



## **“BLUE 4 OUT”**

**By Dr. Richard Zapf**

Will Smythe was Blue 4 in a flight of four Hawker Hurricanes. It was February 14, 1941, and the Battle of Britain had petered out the previous fall. The RAF had prevented a NAZI invasion of the home island, and with what limited resources the British had, it was time for them to go on the offensive. A major opponent of RAF Fighter Command during the battle was the Abbeville Boys. They flew the Messerschmitt Bf109-E one of the best fighter aircraft in the world, and their Geschwader employed some of the best of the German Aces. With their all yellow noses and wingtips they were easily recognized. Today they were about to get a surprise as Will's squadron was going to make a low level fighter sweep over their base just as dawn was breaking.

The squadron was divided into three flights of four aircraft each, Red, Green and Blue flights. Their orders were to cross the channel at a very low level and hopefully catch the Abbeville Boys sleeping or better yet either in the act of landing or taking off. Will had passed through fighter training with better than average scores and posted to number five squadron. After some orientation flights he was assigned as a wingman to John 'Stuffy' Jones, Blue3. Even though Stuffy was a sargent and Will was a PO or pilot officer and out ranked Stuffy, this did not carry any weight as far as the squadron commander was concerned. It was experience that mattered and Stuffy had the experience with three kills to his credit. On the other hand Will had never fired his guns in anger, and his only practice had been a quick trip to the Channel where he fired his guns into the water. The amount of lead from his eight Browning .303 machine guns made quite a splash. To his surprise, his entire stock of ammo was depleted in a little over twenty seconds

“Bloody good shooting Blue 4. The Channel will never be the same. You hit it with each round,” came a transmission from Blue3 who had been detailed to escort the new pilot over the Channel. “Next time use short bursts of three seconds. That's all you'll need and it will prevent you from burning out the barrels. And next time pull out sooner.”

Will had been briefed about holding down the trigger too long, but had become fixated. He was fascinated at how some of the rounds skipped off the water and he almost flew into the Channel. He snapped out of his fixation at the last second, when he heard Blue 3 call, “Pull up! Pull up!” Will was humiliated when he heard Stuffy's transmission but realized that it probably saved his life . All he could do was transmit back, “Roger that Blue 3.”

The next morning the squadron was awakened at 3AM, and briefed on the upcoming operation. "This is a fighter sweep and we are hoping to give the Abbeville Boys an unpleasant surprise. This will be a low level operation so follow my lead. Pay attention because we will be flying less than thirty feet above the Channel until we reach the French Coast. We will be low enough so we will not be picked up by radar and we should blow by their coastal anti-aircraft before Jerry can respond. I know some of you have been out about the town and been able to score a few birds in the pubs over the last few days. This is highly technical flying as you will have to manage avoiding flying into the channel and at the same time look out for Jerry. So don't confuse your Wanger with your joystick, and keep your eyes out of the cockpit."

There was a bit of a chuckle from the pilots. "I'm serious. If you want to live, and not let your mates down, stick to the business of flying once you're in the cockpit. Understood?" said the skipper. "Leave your fantasies and troubles on the ground."

There was a collective, "Yes Sir."

Stuffy was the one to ask the most the most important question. "What's the plan once we get there Skipper?"

The Skipper pointed to the chart on the wall. "The squadron will break into three flights of four and come at Jerry's field from three different directions. This should confuse any ground fire. I'll lead green flight and strike first, then red, and finally blue. One pass only. Shoot up anything you see in the air or on the ground, and get out before Jerry wakes up. We will rendezvous over point alpha at angels ten. Man your aircraft at 0500"

Will was busy jotting down the particulars of the mission, but at the same time was thinking of Melissa Wells, his girl. She was a driver in the Women's Auxiliary and he thought she looked cute in her uniform. She was a redhead of about five three with just a sprinkling of freckles. They had been dating for six weeks. When they were off duty they were inseparable. While Will tended to be taciturn, Melissa was bubbly and that helped to bring him out. Sometimes she would yammer on and on about all sorts of things that Will was not interested in, from clothing styles to gardening, but he didn't interrupt because he just liked to hear the sound of her voice. He had also discovered through a bit of petting that she was all there. In spite of rationing, the two of them had scrimped to have a Valentine's dinner in her flat. Her two roommates would be away. Both Will and Melissa were virgins and they discussed that tonight just might just be the night. Just the thought of seeing Melissa with less than her uniform on made it hard for Will to think of much else.

It was 0520 and the squadron was now speeding across the Channel. They were in a V formation of three flights. Green in the center, Red on the left and Blue on the right. As Blue 4, Will was the last aircraft on the extreme right guarding their right flank. He was concentrating very hard to stay in formation and avoid flying into the Channel. Several times he had to clear the perspiration from around his goggles and oxygen mask. Rather than maintaining a light touch on the joystick he realized he was gripping it so tight that his hand cramped. He had to switch hands and exercise his fingers. The squadron was so low that he could see that Green flight was actually causing a wake and kicking up spray as they passed over the water and he guessed that his flight was doing the same. At near three hundred mph, one slip at such a low altitude meant death. He started to think about Melissa and as a result began to gain a slight separation from his flight. Normally this would not be a problem at angels ten, but at thirty feet it could kill a lad. " *Sorry Melissa,* he thought to himself. *"If I'm to survive the war I need to boot you out of the cockpit."*

Before he could contemplate much else the French coast came up faster than Will expected. He had no time to think of Melissa. The three flights broke in three different directions after they hit the coast. The surprise of the coastal defenses was almost complete. Most of the flak and tracer fire was behind them, but Jerry got in a lucky shot. Red 3 suddenly started to smoke and pitched up making a tight turn for home. Will did not have time to see if Red 3 made a good escape.

"Oh shit, oh shit!" Will said more to himself. His mouth went dry, and he had a strange copper taste in his mouth.

There was a transmission from the skipper that seemed to be directed to Will. "Stay on mission lads. We've a job to do."

Blue leader spotted their waypoint which was a small village with a church steeple marked as the actual turning point. Will's flight turned thirty degrees and started to climb to a thousand feet. As they climbed, they could see a clear patch of ground that was the airfield. Green and Red flights had already made their passes. There was considerable smoke and a number of burning buildings and aircraft on the field. Will could not tell if they were friend or foe. He hoped the wreckage belonged to Jerry. As planned, Blue flight deployed in a line astern with Will being the tail end Charlie. Blue leader caught a pair of Bf109s just taking off. He put a three second burst into the cockpit of the lead aircraft. It dropped the left wing and cartwheeled down the runway bursting into flames. His wing man, Blue 2, was about to do the same when a Bf109 dropped out of nowhere and put several rounds into Blue 2 causing him to burst into flames. It was Stuffy's turn to return the favor, but as he lined up the 109, another 109 skimmed over Will's cockpit missing him by inches. He screamed into his mike, "Break! Break!" It was too late. A quick burst from the 109 and Stuffy exploded. Why the 109 had not seen Will or chosen to ignore him, Will could not explain. He did not need a sight to line up the 109 because it filled his windscreen. He could see it had a yellow vertical stabilizer, gray and green upper camouflage, and light blue underside with yellow wing tips. Three seconds was enough to finish off the 109, but Will kept the trigger down even as he pulled up, flying through the wreckage of his victim. He could hear and feel some of the debris strike his Hurricane. One chunk of wing, spinning wildly, struck his armored windscreen cracking it. Will ducked. "*How dumb was that!*," he thought. "*You can't duck from anything at three hundred miles per hour.*"

As he continued to climb, he surveyed the damage. There were some dents in the leading edge of his port wing. The damage was bad enough that the guns on that wing probably would not fire. This was a moot proposition as he had no ammo left. For once, he was thankful he was flying a Hurricane instead of a Spitfire which he coveted. While the Spit was faster and was a dream to fly, it couldn't take the kind of battle damage that the Hurricane could.

Will could hardly see forward through the smashed windscreen. He pushed back the canopy for better visibility. It moved an inch and no more. He panicked. Then he put both feet on the dashboard and pulled with both hands. The damn thing moved another inch and stuck. He had other things on his mind like looking out for Jerry and finding the rest of his Squadron. Thank God the Rolls Royce Merlin engine was running like a top. He reached Angels ten over point Alpha and the sky was empty. No Jerry and no squadron. He had heard from more veteran pilots that sometimes after intense combat that the sky would be empty even though you'd expect to see squadrons of aircraft. He guessed this was one of those occasions. Will keyed his mike, "Blue 4 to Blue leader, over." There was no response, so he tried several more times with the same result. The radio would not transmit on the squadron frequency.

Fuel was getting low, and there was no sense in hanging about in enemy territory with a banged up Hurry and no ammo. It was time to head home. He decided to climb to angels 15, fifteen thousand feet. *"It never hurts to have extra altitude. I can always trade it for speed if I need it,"* he thought. As he crossed the French coast, Will should have been taking evasive maneuvers to avoid the flak, but he was preoccupied with keeping his banged up bird in the air. Suddenly there were several explosions about the Hurry and one hell of a bang. The whole aircraft jolted. He was surprised that he was still flying, and let out a sigh. A few seconds later the Merlin started to act up. The news from the instrument panel was not good. Oil temp was going up and oil pressure was going down. He throttled back to save the engine. Normally it would be time to bail out and be picked up by Air Sea Rescue or become a guest of the Luftwaffe for the duration of the war, but with a jammed canopy this wasn't an option. Again, he desperately tried to force it open. It would not move. The rail of the canopy cut into his fingers even though he has gloves on. He took out his revolver and shot holes in the canopy to make a hole. Even when he used the pistol as a club he could not make a hole big enough to climb out. There was another problem because a look back revealed that Blue 4 was trailing dirty brown and black smoke announcing to the world, *"Hear I am! Shoot me down!"*

In desperation Will switched frequencies to fighter control. He keyed the mike, "Bedrock, Blue 4,over" he said in a calm voice. He had picked up this manner of communication from other pilots who would report dire situations in the calmest manner. "Even if you are on fire it would be bad form to scream into the mike. It upsets the ground control operators who are all young women," the skipper said when Will first presented his orders to join the squadron. "So act like a proper gentleman."

Will was surprised when the radio worked. A pleasant female voice responded, "This is Bedrock. We copy you Blue 4 over."

"Bedrock, Blue 4 is at angels fifteen and a bit banged up. Engines clobbered up. Request alternate destination over."

"Roger that Blue 4. What is your position over"

Will gave it to her. He was feeling some excitement as he sat up in the cockpit. He could clearly see the Isle of Wight.

"Blue4, maintained course of two seven zero and as you approach home you should see your alternate off to the right over."

"Roger that Bedrock. Blue 4 out."

Will continued to feeling hopeful. In another five minutes he could glide to the emergency field even if the engine quit, and the rescue crews could pry open the canopy. Not only that, as he looked off to his right he could see two specks heading toward him. An escort he hoped. They were closing fast and a second look revealed yellow noses and wing tips. A shot of adrenaline went through him. His hand started to shake and he pushed his goggles up. They were fogged with a combination of tears and perspiration. There was little chance of escape, but he had to try. He put the nose down to try to outrun them. Will slammed the throttle to the firewall. The cranky Merlin responded with only a slight increase in speed, belched even more black and brown smoke and started to shake violently. The Hurry was barely making 150 mph. The Abbeville Boys could easily double that speed. He tried weaving. The Hurry was usually responsive to such evolutions, but even with aggressive movement of the joystick and rudder pedals her's handling was sluggish. Control lines were either jammed or shot away. He punched the instrument panel in frustration. Will then keyed his mike one more time. He took a

breath, "Bedrock this is Blue 4 over."

"Bedrock to Blue 4. We copy you over."

"Bedrock could you please call Miss Melissa Wells at Mayfair 2997, and give PO Will Smythe's regrets that he will be unable to attend the planned Valentine's Day dinner this evening over."

There was a longer than normal pause and a slightly choked female voice read back his message finally responding "Over".

"Roger that. Blue 4 out."

Will then looked out to his right. For a moment he thought he had shaken the 109s because he could not see them. This was a ray of hope. He might make it. A glimpse into his rearview mirror suggested otherwise. He could see the leader directly behind him and his wing man higher and slightly to the leader's right. Will scrunched his body as small as he could to get as much of it behind the armor plating behind the pilot seat.