

Someone started a radial engine inside a nearby hangar, and the familiar, homey *put-a-put, put-a-put, put, put* sound as the engine coughed, sputtered, and finally began to idle smoothly was a comfort.

Jack, walking across the grass from the apron to the Ops Shack, carrying his parachute under a tropical sun and sweating freely inside his flight suit, took a deep breath and felt a smile at the corners of his mouth. For a few moments, he wasn't conscious of much else, just the swing of his legs, the heat of the sun on his back, the sweat trickling down between his shoulders, the weight of the parachute over his shoulder, the feel of the ground under his feet, and the memory of the blue sky and cool air at 10,000 feet as he checked out the P-35 he'd just landed. That P-35 was one of those that had suffered minor damage as a result of a landing mishap two days ago. Regulations required that the airplane go through a test regimen after repairs, and Jack, as the newly assigned squadron assistant maintenance officer, drew the task of the test flight.

Dyess kept reading for a second, puffing on his pipe, as Jack mounted the two steps up to the veranda and stood before him. Then Dyess looked up.

"Know what I've got here, Jack?" Dyess asked.

"No, sir."

"It's your personnel file. I've been reviewing it. I got curious about your time with the 31st Pursuit last summer."

Jack shrugged the parachute harness off his shoulder and hooked it on the back of a nearby chair. Then he took off his leather helmet.

"So how did you like the 31st?"

"It's a good outfit."

"But you requested a transfer. I can't think it was because you'd heard something about the 35th being sent to the Philippines and you wanting to be in the middle of the action. That move was top secret at the time."

"Yes, sir." Jack hesitated. "Truth is, sir, my fiancée lives in Los Angeles. I figured if I were at Hamilton Field, I might have a better chance of seeing her."

Dyess lit another cigarette. "Looks like that transfer went through pretty quick. You know someone in Personnel?"

"Well, sir..."

"Never mind. That question was pretty much rhetorical. Of course you do. But I guess it backfired on you."

Jack shrugged. "Only half the group was sent out this time. I could've been with the other half."

"But you didn't try to stay behind. Not that I remember. Hell, you were in my flight at Hamilton before they made me half a squadron commander."

"Sir, asking a favor is one thing. Asking two is another. I won't say I was happy, but it didn't look like there was much even Colonel Miller could do about it."

Dyess grinned. "You know Joe Miller?"

"He and my father served together in France."

"OK. Well, that makes some sense. I know the colonel, as it happens, and you're right. You could've pushed for two favors, but I doubt you'd have gotten a third."

"Yes, sir."

"Boyd Wagner tells me you did pretty well yesterday. I had to remind him I needed you again. I think he'd like to shanghai you. So how d'you like the P-35?"

"I hope we get P-40s soon, but the P-35 isn't a bad airplane. Handles really well. Not so sure about those engines, though."

"What do you mean?"

"They need to be replaced. At the least, they need to be overhauled. The one I was just in was thirty hours overdue. Stateside, the line chief would've pushed it back behind the hangar if he couldn't change the engine."

"So he would have. But we're not Stateside. I keep hearing we could be in a war zone any minute. Would you rather have a P-35 with a tired engine, or no airplane at all?"

Jack scoffed. "Ten minutes into my first dogfight it might not matter."

"That bother you?"

"Hell, yes."

“Good. So you know, I don’t like it either, and I hope we get P-40s soon, too. Speaking of which, how well do you remember the Allison engine in the P-39?”

“Fairly well.”

Dyess regarded him in silence for a moment. The squadron commander took another drag on his cigarette, then put it out in the ashtray on the table next to his chair.

“Sit down, Jack,” Dyess said.

Jack dragged up the chair his parachute hung on and sat.

“Remind me, how much civilian time do you have?” Dyess asked.

Jack blinked. He’d started flying in 1938, just before his father was killed at the Cleveland Air Races. But he hadn’t thought much about his civilian hours since he’d been accepted for the Air Corps. It was mostly cross-country and stunt flying or cloud-chasing in a Waco biplane. He told Wagner that he’d been a flight instructor, and that was true, but he’d only taught for a couple of months before he went into the Air Corps.

“I don’t remember exactly,” Jack replied. “Four hundred hours or so, I think.”

“You didn’t log it down?”

“Yes, sir. But that logbook is back home, and it was made pretty clear to me at Kelly Field that whatever I’d learned as a civilian, I’d better unlearn or better yet, just forget.”

Dyess’s grin came and went. “I see. Well, that means, given the time I see here in your file and what I estimate you’ve flown here with me, that you have something like 700 hours total flying time.”

“Is that a lot?”

“Yes and no.” Dyess gestured at the pilots and mechanics gathered around the P-40E across the apron. “Things were different in 1938 when I got my wings. The syllabus was a lot more detailed and training was a year instead of nine months. Nowadays, you kids come out of flight school with a set of shiny silver wings and about 200 hours flying time. Then the Air Corps puts you into something like a P-39 or a P-40 and invites you to do your best to bust your ass. Darwin might like that approach, but I’ve got a squadron to run. How much time did you get in P-39s with the 31st?”

“About fifty hours, I think.”

“That’s close. Fifty-two and some change, according to your file. How did you like the P-39?”

Jack smiled. “Like I said the other night, she’s fun to fly, but you’ve got to watch your elevators. With the engine behind the cockpit like that, she’s real sensitive to pitch changes. Some of the guys claimed she’d tumble end over end in an accelerated stall.”

Dyess nodded. “37mm cannon in front of the cockpit, Allison engine behind it, center of gravity not as far forward as on most airplanes? Yeah, I could maybe see that.”

Jack waited. He could see Dyess was thinking something over.

“OK,” Dyess said finally. “You’re a pretty good pilot. I knew that after flying with you back in the States. Wagner thinks you’re pretty good, too, and he isn’t the type for unnecessary praise. Your record bears that out. I’ve heard enough about the P-39 to think that it got out of the Bell Aircraft factory with maybe one or two interesting flight characteristics most pilots find out about the hard way. Again, it adds up to Jack Davis being a pretty good pilot. Now I’m going to tell you something you won’t like, Jack, but I want you to bear with me. You’re going to be one of the last pilots I put in the P-40.”

Jack blinked and sat back a little. He thought of that beautiful airplane sitting on the apron about two hundred yards away from him.

Dyess grimaced. “I figured you’d take it like that. I have a good reason for it, though. Jack, I think you can go up in the P-40 anytime you want and learn the airplane quick. You’ve got experience in the P-39, which is a trickier airplane and has the same engine, so that should make it easier for you.” Dyess paused to light another cigarette. He took a draw on it and pointed it at Jack while he exhaled a cloud of smoke.

“But out of the twenty pilots in this squadron, you’re one of maybe a half-dozen, myself included, with the combination of skill and experience to make that happen. I can’t run a squadron with six pilots in it. I need the other fourteen guys, if not to the same level, at least trained up enough that when I put them in the P-40, we don’t lose half of them in silly accidents in the first week.” The squadron commander paused.

“So here’s the deal. I’m making you an unofficial instructor pilot. You’re going to take these guys up in an A-27 and evaluate them. You see any really bad habits or deficiencies, you let me know. Then we’ll work with them in the P-35. After that, as we figure the guys are ready and as P-40s come available, they go into the P-40. It’s

going to mean a lot of flying and a lot of work on the ground and in the air. Are you up for it?"

Jack started to grimace and quit; started to sigh and stifled it. "Yes, sir," he said.

Dyess leaned back in his chair and grinned. "You know, Jack, what we're doing here, it's not about flying and having a good time. This is a pursuit squadron. Our job is to kill people in other airplanes. We can't do that nearly so well if we lose half our guys to accidents because they don't know what they're doing."

"I understand, sir."

"It's just you had your itty bitty heart set on flying that P-40, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"So tell me, have you reread the manual for the airplane?"

"Yes, sir."

Dyess nodded. "What's your flaps down, gear down stall speed?"

"What airplane weight?" Jack asked.

"7500 pounds."

"Manual says 75 mph."

"What do you say?"

"It varies a few knots from airplane to airplane. With flaps and gear up, she's supposed to stall at 85 mph, and at 7500 pounds, my landing speed is 90 mph. Get much below 100 mph and things will start to get squirrely pretty quick, is my feeling."

"Define squirrely."

"Well, the manual also says the airplane has no tendency to enter a spin from a stall. But it also says when she does spin, she drops her nose, whips hard to the left, and spins violently. You get below 100 mph and you're close to stalling anyway."

"And you can't enter a spin until you stall," Dyess agreed. "OK. Think you can start an Allison engine?"

Jack shrugged. "It's been a couple of months. I'd have my crew chief look over my shoulder as a backup and take my time going down the checklist."

"Most of these guys would think that kind of sissy, having your crew chief look over your shoulder."

“They can think what they like. Any Air Corps crew chief worth a damn knows the airplane better than I do, or at least as well. The crew chief’s job is to make sure the airplane is airworthy. He’s on my side and I don’t mind having him right there, looking over my shoulder.”

Dyess thought for a moment. “Your dad was a racing pilot, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, sir. Every race I ever watched, when he started up, he had his mechanic looking over his shoulder.”

“You learned some good habits. OK. This is what I want you to do. If I’m going to make you an instructor, it’s going to be easier for these guys to listen to you if they know you know what you’re talking about. I want you to go fly that P-40 on the apron. Take her up, wring her out, get reacquainted. If you feel comfortable with the airplane, make a low-level high-speed pass over the runway, but Jack, make no mistake. This is not an invitation to do any Hollywood stuff. No aerobatics on the deck for a while, OK? In particular, I want you to remember that the manual specifically prohibits intentional spins, so don’t get into any unintentional spins, either.”

Jack grinned. “I think I can manage that for you, Skipper.”

“See that you do. Come on. Let’s go make you the envy of all eyes.”

The crowd around the airplane fell silent as Dyess walked up to it with Jack in tow. The pilots grinned in anticipation when they noticed Jack was in his flying gear and carrying his parachute. One or two of them exchanged glances. Roy Chant caught Jack’s eye and winked.

Dyess went to stand beside the left wing root and put a hand possessively on the fuselage. He ran his hand over the smooth aluminum skin of the airplane, smiling for a moment, and then turned to face the other pilots.

“Beautiful airplane, isn’t it?” he asked, the smile still on his face. “I hear they’re being set up pretty quickly now, even if it might be another week before we get ours.”

The pilots, without being told, edged closer to Dyess. Jack stood back a little, watching the rest of them, and watching the squadron commander.

He couldn’t decide what it was about Dyess. The pilots crowding around him were young, but only a few years younger. He was a first lieutenant, and the rest of the pilots

were second lieutenants, most of them not long out of flight school. Dyess wasn't particularly handsome or strong or otherwise distinguished.

But it was a fact that Dyess was, as Jack was unashamed to admit (at least to himself), the best pilot in the squadron, maybe the best pursuit pilot in the FEAF, with the possible exception of Boyd Wagner. Jack had no intention of letting things stay that way, but Dyess set a high standard as a pilot. Now, watching him with his pilots, Jack realized the man set a high standard as a leader.

So maybe it was the man's easy confidence in his own ability, the absolute assurance that he could take an airplane, make it do exactly what he wanted it to do, and remain master of any situation that might arise. That, Jack realized, looking at the faces of the other pilots as well as into his own heart, was a real achievement.

It was something to remember, something to study. While Dyess spoke to his pilots, Jack studied the P-40E.

From the prop spinner and the hefty oil cooler under the Allison engine back to her well-formed tail, the P-40 was every inch a pursuit airplane. It *looked* tough and self-reliant, like the kind of airplane that should have a bunch of Jap flags—well, Japs, Krauts, or whomever, he corrected himself—painted under the cockpit. He looked along the leading edge of the wing and saw the muzzles of three .50-caliber machine guns. He could see the armament panels in the wing just behind the guns, where the ground crew would feed in the ammunition belts. Before he actually knew what he was doing, he began to identify features on the airplane he'd read about in the manual, looking down the line of the air scoop above the nose to the mechanical ring gunsight in line with the optical sight just above the instrument panel inside the cockpit, down to the six exhaust stacks that poked out of the engine nacelle, still gleaming and looking factory-new. That thought made him frown to himself; it meant they'd have to slow-time these damned engines. That thought brought up another: had the machine guns been sighted in? What the hell good was a machine gun if it didn't shoot where the pilot's gunsight pointed?

"Lt. Davis," he heard Dyess say.

"Yes, sir."

Dyess beckoned and Jack pushed through the crowd to Dyess's side.

“I’m sure you all know Jack by now,” Dyess said. “And in what I’m sure will be a popular decision, Jack here is going to be an instructor pilot. Which means he’s going to be stuck in A-27s and P-35s awhile longer, so as a consolation prize, he’s taking the first flight in our first P-40.”

Dyess turned to the line chief. “Chief, is she ready to go?”

“Sure ’nuff, Lt. Dyess. Just baby the engine a little.”

“You hear that, Jack?”

“Yes, sir,” Jack replied. “Perhaps the chief would look over my shoulder while I start the engine?”