

The Knife Edge

by Paul Hargreaves

The airframe of a 1936 Stearman is a lacework of welded tubes skinned over with fabric which, in the decelerative forces of a vertical impact, will crumple with virtually no engineered resistance. Max understood this perfectly and could easily picture the slow-motion buckling of the spars and the accordion collapse of the fuselage as the propeller blades' churned up the ground. And although he knew from his wartime experience that this would be followed by an explosive rush of flame, he could never quite resolve this element into the imagined event sequence; surely the ground strike would be sufficient to spare him any knowledge of the fire. Surely death would be an efficient business.

Max thought it neither odd nor morbid to call these thoughts to mind as he settled into the aft cockpit and snugged-up the straps of the shoulder harness. It was in fact an almost calming habit of mind, one that he indulged so faithfully that he might as well have included it on the pre-flight checklist: BELTS AND HARNESSSES-CHECK/VISUALIZE VERTICAL IMPACT-CHECK.

He turned his focus to the more immediate business of engaging the starter and coaxing the propeller through a series of reluctant turns. Through four revolutions the radial engine debated its options. Then, in a belching of blue smoke and a roar of firing cylinders, it finally yielded. Max pulled his flight goggles down from his forehead and taxied out to the grass strip.

It was good to be airborne, to feel the play of the wind transmitted through gentle oscillations of the control stick and to face its blast where it planed over the windshield. Max squinted to read the altimeter. He watched the needle's slow progress as the aircraft lumbered skyward along its shallow gradient. As he climbed, everything below became remote, reduced to an abstraction that offered a comforting solace of detachment.

He held the nose into the wind for some time, scanning the empty fields below where friends had once waved as he roared

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overhead. They were all gone now — some dead, others transported to the purgatory of their retirement residences. He'd visited them periodically, asked if they'd care to join him for a hop over the old patch. Most had declined, either from unspoken concern over his fitness as a pilot and the airworthiness of the ancient biplane, or from the physical limitation of climbing into the cockpit. Which was, admittedly, getting more and more difficult, even for Max.

The once-familiar fields continued to glide below him, the woodlots ablaze in the full flush of autumn sunshine. Some of the open tracts were still being farmed, but most had been sold to developers engaged in the more profitable cultivation of rooftops, chimney stacks and swimming pools.

Max now found himself entirely beyond the fields and groves, and over the sprawling networks of grey streets and grey shingles. The dullness of this urban palette, flecked with black pool covers where the fallen leaves were already beginning to decay, rapidly extinguished any desire to go on. Turning back, he noted the quickening pace as the tailwind sped him over the fields, back toward the farm, the hangar and the grass strip.

The air was clear and dry, revealing every detail of the familiar landscape beneath him — the crumbling ruins of the twin silos and the places where the barn's roof had collapsed. He could see the corrugated ridges of the fallow field, the furrows of the most recent plowing now sunken into two years of neglect. And he could see the red roof of the farm house where his wife, Eileen, was surely pausing from her quilting and straining an ear to the sound of the approaching aircraft.

He pulled the control stick hard left, throwing the airplane into a steep turn, and held it there as he circled.

Eileen would surely find the hand-written letter among his papers, he thought. That and the oncologist's report he had buried along side it. He had explained it all as best he could, wrestling the awkward sentences onto the paper in a way that, he hoped, would liberate her from any sense of guilt or self doubt. He'd gone over the

thing a hundred times and firmly decided that, when the moment came, this would be the right thing.

He held the aircraft at the knife edge, through one final vertical turn in the sunlight. One last go around and one long look down before slipping into a smoothly controlled descent. The windsock nodding at the approach end of the runway rose to meet him and the tires bounded softly on the grass. He let his hand hang loosely against the yellow cloth of the fuselage as he fishtailed the airplane toward the hangar.

It wanted an overcast day. An absence of shadows. Then, a chop of the throttle and a gentle pull of the stick would do the trick. A firm kick of the rudder. That would be the moment when he'd close his eyes and lift his face into the planing wind. It would surely be an efficient business.

