Going Solo 2 - The Beginning of the War

24 year old Roald Dahl is in Tanganyika, working for the Shell Company, and it's 1939.

Episode Two

Dar es Salaam
Sunday (no date)

Dear Mama,
I suppose that by the time you get this letter war will either be declared or it'll be off, but at the moment things, even here, are humming a bit. We're all temporary army officers, with batons, belts and all sorts of secret instructions. If war breaks out it'll be our job to round up all the Germans here…….

Dar es Salaam
Friday 15th September

Dear Mama,
I'm very sorry I haven't written to you for such ages but you can guess that things have been humming a bit here. Now all the Germans in the territory, and it's a pretty big place in which to try to catch them, have been safely put inside an internment camp. And we army officers were the people who had to collect them. The moment that war broke out at about 1.15pm on Sunday the alarm was given on a series of telephones and certain key men dashed round and collected their squads and proceeded to the police lines to be armed and to receive orders. At the time, I was actually out guarding the road going down the South Coast with native troops and a blockade across the road. All I heard was a grim voice down the field telephone which said, 'War has been declared – stand by – arrest all Germans attempting to leave or enter the town.' Then the fun started. I'd better not say any more or the censor might hold up the letter….'

In November 1939, when the war was two months old, I told the Shell Company that I wanted to join up and help in the fight against Hitler, and they released me with their blessing. In a wonderfully magnanimous gesture, they told me that they would continue to pay my salary into the bank wherever I might happen to be in the world and for as long as the war lasted and I remained alive. I thanked them very much indeed, and set off on the 600-mile journey to Nairobi to enlist in the RAF.
I was given a medical by an affable English doctor who remarked that six feet six inches was not the ideal height for a flier of aeroplanes.
'Does that mean you can't pass me for flying duties?' I asked him fearfully.

'Funnily enough,' he said, 'there is no mention of a height limit in my instructions, so I can pass you with a clear conscience. Good luck, my boy.'

There were sixteen of us altogether learning to fly in this Initial Training School, all young men like me who had come out from England to work for some large commercial concern, and who had now volunteered for flying duties. We were to spend the next six months training, and then we would all be posted off to various operational squadrons. Out of those sixteen, no fewer than thirteen were killed in the air in the next two years.
In retrospect, one gasps at the waste of life.
We had three instructors and three planes. The instructors were civil airline pilots borrowed by the RAF from a small domestic company. The planes were Tiger Moths. The Tiger Moth is or was a thing of great beauty. Everybody who has ever flown a Tiger Moth has fallen in love with it. The Gypsy engine has never been known to fail in mid-air. You could throw a Tiger Moth about all over the sky and nothing ever broke. There were two cockpits, one for the instructor and one for the pupil, and you could talk to each other through a rubber mouthpiece.
There was only one runway on the little Nairobi aerodrome. And on most mornings, we all had to run out on to the airfield and chase the zebras away.
When flying a military aeroplane, you sit on your parachute, which adds another six inches to your height. When I got into the cockpit for the first time, my entire head stuck up in the open air.
'You're too tall,' the instructor said. 'Are you sure you want to do this?'
'Yes, please,' I said.
'Wait till we rev her up,' he said. 'You'll have a job to breathe. And keep those goggles on or you'll be blinded by watering eyes.'
He was right. I was almost asphyxiated by the slipstream and survived only by ducking down into the cockpit for deep breaths every few seconds. After that, I tied a thin cotton scarf around my nose and mouth and this made breathing possible.
I see from my Log Book, which I still have, that I went solo after 7 hours 40 minutes, which was about average. I was allowed to go up alone and it was wonderful, whizzing and soaring above a country as beautiful as Kenya. What a fortunate fellow I am, I kept telling myself.
The initial training took eight weeks, and at the end of it we were all fairly competent, and full of confidence. We were put on a train for Kampala, in Uganda. From there, a flying-boat took us 2000 miles north to Cairo. We were shuttled ashore and put on board a monstrous and ancient transport plane whose wings were joined together with bits of wire.
'Where are they taking us to?' we asked.
'To Iraq,' they answered, 'and jolly good luck to you all. Habbaniya in Iraq is the most godforsaken hell-hole in the entire world,' they said, smirking. 'You will stay for six months to complete your advanced flying training, after which you will join a squadron and face the enemy.'
Habbaniya was a vast assemblage of hangars and Nissen huts and bungalows set slap in the middle of a boiling desert miles from anywhere.
We were flying more powerfull planes now, and everything became suddenly much more serious. We would practice shooting down the enemy by firing at a canvas drogue, an open ended sleeve, towed behind another plane.

Eventually we got our wings and were judged ready to confront the real enemy. I became a Pilot Officer and a fighter pilot. I found myself at a large RAF station on the Suez Canal called Ismailia, posted to 80 Squadron, who were flying Gladiators against the Italians in the Western Desert of Libya.
A rather supercilious Flight-Lieutenant pointed to a parked Gladiator on the tarmac and said to me, ‘That one’s yours. You’ll be flying it out to your squadron tomorrow.’
‘Who will teach me how to fly it?’ I asked, trembling.
‘Don’t be an ass,’ he said. ‘How can anyone teach you when there’s only one cockpit? Just get in and do a few circuits and bumps and you’ll soon get the hang of it.’
I remember thinking that this was surely not right. They had spent eight months and a great deal of money training me to fly and suddenly that was the end of it all. Nobody was going to teach me about air-to-air combat, and nobody was going to take time off to instruct me in a busy operational squadron. We were flung in at the deep end, totally unprepared for actual fighting, and this, in my opinion, accounted for the very great losses of young pilots that we suffered out there. I survived only by the skin of my teeth.

I had climbed into my new Gladiator and had set off alone to join 80 Squadron in the Western Desert. I had been told that I should report to the Commanding Officer at Fouka, who would tell me precisely where 80 Squadron were at the moment, and I would then fly on and join them.
The flight was fairly daunting. I had virtually no experience of the aircraft, no radio. All I had was a map strapped to one knee. But I landed at Fouka, and reported to the CO in his tent.
‘Eighty Squadron are now there,’ he said, pointing to a spot in the middle of the desert.
‘Will it be easy to see?’ I asked.
‘You can’t miss it,’ he said. ‘You’ll see the tents and about fifteen Gladiators parked around the place.’
I estimated my course and flight time. I flew straight for the point where the 80 Squadron airfield should have been. It wasn’t there. I flew around the area. Below me was nothing but empty desert, rather rugged desert, full of large stones and boulders and gullies.
At this point, dusk began to fall and my fuel was running low. The only course open to me was to make a forced landing in the desert quickly, before it was too dark to see. I skimmed low, searching for just one small strip of reasonably flat sand. There simply wasn’t one. I *had* to get down somehow or other. I made an approach. I came in as slowly as I dared. My wheels touched down. I prayed for a bit of luck.
I didn’t get it. My undercarriage hit a boulder and collapsed and the Gladiator buried its nose in the sand at what must have been about seventy-five miles an hour.
My injuries came from my head being thrown forward violently against the reflector-sight – apart from a skull fracture, the blow pushed my nose in and knocked out a few teeth and blinded me completely for days to come. There was a mighty *whoosh* as the petrol tanks exploded and went up in flames. I could see nothing and all I wanted to do was to go gently off to sleep. But soon a tremendous heat around my legs galvanized my soggy brain. With

great difficulty I managed to undo my seat-straps and my parachute and roll out head first on to the sand below. I began very slowly to drag myself away from the awful hotness. I heard ammunition exploding and bullets were pinging all over the place. I had to keep dragging myself until in the end the temperature became bearable. Then I collapsed and went to sleep.
I was told later that the CO at Fouka had given me wrong information. 80 Squadron were fifty miles to the south, and the place to which I had been sent was actually no-man's land, between the front lines of the British and Italian armies. The flames from my burning aircraft lit up the sand dunes for miles around, and both sides knew it was an RAF fighter that had come down. When the flames had died down and the desert was dark, three brave men from the Suffolk Regiment crawled out to inspect the wreck. They were astounded to find my still-breathing body.
They got me back behind their lines, and I was taken by ambulance to a railway that was our supply line for troops in the Western Desert, and by train to hospital in Alexandria.
I was finally discharged from hospital five months after I was admitted, and after four weeks' convalescence reported to the RAF medical examiners in Cairo, and I was once again passed fully fit for flying duties.
But where was my old squadron now?
No longer in the desert, but far across the water in Greece.

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