"OUTWITTING THE HUN"

by LIEUTENANT PAT O'BRIEN

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PREFACE.

There is a common idea that the age of miracles is past. Perhaps it is, but if so, the change must have come about within the past few weeks—after I escaped into Holland. For if anything is certain in this life it is this: this book never would have been written but for the succession of miracles set forth in these pages.

Miracles, luck, coincidence, Providence—it doesn't matter much what you call it—certainly played an important part in the series of hair-breadth escapes in which I figured during my short but eventful appearance in the great drama now being enacted across the seas. Without it, all my efforts and sufferings would have been quite unavailing.

No one realizes this better than I do and I want to repeat it right here because elsewhere in these pages I may appear occasionally to overlook or minimize it: without the help of Providence I would not be here today.

But this same Providence which brought me home safely, despite all the dangers which beset me, may work similar miracles for others, and it is in the hope of encouraging other poor devils who may find themselves in situations as hopeless apparently as mine oftentimes were that this book is written.

When this cruel war is over—which I trust may be sooner than I expect it to be—I hope I shall have an opportunity to revisit the scenes of my adventures and to thank in person in an adequate manner every one who extended a helping hand to me when I was a wretched fugitive. All of them took great risks in befriending an escaped prisoner and they did it without the slightest hope of reward. At the same time I hope I shall have a chance to pay my compliments to those who endeavored to take advantage of my distress.

In the meanwhile, however, I can only express my thanks in this ineffective manner, trusting that in some mysterious way a copy of this book may fall into the hands of every one who befriended me. I hope particularly that every good Hollander who played the part of the Good Samaritan to me so bountifully after my escape from Belgium will see these pages and feel that I am absolutely sincere when I say that words cannot begin to express my sense of gratitude to the Dutch people.

It is needless for me to say how deeply I feel for my fellow-prisoners in Germany who were less fortunate than I. Poor, poor fellows—they are the real victims of the war. I hope that every one of them may soon be restored to that freedom whose value I never fully realized until after I had had to fight so hard to regain it.

PAT O'BRIEN.

Momence, Ill., January 14, 1918.

CHAPTER I.

The Folly of Despair.

Less than nine months ago eighteen officers of the Royal flying corps, which had been training in Canada, left for England on the Meganic.

If any of them was over twenty-five years of age, he had successfully concealed the fact, because they don't accept older men for the R. F. C.

Nine of the squadron were British subjects; the other nine were Americans, who, tired of waiting for their own country to take her place with the allies, had joined the British colors in Canada. I was one of the latter.

We were going to England to earn our "wings"—a qualification which must be won before a member of the R. F. C. is allowed to hunt the Huns on the western front.

This was in May, 1917.

By August 1, most of us were full-fledged pilots, actively engaged at various parts of the line in daily conflict with the enemy.

By December 15, every man jack of us, who had met the enemy in France, with one exception, had appeared on the casualty list. The exception was H. K. Boysen, an American, who at last report was fighting on the Italian front still unscathed. Whether his good fortune has stood him up to this time I don't know, but if it has I would be very much surprised.

Of the others, five were killed in action—three Americans, one Canadian, and one Englishman. Three more were in all probability killed in action although officially they are listed merely as "missing." One of these was an American, one a Canadian, and the third a Scotchman. Three more, two of them Americans, were seriously wounded. Another, a Canadian, is a prisoner in Germany. I know nothing of the others.

What happened to me is narrated in these pages. I wish, instead, I could tell the story of each of my brave comrades, for not one of them was downed, I am sure, without upholding the best traditions of the R. F. C. Unfortunately, however, of the eighteen who sailed on the Meganic last May, I happened to be the first to fall into the hands of the Huns, and what befell my comrades after that, with one exception, I know only second hand.

The exception was the case of poor, brave Paul Raney—my closest chum—whose last battle I witnessed from my German prison—but that is a story I shall tell in its proper place.

In one way, however, I think the story of my own "big adventure" and my miraculous escape may, perhaps, serve a purpose as useful as that of the heroic fate of my less fortunate comrades. Their story, it is true, might inspire others to deeds of heroism, but mine; I hope, will convey the equally valuable lesson of the folly of despair.

Many were the times in the course of my struggles when it seemed absolutely useless to continue. In a hostile country, where discovery meant death, wounded, sick, famished, friendless, hundreds of miles from the nearest neutral territory the frontier of which was so closely guarded that even if I got there it seemed too much to hope that I could ever get through, what was the use of enduring further agony?

And yet here I am, in the land of liberty—although in a somewhat obscure corner of it—the little town of Momence, Ill., where I was born—not very much the worse for wear after all I've been through, and, as I write these words not eight months have passed since my seventeen comrades and I sailed from Canada on the Meganic.

Lieut. Pat O'Brien in the Uniform of the Royal Flying Corps.

Can it be possible that I was spared to convey a message of hope to others who are destined for similar trials? I am afraid there will be many of them.

Years ago I heard of the epitaph which is said to have been found on a child's grave:

"If I was so soon to be done for
What, O Lord, was I ever begun for?"

The way it has come to me since I returned from Europe is:

"If, O Lord, I was to be done for. What were my sufferings e'er begun for?"

Perhaps the answer lies in the suggestion I have made.

At any rate, if this record of my adventures should prove instrumental in sustaining others who need encouragement, I shall feel that my sufferings were not in vain.

It is hardly likely that anyone will quite duplicate my experiences, but I haven't the slightest doubt that many will have to go through trials equally nerve-racking and suffer disappointments just as disheartening.

It would be very far from the mark to imagine that the optimism which I am preaching now so glibly sustained me through all my troubles. On the contrary, I am free to confess that I frequently gave way to despair and often, for hours at a time, felt so dejected and discouraged that I really didn't care what happened to me. Indeed, I rather hoped that something would happen to put an end to my misery.

But despite all my despondency and hopelessness, the worst never happened, and I can't help thinking that my salvation must have been designed to show the way to others.

CHAPTER II.

I Became a Fighting Scout.

I started flying in Chicago in 1912. I was then eighteen years old, but I had had a hankering for the air ever since I can remember.

As a youngster I followed the exploits of the Wrights with the greatest interest, although I must confess I sometimes hoped that they wouldn't really conquer the air until I had had a whack at it myself. I got more whacks than I was looking for later on.

Needless to say, my parents were very much opposed to my risking my life at what was undoubtedly at that time one of the most hazardous "pastimes" a young fellow could select, and every time I had a smashup or some other mishap I was ordered never to go near an aviation field again.

So I went out to California. There another fellow and I built our own machine, which we flew in various parts of the state.

In the early part of 1916, when trouble was brewing in Mexico, I joined the American flying corps. I was sent to San Diego, where the army flying school is located, and spent about eight months there, but as I was anxious to get into active service and there didn't seem much chance of America ever getting into the war, I resigned and, crossing over to Canada, joined the Royal Flying corps at Victoria, B. C.

I was sent to Camp Borden, Toronto, first to receive instruction and later to instruct. While a cadet I made the first loop ever made by a cadet in Canada, and after I had performed the stunt I half expected to be kicked out of the service for it. Apparently, however, they considered the source and let it go at that. Later on I had the satisfaction of introducing the loop as part of the regular course of instruction for cadets in the R. F. C., and I want to say right here that Camp Borden has turned out some of the best fliers that have ever gone to France.

In May, 1917, I and seventeen other Canadian fliers left for England on the Meganic, where we were to qualify for service in France.

Our squadron consisted of nine Americans, C. C. Robinson, H. A. Miller, F. S. McClurg, A. A. Allen, E. B. Garnet, H. K. Boysen, H. A. Smeeton and A. A. Taylor, and myself, and nine Britishers, Paul H. Raney, J. R. Park, C. Nelmes, C. R. Moore, T. L. Atkinson, F. C. Conry, A. Muir, E. A. L. F. Smith and A. C. Jones.

Within a few weeks after our arrival in England all of us had won our "wings"—the insignia worn on the left breast by every pilot on the western front.

We were all sent to a place in France known as the Pool Pilots Mess. Here men gather from all the training squadrons in Canada and England and await assignments to the particular squadron of which they are to become members.

The Pool Pilots Mess is situated a few miles back of the lines. Whenever a pilot is shot down or killed the Pool Pilots Mess is notified to send another to take his place.

There are so many casualties every day in the R. F. C. at one point of the front or another that the demand for new pilots is quite active, but when a fellow is itching to get into the fight as badly as I and my friends were I must confess that we got a little impatient, although we realized that every time a new man was called it meant that some one else had, in all probability, been killed, wounded or captured.

One morning an order came in for a scout pilot and one of my friends was assigned. I can tell you the rest of us were as envious of him as if it were the last chance any of us were ever going to have to get to the front. As it was, however, hardly more than three hours had elapsed before another wire was received at the mess and I was ordered to follow my friend. I afterward learned that as soon as he arrived at the squadron he prevailed upon the commanding officer of the squadron to wire for me.

At the Pool Pilots' Mess it was the custom of the officers to wear "shorts"—breeches that are about eight inches long, like the boy scouts wear, leaving a space of about eight inches of open country between the top of the puttees and the end of the shorts. The Australians wore them in Saloniki and at the Dardanelles.

When the order came in for me, I had these "shorts" on, and I didn't have time to change into other clothes. Indeed, I was in such a sweat to get to the front that if I had been in my pajamas I think I would have gone that way. As it was, it was raining and I threw an overcoat over me, jumped into the machine, and we made record time to the airdrome to which I had been ordered to report.

As I alighted from the automobile my overcoat blew open and displayed my manly form attired in "shorts" instead of in the regulation flying breeches, and the sight aroused considerable commotion in camp.

"Must be a Yankee!" I overheard one officer say to another as I approached. "No one but a Yankee would have the cheek to show up that way, you know!"

But they laughed good-naturedly as I came up to them, and welcomed me to the squadron, and I was soon very much at home.

My squadron was one of four stationed at an airdrome about eighteen miles back of the Ypres line. There were 18 pilots in our squadron, which was a scout squadron, scout machines carrying but one man.

A scout, sometimes called a fighting scout, has no bomb dropping or reconnoitering to do. His duty is just to fight, or, as the order was given to me, "You are expected to pick fights and not wait until they come to you!"

When bomb droppers go out over the lines in the daytime a scout squadron usually convoys them. The bomb droppers fly at about twelve thousand feet, and scouts a thousand feet or so above them.

If at any time they should be attacked, it is the duty of the scouts to dive down and carry on the fight, the orders of the bomb droppers being to go on dropping bombs and not to fight unless they have to. There is seldom a time that machines go out over the lines on this work in the daytime that they are not attacked at some time or other, and so the scouts usually have plenty of work to do. In addition to these attacks, however, the squadron is invariably under constant bombardment from the ground, but that doesn't worry us very much, as we know pretty well how to avoid being hit from that quarter.

On my first flight, after joining the squadron, I was taken out over the lines to get a look at things, map out my location in case I was ever lost, locate the forests, lakes and other landmarks and get the general lay of the land.

One thing that was impressed upon me very emphatically was the location of the hospitals, so that in case I was ever wounded and had the strength to pick my landing I could land as near as possible to a hospital. All these things a new pilot goes through during the first two or three days after joining a squadron.

Our regular routine was two flights a day, each of two hours' duration. After doing our regular patrol, it was our privilege to go off on our own hook if we wished, before going back to the squadron.

I soon found out that my squadron was some hot squadron, our flyers being almost always assigned to special duty work, such as shooting up trenches at a height of fifty feet from the ground.

I received my baptism into this kind of work the third time I went out over the lines, and I would recommend it to anyone who is hankering for excitement. You are not only apt to be attacked by hostile aircraft from above, but you are swept by machine-gun fire from below. I have seen some of our machines come back from this work sometimes so riddled with bullets that I wondered how they ever held together. Before we started out on one of these jobs, we were mighty careful to see that our motors were in perfect condition, because they told us the "war bread was bad in Germany."

One morning, shortly after I joined the squadron, three of us started over the line of our own accord. We soon observed four enemy machines, two-seaters, coming toward us. This type of machine is used by the Huns for artillery work and bomb dropping, and we knew they were on mischief bent. Each machine had a machine gun in front, worked by the pilot, and the observer also had a gun with which he could spray all around.

When we first noticed the Huns, our machines were about six miles back of the German lines and we were lying high up in the sky, keeping the sun behind us, so that the enemy could not see us.

We picked out three of the machines and dove down on them. I went right by the man I picked for myself and his observer in the rear seat kept pumping at me to beat the band. Not one of my shots took effect as I went right down under him, but I turned and gave him another burst of bullets, and down he went in a spinning nose dive, one of his wings going one way and one another. As I saw him crash to the ground I knew that I had got my first hostile aircraft. One of my comrades was equally successful, but the other two German machines got away. We chased them back until things got too hot for us by reason of the appearance of other German machines, and then we called it a day.

This experience whetted my appetite for more of the same kind, and I did not have long to wait.

It may be well to explain here just what a spinning nose bend is. A few years ago the spinning nose dive was considered one of the most dangerous things a pilot could attempt, and many men were killed getting into this spin and not knowing how to come out of it. In fact, lots of pilots thought that when once you got into a spinning nose dive there was no way, of coming out of it. It is now used, however, in actual flying.

The machines that are used in France are controlled in two ways, both by hands and feet, the feet working the yoke or rudder bar which controls the rudder; that steers the machine. The lateral controls fore and aft, which cause the machine to rise or lower, are controlled by a contrivance called a "joy stick." If, when flying in the air, a pilot should release his hold on this stick, it will gradually come toward the pilot.

In that position the machine will begin to climb. So if a pilot is shot and loses control of this "joy stick," his machine begins to ascend, and climbs until the angle formed becomes too great for it to continue or the motor to pull the plane; for a fraction of a second it stops, and the motor then being the heaviest, it causes the nose of the machine to fall forward, pitching down at a terrific rate of speed and spinning at the same time. If the motor is still running, it naturally increases the speed much more than it would if the motor were shut off, and there is great danger that the wings will double up, causing the machine to break apart. Although spins are made with the motor on, you are dropping like a ball being dropped out of the sky and the velocity increases with the power of the motor.

This spinning nose dive has been frequently used in "stunt" flying in recent years, but is now put to practical use by pilots in getting away from hostile machines, for when a man is spinning it is almost impossible to hit him, and the man making the attack invariably thinks his enemy is going down to certain death in the spin.

This is all right when a man is over his own territory, because he can right his machine and come out of it; but if it happens over German territory, the Huns would only follow him down, and when he came out of the spin they would be above him, having all the advantage, and would shoot him down with ease. It is a good way of getting down into a cloud, and is used very often by both sides, but it requires skill and courage by the pilot making it if he ever expects to come out alive. A spin being made by a pilot intentionally looks exactly like a spin that is made by a machine actually being shot down, so one never knows whether it is forced or intentional until the pilot either rights his machine and comes out of it, or crashes to the ground.

Another dive similar to this one is known as just the plain dive. Assume, for instance, that a pilot flying at a height of several thousand feet is shot, loses control of his machine, and the nose of the plane starts down with the motor full on. He is going at a tremendous speed and in many instances is going so straight and swiftly that the speed is too great for the machine, because it was never constructed to withstand the enormous pressure forced against the wings, and they consequently crumple up.

O'Brien Standing Beside the First Machine in Which He Saw Active Service.

If, too, in an attempt to straighten the machine, the elevators should become affected, as often happens in trying to bring a machine out of a dive, the strain is again too great on the wings, and there is the same disastrous result. Oftentimes, when the patrol tank is punctured by a tracer bullet from another machine in the air, the plane that is hit catches on fire and either gets into a spin or a straight dive and heads for the earth, hundreds of miles an hour, a mass of flame, looking like a brilliant comet in the sky.

The spinning nose dive is used to greater advantage by the Germans than by our own pilots for the reason that when a fight gets too hot for the German, he will put his machine in a spin, and as the chances are nine out of ten that we are fighting over German territory, he simply spins down out of our range, straightens out before he reaches the ground, and gets on home to his airdrome. It is useless to follow him down inside the German lines, for you would in all probability be shot down before you can attain sufficient altitude to cross the line again.

It often happens that a pilot will be chasing another machine when suddenly he sees it start to spin. Perhaps they are fifteen or eighteen thousand feet in the air, and the hostile machine spins down for thousands of feet. He thinks he has hit the other machine and goes home happy that he has brought down another Hun. He reports the occurrence to the squadron, telling how he shot down his enemy; but when the rest of the squadron come in with their report, or some artillery observation balloon sends in a report, it develops that when a few hundred feet from the ground the supposed dead man in the spin has come out of the spin and gone merrily on his way for his airdrome.

CHAPTER III.

Captured by the Huns.

I shall not easily forget the 17th of August, 1917. I killed two Huns in the double-seated machine in the morning, another in the evening, and then I was captured myself. I may have spent more eventful days in my life, but I can't recall any just now.

That morning, in crossing the line on early morning patrol, I noticed two German balloons. I decided that as soon as my patrol was over I would go off on my own hook and see what a German balloon looked like at close quarters.

These observation balloons are used by both sides in conjunction with the artillery. A man sits up in the balloon with a wireless apparatus and directs the firing of the guns. From his point of vantage he can follow the work of his own artillery with a remarkable degree of accuracy and at the same time he can observe the enemy's movements and report them.

The Germans are very good at this work, and they use a great number of these balloons. It was considered a very important part of our work to keep them out of the sky.

There are two ways of going after a balloon in a machine. One of them is to cross the lines at a low altitude, flying so near the ground that the man with the antiaircraft gun can't bother you. You fly along until you get to the level of the balloon and if, in the meantime, they have not drawn the balloon down, you open fire on it and the bullets you use will set it on fire if they land.

The other way is to fly over where you know the balloons to be, put your machine in a spin so that they can't hit you, get above them, spin over the balloon and then open fire. In going back over the line you cross at a few hundred feet.

This is one of the hardest jobs in the service. There is less danger in attacking an enemy's aircraft.

Nevertheless, I had made up my mind to either get those balloons or make them descend, and I only hoped that they would stay on the job until I had a chance at them.

When our two hours' duty was up, therefore, I dropped out of the formation as we crossed the lines and turned back again.

I was at a height of 15,000 feet, considerably higher than the balloons. Shutting my motor off, I dropped down through the clouds, thinking to find the balloons at about five or six miles behind the German lines.

Just as I came out of the cloud banks I saw below me, about a thousand feet, a two-seater hostile machine doing artillery observation and directing the German guns. This was at a point about four miles behind the German lines.

Evidently the German artillery saw me and put out ground signals to attract the Hun machine's attention, for I saw the observer quit his work and grab his gun, while their pilot stuck the nose of his machine straight down.

But they were too late to escape me. I was diving toward them at a speed

Continued next week).