The Burning Blue

James Holland

Chapter 1

North Africa – July, 1942

Although the enemy has lost a great many of his fighter aircraft during the last two months, there has been so far no apparent sign of a decrease in flying ability or combat performance. Combat effectiveness has been maintained, and indeed increased.

Memorandum from General von Waldau,

Fliegerführer Afrika, 25th July 1942

A little after four that afternoon, Joss Lambert left his tent and strode towards his plane in a line of others on the far side of the landing ground. He was twenty-two, unshaven, with blond hair which had thickened with dirt and sand. The last time he'd looked in a mirror he'd noticed a new line that ran from the side of his nose to his mouth; no longer such a baby face.

It was hot again, really hot, but very still and quiet, so that the only sound was of his boots crunching across the desert grit.

He was conscious of very little going on around him. For weeks now, he'd felt an increasing detachment from the job in hand. In part, this was deliberate, a necessary means of dealing with the desperateness of his situation. His life was more bearable if he did not think too much about what it was he was doing. Then perhaps one day – one day – he might be allowed to return home to her.

But now – well, now, there was nothing. He'd read her letter a dozen times, but it was as though his brain had simply shut down, refused to absorb the meaning of those words. Instead he had become numb, unable to think about anything other than the task ahead: a German land recce The Burning Blue unit to bomb and strafe. More enemy to kill. Sweat glistened on his temples and ran, like a spider, down his back. He brought his upper lip to his sleeve and looked at the wet imprint of a moustache outlined on the material.

Bradshaw, his rigger, was giving the windscreen and canopy a final clean as Joss grabbed the parachute off the plane's wing. Feet first, then arms through the canvas straps and all brought together into the single fastener. He paused, ran his tongue around his gums, and then spat, as he always did in a vain attempt to rid his mouth

of sand before a flight. He'd been the first to reach his plane. Ten battered Curtis Kittyhawks, all gently baking in the sun. The metal was too hot to touch, so hot they'd once fried corned beef on one of the wings. Joss put on his gloves, then hoisted himself onto the wing and into the cockpit, his parachute pack thumping against the back of his legs. The other pilots were reaching their planes. Prior, the squadron leader, walked round his, touching it, examining the underside of the wings and rudder. Everyone had their own routines.

'That's as clean as I'm going to get her,' said Bradshaw, leaning back to give the Perspex one last inspection. He glanced up at Joss. 'You all right, sir?'

Joss looked up, forced a fleeting smile.

'Well, she's all ready for you,' said Bradshaw, and slid off the wing.

Out in the open, there was something about the vastness of the desert that muffled the occasional clang or shout. But in the narrow space of the plane, the quietness was close and contained, even with the hood pushed right back: sounds were amplified and tinny so that he was conscious of his breaths, of the squeak of pedals being pushed up and down, and the strapping of his flying helmet; sounds that emphasized the routine of the pre-flight checks.

Without meaning to, his gloved hand felt for the letter in his shirt pocket, and as it did so his mind flooded with the crushing weight of despair. Stella, he thought, how could you do this? He lifted his arm to rub the sweat off his forehead and saw his hand was shaking.

When the ground crew gave him the signal, he began to manipulate the hand pumps and starter buttons. The airscrew began to turn, silently at first, then chugging, until the exhaust stubs vomited blue flame and black smoke and the whole airframe began to shudder and clank as the Allison engine erupted into life. Moments later, the other nine planes joined him, a deafening roar tearing apart the quiet.

Pulling the hood close, he lowered his goggles. Christ, it was hot. Even his arms and legs were glistening now. Come on, come on. Any longer and both he and the plane would be dead from overheating. He felt in his pocket, then realized he'd left his tiny wooden lion behind. Damn. Still, it was too late to worry about it now. Put it out of mind, he told himself, put everything out of mind.

At last, Prior, at Red One, moved off, followed by Reds Two and Three. A new low whining began, then it was his turn, at Blue One, to open the throttle and start trundling into position. Swathes of sand and dust whipped the airframe. It was bad enough taxiing with an enormous engine cowling for a view, but with the man-made

sandstorm it was like night-flying without the lights. A further complication – and there always was one – was the way the Kittyhawk tended to veer to the right. He had developed a method of taking a compass bearing and hoping for the best, but with everything juddering – including his legs on the rudder pedals and the arrows on the dials it wasn't easy. And on the ground there was always time to worry. Like the fact that his plane was full to bursting with high-octane fuel and a 500lb bomb.

Sand and grit battered the Perspex. So much for Bradshaw's cleaning efforts. Opening the throttle further, he felt the plane surge forward. A sudden jolt as a wheel went over a large stone and the stick bolted in his hand momentarily, knocking his elbow against the side of the cockpit and numbing his arm. He cursed and corrected the yaw of the plane. The rattling and noise increased with the speed, until with a sigh of relief from both the pilot and machine, Joss pulled back, the stick biting and firming up, his grip tightening, as though controlling a strong dog on a lead. The shaking stopped as he and his plane, strapped together, emerged into the big wide blue. From sand cloud to glaring brightness, he thought, squinting through the goggles at the sun that was now gleaming off the Perspex of the machine in front. He glanced behind him, back at their airfield. One of the planes was still on the ground, its propeller slowing. That song – Blue Skies. She'd always sung it wrong – wrong words, wrong tune half the time too.

The target was a wadi some forty miles south of Mersa Matruh and the coast, full of tanks and other vehicles, and more importantly, ammunition, fuel dumps and several hundred men. These dried river beds were hard to spot from the otherwise flat desert floor, but from the air offered rich pickings, as Prior had cheerfully pointed out. But no one had been fooled by his bravado; such a base would be dense with anti-aircraft flak and machine guns. It was a basic equation: the richer the pickings, the smaller the chances of making it back.

They crossed down into the Qattara Depression, the huge escarpment marking its northern edge clearly visible, then headed west, eighty miles behind enemy lines before looping up north so they could attack low, fast and out of the sun. Surprise was the key. They had to pray no one saw them before they dropped height into the bomb run. At twenty miles from the target, Prior brought the squadron into line astern. An old RAF attack formation, but then again, Prior, was a Cranwell man. Joss had tried suggesting they attack in lines of three astern, but it had fallen on deaf ears. 'Doesn't give us enough room for manoeuvre,' Prior had told him, 'and makes us a bigger target.' And that had been that. This was fine on a single run, but when there were two circuits to be made – the bombing, then the strafe – the odds were shortened even further for those at the end of the line.

As they approached the wadi, Joss lifted his goggles onto his forehead. They were low enough now for him to see a burnt-out bomber, crumpled and alone among the sand and stone away to his left. With his thumb, he flicked off the gun safety catch. He had been on the receiving end of such attacks on many occasions. From the ground, the attackers seemed to hold all the advantages, but this was of little

comfort. Strapped into the tiny cockpit, so narrow his elbows brushed the sides and his head the canopy roof, he wondered how he ever made it through. A deep breath, the target rushing towards him. Lines of orange and green tracer were already criss-crossing the sky in front of him, despite the advantage of surprise and coming from out of the sun. Arcing lazily at first, they accelerated as they flashed past his plane.

Joss pushed the stick over hard right then left, half-rolling his plane from side to side, stomach lurching as the blue horizon swivelled. On the ground, men fell flat at the roar of nine Allison engines belting past so low. He corrected himself, dropped his bomb, and not waiting to see where it had hit, sped on through the encampment. Explosion after explosion thundered behind him, and one massive fire-ball pitched orange flames and black smoke like a geyser into the sky. Someone had scored well. Tracer followed him out into the desert as he circled, black puffs of smoke filling the sky, ahead, below and to the side. They were way off, but it wouldn't be long now. He glanced round. They'd all made it through the first run, but then that was the easy bit. Now for the strafing. No surprise any more, and the guns would be ready. The puffs of smoke intensified, and the plane jolted. Closer now. Joss gripped the stick tighter, breath quickening. Another crash, the plane shuddered again and tiny shards of shrapnel showered the airframe. Jesus that was close. He saw Prior turning in for his second run, followed by Reds Two and Three. Then his turn.

One, he counted. The camp looked a mess. Thick oily smoke belching into the sky, but there was no let-up from the flak batteries. More splinters rained across the airframe. Two, lines of tracer looking as though they would hit him square between the eyes, but somehow hurrying past and over. The stick jolted and shook with the plane. Joss gripped it with both hands. Sweat poured down his cheeks and back. Three. Over 300 miles an hour into a sky raining bullets and debris and pieces of jagged metal. Finger on the firing button. Four. More men down below, leaping face-first onto the ground as his bullets sprayed across them. Five. Another massive explosion – not flak, not a bomb, but one of their Kittyhawks disintegrating in mid-air. The planes ahead disappeared into a cloud of smoke, then Red Three emerged again, a spectral silhouette, hardly real at all. Six. He whipped on through the burning gust. The tracer still pursued him, flashing doggedly over his canopy as he rolled once more, before running out of steam and dropping away.

Six seconds. That was all it took, and then he was away, blind through the smoke wall at fifty feet, and then racing over the desert. The whole attack completed in just over a minute. Joss started to gulp deep breaths of air, realizing he'd stopped breathing again as he'd counted through the strafing run. Looking behind, the puffs of flak and tracer disappeared into the distance, until all he could see was the smoke cloud caused by their sixty seconds of destruction.

Spared again.

Prior led them back up to 10,000 feet before breaking radio silence. Two pilots killed: one blown up, the other by ploughing straight into the ground (causing as much

damage as any 500-pounder). Most of the others had taken some kind of punishment, although no one else was injured and the planes were still flying, still keeping up with the CO.

'Well done everyone,' said Prior, 'but keep a sharp look out. We're not out of the woods yet.' Predictable, routine words.

Sixteen months before, when Joss had first arrived in the desert, he'd been surprised to find his shoulders bleeding after his first sortie. The combination of sand and wearing only a thin shirt rather than a thick jacket or Irvin had caused the straps to chafe as he kept turning his head to scan the sky. His skin had hardened since. He'd also lined both his parachute and the cockpit straps with padding, but even this minor irritation had made him realize there were a number of differences between flying over home and the desert. Another was the lack of cloud cover. Flying over England, they'd cursed when there was little cloud; in North Africa, there simply were no clouds. Just a vast, burning blue, with only the sun's glare for cover.

Goggles lowered once more, he continued to search the wide desert sky, although his mind had now begun to drift. He could do that, fly and keep a look out without really concentrating. He'd often thought it was a bit like driving a car. He might indicate, overtake or change down a gear, but without being conscious of it, thoughts on something else entirely.

But now the dull nauseous sensation in his stomach had returned. No, he thought, this cannot be happening, not now, not after all this. 'It can't, it can't,' he said out loud. There had been a time when he'd believed Tommy – that war promised honour, excitement and fellowship – but this place, this fucking awful desert, with its freezing nights and scorching days, its sand and its millions of flies and fleas, had soon put paid to that. But he'd persevered, borne it because there'd been the hope of a future worth having; a future with her. Stella had made it all bearable, only Stella.

Bob Carter at Red Three was wavering up and down before him. Damage somewhere. Rudder or aileron, maybe. Further ahead was Prior with Brian Scott flying at his side. Christ, but what a bunch they'd become. Sun-bruised faces, uncombed, bony, barely a decent uniform between them. Joss had begun by trying to keep himself presentable, but on a canteen of water a day it was impossible. He'd rather have a glug of water on his return from a sortie than enough to wash in properly. They were all exhausted. They smelled too, of sweat mixed with oil and grease, although it was only when someone came back from leave that anyone noticed. The little round pills the medical officer sometimes issued helped keep them going, but they were no substitute for leave. And leave in Cairo was no substitute for going home.

No wonder lines were appearing on his face.

He looked down: wide, flat and unrelenting, a sprawling, sandy grey desert which disappeared at the horizon into a strip of haze that merged with the sky. He was unable to make out details: without woods or snaking river valleys it all looked the same to him, a barren, lifeless plain that meant nothing. No towns or villages, just sand and rock. A hellish landscape.

The churning throb of the engine had become a neutral background that had evolved into a heavy kind of silence. He could no longer understand why he was still alive. Why was someone playing such a cruel trick on him? He was, he supposed, an above-average fighter pilot with an aboveaverage combat record, but even the greatest aces usually came down eventually: Mannon, Richtofen, Ball; Molders, Wick; even Bader and Tuck were in POW camps now. The chances of his surviving over two years of almost continual active service (bar three months instructing in the Sudanese desert) were virtually nil. But he'd always been lucky; it had been something of a joke. Strange coincidences, or flukes of nature, had followed him from England to North Africa. He had been shot down three times, crash-landed more often than he could count on one hand, been bombed, strafed and nearly died, of all things, from an infection just a few weeks after arriving in the desert. Yet here he still was.

There had been another fortunate escape the previous evening. After dinner, Denis Carr had asked him for a game of cards. At first Joss refused, but Denis was persistent.

'What are we playing for?'

'Cigarettes,' said Denis.

They'd all been running low, and getting quite irritable about it too, but Calloway, the adjutant, had told Joss they were expecting a supply plane the following morning – with plenty more cigarettes on board. Clearly Denis didn't know.

'Not money?'

'No – just fags. More valuable at the moment.'

Joss relented.

In the desert, where so much chipped away the nerves, Joss had soon realized that it was ever more important that everyone got on. After all, there was no escape, no pub and even the beer had usually gone off by the time it reached their mess tent. Any

arguments tended to be short-lived affairs: one might see two pilots at each other's throats one night but exchanging jokes the following morning. And he did like most of them well enough – he was just not as close to them as he had been to the squadron in the old days; he'd learnt his lesson the hard way. Only a week before, Laurie Collins had gone missing. The previous day, Joss and Denis had finally packed up his things. Denis had never said anything about it – it wasn't done – but he and Laurie had been close. They all needed distractions, and Joss – who had only recently started smoking – could afford to lose a few smokes.

It was dark and already freezing, so they had sat in Denis's tent with thick jumpers and overcoats on, clutching their cards, Joss blowing into his cupped hands. He'd already lost three cigarettes when they heard, faintly, the whirr of engines.

'Jesus fucking Christ,' said Denis, 'sneaky bastards.'

In no time at all – only the time to pause, look at each other, then realize it was Italian Macchi 202s – they heard the first crack of machine-gun fire, and immediately dived into Denis's slit-trench of a bunk.

The Italian planes were gone as quickly as they'd arrived. But when Joss checked his tent, he found a neat line of bullet holes that crossed one side to the other. Inside, the fold-away table at which he wrote his letters was cut in two, and his sleeping bag still smoking. Denis had followed, and at the time Joss had turned to him and thanked him for bullying him into playing poker. And God for watching over him again.

Denis hadn't returned that afternoon. His was the Kittyhawk that blew up.

The supply plane – a Whitley – had brought more cigarettes.

'You knew,' Denis had said that morning. And he'd whacked his cap against Joss's arm. Denis: small, wiry, his almost-black hair sticking up on end, and grinning a gaptoothed smile. Now scattered across that German camp.

What a sham. And the letter had arrived on the same plane. Some of the pilots were sent books and magazines, which were then passed around. Out of date newspapers and copies of Crusader, the Eighth Army magazine, were also delivered regularly, and although most of the articles tended to be little more than morale-boosting pep talks, it was at least something new to read. The mail had been one of the first things to be brought out from the plane. Calloway had riffled through the assorted post, reading out names and waiting for them to be snatched from his hand.

Joss had recognized the handwriting immediately, but only once he was in his tent, out of sight from anyone else, did he tear open the seal.

Alvesdon Farm

28th April 1942

Dear Joss,

I don't know how to say this to you, but Philip Mornay has asked me to marry him and I've accepted. I'm so sorry, but I cannot go on like this, worrying about you constantly, not knowing whether you are alive or dead. It's eating me away. I thought I was stronger; thought I would somehow be able to cope. But I can't. Are you still the same Joss? Or someone very different? I don't know where you are, or what you are doing. I can see your face, but I can barely remember the sound of your voice, except that I loved it. I always felt we would be punished, that there would be a price to pay. To expect you to come back to me is tempting fate too much. I can't help feeling that if I wait any longer, God will snatch you from me. That sounds stupid, I'm sure, but I feel it; I've dreamt it countless times. If I release us both, then perhaps we have a chance. I don't expect you to understand, but hope that one day you might forgive me.

I will always love you and those precious months we had together,

Stella.

Oh Stella, no. He'd stayed there, reading and re-reading it, his body frozen with shock. An hour later he was called back to the mess for the mission briefing. Then he'd gone to his plane.

In the past, he'd believed he'd been spared because of her; that the losses they'd suffered, and the torment of being parted for so long were nothing more than tests that had to be endured, and which would make the ultimate reward more wondrous. He thought about some of the pilots who'd come and gone: some had had wives and children back home, others adoring parents who sent regular packages, lovingly wrapped; a few had showed the promise of doing something brilliant in later life. All dead. But he, with only Stella, had survived. He had endured the scraping, abrasive, sand getting everywhere, wearing away the skin of his joints, chafing his feet, working its way into every orifice, scratching his eyes. He had helped clear the base after the khamsin had crept upon them, bringing with it a vindictive, swirling sandstorm that covered everything, choking engines and half-burying the camp sandpapering their planes to death.

Christ, but what was the point of this torture if not for her? What was the point of being constantly persecuted by the hordes of flies that made their lives a misery? He even had two in his cockpit now, buzzing around, then settling on his back or bare knee. He tried opening the canopy, but they insisted on remaining. Desert flies were different, nothing like the house flies Joss knew back home. The desert fly was smaller but hardier and more aggressive, attracted by sweat to exposed flesh. Especially irritating was when they buzzed around an ear, or swarmed at mealtimes. Eating became a skilled art, done one handed, the other saved to brush away the hordes. Even so, it was still impossible to complete a meal without a sizeable portion of desert fly. Laurie Collins once spent a morning trapping flies in an old tin, which he then doused with petrol and lit. Everyone enjoyed this brief moment of revenge until they were overwhelmed by the powerful, yet familiar stench. With horror, they realized that the flies must have been feeding on rotten flesh. Burnt, rotten, human flesh. There were some who could not eat for several days after. But not Joss; he had a reason to keep going. Another irony: by some glitch, her letter had taken three months to reach him. Twelve weeks passing between ship and aeroplane, crossing oceans and continents, denying the truth. He wondered whether she had read the letters he'd sent her in the meantime: letters of love, of hope.

Urgent shouting cut across the air, and out of nowhere bullets and tracer jabbered across his wings. Joss's time for brooding was over. Prior had warned them to be vigilant, but that hadn't prevented them from being bounced again, and out of the sun again. Germans this time, in Messerschmitt 109s.

Without thinking, Joss pushed the stick forward, diving then turning in towards the enemy, the horizon rising and rolling before him. His insides churned and an invisible weight thrust him back against his seat, but the tracer was already curving wide behind him. There wasn't much he could say in favour of the Kittyhawk: it had a slow rate of climb, slower even than a Hurricane, and none of the visibility of a Spitfire; nor could the shark teeth painted onto the underside of the engine cowling have been very intimidating. But at least it could out-dive and out-turn a 109.

The firing stopped and Joss glanced back to see that his pursuer had broken off. He turned round to find another 109 heading straight for him, guns spitting bullets and cannon shells. Shit – where had he come from? A loud crack and his mirror disappeared. Another, and the plane juddered. Screaming in his ears – a pilot burning. Frank? Hard to tell: one man's screams sounded much the same as another's. But his plane kept going, hurtling towards the 109. Joss tensed, closed his eyes.

He opened them again as the 109 flashed its underbelly just feet above him, vulnerable and silvery as a trout, a brief moment before exploding, tearing in half like paper. The blast jolted the stick from Joss's hand and knocked his head against the side of the canopy. A wing cartwheeled through the air, the black cross spinning. The engine and half the fuselage fell in flames. Debris fluttered in every direction,

and as Joss turned he saw blood streaked across the outside of his canopy. He retched. For those few seconds he had thought they were going to collide.

The pedals kicked his feet. The rudder. He looked round quickly and saw nothing, then another Messerschmitt lurching into view. More sparkling tracer. Something whipped across his right arm, searing, and Joss thrust the stick forward and dived again. The needle on his oil gauge was rising and the whole airframe juddered. He clenched his teeth, both hands gripping the stick. The engine whined, screeching in his ears, then for a second, maybe two, his vision dimmed, on the point of blackout. Only when he was sure the tracer had stopped following him, did he pull back the control column. Down to 1,000 feet. My arm. Jesus. Blood was spreading in a widening stain across his shirtsleeve, and dripped from his elbow. He yelled out loud; in unison the engine coughed, spluttered, then stopped. Silence, apart from a gentle whistling. The propellers slowly wound down to a halt, one of them chopped in half.

He was gliding, alone. Four of the nine, himself included, would not be making it back today. Almost half the flight. A bad day by anyone's standards. Blood drained from his head as his energy ebbed. His teeth began to chatter.

Flames were flickering around the engine cowling, and wafts of smoke streaming over the wings. Joss wondered whether he should try and turn the plane and jump out, but he was already almost too low to bale out. If he stuck with it, they might just smash into the ground, and that would be it. Over, once and for all. He realized he didn't mind; in fact, he welcomed it.

Another part of his brain took over, ordering his hands and feet to try and control the plane so that it drifted downwards in a gentle trajectory. The undercarriage was trapped, but everything else seemed to work: the ailerons, flaps, and even the rudder. The eventual landing was almost graceful. Initial contact with the desert floor jolted him enough to wind him, and he gasped with the terrible scraping of metal on stone, but after a short while, the machine ran out of steam and ground, creaking, to a halt.

The flames were growing. In seconds, they were scorching his legs and singeing his bare arms. He thought of the screams, screams he'd heard countless times before. He never, ever wanted to suffer that kind of pain. His right arm had numbed, but from somewhere deep within him, a primeval desire for survival urged him out of the cockpit. Sliding off the wing, he staggered thirty yards and collapsed.

Joss lay on the desert, spread-eagled, dipping in and out of consciousness. The smell, this time not of other men's burnt flesh, but his own, was rich and cloying; and this time he vomited. He clutched his right arm and heard himself cry out. His hand covered in blood, his forearms red and white, blistering and swollen. Such a mess. He dropped his head back onto the ground, the sun bearing down on his closed

eyelids, creating a luminous kind of orange glow. They were advised not to wear shorts or rolledup sleeves: clothing was another layer of protection against fire. But the advisers weren't the ones flying the things in the middle of the day in stultifying heat.

He began thinking about Dick. His voice, very clear, came back to him. 'I knew if I stayed where I was, I would be a dead man, so I started walking.' Twenty-four hours after his crash, Dick had stumbled back into camp. But he'd had some chocolate, plenty of water, a map, a compass, and crucially, had known pretty much where he'd crashed. It hadn't done him much good anyway. He'd been shot down again a day later. No one saw it, but he'd been missing for two weeks, and after a few initial jokes, everyone had agreed even Dick couldn't survive in the desert for that long.

Joss's canteen was still in the plane. Now the whole cockpit was gently burning, the smell of burnt rubber, paint and oil mingling with the stench of his own burns. Without water, and with the loss of blood, he couldn't last long.

He'd been dreaming about being in the belly of a great ship, surging back to England, the pitching and yawing of the boat thrusting him up and down, the roar of the massive pistons drowning out all the other noise. Then voices, English voices. So then, still alive. He opened his eyes.

'Don't worry mate, it's going to be all right. You take it easy.'

It was dark in the back of the truck, but there was that smell of metal and oil, familiar to all machinery. Lying flat on his back, occasionally jolted as the truck passed over a bump or a stone in the sand, Joss was watched by the two men. They wore British Army tin hats and khaki drill, but the white armbands and red crosses stood out in the dim light.

'You're going to be just fine,' said one of them. 'Get you back to a nice hospital in no time.'

Joss murmured.

'Watched your plane come down. And saw you charge at that Jerry. Death wish haven't you?'

Maybe then, he thought, but now he wasn't so sure. He moved his lips again, but the words weren't there.

'You were only twenty-odd miles behind the southern section of the front line,' the other man said. 'We were looking for a bomber crew but couldn't find them. Saw you instead. Still, you were lucky. Another few miles further south and you'd have hit the Depression. Then you'd have been well and truly fucked.'

So they're dead and I'm alive.

'All the same,' said the first medic, 'don't reckon you'd have lasted too long where you were on your own. Someone's watching out for you all right.'

'Yes,' Joss managed, and closed his eyes.