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AIR MEN O' WAR

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EAN 8596547232179

DigiCat, 2022
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FOREWORD

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It has been my endeavour throughout these tales not only to chronicle some of the wonderful work done in the air, but also to show the connection between it and that of the Armies on the ground, the assistance rendered in so many ways by the air arm, and its value in a battle and in a campaign. I hope that my stories may show something of the skill and daring of the air men and—what is less well known to the public—how much they are doing to save the lives and cut down the casualties of the men on the ground, and to help our arms to victory.

Already I have been rebuked for exaggerating and making my characters perform impossible feats, so I may forewarn the reader that I have written nothing here for which I cannot find an actual parallel—and in some cases even more wonderful—fact. Practically every incident I have pieced into my tales has, to my own knowledge, occurred, and I have left untold many which for sheer sensationalism would beat these hollow. There are many in the Air Force who will recognise incidents and feats, but will not recognise the characters I have attached to them, because—mainly at the urgent wish of the men themselves—I have used entirely fictitious characters and names throughout. Because most of the writing was done while the R.N.A.S. and R.F.C. were still in existence I have left this as written.

I ask the indulgence of critical readers amongst the air men to any technical errors they may discover (knowing how keenly they will look for them). I make no pretence to

being a flying man myself, but because I have done flying enough—or rather have been flown, since I am not a pilot—to know and appreciate some of the dangers and risks and sensations of the work, and have lived for over a year in the Squadrons at the Front, I cherish the hope that I have absorbed enough of the nature and atmosphere of the work to present a true picture of the life. I shall be very well content if I have been able to do this, and, in any slightest degree, make plain how vital to success a strong Air Force is. I have had experience enough of the line, and have gained enough knowledge of the air, to be tremendously impressed with the belief, which I have tried in this book to pass on and spread, that every squadron added, every man trained, every single machine put in the air, helps in its own measure to bring us to final victory, more quickly, and at a less cost in the long and heavy "butcher's bill" of the war.

I
SILVER WINGS

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An old man working in one of the aircraft factories once complained that he was not very satisfied with his job. "I've got three boys out Front, all in the infantry; and I keep thinkin' to myself, Why shouldn't I be doin' some sort of munition work that 'ud help my own three boys? I don't know a livin' soul in the Flyin' Corpse; why should I be workin' for them, an' not makin' shells or bombs or suthin' that 'ud be helpin' my own three boys?"

And then somebody told him how he *was* helping his boys, what the work of the air services really meant, how the artillery observation, and photographing, and bombing, and directing the guns on to hostile batteries and machine-gun emplacements, and so on, all worked up to the one great end, to making the task easier for the infantry, to saving the lives of the men on the ground; and told a few stories of some of the ninety and nine ways this help works out.

The old man was fully satisfied and grateful for all that was told him, and declared he'd go back to his job with twice the heart—"just knowin' I'm doin' mebbe the best work I could, and that I'm givin' real help to my own three boys."

Amongst the tales told him the one of "Silver Wings" perhaps impressed him most, and that, probably because it bore more plainly its own meaning of help to the infantry, was more easy to make clear than the technicalities of artillery observation and the rest.

And just because it is such a good instance of how, after all, the chief or only end and aim of the air services is the helping to victory of the men on the ground this story of "Silver Wings" may be worth the telling here.

Hard fighting had been in progress for some days, and the flying men had been kept desperately busy from dawn to dark on the various branches of their several works, when a "dud day"—a day of rain and squalls and hurricane winds—gave them a chance to rest.

Toward afternoon the weather showed signs of abating a little, and word came through to the Squadron to which

"Silver Wings" belonged asking if they could get a machine in the air and make a short patrol over the line on a special reconnaissance. A heavy and unpleasantly gusty wind was still blowing, but a pilot and machine were picked for the job and presently made the attempt. An anxious Squadron Commander and a good many of the pilots watched the trial and saw the quick result. The machine was brought out with mechanics hanging to the wing-tips to steady her against the gusts, the engine started and given a trial run up; then the pilot eased her off, looked round, felt his controls, ran the engine up again until his machine was throbbing and quivering to the pull of the whirling propeller, and waved the signal to haul away the chocks that blocked his wheels. His machine began at once to taxi up into the wind, still swaying and swinging dangerously, and then, in answer to the pilot's touch, lifted clear of the ground, ducked a second, rose again and swooped upward. The watching crowd let go a breath of relief as she rose clear, but before the breath was out it changed to a gasp of horror as the machine, caught by some current or eddy of wind, swerved, heeled, righted under the desperate effort of the pilot, slipped sideways, and with a sudden swoop plunged and crashed on the ground. The machine was hopelessly smashed and the pilot was dead when they ran and came to him and picked him up.

The Squadron Commander would have abandoned or postponed the attempt to get a machine up, but the pilot of "Silver Wings" spoke to him and urged that he be allowed to have a try. "I'm sure I can get her off," he said. "I'll take her right over to the far side of the ground clear of the currents

round the sheds. I know what she can do, and I'm certain I can make it."

So the Major gave a reluctant consent, and they all watched breathlessly again while "Silver Wings" fought her way along the ground against the wind, lifted suddenly, drove level for a hundred feet, swooped sickeningly again until her wheels were a bare six feet off the ground, hoicked up and away. Everyone could see by her dips and dives and sudden heelings and quick righting how bumpy and gusty the air was, and it was not until she was up several hundred feet, and came curving round with the wet light shining on her silvery planes that the watchers on the ground heaved a sigh of relief, watched her streak off down wind, and swing in a climbing turn that lifted her farther and farther into the safety of height.

"He's all right now," said one. "Only, the Lord help him when he comes to land again." The hum of the engine droned down to them, and the shining wings wheeled again close up against the dark background of the low clouds and shot swiftly down wind towards the lines.

Over the lines she turned again and began to fight her way across wind and moving slowly north. The wind constantly forced her drifting over Hunland, and in accordance with his orders to hold close along the front, the pilot had to keep making turns that brought him facing back to the west and fighting slowly up wind, edging off a little and slanting north and watching the landscape slide off sideways under him. And so, tacking and manœuvring buffeted and wind-blown, he edged his way along the front, his eyes alternately on the instrument-board and on the

ground and puffing shell smoke beneath, his ears filled with the roar of his engine and the shriek and boom of the wind beating about him, his hands and feet in constant motion, juggling with controls, feeling, balancing, handling the throbbing horse-power and the wind-tossed fabric under him. And so at last, at the end of a hard-fought hour, he came to the spot he sought, circled and "sat over it" for five minutes, and watched and tried to pick up the details of the struggle that spluttered and spat in smoke-puffs and flashing jets of fire and leaping spouts of earth and smoke beneath him. He began to piece together the meaning of what he could see, and of what he had been told before he set out. A body of our infantry in the attack had gone too far, or their supports had not come far enough, with the result that they had been cut off and surrounded and were fighting desperately to hold off the infantry attacks that pressed in on them under a heavy supporting artillery fire. The cut-off party were hidden from the view of our front line by a slight ridge and a wrecked and splintered wood, and their desperate straits, the actual fact of their still being in existence, much less their exact location, was unknown to our side. This much the pilot knew or was able to figure out; what he could not know was the surge of hope, the throb of thankfulness that came to the hard-pressed handful below him as they saw the glancing light flash from his hovering "Silver Wings." They made signals to him, waving a dirty flag and straining their eyes up for any sign that he saw and understood. And with something very near to despair in their hearts they saw the shining wings slant and drive

slowly up into the wind and draw away from over their heads.

"No good, Jones," said a smoke and dirt-grimed young officer to the man still waving the flag. "He doesn't see us, I'm afraid. Better put that down and go back and help hold off those bombers."

"Surely he'd hear all this firing, sir," said the man, reluctantly ceasing to wave.

"I think his engine and the wind drowns any noise down here," said the officer. "And if he hears anything, there's plenty of heavy gunfire all along the front going up to him."

"But wouldn't he see the shells falling amongst us, sir, and the bombs bursting, and so on?" said the man.

"Yes; but he is seeing thousands of shells and bombs along the line from up there," said the officer; "and I suppose he wouldn't know this wasn't just a bit of the ordinary front."

Another man crawled over the broken débris of the trench to where they stood. "Mister Waller has been hit, sir," he said; "an' he said to tell you it looks like they was musterin' for another rush over where he is."

"Badly hit?" said the officer anxiously. "All right, I'll come along."

"He sees us, sir," said the man with the flag, in sudden excitement. "Look, he's fired a light."

"Pity we haven't one to fire," said the officer. "But that might be a signal to anyone rather than to us."

He turned to crawl after the man who had brought the message, and at the same moment a rising rattle of rifle-fire and the quick following detonations of bursting bombs gave

notice of a fresh attack being begun. Still worse, he heard the unmistakable tat-tat-tat of renewed machine-gun fire, and a stream of bullets began to pour in on them from a group of shell-holes to their right flank, less than a hundred yards from the broken trench they held. Under cover of this pelting fire, that forced the defenders to keep their heads down and cost them half a dozen quick casualties amongst those who tried to answer it, the German bombers crept closer in from shell-hole to shell-hole, and their grenades came over in faster and thicker showers. The little circle of ground held by the group belched spurts of smoke, hummed to the passage of bullets, crackled and snapped under their impact, quivered every now and then to the crash and burst of shells. They had been fighting since the night before; they were already running short of ammunition, would have been completely short of bombs but for the fact of the ground they had taken having held a concreted dug-out with plentiful stores of German bombs and grenades which they used to help out their own supply. The attack pressed savagely; it began to look as if it would be merely a matter of minutes before the Germans rushed the broken trenches they held, and then, as they knew, they must be overwhelmed by sheer weight of numbers. Waller, the wounded officer, had refused to be moved. "I'll stay here and see it out," he said; "I don't suppose that will be long now;" and the other, the young lieutenant who was the only officer left on his feet by this time, could say no more than a hopeful "Maybe we'll stand 'em off a bit yet," and leave him there to push along the trench to where the fire and

bombing were heaviest and where the rush threatened to break in.

The din was deafening, a confused uproar of rifles and machine-guns cracking and rattling out in front and banging noisily in their own trench, of bombs and grenades crashing sharply on the open or booming heavily in the trench bottom, of shells whooping and shrieking overhead or *crumping* savagely on the ground, and, as a background of noise to all the other noises, the long rolling, unbroken thunder of the guns on both sides far up and down the lines.

But above all the other din the lieutenant caught a new sound, a singing, whirring *boo-oo-oom* that rose to a deep-throated roar with a sharp staccato *rap-tap-tap-tap* running through it. He looked up towards the sound and saw, so close that he half ducked his head, a plunging shape, a flashing streak of silver light that swept over his head and dived straight at the ground beyond his trench, with stabbing jets of orange flame spitting out ahead of it. A bare fifty feet off the ground where the Germans crouched in their shell-holes "Silver Wings" swooped up sharply, curved over, dived again with the flashes of her gun flickering and streaming, and the bullets hailing down on the heads of the attackers. It was more than the Germans, lying open and exposed to the overhead attack, could bear. They scrambled from their holes, floundered and ran crouching back for the shelter of deeper trenches, while the lieutenant, seeing his chance, yelled and yelled again at his men to fire, and seized a rifle himself to help cut down the demoralised attack. He could see now how close a thing it had been for them, the weight of the attack that presently would have

swarmed over them. The ground was alive with running, scrambling grey figures, until the bullets pelting amongst them cut them down or drove them headlong to cover again. Then his men stopped firing and watched with hoarse cheering and shouts the dives and upward leaps of the silvery shape, her skimmings along the ground, her upward wheeling climbs followed by the plunging dives with fire spitting and sparkling from her bows. The Germans were firing at her now with rifles and machine-guns until she turned on the spot where these last were nested, drove straight at them and poured long clattering bursts of fire upon them until they were silenced.

Then she turned and flew over the broken British trenches so close that the men in them could see the leather-clad head and arm of the pilot leaning over the side, could see his wave to them, the flung packet that dropped with fluttering streamers down amongst them. The packet carried a note jerkingly scribbled in pencil: "Hang on. I'm taking word of where you are, so that they can send help to you. Good luck."

The lieutenant, when he had read, handed the message to a sergeant and told him to pass it along round the men. And they read and shouted cheers they knew he could not hear to the pilot lifting the "Silver Wings" steadily into the sky and back towards the lines. He was high enough now for the "Archies" to bear on him again, and from their trenches the men watched with anxious hearts and throbs of fear and hope the black puffs of smoke that broke rapidly above, below, and about the glinting silver. He made desperately slow speed against the heavy wind, but fortunately had not

far to go before he was far enough back to be over the lines and out of reach of the Archies. Then just when it seemed that he was safe, when the Archie shells had ceased suddenly to puff about him, the watchers saw another machine drop from the cover of a cloud, dive straight down on the little silver shape, saw the silver wings widen as they turned sharply upward to face the enemy, wheel and shoot sideways to avoid the dive. With beating hearts and straining eyes they watched the two dipping and curving, lifting and diving, wheeling and circling about each other. The battle noises drowned all sound of their guns, but they knew well the rapid rattle of fire that was going on up there, the exchange of shots, the streaming bullets that poured about both, thought at last they could catch the sound of the firing clearly, could see the black cross and circled red, white, blue, that marked enemy and friend as the two machines drifted back in their fighting down wind until they were almost overhead. Once the watchers gasped as the enemy dived on "Silver Wings" and she slipped sideways and came down a thousand feet nose first and spinning in dizzy circles. The gasp changed to a cry of relief as the "Silver Wings" righted, zoomed sharply up, whirled round, and in turn dived on the enemy machine, that had overshot his pursuing dive and come below her. And the cry changed again to a yell of applause, a burst of cheers, as the enemy swerved suddenly, slid drunkenly sideways and down, rolled over, and fell away in a spinning dive, swoop after sickening swoop, that ended crashing in a clump of wood half a mile away. A wind-blown torrent of streaming black smoke marked the place of the fall and the fate of the enemy.

"Silver Wings" turned again, and fought her way back towards the lines, with the Archie shells puffing and splashing about her.

Down in their trenches the isolated cluster of men set about strengthening their defences with new heart, made with a new hope preparations to withstand the next attacks. It was not long before they had help—a help that the guns, knowing now exactly where they were although they could not see, could send in advance of the rescuing attack. A barrage of shells began to pound down beyond them, out to their right and left, and even behind them. "Silver Wings" had dropped her message, and the shells brought the answer plain to the cut-off party. They knew that they were located, that the guns would help out their defence, that rescue would come to them as speedily as might be.

The actual rescue came presently in the shape of an attack over the ground they had covered the day before. Before it came they had to beat off one or two more enemy rushes, but this time the help of those barraging shells stood them in good stead, the sweeping shrapnel prevented the enemy creeping in to occupy in comparative safety the shell-holes round the position, the steady fall of high explosives broke down the enemy trenches and checked free movement in them. The Germans were badly pounded on that portion of front, so that when the rescuing attack was made, it fought its way rapidly forward, and the isolated party were able to do something to help it merely by hanging to their position, by rear and flanking fire on the Germans who held the ground between them and the attacking line. The attack resulted in the whole line being

pushed forward to the ridge behind the separated party, holding it, and thrusting forward a little salient which took in the ground the party had hung to so stoutly, consolidated, and held it firm.

The rescued men were passed back to their lines, and—most of them—to the casualty clearing stations. And when the lieutenant brought the remnant of his company back to the battalion, he told the Battalion Commander his end of the story, and heard in return how the message of their whereabouts had been brought back and how it had directed the movement that had got them out. The lieutenant wanted to send a word of thanks to "Silver Wings" and her pilot, but this the C.O. told him he could not do. "The pilot was lifted out of his machine and taken straight to the C.C.S.,[1]" he said. "He was wounded by rifle-fire from the ground when he first dived to help you beat off that attack. No, not seriously, I'm glad to say, but he'd lost a lot of blood, and he got rather knocked about landing and broke his machine a bit I believe."

"Wounded," said the lieutenant slowly, "and at that time. So he kept on diving his machine about and fighting after he was wounded; and went through that air fight with his wound, and shot the Hun down, and then came on back and gave his message——" "Dropped a note straight into the signallers at Brigade Headquarters," said the C.O.

The lieutenant drew a deep breath. "We knew we were owing him a lot," he said. "But it seems we were owing even more than we thought."

"And I'm beginning to think," said the C.O., "that all of us here on the ground are owing more than we've known to

those fellows in the air."

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[1] Casualty Clearing Station.

II
BRING HOME THE 'BUS

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For ten minutes past the observer had been alternately studying his map and the ground 20,000 feet below, and now he leaned forward out of his cockpit, touched the pilot on the shoulder, and made a slight signal with his hand. Immediately the machine began to swing in a wide curve, while the observer busied himself with his camera and exposed plate after plate.

He looked up and out a moment as there came to his ear, dully but unmistakably above the roar of the engine, the hoarse "*woof*" of a bursting anti-aircraft shell. The black smoke of the burst showed a good hundred yards out to their left and some hundreds of feet above them, and the observer returned to his photographing.

"*Woof*" came another shell, and then in quick succession another and another, the last one dead ahead and with such correct elevation that, a second later, the machine flashed through the streaming black smoke of the burst. The pilot looked back inquiringly, and the observer made a sign which meant "Do what you please," and sat back to wait until the

pilot took such steps as he thought fit to disarrange the aim of the gunners below.

The harsh rending cough of another shell came so close beneath the machine that both men felt her distinctly jolt upward, twisting from the wind shock. The pilot waited no more. He jammed the controls hard over and flung the machine out in a vicious side-slip, caught her at the end of it, tipped her nose over and plunged straight down with the engine full on for a thousand feet, banked sharply, pivoting fairly on his wing-tip, and shot off at right angles to his former course for a quarter of a mile; then, climbing slightly as he went, swung hard round again, dipped a little to gather speed, hoicked hard up, and in a few seconds was back somewhere about the position at which he had first departed from the course.

Back about the point where they had last turned a string of black smoke-puffs flashed out rapidly. The pilot shut his engine off for an instant. "Fooled 'em that time," he yelled back, and grinned gleefully at his observer. The observer peered out carefully and exposed another plate, turned and passed another signal to the pilot. Instantly the engine roared out, and the machine tipped her bows down and went plunging earthward. The observer watched the needle of his height indicator drop back and back through 20,000, 19, 18, 17, 16, hang there an instant, leap up again to 16 and 17. There it stayed quivering for ten seconds, while the machine hurtled forward at a hundred miles an hour on a level keel. There the pilot dropped her nose a little again and went slanting down with the engine full on, and the needle of the speed indicator climbing up and up until the

speed touched 140 miles an hour and the height indicator dropped to a 14,000-foot level.

The Archie shells were spouting and splashing round them in all directions, but their erratic course had sufficiently upset the gunners to bring the bursts well out and clear, and the pilot made the last steep dizzying plunge that brought him to the 10,000-foot height his observer had asked for. But at this height they were well within the range of smaller Archie batteries, and the observer jerked the handle of his camera to and fro at intervals, with the racking cough of the shells sounding perilously close, and the reek of their burst at times swirling past as the machine tore through their smoke. Three times heavy splinters *whurred* viciously past them, and once a sharp crack and rip left a gaping black rent in the cloth of the body close astern of the observer.

For a good ten minutes the machine circled and swung and darted to and fro, while the observer hung on and snapped his plates at such objects as he wanted on the ground below; and for all that ten minutes the Archies continued to pitch a stream of shells up round and over and under them.

Then the observer signalled "finished," and the machine jerked round and streaked off at top speed in a series of curves and zigzags that carried her westward and homeward as straight as the pilot dared drive in avoiding the shells that continued to follow them. The pilot kept her nose down a little as he went, so as to obtain the maximum speed, but when he began to run out of range of the Archies and leave their smoke bursts well astern, he tilted up and

pushed straight west at top speed, but on a long climb that brought him up a thousand feet a mile. Presently he felt the signal cord looped about his arm jerk and jerk again, and, tilting the machine's nose slightly downward, he shut off his engine and let her glide and twisted round to the observer.

"Huns," yelled the observer. "Six of 'em, and coming like stink," and he pointed up and astern to half a dozen dots in the sky.

"Would you like a scrap, Spotty?" shouted the pilot. "Shall we take 'em on?"

"Don't ask me," shouted Spotty. "Ask the Hun. He'll scrap if he wants to, and you and your old 'bus can't help it, Barry."

"Thought you knew the old 'Marah' better," retorted Barry. "You watch"; and he twisted in his seat and opened his engine out.

Now the "Marah" was the pride of her Squadron, and, most inordinately, of her pilot. Built line by line to the blue-print of her class, fraction by fraction of an inch in curve, straight, and stream-line, to the design of her sisters in the Squadron, differing no hair's-breadth from them in shape, size, engine, or propeller, she yet by some inscrutable decree was the best of them all in every quality that counts for best in a machine. There are theories to account for these not uncommon differences, the most popular and plausible being that the better machine is so merely because of some extra skill and minute care in her and her engine's building, last touches of exactness and perfection in the finish of their parts and their assembling.

The "Marah" could outclimb anything in the Squadron with the most ridiculous ease, outclimb them in feet per minute, and in final height; she could outfly them on any level from 100 to 20,000 feet, could "out-stunt" them—although here perhaps the pilot had as much to say as the machine—in any and every stunt they cared to challenge her on. Barry, her young pilot, literally loved her. He lost no chance of trying her out against other types of machines, and there were few of the fastest and best types even amongst the single-seater scout machines that could beat her on a level fly, or that she could not leave with her nose held slightly down. No two-seater Barry had ever met could come anywhere near the "Marah" in stunting, in the ease and speed at which he could put her through all sorts of fancy spins, loops, side-slips, and all the rest of the bag of air tricks. How much of her superiority was due to her own qualities and how much to her pilot it is hard to say, because certain it is that Barry could climb her nearly a thousand feet higher, and drive her several knots faster, than any other pilot who had flown her.

It is because of all these things that Barry had preferred to make this particular photographing trip a lone-hand one. It was a long-distance journey far back behind the German lines, to a spot known to be well protected by long-range Archies, and of such importance that it was certain to order out fast fighting machines to cut off any flight taking back reports or photographs. Barry's arguments for his single-handed trip were simple, and, as the Squadron Commander had to admit, sound. "One machine stands much more chance of sneaking over high up without being spotted than

a whole flight," said Barry. "When we're there I can chuck the 'bus about any old how to dodge the Archies, while Spotty snaps his pictures; and if we're tackled by any E.A., [2] the old 'Marah' could probably outfly them by herself. And since you're so beastly positive that this isn't a scrapping stunt, I'd sooner be on my own and free to dodge and run and use clouds and so on without having to think of keeping formation. Don't you worry. We'll come through all right."

The Squadron Commander gave in. "Right oh," he said reluctantly. "And do keep your eyes skinned for Huns and run from 'em if you've a chance. This information is wanted badly, remember, and you mustn't risk getting scuppered with it. And, besides we can't afford to lose the 'Marah' out of the Squadron. You don't count of course, but the old 'bus is too good to lose."

He hid a good deal of anxiety under his chaffing, and Barry, reading that and the friendship that bred it, laughed and took the same light-hearted tone. "You won't lose her," he said. "If a Hun punctures me and Spotty we'll just jump overboard and tell the old girl to push along home on her own. She's jolly near got sense enough to do it too, I believe."

Now all this was in Barry's mind when Spotty told him of the pursuing enemy, and so he set himself to take every ounce of advantage he could. The machines behind were travelling faster, because they had sighted him from a much higher level, and had all the additional speed that a downward slant gave them, while the "Marah," still held on