

THE RAID ON DUN

September 26th, 1918

BY SIDNEY HOWARD

Like sound of taps at twilight from the hill,
The solemn thought comes that these youths are gone;
At evening, when the breathless world grows still
And the grey day steals from the bird-hushed lawn,
When over wooded crests the sailing moon
Comes casting spells of beauty they have lost,
Across delicious valleys, warm with June,
I count the fearful price the victory cost.

—*Hervey Allen.*

It is only a year since the battle of the Argonne Forest. We are too ready to forget, here in America, where our loss has been so slight and our satisfaction so great. Some stories remain still to be told; stories more real to the heroes of them than anything that ever went before or has happened since the war. These letters were written by three soldiers at the front a year ago to tell the story of a certain day air-raid on the village of Dun-sur-Meuse in which fourteen aviators took part and from which three returned.

The battle of the Argonne began on the 26th of September. It was a day of bad weather, but with an offensive under way, the aviator flew, weather or none. The pilots and observers of the flight knew this very well. They understood that their orders had been so disorganized by their commanding Major, that inevitable and formidable German resistance was in store for them. They knew, finally, that the plane to which they confided their lives, the American built De Haviland 4, was the very worst air-craft between the Swiss Border and the North Sea on either side of the line. They called it "The Flaming Coffin" and

their Major "The German Ace." Thanks to the efficiency of both, they had already seen their comrades go down to death. They had no illusions when they set out to bomb Dun.

They were members of the 20th Day Bombing Squadron, one of the units attached to the 1st Bombardment Group. They were picked men sent to the front from long duty in the rear, green to war conditions, very enthusiastic, very eager. The particular difficulties no longer matter. Because they themselves happened to be such men as they were, they went on their way rejoicing, Cooper waving "luck" to Matthews, Parrott jeering at the fog in the last words he ever spoke, Rhineland filled with the dignity of his first venture "across."

They were a rare group. Parrott, the leading observer in the flight, who aimed the bombs—mystic, enthusiast, epicure—his attention was always divided about equally between the fundamentals of religion, the perils of battle, and the subtleties of Voisin's food. Rhineland and Potter, the inseparable friends, both of them went over for the first time this day, one to his death, the other to return undaunted only to meet his end in a later battle. They were such types of young American spirit as you would cheer to find anywhere. And Wiser, the artist of the squadron insignia, and Cooper, the perfect adventurer, who is not satisfied with one war but must return from German prison camps to "*chercher*" another in Paderewski's army.

There would be much to say of the others, just as there is much of the detail of the fight I do not know. Some of the story has been gathered from peasants who watched from the fields beneath and buried the dead after the planes had passed. The aftermath of an aerial battle brought as many different accounts as there had been participants. War in the air is swift and impersonal. The flight leader brought his story back, a very meagre story, mostly of his own experience. Lieutenant Leonard wrote his account during his captivity. For the rest we have only the peasants of the region. It was one of them who told how Matthews and Taylor fell in flames, and how Harris and his observer, Forbes, protected their fall until the Germans had done for both teams. It was another who saw Rhineland and Preston die, fighting as they fell, with two of their enemies

to their score before a third had set their own plane ablaze.

The reality of that time is more tense than the experience of this present. It cannot be forgotten. These men were among the best we had and lost. They lived strong lives intimately and merrily with one another; they cared for France and flying; they resented the Germans from time to time, though never as seriously as they resented the stupidity of their own higher commanders. They loved their lives and gave them, like so many others, in battle, "and reaped not any glory from the strife"—or, at least, very little. For myself, who led them, they were the highest experience the war held.

II

LIEUTENANT LEONARD'S ACCOUNT¹

. . . It was a mean morning for a flight; a thick fog covered everything. As the planes left the ground further down the field, they flew directly over us. We could hear the heavier sound of a motor coming nearer, but we could see nothing until suddenly the machine burst into view overhead, thirty or forty feet up, the bombs hanging underneath the wings. Then the plane passed on and was swallowed up by the fog with a diminishing roar of the engine. Our own wheels left the ground at nine o'clock, and we rose into the fog. Our eyes were our only guard against collision; in the mist it was like another world. Then the sun grew brighter, and we suddenly burst into daylight and blue sky. The rest of the flight was a mile ahead, climbing slowly and closing into formation.

We had been up nearly an hour and we were at a height of two miles and a half when we headed for the lines of trenches and the smoke puffs of bursting shells. We were alone, seven of us, when we crossed; none of the other flights in sight. The Germans must have been watching, for we were barely above the trenches when their anti-aircraft batteries began shelling us. I did not see the first shell break, but I heard it—a short, sharp sound like the muffled ripping of a piece of linen. My first thought was that an engine part had been thrown back into the plane, tearing the fabric. Then the "woof" came again, and this

¹ Written on the checks in his check book during his confinement in the German Hospital.

time I saw the shrapnel burst and on every hand—black and yellow blots in the atmosphere, now a little higher, now in the midst of the formation. At our altitude (13,000 feet) we could not see much of the battle on the ground. Here and there a pin point of white smoke—a battery in action. I let them have a few shots from my Lewis gun to keep the oil from freezing and gumming the action.

As we neared the objective, the machines flew closer together. A brother observer in the next plane grinned and we shook hands to one another. The leading observer fired his signal to prepare to bomb. I leaned over the side with my hand on the release, watching for the bombs to fall from the plane ahead. They fell and I pulled my own lever and marked up 448 pounds more of T.N.T. for the Germans. We watched the bombs in the air as far as we could see them. We saw a number of black puffs on the ground and a fire start in the town. At once we turned back home.

I was beginning to think that it was only a joy-ride after all when I saw the Boches. Tiny specks in the distance, almost before we could think, they were on us, five life-sized Fokkers painted yellow and black. They slid around our machines like yellow jackets. One of them got under our tail and hung there; I could not shoot at him without shooting away part of our own machine. I wiggled the controls from my seat to attract the pilot's attention and pointed out Mr. Boche to him. Promptly he turned, first to right, then to left, and at every turn the Fokker came into view about seventy-five yards away. Each time we swung I was waiting and let him have both guns. I could see the tracers go right into his cockpit, and I knew that one bullet at least must find its mark. And it did. At my third burst he started down in a nose spin out of control. The Fokkers remaining then left us, evidently deciding that the odds were too much in our favor. There were still eight of us. I felt pretty fine at having shot down my first Boche.

But the breathing spell did not last long. In front and above, stretched out across the sky, I counted twelve more little specks. They came driving through the midst of our formation, shooting a steady stream of fire. The tracer bullets made it look as though it really was fire. It was

like a dream. I was so busy that three pairs of hands would not have been enough.

We were perhaps fifty yards below the rest of the formation, having come down to help another plane which had dropped out in the first scrap. Naturally we offered a good target to the Fokkers; the guns wouldn't swing fast enough; there were too many Huns all around, above and below. It was a beautiful sight, eight of our two-seated machines and twelve of the single-seated Fokkers; each of our planes shooting at the Germans from two guns, each of the Germans shooting at us from three. The air was one network of fire from the tracer bullets. It looked impossible for anyone to escape from the storm of them going both ways. It was magnificent. Something had to happen. It couldn't last.

One of our planes rose suddenly higher than the rest and gradually turned nose down, leaving a trail of flame and smoke behind it. It was beautiful, yet terrible. Two of our friends and pals sat in that plane burning up. I redoubled my efforts and took great care in aiming.

We were still below the rest of the formation. It seemed as though all the lines of tracers were coming our way. I worked faster and faster, but had no time to tell whether a Hun who slid away from my fire was hit or not. As fast as one moved away, a second took his place. I was beginning to wonder how long it could last when I got it in the neck. The shot knocked me down on the seat with the force of a pile driver. The Fokker who had shot and seen my guns stop shooting was coming up close beside us. I got on my feet, took good aim, and let him have both guns from about fifty yards. "Coop" (Captain Cooper, the pilot) says that he went down in flames. I was too busy to watch him. I was conscious of only one thing—to get rid of three others who had begun to close in on us.

Suddenly our plane dropped into a nose spin. I thought that "Coop" had been shot and that in a very few seconds we should hit the ground and be through with everything. I slipped down on the seat unconscious, but only for an instant. When I regained my senses we were still falling in a spin, but "Coop" had unfastened his safety belt and was standing with one foot over the side in the act of jumping overboard. And no wonder; for his cockpit was

a mass of flames from the motor which was on fire.

It was a question of dying an easy death by jumping, or of burning. His first thought was to escape the agony of the flames; he did not know whether I was dead or alive. But when he saw me open my eyes, he did not hesitate. Rather than desert a wounded and helpless comrade, he stepped back into what seemed at the time the certainty of burning to death.

We came out of the spin up-side-down and went into a side slip in a fruitless attempt to extinguish the flames. By this time his hands were so badly burned that the stick slipped from his fingers and he had to use his elbows and knees to work the controls. Finally, by diving straight down with full motor, the impossible was accomplished and the flames put out. I could do nothing, as we fell, but sit in the back and wonder how soon the flames would reach the gas-tank. I looked up and saw the fight still going on, further and further away, as we neared the ground, until the planes were like large and small gnats.

We were still over German territory and the motor would barely turn over. There was nothing for it but to land. All we could do was to smile at one another with the Liberty sounding so like a couple of tin cans rattling together. We landed in a large field, just missing some telegraph wires as we came in. "Coop" landed the machine with the stick between his knees and elbows. Although we hit the ground with force enough to send the plane up on its nose, neither of us was thrown out. The machine was pretty well shot up; the motor was a wreck. There were bullet holes all over, sixty, more or less, little round holes and long gashes in the fabric.

Before we could climb out, a Fokker which had followed us down from the fight, flew past about fifty feet up, motioning us away from our plane. We climbed out and walked a little distance. Whereupon he landed and walked over to meet us.

He was a good clean-looking fellow with a first class Iron Cross pinned on his coat together with a number of other medals. We had heard many stories of the cruel treatment given prisoners by the Germans, and we did not know what to expect. Imagine our surprise when he saluted us just as though he were a brother officer in our own

army. Each of us had a pistol which we surrendered to him handle first when he asked if we were wounded. By this time a crowd of German soldiers had gathered and an automobile had come from the village. A man in the car had some bandages and proceeded to tie them around my wound and stop the flow of blood which had pretty well soaked my clothes. But he could do nothing for Cooper's burns. I had to take my flying suit off and left it on the field when I came away. That, in itself, was unimportant, but I left my pipe in the pocket.

While my wound was being dressed, the Fokker pilot looked the plane over pretty thoroughly. He found a picture which "Coop" had fastened to the instrument board and very graciously took it out and gave it to him, asking if he did not want to keep it. Of course we regretted the fact that we were out of action and prisoners, but it had to be. We had accounted for one German plane; possibly two. Be that as it may, it was the splendid heroism and nerve of Coop that got us on the ground with our lives.

We were taken to a village about thirty miles from Verdun and twenty-five from Metz. We could hear the artillery very plainly and, judging from that, we were approximately ten miles from the firing line. During the afternoon we were separated. I was moved to a room alone where, shortly, an Intelligence officer, Lieutenant Goertz, visited me. He had flown as an observer on the Russian front in the early years of the war, had been wounded and a prisoner in Russia for some months. His attitude was that of one gentleman to another, and he even sent an attendant into the village to buy cigarettes for me. He tried to find out what squadron we belonged to and the location of our aerodrome, which, of course, we would not tell. He asked why the United States was in the war. He said: "France is fighting for revenge."

III

THE FLIGHT LEADER'S LETTER

... The 26th was a mess, and no mistake. We lost most of our best men, among them Parrott and Rhineland. I haven't quite pulled myself together yet. We crossed seven, to which one of the 11th added himself, God knows when

or why. He was still with us when I landed. I shan't forget how I watched his plane taxi across the field, scarcely daring to hope that it might be one team more than another, and how shocked I was (I must have shown it) when two strangers stepped out. We were jumped, much as we had expected to be, just after the bombing as I was turning home. Parrott had made a bully hit on the town and bridge; he had just time to fire the Boche signal. Fokkers, five or six, came from above and behind, a second group from above and beneath, and a third (something new with four machine guns) from in front and below. They came out of peace and nothing and were on us in an instant, diving through and flying as part of our formation! The tracers were like streamers of tinsel. Bullets hit my plane as though someone had been peppering me with handfuls of gravel. The fight ran east of the Meuse, eight of us mixed up with more than twenty Germans.

As nearly as I remember things through a running fight of over half an hour, Parrott must have been killed almost at the beginning. I knew that he had been seriously hurt because he fell on my controls, jamming them and throwing them out for the remainder of the chase. It caught me off my guard. I was watching Rhineland and a Boche who was between Wisser and me. I never saw anyone so near in the air as that Boche was. Then I looked for Parrott and he was gone. I remember that I was amused at Rhineland's observer (Harry Preston) who was throwing his empty magazines at the Fokkers, and it almost seemed that I heard Parrott hit. Then he slipped down on the controls. I did regain something like mastery of things, but I could not, to save me, free the rudder enough to turn and I was going with the wind and like the devil into Germany. Both my guns were useless, shot out and shot up; I had lost a strut and two others were badly split. I was just about helpless; it was a beastly sensation.

One of our ships went down in flames, a long tongue of red streaming from its gas tank. Another dropped off to my right, steaming from a punctured radiator. I have figured that the poor flaming one must have been Matthews and the other Wisser. Struggling as I was, I saw nothing of what happened to the rest. Rhineland simply disappeared and I have no accounting to give anyone of his fate.

It seems now that I looked around and saw only two other American planes, one below me and behind, and Potter flying in Rhineland's place as close as ever he could to my crazy ship.

I believe I should have given up and tried a landing had not Potter stuck. And how he stuck! I dare say it was that put the nerve into me to pull hard on things, for I was fairly wrecked as it was. But I gave him a wave and jerked things free enough to turn at last, and we cut through the center of the dozen Boche who still held on behind us. One of them dove in front of me; his bullets clattered underneath my motor and came through the floor of my cockpit. We were glad to have the archies for they cut off pursuit.

I had turned (will you believe it?) somewhere north of Metz. Well, we did get out, three out of fourteen, one team and a half out of seven—not including Waring and Norris of the 11th.

My one thought was Parrott. Nerves, of course, but I was certain I could feel him rapping on his stick, and I was continually shaking it back at him. He had fallen out of sight. I could not see him nor get him clear. I landed on Gilbert Winant's field near the lines, thinking to get him the sooner to a hospital. He had been killed instantly.

He got one Boche; I am nearly certain of that because the fellow was between us and the next plane and we were in close formation. They are hard boiled, these Germans, and good shooters! Potter and the other plane landed with me. I was pretty well done and Potter was as cool as—I have no simile.

I shall be lost without Parrott. I have never worked with any but him. No man could have died more heroically. He had always the same reassuring trick of turning to smile at me in the little mirrorscope in which I watched his shooting. He was still smiling when we lifted him from the plane.

LIEUTENANT MATTHEWS' LETTER¹

. . . We ran out to Pierrepont, a tiny village 10 kilometres southeast of Longuyon and he (Captain Cooper) took me to Rick's grave without a word. . . Here at the end

¹ Written to his family describing the search for his brother's grave.

of the path Rick's body had been carried down upon the shoulders of four German soldiers, and there he lay. A level brown piece of earth covered by three huge fir wreaths made by the French girls in the village the afternoon of the fight and placed upon the bodies with the permission of the German Commandatur who lived at the home of one of them. . . . Around, the four stones pressed into the ground by the French grave digger. He wanted them set off from the Germans, he said, that lie on either side. Trees all about, good straight trees, like soldiers standing guard; on the graves the four wreaths, at the head stand six-inch stakes, that's all—no frames, no crosses. They lie in the order, Taylor, Rick, Harris and Forbes. All about are hundreds of German crosses in stiff rows, no mound on any; through the trees a big monument of brown stone surmounted by a white lion lying upon his paws with "1914" on his face. . . . A quiet spot it is, in the distance a low ridge on one side and open country on the other side of the woods, and then the main road. . . .

In a little village named Hani, one kilometer from Pierrepont, the villagers were startled about 11:00 by the roar of many motors and the rat-a-tat of machine guns high overhead. Paul Demage, a 20-year-old peasant, cutting wood, looked up and saw two planes falling in flames toward him. Suddenly a body fell from one, the plane in flames with Taylor descending like a rock three hundred metres on. He ran over with a German soldier and found Rick there dead, lying face upward, a bullet through his head. There the imprint of his body is today, forced in the clay soil from his fall. . . Demage guarded Rick's body there in the field for two hours, then the Germans came and placed all four of them in a camion, and took them up to an aviation field by Pierrepont. There little Mademoiselle Antoinette Calas and a number of other girls in the French village made the wreaths and sent them over to be placed on the graves, and later visited the graves to see them.

No French were allowed there (in the morgue), but the old grave digger somehow crept in and copied the name burned on the top of each coffin. The next day the cortege descended to the graves—an open trench. The Germans stood at present arms and the chaplain, a Protestant, said a few words. Here is the German for you (the

information comes from the old grave digger, for only Germans were there) :

Here lie four Americans. One of them had a fiancée. He would not be here if he had stayed at home. She would not be sad.

All the time he forgot that a German was also being buried.

That is the story; there he lies between the straight tall trunks, between his comrades who died with him, quietly at peace, a great mission filled.

PILOTS

Sidney Howard, leader.
Philip Rhineland, deputy (killed).
G. B. Wiser (captured).
Merian Cooper (captured wounded).
David Harris (killed).
Richard Matthews (killed).
Clarkson Potter (killed Oct. 10).

OBSERVERS.

Edmund Parrot, leader (Killed).
Harry Preston (killed).
Glenn Richardson (captured).
E. C. Leonard (captured wounded).
Earl Forbes (killed).
Everett Taylor (killed).
George Schultze.

Lieutenants Waring and Norris joined the flight, having strayed from the formation of the 11th Squadron. They were awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for heroism on this day, along with Lieutenant Potter and Captain Cooper.