

PLEASE CHECK WITH BROADCAST

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The following postscript to the 9 o'clock news  
tonight is by a Royal Air Force Officer

DAWN PATROL

I'm not good at getting up early - really early, I mean, and even in summer, the early morning air at 4.0 a.m. is chilly. But it has its compensations, for after you've overcome the revulsion of getting out of a warm bed, there's something exhilarating and thrilling at that hour of the morning, especially when there's the prospect of a flying trip ahead. As a rule it's a good thing to have a cup of tea or something hot and a biscuit. It helps a lot towards waking you up...

When we get to the aerodrome it's still quite dark, except for the crescent of the last quarter of the moon and a very faint tinge of light in the east. Perhaps we're lucky, and it's clearly going to be a fine day. A gentle breeze of ten miles an hour from the south, three-tenths to five-tenths cloud at five thousand feet and a visibility of twelve miles or more. The Bomber boys were out last night and a distress signal has been received saying that someone was down in the "ditch" thirty miles north-east of Calais. The boats are out searching and I hope we shall have a chance of looking for them when we get out there.

Although it's still too dark to take off, we can just make out the faint silhouette of aircraft parked by the perimeter track. They look rather ghostly and yet somewhat animal with their long snouts; the thick cable from the engine to the battery starter trolley - that's a large box containing an accumulator - gives them the appearance of being tethered to a trough.

As we arrive at the Flight Dispersal, one engine after another bursts into life. My aircraft has already been warmed up and is ready for me to climb and take-off. In the dark you may see a few sparks but otherwise all you can detect is a faint mauve halo along a line of red hot pipes.

As I climb onto the wing of my aircraft, I notice that the morning dew and condensation have caused the wind-screen and perspex hood to mist up; that's inevitable but it will clear up as soon as we reach the cold air above.

Then I take off. Although the Duty Pilot has seen me take off and will phone the information to Group, I must "book-in" by wireless, so as soon as I'm in the air I press the "Transmit" switch on my R/T set. "Hullo, Bolton Control, Bolton Control. Party 24 airborne. Over." It's always a good thing to keep messages short, as it does not then give the Hun any time to plot my position. Immediately back comes the reply: "Hullo, Party 24, 24, Bolton Control answering. Receiving you loud and clear. I have no information for you. Listening out." That means that no enemy aircraft are reported in my vicinity, that Group know they can get into touch with me if and when they want to, and also confirms that my transmission is satisfactory.

Let's decide to climb above this first cloud layer and steer on 270 degrees. As the altimeter marks 4,000 feet, we get our first glimpse of the sun. At present it's just a red ball partially concealed by small clouds; the Channel and land below us are still in shadow but the lights and changing colours reflected on the clouds must be seen to be believed. I wish I were an artist and could paint them; I always feel that a sunrise seen from the air is so beautiful that were an artist to paint one truthfully, he would be accused of exaggeration. I wonder why it is so much more beautiful from the air than from ground level?

/We are

We are now passing through the light cloud layer. Small white wisps rush past me and the ground is blotted out as I break surface on top. It's glorious up here. The engine thrusts forward with a powerful roar, and although I'm in one of the fastest and deadliest of war planes, I feel miles away from the war and rather tempted to day-dream. But that must stop right away.

My position, silhouetted against the patch of white cloud, makes me vulnerable for I can be seen very easily if there are any Huns above me. I take a good look around the sky, paying particular attention to that area behind me. There's nothing about so we continue to climb towards the south-east. At 10,000 feet, I level out and take notes of the weather. The height, formation and amount of cloud, the temperature and visibility. All this I jot down on the writing pad strapped to my knee. Below me the clouds have thinned out and I am now immediately above a Belgian coast town which was formerly a well-known holiday resort.

I note any ships I can see and then turn through 180 degrees to dive down through the fast disappearing cloud. To my right we can see the long white wake of an air-sea rescue launch. It must be searching for the bomber crew reported during the night. We shall not be able to spare much time looking for them and there will be plenty of other aircraft doing that job but - you never know - we might be lucky. I open the hood above my cockpit, for two reasons. It's easier to search by leaning a little out of the cockpit, and also I have a horror of falling into the water and being trapped inside. Higher up, I always fly with the hood closed because I would have ample time to jettison if my engine failed or if I were unfortunate enough to be shot down. Low down I might not have the time before my aircraft hit the water and, you know, Spitfires don't float.

There's quite a lot of wreckage and oil floating about in the channel these days which makes me turn back several times and circle over a piece of wood or oil patch fearing I might miss something or somebody. Every now and again I glance in the mirror above the wind-screen or look behind me in case an enemy aircraft has spotted me and is creeping up. There doesn't seem to be anything about so I think I - What's that? What a lucky break! Right below me, a large bomber's dinghy with five chaps in it. The sea all round is coloured bright green from the fluorescene carried in the Mae Wests and which helps so much to attract the attention of searching aircraft. Climbing above my "find", I circle and carefully note the position of the nearest rescue launch some six miles away. The rest is easy. I attract the attention of the launch and send it in the direction of the dinghy. They acknowledge my signals and a few minutes later, the bomber crew was picked up.

We've now been airborne forty minutes. Allowing for twenty minutes scrapping, in case we meet anything in the air, that will leave about thirty minutes in which to play around. I decide to go and see if there's anything interesting inside France. We'll go down to nought feet and cross the coast between Boulogne and Calais. The cliffs at this part of the French coast are very like the ones at Dover, and on one occasion, I remember, I thought they were the English ones. We had been engaged somewhere in the middle of the channel and I had got rid of a Hun off my tail by spinning furiously and I turned to the right and headed south instead of north. I soon found out my mistake because it seemed as if every anti-aircraft gun in France was having a pot at me and I can't tell you to this day why I wasn't hit. However, that's another story.

Here's the coast. Now ease the stick gently back to scrape over the top of the cliffs and we're over France. There doesn't seem to be any sign of life at this hour of the morning (it's just 5.45 a.m.) but that doesn't mean much and I'm quite sure that we've been spotted by some defence post but we are too low and moving too quickly for anyone to have a shot at us. Trees and isolated houses flash by us as we streak along at nearly 300 miles an hour. I'm looking for the aerodrome just south of the town we've passed but it's impossible to read a map at this speed and anyway, I want both eyes to watch the ground ahead and to avoid trees and other obstacles which appear as if from nowhere under my wings.

A clump of buildings ahead look familiar, so also does that line of electric pylons to my right. Yes, I can now see the burnt out remains of a hangar which was set on fire during one of the bombing attacks at the beginning of the summer. It's the aerodrome all right and the people on it are awake, for cutting across my port wing I can see thin white streaks. Flak. I can't hear any sounds of gun-fire above the noise of the engine, but catch a glimpse of the gun-post on our left as we pass. Right ahead of me is what I'm really looking for, a couple of aircraft parked in front of a dispersal bay.

I haven't the time to make out the type (they are probably 190s or 109s) and as my sight ring covers one of them, I press the gun-firing button on the control column. Small pencils of smoke reach out from each wing as my cannons fire. Although I can hear the guns firing, I'm not so much conscious of the noise they make as of the vibration and momentary drop in speed of the aircraft. It's a sensation hard to describe. Rather like standing very close to one of these pneumatic road drills where the noise is not deafening but seems to go through you and everything seems quiet in comparison when it leaves off.

As I pass a couple of feet above the enemy aircraft, there's a blinding flash of white flame and a puff of oily black smoke is thrown into the air. We've hit it all right and I would very much like to stay and watch it burning but as all the guns round the aerodrome are having a crack at me, I resist the temptation and crouch lower in my seat. Not that crouching any lower would do the slightest bit of good if the aeroplane were hit fair and square, but somehow I feel as if I want to make myself very scarce just now.

I keep the aircraft right down on the deck and shave a farm house or some building on the far side of the aerodrome, then down a small valley (I wish it were deeper) and hard right at the end of it so as to put as much distance and as many trees and buildings as possible between me and those red tracers which appear to be reaching out after me. We haven't been hit and there doesn't seem to be a single Hun in the sky. Anyway, I've used up a lot of my ammunition and feel that I've had my fun for the morning so we'll just turn through ninety degrees to starboard and head for home.

Half way across the channel I pass over the rescue launch with the bomber's dinghy alongside. A couple of the crew wave and give the "thumb's up" signal. Good show. They'll be back in England in time for breakfast, and talking of breakfast, am I hungry?