

1

TAKE-OFF

RECORDED AT SS OF THE
PERPETUAL VENERATION
PLAS GAERLLWYDD
LLANGWYNYDD
WEST GLAMORGAN
UNDATED—PROBABLY AUTUMN 1986

STRANGE, I ALWAYS THINK, how the pettiest and least significant things—some banal tune playing on the wireless, the smell of the floor polish they once used at your old school—can set off a train of recollections; even when one has not thought about the matters in question for decades past, and even in someone like myself, who has never been one of nature's chroniclers or—at least until lately—much addicted to reverie, never even kept a diary except when required to do so by service regulations.

It was the television that set it off, yesterday evening in the residents' lounge: that draughty, high-ceilinged hall converted (I would imagine) from the one-time drawing-room of this dilapidated Victorian mansion, built out here on the tip of peninsula so as to be as far as possible upwind of the Swansea copper-smelting works which provided the money for its construction. I was sitting near the back of the room, in the armchair where Sister Elżbieta parks me each afternoon and which I occupy by virtue of my position as the Home's eldest resident: a hundred and one next April if I last that long. I was sitting there with a blanket over my knees, trying to read a little, in so far as cataract allows me, and to absorb some of the feeble warmth radiated by the Plas Gaerllwydd's monstrously inefficient central-heating system. My young friend Kevin the caretaker fired up the boilers the day before yesterday to counter the autumnal chill cast by the Bristol Channel fogs, but one would be hard put to it to notice any difference.

It was only just after supper but the television was already jabbering away at the front of the room, surrounded by its circle of devotees intent on their evening act of worship. Normally it disturbs me little. My English is quite creditable—as well it might be, considering that I began to study it about 1896 and that I have spent the best part of half a century in exile in this country. But I find that programmes in what is still (for me) a foreign language are something that I can easily shut my ears against. In fact, since the Sisters moved me down here from Ealing in the summer the position has been doubly satisfactory in this respect, since a good half of the programmes each day are in Welsh, of which I think that I may be forgiven for not understanding a single word.

It never ceased to amaze me even back at the Home in Iddesleigh Road how the residents there (I try hard not to call them inmates) would cheerfully spend sixteen hours a day, seven days a week, watching programmes in a language which many of them still barely understand. So what shall I say of them down here in south Wales? No, I sat undisturbed and thought, and read a little, then thought again: all the long-forgotten events which have been coming to the surface these past few months, like oil and wreckage from a sunken ship, since the photograph album turned up and they brought me to this place and I began telling these improbable yarns of mine to young Kevin. I could have continued like that until they came to put me to bed. But then the insufferable Major Koziolkiewicz strode in on his bandy cavalryman's legs and, without asking anyone, walked over to the television set and turned up the volume (he is deaf in one ear and half deaf in the other, but the vanity of old age prevents him from wearing a hearing aid). Bored with my book, and wishing anyway for some respite from memories which were not always entirely welcome, I sighed and turned resignedly to watch the programme.

It was a poorly made pulp-thriller film of early-1970s vintage: the usual turgid, best-seller-made-into-film stuff of which the chief characteristic is that, after the first two minutes or so, no one could care a button what happens to any of the characters. This particular offering was worthy of note only in that it contained in the very first five

minutes an example of one of the most verdigris-encrusted of cinematographic clichés; the one where the air hostess emerges from the door of the flight deck with an anxious look on her pretty face and asks whether any of the passengers is either a doctor—preferably a consultant toxicologist—or a qualified pilot. At this point, as Charlton Heston (who, naturally, just happened to be both) rose from his seat, I gave up and returned to my book, knowing only too well what rolling vistas of tedium would now unfold themselves before me.

But still this episode, ludicrous in itself, had set my mind working. For the truth is, I think, that more often than we care to admit life impersonates art and real events take on the character of a B-feature film. I imagine—admittedly on the basis of no evidence whatever—that there must be occasional Tarts with Hearts of Gold who address their clients as “dearie.” And years ago there were unquestionably Scottish ship’s engineers (I once met one) who wiped their hands on cotton waste while informing the bridge that their engines wud nae make it thru this storm. And believe it or not, something very similar to the situation that I have just described did once happen to me; though in the event it was not to turn out quite as the film version would have it.

It was in the summer of 1959, I remember, when my English second wife Edith and I were living in Chiswick. The telephone had rung in the small hours of the morning. It was Edith’s younger sister calling from the island of Jersey. Their mother, then aged ninety-six or so, had moved from Suffolk to live with her a few years before and had been in poor health for some months past, bedridden and half paralysed by a stroke. Her condition had suddenly worsened during the night and the doctor’s opinion was that she was unlikely to last much longer. She was asking for her children to be at her bedside, so in the end there could be no argument about it: we would have to get there as quickly as possible even though it meant the expense of an air flight. I say “we” because Edith, even though she had been a VAD with the Serbian Army during its terrible winter retreat through the Balkans in 1915 and might therefore be reckoned to have been immunised for life against fear, was still extremely nervous about flying and would

certainly not board an aeroplane without me to accompany her. So a taxi was summoned, overnight bags were hurriedly packed and at first light that Saturday morning we set off for Waterloo Station, driving across a city still barely stirring from its sleep.

The trains were still steam-drawn in those days: glossy dark-green carriages with varnished panelling inside and nets overhead for luggage, pulled by curious boxed-in locomotives like enormous baking-tins. We arrived at Eastleigh Aerodrome (as it was still called) about breakfast time, and just managed a ham sandwich and a cup of tea in the wartime hangar that served as a passenger terminal while my travel documents were examined by the airport officials. Jersey was British territory, but this was only fourteen years after the end of the war and the Home Office still demanded that I should show my identity papers before embarking upon air flights: "Ottokar Prochazka (formerly Prohaska)—British-Protected Person Resident in UK—Born Austrian Subject 1886; subsequently Czechoslovak and Polish Nationality—Stateless Person since 1948." They scratched their heads politely over this for a couple of minutes, then stamped it and allowed us out on to the airfield. Our tickets had been waiting for us at Eastleigh, booked in advance by Edith's sister, so there were no further formalities to be gone through as we hurried out across the brown-scorched grass of that blazing summer, one of the hottest that I can remember during all my long years in this country.

The aeroplane standing before us, completing its fuelling, was a delightfully graceful little twin-engined De Havilland: twelve passengers plus pilot and cabin stewardess. And as we walked out across the field, bags in hand, I knew that despite my wife's misgivings I was going to enjoy this trip. People flew but rarely in those days, even the moderately well-off like ourselves, and my last flight had been sixteen years before: at night, over the darkened countryside of Bohemia, in the belly of an RAF Whitley bomber with a parachute strapped to my back. As we neared the aeroplane steps and the smiling hostess bade us good-morning and asked for our boarding passes, dim half-forgotten memories were stirring of such summer mornings many years before, and walks out across the grass of distant meadows to climb aboard other

flying machines, far more primitive than this one and bound on much less innocent errands.

We were shown to our seats, one row back from the flight-deck bulkhead athwart the propellers, and sat down one on each side of the gang-way. Poor Edith was already pale and tense as I reached across the aisle and squeezed her hand to reassure her. For myself though, I settled back into my seat—so much more comfortable than the creaking wicker cat-baskets which had cradled my backside when I first started to fly—and looked out of the porthole at the sunlit field and the cloudless blue sky. A curious feeling of contentment spread over me. Despite the distressing circumstances of our journey I knew that, for me at least, this part of the outing would be a wonderful lark and a most welcome diversion from the rather monotonous daily round of old age. I could only hope that some of my eager anticipation would communicate itself through our clasped hands to Edith, for whom flight was anything but a happy adventure.

The remaining passengers took their seats, the pilot appeared at the front of the cabin to wish us a pleasant journey—about forty-five minutes he said—then disappeared like a magician behind the dark-green curtain that masked the flight-deck door. The hostess showed us how to put on our life jackets (Edith winced at this and shut her eyes tight), then we fastened our seat belts as she took her place at the rear of the cabin and the pilot started the engines. I heard vague quackings from the wireless up forward, and after some minutes a light winked from the control tower to signal us out on to the concrete runway: “Ausgerollt—beim Start,” as we used to say in the k.u.k. Fliegertruppe.

I have lived over a century now, and experienced many wonderful and terrible things. But for me there are still few moments as exhilarating as that of leaving the ground; as exciting even now as it was for me that first time I took to the air, in a wire-and-bamboo Etrich Taube some months after the *Titanic* went down. I cannot be far away now from my own long-postponed death; but if the sensation of passing from this world into the next is at all like that of take-off in an aeroplane—as I suspect it may well be—then I shall not mind it one bit: the gathering speed, that sudden rush as the air starts to bite, the

shudder as the wings begin to lift, the feeling of being pressed back in one's seat even in a slow piston-engined aero-plane, that invariable missing of a heartbeat or two as the wheels leave the ground—and the equally invariable worry (no idle anxiety in my younger days I can assure you) that the pilot will exhaust his supply of runway before we are properly airborne. I was so engrossed in all this that I almost forgot my wife, white-faced and trembling across the gangway.

We were soon clear of Eastleigh Aerodrome and climbing steadily into the summer sky, the pilot giving rather more throttle than usual (I thought) on account of the thinness of the already warmed-up atmosphere, but otherwise as smoothly and as pleasantly airborne as one could possibly have wished. I settled down to admire the view: the chimneys and cranes of Southampton Water below us; with two transatlantic liners in the ocean terminal and a lavender-grey Union Castle ship manoeuvring to dock; and away to port the fretted coastline of Portsmouth Harbour, its gleaming silver expanse dotted with warships—for whatever the sad realities might have been back in 1959, Britain in those days still looked almost as great a naval power as when I had first visited the place over half a century before. We passed over Calshot Spit, with its flying-boat hangars and its endless rows of laid-up minesweepers, and were soon climbing gently to pass over the Needles and head out across the English Channel. Within a couple of minutes the western tip of the Isle of Wight had slid away below us and we were out over open water, heading for St Helier, about half an hour's flying time away. Edith seemed to have calmed down for the moment, so I sank into a pleasurable state of reverie, lulled by the steady hum of the engines and the gentle rush of wind along the aeroplane's fuselage. Pity that it had to be so short a flight, I thought.

This blissful, almost infantile state of contentment continued for another ten minutes or so; until I began to notice, while looking at an oil tanker far away on the shining sea, that the aeroplane was beginning to yaw gently from side to side, then to pitch up and down in a long, soft undulation like that of a large ship riding the swell from a far-off storm. I looked out of the cabin window again. Air turbulence? Surely not: the weather had been very hot lately but we were far from land and

there had been little wind that morning when we took off. After a couple more minutes of this meandering progress—so gentle as yet that none of the other passengers appeared to have noticed it—the air hostess put down her magazine and bustled forward to disappear behind the flight-deck curtain. And when she emerged once more, a minute or so later, I saw to my alarm that she was wearing that bright games-mistress smile which among the English is supposed to convey reassurance, but which I must say has on my morale rather the effect of smoke oozing from under a door, or water starting to drip from a bulge in the ceiling. Prochazka's First Law, based upon more than half a century's observation of the English, states that when a nurse sits down by the head of the examination couch and starts making light conversation with you, it usually means that you are about to be given a spinal tap without benefit of anaesthetic.

"Well," she enquired brightly, "everyone enjoying their flight I hope?" She spoke—as did all air hostesses in those days—in the carefully cultivated tones of the J. Arthur Rank Charm School: the sort of well-groomed débutante-cum-Esher diction which was so perfected by the late Jessie Matthews and which seems almost to have died out now, along with elocution classes and the Court Turn. We all agreed that we were enjoying the flight. I sensed that the man in front of me already seemed a trifle uneasy; but the other passengers appeared not to have noticed anything amiss so I nodded with the rest.

"Splendid, super." Then there was an ominous pause, although the smile remained as fixed as ever. "I say, I wonder whether anyone has ever flown before?" By the murmur of assent I judged that about half the passengers had in fact flane befaw. A faint, barely discernible shadow stole across the radiance of the smile. "No, no. I meant, has anyone actually flown an aeroplane before. You know: *flown* an aeroplane, not flown *in* an aeroplane." The significance of this question appeared not to have sunk in, so she persisted. "I mean, is any of you actually—er—a qualified pilot?" This question produced a sudden chill in the cabin—accompanied as it was by a distinct and ominous lurch to starboard. I looked across at Edith, who was staring in a sort of trance with tiny drops of sweat already breaking through the face powder on

her forehead. Quite clearly, something was badly amiss. I raised my hand—and saw the young woman's smile freeze as she glanced at me.

"Excuse me young lady, but I am a qualified pilot."

She looked at me, struggling valiantly to conceal her dismay. I was a well cared-for old gentleman I suppose, in my early seventies and still (I imagine) with some vestiges of the stiff-backed bearing of a one-time career naval officer of the House of Habsburg, without a walking-stick or even spectacles. No, I suppose that it must have been other factors that did it: the Central European accent and the bristly white moustache and the rather squarish, high-cheekboned Slavic cast of countenance. One of the least endearing traits of the English, I have often had cause to observe—now quite as much as in those early post-imperial days—is their total inability to take any nationality but themselves seriously; as if Englishness were some God-ordained ideal state of humanity of which all the other peoples of the earth fall short to a greater or lesser degree. And in my case of course, being an Austro-Czech by birth placed me immediately in a sort of third-class compartment of risibility some way below Belgians and only just above the Portuguese and the Greeks: remote, quaint and absurd, probably untrustworthy but basically harmless; bracketed for ever in the realms of operetta along with Rupert of Hentzau and the late Richard Tauber, complete with monocle and silly accent.

The hostess's response to my intervention was at any rate the normal reaction of the English Lady when confronted with anything alarming or unwelcome: that is to say, she simply ignored it and went on as before, raising her voice this time and craning to look over our heads as though she suspected that Captain Lindbergh in full flying kit might be aboard, concealing himself behind the seats for a joke.

"I said, is anyone here a qualified pilot?"

Well, I can be stubborn too, and matters were clearly getting serious: the aircraft's pitching was now so pronounced that she was having to hold on to a seat-top to steady herself.

"Excuse me, young lady, but I said that I am a qualified pilot." She looked at me as if I had just made an indecent suggestion, but still with that glassy smile. Feeling that my credentials were being called into

question I decided to elaborate. "In fact I have held a pilot's licence since the year 1912, though it has not been renewed since before the last war ..."

"Oh really? How very interesting, I said, is there anyone here who ..."

"... I was one of the first pilots of the Austro-Hungarian Naval Flying Corps, and I flew as an officer-observer with the Imperial and Royal Flying Service for five months on the Italian Front in 1916. It is true, I have not piloted an aeroplane since that year, and I think that twin-engined aircraft might give me some problems at first. But I am quite confident that I could still handle a small piston-engined aircraft like this with no difficulty whatever ..."

If, until now, the full gravity of our plight had not fully dawned upon my fellow-passengers, it certainly did at that moment: the sudden, awful realisation that they were several thousand metres above the middle of the English Channel in a small aeroplane with no co-pilot and with some unspecified but dreadful emergency taking place on the flight deck. And as if that were not bad enough, that their only hope of survival should now rest in the hands of a decrepit old Mitteleuropean zany who claimed to have last flown with Prince Eugen of Savoy during the War of the Spanish Succession. As if to underline the point, the aeroplane suddenly leant over on to one wingtip for a second or two, causing the hostess to lose her balance and land in my lap with a squeal of alarm.

"I said, I am a qualified pilot ..."

"Shut UP, you horrible old man!" she hissed as the aeroplane came level again and she got up, smoothing her uniform and trying to reassume her smile as near-hysteria broke out among the passengers (Edith, mercifully, had just fainted). In the end my qualifications were rejected and she scrambled through the curtain dragging after her the passenger who had been sitting in front of me: a large, mild-mannered commercial traveller in carborundum wheels who (it transpired) had been a flight engineer in a Halifax bomber during the war.

We heard later that while the aeroplane had been standing on the field at Eastleigh a large bumble bee had flown in through the cockpit

window to escape the heat and had remained dozing behind the instrument panel until we had passed the Isle of Wight, whereupon it had flown out in alarm—perhaps realising belatedly that it was bound for a new life in the Channel Islands—and stung the pilot on the bridge of his nose. He was one of those people who have an allergy to bee stings, and within a few minutes the poor man had become woozy while his face had swollen up to a degree where he could barely see out of his eyes. In the end though, assisted by our flying carborundum-wheel man, he recovered sufficiently for us to make a safe if bumpy landing at St Helier, where fire engines and ambulances were standing by to receive us. As we descended the steps—myself following Edith, who was being carried out unconscious on a stretcher—the air hostess stood at the foot of the steps, a model of well-groomed composure once more. As the passengers filed past she bade them a smiling farewell, making the expected apology for “the unfortunate incident” and hoping that they had otherwise had a pleasant flight. And the passengers for their part—who not twenty minutes before had expected to be entering the Eternal Kingdom—assured her as the English will that yes, it had been a pleasant flight and that it was no bother to them at all to have narrowly missed nose-diving into the sea. My turn came, last in the queue. But for me there were no comforting words: only a suddenly frozen smile and the reproachful stare reserved for someone who cannot really be expected to behave well, but who has still contrived to act in a base and cowardly manner—letting the side down even though he could never have aspired to belong to the side.

“I’m afraid,” she said, “that your behaviour back there was simply disgraceful—there are no other words for it—and you must never, never, do you hear me? *never* do that sort of thing again. If you can’t restrain yourself from upsetting the other passengers with your silly jokes then you really shouldn’t fly at all. I’m afraid that in this country we just don’t behave like that.”

I have often had cause to wonder, both then and since, at that effortless tone of authority which seems to come so naturally to the English upper-middle-class female, whether the genuine article or (as I suspect in this case) one promoted from the ranks. I spent over half my

life as a career officer at sea, on land and in the air; leading men under fire aboard ships, in the control rooms of submarines and on a dozen battlefields from the hills of north China to the Paraguayan chaco. Yet I could never hope to equal the faultless self-confidence of that young woman's voice: as if only a moral degenerate or a person utterly devoid of decency could possibly fail to do as they were told. I suppose it was the result of three centuries of being able to lay down the law to the natives wherever the guns of the Royal Navy could reach. What a pity, I think now, that she should have been born into an age when the natives were fast acquiring bigger and better guns of their own.

When we arrived at my sister-in-law's house we discovered that Edith's mother had already been dead several hours, so we might just as well not have bothered. Not surprisingly, Edith insisted on returning by sea, saying that she would far rather remain on Jersey for the rest of her life, sleeping under hedges if necessary, than ever fly again.

A silly incident really, and I must apologise for having rambled on so and bored you with it. But I was reminded of it by that silly film on television. And it made me cast my mind back even further to events forty years earlier still: to my brief but hectic career in the summer and autumn of 1916 as a flier for the Noble House of Austria: not quite four months with the Austro-Hungarian Army Flying Service, followed by a period of nine weeks with the Imperial and Royal Navy's air arm. After Sister Assumpta had helped me up to my room that evening (I can still manage the stairs on my own but they prefer someone to be with me), I took out my old photograph album and began leafing through the pages.

The Sisters brought me down here in May, after I had suffered so badly from bronchial asthma in Ealing the previous summer. It was to have been only a short seaside holiday, but they have shown no disposition to move me back and anyway, a lengthy military career has taught me that nothing lasts quite so long as a temporary posting. No, I suppose that I might as well die here as there, almost on the shore of the great ocean which is now the only fatherland to which I feel any attachment whatever. And anyway, we have to be practical about these

things. I understand that the Sisters have a cheaper-by-the-dozen concession with the Swansea and West Glamorgan Co-op and receive no less than ten books of stamps for each funeral, which makes no small contribution to the Order of the Perpetual Veneration's finances over the course of a year. They are not allowed to do it back in Ealing because the Order's chaplain, a ferocious old bigot called Father Czogala, holds the Co-operative retail movement to be a part of the worldwide Jewish-Bolshevik-Masonic conspiracy. But down here they are far enough away from his rantings to have some discretion about their trading arrangements. I have enquired of Mother Superior whether she could get the Co-op to bury me at sea—no nonsense about a coffin; just a seaman-like shroud of canvas and a couple of bricks tied to my feet—but she is dead set against the notion, I fear. Being a land-locked people the Poles like to have a grave to mourn beside (though no one at all is left to mourn beside mine), and anyway, she tells me that the local Co-op are reluctant to do sea burials after a distressing incident a few months ago, when hake fishermen trawled up a coffin off Tenby. So I suppose that I shall just have to be content with being devoured by worms like the rest.

But there, I am wandering again. Yes, what about the photograph album? Well, the photograph album covers the years 1915 to 1918, kept with the Imperial and Royal War Ministry's permission as the basis for a post-war book about the career of an Austro-Hungarian submarine. It was restored to me back in May by a quite extraordinary stroke of luck after it had turned up among the possessions of a dead Ukrainian émigré in a west London bed-sitter. Most of the surviving photographs detail my career as a k.u.k. U-Boat captain: *Linien-schiffsleutnant* Ottokar, Ritter von Prohaska, submarine ace of the Mediterranean theatre and holder of Old Austria's highest military honour the Knight's Cross of the Military Order of Maria Theresa. It was these faded pictures that provided the background for my reminiscences when Kevin and Sister Elżbieta prevailed upon me to tape-record them some weeks ago. But one photograph—and one only—remains from those months in late 1916 when I was taking an enforced break from submarining and instead doing my best to get

myself killed in the air. I gazed at it that evening by the light of the bedside lamp.

Faded and sepia-grey with the passage of seventy years, it shows a group of men standing in front of an aeroplane on a sunlit, stone-littered field fringed by a few wooden huts and canvas hangars. By the foliage on the trees in the background, it looks like early September or thereabouts, and in the distance one can see a low range of eroded, bare mountains. The two men are wearing leather flying overalls with helmets and goggles, and are accompanied by four mechanics in the baggy grey uniforms and high-fronted peaked caps of Austrian soldiers. The taller of the two airmen is clearly me as I was then: erect, confident, with binoculars slung around my neck and a map case under my arm, every centimetre the Habsburg career officer. The creature standing beside me however is barely recognisable as a human being at all: at least a head and a half shorter, hunch-shouldered, bandy-legged, with a prognathous beetle-browed face scowling out from under the brim of his flying helmet like something from a zoo cage or a fairground sideshow. This is—or was—my personal chauffeur, Feldpilot-Zugsführer Zoltan Toth—or Toth Zoltan as he would have styled himself back in his native Hungary.

As for the aeroplane behind us, even if it were not for the black Maltese crosses on the tail and beneath the lower wings, one would scarcely need to be an expert on aviation history to identify it as one of that numerous family of German-designed two-seater reconnaissance biplanes of the First World War: a large, squared-off, uncompromising machine without much pretension to grace or refinement, only the sturdy utilitarian good looks of a well-bred carthorse. It stands there behind us on that field, rearing up in indignation on its large-wheeled undercarriage as if to say “What the devil do you mean?” its short nose occupied by a six-cylinder inline engine, and with the space between that and the upper wing’s leading edge occupied by the clumsy box-radiator which gives it away to the expert as an Austrian machine: to be precise, a Hansa-Brandenburg CI.

In fact, if the expert really knew his stuff he might be able to date the photograph to 1916 or thereabouts by the fact that the aeroplane is

still not in camouflage paint but left in its natural colours: gleaming varnished plywood for the fuselage and clear-doped linen for the wings, the latter so translucent (I now notice) that if I look carefully I can just make out the black crosses on the upper wings showing through on the underside. One can also just see the number on the fuselage side, 26.74, and the name, *Zoska*, bequeathed to us by some earlier Polish crew. Curious now to think that this was probably the only aeroplane in the entire history of aviation ever to have been flown in Latin.

Strange also how merely touching the grainy surface of that faded photograph evokes all the smells of those months so many years ago, rather like one of those children's ornamental stickers (Mr Dabrowski's great-granddaughter showed me one last summer), where scratching it with a fingernail liberates a pungent odour of peppermint or cinnamon. I have only to touch it and back come all the various scents of seventy years ago, flying over the now forgotten battlefields of the Austro-Italian Front: the smell of early-morning dew on the tyre-crushed grass of the airfields; the smell of petrol and cellulose dope and lubricating oil on hot engines; the warm sweet-sour perfume of mahogany plywood; the reek of cordite and fresh blood; and the nauseating rotten-egg stench of anti-aircraft shellbursts. And the smell of burning wood and linen left hanging in the thin, cold air, flavoured sometimes with a sinister taint like that of fat burning in a frying-pan.

I never spoke or even thought much about it in the years that followed: we had lost the war, while I had lost my country and my career and had a new life to build for myself. Many of the memories were distressing—in fact are painful to me even now, a lifetime after the events. And to tell you the truth, I very much doubted whether anyone would be at all interested. But young Kevin and Sister Elzbieta tell me that I am now one of the very few left who remember it all. So perhaps now that I have at last committed my U-Boat reminiscences to posterity I might as well tell you about my flying career as well. It may perhaps interest you; and if nothing else it will help me to pass the time before the undertakers come to screw down the lid on me. You will probably think some of the tales a little improbable, but there you are, I am afraid that I can do nothing about that: Austria-Hungary was a

rather improbable sort of country, and in the year 1916 flying was still a decidedly eccentric sort of thing to be doing, so much so that the psychiatric tests which became *de rigueur* for aspirant fliers in the Second World War were held to be completely unnecessary in the First since, by definition, anyone who volunteered to fly must be not quite right in the head—or if he was not already, very soon would be. I hope that these yarns of mine may at least entertain you, and perhaps give you some idea as well of what it was like to go up in an aeroplane in those few brief years when men took to the air wearing the two-headed-eagle emblem of the Holy Roman Empire.