Glory Boys

Harry Bingham

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PROLOGUE

To begin with, it looked like nothing. A nick on the horizon. A moving dot. A speck of red and white against the smoky Georgian blue.

Herb Johnson, standing bolt upright on his wagon, followed it with his eyes. The little plane was flying low, carving an unsteady course between the twisting hills. Every now and then it rose sharply upwards, before beginning a slow glide earthwards again.

The town could boast four war heroes, but Herb Johnson was the only one to have seen the front line in France. Consequently, he was also the only guy in town to have seen an airplane. He wanted to hang on to the sight alone; be the only man in town to see it. He looked for a while, then sat back down on the wagon board and settled his hat back on his head.

'Good God in the morning!' he hollered. 'Airplane! Airplane! Airplane!'

Something was wrong.

That much was obvious. The plane, now directly overhead, was gasping for breath. The engine would fire properly for a couple of beats, then choke, then fire again, then cut completely, then spurt back into temporary life.

'That feller didn't oughta stay up there,' remarked Jeb Holling, with a considered tobacco-speckled spit on the ground. 'That engine ain't holding him up too good.'

The machine was a biplane, with red wings, a red nose and a clean white fuselage that seemed too bright in the sun. When the plane banked a little, they could see the pilot, no more than a leather-helmeted head and a pair of shoulders. Some of the kids waved, but the pilot must have been a surly type, because he wouldn't wave back, not even to say hi to a bunch of kids who'd never seen an airplane before, let alone right up close, floating over their town like a giant dragonfly.

'Ain't so easy,' said Johnson, who had quickly and delightedly established himself as the town's aviation expert. 'Them planes need an air-eo-drome. In France . . .'

The plane came back again, lower this time. They could see the pilot's face better. They could see his lips moving, and he was waving this time, one leather-gauntleted hand gesticulating out of the cockpit, though in an angry kind of way, hardly the way to wave at kids. The engine was still bad and when it cut out, you could almost see the flashing propeller blades slow down.

'Like to see it come down on my place,' said one farmer from out of town. 'Terraced fields like mine, it'd be like landing on a flight of steps.'

'There's the woods round by Williams Point,' said another man. 'That'd be the place all right. Come down into the trees . . .' His words petered out, as he realised that his picture of airplanes roosting in the treetops probably contained more than an ounce or two of inaccuracy.

It was a kid who saw the truth first. Little Brad Lundmark, a red-headed kid, looking a couple of years younger than his fifteen years, yelled it out. 'He wants to land here. He wants to come down right here!'

The kid was right. The pilot was criss-crossing overhead and waving. The plane continued to bob crazily in the air,

pulling upwards when the engine was sound, drifting down when it sputtered. And when you thought about it, Main Street in Independence was about the only hard flat place for miles around. If you excluded those places which were dotted with cows or drainage ditches or trees or houses, then you might have to cross right over into Anderson County before you could find a better place to land.

'Quick,' said Johnson, anxious to regain his ebbing leadership. 'Clear a space there, will you?'

Everyone pushed and shoved, until they had cleared a circle some forty or fifty feet wide. Herb Johnson winked and waved at the pilot, inviting him to come on down. Once again, the kid knew best.

'He needs the street,' shouted Lundmark. 'He needs the whole street.'

Instantly, the street was cleared. Horses were led down side alleys. A couple of buggies were hauled and pushed to the side of the road. There were only five cars in town, but the one belonging to Gibson Hennessey, owner of the General Store, didn't start too well in the heat of the day, so it was decided to leave them all. Men, women and kids, ran indoors to watch from windows, or stood in the shade of the verandas, until the whole town was lined up in two long rows that quivered with expectancy.

The red-winged plane banked for a final turn. Right overhead, the engine roared into life, then cut. There was an anxious-delicious moment when it seemed the plane must surely crash, but the engines fired again, strongly enough for the pilot to get his machine under control for landing. For a moment or two, the plane disappeared behind the two-storey warehouse belonging to the Agricultural-Mercantile on the edge of town. People craned forwards, desperate to see it again.

Then, when they did, they leaped back again in shock. The plane was headed right at them, diving towards the road from no distance at all. The propeller was a flashing

disc of metal. The plane's nose was a fat red bullet aimed straight at the town.

Somebody screamed. The plane plunged. Wheels slammed hard into the earth.

Then everything happened at once. The plane tore down the street. For a few moments, it looked as though the impossible landing would take place without mishap. Then the tail-skid snagged on a pothole. The plane's motion altered suddenly and drastically. The fuselage slewed violently round. An axle or a wheel-strut broke. One of the wingtips hit the ground and splintered. The plane skidded sickeningly along the ground, crunching up the end of its lower wing as it moved. It came to rest with the nose four feet from the barber's shop window, as though about to pop in for a shave.

The pilot's cockpit was lost in the dust he'd kicked up. The engine was silent. The propeller blade began to slow. Somewhere a piece of wood cracked loudly. The airplane sank.

For a moment, just for a moment, everything fell silent.

PART ONE

Beginning

Afterwards, people like to sit and figure out when it all started.

Mostly people talk about the crash landing, the hot May day in 1926 when an airplane fell clean out of the sky. But there are others who look a little further back. They talk about when the troubles in town first started. They talk about the Volstead Act, the law which prohibited the sale of alcohol the length and breadth of America. They talk about politics and the good old days and the general decline in moral values.

But when you think about it properly, you can see that there is no beginning. Not really. If it hadn't been for the Great War, there wouldn't have been Prohibition. If it hadn't been for the Wright brothers, and Santos-Dumont in France, and all the other guys who spent their lives coaxing chunks of wood and metal to jump into the air and fly, then there wouldn't have been airplanes, and everything in this story is to do with airplanes.

But if you want to talk about beginnings, then you have to go back to the start. Right to the start. And that wasn't Santos-Dumont or the Wright brothers, or even Langley and his doomed experiments over the gloomy Mississippi.

The beginning was an English guy, name of Sir George Cayley.

Cayley was born in 1773, when George Washington was still a British subject and the good folks of Boston were filling their harbour with forty-five tons of best Bohea tea. Cayley was another one of these guys who ought to have been born with feathers. He wanted to fly. He spent his whole life working on the problem. But unlike all those who had gone before, Cayley got a whole lot of things pretty right.

Up until Sir George, anyone designing a flying machine thought about birds. Birds flap their wings and that's the whole deal. They get their lift from wings. They get their forward motion from wings. Most of what stops birds rolling around in the sky like corks in a waterfall is built into the wings as well. Lift, thrust and control. All in the same neat instrument.

But that's birds. Sir George's particular spark of genius was to see that what worked for birds would never work for humans. So he split the three problems and tackled them separately. He conducted careful scientific experiments on lift, drag and streamlining. He tackled the issues of stability, pitch-control and general aircraft design. He did some tough mathematics and some solid science.

And he got there. He designed the airplane. For lift, he chose a pair of fixed wings, shaped like an aerofoil. For thrust, he chose an airscrew – what we'd call a propeller. And to give his flying machine control, he designed a tail fin and rudder, not a whole lot different from what you see sticking to the ends of airplanes today.

If you want to see the first ever drawing of a working airplane, you'll find it in the notebooks of good old Sir George. Of course, the gallant knight only had steam engines to play with. There was no way a steam engine of his day would develop enough horsepower to lift itself, an airplane and a human being all together. But he built gliders

though, good ones. You want to know when the first true airplane flight in history took place? Answer: in 1853, when Sir George ordered his coachman out of his coach and into a glider. The glider soared happily into the air, flew five hundred yards across a Yorkshire valley, then came to a bumpy rest. The coachman, already the world's first airplane pilot, wasn't too keen on becoming the world's first airplane casualty and he handed in his notice. Cayley, an old man now, quit building gliders and died almost fifty years before the Wright brothers left earth at Kitty Hawk.

So, if you want a beginning, there it was.

Lift, thrust, control. Three problems. Three solutions. The start of everything.

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The pilot lifted his goggles and removed his helmet, all in the same motion. He let helmet and goggles drop to the floor. The air was still cloudy with dust and his eyes pricked.

With an automatic hand, he checked his switches (all off) and the cockpit fuel pipes (all sound). He sniffed to detect any escaping gasoline. The air stank of petrol, but the pilot had never been in a crash where the air smelled any other way. The pilot flexed his left leg, then his right leg, then both arms, then ran his hands over his back, neck and head. His left foot was sore where the rudder bar had snagged it, but apart from that, he seemed to have escaped uninjured. His left arm struck the instrument panel a couple of times softly.

'Sorry, sweetheart,' he muttered.

He lifted himself to the lip of the cockpit and stepped down to the ground. The movement made him grimace. Not because of the pain in his foot, but because the undercarriage should have been lifting the fuselage well clear of the ground. But the plane no longer had an undercarriage to speak of, and the fuselage was lying prostrate on the ground like a beached sea animal.

The pilot undid his flying jacket, wiped his forehead on his arm and stepped, blinking, away from the dust and the plane wreck into the brilliant glare of the sun.

And that was how they saw him first. Long afterwards, that was how most of them would remember him as well. A man a little less than medium height. Not big built, but light on his feet. Poised. A sense of athleticism held a long way in reserve. Fair hair very closely cropped. Skin deeply tanned. Eyes of astonishing blueness. His face lined but still somehow young. Or perhaps not young exactly, but alert, watchful. And smiling. That was how they first saw him.

Smiling.

The pilot was used to being stared at, but even for him this was something new. Independence, Georgia boasted a population of 1,386 and right now the pilot was being given the chance to inspect almost every last one of their number.

He wiped his forehead again. Leather flying clothes make a whole lot of sense six thousand feet up in an eighty-mile-an-hour wind. They make a lot less sense the second you touch earth. He shrugged off his jacket and advanced a few more paces. The town had grouped itself into a semicircle around him and was staring at him, like he was something out of the Bible.

'Hi, folks,' he said. 'Seen better landings, huh?'

He laughed. Nobody else moved. They were still staring, still in awe.

'Thanks for clearing a way for me. Things were getting kinda tough up there.'

There was a bit of shuffling amongst the townsfolk and one of them was pushed to the front.

'Good afternoon, sir,' he said. 'My name's Herbert Isiah Johnson, and on behalf of Independence and Okinochee County and on behalf of . . . of . . . everyone, we'd like to welcome you to Georgia.'

Johnson's mumblings broke the spell. People surged forward.

'Gee whizz, Ma, did you see the wing go pop . . .?'

'Spark plugs, was it? I once saw that on a Model-T. Lousy sparks . . .'

'You OK, pal? You shouldn't be walking any, not after . . .'

'He didn't take a left. You go past the Ag-Merc, you have to jink a little to the left . . .'

'I said them things weren't safe to use. If the good Lord . . .'

But amidst the crush of people, there was no one more determined than Brad Lundmark, the red-headed kid who'd first understood the pilot's need to land. Within seconds of seeing the pilot emerge safely from the wreckage, Lundmark was running. First he ran hard, round a corner, into a simple two-storey house on Second Street. He was inside for about twenty seconds, then came racing out again. He tore back the way he'd come and hurtled into the thick of the crowd. Doggedly, he fought his way to the front.

'Excuse me, sir. Sir, excuse me, please. Please, sir . . .'

There was something in Lundmark's single-mindedness which made other people quit talking, until he found himself talking into a vacuum.

'Sorry. Sorry. Just . . .' He held out the things he'd fetched from the house. They were a well-chewed pencil and a photo. The photograph had been neatly clipped from the pages of a boy's magazine. It was unmistakably a picture of the pilot, a few years younger and stiffly dressed in military uniform. 'Captain Rockwell, sir, I wonder if I could have your autograph.'