

## *Aeroplanes and Bridges*

Jim looked at the kitchen table and saw in his mind a completed model Spitfire. His sister, Jane, looked at the table and saw dozens of bits and pieces, none of which made much sense to her. Maybe that's because she was just seven years old, while Jim was all of 13. When their mother, Clara Elliot, looked at the kitchen table, she saw a tidying up job that needed done by bedtime.

'May I begin making my new model tonight?' Jim asked, knowing the answer very well, but ever hopeful.

Mrs Elliot grinned. 'If I said "yes", I'd have to prise you away with a grappling iron to get you to bed. Best wait until tomorrow when your mind is fresh anyway.'

Bert laughed. 'His mind is fresh 24 hours a day when it's focused on aeroplanes or sailing ships. But I don't see him begging for a late night to do schoolwork.'

Bert, who was the second of the four Elliot children, and three years older than Jim, thought he was really quite grown up. Despite that, he was as excited as his little brother about the Spitfire. After all, it was the latest thing in aviation, and he reckoned that it would

win the war against the Germans. The oldest of the family, Bob, who wasn't at home that night, would have enjoyed helping build the aeroplane too. But even to Bob, who was 19, Mum Elliot's word was law. If she said the model had to be packed away till tomorrow, that's just what happened. And it usually happened without a grumbling match, because all their lives the Elliot children had known that Dad and Mum only said 'no' when they really meant it. Arguing about it made so little difference that the youngsters gave it up early on.

Mum Elliot was strict, but she wasn't unreasonable. She knew that Jim was taking his time packing up the pieces because he didn't want to lose any of the littlest ones.

'Those wings are very fragile looking,' she said, as she watched.

Jim's eyes lit up. Here was an opportunity to talk on one of his favourite subjects.

'Yes,' he agreed. 'The Spitfire is quite different from the usual fat-winged monoplanes or biplanes. It has a really large root chord that makes the wings very strong even though they're thin. And do you know what?' he asked, but didn't wait for a reply. 'Each of the Spitfire's wings houses eight Colt/Browning .303 machine guns! I guess that's why it's called the Spitfire. It can swoop down from the sky spitting fire on its target as it dives.'

Jim's mother was just about to ask for more details about the aeroplane, when she caught her son's eye and realised that if she asked just one more question, they'd still be sitting side by side at the table at midnight. Once the boy started on a subject, there was no stopping him.

'Enough!' Mum Elliot laughed. And the pair of them joined the rest of the family at the fireside.

Dad had the Bible open already, and the reading was about heaven and how wonderful it would be. Jim listened to his father reading, and followed the words in his mind. They were wonderful words. He'd heard them so often, and read them over and over again. So when his father reached verse four, Jim was able to join in and say the words along with him. 'He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'

The Elliot young people couldn't remember a time when their day had not begun with a reading from the Bible and prayer, and they couldn't remember a night when it hadn't ended in just the same way.

When Jim went to bed at night, he tried to keep the evening Bible reading in his mind. He liked when that was the last thing he thought about before falling asleep. But tonight his mind was all of a jumble. He could picture Spitfires dodging and diving through the

air, spitting their deadly fire on the enemy below. And they were all muddled up with thoughts about heaven, where there was to be no tears, no death or mourning, no crying or pain. He thought about Europe, in the throes of the Second World War, with bombs maybe dropping on London or Berlin as he lay comfortably in bed. Jim rolled over and tried to snuggle his mind as well as his body deep in the blankets. But thoughts of war and of heaven would not go away.

‘It’s a shame that these planes are made to kill people,’ he decided, just as sleep crept up on him. ‘It would be great if they could be used to help people rather than to shoot them.’

Bert crept into the room to get ready for bed, and was surprised that his little brother was already asleep.

‘I don’t know how he does it,’ thought Bert. ‘I think he must have an on/off switch!’

Early the following evening, Spitfire building began in earnest. Jane was trusted to sort the pieces out by shape, while Jim and Bert consulted the instruction sheet.

‘Doesn’t the stressed skin wing cover make it easily damaged?’ Jim asked his brother.

‘Yes, it does,’ agreed Bert. ‘The Hurricane is a much stronger plane, but it’s not nearly so versatile. The Spitfire is the nippiest of all. The one thing that it can’t do is nose over into a dive without the engine coughing. The Germans are one up on us there. Their

Messerschmitt Bf-109s can roll right over without cutting out. Spitfire pilots can only half-roll before diving.'

'Why does that happen?' asked Jim.

'I guess it has something to do with the carburetted Rolls-Royce Merlin engine,' Bert suggested. 'And the thing about war is that there's no time to make refinements on planes. You just have to keep producing them to maintain the forces in the air.'

As Bert spoke, Jim remembered his falling asleep thoughts.

'Wouldn't it be great if aircraft could be used for helping people rather than fighting?' he asked.

'Some are,' Bert reminded him. 'Look at the Northrop Alpha. It carries up to 465 lbs of mail.'

Jim grinned. 'I'd like to fly one of them. Sitting in an open cockpit really appeals to me!'

Bert shivered. 'Actually, I quite like the thought of a Beech Staggerwing.'

'Model C17L?' asked his younger brother. 'You're into real luxury class travel there. I'll stick with the Northrop Alpha and its open cockpit. And I'll wave to you as I buzz past!'

Jane, who wished she knew enough about aircraft to join in her big brothers' conversation, grabbed the chance. There was one plane she did know about, and Jim talking of buzzing past reminded her of it.

‘My favourite plane is the Granville Gee Bee,’ she chipped in. ‘Because it’s the same shape as a bumble bee.’

‘Quite right!’ laughed Jim. ‘But it can fly at speeds up to 252 mph, which makes it faster than any bumble bee I’ve ever seen.’

His little sister stored that piece of information carefully in her memory. There was no telling when it would come in useful in the future. Being the only girl in the family made Jane collect useful snippets of technical information that she could toss into conversations with her brothers’ friends. Sometimes that really surprised them!

Interesting things appealed to Jim Elliot. And the history of Portland in Oregon, to which his family had moved from Seattle before he was born, interested him very much indeed.

‘Your Portland assignments should be completed before the summer holidays,’ his class teacher said, towards the end of April 1940. You can take your time researching them. Choose what aspect of the city most interests you from the list I’ve given you.’

‘I’d like to write about the bridges over the Willamette River,’ DK told Jim, as they walked from the school to the bicycle racks. ‘You could help me with my research. You’re good with facts and figures.’

‘I wouldn’t mind visiting some of the bridges with you, if that’s what you mean,’ agreed Jim. ‘But I can’t decide what aspect of the city I’d like to write on.’

‘Portland’s geography is interesting,’ he thought, as he freewheeled down a hill on his way home from school. ‘Although it’s a big port city, it’s not actually on the coast. But when the Willamette and Columbia rivers meet, there is such a volume of water that it’s as good as being on the Pacific Coast. Even huge ocean-going ships steam up-river to Portland, bringing a great variety of things in their holds.’

His brothers had taken Jim to see ships’ cargoes being unloaded. Jim could list all the main imports, because he’d had to learn them as a little boy at school. ‘Lumber and furniture, wheat and flour, canned and fresh fruits to sell; packed meat, paper and paper pulp, chemicals and wool as well.’ Jim laughed aloud. ‘If that’s meant to be poetry, it’s awful! I suppose it was made to rhyme to help us remember it.’

The following Saturday, DK and Jim set out on their bikes to look at some of the city’s bridges.

‘Which is the oldest one?’ DK asked.

‘The Hawthorn is the oldest highway bridge over the Willamette. It was built in 1910. But the one I like best is the Steel Bridge that was built two years later. Its two spans can be raised and lowered independently of each other.’

‘My favourite is St John’s Bridge,’ DK said. ‘It’s the only steel suspension bridge in Portland. When the setting sun hits the bridge, it looks as though it’s on fire.’

‘I remember Bob and Bert taking me to see it when it opened. I think I was about four at the time,’ Jim commented.

‘That’s right,’ agreed DK. ‘It opened in 1931. And the Burnside Bridge was built five or so years before that.’

‘Portland’s bridges would make an interesting assignment,’ Jim thought aloud.

‘That’s why I got there first!’ laughed DK. ‘You’ll have to think of something else.’

‘I am,’ agreed Jim. ‘I’m thinking it’s time for our picnic. I’m starving.’

The boys found a grassy patch within sight of St John’s Bridge, and they discussed its streamlined design as they ate their way through the egg sandwiches Mum Elliot had provided.

Quarter of an hour later, both boys were comfortably full, comfortably warm and more than a little sleepy. They lay on the grass and talked for a while.

‘I think Jesus is rather like a bridge,’ Jim said, looking up into the bright blue afternoon sky.

‘Don’t see it myself,’ grinned DK. ‘But nearly everything reminds you about Jesus. The only thing



that reminds me about him is once a month when I'm hauled out of a perfectly good long lie to go to church.'

Jim didn't say anything aloud, but he did say a silent prayer for his friend.

'OK then,' said DK. 'Explain yourself. How come Jesus is like a bridge?'

Sitting up, Jim wondered how to explain what he was thinking.

'It's like this,' he said, 'when God made Adam and Eve, he made everything perfect. And the Bible says that God used to walk with them in the Garden of Eden. Then it all went pear-shaped when Adam and Eve sinned. Since then there has been a chasm between God and man, the chasm of sin.'

'You've preached your sermon without mentioning a bridge!' laughed DK. 'But I suppose it's still to come.'

'And it's coming right now,' Jim agreed. 'When Jesus died on the cross, it was so that those who trust in him, and ask him to forgive their sins, could have their sins forgiven. He opened the way back to God. Jesus is like a bridge that allows all who trust in him to cross over the chasm of sin and go to heaven when they die.'

DK looked at St John's Bridge.

'You mean it's as though the only way over the Willamette River was by one bridge, and only those who crossed it could get to the other side. And the one

way to get from earth to heaven is by believing in Jesus, who is therefore like a bridge between man and God.'

'That's an even better sermon than mine,' Jim smiled.

DK looked surprised. 'I'm not a preacher-man,' he said. 'And I guess I never will be.'

'Have you always been religious?' asked DK, as the pair of them cycled for home.

'What do you mean?' wondered Jim. 'I don't know if I am religious.'

'That bit about putting your trust in Jesus. Have you done that?' queried DK.

'Yes, I have,' Jim said, trying not to sound too excited.

He had prayed that he'd have the opportunity to tell DK about the Lord, but usually his friend wasn't interested.

'Want to hear about it?' asked Jim casually.

'Suppose I might as well,' his friend said. 'But don't preach at me. I was at church a week ago Sunday, and I'm not due another sermon for a full two-and-a-half weeks.'

'In a way I've always believed in Jesus,' Jim said, as he freewheeled down a slope. 'Dad and Mum are Christians, and I've always known they loved the Lord with all their hearts. You only need to be in our home for a day to know that.'

‘Yea, they’re different,’ agreed DK. ‘But I want to hear about you, not about Dad and Mum Elliot...’

Jim explained how the Bible was read in his home morning and evening each day, and always had been. He told DK that his parents prayed for them and prayed with them every single day, and how he and his brothers and sister had heard stories of Jesus since before they could remember.

‘One night, when I was six,’ Jim said, ‘we’d all been at a meeting ...’

‘You mean a church service?’ asked his pal.

‘Yea, kind of,’ agreed Jim. ‘And I knew in my heart that night that I really, truly trusted the Lord Jesus Christ as my Saviour. I remember telling Mum that the Lord Jesus could come wherever he wanted because all our family were now Christians, apart from Jane, who was still too young to know him.’

‘What do you mean the Lord Jesus could come whenever he wanted. He came 2000 years ago!’

‘But he’s coming back one day,’ Jim said. ‘And when he does, he’ll take all who believe in him to heaven.’

‘And the rest?’ asked DK.

‘Those who don’t go to heaven, go to hell,’ Jim said seriously. ‘And I’m not making that up. It’s in the Bible.’

The boys cycled in silence for a while. For the first time DK was giving some thought to the Christian faith. And Jim? He was praying for his friend.