

Going Solo 3 (Roald Dahl)

The Second World War interrupted Roald Dahl's job in East Africa, working for Shell Oil, and he trained as a pilot for the RAF. He crashed in the Libyan Western Desert, looking for the squadron he was to join, and when he had recovered from his injuries five months later, his squadron had gone to Greece.

Episode 3

Eighty Squadron was in Greece, no longer flying Gladiators, which I had only just learnt to fly when I had crashed.

I was in Ismailia, on the Suez Canal. A Flight-Lieutenant pointed to a Hurricane standing on the tarmac and said, 'You can have a couple of days to learn how to fly it, then you take it to Greece.'

'Fly that to Greece?' I said.

'Of course.'

'Where do I refuel?'

'You don't,' he said.

'How long will it take?'

'About four and a half hours,' he said.

Even I knew that a Hurricane had fuel for only one and a half hours' flying, and I pointed this out. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'We're fitting extra fuel tanks under the wings.'

'Do they work?'

'Sometimes,' he said, smirking. 'You press a little button and if you're lucky a pump pumps petrol into the main tank.'

'What happens if the pump doesn't work?'

'You bale out into the Med and swim.'

'No,' I said. 'Be serious. Who picks me up?'

'Nobody,' he said. 'It's a chance you have to take.'

I was petrified as I strapped myself into the Hurricane for the first time. It was many times more powerful and speedy and tricky than anything I had ever seen. I was just beginning to learn where most of the knobs were located and what they were for when my two days were up and I had to leave for Greece.

Baling out into the Mediterranean didn't worry me as much as the thought of spending four and a half hours squashed into that tiny metal cockpit. I was six feet six inches tall, and when I sat in a Hurricane I had the posture of an unborn baby in the womb, with my knees almost touching my chin.

I took off the next day, and after a couple of hours I was over Crete and beginning to get severe cramp. My main fuel tank was nearly empty so I pressed the little button. The pump worked. The main tank filled up again and on I went. I landed at last on Elefsis aerodrome, near Athens, but by then I was so knotted up with cramps I had to be lifted out of the cockpit by two strong men. But I had come home to my squadron at last.

'A bit scrunched up in there, were you?' one of the airmen asked. 'You oughtn't to be flyin' fighters a chap of your height,' he said. 'What you want is a ruddy great bomber where you can stretch your legs out. Anyway, this kite

won't last one week in this place! None of 'em do! Krauts is *pourin'* in 'ere like ruddy ants! They've got *one thousand planes* just the other side of those mountains and what've we got?'

'Tell me,' I said.

'What we've got is exactly what you can see on this ruddy field!' he said.

'*Fourteen 'urricanes!* No it isn't. It's gone up to fifteen now you've brought this one out!'

'What about bombers?' I said.

'There's about four clapped-out Blenheims over there at Menidi,' he said, 'and that's the lot. That's the entire ruddy RAF in the 'ole of Greece.'

To some extent I was aware of the military mess I had flown in to. I knew that a small British Expeditionary Force, backed up by an equally small air force, had been sent to Greece from Egypt a few months earlier to hold back the Italian invaders, and so long as it was only the Italians they were up against, they had been able to cope. But once the Germans decided to take over, the situation immediately became hopeless. But curiously enough none of it worried me in the slightest. I was young enough and starry-eyed enough to look upon it as nothing more than a grand adventure. The thought that I might never get out of the country alive didn't occur to me.

I pushed open the door of the Ops Room hut and went in. The Squadron Leader had a black moustache and a Distinguished Flying Cross ribbon on his chest. He also had a frowning worried look on his face. 'Oh, hello,' he said. 'We've been expecting you for some time.'

'I'm sorry I'm late,' I said.

'Six months late,' he said. 'You can find yourself a bunk in one of the tents. You'll start flying tomorrow like the rest of them.'

It was quite a shock to be dismissed as casually as this. I had expected at least a brief 'I'm glad you made it.' But this was a different ball game altogether. What difference did an extra pilot make when you only had fourteen? What the Squadron-Leader wanted was *a hundred* extra planes and pilots, not one.

I was to share a tent with another pilot and when I went in, my companion was sitting on his camp-bed. He introduced himself as David Coke (pronounced Cook).

'Are things out here really as dicey as I've been told?' I asked him.

'It's absolutely hopeless,' he said. 'The German fighters outnumber us by about fifty to one.'

'Look,' I said, 'I have never been in action in my life. I haven't the foggiest idea what to do if I meet one of them.'

'Oh Christ!' he said. 'What a place to start! How many hours do you have on Hurricanes?'

'About seven,' I said.

'Oh, my God!' he cried. 'That means you hardly know how to fly the thing!' We sat on our camp-beds thinking about the future. I could see that it was going to be a pretty hairy one.

Then David said, 'As you don't seem to know anything at all, I'd better try to help you. The bombers you will meet will be mostly Ju 88s. It's got a rear-gunner and a front-gunner. So if you are attacking a Ju 88 from astern, make sure you get well below him so the rear-gunner can't hit you. You have to go for one of his engines.'

I hardly knew what he was talking about, but I nodded and said, 'Right. I'll try to do that.'

At exactly ten o'clock next morning I was strapped into my Hurricane ready for take-off. I climbed to 5,000 feet and started circling above the flying field. My code-name was Blue Four.

Through a storm of static a far-away voice kept saying in my ear-phones, 'Await orders. Listen out.'

I cruised around admiring the blue sea and the great mountains, and I was just beginning to think that this was a very nice way to fight a war when the static erupted again and the voice said, 'Blue Four, are you receiving me?' 'Yes,' I said.

'Bandits over shipping at Khalkis,' the voice said. 'Vector 035 forty miles angels eight.'

'Received,' I said. 'I'm on my way.'

The translation of this message, which even I could understand, told me that if I set a course on my compass of thirty-five degrees and flew for forty miles, I would then, with a bit of luck, intercept the enemy at 8,000 feet, where he was trying to sink ships off a place called Khalkis, wherever that might be. I set my course and opened the throttle and hoped I was doing everything right. I cleared the top of the mountain range. Then I saw below me a kind of waterway and a little cluster of houses. There was one large cargo ship and as I was looking at it I saw an enormous fountain of spray erupting high in the air close to the ship. I had never seen a bomb exploding in the water before. Then suddenly I spotted the bombers. It was my first-ever sight of the enemy from my own plane. I turned the brass ring of my firing-button from 'safe' to 'fire'. I headed straight for the bombers.

They were Ju 88s. I counted six of them. There are three men in a Ju 88, which gives it three pairs of eyes. Had I been more experienced, I would have realised this and I would have swung round so that the sun was behind me. I would also have climbed very fast to get well above them before attacking. I did neither of these things. I simply went straight for them at the same height as they were and with the strong Grecian sun right in my own eyes.

They spotted me while I was still half a mile away and suddenly all six bombers dived straight for a great mass of mountains behind Khalkis. I followed, and sometimes we flew so close to the cliffs I could see the startled vultures taking off as we roared past. I was gaining on them, and when I was about 200 yards behind them, all six rear-gunners in the Ju 88s began shooting at me.

I was just beginning to realise that I had got myself into the worst possible position when suddenly the passage between the mountains narrowed and the Ju 88s were forced to go into line. This meant that only the last in line could shoot at me. That was better. David Coke had said, 'Go for one of his engines.' I managed to get the starboard engine of the bomber into my reflector-sight. I aimed a bit ahead of the engine and pressed the button. A second later I saw a huge piece of his metal engine-cowling go flying up into the air. Good heavens, I thought, I've hit him! I've actually hit him! Then black smoke came pouring out of his engine and very slowly, almost in slow motion, the bomber winged over to starboard and began to lose height. He was well below me now. He was turning over and over like a leaf. Then I

saw one... two....three people jump out and go tumbling earthwards, and a moment later one...two....three parachutes billowed open and began floating gently down between the cliffs.

I watched spellbound. I couldn't believe that I had actually shot down a German bomber. But I was immensely relieved to see the parachutes. The remaining five Ju 88s had disappeared. Fifteen minutes later I landed at Elevisis. I parked my Hurricane, and walked all the way round it looking for damage. Miraculously it seemed to be almost completely unscathed. I walked across to the Ops Room hut.

The Squadron-Leader looked at me and frowned. 'How did you get on?' he asked.

'I got one Ju 88,' I said, trying to keep the pride out of my voice.

'Are you sure?' he asked. 'Did you see it hit the ground?'

'No, but I saw the crew jump out.'

'OK,' he said. 'That sounds definite enough.'

'I'm afraid there's a bullet hole in my propeller,' I said.

'Oh well,' he said. 'You'd better tell the rigger to patch it up.'

That was the end of our interview. I expected more, a pat on the back or a smile, but he had many things on his mind, including a Pilot Officer who had gone out thirty minutes before me and hadn't come back. Who didn't ever come back.

I told David Coke about my trip.

'Never do that again,' he said. 'Never sit on the tails of six Ju 88s and expect to get away with it because next time you won't. You'd better be very careful next time.'

'I'll try,' I said. 'I'll do my best.'

1971 words including intro.

And though he went through many hair-raising situations, Roald Dahl did survive, obviously, but was invalided out of the RAF when he was flying in Palestine and developed bad headaches and loss of vision as a result of that first crash in the Western desert.