

THE DISPATCHERS

On the night of November 19, 1943, the airspace above Germany at midnight was a bleak place. At 22,000 feet the sky was very dark and dotted with stars, no moon was visible and down below all of the nation at war was blacked out. The local wardens had done an excellent job in monitoring compliance - the ground was more of a known fact than a visible reality. Far in the north it was possible to imagine or even glimpse the lights of neutral Sweden, a dream of a peaceful existence in a world at war.

On this night, if one was able to hover in midair to see it, there floated a faint, luminous cloud up in the sky. Its dimensions were hard to tell in the absence of any scale or point of reference, but it may have been about five feet across, and it was more or less round. It was too uniform and smooth to be a regular cloud, and its inner glow at the least set it apart from other clouds.

From the abyss below, another luminous mass approached the cloud. It moved at a snail's pace towards the weakly shining cloud until the two were almost level. After a while, a wordless channel of communication opened between the entities as they slowly revolved around each other.

"Hullo! Can you tell me what is going on here?" the newcomer asked.

"What do you mean?" was the soundless reply.

"What are we doing here?"

The slightly higher cloud entity communicated: "Ah... You're new. I thought I was getting an experienced deputy. Not to worry, we'll soon have you up to par here." The other entity changed color from pearly to slightly pink, but it was not possible to say if that was intentional.

"Look, old boy, you'll just have to fill me in from scratch; I don't have a clue."

The upper entity communicated, "Would it help if I did this?" and the cloud turned into an RAF Flight Lieutenant in uniform, complete with ribbons and a cap.

"Just how did you do that?" exclaimed the other entity.

"Easy. Just think of yourself as you last saw yourself."

In a moment there appeared another former pilot out of the formless blob. This one was in flight gear.

"Well well... Squadron Leader you were then, I see. Were you on one of the missions going on below?"

The other apparition said, "Jameson, John W., 676 Squadron. I seem to have gone on a flight but then I remember only half of it."

"That's because there was no other half of it for you. You died. After that you have been adjusting to this side of life again. Oh - my name was Brown, David Brown, by the way. I died in the Battle of Britain already; got my derrière mauled by a 109 near Calais. Have been doing this since January, 1941."

"Seeing you helps me for now at least. Now just what the heck are we doing up here?"

"We're here to dispatch people, just as you were dispatched - when was it?"

The Squadron Leader thought back. "I don't know actually. What day is it now?"

"November 19."

"I went on a flight on the 11th."

The Flight Lieutenant looked appreciative. "And you're here already. You've done this many times, an old soul therefore." He swung round and appeared to seat himself comfortably in the air just below the Squadron Leader. Squadron Leader Jameson tried a few small movements himself and found he could easily position himself any which way, gravity didn't seem to enter the equation at all.

"You probably have been to see some dispatchers and they decided it'd be good for your development to try your hand at this side of the game for a while."

Jameson looked puzzled. "I don't recall seeing anyone or anything before you."

Brown shook his head. "Another indication of your old soul. You see, some dispatchers think that old souls can cross over with no help at all from us on the other side. That's not so. I believe every dying person should be guided over; otherwise they do just as you do and waste time and effort in trying to figure out where they are. Even if you've done it a number of times, death is always a problem." Brown indicated his displeasure at the lax attention to proper procedures of some dispatchers.

"In a nutshell, this is how it goes: When you die, you cross over from time to outside of time. As you step over, you also step out of space as we know it on the ground. That's why you can float around here like this with no visible means of support " - Brown smiled in a snide way - "or go see anyone or any place. The only restriction is interaction, or lack thereof. You may not affect the world below as it has its own set of rules it abides to, and your vision being out of time might be beneficial or detrimental to those still in the world if you had access to them. The only relaxation of the rule is dispatching, and that's where it gets interesting."

Squadron Leader Jameson looked puzzled still. "So... what do dispatchers do then?" he asked.

Brown started to explain. "As many as there are lifetimes, so many there are deaths. Some of them are easy, like dying of pneumonia at an old age in your bed with weeping relatives around you, and some are violent, such as your recent departure." Brown looked into the distance with no focus in his eyes. "Yes, quite violent. A Flak cannon shell blasted your entire bomb load, and the plane was blown to smithereens. Remains of the crew were also evenly spread about Amstelveen in the Netherlands."

Jameson had to ask, "How can you tell?"

Brown was calm as he explained, "I am outside time, remember? I can see back and just by thinking of you and your last moments, I can see what happened to you, or me, or anyone at any time."

Brown looked at Jameson again. "We're killers, us dispatchers. We take people over the border, according to the method and procedure of the death that awaits them."

Jameson asked, "But how can you tell how a man is to die?"

Brown said, "I think of the man. Or, if you will, I can have a look at the roster." A stack of form papers appeared in his hand, bound in a file. "This is our next task. It's a 642 Squadron Lancaster, call sign LZ-V, bound for Berlin. There are seven regulars aboard and one Group Commander on a sightseeing trip. We need to take five lives, but let three of them survive and become prisoners of war." Brown leafed through the papers. "Let's see... kill five, spare three... looks like a lucky Flak cannon crew and then fire on both wings to me. That way there's no explosion, but we can deal with the deaths one by one and then still allow time for the three to escape the stricken plane."

Jameson said, "I still don't know what we're going to do, but I guess I'll learn on the job."

"Exactly! Let's just go and do this one and you'll see what I mean. Ah... I believe the raid's on, and the planes are coming."

As Brown spoke, Jameson became aware of a congregation of other entities in their vicinity. A total of five more blobs floated about, and Brown greeted a couple. The other blobs did not assume forms, but rather just wobbled about. Jameson felt a bit odd, but decided to remain in human form for the time being. Then he became aware of the planes approaching from the West. The drone of hundreds of Merlin engines was initially very faint but grew to a menacing rumble and soon Jameson was able to see an armada of bombers coming in. He could see bright flashes of Flak grenade explosions, and even brighter explosions where Lancasters ceased to be, and crews were dispatched en masse.

"Impressive, there's dispatching going on already and we're still far from Berlin," Brown said. "Let's go and locate our charge, shall we. Just think of the call sign. LZ-V. It'll take you there." And as soon as Jameson thought of the callsign, he found himself close to the cockpit of a late model Lancaster. He could see the pilot and copilot easily in the dim lights of the gauges.

"Can we go in?" he asked Brown.

"Of course. Just think your way inside the plane." Jameson thought of the navigator and in a moment he was sitting next to the man huddled above his charts. Brown followed him.

"Let's have a peek at the roster and plan the sequence. Ah yes. This is a slightly rough case, so I'll handle him. He has died peacefully for three of his four past lives, now it's time for a painful departure. The pilot and co-pilot along with the passenger will survive, albeit the Group Commander loses an arm, so we can just figure out how to dispatch the crew back here.

The tail gunner we can dispatch with a fast bullet - his files say 'no need for experiencing pain this time around'".

The wireless operator fiddled with his equipment and the bomb aimer chatted with the pilot. "The mid-upper gunner we can also just kill. No special mentions in his information, so I always go for an easy exit in those cases," Brown explained.

Jameson felt a chill. His presence beside the navigator made the man uneasy and he looked about the plane, but of course missed seeing the Squadron Leader sitting next to him.

"The sequence: A Flak grenade kills the tail gunner. The next two grenades blow holes in the wings. The navigator must get some shrapnel outside the flak jacket, but in a lethal position... a thigh artery would be good. The upper gunner can die of the same burst, but with a massive dose of shrapnel to ensure a quick exit. Then the bomb aimer and the wireless operator - I'll do these two myself. Maybe you want to watch how I dispatch the tail gunner, and then you can try the mid-upper gunner? And I almost forgot: when you dispatch someone, you're the first thing he'll see. You need to take him in your control and tell him to go towards the bright light up there, see?" And Brown pointed to a whitish hue bright spot which was visible through the roof of the fuselage. "That's all. Now, it's time to go and start to work on these, we're right above the flak fields of Hanover. Come with me."

Brown went to the tail of the plane. "Now, to get to dispatch someone, you usually have to enter slow time. That means you'll move so fast that their time becomes very slow, and this way you can modify trajectories of grenades and bullets and orchestrate fires in planes and whatever needs to be done. To enter slow time, just think 'slow time' and it's there. To reverse, just think 'normal time' and you're back. It's good to be outside time and space, eh?" And Brown flashed his wide grin.

He went on: "Remember, in dispatching, you can access the physical world to bring about the death specified. So... let's find a Flak grenade. There's one at 20,000 feet, some five hundred feet in front of the plane. As the plane flies, I can think of the grenade being on such a trajectory that instead of missing the plane, it'll explode behind the plane. I'll also think of the shrapnel being projected into the tail gunner's compartment, and killing him instantly. Then, all I need to do is to grab the soul as it escapes and tell it where to go. Watch me. Slow time."

Brown bent the trajectory of a heavy Flak grenade, bringing it behind the plane, and as it was level with the tail gunner, he thought of it exploding. The shrapnel went into the tail and shredded the tailplanes, and ended the earthly existence of the tail gunner. As soon as he was seen exiting the damaged tail, Brown went to him and said, "Look, pal, you're done for. See the light? Go there. Think of the light, and go see what's there. Just go. That's a good boy."

The tail gunner, who couldn't have been beyond 19 years of age, said, "What? I'm dead? Can't be! I'm DEAD? NOOOOOO!!! What about Maggie? MAGGIEEEEEEEeee....." and he was gone in a flash.

Brown looked irritated. "Not the best of dispatches, especially not as a showpiece for you. Now he's on his way to meet Maggie, poor girl, and there's going to be displays of psychic events, such as steps in the corridors of Maggie's house, clocks stopping and the like. I doubt the poor sod has enough experience or energy to communicate. Oh well, the mop-up crews

will find him and show him where to go a bit later.” Brown sighed. “It'd be so good if they all believed us and went to the light. They'd be back in the cycle in a jiffy, but this way it's a long road to another birth.”

He looked at Jameson. “Let's go and do the mid-upper gunner now. We'll see if he buys it any better from a Squadron Leader instead of just a lowly Lieutenant.”

Thinking of the mid-upper gunner position brought them level with the man in the dorsal bubble canopy. He rotated the turret all the time in a vain search of night fighters. Brown pointed at him: “Now, locate a promising grenade that's going to pass nearby. You could just as well pick up one from miles away, but that'd require you to move it over here by power of thought and that's very hard. Easier to find one already flying about.”

Jameson focused on grenades, and found one that was on the left side of the plane. “How's this one?”

“Very good!” said Brown, “Now bring it over here.”

Jameson imagined the grenade arcing over to the plane, and to his intense surprise, it followed his thought. It was still flying at high speed, when Jameson remembered to think “Slow time”, after which it became much easier to control it.

Jameson brought the grenade close to the turret, and understood Brown was saying, “Just let it go off. It's close enough to the turret. It'll knock him off.” Jameson thought of an explosion and immediately the grenade went off. Pieces of the turret hurtled in all directions before they succumbed to the wind and fell behind and down. The gunner inside the turret caught the terrible blast of the grenade and died instantly.

Jameson was close at hand when the gunner exited and told him, “Sergeant, it's time for you to follow my orders. See that white light? Go there - think of going there. Go to the light.” The sergeant was clearly in a daze, but seeing a Squadron Leader and a Flight Lieutenant in this situation caused him to salute and say, “Yes Sir, right away Sir.”

Jameson nodded towards the light. “Go, son, it's for you.” The recently departed sergeant started towards the light, attempting to walk first, but soon understanding it was no longer necessary to attempt any physical movements. Jameson looked at Brown.

“Impressive, Sir, very nice indeed. You have done this before, I am sure.” Brown looked very approving. “But we still have work to do. Let's go get the navigator and then set the plane on fire so we get the pilots out in time.” The dispatchers moved to the navigator, and Brown brought a grenade in directly below the man. It exploded. A large piece of shrapnel slit open the thigh of the navigator, who started to thrash about in intense pain, howling. It lasted for a minute, during which he crawled to the cockpit. As the pilot and co-pilot watched in horror, the navigator expired, but Brown coaxed him gently to start his journey to the light above.

After this the dispatchers went to the cockpit to check what was going on there. The pilot struggled frantically to maintain level flight but with the tailplanes almost gone, he was struggling hard. “Go find a couple of grenades, but don't hit the tanks with them. Try to set the wingtips on fire,” Brown said to Jameson.

"Okay, I'll do what I can," the Squadron leader replied. He went to the front of the plane, located two grenades, and had them explode near the wingtips. The left wing caught fire but the right one didn't ignite.

"Leave it, that's bad enough for the pilot!" Brown told him.

The pilot was screaming "BALE OUT! BALE OUT!" in the intercom. The co-pilot and the passenger left through the emergency hatch of the cockpit, and after that the pilot left too. Brown sat in his seat for a while.

"That's nice. The ground handlers will make sure they arrive safely on the ground and get arrested by the Jerries. All that remains up here is to blow this thing to tiny bits so no one dies on the ground because of it. Umm... see the blood on the hatch? That's where I broke the passenger's arm and by the time the Germans find him, it'll have to be amputated." ‘

Jameson said, "This thing really calls for an eye for detail, eh?"

Brown smiled. "You said it Sir, it really does. Let's take out the plane now. The wireless operator and bomb aimer can go in the blast, so why don't you go by the bomber and get him when he goes? I'll get the wireless operator."

Jameson thought of the bomb aimer who was struggling to get free of the plane, but all escape hatches were jammed, no doubt by Brown's thoughts. "Fire in the hole!" Jameson sensed Brown think, and as soon as it was over, a grenade exploded in the bomb bay. In the ensuing fireball, Jameson could see two entities inside the red-hot cloud of burning kerosene.

He went to one of them and said, "Come with me, your journey continues. See the light? Go to it." The man, dazed and confused, just stared at himself, trying to figure out how he was still looking intact even with the remains of the plane falling in a rain of burning debris. "You're dead. Come with me and go to the light. Nothing else you can do. Just aim for the light." The bomb aimer didn't express any thoughts but went to the light, fading into a formless blob as he neared it.

Brown came up from below. "Just followed the engines down... one of them was hitting a house, but I diverted it into the orchard - there was no one in the house with an expiry date for tonight. It's a good idea to watch for unintended damage."

Jameson said, "I get the point. This seems like an important task to me."

Brown replied, "Well yes, this is very important for the dying. Besides, now with the war, we need more dispatchers than in times of peace, so if you think you can handle this with such a short crash course, you're free to continue on your own." Brown went silent for a while. "You probably saw that we didn't get the sequence quite right the way we first set it up, but the events never are important in themselves, it's the mode of death that counts. I need to go over to Norway now and take out an RAF plane that's dropping Norwegian resistance men in there - lived in Bergen for three years as a kid. Good to have you on board, Sir," Brown communicated and then he was gone.

Jameson let his apparition fade into a blob as he floated above Hanover. He felt intensely alone, and yet not alone at all. He thought of thinking of his wife, but as soon as he

did that, he became aware of the fact that she was not going to need dispatching until many years would pass on the ground. Rejecting the idea, he concentrated instead on his next dispatch. He became aware of the second wave of bombers droning in from the West, and he knew his plane was OL-W. All his life he had been a man of action, and none the less on the other side. He would need no roster this time. The plane would soon be here.