

WHEN THE FEATHERS FALL.

Since the very early years of centuries gone by, man has waged war on his neighbours. For whatever reason, there has always been that need to demonstrate your willingness to fight and die for the cause.

A well-known quote says “He who fights and runs away, lives to fight another day!” However, there have always been those who didn't want to fight in the first place and their notoriety lives to this day, across all walks of life.

In times of war there were those who, for religious or purely personal reasons, refused to fight. The conscientious objectors, as they came to be known, were ostracised by their fellows, despite their strongly-held beliefs. As far back as the year 295, a Roman citizen by the name of Maximillianus refused to fight and betray his beliefs and it cost him his life in a customary execution. Later in 1575, Dutchmen were able to buy themselves out of military service. Two hundred years later and only the Quakers were officially exempt from military service.

At the time of the first world war, the 'conchies' were deemed to be cowards, were prosecuted by the state and even faced the death penalty for their refusal to fight. By the time of the second world war, public opinion had changed little, but those who managed to convince the courts, both civil and military, that their piety was truly felt, were enlisted in the military in non-combatant roles such as cooks, messengers, clerks or medical orderlies. This way, the courts were able to show that despite escaping the noose, the hated conscientious objectors would serve, and not avoid the call.

One such individual was a young landowner's son, who found himself serving as a medical orderly on a front-line Air Force base on the south coast, close to the stretch of water separating the two protagonists. So high was the feeling amongst the aircrew that he was made to wear a black overall to carry out his duties. The idea being that he was invisible to them. He was 'sent to Coventry' and ignored by everyone, even the aircrew he occasionally treated for their injuries. Eventually, his exile became so extreme that it was as if

he simply did not exist, despite him answering the call “medic!” whenever he heard it.

In the evening twilight he would find a quiet spot away from the others, take out his bible, and seek comfort from its words. As he read, his mind would take him back to his home in the Dales where his Mum and his younger brother ran the family estate.

Would he ever see them again? Would he survive this dreadful war which was doing all the killing he so objected to? His father had been imprisoned for his views during the previous conflict, and carried the stigma to his grave! He found it very sad that his father had been so badly treated by his fellow parishioners so long ago. It was inconceivable that anyone should be so hated for not wanting to kill his fellow man.

Closing his bible, he tucked it into his inside pocket and headed back to the obscurity of his place in the shadows.

He had just reached his dark corner of the hanger when all hell let loose! The sirens were screaming from the hanger roofs, and the scramble bell was calling the crews to their aircraft, where ground crew were already starting up their engines. The air was filled with the noise of the aircraft as they built up their revs for take-off. It was then that the raiders appeared, silhouetted against the glow of the fading sunset.

The taxiing aircraft were helpless on the ground as wave after wave attacked them on the runway. Not one of them had a chance to get airborne, as one by one they were hit by a hail of shells and bomb shrapnel and wrecked where they stood! He watched in horror from the hanger doorway as each aircraft collapsed to the tarmac. Their pilots were quickly rescued and rushed to safety, away from their burning aircraft. Once again, he answered the call, and anonymously performed his medical duties for the injured pilots. Mostly, the injuries were minor, and after being patched up, the injured pilots went back to their crew hut to wait for their aircraft to be salvaged. However, there was one young pilot who hadn't fared as well as the

others. As he treated his wounds, he realised that the young man wasn't going to survive, his injuries were so severe. With a hollow feeling inside he realised that his patient could be no more than nineteen years old and was dying for his King and Country. "What a waste of life". Without a second thought he reached into his inside pocket, took out his bible and quietly gave the dying youngster his last rights. It was then that the young pilot spoke.

Reaching out his hand he weakly whispered, "Thankyou" and died in the medic's arms. This was the first time anyone on the base had spoken to him and somehow he felt that this young pilot was aware of the hurt his comrades had put on someone who just didn't want to fight.

Back in the crew-room, bemoaning their injuries and declaring revenge for their embarrassment, the survivors wondered where the 'conchie' had been hiding during the raid. "Probably found a hole to crawl into, whilst we were out there, getting shot up!"

At that moment the sirens started up again but this time there were no scramble bells ringing. "Not a lot of point, chaps. We really are sitting ducks this time and no mistake! There's only one kite patched up and not one of us fit to fly it."

Then they heard it. The roar of the Merlin was unmistakeable as the revs wound up inside the hanger. Then she appeared, exhausts spitting fire and engine growling in her anger as she ran out into the fading light. Without a pause the plane headed straight for the runway and faced into what bit of wind there was blowing across the airfield.

"What the hell? Who's flying her? We're all here, and there's no-one missing!"

"Except for young Andy. He bought it, poor sod. So, who is flying her?"

The thundering Merlin lifted the lone Spitfire into the air and took her high into the clouds to meet the oncoming raiders. As the aircraft rose almost vertically one of the casualties marvelled, "Whoever is in

that kite knows what he's doing and no mistake. I've never seen flying like that before. Let's hope she's armed. Let's get outside and see how she gets on!"

They all gathered in their chairs outside the hut and waited for the action to start. When they saw the approaching enemy planes, one said, "Oh, that's it then. Whoever's in our Spit doesn't stand a chance. He won't last five minutes!"

The raiders swept in, bent on finishing off the damaged aircraft where they lay on the runway. What they weren't aware of was the lone Spitfire, high above them and closing in with the setting sun behind her. The raiders must have assumed that they weren't going to face any opposition and lined up to start their attack. They were at the perimeter of the airfield when the Spitfire attacked them.

One by one, before they could react, each aircraft was sprayed with shells which chewed their airframes to shreds. Still able to fly, the raiders turned tail and ran but not before one gunner had managed to fire off a few rounds at the Spitfire, which exploded in a ball of flame as its fuel and ammunition blew up.

"He's bought it! The poor blighter's bought it! They would have done for us if he hadn't been there! Now we'll never know who he was. There'll be nothing left for the padre after that prang."

The crewmen sat quietly outside their crew hut trying to take in what had just happened and that was when they noticed it.

Caught in the light from the setting sun, a single white feather floated gently down and settled on the grass at their feet.

Frederick James.