



COMING IN TO LAND



Dennis Hamley

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“ Another few seconds of juddering, then: ‘Let go,’ came the shout. Jack suddenly felt free, floating on a waterless sea, silent but for the rush of air outside, perfect peace, *magic*. He looked down at patchwork fields, green, brown, yellow, roads stretching grey across them, cars and lorries like tiny toys. Glorious. ”

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First Flight

Jack didn't expect it to be like this. The winch far below dragged the steel hawser upwards and the tiny two-seater training glider juddered and shook so much that it seemed its nose section must be wrenched off. The voice of Flying Officer O'Brian, the instructor, sounded from behind him.

'When we've reached a thousand feet I'll

pull the cable-release and shout “Let go.” You’ll be doing this next time, so you’ll shout the same now, when I do, so I know you’ve got it right. OK?’

‘OK,’ Jack answered.

Another few seconds of juddering, then: ‘Let go,’ came the shout. Jack repeated it and suddenly felt free, floating on a waterless sea, silent but for the rush of air outside, perfect peace, *magic*. He looked down at patchwork fields, green, brown, yellow, roads stretching grey across them, cars and lorries like tiny toys. He saw the grass airfield with the other training glider on the ground, winches like tiny, prehistoric monsters at the perimeter fence, the windsock hanging limp on this still, hot day. Glorious.

Sudden fright. Up so high in a tiny box with creaking wings and no engine, a frail

little thing at the mercy of every breath of air – if he looked sideways he saw the wingtips shake as if they were going to snap off. So fragile, surely they'd break up in mid-air ...

O'Brian's voice again.

'No daydreaming. Put your hands on the joystick. It's dual-control so don't grasp it tight, you must feel how I use it. Keep your feet on the rudder bars. Don't push on them. You've got three dials in front of you. One's the airspeed indicator and when we're up here we keep it about thirty knots, straight and level. You sure won't like it if we get too slow and stall. The next dial tells you the height, the third whether we've got lift.' Silence. 'When do we get lift, Rayner?'

'When we find a thermal,' said Jack.

'Good. And what's a thermal? And don't say your underpants.'

‘Warm air rising.’

‘And is today good for thermals?’

‘Yes. It’s hot, no wind and we’re over fields. Cornfields are best.’

‘Well, at least you listened to what we told you.’

This first flight lasted twenty minutes. In that time Jack was shown turning, banking and getting out of a stall.

‘You’ll do this yourself in a few days,’ said O’Brian.

It didn’t seem possible, but Jack felt a thrill of joy just the same. They hit a thermal and rose to fifteen hundred feet. When O’Brian said, ‘Sorry, Rayner, but it’s time to go home,’ he was really regretful.

‘Now for landing,’ said O’Brian.

Landing. Landing was difficult. Jack knew it was the most dangerous part of any flight.

The year was 1943, the bombing war was at its height and Jack had heard of bombers crashing on landing. Lancasters and American Flying Fortresses, which had been shot up by German fighters, would toil home across the sea to their airfields and then, when the hard work had been done, plough into the ground at the very end of their missions.

But at least they had engines to throttle back to help them slow down: the little glider had nothing but a rushing wind and a boy at the controls.

‘We land anywhere inside that square marked out on the grass,’ said O’Brian. Jack looked down. It looked the size of his thumbnail. It *was* impossible.

O’Brian lined the glider up so they would come over the winches towards the magic square.

‘Shallow dive,’ he said. ‘Check height, check rudder, wingtips level with horizon, ease stick forward just a little.’

Jack felt the joystick move forward slightly and the nose drop. Through the large, clear cockpit windscreen he saw the green below come up to meet them. Their speed increased, the wind rushed past with a swooshing noise and now the square was wider.

But surely they were coming in too steeply. Jack drew his breath in panic. They were going to hit the ground nose-first.

Then O’Brian said, in his matter-of-fact voice, ‘Watch this, Rayner and watch well. I ease the stick back and level out the instant the airfield stops looking like a green tablecloth and I can pick out individual blades of grass. Then I say “Check.” Got that?’

Jack gulped. ‘Yes,’ he muttered.

The ground was meeting them very fast. He didn't believe O'Brian, there wouldn't be time to pull out, it couldn't happen, they'd plough into ...

'Check!' O'Brian shouted and the little plane was suddenly level and skimming easily over the ground until it gently kissed the grass, came to a halt and canted over, so the starboard wingtip rested on the ground.

'How was that, Rayner?' said O'Brian.

'Fantastic,' Jack replied.

'Wait till you're on your own. Then you'll know how fantastic it is.' O'Brian smiled. 'Get unbuckled and see what your mates thought of it.'

But when he walked across and joined them where they sat on the ground waiting for their flights, Cecil Pirbright was the only one who spoke.

'Pity,' he said. 'You came back.'