



**BIGGLES**

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**The Authorized  
Biography**

JOHN PEARSON



BLOOMSBURY READER

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## POSTSCRIPT

# Introduction

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At first we knew him simply as the new tenant of Ferndene Cottage, an unlovely little red-brick house standing four-square behind its overgrown privet hedge on the far side of the London Road from where we live.

The cottage had stood empty for some time, so we were naturally inquisitive about the new arrival, but it was some time before we learned the identity of the red-faced, rather portly little man with the leather-patched tweed jacket who would emerge from Ferndene Cottage at 8.30 punctually each morning, taking his pug-dog for a walk. In Camberley we have a lot of pug-dogs and a lot of retired army people. They seem to go together, so we assumed our newest neighbour with his jaunty walk and weather-beaten countenance must be one of them.

It was the vicar, our walking social register, who finally put us right.

‘And how are you getting on with our celebrated new neighbour?’ he asked my wife.

She must have looked surprised, for he went on, Wing-Commander Bigglesworth. Your husband must have read of his adventures when he was a boy — you know, Biggles, the great schoolboy hero of the R.A.F. I’m quite determined to persuade him to open the village fête. He should be quite a draw.’

But Biggles did not open the vicar’s fête — nor anything else in Camberley that year. Instead, he seemed distinctly anxious to keep himself to himself, and while we were all quite proud to have genuine celebrity in our midst, we soon accepted him as a recluse, our interest waned, and that was that. And then, one wet November evening, I was walking home and passed him near the church. He was carrying a twelve-bore shotgun and had half a dozen pigeons slung across his shoulder.

‘Good shooting, Wing-Commander!’ I called out. At first he seemed surprised to be addressed like this, but he stopped and instantly eased up when I said something about how hard I always found it to shoot wood-pigeon.

‘Simple enough, when you’ve got the knack,’ he said. ‘I only do it to keep my eye in, don’t you know?’ There was a slightly awkward pause and he added, ‘I suppose your wife couldn’t make use of them, could she? My housekeeper can’t be bothered with them, and they generally end up in the dustbin.’

I thanked him, but on the condition that he came and helped us eat them. He seemed quite pleased at the idea and two nights later he arrived for dinner. And so began a friendship that endured until his death, some three years later.

The truth, as I soon discovered, was that around this time he had grown bored with his retirement and was really rather lonely. He had retired to the country on his doctor’s orders, but it didn’t really suit him. He owned an elderly MG, in which he would drive to London once or twice a week. As well as shooting, he would fish a little. ‘Used to do it as a boy,’ he told us. ‘Now that I can’t play golf keeps me out of mischief I suppose.’

I couldn’t think what mischief he was likely to get up to — certainly not with his old housekeeper Mrs Roberts. She was a frail-looking, gap-toothed, rather ghostly lady. When my wife got to know her she would often grumble on about the Wing-Commander’s habits — his untidiness, his fussiness about his food, his cigarettes and his uncertain temper. But with us he was always kindness itself and soon became a regular visitor.

Although he often brought us pigeon — and partridges and pheasants, now that the season had

begun — what he really liked to eat was steak, and what my wife called ‘nursery food’ — fishcake and shepherd’s pie and sausages and mash. His favourite food of all was toad-in-the-hole, particularly the crispy bits around the edges of the dish. Apart from a couple of pink gins before dinner, he would drink very little. What he apparently enjoyed most of all in life now was talking, particularly with the children present. At first I never knew quite how many of his tales were true and how much was pure fantasy, but he was certainly a splendid raconteur when in the mood, and after dinner he would sit for hours, smoking his disgusting pipe and reminiscing about his life. Whenever this occurred it was impossible to get the children off to bed.

All this was rather strange, for to the world at large, Biggles — as I have to call him — remained secretive to a degree about his life. I remember seeing him one morning chasing two news reporters down the garden path of Ferndene Cottage with his twelve-bore. All they had wanted was an interview to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of his legendary old squadron, No. 266 of the Royal Flying Corps, but for Biggles it had been unforgivable of them to have tried to beard him in retirement in this way.

‘Gutter journalists,’ he called them, when he told us all about them later, ‘prying into people’s private lives. They’d all be horsewhipped if I had my way with them.’ But he said this with a twinkle in his eye, and certainly exhibited no inhibitions about telling us the details of his private life — quite the contrary.

He enjoyed these evening reminiscences by the fire; they offered him at least some relief from the boredom of his life in Camberley. His present state of health depressed him, for like many very active men who had always taken perfect health for granted, Biggles found it hard to cope with ill health when it came. His back used to trouble him a lot and he was slightly diabetic. His eyes bothered him as well.

‘Doing my best to fight off the Grim Reaper!’ was the invariable reply if one asked how he was — but once he was embarked upon his stories of the past he seemed to forget all his present troubles. He even managed to look different, for as he talked he was re-living scenes from a life he had obviously enjoyed. His hazel eyes used to gleam and he had an air of such gusto and absorption in his tale, that it was just as if a younger, more adventurous self had taken over.

As far as we could judge, Biggles held little back. He frequently referred to his outlandish family, his childhood in India, his schooldays and his earliest experiences in the air. My children were avid readers of the Biggles books, and would interrogate him mercilessly, making him go over particular adventures, asking for extra details and making him repeat the circumstances of some favourite incident. And so, from these winter sessions round the fire, I learned the outlines of the story of his life. Much was familiar already from the writings of Captain W. E. Johns, and this I have tended to compress or refer to in passing in the narrative that follows. But there was much that seemed totally unknown and it is this completely new material that I have concentrated on in my attempt to write the biography of this most remarkable and kindly man of action.

Where Biggles’ own version of events differed from those of Captain Johns, I have naturally deferred to Biggles. I found that Johns had used his ‘author’s licence’ somewhat freely to adapt the adventures of his hero to suit his young readership, and had at times skilfully changed the circumstances to fit his tales. In the interests of good storytelling, Biggles approved of this at the time.

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## An Indian Boyhood

‘I’m a Victorian and proud of it,’ Biggles used to say, ‘born in May 1899,’ — and in a number of important ways Biggles remained a genuine Victorian all his life. He was what one might call ‘old-fashioned’, in his somewhat strait-laced attitude to life, the emphasis he always placed on ‘manner’ with the young, and his views on morality. Also, his whole life as an adventurer and pioneer air pilot had more in common with the careers of the tough empire-builders of the old Queen-Empress than with the ‘softies’, as he called them, among the young men of today, who incurred his wrath.

His family traditions also helped make him what he was. The name Bigglesworth, as he took great pains to explain when asked about it, started as an attempt to anglicise the Flemish, *Beiggelschwan*, for one of Biggles’ far-off paternal ancestors had been a Dutchman of this name who settled in Aberdeen at the beginning of the eighteenth century, set up as a naval factor and married a local girl. She was a MacGregor — Biggles was always rather proud of that — so that from the start the Bigglesworths were an unusual mixture of wild Highlanders and dour Flemings from the flatter countryside in Europe. The mixed strain soon produced a number of unusual characters, wild self-denying men with a savage knack of embarking on lost causes. ‘The nineteenth-century Bigglesworths,’ Biggles once remarked, ‘were generally considered slightly mad.’ One of his great great-uncles was a missionary in India who lost his faith and ended as a fakir on a bed of nails in Rajasthan. Another was an explorer who set out to find the source of the Nile in a canoe. A third was last seen in Brazil, searching for a golden city. ‘The Bigglesworths,’ he said, with something like a note of sadness in his voice, ‘tended to be losers.’

One of the few who wasn’t, and the only Bigglesworth to reach the history books, was Biggles’ celebrated uncle, Brigadier General ‘Bonzo’ Bigglesworth, who battled as a subaltern at Majuba Hill, helped save the day at Omdurman, deposited an arm at Mafeking, and left the army in disgust when the Boer War ended. He bought a small estate in Norfolk — a run-down country house with a few acres of indifferent farmland and the shooting rights across a stretch of woodland — and there he stayed until his death in 1925. ‘The ideal *unimproving* landlord’, as Biggles called him.

As a boy, home from India, Biggles often stayed with him, and he spoke affectionately of the one-armed fire-eater he remembered. ‘Treated me like a son and I was a good deal fonder of him than my real father,’ he confessed. And, by all accounts, Biggles and the General had a lot in common.

The old man was an enthusiastic and alarming motorist whose red de Dion was for many years the terror of the Norfolk lanes. He also had the perpetual schoolboy’s love of gadgetry, and his best known inventions were an explosive kite for siege warfare, an inflatable saddle, which he fondly hoped would revolutionise amphibious operations in the field, and ‘the Bigglesworth Terrestrial Torpedo’.

This alarming weapon, powered by a small Steadman petrol engine, could carry seven hundredweight of high explosive for over half a mile at a speed of twenty miles an hour. One of Biggles’ early memories of holidays in Norfolk was of a field test in which the torpedo went off course, all but demolishing the stable block. The General was apparently delighted at this proof of its effectiveness and never ceased to blame ‘those flaming blockheads in Whitehall’ for not adopting it when the Great War broke out. ‘Could have shortened it by several years,’ he claimed. Biggles used to laugh about this, and his uncle’s antics, but I always thought he probably inherited something of the General’s attitude to ‘bureaucrats and damn-fool politicians’ from those early days.

By all accounts, Biggles' father, John Henry Bigglesworth, was utterly unlike his elder brother and Biggles rarely talked about him, except with bitterness. A sober, quiet, studious man, he settled early for a life as an administrator with the Indian Civil Service, rather than compete with his famous brother's reputation by entering the cavalry. He was romantically good-looking, if a trifle dull, and some months after his arrival Calcutta witnessed the one exciting gesture of his life, when he eloped with the daughter of the Governor of Bengal, nineteen-year-old Catherine Lacey.

'Hideous mistake' was Biggles' verdict on the marriage on the one occasion when he brought himself to mention it to us. Grandpapa Lord Lacey was an exacting martinet, remembered — if at all these days — for the speed with which he put down the Jumna Riots of 1884, and he attempted much the same tactics with his wayward daughter. Here he was less successful. For Catherine Lacey proved of sterner stuff than the malleable Bengalis, claimed that she was pregnant, and insisted on her right to wed the now appalled John Henry Bigglesworth. Lord Lacey never saw his daughter again, and the offending newly-weds were speedily despatched to Garhwal, a dreary district, south of West Bengal. Eight months later, in January 1894, their first child, Biggles' elder brother, Charles, was born.

John Henry Bigglesworth's career never recovered from the blunder of his marriage. He seems to have attempted to make the best of things in the approved, long-suffering Scottish manner, and was to be a conscientious Assistant Commissioner, governing an area half the size of Wales. But with the influential unforgiving father-in-law in Bengal, he had no chance of getting any further. The Indian he ruled respected him. His wife, alas, did not. Her elopement had been an escape from the boredom of Calcutta. How much more boring was her life now as the wife of a meticulously-minded government official stuck in a bungalow in Garhwal.

I soon realised, from chance remarks that Biggles dropped, that there must have been something that went terribly wrong early in his childhood. (Indeed, attentive readers of the Biggles' books might have guessed as much.) But it was some time before I found out exactly what had happened.

Biggles was always reticent about his parents, but it was not hard to get the outlines of what was clearly a most wretched marriage — that imperious, impossible mother with her 'vapours' and her sulks and rages, the disappointed father who increasingly took refuge in his work, and young James Bigglesworth bearing the brunt of much domestic misery.

Clearly, he adored his mother, but as so often is the case with adoring second sons, she preferred his elder brother, Charles. For Charles, just five years older, was everything that James was not — big-boned, athletic, and a hearty, cheerful boy whose easy manner and good looks earned him friends everywhere. In painful contrast, James was undersized and shy. (Biggles showed us a few photographs surviving from this period of a white-faced, skinny little boy with straggly fair hair and melancholy eyes.) Then when his brother Charles was away in England at his boarding school, this vulnerable small boy was hit by the tragedy that changed his life. The Bigglesworths became involved in scandal.

His mother had just reached those dangerous female crossroads of the early thirties when she met her fate — in the rolling eyes and eager haunches of Captain the Honourable 'Banger' Thomas of the 45th Rawalpindi Horse. The Captain was undoubtedly a bounder and probably a cad. All that Biggles could remember of him was his waxed moustache, his gleaming riding-boots, and the stench of the Trichinopoly cigars he always smoked. (All his life, Biggles seems to have believed that a liking for cigars was a tell-tale symptom of a man who could not be trusted with a woman.) But for all his faults — or possibly because of them — the Captain had no difficulty captivating the sprightly Miss Bigglesworth.

One can picture all too easily the hackneyed stages of this tropical romance — hot nights on the verandah with the cloying scent of frangipani in the air and languid evenings at the Polo Club with

nothing but the mournful rhythm of the punkah to distract the lovers. Then, the whispered gossip of the bored society around the Club, the gathering suspicions of the neglected husband, the jealous denials, desperate affirmations, all of which culminated in that moment of high melodrama when, for the second time in Catherine Lacey's life, she bolted.

Biggles was eleven, and his brother Charles, in England, was about to enter Sandhurst. Everybody's sympathy went out to the abandoned husband, and no one seems to have given much attention to the small boy who was suddenly without the mother he adored. But when all possible allowances are made for John Henry Bigglesworth's hurt feelings, the fact remains that he behaved quite dreadfully toward his son. Even in old age, Biggles could not quite forgive him. 'He told me she had died, and never spoke of her again.'

This was a crucial point in Biggles' life, and he would bear the scars of it forever. His grief was pitiable, and for several months was so extreme that he fell seriously ill. (This was the source of the mysterious illness Captain Johns refers to in his brief, carefully censored references to this period. Naturally Biggles never wished the facts to be revealed while he was alive.) The boy's life was actually despaired of for some while, and when he did recover, he remained extremely delicate and always prone to malarial fevers, stomach upsets and prostrating headaches.

He finally grew out of them, of course, and the natural toughness of the Bigglesworth stock ultimately kept him free of illness till his seventies. But in the long run, the most serious effect of his mother's disappearance was on his emotional development. He once admitted — in one of his rare unguarded moments — that he was obsessed by the memory of his mother. He was intelligent enough to sense that there was far more to her 'death' than the adults told him, but never dared to ask his father for the truth. He said he always felt she was alive and used to dream of finding her and being reunited with her in some far-off place. But he was also naturally tormented by the certainty that she had abandoned him. He had no way of knowing what had really happened. At times he blamed himself, but nothing could alter his belief that this one woman he had really loved had callously betrayed him. Throughout his life Biggles would always be a wary man where women were concerned.

It was his mother's disappearance that also helped to turn young Biggles to adventure early on in life — if only to escape the boredom and the loneliness of life at home. Had his mother been there, this could not have happened, but with his father finding his relief in overwork — and possibly in drink, according to one hint Biggles dropped — he was left more or less to his own devices, and before long was escaping into the rich, exciting world beyond the narrow confines of the Club, the schoolroom, and the houses of his father's European friends. He soon found his way around the maze of little streets that made up the Indian quarter of the town, and grew to love its noise and smells and teeming sense of life, so different from the dull security of home. Then he explored the countryside with its dusty villages and ancient tracks that led to the forests and the hills. Here, for the first time, in the middle of this great sub-continent, he sensed the vastness of the world, and used to envy the kite and the birds sailing so effortlessly in the pale blue skies above him. He would go off for days alone searching for he knew not what, and finally return exhausted to his father's bungalow. His father rarely noticed his absence.

Since his brother left, Biggles had no European friends of his own age. After the disappearance of his mother, he must have felt that all the Europeans were inquisitive or pitying, so he avoided them and kept his secrets to himself. The few friends he had, he found among the local Indian boys; his favourite was a boy called Sula Dowla, son of an assistant overseer at a nearby tea estate. He was a bright boy, who spoke perfect English and who was flattered when the son of Biggles Sahib became his friend.

For Biggles, this was an important friendship, for Sula Dowla led a gang of other small Indian boys, a raggle-taggle lot, who used to haunt the bazaars, stealing what they could, and waging war on gangs from other districts. Biggles became an honorary member. He spoke Hindi perfectly, was up to any mischief going and, though undersized, could out-wrestle and outrun every member of the gang. He also soon began to organise them. He explained to Sula Dowla that as the son of Biggles Sahib, he could not countenance their criminal activities. Sula Dowla pulled a rueful face and said that his members did it merely for fun. Biggles replied that it would simply lead to trouble and was stupid. It would be far more fun to organise the gang on a proper basis, impose strict discipline on all its members, and plan their forays on the other gangs on sound military principles.

This was Biggles' first experience of warfare, and from the start he showed a sort of genius for it. He was a daring leader who carefully rehearsed his followers before each campaign. One of the earliest successes was a night-time raid on the headquarters of their deadliest enemies, the much stronger 'Buffalo Gang', who had set up camp in a deserted warehouse on the outskirts of the town. Biggles planned the whole attack meticulously, spending several days on what he called 'intelligence', sending out members of his gang to watch the warehouse, trailing the leading 'Buffaloes' around the town, and finding out which nights the warehouse was inhabited. He and Sula Dowla also spent much time on 'tactics', planning the line of their attack, choosing their weapons, and also planning how to meet the enemy when they retaliated — as they surely would.

Biggles would long remember that first 'battle' of his life — assembling his 'troops', giving each of them his final orders, and then the excitement of the surprise attack. Biggles knew that they had little chance of beating the 'Buffaloes' by sheer brute force — they were too big and numerous for that. Instead, he was relying on a secret weapon to bring terror to the enemy. A few days earlier he had asked his father for some fireworks and *papier-mâché* masks for Guy Fawkes day. (Although they were in India, Biggles' father was always keen to celebrate the festivals that he had known in England.) His father had agreed, but Biggles had an idea for a special Guy Fawkes celebration of his own. He gave each member of the gang a Guy Fawkes mask, whilst he and Sula Dowla took charge of the loudest of the fireworks. Then they all crept towards the warehouse.

For a while they lay in wait, and then at Biggles' signal every boy began a fearful wailing. The racket was enough to wake the dead, and while it was at its height, Biggles and Sula Dowla lit the fireworks and lobbed them through the warehouse windows. Then, as the first of them exploded, Biggles and Sula Dowla led the charge, waving their wooden swords and screaming like banshees. But it was probably the Guy Fawkes masks that did the trick. The sight of them was too much for the 'Buffaloes' and they fled, leaving their camp to Biggles and his small victorious gang.

This was the beginning of a whole series of successful 'wars' which Biggles and Sula waged: but although Biggles seems to have enjoyed the planning and organising of what he called the gang's 'intelligence section', there were times when he grew bored with the little town and tired of his friends. When these moods took him he would long to be away and would dream of travelling — across the hills and the far-off Himalayas to the north and on to China, or westwards to Bombay and then across the seas to Africa. The only books he read were books of travel and the only adult who remotely understood him was one of his father's few real friends, the legendary white hunter, Captain Lovell of the Indian Army.

Lovell, by all accounts, was an extraordinary character, a short, fat, dumpy little man with a glaring eye and a bristling red moustache. In youth he had been known as a great *shikari*, with countless tigers to his credit and a reputation for extraordinary toughness. (At Kaziranga, in Assam, he was once badly mauled by a tiger, left in a swamp for dead, and reappeared some three days later, dragging the tiger skin behind him. 'I got the brute' was all he said before collapsing.)

This was a story that appealed to Biggles, and although the Captain was now past his prime and living on his pension in Mirapore, near Garhwal, he became the first of Biggles' boyhood heroes. Biggles used to call him 'Skipper', and the old hunter, who apparently liked nothing more than talking about himself, seems to have done a lot to teach him his earliest philosophy of life. Biggles once asked him if he had ever known fear.

'Course I have, boy,' the old hunter answered. 'Only a damn fool doesn't feel afraid when faced with death. But it's the man who *is* afraid, yet faces up to it, who deserves a royal salute. That's the true test of courage, James my lad. Such men are gold, pure gold.'

Biggles remembered that. He was also impressed by Captain Lovell's admiration for what he termed 'gameness' in a man.

'Doesn't much matter, James my boy, whether you win or lose as long as you're really game until the end. Gameness is what distinguishes the men from the boys, when the chips are down.'

And it was Captain Lovell who instilled in Biggles his own special version of 'the White Man's Burden'.

'Whenever I was really up against it, I would tell myself, "Skipper, old boy, you're British. And Britisher is worth two Huns, five Frenchmen and a dozen darkies. So pull yourself together!"'

With sentiments like these to spur him on, Biggles became increasingly demanding of himself. Even from the time he was seven he had learned to shoot — potting at crows with a small shotgun of his father's which all but blew his head off when he fired. Now on his expeditions through the local countryside he was rarely without his rifle, and whilst he theoretically believed that hunting for sport was 'barbarous' (this was his father's view), he found enough occasions when wild animals were threatening life and limb to give him an excuse for action.

On one occasion he despatched a rabid pariah-dog which had been threatening the children in a nearby village. Another time he was on hand to deal with a leopard that had been stealing livestock and was threatening an old villager who had tried fruitlessly to scare it off. And on one memorable occasion the boy's longing for excitement and adventure nearly finished his career for good.

This was the time when the district where he lived was suffering the rare attentions of a man-eating tiger. There had been vague reports about the beast — goats had disappeared, a native woman had been killed some miles away at Delapur, and Captain Lovell had been in his element trying to track it down. Typically, Biggles' father gave scant attention to these stories. Certainly he did nothing to warn his son about the danger and Biggles had continued his carefree wanderings with Sula Dowla.

Some people naturally attract danger. Biggles did so all his life, and even as a boy the tendency was there. He always said that he had no intention of searching for the tiger — nothing was further from his thoughts. But some mysterious intuition made him take his rifle with him that morning as he strolled to Sula Dowla's house beyond the tea plantation. And something made him take a short cut home across a stretch of scrubland known as 'the Plains'. It was on the Plains, emerging from a patch of scrub, that Biggles and the tiger came face to face.

Frequently in later life Biggles would be faced by almost certain death, and every time some instinct of survival seems to have brought him through. It did so now. For the first time he was experiencing that strange clear-headedness in the face of danger which is the hallmark of the man of action. He could smell the rank stench of the animal, see the dull gleam in its yellow eyes and sense its vicious power. But, to his surprise, he was not afraid. Quite calmly, he considered what to do and found himself repeating some advice old Captain Lovell had once given him. 'If you surprise a dangerous animal, never run. It's fatal and you wouldn't have a hope. Stand absolutely still, stare the

beast out, and do your best to show him that you're not afraid.'

He did this now and for what seemed an age Biggles and the tiger stayed stock still, facing one another. Gradually it seemed that the advice would work. The tiger moved its head away, as if anxious to escape Biggles' gaze. Its tail dropped and it was on the point of slinking off when Biggles made a terrible mistake. He sneezed. The tiger turned to face him in a flash, growled, crouched back on its haunches and prepared to spring.

There was no question now of simply staring at the beast. The time for action had arrived, and very slowly Biggles raised his rifle to his shoulder, sighting the animal between the eyes. It moved forward limping slightly, stopped as if still undecided, crouched again, then, uttering a low growl, darted forward. Biggles fired — to no avail. The beast came on. He fired again, still uselessly it seemed, and the tiger was almost on him when he fired straight at its open mouth.

He never knew quite what happened next, for as he closed his eyes and waited for the blow to fall the tiger uttered one last fearful growl, swerved past him and went bounding off into the shelter of the undergrowth. Then came an anti-climax. Biggles ran home to tell his father of the tiger and of his miraculous escape. But John Henry Bigglesworth seemed unimpressed. Not even a tiger in his own back yard could bring a flicker of excitement to that cold impassive man.

'Wounded it eh, did you boy? That's bad. Wounded tiger is the very devil. I'll send out word so that the people keep well clear of the Plains, and we'll attend to Mr Tiger in the morning.'

Biggles waited, hoping for praise or possibly some brief paternal sympathy. Even in Garhwal wasn't every day a boy of thirteen had an encounter with a tiger and escaped to tell the tale. But all his father said was, 'Go and drink a glass of water, boy. You look as if you need it.'

It was a remark that Biggles never would forget. And when, next day, he duly watched his father and the Captain shoot the tiger at the climax of a full-scale tiger hunt across the Plains, all that Biggles felt was bitterness and dreadful disappointment. His father fired the fatal shot, but when the Captain shouted, 'Oh, good shot, Bigglesworth! Great work!' Biggles felt cheated. It was his tiger, not his father's. But he had learned enough about that distant man to keep his feelings to himself.

He also kept his feelings to himself a few weeks later when his father, with his habitual absence of emotion, calmly informed him that he had a week to pack up his belongings. He was off to England to the boarding school where his brother Charles had been.

This was a moment of profound unhappiness for Biggles. Much as he longed to travel, he could feel nothing but despair at the idea of exchanging the freedom of Garhwal for a boarding school in that far off island with its cold, fog, and icy seas. With Charles now at Sandhurst, he would be absolutely on his own — no Sula Dowla he could take on expeditions through the forest, no gangs of small Indian boys to organise in battle, no Captain Lovell to tell tall tales about his exploits as a hunter. Even the bungalow where he had grown up appeared precious to him now. Suddenly his whole world seemed threatened, but he had no one to confide in, and so once again he kept his fears and sadness to himself. When the day of his departure dawned he shook hands with his father, bade a dignified farewell to all the members of his gang who had assembled at the bungalow to see him off, and managed to fight back his tears. He had told Sula Dowla that when he had finished school he would return, but in his heart of hearts he knew he never would. Had Captain Lovell known just how 'game' young Biggles was being at that moment, he would have been proud of him.

Malton Hall School near Hertbury was not the place to make a sensitive small boy feel particularly at home. It was a mid-nineteenth-century foundation, set up as a sort of poor man's Wellington College.

to turn out the future soldiers and colonial administrators the Empire needed. Discipline was strict, food more or less inedible, and bullying the order of the day. Biggles arrived there for the autumn term of 1912, at a time when the school was still under the direction of its elderly headmaster, Colonel Horace 'Chevy' Chase, an unbending figure with a steely eye and closely cropped grey hair. Chase was a martinet, far more the keen ex-soldier than a scholar, and the school reflected this.

Biggles had been unwell. The voyage and the English climate had brought on a serious recurrence of malaria, which meant that he had to spend some weeks convalescing with his uncle, the General, in his place in Norfolk. From the start they got on well together. The General was a kindly man beneath his fiery exterior, and he felt sorry for the motherless small boy. His sickliness disturbed him, but he was delighted when he found he was a first-rate shot. He did his best to 'build him up' — with massive meals of half-cooked beef which Biggles hated — and Biggles' recovery did credit to the General's care. (In fact, the most important element in the boy's recovery was simply the old General's kindness and concern. Unlike his cold fish of a brother, 'Bonzo' Bigglesworth was a warm, emotional, warm-hearted man, and Biggles instantly responded to him.) When Biggles left for Malton Hall, his uncle gave him half a sovereign and some good advice.

'If anyone tries to bully you, my boy, punch them on the nose. It always works, however big they are, provided you punch hard enough.'

To start with, Biggles loathed his school. During his first interview with the Headmaster he was exhorted to stand up straight and not to mumble, and told he was expected to live up to the example of his brother, who had been head boy and had apparently brought glory to the school through his success in the Sandhurst examinations. Colonel Chase pronounced it 'Sandust' and at first Biggles didn't understand him. When he did, he tactlessly replied that he had no intention of entering the army.

'What do you want to do then, boy?' the Head inquired.

'Travel, sir,' said Biggles with alacrity. At which the Head said, 'Humph! We'll have to see about that,' and ended up by warning the small boy not to come snivelling to him with his troubles. Biggles decided there and then that he would rather die than do so, and with a sinking heart went off to face his fate.

Biggles soon found that he could deal with the bullying. He was wiry and tough and though undersized had learned some useful tricks in his battles with the rival gangs in India. He also had a powerful temper when he considered that his dignity was threatened; when a larger boy called Hervey picked on him and called him a 'mangey punkah wallah' he saw red, and promptly put his uncle's good advice to practical effect. Hervey did not pick on him again.

But what did worry Biggles, more than the bullying at Malton Hall, was the sense he had of being out of things. This was his first experience of English boys *en masse* and he was made to feel a foreigner among them. They were so different from the courteous Sula Dowla and he found them arrogant, uncouth and rather boring, with their tedious school slang and their obsessional concern with football. Biggles did not like football. (After polo, it struck him as a very common game, but he had the sense to keep this to himself.) None of them spoke Hindi or had shot a tiger and there was not a single boy at Malton Hall he would have chosen to accompany him into the jungle.

On the other hand, he longed to be considered one of them, if only as an antidote to loneliness. And so he consciously began to copy them — the words they used, their attitudes to life, the whole strange tribal rigmarole of Edwardian middle-class small boys. This was the beginning of that exaggerated pre-war Englishness that Biggles never lost. That over-hearty turn of phrase, the breezy manner and the apparently unthinking code of 'what one expects an Englishman to do' were not so much the result of Biggles as a protective pose that he adopted. And as so often happens with adopted poses, it stuck. B

beneath the carefully conformist self that he was now adopting, Biggles remained entirely his own person, sharp, intelligent, and something of a loner.

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He made it clear that he had no intention of following in the footsteps of his famous brother. He was no athlete, cricket bored him even more than football, and he utterly lacked the temperament for team games. Nor, as Colonel Chase soon realised, was Biggles reliable 'perfect material' as his brother Charles had been. He was not exactly a 'subversive element' — one of the Colonel's favourite phrases for schoolboy wickedness — but he remained emphatically an individual throughout his time at Malton Hall, and, for all his efforts to conform, a definite outsider.

According to Captain Johns, at this time Biggles appeared a 'slight, neatly-dressed, delicate-looking boy [with] thoughtful eyes, a small firm mouth, and fair hair parted at the side'. He was, he adds, 'no better and no worse than any other schoolboy of his age and era. Like any normal boy he excelled in some subjects and failed dismally in others. He was thoughtful and inclined to be serious rather than boisterous.'

Biggles confirmed this picture of himself. The subjects he 'excelled' in were history, geography and French. (He had inherited a flair for languages from his mother.) Mathematics was an absolute blind spot for him; so was science, but he possessed mechanical aptitude above the average.

He had few close friends, and those he did have tended to be outsiders like himself. His best friend at Malton Hall, a bespectacled, extremely spotty boy called Smith, was to become a distinguished scientist who was killed in the Second World War on one of the early tests of airborne radar. But at Malton Hall, Smith rather took the place of Sula Dowla as a sort of deferential crony, always on hand to give Biggles aid and moral support on his various escapades.

For, just as in India, things still had a habit of happening to Biggles, and before long he achieved a reputation as a 'character' — one of those unusual boys who tend to land in trouble and can be relied on for the unexpected. Very early on, for instance, there was the extraordinary episode of the dancing bear.

It all began one lunchtime with an announcement from the Head that a highly dangerous animal, a large brown bear, had been reported in the neighbourhood. He thought it had escaped from a menagerie, and armed men were already out pursuing it: There was no need for alarm, but the boys should all be on their guard and if they saw the animal should report it and keep well away.

Biggles was playing games that afternoon and thought nothing more about the bear until, walking back towards the school, he noticed several men with rifles. One of them shouted to him to go back and suddenly he saw the cause of their alarm. By the hedgerow, eating berries, stood a fully-grown male brown bear. Biggles had often seen such bears in India; indeed one of Sula Dowla's friends had been the son of a beggar with a dancing bear in the back-streets of Garhwal, and he always had a special spot for the animal. Certainly the idea of a similar bear in England being treated as a ravening wild beast appeared ridiculous, particularly as the bear in question was already looking rather lost. It had a collar round its neck and a long thin chain exactly like the dancing bears that he had seen in India. And so, without a second thought, Biggles walked on towards the bear, oblivious of the shouted warnings from the men behind him.

The bear looked at Biggles and Biggles looked at the bear. For some moments neither moved, then Biggles behaved exactly as he did with the bear that he had known in Garhwal. He spoke to it in Hindi, told it not to be afraid, and offered it the sugar bun that he had been saving for his tea. The bear hesitated, grunted and then thoughtfully accepted it. As it did so, Biggles picked up its chain and carried on addressing it in Hindi. For a while the bear munched his bun, then very slowly it began to dance. Biggles encouraged it and then began to lead it back towards the school. As he did so he

shouted to the men to drop their guns.

‘I was just longing to see the look on old Chevy’s face when I walked into his study with the bear,’ he said when he recounted the tale to us. ‘He was a humourless old devil and it might have cheered him up.’ But unfortunately before he reached the school the owner of the bear appeared, a wandering Indian from a circus, who was overjoyed to find his animal safe and sound. He was effusive in his thanks and led the bear away before Biggles had a chance to enjoy the sight of Colonel Chase confronted with a fully-grown dancing bear.

It was from this day that the Headmaster seems to have had his doubts about Biggles, but his reputation with the other boys began to grow. There were other episodes to follow. On one occasion he and the faithful Smith started a wild-goose chase for some non-existent ‘buried treasure’ which had half the inhabitants of the nearby village digging up the Common. And another time, he totally disrupted the School Corps field-day by capturing the ‘enemy’ headquarters long before the battle started.

From time to time the question would be mooted as to exactly what he wanted for a career. Despite the united influence of both his uncle and the Head, he remained resolutely against the idea of the army. ‘Not my thing at all. Too much confounded discipline, and anyhow my brother was already in the Rifle Brigade and I’d had enough of following *his* footsteps, thank you very much,’ was Biggles’s attitude. Instead, he thought quite seriously of studying Oriental languages at Oxford, but the war was to put a stop to that.

Curiously enough he did have one uncanny foretaste of his future while he was still at Malton Hall. He was on the playing field one afternoon, trying, as he put it, ‘to avoid the dreadful tedium without exactly dropping off to sleep’, when suddenly he heard a noise he thought at first must be his uncle old de Dion on an unexpected visit. It grew louder and then, over the elms at the end of the cricket field, appeared an aeroplane, a Bleriot two-seater. None of the boys had ever seen an aeroplane before and, inevitably, all thought of cricket was abandoned. The plane circled the field, the pilot waved, then someone shouted, ‘Look, he’s coming down!’ And so he was. At what seemed breakneck speed the Bleriot was heading for the cricket pitch and Biggles never would forget his first sight of a perfect three-point landing.

‘I don’t know why, but I felt something turn over within me. I’d read about aeroplanes of course but I’d never thought about them seriously till that moment. For some reason, when I clapped my eyes on that confounded Bleriot I knew that I was hooked. Don’t ask me why, but I knew for certain that that was where my future lay.’

The pilot was an old Maltonian, a boy called Morris whose father was a rich tobacco merchant. Biggles had known him as a senior boy a few terms earlier, and Morris was obviously enjoying showing off to his erstwhile schoolmates. Even Colonel Chase appeared impressed. Morris stayed for a hero’s tea in the pavilion, then donned his goggles and his flying helmet and flew off. He was killed in a flying accident not long after, but this did nothing to deter Biggles from the great ambition of his life. If Morris could fly then so could he. As for crashes — ‘at that time of life one never really thinks about them,’ he said. Biggles had fallen unreservedly in love with the idea of flying. It was his dream, his secret hope, the answer to that restlessness which had pursued him since his mother left. But, since it meant so much to him, he kept it strictly to himself, knowing quite well that if he talked about it openly he would be mocked by the other boys and branded as an eccentric by the Head, who thought that all careers except the army were ridiculous.

So it was that Biggles grew up with the idea of flying as an exciting yet forbidden dream. The only person he confided in was the old General, when he was back with him one summer holiday, and the

General, as Biggles had expected, was distinctly sympathetic.

‘Thinking of buying one of these flying machines myself. Dashed exciting, I’d have thought. Use to fly up to London. Quicker than the train,’

Alas, upon inquiry General Bigglesworth was advised that whilst a one-armed man could manage de Dion — just — it was impossible to pilot a new flying machine one-handed. Biggles was even more upset than his uncle at the news — for several weeks he had been picturing himself slipping back to Norfolk during holidays and somehow teaching himself to fly in secret — but the General did his best to comfort him. ‘Before long you’ll be piloting a plane yourself,’ he said prophetically; and in the meantime, to console his nephew, he took him off to see one of the earliest displays of aircraft at the tiny flying field near Hendon where all the latest aircraft — Bleriot and Farman biplanes and the brand new Sopwith interceptor — were on show. The star of that particular afternoon was the celebrated B. C. Hucks, the first man in the world to loop the loop, a feat which at that time was rare enough to bring a murmur of excitement from the crowd.

Apart from his dreams of flying and the friendship of his extraordinary old uncle, Biggles had few consoling features in his life. He always had admired his brother, Charles, but they had never been particularly close, and on the few occasions when they saw each other now, Biggles was painfully aware of the gulf between them. This was partly due to age and partly temperament. Charles was very like their father, and the army had brought out the keen, conformist side of his heredity. As a promising young subaltern in a famous regiment, he was also rather on his dignity towards his undersized young brother, and disapproved of Biggles’ lack of enthusiasm for the army and for Malton Hall. (Biggles suspected Colonel Chase of passing the word along that Biggles Minor just ‘wasn’t up to scratch’.) Charles was also on much closer terms than Biggles with John Henry Bigglesworth. Since he had arrived at Malton Hall, Biggles’ letters to his father had soon trickled down to one or two a term, but Charles wrote regularly, and felt obliged to lecture Biggles on his duties to what he called ‘the pater’. Biggles resented this, and if truth be told, would not have cared too much if he had never seen or heard from his father again. Needless to say, one subject was always total taboo between the brothers — their mother. Biggles suspected Charles of knowing more than he let on about the whole mysterious business of her departure from Garhwal and her reported death, but on the one occasion when he tried to tap his brother on the subject, Charles replied tersely, ‘that’s all over and done with’, and promptly changed the subject. They never talked of her again.

This did not mean that Biggles had no contact with his mother’s family. Lord Lacey — unforgiving to the last — expired in Calcutta at the end of 1910. (According to one version of his death, he was overcome by a fit of apoplexy in the bath brought on by anger when a servant offered him carbolic soap.) In later life, Biggles regretted that he had never seen him. The title passed to Biggles’ uncle Henry Lacey, a man as different from his father as anyone could possibly imagine. He was a gentle, absent-minded man, a botanist by training, who lived in a big ramshackle house in Lewes. On hearing that he had inherited the title, his chief concern was that his duties at the House of Lords would interrupt his lifelong search for wild flowers. He need not have worried. Henry Viscount Lacey visited the House of Lords on two occasions — once to take his seat, and once when he had been to a wedding at St Margaret’s, Westminster, and could not find a lavatory. The remainder of his life was dedicated to his monumental *Wild Flowers of Heath and Hedgerow*, which was published privately a year or two before his death in 1953.

Biggles always spoke of his botanising uncle as something of a joke. He used to be invited to the house at Lewes, but much preferred staying with the General. Motorcars and land torpedoes were more to his taste than wild flowers, and Lord Lacey was so distant and eccentric that he really had no time for Biggles. But on the other hand, Lady Lacey, Biggles’ formidable Aunt Priscilla, apparently

felt sorry for him and used to try to organise his life. At times she could be something of a menace. ‘Bossy old harridan’ was how he described her to us. ‘Always trying to rope me in for good works and telling me to wash behind my ears.’

The Laceys had a son called Algernon — ‘freckle-faced, spoiled little brat I always thought him those days’. Algernon was almost two years younger than his cousin, and it would have been impossible for any boy to have escaped the domination of a mother like Aunt Pris. Biggles tended to ignore him and it was not for several years to come that Biggles realised the truth — the insignificant Algy hero-worshipped him and would do so in his own strange way for the remainder of his life.

There was another way in which the Laceys were important to Biggles at this time, for it was through them that he finally got news about his mother. His aunt had no inhibitions about telling him exactly what had happened, and it appeared his mother was now living in the South of France. Captain Thomas had deserted her long since, and she had married a French businessman, a Monsieur Duclos.

For weeks after hearing this Biggles could think of nothing else, and was all for contacting her at once, but Aunt Priscilla prudently advised him otherwise. ‘You must be very understanding, James dear boy,’ she said. ‘Your mother — whether she deserved it or not is neither here nor there — has been through hell, and now at last has found a new life for herself in France. Her husband, as I know only too well myself, is an extraordinarily jealous man. I’ve no idea how much she’s told him, so you must be extremely cautious. I will be seeing her this autumn when we are in Cannes, and I will ask her what she wants to do about you. We must, of course, respect her wishes utterly.’

Biggles longed to see his mother; now that he knew she was alive he could not wait to be reunited with her. But he also knew his aunt was right, and so he waited as the weeks dragged by, and he was back at Malton Hall when he finally received a letter from his aunt. She had seen his mother and had talked to her about her sons. She had told her how eager Biggles was to see her, but his mother was inflexible. She sent her love, but felt ‘the time is not appropriate for a meeting’. (In fact, as Biggles told us, she had disguised her age when marrying her second husband and had not even told him of the existence of her two grown sons.)

Biggles was nearly fifteen by now, and had sufficient self-control to hide his feelings, but he suffered horribly and, even more than when his mother left, felt himself rejected by this icy-hearted woman that he loved. It was then that something closed up inside him and he no longer really cared what happened to him. During his final years at Malton Hall he became moody and withdrawn. He had no close friends (even the faithful, spotty Smith had left him), dodged games whenever possible and hardly bothered with his work. Everything in him now was set on one ambition — flying. But he told nobody about it and it was not until the early summer of 1914 that there appeared a slender chance that all his dreams would finally come true.

## Biggles Learns to Fly

‘It’s funny, looking back,’ Biggles remarked one day, ‘but when the 1914–18 war broke out, my greatest fear was that it would all be finished before I had a chance to join the fighting. Only goes to show how stupid one can be, but you must remember that everybody seemed to think the war would be over by Christmas, and of course my brother Charles was, off to join his regiment in France. I was bored stiff at dear old Malton Hall and the war appeared my one great chance to get into an aeroplane. But there I was, just fifteen, with the summer holidays half over, and not the faintest hope, it seemed, of ever getting closer to the enemy than my uncle’s house at Lewes. So I tried to volunteer. I went to the recruiting office, which was in Brighton in those days, and told them I was eighteen. There was a sergeant there, a great big fellow with a huge moustache, and when he saw me he just roared with laughter. “Back to school with you, Sonny Jim,” he shouted. “When they start needing schoolboys for the Front we’ll write and let you know.”’

Not for the last time in his life, Biggles was experiencing the effect of his lack of size and extraordinary youthfulness. But there was nothing he could do except soldier on at Malton Hall, and offer up his private prayers that the war would continue long enough to let him play his part in it. Which all too horribly it did. The early months of optimism and euphoria passed, and soon the boys at Malton Hall began to realise the nature of the struggle as the Head read out the names of more and more quite recent old Maltonians, ‘who have made the supreme sacrifice for King and Country’.

But the idea of death made no impression on young Biggles, and his ambition stayed the same as ever — flying. He used to keep a scrapbook on aeroplanes and famous fliers — men like the legendary Captain Ball who shot down the first German airship over Britain, and the fearsome German ace, von Richthofen — and as the war dragged on, and life at Malton Hall seemed more and more beside the point, Biggles was becoming quite an expert in aeronautics. He still felt hideously out of things — especially with his brother Charles becoming something of a hero now. He fought with gallantry at Mons, was awarded the M.C. and promoted captain on the field of battle.

Early in 1916, Charles, by now a major with his own battalion, was wounded badly in the leg. The Easter he was back in Norfolk, convalescing with old General Bigglesworth, and it was then that Biggles finally decided he had had enough of Malton Hall and waiting patiently for his turn to come. Another boy at school called Turner, who was two months junior to Biggles, had just been accepted into the Royal Navy as a midshipman. Biggles informed his uncle that he intended following him. The General was appalled. A Bigglesworth in the Navy! What was his silly nephew thinking of? He positively forbade it. But Biggles was determined and explained quite coolly to his uncle that he intended entering the Navy and transferring to the newly formed Royal Naval Air Service as soon as possible.

‘I don’t give two hoots what uniform I wear,’ he said. ‘All I want to do is fly.’

The General knew his nephew well enough to realise he wasn’t bluffing, and when he had calmed down sufficiently to think coherently he offered him a deal.

‘Listen, my boy!’ the old gentleman began, ‘I want to hear no more about this Naval nonsense. It’s bad for my blood pressure. But if you promise not to mention it again and wait until you’re seventeen I’ll see what can be done to get you commissioned into a decent regiment. You’ll have to lie about your age of course, but with my backing they’ll accept you. From then it will be up to you.’

And so it came about that early that summer of 1916, Biggles was summoned to Whiteha

Because of the frightful losses at the Front, young officers were needed, and thanks to a letter from his uncle, Biggles was accepted as a second lieutenant into a rifle regiment, after some two weeks' very basic training at the regimental depot outside Aldershot — and even then his luck continued. The depot was in chaos. Nobody seemed to know or care what happened to this raw young subaltern, and when he applied for an instant transfer to the Royal Flying Corps, nobody objected. Pilots were desperately needed out in France, and by the end of September it seemed that Biggles' dearest dream had suddenly come true. He had a brand-new fur-lined flying coat which reached his ankles, a flying helmet, a pair of goggles, and an official posting to the R.F.C.'s No. 17 Flying Training School at Weymouth. Settling in Norfolk.

'They called the place a training school for fliers,' Biggles said. 'In fact it was more by luck than judgment that anyone came through that so-called flying course alive. Most of the instructors there were pilots who had been sent back from France as "unfit for combat duties", and the aircraft that they had were even worse, clapped-out old Farman biplanes that should have been in a museum when the war broke out. They were nothing short of flying death-traps. Get one in a spin and it was impossible to pull out of it. If you tried to dive, the wings came off. The crash rate was a damned disgrace, and for training, it was survival of the fittest — or the luckiest.'

Biggles was both. After a week or so of dual flying, his instructor — a shell-shocked veteran called Captain Nerkison — decided that the time had come for him to solo, which he did, miraculously without mishap.

'When I think back to it,' laughed Biggles, 'I get the cold shudders. I wasn't really fit to drive a farm cart, let alone a plane as tricky as a Farman. But at that age, nothing seems impossible, and apart from a very bumpy landing, I survived.'

Here one must make allowance for his modesty, for it is clear that from the start Biggles was the rarest of all beings, a natural pilot. Even the erratic Captain Nerkison must have realised as much, for with less than two hours' solo flying in his log-book, Biggles was sent on to the second stage of training — to the grandly titled No. 4 School of Fighting at Frensham on the coast of Lincolnshire.

The training here was still quite elementary — 'in at the deep end — sink or swim' — as Biggles put it, but he was taught the rudiments of combat flying, and for the first time had a chance to fly some of the newest aircraft which were coming into service with the R.F.C., planes like the legendary Sopwith Pup with its powerful rotary engine, and the two-seater F.E.2. He was taught basic navigation, lectured on 'flying tactics', and given his chance of target practice, against several ancient aircraft on the beach. And that, for all practical purposes, was that. At a time when the average combat pilot's life in France was something like three weeks, there was no chance of much finesse. Pilots were needed for the squadrons at the Front and it seemed to Biggles that he had barely arrived at Frensham before he received his movement order out to France. He had to collect it from the Adjutant at the Fighting School, and as he stamped his log-book, the Adjutant said casually, 'Oh, by the way, you can put up your "wings". You've passed. Well done!' Not yet eighteen and with less than fifteen hours flying to his credit, 2nd Lieut James Bigglesworth had suddenly become a fully-fledged pilot in the Royal Flying Corps.

When he reached France his first posting was to 169 Squadron stationed near St Omer in the north of France. He had been hoping for a scout squadron, flying the latest Sopwith Pups, and he was somewhat

disappointed to discover that in 169 they were still equipped with the lumbering two-seater F.E. pusher biplanes. They were reliable enough and easy to fly, but they were underpowered. Their top speed was a laboured eighty miles an hour, and already the German Albatrosses had the edge on them. Indeed, that autumn was a testing time for the Allied air forces. The Germans had a new device allowing their machine-guns to fire forward through the propeller, and at a time when the German ground forces were bogged down in the trenches of the Somme, their airmen were hard on the offensive, particularly in the small area from St Omer up to the Belgian coast where Biggles found himself. As early as that July, ten German bombers had attacked the British Lines at Festubert in broad daylight. Boulogne was raided, and just a few days before Biggles reached his Squadron, 8,000 tons of ammunition were destroyed in a daring midnight raid on the British base at Audruicq.

Squadron No. 169 was in the thick of things. Losses had been heavy and beneath the atmosphere of forced cheerfulness which seemed to be the order of the day, morale was bad. Conditions at St Omer were grim — so grim in fact that Biggles himself was almost killed within minutes of arrival. He had reported to the Adjutant — who was distinctly off-hand with him — and was strolling over to the Mess, when he heard an aeroplane approaching. He took no notice, thinking that it was one of the Squadron coming in to land, but he heard a sudden whistling noise and a moment later was thrown to the ground by a violent explosion. This must have saved his life, for the aircraft was in fact a German scout plane, making a sortie from its base across the Lines, and having dropped its bomb, it then went on to rake the airfield with machine-gun fire.

Biggles was indignant, and rather shaken, but the members of the Squadron treated this mishap to the new boy as an enormous joke.

‘Jerry must have heard that you were coming, old boy!’ remarked the Adjutant drily. ‘Obviously he popped over to give you an official welcome from the Kaiser. Probably as well he didn’t get you, though. We’re getting rather low on pilots.’

This was all too true, for later that same afternoon 169 lost its Commanding Officer. The poor man died of wounds after bringing back his badly shot-up F.E.2, and it was the new CO., a difficult, bad-tempered man called Major Paynter, who officially welcomed Biggles to the Mess of 169 that night. It was an uncomfortable occasion, which Paynter’s words did little to relieve, and afterwards there was a lot of horseplay and heavy drinking — the inevitable reaction to the losses and the strain the Squadron had to bear, and Biggles heard somebody remark, ‘Good God, they’re sending us schoolboys now!’

Someone else suggested taking Biggles’ trousers off (the traditional method in some regiments of those days of putting young subalterns in their place). But this was firmly stopped by the Second-in-Command, a major by the name of Roberts. ‘No time for that sort of tommy-rot,’ he shouted. ‘We’ve got too much work to do tomorrow, and Bigglesworth here is due to fly with Way as his observer. Time for you to get off to bed, my lad.’ As Biggles followed his advice, Roberts said tactfully, ‘Don’t take too much notice of what’s happened here tonight. Everyone’s a bit strung up. You’ll be all right, and Way will keep an eye on you. Do’as he says, and you won’t go far wrong.’

Hardly surprisingly, Biggles had little sleep that night, and all next morning as he stayed on standby for his first operational flight, he suffered badly from an attack of nerves — one of the few occasions that he ever did. But luckily Lieutenant Way realised how he was feeling and did his best to put him at his ease. Way was a down-to-earth New Zealander, and although barely twenty-one himself, he was already one of the most experienced observers with the R.F.C. His pilot had been killed two days earlier, but he was admirably calm as he explained the drill for the patrol — the way the flight would keep together, how he would operate the two machine-guns in the aircraft’s nose, and the necessity to keep as high as possible above the enemy. ‘Just keep the old bus in the air, and stay glued to the Flight

Commander's tail,' said Way. 'I'll do the rest.'

It sounded easy, but as the hours ticked by Biggles' nervousness grew worse. He tried to think about the General and his brother, Charles, but even that was not much help. But he couldn't help remembering the remark about schoolboys — it made him angry and his anger kept him going. He ate no lunch, and then, just after two o'clock, the order came — take-off in ten minutes' time. His debut as a combat pilot had begun.

He still had his outsize flying coat, and all but tripped over it as he swung himself aboard the plane, but once inside the cockpit all his worries left him. Way gave him the thumbs up from the forward cockpit, a mechanic swung the big propeller, and as the Beardmore engine thundered into life something in Biggles came alive as well. He was no longer worried or concerned with death, and suddenly he felt at one with the machine. As he opened up the throttle and the aircraft started to roar across the field, he was caught up in a sense of real exhilaration. It was a grey, wet afternoon, with low cloud shrouding the horizon, but as the tail lifted and the biplane rose above the poplars at the far end of the field, Biggles felt his spirits lift with it.

After his doubts and fears it seemed extraordinarily easy. The Flight Commander's plane was the one ahead of him to follow, the F.E.2 was flying beautifully, and for some twenty minutes they were circling above the airfield as they climbed to 7,000 feet. Then the Commander dipped his wings and Biggles saw him turn towards the east. His first sortie over enemy territory had started.

As the three planes sailed on in perfect formation, Biggles could soon see the long brown scar of the Front Line trenches in the neat countryside below. That was where men were fighting in the mud and misery of Northern France, but on that perfect autumn afternoon it was impossible to grasp — even when he saw a group of round black blobs suddenly appear a few hundred yards ahead. He counted them — five, six — and suddenly there was a flash quite close to the left wing-tip followed by a dull explosion and a rush of air which made the biplane buck. He almost panicked as he thought that he would lose control, but he soon pulled the aircraft back on course, and as he did so Way turned round, grinned at him and shouted something.

Biggles could not hear him but he knew what he was saying: 'Archie' — enemy anti-aircraft fire. A full-scale barrage, and by the look of it, too close for comfort. But there was nothing to be done except to ignore it. The Flight Commander was still holding his position, and, a little nervously by now, Biggles did the same.

Then he saw that Way was standing up. The anti-aircraft fire had ceased, and his observer had his Lewis gun in readiness over the side of the cockpit. He fired a short burst — probably to warm the gun and stop it freezing up, thought Biggles, who could only see the other aircraft of the flight and the empty sky above. Then Way fired again, a longer burst this time, and Conway, the observer in the nearest F.E.2, was also firing.

This had Biggles puzzled. He could still see nothing but clear sky ahead, but Conway was signalling, waving and pointing downwards. Way waved back, then leant out of the cockpit to aim the Lewis gun straight down. Biggles craned his neck to see what he was firing at, and with shocked amazement saw a green aircraft with swept-back wings immediately below them. But what held his attention were the two black Maltese crosses glaring at him.

Everything seemed to happen in slow motion then. The German plane — an elderly two-seat Taube used for reconnaissance — tried to bank away, followed by another burst of fire from the Lewis gun, and Biggles saw the figure in the rear cockpit stand up and collapse as the bullets hit him. The plane slipped sideways and its left wing crumpled like tissue paper. As it spun towards the countryside below, one of the crew fell out. Biggles watched him turn and turn, then disappear.

That brought Biggles back to his senses very swiftly. The Flight Commander turned his plane abruptly, making Biggles bank the F.E.2 so sharply that he almost went into a spin himself. Luckily he still had sufficient height to put the plane into a dive and then pull out, as he chased back towards the Allied Lines, following his leader.

It was then that the real sense of exultation caught him. The wind was streaming past his face, the engine roaring, and he had just experienced his first 'kill' in the air. He felt no pity or remorse for the figure he had seen spin down to earth — it was too unreal for that. This battle in the air was an exciting game — and he had felt himself invincible.

He saw a green Very light fired by the Flight Commander, signalling the end of the patrol, and the airfield was below them. Biggles made a perfect landing, and when the plane had rolled to a halt he shouted his congratulations to his observer.

'Good shooting! You got that Taube beautifully. I didn't realise that it was there until you'd hit it.'

Lieutenant Way took his goggles off, and gave Biggles a thin smile.

'I didn't really get the Taube. That was Conway's. I got the other one.'

'What other one?' said Biggles warily.

'The blue and yellow Fokker that was after us,' Way said in his soft New Zealand accent. 'Didn't you see the blighter? He almost got us. He was with another Fokker, black one. Conway got him well. I'll have to buy the man a drink.'

Biggles was feeling slightly dazed by now — no longer the daredevil combat ace that he had felt himself to be whilst coming in to land.

'How many were there, then?' he asked.

'Heavens, man! Didn't you see them? There were seven all told — a whole Hun patrol. We sailed through the middle of them. Why else d'you think the Flight Commander turned our noses back so fast?'

He laughed and Biggles felt extremely foolish, but Lieutenant Way was a kindly man at heart and slapping Biggles on the back, he said, 'Don't worry, youngster. You flew damned well, and you'll soon get the hang of things. Huns take a lot of spotting till you get the knack. Now come and have a spot of tea. I think we've earned it.'

And so it was that over tea and army biscuits Biggles celebrated his first 'kill' in the air — of an aircraft he had never even seen.

Biggles could not afford to be an innocent for long. He was learning in a school where few who made mistakes survived, and he was constantly spurred on by the feeling that the other members of the Squadron were laughing-at him — they had christened him 'the schoolboy wonder'.

The German Air Force was maintaining its superiority, and Biggles was soon flying across the Allied Lines three and four times a day. To survive one had to know one's job, and at a time when the average life of a British pilot was three weeks, Biggles was managing it very well. He insisted that he had a lot of luck, and 'the schoolboy wonder's luck' became a byword in the Squadron. Once he returned with a German bullet-hole in the flap of his leather flying helmet; another time a German Halberstadt had Biggles at its mercy, and then its guns jammed (Biggles insisted he could still remember the look of fury and disgust on the German pilot's face as he went diving past). But luck apart, Biggles was a born combat pilot, and within three weeks of his arrival at 169 he was earning the

grudging admiration of his brother officers.

Despite this, Biggles continued to feel out of things — just as he had at Malton Hall. This was partly age — he was still only seventeen and a half at the beginning of 1917, and all the other members of the Squadron seemed considerably older. As at school, he made efforts to conform. He started smoking, attempted unsuccessfully to grow a small moustache, and would join in with any high-jinks that were going in the Mess. Yet, however hard he tried, Biggles was all too aware that he was a loner still.

In some ways this was an advantage. Pilots are individualists at heart and Biggles always felt that in the last resort he had no one to rely on but himself. On the other hand, it was now, in his most impressionable period of all, that Biggles consciously adopted the slang and manner of his older brother officers. It was a *persona* that he never lost — indeed, as the years went by, he would become something of a caricature of an old style pilot from the R.F.C. But in that hard-pressed winter that he spent at St Omer, Biggles still appeared a rather earnest, overgrown schoolboy with a cheerful word for almost everyone and a fanatical love of flying.

This passion never left him. Most of the older pilots in the Squadron ultimately tired of flying. If they were lucky and survived their first few months with an active-service squadron, their nerve would usually begin to go, and generally only the toughest or the maddest fliers went on to become the famous aces of the war.

Biggles was different. Partly through temperament — and partly too because of the extraordinary series of adventures that soon diverted him from Front-Line flying — Biggles never did become a famous ace. He was not a natural killer, and he flew for the simplest of reasons — because he loved to fly and believed that the happiest place on earth was the cockpit of an aeroplane.

Towards the end of 1916, the British forces in the north of France were finally bogged down. The weather was as bad an enemy as the German army, as fog and ice were added to the hazards of a combat pilot's life.

Allied Headquarters had been hearing rumours that the enemy was massing to attack along this narrow segment from the Belgian border, but clear-cut information was urgently required — information which only aerial reconnaissance could provide.

Even in decent weather this sort of reconnaissance was hazardous. The German base at Vanfleteren was forty miles behind their Lines, and although the F.E.2s were ideal for this sort of operation, and their low speed and stability made them the perfect spotter planes, they were also hideously vulnerable. The generals were demanding detailed information — numbers of rail trucks in the sidings, news about arms dumps and troop formations, all of which meant that the aircraft would have to spend several minutes flying dangerously low across the town.

When the request came through from High Command, one of the most experienced pilots in the Squadron, a Captain Littleton, was given the job. He failed to return. So did Lieutenant Blake, another veteran of 169. But although two planes were lost, there was no question of abandoning the task; now was the turn of Biggles' flight.

Mapleton, the Flight Commander, refused point blank to ask for volunteers. 'I'm not letting anyone commit suicide just because he considers it the right thing to do,' were the words he used. Instead he suggested that all three pilots tossed for it, the odd man out to go. Inevitably, the odd man out was Biggles. Way appeared understandably concerned. Mapleton's talk of suicide was not exactly calculated to give much encouragement to the chosen victims, but Biggles seemed delighted, for he

had reached that dangerous point of all young fliers where confidence had started to outrun experience. He seemed to have a charmed life in the air and felt no fear. Flying was still a game, and even the warnings and the grim briefing from the CO., Major Paynter, failed to dampen his spirits.

Paynter suggested that they flew at dawn next morning, but Biggles showed his contempt for Paynter's advice by insisting on that very afternoon.

'Jerry is always waiting for a dawn patrol,' he said. 'Less opposition in the afternoon.'

The C.O. agreed but warned them to watch out. 'Reports from Intelligence suggest that Richthofen and his merry men have moved up to the airfield at Douai, and there are already more Boche combat planes there than anywhere else on the Western Front.' He smiled quizzically. 'I tell you this to cheer you on your way.'

'Well, if we've got to go, we might as well get it over with as soon as possible,' Way remarked to Biggles-when they were safely out of earshot.

Biggles was irrepressible, and twenty minutes later he was giving the F.E.2 full throttle, and the sheds and hangars of the Squadron H.Q. were receding in the rain beneath them. It was filthy weather all the way — rain, broken cloud, and at 8,000 feet ice was soon forming in the cockpit (twice Way fired short bursts on his Lewis guns to stop them icing up). In some ways, however, the weather was a blessing. The cloud gave cover and it would be a very eager German who took his aircraft up in such conditions. And in fact, some forty minutes after taking off, Biggles and Way had reached their destination without incident.

Then came the tricky bit. Biggles had difficulty finding a break in the cloud and had to bring the aircraft down to 2,000 feet before he and Way could see a thing below then, and at that height the eighty-mile-an-hour F.E.2 was something of a sitting duck for the German anti-aircraft guns. Not that this made the slightest difference to our hero. One of the earliest lessons he had learned was that the only way to deal with 'Archie' was to ignore it. 'If a shell has your name on it, too bad,' was his philosophy. But as the aircraft sailed slap through the middle of the German barrage, even his equanimity was shaken, and the aircraft bucked and bucketed as the German gunners got rather too close for comfort. Biggles took what evasive action he could manage, banking the F.E.2 and doing his best to twist and turn across the target — none of which made his observer's task any easier. But Way was meticulous, and as the lumbering aircraft flew across Vanfleur at little more than 1,000 feet, he had a great deal to record. The sidings of the goods yard were full of flat trucks, each with a German field gun plainly visible. Shell were being loaded further on, and there were stores and motor vehicles whilst outside the little town were row on row of tents for troops that would reinforce the big attack.

In those days before aerial photography much depended on the accuracy of the observer, and it was clearly urgent to get detailed news of this big German build-up back to the Allied High Command. So whilst Biggles' instincts were to get out of Vanfleur now as speedily as possible (and how he wished he'd had a bomb or two to drop on the ammunition dump outside the station), Way was insisting on further flight across the town just to make sure that he had everything recorded on his note-paper. Biggles reluctantly agreed and, bringing the aircraft almost down to rooftop level now, started the return journey over the town.

This time all hell broke loose, not only from aircraft guns, but also from German soldiers in the streets, who took pot shots with their rifles at the aircraft with the unmistakeable red, white and blue roundels on its wings. Miraculously, she came through unscathed — apart from some tell-tale bullet holes around the cockpit, and shrapnel gashes in the wings — and Biggles decided they had tempted providence enough for one wet afternoon and that it was time for home.

Easier said than done. As he began to put the aircraft into a slow climb and turn her nose south-west, the German guns below fell silent, and suddenly he saw the reason. Out in the clearing sky there lay between the F.E.2 and home were twelve black dots which, even as they watched, grew large German Albatrosses! Against such opposition Biggles' F.E.2 had as much chance of surviving as a cow faced with a pack of hungry lions.

But he still possessed one lingering advantage — the blanket of low grey cloud that stretched north of Vanfleur to the Belgian coast. If they could reach it, there was still a chance of giving the faster German planes the slip.

For the next few minutes it was touch and go, with Biggles speeding for the cloud-bank at full throttle, and the German triplanes closing in. Biggles could see by now the Squadron numbers on the fuselage of the leading aircraft, and then, suddenly, they were in the cloud. It was like flying straight into a dense grey fog, an eerie, silent world in which the German planes could never hope to find them.

There was no question now of flying south towards St Omer, for their best hope of dodging the pursuers still lay in the protection of this interminable bank of cloud. So, Biggles flew north-west by his compass, hoping in the end to reach the Belgian coast, then follow it down towards Dunkirk and home.

At first it seemed as if this plan would work. The German aircraft had no hope of finding them, and after studying his map and calculating distance from his flying time, Biggles decided they would soon be over the Belgian coast, and cautiously brought the aircraft down below the level of the cloud.

'Great!' shouted Way as they reached clear air beneath the cloud-bank, for there on the horizon lay the sea with a pale blue sky beyond. Biggles gently eased the aircraft to the left and started the slow journey back to Base. Two things were worrying him by now. The first was his petrol level. The F.E.2's maximum endurance was three hours, and they had already been airborne more than half of this. The second worry was an enemy patrol. In this clear sky by the coast the F.E.2 would have no hiding place.

For twenty minutes all seemed well. The pale blue winter sky began to darken with the approach of evening, and Biggles kept the aircraft's nose along the white line of the breaking surf beneath, while Way kept a sharp lookout for an enemy. But as always happens, trouble came when least expected.

From the map, Biggles had calculated that they would soon have reached the point where the Front Line met the sea, and was already looking forward to getting back in time for dinner, when Lieutenant Way shouted out a warning and swung his Lewis gun towards the water. Biggles followed that direction, only to see the dark shape of an Albatross heading towards them from the mist. At the same time, something made him glance in the opposite direction: another Albatross was swooping towards them for the kill. The two scout planes, out on their evening patrol, were evidently working together and launching a beautifully-timed dual attack on them.

Way did his best to head them off by firing manfully at each aircraft, but the odds were obviously too great, and the F.E.2 was no match for the synchronised machine-guns of the German planes. The distances began to narrow, and above the racket of the engine and the Lewis gun. Biggles could hear the whine of the two approaching Albatrosses. They were daring fliers to approach so close, and at the point where it looked as if collision was inevitable, Biggles yanked at the joystick and sent his aircraft zooming upwards. A second later came an appalling crash from just below. The aircraft shuddered in the explosion and was hit by small bits of wreckage, and as Biggles peered down he saw what had occurred. The two German pilots must have taken simultaneous evasive action to avoid collision, but had done it in the same direction and had met each other head on. There were no survivors, and as the

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