
Opening Extract from...

A Trail of Fire

Written by Diana Gabaldon

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A Trail of Fire

Four Outlander Tales

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Mistress of the Bulge

When *The Scottish Prisoner* was published, a bookseller friend turned to me in delight and said, 'I think you've invented a new literary form – the bulge!' In other words, a story that is neither sequel nor prequel, but lives inside an existing body of work. Now, frankly, I wish she had thought of something more poetic to describe my efforts, but I have to admit that 'bulge' has a bit more punch – with its vivid imagery of a snake that's swallowed some large and squirming prey – than colourless terms like 'interpolation' or 'inclusion'.

I first wrote a short story fifteen years ago, mostly to see whether I *could* write something shorter than 300,000 words. It was an interesting technical challenge, but 'short' is not what you'd call one of my great natural skills. Still, I found the experience interesting, and since then have written the occasional short (well . . . sort of; it's all relative, isn't it?) piece when invited to contribute to an anthology now and then.

Even though these stories are relatively brief, they're almost all connected to (and integral parts of) the large series of novels that includes both the huge *Outlander* novels and the smaller historical mysteries focused on the character of Lord John Grey. These novellas too are bulges; stories that fill a lacuna in the main story or explore the life and times of secondary characters, while connecting with the existing parts of the series.

Now, an anthology is a collection of stories written by a number of different authors. It's a good way to sample the styles and voices of writers you might not usually encounter, or try an unfamiliar

genre. Still, some readers may be chiefly interested in a particular favourite writer, and not want to buy an anthology for the sake of just one short story or novella.[1]

A few years ago, I collected three novellas about Lord John Grey (two of them previously published in anthologies, one written specifically for the new collection) into a single volume, and titled it *Lord John and the Hand of Devils*. Readers enjoyed having these pieces of Lord John's story conveniently to hand, and so I figured that whenever I had a few more short pieces, I'd publish another collection. This is it.

This volume includes two Lord John novellas: *The Custom of the Army*, and *Lord John and the Plague of Zombies*. In terms of the overall chronology of the novels and shorter pieces involving his lordship, *Custom* follows the novel *Brotherhood of the Blade* and precedes the novel *The Scottish Prisoner*. *Zombies* follows *The Scottish Prisoner* (though it was in fact written *while* I was writing *Prisoner*, and was published before the novel was finished, and if you don't think *that* was a swift bit of juggling . . .). You'll find an overall chronology of both the main *Outlander* novels and the Lord John novels and novellas at the back of this book.

The Custom of the Army is set in 1759, in London and Quebec, and while it probably *was* all the fault of the electric eel, Lord John finds himself obliged to leave London for the wilds of Canada and the dangerous proximity of James Wolfe, the British general besieging the Citadel of Quebec. *('Melodramatic ass,' was what Hal had said, hastily briefing him before his departure. 'Showy, bad judgement, terrible strategist. Has the Devil's own luck, though, I'll give him that.* Don't *follow him into anything stupid.')*

Plague of Zombies takes place in 1761, on the island of Jamaica, where Lord John is sent as commander of a battalion intended to suppress what seems to be a revolt of the escaped slaves called

[1]According to the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, a short story is something containing fewer than 17,500 words, while a novella is a story between 17,501 and 40,000 words. Anything bigger than 40,000 words is technically a novel. By *some* people's standards. <cough>

maroons. But things are not always what they seem. (*He rubbed the rest of the blood from his hand with the hem of his banyan, and the cold horror of the last few minutes faded into a glowing coal of anger, hot in the pit of his stomach. He'd been a soldier most of his life; he'd killed. He'd seen the dead on battlefields. And one thing he knew for a fact. Dead men don't bleed.)*

Now, you'll also find two other stories in this book: *A Leaf on the Wind of All Hallows*, and *The Space Between*. *Leaf* is the story of Roger MacKenzie's parents, Jerry and Dolly, and takes place during WWII. *(It was cold in the room, and she hugged herself. She was wearing nothing but Jerry's string vest – he thought she looked erotic in it – 'lewd,' he said, approving, his Highland accent making the word sound really dirty – and the thought made her smile. The thin cotton clung to her breasts, true enough, and her nipples poked out something scandalous, if only from the chill. She wanted to go crawl in next to him, longing for his warmth, longing to keep touching him for as long as they had.)*

The Space Between follows the events in the novel *An Echo in the Bone*, is set in Paris in 1778, and concerns Michael Murray (Young Ian Murray's elder brother), Joan MacKimmie (Marsali MacKimmie Fraser's younger sister), Master Raymond, Mother Hildegarde (yes, she's still alive), the Comte St Germain (ditto – surely you didn't think he was really dead, did you?), and a number of other interesting people. *('What a waste of a wonderful arse,' Monsieur Brechin remarked in French, watching Joan's ascent from the far side of the cabin. 'And mon Dieu, those legs! Imagine those wrapped around your back, eh? Would you have her keep the striped stockings on? I would.' It hadn't occurred to Michael to imagine that, but he was now having a hard time dismissing the image. He coughed into his handkerchief to hide the reddening of his face*.)

I hope you'll enjoy the journey into so-far-uncharted territory, torches held aloft!

Diana Gabaldon

Introduction to
A Leaf on the Wind of All Hallows

One of the interesting things you can do with a 'bulge' is to follow mysteries, hints, and loose ends from the main books of the series. One such trail follows the story of Roger MacKenzie's parents.

In *Outlander*, we learn that Roger was orphaned during World War II, and then adopted by his great-uncle, the Reverend Reginald Wakefield, who tells Claire and Frank that Roger's mother was killed in the Blitz, and that his father was a Spitfire pilot 'shot down over the Channel'.

In *Drums of Autumn*, Roger tells Brianna the moving story of his mother's death in the collapse of a Tube station during the bombing of London.

But in *An Echo in the Bone*, there is a poignant conversation in the moonlight between Claire and Roger, during which we encounter *this* little zinger:

> Her hands wrapped his, small and hard and smelling of medicine.
>
> 'I don't know what happened to your father,' she said. 'But it wasn't what they told you [. . .]
>
> 'Of course things happen,' she said, as though able to read his thoughts. 'Accounts get garbled, too, over time and distance. Whoever told your mother might have been mistaken; she might have said something that the reverend misconstrued. All those things are possible. But during the War, I had letters from Frank – he wrote as often as he could, up until they recruited him into

MI6. After that, I often wouldn't hear anything for months. But just before that, he wrote to me, and mentioned – just as casual chat, you know – that he'd run into something strange in the reports he was handling. A Spitfire had gone down, crashed – not shot down; they thought it must have been an engine failure – in Northumbria, and while it hadn't burned, for a wonder, there was no sign of the pilot. None. And he did mention the name of the pilot, because he thought Jeremiah rather an appropriately doomed sort of name.'

'Jerry,' Roger said, his lips feeling numb. 'My mother always called him Jerry.'

'Yes,' she said softly. 'And there are circles of standing stones scattered all over Northumbria.'

So what *really* happened to Jerry MacKenzie and his wife Dolly? Read on.

A Leaf on the Wind of All Hallows

It was two weeks yet to Hallowe'en, but the gremlins were already at work.

Jerry MacKenzie turned Dolly II onto the runway full-throttle, shoulder-hunched, blood-thumping, already halfway up Green leader's arse – pulled back on the stick and got a choking shudder instead of the giddy lift of takeoff. Alarmed, he eased back, but before he could try again, there was a bang that made him jerk by reflex, smacking his head against the Perspex. It hadn't been a bullet, though; the off tyre had blown, and a sickening tilt looped them off the runway, bumping and jolting into the grass.

There was a strong smell of petrol, and Jerry popped the Spitfire's hood and hopped out in panic, envisioning imminent incineration, just as the last plane of Green flight roared past him and took wing, its engine fading to a buzz within seconds.

A mechanic was pelting down from the hangar to see what the trouble was, but Jerry'd already opened Dolly's belly and the trouble was plain: the fuel line was punctured. Well, thank Christ he hadn't got into the air with it, that was one thing, but he grabbed the line to see how bad the puncture was, and it came apart in his hands and soaked his sleeve nearly to the shoulder with high-test petrol. Good job the mechanic hadn't come loping up with a lit cigarette in his mouth.

He rolled out from under the plane, sneezing, and Gregory the mechanic stepped over him.

'Not flying her today, mate,' Greg said, squatting down to look up into the engine, and shaking his head at what he saw.

'Aye, tell me something I don't know.' He held his soaked sleeve gingerly away from his body. 'How long to fix her?'

Greg shrugged, eyes squinted against the cold wind as he surveyed Dolly's guts.

'Half an hour for the tyre. You'll maybe have her back up tomorrow, if the fuel line's the only engine trouble. Anything else we should be looking at?'

'Aye, the left wing-gun trigger sticks sometimes. Gie us a bit o' grease, maybe?'

'I'll see what the canteen's got in the way of leftover dripping. You best hit the showers, Mac. You're turning blue.'

He was shivering, right enough, the rapidly evaporating petrol wicking his body heat away like candlesmoke. Still, he lingered for a moment, watching as the mechanic poked and prodded, whistling through his teeth.

'Go on, then,' Greg said in feigned exasperation, backing out of the engine and seeing Jerry still there. 'I'll take good care of her.'

'Aye, I know. I just— aye, thanks.' Adrenaline from the aborted flight was still surging through him, thwarted reflexes making him twitch. He walked away, suppressing the urge to look back over his shoulder at his wounded plane.

Jerry came out of the pilots' WC half an hour later, eyes stinging with soap and petrol, backbone knotted. Half his mind was on Dolly, the other half with his mates. Blue and Green were up this morning, Red and Yellow resting. Green flight would be out over Flamborough Head by now, hunting.

He swallowed, still restless, dry-mouthed by proxy, and went to fetch a cup of tea from the canteen. That was a mistake; he heard the gremlins laughing as soon as he walked in and saw Sailor Malan.

Malan was Group Captain and a decent bloke overall. South African, a great tactician – and the most ferocious, most persistent air fighter Jerry'd seen yet. Rat terriers weren't in it. Which was why he felt a beetle skitter briefly down his spine when Malan's deep-set eyes fixed on him.

'Lieutenant!' Malan rose from his seat, smiling. 'The very man I had in mind!'

The Devil he had, Jerry thought, arranging his face into a look of respectful expectancy. Malan couldn't have heard about Dolly's spot of bother yet, and without that, Jerry would have scrambled with A flight on their way to hunt 109s over Flamborough Head. Malan hadn't been looking for Jerry; he just thought he'd do, for whatever job was up. And the fact that the Group Captain had called him by his rank, rather than his name, meant it probably wasn't a job anyone would volunteer for.

He didn't have time to worry about what that might be, though; Malan was introducing the other man, a tallish chap in army uniform with dark hair and a pleasant, if sharp, look about him. Eyes like a good sheep dog, he thought, nodding in reply to Captain Randall's greeting. Kindly, maybe, but he won't miss much.

'Randall's come over from Ops at Ealing,' Sailor was saying over his shoulder. He hadn't waited for them to exchange polite chat, but was already leading them out across the tarmac, heading for the Flight Command offices. Jerry grimaced and followed, casting a longing glance downfield at Dolly, who was being towed ignominiously into the hangar. The rag-doll painted on her nose was blurred, the black curls partially dissolved by weather and spilled petrol. Well, he'd touch it up later, when he'd heard the details of whatever horrible job the stranger had brought.

His gaze rested resentfully on Randall's neck, and the man turned suddenly, glancing back over his shoulder as though he'd felt the stress of Jerry's regard. Jerry felt a qualm in the pit of his stomach, as half-recognised observations – the lack of insignia on the uniform, that air of confidence peculiar to men who kept secrets – gelled with the look in the stranger's eye.

Ops at Ealing, my Aunt Fanny, he thought. He wasn't even surprised, as Sailor waved Randall through the door, to hear the Group Captain lean close and murmur in his ear, 'Careful – he's a funny bugger.'

Jerry nodded, stomach tightening. Malan didn't mean Captain Randall was either humorous or a Freemason. 'Funny bugger' in this context meant only one thing. MI6.

Captain Randall *was* from the secret arm of British Intelligence. He made no bones about it, once Malan had deposited them in a vacant office and left them to it.

'We're wanting a pilot – a good pilot –' he added with a faint smile, 'to fly solo reconnaissance. A new project. Very special.'

'Solo? Where?' Jerry asked warily. Spitfires normally flew in four-plane flights, or in larger configurations, all the way up to an entire squadron, sixteen planes. In formation, they could cover each other to some extent against the heavier Heinkels and Messerschmitts. But they seldom flew alone by choice.

'I'll tell you that a bit later. First – are you fit, do you think?'

Jerry reared back a bit at that, stung. What did this bloody boffin think he— then he caught a glance at his reflection in the window pane. Eyes red as a mad boar's, his wet hair sticking up in spikes, a fresh red bruise spreading on his forehead and his blouson stuck to him in damp patches where he hadn't bothered to dry off before dressing.

'Extremely fit,' he snapped. 'Sir.'

Randall lifted a hand half an inch, dismissing the need for sirs.

'I meant your knee,' he said mildly.

'Oh,' Jerry said, disconcerted. 'That. Aye, it's fine.'

He'd taken two bullets through his right knee a year before, when he'd dived after a 109 and neglected to see another one that popped out of nowhere behind him and peppered his arse.

On fire, but terrified of bailing out into a sky filled with smoke,

bullets, and random explosions, he'd ridden his burning plane down, both of them screaming as they fell out of the sky, Dolly I's metal skin so hot it had seared his left forearm through his jacket, his right foot squelching in the blood that filled his boot as he stamped the rudder pedal. Made it, though, and had been on the sick and hurt list for two months. He still limped very noticeably, but he didn't regret his smashed patella; he'd had his second month's sick leave at home – and wee Roger had come along nine months later.

He smiled broadly at the thought of his lad, and Randall smiled back in involuntary response.

'Good,' he said. 'You're all right to fly a long mission, then?'

Jerry shrugged. 'How long can it be in a Spitfire? Unless you've thought up a way to refuel in the air.' He'd meant that as a joke, and was further disconcerted to see Randall's lips purse a little, as though thinking whether to tell him they *had.*

'It is a Spitfire ye mean me to fly?' he asked, suddenly uncertain. Christ, what if it was one of the experimental birds they heard about now and again? His skin prickled with a combination of fear and excitement. But Randall nodded.

'Oh, yes, certainly. Nothing else is manoeuvrable enough, and there may be a good bit of ducking and dodging. What we've done is to take a Spitfire II, remove one pair of wing-guns, and refit it with a pair of cameras.'

'One pair?'

Again that slight pursing of lips before Randall replied.

'You might need the second pair of guns.'

'Oh. Aye. Well, then . . .'

The immediate notion, as Randall explained it, was for Jerry to go to Northumberland, where he'd spend two weeks being trained in the use of the wing-cameras, taking pictures of selected bits of landscape at different altitudes. And where he'd work with a support team who were meant to be trained in keeping the cameras functioning in bad weather. They'd teach him how to get the film out without ruining it, just in case he had to. After which . . .

'I can't tell you yet exactly where you'll be going,' Randall had said. His manner through the conversation had been intent, but friendly, joking now and then. Now all trace of joviality had vanished; he was dead serious. 'Eastern Europe is all I can say just now.'

Jerry felt his inside hollow out a little and took a deep breath to fill the empty space. He could say no. But he'd signed up to be an RAF flier, and that's what he was.

'Aye, right. Will I— maybe see my wife once, before I go, then?'

Randall's face softened a little at that, and Jerry saw the Captain's thumb touch his own gold wedding ring in reflex.

'I think that can be arranged.'

Marjorie MacKenzie – Dolly to her husband – opened the blackout curtains. No more than an inch . . . well, two inches. It wouldn't matter; the inside of the little flat was dark as the inside of a coal-scuttle. London outside was equally dark; she knew the curtains were open only because she felt the cold glass of the window through the narrow crack. She leaned close, breathing on the glass, and felt the moisture of her breath condense, cool near her face. Couldn't see the mist, but felt the squeak of her fingertip on the glass as she quickly drew a small heart there, the letter J inside.

It faded at once, of course, but that didn't matter; the charm would be there when the light came in, invisible but there, standing between her husband and the sky.

When the light came, it would fall just so, across his pillow. She'd see his sleeping face in the light: the jackstraw hair, the fading bruise on his temple, the deep-set eyes, closed in innocence. He looked so young, asleep. Almost as young as he really was. Only twenty-two; too young to have such lines in his face. She touched the corner of her mouth, but couldn't feel the crease the mirror showed her – her mouth was swollen, tender, and the ball of her thumb ran across her lower lip, lightly, to and fro.

What else, what else? What more could she do for him? He'd left her with something of himself. Perhaps there would be another baby – something he gave her, but something she gave him, as well. Another baby. Another child to raise alone?

'Even so,' she whispered, her mouth tightening, face raw from hours of stubbled kissing; neither of them had been able to wait for him to shave. 'Even so.'

At least he'd got to see Roger. Hold his little boy – and have said little boy sick up milk all down the back of his shirt. Jerry'd yelped in surprise, but hadn't let her take Roger back; he'd held his son and petted him until the wee mannie fell asleep, only then laying him down in his basket and stripping off the stained shirt before coming to her.

It was cold in the room, and she hugged herself. She was wearing nothing but Jerry's string vest – he thought she looked erotic in it, 'lewd,' he said, approving, his Highland accent making the word sound really dirty – and the thought made her smile. The thin cotton clung to her breasts, true enough, and her nipples poked out something scandalous, if only from the chill.

She wanted to go crawl in next to him, longing for his warmth, longing to keep touching him for as long as they had. He'd need to go at eight, to catch the train back; it would barely be light then. Some puritanical impulse of denial kept her hovering there, though, cold and wakeful in the dark. She felt as though if she denied herself, her desire, offered that denial as sacrifice, it would strengthen the magic, help to keep him safe and bring him back. God knew what a minister would say to that bit of superstition, and her tingling mouth twisted in self-mockery. And doubt.

Still, she sat in the dark, waiting for the cold blue light of the dawn that would take him.

Baby Roger put an end to her dithering, though; babies did. He rustled in his basket, making the little waking-up grunts that presaged an outraged roar at the discovery of a wet nappy and an empty stomach, and she hurried across the tiny room to his basket, breasts swinging heavy, already letting down her milk. She wanted

to keep him from waking Jerry, but stubbed her toe on the spindly chair, and sent it over with a bang.

There was an explosion of bedclothes as Jerry sprang up with a loud 'FUCK!' that drowned her own muffled 'damn!' and Roger topped them both with a shriek like an air-raid siren. Like clockwork, old Mrs Munns in the next flat thumped indignantly on the thin wall.

Jerry's naked shape crossed the room in a bound. He pounded furiously on the partition with his fist, making the wallboard quiver and boom like a drum. He paused, fist still raised, waiting. Roger had stopped screeching, impressed by the racket.

Dead silence from the other side of the wall, and Marjorie pressed her mouth against Roger's round little head to muffle her giggling. He smelled of baby-scent and fresh pee, and she cuddled him like a large hot-water bottle, his immediate warmth and need making her notions of watching over her men in the lonely cold seem silly.

Jerry gave a satisfied grunt and came across to her.

'Ha,' he said, and kissed her.

'What d'ye think you are?' she whispered, leaning into him. 'A gorilla?'

'Yeah,' he whispered back, taking her hand and pressing it against him. 'Want to see my banana?'

'*Dzien dobry*.'

Jerry halted in the act of lowering himself into a chair, and stared at a smiling Frank Randall.

'Oh, aye,' he said. 'Like that, is it? *Niech sie pan odpierdoli*.' It meant, 'Fuck off, sir,' in formal Polish, and Randall, taken by surprise, broke out laughing.

'Like that,' he agreed. He had a wodge of papers with him, official forms, all sorts, the bumf as the pilots called it – Jerry recognised the one you signed that named who your pension went

to, and the one about what to do with your body if there was one and anyone had time to bother. He'd done all that when he signed up, but they made you do it again, if you went on special service. He ignored the forms, though, eyes fixed instead on the maps Randall had brought.

'And here's me thinkin' you and Malan picked me for my bonny face,' he drawled, exaggerating his accent. He sat and leaned back, affecting casualness. 'It is Poland, then?' So it hadn't been coincidence, after all – or only the coincidence of Dolly's mishap sending him into the building early. In a way, that was comforting; it wasn't the bloody Hand of Fate tapping him on the shoulder by puncturing the fuel line. The Hand of Fate had been in it a good bit earlier, putting him in Green flight with Andrzej Kolodziewicz.

Andrzej was a real guid yin, a good friend. He'd copped it a month before, spiralling up away from a Messerschmitt. Maybe he'd been blinded by the sun, maybe just looking over the wrong shoulder. Left wing shot to hell, and he'd spiralled right back down and into the ground. Jerry hadn't seen the crash, but he'd heard about it. And got drunk on vodka with Andrzej's brother after.

'Poland,' Randall agreed. 'Malan says you can carry on a conversation in Polish. That true?'

'I can order a drink, start a fight, or ask directions. Any of that of use?'

'The last one might be,' Randall said, very dry. 'But we'll hope it doesn't come to that.'

The MI6 agent had pushed aside the forms, and unrolled the maps. Despite himself, Jerry leaned forward, drawn as by a magnet. They were official maps, but with markings made by hand – circles, X's.

'It's like this,' Randall said, flattening the maps with both hands. 'The Nazis have had labour camps in Poland for the last two years, but it's not common knowledge among the public, either home or abroad. It would be very helpful to the war effort if it *were* common knowledge. Not just the camps' existence, but the kind of thing that goes on there.' A shadow crossed the dark, lean face – anger,

Jerry thought, intrigued. Apparently, Mr MI6 knew what kind of thing went on there, and he wondered how.

'If we want it widely known and widely talked about – and we do – we need documentary evidence,' Randall said matter-of-factly. 'Photographs.'

There'd be four of them, he said, four Spitfire pilots. A flight – but they wouldn't fly together. Each one of them would have a specific target, geographically separate, but all to be hit on the same day.

'The camps are guarded, but not with anti-aircraft ordnance. There are towers, though; machine-guns.' And Jerry didn't need telling that a machine-gun was just as effective in someone's hands as it was from an enemy plane. To take the sort of pictures Randall wanted would mean coming in low – low enough to risk being shot from the towers. His only advantage would be the benefit of surprise; the guards might spot him, but they wouldn't be expecting him to come diving out of the sky for a low pass just above the camp.

'Don't try for more than one pass, unless the cameras malfunction. Better to have fewer pictures than none at all.'

'Yes, sir.' He'd reverted to 'sir', as Group Captain Malan was present at the meeting, silent but listening intently. Got to keep up appearances.

'Here's the list of the targets you'll practise on in Northumberland. Get as close as you think reasonable, without risking—' Randall's face did change at that, breaking into a wry smile. 'Get as close as you can manage with a chance of coming back, all right? The cameras may be worth even more than you are.'

That got a faint chuckle from Malan. Pilots – especially trained pilots – were valuable. The RAF had plenty of planes now, but nowhere near enough pilots to fly them.

He'd be taught to use the wing-cameras and to unload the film safely. If he was shot down but was still alive and the plane didn't burn, he was to get the film out and try to get it back over the border.

'Hence the Polish.' Randall ran a hand through his hair, and gave Jerry a crooked smile. 'If you have to walk out, you may need to ask directions.' They had two Polish-speaking pilots, he said – one Pole and a Hungarian who'd volunteered, and an Englishman with a few words of the language, like Jerry.

'And it is a volunteer mission, let me reiterate.'

'Aye, I know,' Jerry said irritably. 'Said I'd go, didn't I? Sir.'

'You did.' Randall looked at him for a moment, dark eyes unreadable, then lowered his gaze to the maps again. 'Thanks,' he said softly.

The canopy snicked shut over his head. It was a dank, damp Northumberland day, and his breath condensed on the inside of the Perspex hood within seconds. He leaned forward to wipe it away, emitting a sharp yelp as several strands of his hair were ripped out. He'd forgotten to duck. Again. He shoved the canopy release with a muttered oath and the light brown strands caught in the seam where the Perspex closed flew away, caught up by the wind. He closed the canopy again, crouching, and waiting for the signal for take-off.

The signalman wig-wagged him and he turned up the throttle, feeling the plane begin to move.

He touched his pocket automatically, whispering, 'Love you, Dolly,' under his breath. Everyone had his little ritual, those last few moments before take-off. For Jerry MacKenzie, it was his wife's face and his lucky stone that usually settled the worms in his belly. She'd found it in a rocky hill on the Isle of Lewis, where they'd spent their brief honeymoon – a rough sapphire, she said, very rare.

'Like you,' he'd said, and kissed her.

No need for worms just the now, but it wasn't a ritual if you only did it sometimes, was it? And even if it wasn't going to be combat today, he'd need to be paying attention.

He went up in slow circles, getting the feel of the new plane, sniffing to get her scent. He wished they'd let him fly Dolly II, her seat stained with his sweat, the familiar dent in the console where he'd slammed his fist in exultation at a kill – but they'd already modified this one with the wing-cameras and the latest thing in night-sights. It didn't do to get attached to the planes, anyway; they were almost as fragile as the men flying them, though the parts could be reused.

No matter; he'd sneaked out to the hangar the evening before and done a quick rag-doll on the nose to make it his. He'd know Dolly III well enough by the time they went into Poland.

He dived, pulled up sharp, and did Dutch rolls for a bit, wig-wagging through the cloud-layer, then complete rolls and Immelmanns, all the while reciting Malan's Rules to focus his mind and keep from getting air-sick.

The Rules were posted in every RAF barracks now: the Ten Commandments, the fliers called them – and not as a joke.

TEN OF MY RULES FOR AIR FIGHTING, the poster said in bold black type. Jerry knew them by heart.

'*Wait until you see the whites of his eyes*,' he chanted under his breath. '*Fire short bursts of one to two seconds only when your sights are definitely "ON".*' He glanced at his sights, suffering a moment's disorientation. The camera wizard had relocated them. Shite.

'*Whilst shooting think of nothing else, brace the whole of your body: have both hands on the stick: concentrate on your ring sight.*' Well, away to fuck, then. The buttons that operated the camera weren't on the stick; they were on a box connected to a wire that ran out the window; the box itself was strapped to his knee. He'd be bloody looking out the window anyway, not using sights – unless things went wrong and he had to use the guns. In which case . . .

'*Always keep a sharp lookout. "Keep your finger out."*' Aye, right, that one was still good.

'*Height gives you the initiative*.' Not in this case. He'd be flying low, under the radar, and not be looking for a fight. Always the chance one might find him, though. If any German craft found him flying

solo in Poland, his best chance was likely to head straight for the sun and fall in. That thought made him smile.

'*Always turn and face the attack*.' He snorted and flexed his bad knee, which ached with the cold. Aye, if you saw it coming in time.

'*Make your decisions promptly. It is better to act quickly even though your tactics are not the best*.' He'd learnt that one fast. His body often was moving before his brain had even notified his consciousness that he'd seen something. Nothing to see just now, nor did he expect to, but he kept looking by reflex.

'*Never fly straight and level for more than 30 seconds in the combat area*.' Definitely out. Straight and level was just what he was going to have to do. And slowly.

'*When diving to attack always leave a proportion of your formation above to act as a top guard*.' Irrelevant; he wouldn't have a formation – and that was a thought that gave him the cold grue. He'd be completely alone; no help coming if he got into bother.

'*INITIATIVE, AGGRESSION, AIR DISCIPLINE, and TEAM WORK are words that MEAN something in Air Fighting*.' Yeah, they did. What meant something in reconnaissance? Stealth, Speed, and Bloody Good Luck, more like. He took a deep breath, and dived, shouting the last of the Ten Commandments so it echoed in his Perspex shell.

'Go in quickly – Punch hard – GET OUT!'

'Rubber-necking,' they called it, but Jerry usually ended a day's flying feeling as though he'd been cast in concrete from the shoulder-blades up. He bent his head forward now, ferociously massaging the base of his skull to ease the growing ache. He'd been practising since dawn, and it was nearly tea-time. *Ball-bearings, set, for the use of pilots, one*, he thought. Ought to add that to the standard equipment list. He shook his head like a wet dog, hunched his shoulders, groaning, then resumed the sector-by-sector scan of the sky around him that every pilot did religiously,

three hundred and sixty degrees, every moment in the air. All the live ones, anyway.

Dolly'd given him a white silk scarf as a parting present. He didn't know how she'd managed the money for it and she wouldn't let him ask, just settled it round his neck inside his flight jacket. Somebody'd told her the Spitfire pilots all wore them, to save the constant collar-chafing, and she meant him to have one. It felt nice, he'd admit that. Made him think of her touch when she'd put it on him. He pushed the thought hastily aside; the last thing he could afford to do was start thinking about his wife, if he ever hoped to get back to her. And he did mean to get back to her.

Where was that bugger? Had he given up?

No, he'd not; a dark spot popped out from behind a bank of cloud just over his left shoulder and dived for his tail. Jerry turned, a hard, high spiral, up and into the same clouds, the other after him like stink on shite. They played at dodgem for a few moments, in and out of the drifting clouds – he had the advantage in altitude, could play the coming-out-of-the-sun trick, if there were any sun, but it was autumn in Northumberland and there hadn't been any sun in days . . .

Gone. He heard the buzzing of the other plane, faintly, for a moment – or thought he had. Hard to tell above the dull roar of his own engine. Gone, though; he wasn't where Jerry'd expected him to be.

'Oh, like that, is it?' He kept on looking, ten degrees of sky every second; it was the only way to be sure you didn't miss any— A glimpse of something dark and his heart jerked along with his hand. Up and away. It was gone then, the black speck, but he went on climbing, slowly now, looking. Wouldn't do to get too low, and he wanted to keep the altitude . . .

The cloud was thin here, drifting waves of mist, but getting thicker. He saw a solid-looking bank of cloud moving slowly in from the west, but still a good distance away. It was cold, too; his face was chilled. He might be picking up ice if he went too hi— there.

The other plane, closer and higher than he'd expected. The other pilot spotted him at the same moment and came roaring down on him, too close to avoid. He didn't try.

'Aye, wait for it, ye wee bugger,' he murmured, hand tight on the stick. One second, two, almost on him – and he buried the stick in his balls, jerked it hard left, turned neatly over and went off in a long, looping series of barrel rolls that put him right away out of range.

His radio crackled and he heard Paul Rakoczy chortling through his hairy nose.

'*Kurwa twoja mać!* Where you learn that, you Scotch fucker?'

'At my mammy's tit, *dupek*,' he replied, grinning. 'Buy me a drink, and I'll teach it to ye.'

A burst of static obscured the end of an obscene Polish remark, and Rakoczy flew off with a wig-wag of farewell. Ah, well. Enough sky-larking then; back to the fucking cameras.

Jerry rolled his head, worked his shoulders and stretched as well as could be managed in the confines of a II's cockpit – it had minor improvements over the Spitfire I, but roominess wasn't one of them – had a glance at the wings for ice – no, that was all right – and turned farther inland.

It was too soon to worry over it, but his right hand found the trigger that operated the cameras. His fingers twiddled anxiously over the buttons, checking, rechecking. He was getting used to them, but they didn't work like the gun-triggers; he didn't have them wired in to his reflexes yet. Didn't like the feeling, either. Tiny things, like typewriter keys, not the snug feel of the gun-triggers.

He'd only had the left-handed ones since yesterday; before that, he'd been flying a plane with the buttons on the right. Much discussion with Flight and the MI6 button-boffin, whether it was better to stay with the right, as he'd had practice already, or change for the sake of his cack-handedness. When they'd finally got round to asking him which he wanted, it had been too late in the day to

fix it straight off. So he'd been given a couple of hours' extra flying time today, to mess about with the new fix-up.

Right, there it was. The bumpy grey line that cut through the yellowing fields of Northumberland like a perforation, same as you might tear the countryside along it, separating north from south as neat as tearing a piece of paper. Bet the emperor Hadrian wished it was that easy, he thought, grinning as he swooped down along the line of the ancient wall.

The cameras made a loud *clunk-clunk* noise when they fired. *Clunk-clunk, clunk-clunk*! OK, sashay out, bank over, come down . . . *clunk-clunk, clunk-clunk* . . . he didn't like the noise, not the same satisfaction as the vicious short *Brrpt*! of his wing-guns. Made him feel wrong, like something gone with the engine . . . aye, there it was coming up, his goal for the moment.

Mile-castle 37.

A stone rectangle, attached to Hadrian's Wall like a snail on a leaf. The old Roman legions had made these small, neat forts to house the garrisons that guarded the wall. Nothing left now but the outline of the foundation, but it made a good target.

He circled once, calculating, then dived and roared over it at an altitude of maybe fifty feet, cameras clunking like an army of stampeding robots. Pulled up sharp and hared off, circling high and fast, pulling out to run for the imagined border, circling up again . . . and all the time his heart thumped and the sweat ran down his sides, imagining what it would be like when the real day came.

Mid-afternoon, it would be, like this. The winter light just going, but still enough to see clearly. He'd circle, find an angle that would let him cross the whole camp and please God, one that would let him come out of the sun. And then he'd go in.

One pass, Randall had said. Don't risk more than one, unless the cameras malfunction.

The bloody things did malfunction, roughly every third pass. The buttons were slippery under his fingers. Sometimes they worked on the next try, sometimes they didn't.

If they didn't work on the first pass over the camp, or didn't work often enough, he'd have to try again.

'*Niech to szlag*,' he muttered, Fuck the Devil, and pressed the buttons again, one-two, one-two. 'Gentle but firm, like you'd do it to a lady's privates,' the boffin had told him, illustrating a brisk twiddle. He'd never thought of doing that . . . would Dolly like it? he wondered. And where exactly did you do it? Aye, well, women did come with a button, maybe that was it – but then, two fingers? . . . *Clunk-clunk. Clunk-clunk. Crunch.*

He reverted to English profanity, and smashed both buttons with his fist. One camera answered with a startled *clunk*! but the other was silent.

He poked the button again and again, to no effect. 'Bloody fucking arse-buggering . . .' He thought vaguely that he'd have to stop swearing once this was over and he was home again – bad example for the lad.

'FUCK!' he bellowed, and ripping the strap free of his leg, he picked up the box and hammered it on the edge of the seat, then slammed it back onto his thigh – visibly dented, he saw with grim satisfaction – and pressed the balky button.

Clunk, the camera answered meekly.

'Aye, well, then, just you remember that!' he said, and puffing in righteous indignation, gave the buttons a good jabbing.

He'd not been paying attention during this small temper-tantrum, but had been circling upward – standard default for a Spitfire flier. He started back down for a fresh pass at the mile-castle, but within a minute or two, began to hear a knocking sound from the engine.

'No!' he said, and gave it more throttle. The knocking got louder; he could feel it vibrating through the fuselage. Then there was a loud *clang!* from the engine compartment right by his knee, and with horror he saw tiny droplets of oil spatter on the Perspex in front of his face. The engine stopped.

'Bloody, bloody . . .' he was too busy to find another word. His lovely agile fighter had suddenly become a very clumsy glider. He

was going down and the only question was whether he'd find a relatively flat spot to crash in.

His hand groped automatically for the landing-gear but then drew back – no time, belly-landing, where was the bottom? Jesus, he'd been distracted, hadn't seen that solid bank of cloud move in; it must have come faster than he . . . Thoughts flitted through his mind, too fast for words. He glanced at the altimeter, but what it told him was of limited use, because he didn't know what the ground under him was like: crags, flat meadow, water? He hoped and prayed for a road, a grassy flat spot, anything short of— God, he was at 500 feet and still in cloud!

'Christ!'

The ground appeared in a sudden burst of yellow and brown. He jerked the nose up, saw the rocks of a crag dead ahead, swerved, stalled, nose-dived, pulled back, pulled back, not enough, oh, God—

His first conscious thought was that he should have radioed base when the engine went.

'Stupid fucker,' he mumbled. '*Make your decisions promptly. It is better to act quickly even though your tactics are not the best.* Clot-heid.'

He seemed to be lying on his side. That didn't seem right. He felt cautiously with one hand – grass and mud. What, had he been thrown clear of the plane?

He had. His head hurt badly, his knee much worse. He had to sit down on the matted wet grass for a bit, unable to think through the waves of pain that squeezed his head with each heartbeat.

It was nearly dark, and rising mist surrounded him. He breathed deep, sniffing the dank, cold air. It smelt of rot and old mangel-wurzels – but what it didn't smell of was petrol and burning fuselage.

Right. Maybe she hadn't caught fire when she crashed, then. If not, and if her radio was still working . . .

He staggered to his feet, nearly losing his balance from a sudden attack of vertigo, and turned in a slow circle, peering into the mist. There was nothing *but* mist to his left and behind him, but to his right, he made out two or three large, bulky shapes, standing upright.

Making his way slowly across the lumpy ground, he found that they were stones. Remnants of one of those prehistoric sites that littered the ground in northern Britain. Only three of the big stones were still standing, but he could see a few more, fallen or pushed over, lying like bodies in the darkening fog. He paused to vomit, holding onto one of the stones. Christ, his head was like to split! And he had a terrible buzzing in his ears . . . he pawed vaguely at his ear, thinking somehow he'd left his headset on, but felt nothing but a cold, wet ear.

He closed his eyes again, breathing hard, and leaned against the stone for support. The static in his ears was getting worse, accompanied by a sort of whine. Had he burst an eardrum? He forced himself to open his eyes, and was rewarded with the sight of a large dark irregular shape, well beyond the remains of the stone circle. Dolly!

The plane was barely visible, fading into the swirling dark, but that's what it had to be. Mostly intact, it looked like, though very much nose-down with her tail in the air – she must have ploughed into the earth. He staggered on the rock-strewn ground, feeling the vertigo set in again, with a vengeance. He waved his arms, trying to keep his balance, but his head spun, and Christ, the bloody *noise* in his head . . . he couldn't think, oh, Jesus, he felt as if his bones were dissolv—

It was full dark when he came to himself, but the clouds had broken and a three-quarter moon shone in the deep black of a country sky. He moved, and groaned. Every bone in his body hurt – but none was broken. That was something, he told himself. His

clothes were sodden with damp, he was starving, and his knee was so stiff he couldn't straighten his right leg all the way, but that was all right; he thought he could make shift to hobble as far as a road.

Oh, wait. Radio. Yes, he'd forgotten. If Dolly's radio were intact, he could . . .

He stared blankly at the open ground before him. He'd have sworn it was— but he must have got turned round in the dark and fog— no.

He turned quite round, three times, before he stopped, afraid of becoming dizzy again. The plane was gone.

It *was* gone. He was sure it had lain about fifty feet beyond that one stone, the tallest one; he'd taken note of it as a marker, to keep his bearings. He walked out to the spot where he was sure Dolly had come down, walked slowly round the stones in a wide circle, glancing to one side and then the other in growing confusion.

Not only was the plane gone, it didn't seem ever to have been there. There was no trace, no furrow in the thick meadow grass, let alone the kind of gouge in the earth that such a crash would have made. Had he been imagining its presence? Wishful thinking?

He shook his head to clear it – but in fact, it *was* clear. The buzzing and whining in his ears had stopped, and while he still had bruises and a mild headache, he was feeling much better. He walked slowly back around the stones, still looking, a growing sense of deep cold curling through his wame. It wasn't fucking there.

He woke in the morning without the slightest notion where he was. He was curled up on grass; that much came dimly to him – he could smell it. Grass that cattle had been grazing, because there was a large cow-pat just by him, and fresh enough to smell that, too. He stretched out a leg, cautious. Then an arm. Rolled onto his back, and felt a hair better for having something solid under him, though the sky overhead was a dizzy void.