with a letter from His Majesty regretting that he was unable to award it in person. "I suppose he's rather busy," Webster said. "Really, I don't mind, Mum. I don't want the fuss."

"Your Dad and I were so shocked to hear about Bill Gabriel." Gabby had often come home with him on leave, and the Websters Senior had treated him like a second son. Webster nodded. "I wrote to his parents, but they didn't reply." If he had been on the squadron, he would have added, "Poor old sod, what a bugger, what a bloody shame," but domestic circumstances were different.

"Nice young man. We were very fond of him."

So had Webster been. So there wasn't much else to say.

"Your Dad will be pleased that you're here. He'll be back in an hour or two. The platoon's out doing guard duty. He'll be ready for his tea. Why don't you go up to your room for a while, and I'll bring you a nice cuppa."

Webster always found it irritating that his father, who had been a young subaltern in the First War, had now been offered no better position than Corporal in the local Home Guard. It was embarrassing when they met in uniform, especially in public, as his father was obliged to salute an officer. For this reason Webster would avoid wearing his uniform when he was home on leave. But his father enjoyed the semi-military activities, and was something of a local celebrity as a rifle marksman, in great demand for inter-company competitions.

The bedroom he remembered so well overlooked the back of the rugby ground. The scars of the Leicester Blitz were still visible as gaps in the neat rows of semi-detached houses. Had there been five bombs in a stick instead of four, his own house would have been hit. Instead, a family of four people six doors down the road had all died. People said it was all a mistake; the Luftwaffe should have been bombing Coventry or Birmingham. But a bomb was a bomb was a bomb. Webster found it odd that folks cursed the Germans for bombing England yet wanted to shake his hand and buy him a drink when they found out he had done a tour on Lancasters.

"Well done, lad. Here, have one on me. Remember to stick one on Hitler, from me and the missus, next time, eh? I was in the last war. I wish it was me teaching the Hun a lesson."

Webster remembered watching a combat between a Halifax and a German night fighter. The Halifax's gunners had been on the ball and set the Messerschmitt 110 ablaze; he had clearly seen the fire inside the German's cockpit canopy, but the pilot had gone in even closer to the Halifax and fired his cannon directly into the bomber's fuel tanks from a range of, in Webster's estimation, all of fifty feet. The stricken Halifax had exploded, taking the German aircraft with it. It was clear to him that the Germans were just as brave and determined as the RAF boys, and he would therefore change the subject when anyone tried to get him talking about the bombing raids. He knew only too well that most times his aiming point was simply an easily definable object slap in a city centre, and that the object of the raid was to kill civilians and workers.

The carefully-sculpted balsa models of the Imperial Airways passenger aircraft and interwar biplanes still swung dustily from the ceiling of his bedroom. Hours he had spent at Uncle Gerry's in Croydon, watching the oil-spattered bellies of the first generation of airliners as they slid overhead and landed, revelling in the bellow of the engines and the aircraft atmosphere. Nobody was surprised when he had volunteered for the RAF. Now he found himself looking at the models as would a night fighter pilot, analysing their weak spots, deciding that he'd come in **there** and **there** to take them by surprise.... nothing had changed except himself.

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"Sorry, Webby, but I didn't have a chance. They especially asked for you."

"Where the hell is this place, sir? I've never heard of it."

The CO opened his top drawer and pulled out a battered navigator's map of central England. After some deliberation, he stabbed a finger near Bedford. "Here it is. Tempsford. What an out of the way place. I'm really sorry, Webby. Look, if you're still in a pickle after a couple of months, get me on the blower, and I'll see if I can get you posted back here."

"Thanks, sir. I'll give it a go. What are they flying down there, anyway? Is it heavies - or Mosquitos?"

"Haven't a clue, old boy. I asked around, but nobody seems to know anything about it at all."

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Flight Lieutenant John Terrence Webster, DFC, RAF, sat in the Officer's Mess for the fifth day and tried not to scream out loud with sheer frustration. Not that it mattered if he did, because there was nobody about; life at Tempsford was quiet. There didn't even seem to be many people here, and although he said nodded his hello's to several other officers, nobody had said much beyond "Wotcher," and "Hiya." Not that anyone was unfriendly, but when Webster had tried to ask just what anyone actually did at Tempsford, he was answered with "I really don't know, old chap. I'm a bit new here myself," or "Sorry, I haven't a clue - why don't you wait until the Old Man can see you? I'm sure that he'll fill you in."

The odd thing was that there didn't seem to be a squadron, just an odd collection of aircraft. A mixed flight of Wellingtons and Hudsons, another of Stirlings manned by severe-looking Poles who kept themselves to themselves, and a dozen Lysanders, the daddy-long-legs of the air. Webster knew that Hudsons and Lizzies were often used for air/sea rescue and to drop dinghies and suchlike to ditched airmen. But Tempsford was too far from the coast to be on such duties, and anyway, no flying was done by day except the occasional air test. Night after night he would hear the Lysanders purr away at random intervals, and sometimes one of the other aircraft. There was no concentrated squadron take-offs, like the ones he had been used to up at Elsham.

It was all very strange.

After almost a week of absolutely nothing to do, he was on the verge of taking up the offer to wangle a posting back to the Heavy Conversion Unit at Blyton. At least there he could fly. However, the Commanding Officer sent for him just in time.

"I suppose you're wondering what we're all doing here?"

"Well, sir - it seems a bit odd. I mean, I'm a Lancaster pilot. There doesn't seem to be anything for me to do."

"We asked for you because you're a resourceful type and with the right experience. How's your French these days?"

For many years Webster had stayed a month out of every year with distant relatives in France, and had become virtually bilingual.

"French, sir? Well, it's still good, although rather rusty, I suppose. I don't use it much these days."

"What about your navigation?"

"I never had to do much, sir. Gabby - my navigator - took care of that for me."

"But you could do it on your own if needs be?"

"Oh, yes, sir. I haven't forgotten the essentials."

"Fine. Look here, let's go and have a quiet drink in the Mess, shall we, and I'll give you the gen on what we're doing."

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Flight Lieutenant John Terrance Webster, DFC, RAF, affected a friendly, if vacuous, expression.

"Do here? Us? Don't ask me, old boy. Look, take it easy for a while. I'll see if I can find the Old Man. Have a jar on my account. Steward.....?"

Two months after his arrival, Webster made a low level flight in a Lysander out over the Channel, dodging heavy cloud at two thousand feet and German searchlights and light flak. Making constant reference to the chart strapped to his knee, he flitted around a small French village at three hundred feet, well throttled back, until he saw the expected signal from the ground. Bang on track, he thought. Lower now, he could see the flickering of the lanterns which marked off his landing area, and the Lysander responded readily to the controls, turning steeply over the farms and sheds, sideslipping off the final fifty feet, and rumbling to a stop on the springy turf, well before the end of the improvised runway. Spinning the light aircraft quickly on one wheel and plenty of rudder, he eased the .38 pistol in the holster at his belt as shadowy figures in heavy coats came running out of the hedgerows.

*"Always take a pistol with you. You can **never** be **quite** sure who's going to meet you, no matter what signals they make.... better safe than sorry, eh?"*

He had seen the sense of that, and had drawn the revolver and ammunition from the Armaments Officer next day. Nobody had said a word, nobody had queried it.

Now the figures were at the Lysander's door, and pulling it open. An unshaven, tough face underneath the obligatory beret poked into the cockpit. Webster leaned around the control stick and shook the proffered hand. "Bienvenu, bienvenu, Monsieur le Pilote! Nous sommes hereux de vous recevoir ici. Tout est prêt. On depart immédiatement. Vous avez deux" - and the man held up two fingers - "passagers. Deux, comprenez?" He held up his hand again, with two fingers prominent. Webster had only been expecting one, but that didn't matter.

"Sometimes things go a little differently to how you were briefed. Always do what they want as long as you don't endanger yourself or the aeroplane."

"N'importe," replied Webster. "J'ai assez de l'èspace. C'est pas un problème."

The man's face cracked into a wide grin. "Bien, bien, voici vos passagers. Et bon voyage, Monsieur le Pilote. Bonne chance."

"Oui, bonne chance, monsieur." A firm hand-grip, and the man was gone. Across the field hurried a man and woman carrying a suitcase each. They paused briefly to embrace the other man, and then they were clambering under the high wing of the Lysander and into the cramped cockpit space. "Vite, vite, mes amis," said Webster, not wanting to spend more time than he had to on French soil. Peachy Lewis had overstayed his welcome once and sunk both wheels of his aeroplane right in; it had taken five hours for the frantic French to dig out him and his aeroplane, and all the time the Hudson had been right under the noses of the Germans. He had flown back at rooftop height with the rising sun chasing his tail fins, and had laughed it off back at Tempsford. "I came back all the way at daisy height," he chortled, "lucky for me the local farmers left their gates open or I wouldn't have made it." But all the same.....

"D'accord. On est prêt. Allez," came the muffled voice from the rear cockpit. Webster was reaching forward to the throttle when the welcoming Frenchman came running up, dodged around the Lysander's spinning propeller, and thrust a bottle of wine into the cockpit. "Merci, merci, Monsieur, et bonne chance!" Webster stuffed the bottle under his seat, slid the canopy shut, and cracked open the throttle. The Lysander obediently ran down the path between the lamps and lifted away into the night. Two and a half hours later he landed at Tempsford.

Special passengers were always 'Joes.' The aircrew were careful not to look at them too closely and nobody was indiscreet enough to ask any names. It was a matter of a brief "Merci bien, Monsieur le Pilote," a handshake, and they'd be gone, usually into a waiting car or lorry, to be whisked away to wherever it was that they went. And that was it. Webster admired them enormously.

Webster woke the next day but wasn't in time for breakfast; that was fine, it was what he was used to, in that other life when he had been responsible for a Lancaster bomber and six other men. That responsibility had weighed on him; now he felt a deal more free. He had come to like the solitude and general sneakiness of slinking the Lizzie in right under the noses of the enemy, using his own judgement and cunning to outwit them. He had become very good at it. Once he had just not felt right about landing, even though all the signals had been correct. He had flown home, and later word had filtered back from other Joes that it had been a trap laid by the Gestapo. So he trusted his own gut feeling.

The Mess stewards knew the form and there was always tea and sandwiches available for pilots and aircrew who had been flying late. Webster poured a large mug of Air Ministry tea and, selecting a trio of sandwiches, settled down to while away the morning.

"Wotcher, Webby! Thank God, a familiar face! Jesus Christ, but this place is a dump. I'd rather go back on ops any day."

Webster looked up to see a moustached face from his Elsham squadron, a pilot who had crashed towards the end of his tour and who had been hospitalised with a bad arm injury.

"Hello, old boy," he said carefully, shaking hands. "What are you doing here?"

The man gave a snort. "More the question of what are **you** doing here. I've been here two days and nobody's even spoken to me, let alone given me any gen. What's the form?"

"Dunno," said Webster, "don't ask me. Just hang around a few days, will you? I know the Old Man's a bit busy right now. But don't worry, I'll put him right. I expect he'll see you in a day or so."

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"Here," said Pitt, the Intelligence Officer, tapping a small town about fifty miles north of Paris. "See Creil? The Jerries have got some secret stuff down there so they're being a bit touchy. We sent Jimmy Logan in last night and I'm afraid he hasn't come back."

Webster knew that. He had been in the Watch Office as Duty Pilot in the early hours when a message filtered through from one of the south coast listening stations which had heard Logan's Hudson calling, reporting flak damage and the loss of one engine; and asking for a bearing for home. He had been flying at a couple of thousand feet and in filthy weather. They had thrice given him his correct bearing, but he'd never acknowledged it and had gone flying down the Channel and out into the Atlantic, still calling for help and a bearing for home. The Air/Sea rescue boys hadn't found any trace of either him or his aeroplane.

"It's important, then, sir?"

Pitt nodded. "Yes. A hot one. Take one of the Lysanders, Webby, not a Hudson. Catlike tread, eh? There are two passengers, both men. What time shall I pass up the line?"

Webster studied the map carefully, measuring off miles against time, judging how much he was going to have to skip around the likely problem areas, and the red-blotched flak zones. "I'll go at twenty-three thirty if that's ok, sir. That'll put me over them at oh two fifteen. I can be back just after oh four thirty. Time for breakfast."

"Right you are. I'll shoot that up to SOE, and leave you to it. Here are the local maps."

The key to it all, Webster had been told, was preparation. It was vital to know the lie of the terrain around the dropping zone, and whether or not there were any likely hazards such as high tension cables or church spires. Was the makeshift runway grass, or earth? How long was it? How long did it need to be if as sometimes happened the Joes were big, heavy men with suitcases? Which way was the prevailing wind? What signal system was in use that night and what recognition codes had been arranged? Survival of himself and his passengers depended on these things. Whilst mostly it was a straightforward parachute drop of men or supplies over an obscure region of France or Holland, sometimes an actual landing was required. It was required tonight.

His aeroplane was in the care of small group of ground staff in one of the disguised hangars which from a few hundred feet looked exactly like a Dutch barn.

"Don't get lost flying around, old boy. Believe me, it's easily done. Two hundred feet up and all you can see of the aerodrome is the farmer's wife hanging out her knickers."

A tough and efficient corporal looked after the Lysander's engine and an airman took care of the rest of the aeroplane. Webster discovered that the aircraft always functioned perfectly, even - as he had once found out - with half a wingtip shot away by German flak. It was only different from the

standard Lysanders in that it had a fixed fuselage ladder and a belly-mounted long range fuel tank. He made a brief air test after spending a couple of hours poring over the maps, had a leisurely tea and then snatched a couple of hours' sleep, and then paid his usual visit to the Armoury.

The Sergeant armourer answered Webster's discreet cough as he went in with a cheerful smile, and reaching into a locker, brought out the black .38 Smith & Wesson in its webbing belt harness.

"Usual, is it sir? Here it is. Just cleaned it myself, sir. Shall I load it for you?"

"No thanks. I'll do that just before I go."

"Right you are, then sir. If you'd sign here please?"

On the way out, Webster paused, drawn by a feeling he didn't understand. He turned back and found the Sergeant again.

"I say, have you got a Sten gun I could borrow?"

"A Sten? Yes, of course, sir. Matterafack, I got some new ones come in yesterday. I'll show you, sir."

Webster felt slightly embarrassed walking out to the aeroplane with the Sten slung over his shoulder along with his parachute, but nobody paid any attention. He tucked the weapon alongside his seat, loaded the revolver, and walked quickly but thoroughly around the black painted Lysander, checking that everything was ok. In Lancaster days Gabby had called it 'counting the engines'. There had been four then, and a huge 4,000 lb cookie in the bomb bay. Now it was just one engine, and himself.

"All set then, sir?"

"Yes, thanks. How's the aircraft?"

Back at Elementary Flying Training School Webster had once called the biplane initial trainer a 'kite.' The instructor's bellow of rage had at once come down the headphones.

"It's not a kite, a bus, a ship, or a plane, Webster. The word is **aeroplane** or **aircraft**," and never had it been anything else from the aspiring pilot's lips.

"She's fine, sir. We've put a new set of plugs in just now and topped off the oil. She won't let you down, sir."

"Okay. Fine. Thank you."

"All part of the job, sir. Good luck."

Webster's maps were carefully folded at the right pages and tucked into his flying-boot tops, fighter-pilot style. He checked the Aldis signalling-lamp on its flexible power cable, and, satisfied, stowed it away. Under his fluid cockpit drill, the Lysander's engine broke into life and the ground crew unplugged and wheeled away the portable battery-wagon. Half an hour later he was setting course,

hoping as always that the RAF's night fighters could tell the difference between a Lysander and the Luftwaffe's very similar Fieseler Storch.

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Yes - that was it! A series of not-quite-bright flashes just to the east of the disused railway siding. Webster throttled right back and let the Lysander float round its own port wingtip at two hundred feet, and watched again. There it was - long, short, long, short, pause, long, long, short, short. CZ. Webster lifted the Aldis and flashed back, short, short, pause, short, long, pause, long, long, long. IAO. He was bang on target.

Slowly the shape of the lights grew into a runway, with the start and finish lines clearly indicated. The Lysander touched a third of the way along, and bounced to stop on the bumpy meadow. Webster gunned the engine, spinning the aeroplane around, and started to taxi back to the downwind end. As figures sprinted out of the bushes, he span the aircraft again and slid back the cockpit canopy as the engine slowed to an idle.

"Bienvenu, Anglais. Vraiment vous êtes un homme brave...."

Webster had met the long-playing welcome before and it scared the shit out of him. There just wasn't time to exchange pleasantries on one's bravery and honour. "Oui, oui," he cut in before the man could go any further. "Les passagers sont prêt?"

Looking distinctly offended at the rebuff, the welcomer nodded. "Enprenez mes meilleurs voeux a votre Roi....."

"Monsieur, je vous en prie. Les passagers?"

The effusive Frenchman beckoned to the nearby hedge and two men in trench coats came out cautiously. One was favouring a wounded or injured arm, which was strapped into a crude sling. Webster turned in his seat. In doing so, his leg knocked into the Sten, reminding him that it was there. "Venez, messieurs!" he called, feeling, for no apparent reason, a strange sensation of foreboding. As the two men ran closer and began to clamber into the Lysander, he could see that whilst they were both nothing more than teenagers, the one with the arm injury was in serious trouble. Dark stains mottled the bandages and as his companion helped him in, fresh blood smeared the cockpit rim.

"Mon frère, Monsieur le Pilote - il est blessé - les Allemands."

Webster nodded and as far as he could in the confined space, tugged the wounded man into the rear cockpit. There was a momentary pause as the other man shook hands and embraced the wordy welcomer, and anticipating the off, Webster inched the throttle forwards and the Lysander began to roll. The uninjured brother turned and in an incredible gymnastic effort, took three or four steps towards the slowly moving aeroplane and vaulted neatly and cleanly through the open canopy and into the rear cockpit. Webster had neither the time nor the inclination to admire the feat. He cracked the throttle and the Lysander surged forward. At the exact moment the tail started to come up, the engine stopped with an incredible suddenness and the machine bounced back to earth, to

stop near the farmost lights. Webster swore comprehensively and at that moment the lanterns were doused.

Again the figures came running up. This time the welcoming Frenchman wasn't so welcoming.

"Alors, Anglais! Il vous faut partir! Les Allemands sont partout, partout! Vite, vite, je vous en prie!"

Webster didn't have time to argue the toss. He pulled the pin of his straps and free from their encumbrance, leapt from the Lysander's cockpit and lifted the starboard engine nacelle cover. At once he could smell petrol and felt liquid spurting over the leg of his flying-suit and boot. The Frenchman ran up, offering an electric torch, and Webster at once saw that the fuel-pipe union was broken. Petrol cascaded out of the feed-pipe and he hastily stuck a pencil in the end to stop the leak before some idiot lit a Gauloise and blew them to pieces.

He turned to the Frenchman, who had been joined by several companions, all armed to the teeth with rifles and captured German small arms. His French evaporating as fast as the spilled petrol, he pointed to the broken pipe, and unable to explain what a Jubilee clip was, pantomimed the action of screwing it up.

One the passengers, the unwounded one, climbed out of the Lysander, saw Webster's mime, and realisation dawned. He snapped his fingers and dashed back to the hedge. After a few second's pause, Webster heard the sound of a car engine starting up. Even Webster's limited geography of the field was enough for him to realise that the farmer's gate was several hundred yards up the hedge, and the same distance back again.

But the young man had other ideas. The hedge and fence directly alongside the car disintegrated in a shower of twigs as the vehicle smashed through, and bouncing heavily on the grass, skidded to a stop a few yards from the stricken aircraft. Switching off the engine, the young man lifted the bonnet, wrenched off the hose to the radiator and removed the screw clip. He ran the few steps over and offered it to Webster, who saw at once that whilst it wasn't entirely the right size, it would probably hold. Seizing a screwdriver from the aircraft's tool kit, he slipped the clip over the fuel feed pipe, offered it to its joint and frantically tightened the union. A small but steady dribble remained; the joint was not tight enough. His hopes crashed as he realised that there was more than enough petrol leaking out to start a fire.

The young man at once appraised the situation. He moved Webster aside and, taking the screwdriver, took it in his powerful hands. His shoulder and arm muscles writhed and Webster watched in astonishment as the makeshift clip tightened another impossible half inch. The fuel leak stopped.

The man grinned triumphantly. "Allez, Monsieur le Pilote," he declared, and tossed the screwdriver back. As he slung it back in the tool kit, Webster noticed with dismay that the tool's handle was streaked with blood and shards of skin.

There was still enough room left to take-off without making a taxi run back down the field. Webster clapped the young man on the shoulder and they clambered back aboard the aeroplane. It started immediately and not bothering to strap in, Webster released the brakes and reached for the throttle.

They would have made it except for a burst of sub-machine gun fire which entered the aircraft from one side and, apart from smashing most of the instruments, bent the throttle arm so badly that

Webster could not move it. A German armoured car crashed through the farmer's gate, machine-gun chattering, and all hell broke loose.

The German driving the armoured car couldn't make up his mind which of several targets to aim for. On the one hand, here was one of His Majesty's aircraft on the point of taking off; on the other hand, here were two or three groups of determined Frenchmen who had captured plenty of ammunition and who had apparently every intention of returning it - sharp end first - to the enemy. So he compromised and drove the vehicle directly across Webster's path, forcing him to flip off the magnetos. Sparkless, the engine stopped again and the aircraft bounced to a halt.

The armoured car's headlights swung again as the driver focussed his attention first on the bigger group of Resistance men, and then on the smaller group. Webster, grabbing the Sten gun at his feet, dived out of the aircraft and found himself alongside the unwounded Frenchman who had also hurriedly left the aeroplane.

The German driver may have had mixed priorities, but the machine-gunner did not. Presumably too busy to reach the controls of the heavy cannon mounted on the turret, he fired a long burst of machine-gun fire and disposed of the large group of Resistance men. Another long burst aimed at the smaller group dispersed them into individuals, and tracer chased them as they scattered across the field and into the darkness. Just as the gunner was tracking his sights towards the Lysander, one of the retreating men lobbed a hand grenade. By more luck than judgement, the bomb landed at the side of the armoured car just as it was taking a tight turn across the grass field, and the force of the turn allied with the explosion tipped it roughly onto one side. The firing stopped.

Even as the turret lid opened, the athletic Frenchman had scrambled to his feet and was sprinting for the wrecked vehicle about twenty yards away. Its lights were still working and as the figure was running down the beams, Webster for one moment thought that the gunner inside would get him. But the machine-gun remained silent, and when the Frenchman was about to reach the vehicle, the German inside was now outside and reaching to his holster for a pistol.

Webster lifted the Sten, but it was too inaccurate at that distance and he might well have hit his ally. Sick with fear, he watched as if in slow motion, the two figures come together, the one panting with exertion, breath streaming in the night air, the other frantically unbuckling the leather flap of his holster; both figures lit by the lights of the tipped-over armoured car.

Even as the German's hand came up with the pistol, the Frenchman's body dropped to the ground and the German went down like a ninepin as his legs were scythed from under him. In retrospect, Webster noted that the Frenchman's movement had been under total control; he had dropped almost sideways to the turf, landed on his damaged palms, and using his legs like a pole-axe, swept them in a semi-circle under the other man's knees.

The German was down, but fast. He rolled over and came back on his feet, without his pistol, but with the glint of a bayonet or knife in his hand. He closed with the Frenchman, and there was a blur of action. Again, in retrospect, Webster realised that the Frenchman had waited until the German had committed himself to a full attack; and then spiralling sideways, had coolly kicked the hand which held the blade, knocking away the weapon, before the sickeningly hard kick under the German's heart which had him measuring his length on the grass, where he did not move.

The athletic Frenchman didn't wait on his success. He sprinted back to the aircraft, and was about to clamber back in before Webster showed him the bent throttle. The great hands gripped the bent

metal, and Webster watched, fascinated, as a thick trickle of blood ran down the shaft of the throttle lever as the stone-faced man forced it back into rough shape - enough for it to be usable. Webster clambered in yet again. This time the Lysander's wings lifted them away cleanly, and navigating by the stars, Webster ran for home at tree-top height, dodging the light flak and searchlights until the Channel gleamed under the aeroplane's belly. An hour later they landed back at Tempsford.

As usual, there was a tarpaulined lorry waiting. Unable to use the damaged radio-telephone, Webster fired a flare on his approach and the Duty Controller had a medical team on hand. They lifted out the unconscious wounded Frenchman and rushed him off in the waiting ambulance.

Webster suddenly felt very shaken. To pull himself together, he walked round the damaged Lysander, and in the pale dawn light counted eleven bullet holes in and around the cockpit, seven in the port wing, and fifteen in the tail section.

"Monsieur le Pilote?"

It was the athletic Frenchman.

"Votre frère - ça va avec lui?"

The man nodded. "Mais ca va pas avec les Allemands," he chuckled. Webster laughed. "Montre-moi vos mains," he asked suddenly. The Frenchman held out his hands, where the tremendous strain of tightening the Jubilee clip and then bending the throttle lever had torn strips off the man's palms, leaving bloody, dirty strips gouged out. He would have shaken the man's hand, but instead, gripped him by the arm.

"Bonne chance en Angleterre, Monsieur."

The Frenchman's eyes glistened. "Mon frère vive seulement que vous avez le courage d'un lion," he declared simply, and in a swift movement, took Webster in a bear-like embrace.

Webster had never thought of it like that.

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John Terrence Webster, retired Director of Personnel for Imperial Electronics, browsed his pint in his local pub, one lunchtime in summer. Retirement had struck him quite hard after a busy life, and he was finding it difficult to adjust to a somewhat carefree existence. The mild heart attack hadn't helped, and a quiet life loomed in front like an unwelcome visitor who doesn't know when to leave.

The village bypass had taken away most of the traffic, and the pub was ideal for passing an idle hour or two in reading the newspaper or just sitting and watching the world go by. Two days ago Webster had been to the funeral of the last other surviving member of his crew for his second tour on Lancasters, which had been interrupted by the end of the war.

You could look from the pub's terrace and watch the stream of vehicles which had come from the British end of the Channel Tunnel; cars, caravans, lorries, many with foreign registrations. Some

even managed to get lost at once and wound up in the village after taking the third instead of the fourth exit at the new roundabout.

Webster finished his pint and deciding against another, started his walk home. Just along from the pub was the village cross, where the young people gathered.

"Look, it's Biggles," shouted one of the kids in glee, as Webster passed. He had never made a big thing out of his flying career, and only when he had read Binyon's moving words at the last Service of Remembrance was he identified in the local paper as "Wing Commander John T. Webster, DSO, DFC and bar, the distinguished bomber pilot who also took part in many clandestine operations." Some fellow writing a book had wanted to interview him, but Webster had pleaded a poor memory. His memory was in fact perfect, perfect enough to remember just how many friends had vanished over enemy or occupied territory, and whose names were now found on the Runnymede Memorial "to those of no known grave."

"Shot down any Jerries today?" taunted another youth. Webster ignored him. "Seen any Gestapo agents?" called another, nastily. Webster ignored him, too.

"Don't it make you ashamed that you killed women and children, Biggles?"

Webster turned. "I fought for King and Country so that you had the freedom to be able to come up to me and call me names," he said, with dignity. "If Hitler had won the war, people like you would not dare behave the way you do."

"Give me Hitler then," guffawed the youth.

"Pah," said Webster, turning away. He didn't see the youth stride up behind him, but he heard the last steps and in a reflex action turned as quickly as he could, raising his walking stick, and in turning caught the youth sharply between the legs, as he was about to deliver a blow to Webster's head. The youth didn't even gasp, but went down, white-faced. In seconds Webster was surrounded by them, taunting, mocking.

One kicked away his walking-stick. Another grabbed him from behind, pinioning his arms. Remembering his Service self-defence, he ground his heel against the unseen assailant's shins, and the howling youth dropped him to the ground.

Between the third and fourth kicks, Webster gave up, and he would have died, for he was old and not a strong man.

Tyres screeched, and the fifth kick was the last. Feet ran across the tarmac, and curses were interspersed with lightning-fast thuds as fist met bodies. Four youths went down; the rest ran away.

Webster was helped to his feet by a strongly-built man, showing white hair and a grizzled face, but powerfully built, and evidently in peak condition. He lifted Webster effortlessly and set him on his feet, dusting down his dirtied clothes and running a critical eye on the wounds.

"Eh bien, ca va, Monsieur?"

Just before he passed out, Webster saw him clearly.

Later, lying in a hospital bed with his son and two daughters satisfied that he wasn't badly hurt, and a Police Inspector satisfied with a statement and five arrests, Webster replayed the scene in his mind. He looked again, and saw not a street brawl around the village cross, but desperate battle between an unarmed Resistance man and a twice-armed German soldier. He saw not a walking-stick, but a damaged Lysander with thirty-three bullet holes. He saw not a rescuing foreign Galahad, but a grateful Frenchman who had embraced him.

The man had declined to give his name, the Inspector had declared. "He was anything between 55 and 70, but he had a hell of a physique, as if he spent hours in the gym, working out. Said that he was a *savate*² instructor. Lucky for you he turned up, Wing Commander. But I'll say this; I saw his hands, and he had terrific scars across the palms, as if he had raked himself over broken glass, years ago."

Of course there were scars. There were scars from action in a French field, fifty years before.

² The French form of self-defence which specialises in kicks and leg manoeuvres.