

# The Last Line

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Dedicated to the memory of my grandparents  
Bessie, Eric, Peter and Vera  
all of whom served their country on the home front.



# I

Friday, 10 May 1940

I was walking in the meadow between the woods when I saw the Spitfire. At first, just a speck in the sky. The engine sounded wrong, the revs falling, spluttering, then finally cutting off with a last cough.

My meadow must have looked like a godsend. Flanked by the woods on either side, running south to north from his perspective, quarter of a mile long. Big enough for me to get a useful amount of hay come haymaking time. Not much distance to slow a fighter plane from flight speed to full stop. Maybe enough. Maybe not. At the northern end of the meadow, a row of ancient chestnuts was a dark wall in the bright early morning. If he hit those trees at speed, there wouldn't be much left of him.

He came in fast, trying to line it up without any power. Behind him, up in the sun, a speck – another plane.

I was halfway along the meadow, inside the treeline. If he survived the landing, he'd need help getting out of the plane. I ran towards those chestnut trees, keeping close to the edge of the field in case the plane suddenly came my way. I did my best to run through the long grass in my heavy boots but it must have been quite a sight – a forty-year-old farmer running flat out like a boy on sports day.

The Spitfire clipped the big oak at the far end of the meadow, breaking off a branch with a loud crack, then he blew past me, hitting the ground hard. The left wheel ripped off and the

wing dipped and caught the grass. He got it back up again but only for thirty yards before the wing dipped again and dug in.

I struck out diagonally across the meadow, following him towards the trees, barely registering the sound of another plane passing close overhead.

With the wing dragging, the Spitfire kept turning, bringing it back towards me. I stopped running and watched it complete a tight circle before coming to an abrupt stop.

The plane that had buzzed me came around again, lining up for its own landing. I hoped he could make a better job of it than the man on the ground.

I hurried towards the downed Spitfire. The canopy slid back and the pilot climbed out, shaking himself out of his restraints. He jumped down onto the grass and stood with his hands on his knees, shaking like a racehorse that's been worked too hard.

'Are you all right?' I asked.

He looked beyond me to the plane coming in to land, his face screwed up in anger.

The second plane was a Messerschmitt. Unmistakable, with the yellow nose and black cross of the German Luftwaffe. It touched down lightly and bumped towards the north end of the field, deftly turning and taxiing towards us. He cut the engine and let it roll to within twenty yards of us before he pushed his canopy open. He was grinning.

He was a young chap. He had a weathered face and a white silk scarf tucked into his shirt. As he climbed out of his cockpit, I put myself between him and the English pilot.

'I think I caught your coolant line,' he said to the English pilot behind me.

'There,' he nodded, 'I see my bullet holes.' He gestured in a diagonal with his flattened hand, sketching out the path his bullets must have traced. 'I wanted to make sure you're all right, but it looks like you are,' he said, confirming his own

diagnosis. 'I think we'll see each other again over France in the coming days.'

The German stepped past me and held out his hand. But the English pilot refused his offer to shake.

'Get away from me, you fucking Kraut,' spat the English pilot, taking a step backwards.

The German stood with his hand held out. He smiled ruefully and took it back.

'That's OK. The adrenaline. I get it. How many flying hours for you in the Spitfire? Twenty? Twenty-five? I was the same.'

He turned to me.

'I'm sorry if we damaged your field.' He looked around appreciatively. 'It's a beautiful place. Maybe when all this is over, I'll become a farmer. It must be good to spend your life growing things, after a war.'

I nodded.

'My boys will be wondering where I got to,' he said, turning back to his plane.

'Fucking Kraut,' muttered the English boy, more to himself than to the German. He fumbled with a lanyard around his neck and pulled an Enfield revolver from the front pocket of his jacket. His arm shook as he raised the gun, his muscles spent from bringing down the plane in one piece. I stepped out of the way. I've had a lot of guns pointed at me and it's an experience I try to avoid. The boy pointed his gun at the back of the German. A symbolic gesture, or so I thought.

The gun fired with a shocking loudness, echoing back off the trees. If this had been a Jimmy Cagney flick, the German would have turned round and uttered a final thought, perhaps a curse on England. But it wasn't a film. He didn't turn around to wrap things up like a gentleman. He dropped to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut.

The English pilot walked stiffly to the body and fired again.

‘Fucking Kraut.’

He grinned at me like a boy who’s hit a six.

‘I got him,’ he said.

He knelt by the body and turned it face up. I knew what he was doing and I turned away, wanting nothing to do with it. I’d seen it too often in the last war: men trading their honour for a souvenir. I guessed he’d take the scarf unless it was too bloody. Maybe he’d take it *because* it was bloody.

I studied the Messerschmitt. It was a beautiful machine, second only to our Spitfire in its speed and manoeuvrability, or so they said. I put my hand on the fuselage and felt the glossy paintwork. It was warm from the May sun.

‘Their guns are much better than ours,’ the pilot said, joining me and circling around the front to examine the propeller. ‘They don’t tell you that on the newsreels. It’s not a fair fight.’

He peered underneath.

‘Fighter-bomber,’ he said, nodding at a hefty-looking bomb strapped to the undercarriage. ‘Two hundred and fifty kilograms. They’re using them to take out our ships in the Channel. Pretty nervy of him to land with that still attached.’

I took a step back, wondering how the bomb was detonated. Presumably some kind of impact trigger.

‘They’re coming,’ he said. ‘The sky over France is thick with them.’

‘It was on the news,’ I said. ‘They said Belgium and Holland.’

‘It’s not like last time,’ he said. ‘They’re already overrunning us. You can see it on the roads. They’re jammed with people evacuating. It’s a mess.’

He looked around.

‘They’ll be here in a few weeks.’



A bright red sports car turned onto the lane in the distance, accelerating down the straight half-mile towards my farm.

We waited in front of the house, leaning against the stone wall separating the garden from the lane. Bees buzzed lazily around the blossoming lilacs.

The pilot was rehearsing the story in his mind, his face previewing some of the emotions he was going to get across, bagging his first Hun and all that. I didn't judge him for it. In war, everything you do is obscene to anyone who wasn't there. I wouldn't have shot the German in the back if it had been me, but it hadn't been me. When it had been me, a long time ago, I'd done things, and I'd told people stories afterwards. I'd told myself stories afterwards.

'He was right,' he said, 'twenty hours flying. And I'm one of the experienced ones in our squadron.'

I looked up at the sky, clear blue.

'From what you said about the situation over there, it sounds like you'll get a few more hours under your belt before you know it.'

'I wonder how many I'll get before my luck runs out,' he said, following my gaze upwards.

★

A clipboard-wielding NCO took my details in preparation for the salvage operation. It would be three or four weeks at least. Planes were falling out of the sky over Sussex faster than they could haul them away to the scrapyard.

'We've taken the Jerry,' he said, offering me the clipboard.

'Will you get word back to his unit?' I asked.

'We've got a pretty good line of communication with them,' he said. 'We'll let them know what happened and they can notify his family.'

I signed in triplicate. Good to see the armed forces hadn't lost their taste for paperwork.

'You should cover up the planes,' he said. 'Get some camouflage over them until we get them hauled away. Herr Goering might send you a nice, personalised bombing raid. They try not to leave operational planes behind.'

## 2

Tea was sausages and boiled potatoes. It was one of two dishes Mum made, so we ate it three or four times a week. That suited me fine, I've always been a creature of habit. Nob always ate it, so we had to assume he didn't have any complaints. Luckily for us, neither sausages nor potatoes were rationed, at least not yet.

Uncle Nob didn't do well in the last war. The Great War: always capitalised, always thick with meaning. I'd done my bit – couldn't wait to sign up, told them I was sixteen. I spent my time at the front, but I got off lightly, more of a Boys' Own adventure than the horror stories others experienced. Nob was there for the duration. Ypres, the Somme, Passchendaele. Every big push. Hundreds of thousands of boys and men at a time, both sides of the field. Nob never really came back. When he was pushed out of a taxi at the end of the lane, dressed in his demob suit and clutching an empty cardboard suitcase, he walked up to the house, found his old armchair by the fire, and sat quietly, his hands shaking. More than twenty years ago. He hasn't said a word since.

We sat at the old oak table in the kitchen, where the oven kept things warm all day every day. The rest of the house was cold and damp, even in summer, so the kitchen got the most use.

'This is the BBC,' said the newsreader on the wireless. 'The Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, travelled this afternoon

to Buckingham Palace, where he met with the King and delivered his resignation. A government spokesman said there will be an announcement later this evening naming his successor. It is widely expected that Lord Halifax will take the role.'

'Told you,' Mum said. 'He should have gone straight after Munich.'

It was a commonly held view. Chamberlain and Hitler had met in Munich in 1938 to negotiate the future of Czechoslovakia. Chamberlain had bent over backwards to appease Hitler, turning four million Czechs into Germans with a signature. Chamberlain returned home triumphant, proclaiming 'peace for our time', and thirty-six German divisions rolled across the border with the blessing of the international community. Within six months Czechoslovakia didn't exist. Turned out those thirty-six divisions didn't stop rolling once they'd taken the bit we'd allowed them. Playground politics. Give in to a bully today and he'll be back tomorrow wanting more.

'In further news, German bombers have attacked Rotterdam,' the BBC newsreader continued. 'This unprovoked attack on a city of civilians is seen as an early indicator of the tactics that Hitler's Reich intends to pursue across Europe. Eyewitnesses report thousands of casualties, with much of the population of the city fleeing in advance of the expected German invasion force.'

Mum switched over to Radio Hamburg. Their news was nonsense of course, but they had better music in the evening.