

Invisible Wings

By Frank Gervasi

Before carefully camouflaged airdromes somewhere in France the young gentlemen of the Royal Air Force, chins up, wait for the big show to start. Meanwhile, they watch warily for silk stockings—a sure sign of lady spies



PATHÉ NEWS

FROM the plane the war zone was a pastoral patchwork of brown-plowed fields and green meadows. Neither the scar tissue of the war called Great nor the wounds of the new war were discernible.

The vineyards were mauve with fruit. Chalky walls of red-roofed villages shone yellow and bronze in the late afternoon sun. Tall poplars leaned in the autumn wind. Northward, under a tumble of cloud and cyclamen mist, lay the Maginot Line where Frenchmen manned their guns and waited.

The plane circled with cautious, calibrated movements; each wing dip, every maneuver was a signal. The pilot fired a rocket in final confirmation to those below that this was a press plane from London and not some overbrave or fool-hardy German come to lay a few eggs.

One unscheduled move and the machine would have been blown from the air by those long, lean guns the British call Aak Aaks, signalers' code for anti-aircraft.

This was not a normal airfield. This was one of the new British phantom airports "somewhere in France." An impressive number of them are scattered throughout the battle zone. Each is so skillfully concealed that, unless the German espionage is far better than the British believe, the enemy not only does not know how many there are but where they are located.

Camouflage has already become one of the major weapons of war. From the sky the enemy is unable to discern the secrets of great irregular splotches of woodland.

To destroy the British and French air bases, Germans would have to bomb every haystack, every square yard of forest and every broad green field—obviously an impossible task even for

the vaunted German air force. The enemy might also find those invisible hangars and airport paraphernalia merely papier-mâché dummies.

Mud and craters left by high explosives won't bother the British airmen as they did in the last war. The British have developed a new wrinkle in landing-field surfaces—steel grillwork bolted together in replaceable strips.

This grille is invisible from above. Up close it looks like so many thousands of sections of V-shaped foot scrapers like those on the bottom step of Grandma's house in Baltimore. There isn't enough steel to spare in all Germany to build a grille for one air field.

But these are only minor indices of the vast advances made in power and preparation for war by the British air-force engineers since they took over the conflict from the politicians who had permitted England's air power to slip to third-rate unimportance in patently war-bound Europe. The censorship designed to prevent vital information from reaching the enemy forbids your reporter writing further exact details.

Improvements in the production both of planes and munitions for fighting machines have been sufficiently pronounced to chase the ogre of enemy air superiority, before whose presence politicians blanched at Munich.

Ever since Chamberlain swapped his umbrella for a cane, things have been different in England. The politicians who a year ago refused an American offer to build a factory capable of producing 2,000 planes monthly, on the grounds "it wasn't necessary" in view of "the lasting peace" signed with Hitler at Munich, have been silenced.

In the smoke-filled bus en route from the landing field to an unnameable town where the Royal Air Force had its head-

quarters the conversation of the officers reflected the change that has come over England—particularly in the morale of the junior fighting service. Confidence has replaced uncertainty and fear of inferiority. R.A.F. men know, for instance, that their fighters, when eventually they go into action, will be superior to the German Messerschmidts.

They have a criterion in the fact that the French Moranes and American-built Curtiss Hawks have chased the Germans out of the air whenever they met. And even the French admit that Britain's slim, fast fighters of the R.A.F. are superior to their own machines. Goering's boys and officers are said to have an unpleasant surprise awaiting them.

It was dusk and time for a stiff drink when our cranky old bus finally sighted its destination, coughing and spluttering over roads where only twenty-five years ago Tommies and Poilus moved into the line, heads down in the slanting rain.

Memories of the First World War

There was a veteran reporter among us who had been here before. He had been here when the village we were entering was a pile of smoldering timber and dusty mortar, and the church we had just passed was a rubbish heap with the crucifix askew on its battered altar.

The bar of the town's only hotel was charged with smoke, noise and laughter. Officers of the R.A.F., in gunmetal uniforms, were ranged four and five deep before the breast-high mahogany. There were a few war correspondents, attitudinous in their new khaki, looking like captains and acting like cadets.

Everybody was a little high except the farinaceous blonde with phony eyelashes who sat behind the island formed by her red-topped table. She looked at

In the midst of the grim business of aerial warfare, the members of Great Britain's Royal Air Force relax behind the lines—somewhere in France

each newcomer with studied disinterest over the brim of her Cinzano à l'eau. Nobody paid any attention to her. It was just before dinner and the men had come to drink. Anyway, she was probably a spy. All women with rouged lips and silk stockings are suspects in the war zone.

What was it the posters at the airfield barracks had said? "A woman loved, an unguarded word, a comrade dead and Hitler served." The posters showed Hitler with one very big ear.

For a fleeting moment the blonde caught the eye of a tall young officer with straw-colored hair. But he turned his head quickly and stared intently at the half-empty glass he held in his hand. Over his heart were embroidered the silver wings of his craft. A black-bordered, bright blue stripe on his sleeve edges said he was a flight second lieutenant. He might have been seventeen or twenty-two.

He leaned easily against the bar and raised his eyes to look hard at a taller, older man before him. He spoke with a public-school accent and he voiced school-tie ideas about the war.

"Now look here," he said. "Bombing women and children is out. Why can't we fight this war properly! I don't mind dropping a few on a bridgehead or factory, old boy, but cities, no. Babies live in cities, old boy. I don't mind knocking off a few troops in trenches, if it comes to that—military objective and all that

sort of rot. But bombing women and children—bad, gen that.”

“Gen,” is Rugby or Winchester for “savvy.”

The taller man had three stripes on his sleeves and under his silver wings a double row of ribbons, two with silver encrustations that told of heroics in the last war. He talked down to his junior officer in a cold, flat voice and he used words like Hun, Boche and Jerry:

“Our mission is to paralyze production of the Hun. And the only way we can do that, old son, is by bombing the production centers of the enemy’s territory. Do you think Jerry is going to be squeamish about doing the same thing? Remember Warsaw? Remember Barcelona?”

The officers sucked down their drinks. They looked at one another and grinned. “Well,” the older man said, “how about some eats?”

He smiled and put his arm carelessly around the younger man’s shoulder. “You were born,” he said, “four hundred years too late. You’re a knight on a silver horse—”

They pushed their way through the bar into the gluey yellow light of the lobby and out onto the street to be swallowed up in the darkness of the black-out.

It was seven-thirty and the bistro keepers yanked down their steel shutters along the main drag. The obliteration of all lights was rapid and systematic. The metallic clamor of café shutters was the signal to townspeople to pull down their blinds, draw their black curtains and seal themselves into their cubicle night worlds.

Streets That Are Black Caverns

Poilu patrols clumped through the street to make certain no light showed anywhere. The streets became black caverns filled with invisible life. Men and women moved about with the uncertainty of those newly blind—in twos, threes and fours but never alone. There was a low hum of voices and the scrape, scrape, scrape of hobnailed boots against the pavement.

Somewhere a Tommy played a mouth

organ, *Let Me Call You Sweetheart* and *We’ll Hang up Our Washing on the Siegfried Line*, and the tune was like the old one about packing up your troubles in the old kit bag.

A girl’s laughter, sudden and startling as the unexpected tinkle of many tiny bells made one peer hard to see to whom the throaty music belonged. Was she blond or brunet? A whiff of cheap jasmine as she passed by, her heels going peck, peck, peck up the street, out of time with the smart, sharp ring of an officer’s boots.

A dispatch rider on a motorcycle shattered the silence in sharp fragments, then it was quiet again except for the shuffle of feet. The motorcycle’s head lamp made a faint bluish blur in the distance, then disappeared.

It was a good night for an air raid. There were no stars and the moon was hidden by high clouds. The wind barely rustled the frost-yellowed leaves of the trees.

The light in a crowded restaurant stung your eyes after the street’s blackness. The long room was filled with

R.A.F.’ers and French officers who sat at long tables laid end to end along the walls.

Voices seemed louder than usual and the men ate and drank noisily, boisterously. Only the women seemed calm. Behind the cashier’s desk dominating the room from the far end sat a black-haired Madonna with a pale face and long, tapering fingers. She manipulated the mechanics of running the restaurant without a movement of her head, speaking quietly and firmly to serving girls who bustled about in black frocks and wine-stained white pinafores. The women were as calm and businesslike as though this were the most normal of well-regulated worlds.

The town’s mayor sat with us as the guest of honor of two American and ten British correspondents who had come to write about the first World War of the Air. Monsieur le Maire wanted to know when was “America coming in?” The Americans looked down at their plates and mumbled something vague about, “Can’t just tell you yet,” and changed the conversation.

The mayor was very young and he didn’t remember much about the last war except that it had killed his father and two uncles. He was worried about the sudden influx of Britishers but the R.A.F. skipper who had taken over the town from him patted Monsieur le Maire affectionately on the shoulder and said:

“Ah, *mon frère*, it is nothing. Think! In two years or three we shall all be gone and you’ll stand on the steps of l’Hôtel de Ville shaking hands with me with tears in your eyes telling me how sorry you are to see us go. And I will embrace you and tell you how sorry we are to go and you, twenty years from that day, will welcome us into the town, telling me or someone like me how glad you are to see *les Anglais* again.”

To Liberty and to Victory

Everybody laughed and thought it was a good joke and made a toast. All except the field censor, a stick of a man with four stripes on his sleeve and a burst of rainbows under his pilot’s wings. He was a Scot with manners crisp and impeccable as the soft curl of his gray hair. His eyes were very blue as he raised his glass:

“To liberty, gentlemen, and to victory in a just cause! May it be justly won and a peace justly made. And may man never thereafter fight against man.”

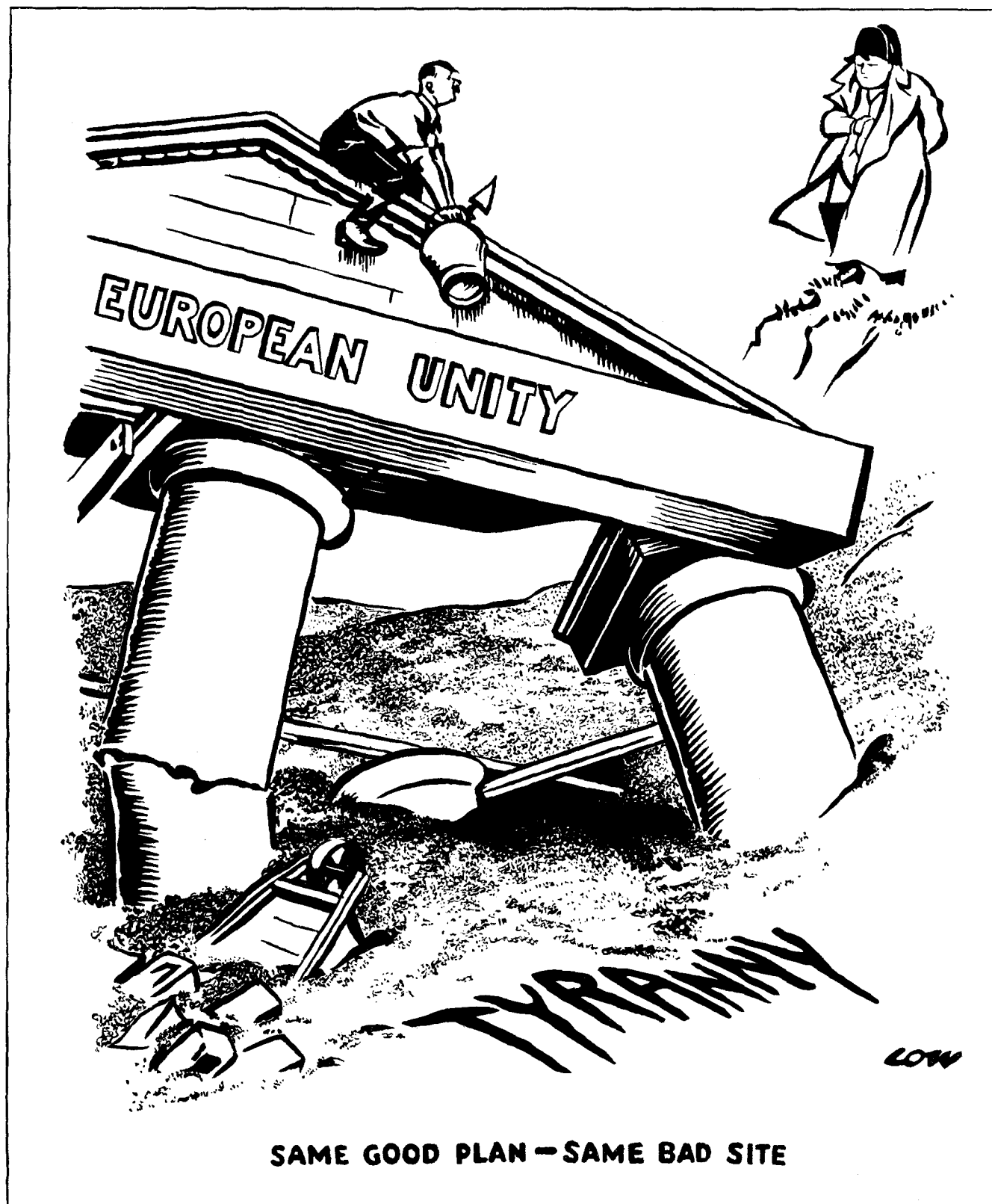
We all drank. I said, “Amen,” under my breath.

The Scot left early.

“That man,” a fellow officer said when the Scot was gone, “fought in the last war. He went up day after day in an open cockpit plane with only a helmet and a fur jacket to protect him from the cold. He had no machine gun. He carried a carbine and he squeezed as many bullets as he could into the calf strap of his boots. He would sit up there doing a top speed of sixty or seventy miles an hour and then he’d come down on a German, potting him with the carbine. He got a few.”

The enemy didn’t come that night, nor the next, nor the night after that. The threat of a raid ceased to become a brain-paralyzing menace of death or injury. Gas masks and tin helmets were left in billets. The regulations said they must be within five seconds’ reach at all times, but we all took the advice of a veteran reporter. “Champagne,” he said, “is the best cure for air-raid fever. When one of those things has your name on it there’s nothing you can do, really. Champagne, that’s the best thing—champagne and more champagne, and if that doesn’t work then dilute the champagne with a little cognac.”

It worked.



SAME GOOD PLAN — SAME BAD SITE

DRAWN BY LOW FOR COLLIER'S AND SENT FROM LONDON BY RADIOPHOTO



"Anyway," she thought now, plowing along in the cold rain, "I'd be afraid to let Alec near a dog. He'd probably beat it"

Birthday

By Tay Hohoff

A very special person—like Eleanor—calls for a very special gift. Like Alexander, Jr.

ILLUSTRATED BY GILBERT DARLING

SHE woke to the sound of rain falling quietly. There was only a faint sense that day would soon be stronger than the dark. For a moment she lay still, wondering uneasily why she had waked so early. Then she remembered with a start that jerked her out of bed.

Last night, very late, Mother had gone to the hospital to have a baby. And today was her birthday; she was twelve years old. The illuminated dial of her little clock said half past five. Terribly early. Eleanor couldn't remember having been awake so early. She tiptoed to the door and peeked out into the dim hall. Not a sound all through the house, except the tick-tick of her clock behind her, and the drip-drip-drip of the rain.

The door squeaked when she opened it wider, and still on tiptoes she went down the hall to her mother's room. That door was wide open, and even in the darkness she could see the bed untouched, the white sheet turned neatly down, on one side only.

Suddenly she was sick with fright. Alec hadn't come home! A sob rose horribly in her throat but she choked it back. She thought of waking the maid,

but she remembered how cross Anna was in the morning and ran back to her own room, not caring now how much noise she made.

Mother was dead. Mother was dead! If Alec hadn't come home it must mean Mother was dead. She stood in the middle of her room, shaking. Horrid, fantastic pictures flashed in a jumble through her mind—things the girls at school had whispered about after lights-out had rung. And Margaret Macmillan's mother had died "in childbirth," they said, and Margaret had left St. Albans and not come back. Margaret had looked so puzzled when she came out of Miss Stevenson's office and then she had begun to cry as if what she had just heard meant anything real to her.

"I can't stand it; I can't stand it,"

Eleanor whimpered over and over again.

But the sound of her own voice steadied her. She must *do* something. She switched on the light and began dressing hurriedly. The hospital was not very far; driving, she had often passed it. . . .

In a few moments she was ready, and turned out the light and ran down the stairs out into the misty rain and the chill darkness. The empty garage gaped at her as she struck off down the road, a sturdy little figure trudging along with her head bent against the wind.

For a while the mere fact of her legs moving back and forth, back and forth, gave her peace. But the wind increased and there were particles of sleet that nipped her skin. She hurried.

Alec should have come home to her.

But he wouldn't; it was like Alec not to think of her.

When her mother had written that she was going to be married again and that Eleanor was to leave St. Albans and live in a real home with her mother and a father, Eleanor had been so happy it had been like pain until she got used to it. She would not even have to spend the summers in camp, because they would all live together in the country and Mother wouldn't need to work any more and she would have a home, a really truly home with maybe a dog and certainly her very own room instead of the cot and one drawer in Mother's bureau at the two-room apartment in the city.

Too good to be true. . . . Well, she thought, tasting the first bitter fruit of disillusion, it *had* been too good to be true.

In the month before she left St. Albans she had built up a most amiable picture of Alec, of her new father. But the saturnine, tall man standing beside her mother when she got off the train was, even at first sight, somehow terrifying.

"Hullo," he said, shaking hands.

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