



"I want you to get pretty well away from the field," he said.

The Man Who Was Dead

By Andrew A. Caffrey

Sure Wino's dead! He proves it!



SELECT coterie of flying elite were killing a long bottle of Dago-red grappa in the back room of a San Francisco hangar. *Grappa* comes from the same root as *grapple*, to seize, and the Celtic after effect expression—O! Grappa makes of flying dangers rare pleasures. Also, it loosens flying tongues.

"I'm a dead man," Pilot Paul "Wino" Galton was telling those of the select coterie. "That's why I wear this beard, 'cause I'm a dead soldier." Wino, dead or alive, was, at the time of telling, half shot. "I'm what you might call an officially dead pilot."

"I wondered why you hid behind the brush. You're wheezie, Wino," somebody was thoughtful enough to observe and remark. "And you will be dead, no damn foolin', if you don't lay off this grappa. Gimme that bottle!... Don't you know, Wino, you can't mix such stuff and do

flying, too?... Giv'us the grappa!"

"I'm a dead man now," Wino insisted. "Been dead for most five years already. Bet you birds never met up with a dead man before. Bet you don't guess what t'hell I'm talking about, eh?"

"Bet we don't care," another agreed. "Giv'us that grappa, and pipe down, Wino, or you'll be dead all over. Shut up!"

"Well,"—Wino Galton said, when none would listen to him—"you boys are all good friends of mine. What I say, you'll forget. I died to get out of Army Air Service, and, what I mean, I died a brave death. Very few guys would have been so brave; I rate a large-sized medal.

"I was at Web Field, Florida, when I died. Just a lousy sergeant in Flight C. But, withal and in spite of all, a flying sergeant; and I should have been a first lieutenant. That was the trouble—the reason I had to die. They wouldn't give me the grade so I died to get out. Lots of other dudes

were dying to get out, but I was the only one game enough to do the thing up brown.

“When a bird’s been with Air Corps for five or six years like I was, he should be a major, and there I was a scurvy buck sergeant, not even a staff sergeant, just a buck. I had to get out, and I couldn’t wait till my enlistment ended. I’d ‘ve been one dumb John if I had, eh? So I died. No one ever died like I did before. I bet you guys’ll say so, too.... Do I get a drink of that grappa now? No? ... All right—but you jaybirds won’t hold out on me when you hear how I died.

“**W**ELL, they wouldn’t make me a loot at Web. And I rated a first-loot grade at least. And they wouldn’t give me a transfer back to Mitchel Field or even to San Anton’. That made the old soldier mad.

“Web was an awful place. It’s so far back in the sticks that the hoot owls make love to barnyard hens, and the rattlesnakes used to come right into the enlisted stiff’s bunks at night. Naw, they wouldn’t hurt anybody. They were just lonesome. Do you see what I was up against? No place at all for a live member like me.

“Near the Web Field reservation there were no houses for more than two or three miles in any direction. And all that country, you know, is flat as a hat. Nothing grows on it but half-starved stock and palmetto.

“But a mile or so south of camp, the state was working a black chain gang on a new piece of highway. These shines were the only birds I ever saw, anywhere, that wore the striped black-and-white suits. There must have been more than a hundred nigs in the gang. They had a tent town near the work. The guards, of course, were white, Southern and hard on shadows.

“One evening at mess there was some kind of trouble in the chain gang camp. That night, or early next morning, a bunch went into the brush. From Web, we could hear the shooting. And when I repeat ‘shooting,’ I mean shooting shots from short shotguns. Them guards—and we could hear them for half an hour—went into the south still shooting furiously.

“Next day from the air we guys counted seven black-and-white suits that were stiff, out on the palmetto barren. Said suits would never move slowly, or otherwise, again. One of the guards told

us that they always let ‘em lay like that, for a few days, just to throw the fear of guns into the rest of the gang. Scattered over a space of a few miles, they lay there all day.

“I did a lot of thinking.... Think it’s about time you gave me a shot of that grappa—ain’t it?... No!... All right. Wait till you bozos hear what I done, and you’ll be sorry.

TOWARD sunset, I spotted one of the dead birds that was in a place right to my liking. I could use him. He was half under a palmetto hummock in a clearing where I had landed a hundred times. I went back to camp knowing that the bird would keep: dead men take no trails, as they say.

“Every night at Web we did some flying till along toward twelve. This work was for the radio gang. Static was so bad during the day that they were outa luck: after things cooled down, was the only time they could get any results at all. Because none of the commissioned flyers care to aviate after dark, I was the sucker for most of that night work. But I never minded it much; if I hopped at night, they gave me the next morning in the hay. So this night I was scheduled to fly.

“We were using an old De Haviland radio ship. The radio officer’s name was Sparks. No kiddin’, that was his real monniker, Lieutenant Cecil Albright Sparks. So help me! *She* was a nice boy, too!

“From seven-thirty till well after nine, me and the lieutenant circled Web, sent and received, and shot several landings when he wanted to run back to the radio room for this, that or the other thing. All the time I was trying to think up a way to shake the lieutenant so’s I’d have a clear field for major operations. To the north, toward the railroad, a cloud bank was beginning to come in. This cloud effect was a stratus—cirro-stratus—and couldn’t have been better if I’d ordered it. I thought of shaking Sparks the next time we should land, and when, at 10:15, we did make another set-down, I started to do just that.

“When he got out of the rear pit, Sparks was still wearing his own parachute. Just as he was going to hurry toward the radio room, I called him back and said, ‘Here, Lieutenant, take my ‘chute with you and leave it in the locker room.’

“‘But won’t you want to wear it?’ he asked.

‘We’re going to fly some more.’

“‘I think the silk in these chutes is hurting our radio reception,’ I told him. ‘While you’re in the sending room, I’m going to wear the ear muffs and fly a turn of the field. You send and I’ll see how it comes in without any silk aboard. What say?’

“‘That’s a good idea, Sergeant,’ he agreed. ‘Maybe there’s something in it; surely the reception has been very rotten tonight.’

“The radio room was under the water tower. That was back in the third line of buildings. I waited and watched till Sparks was out of sight. Then I waited and watched some more to make sure that nobody else was in sight. The guard on the Hangar Post was the only bird up and doing. He came along, asked me the time, and went toward the south end of the mile-long reservation.

“When the guard had gone into the dusk, I climbed down from my cockpit, went into the first hangar, and got a parachute out of Captain Scott’s plane. The captain was on vacation and wouldn’t be back for a month. I knew this, too.

“Just as I was about to take off again—do I get a slug of that grappa now, eh? No? Come on.... Aw right—wait till you guys hear what I did.

“**W**ELL, just as I was going to give her the gun, Sparks came running out to the line. ‘Sergeant!’ he yelled. ‘Just a minute, Sergeant!’

“‘What’ll you have?’ I answered.

“‘I want you to get pretty well away from the field,’ he said. Boy! that was what I wanted, too. ‘Go way up toward Lake Port. Fly around the power house there for a while and see if you can receive through all that interference.... Think I better go with you?’

“‘No,’ I told him. ‘Just now, while you were gone, this old motor was shooting fire into her carburetors. I want to give her an air test alone. Hell, if this crate’s going to burn in the air, I don’t want anyone along.’ That was hero stuff—blah!

“‘But your parachute?’ he questioned. ‘You haven’t got your parachute along.’ See, I wanted him to remember this.

“‘I won’t get high enough to need a parachute, Lieutenant. I’ll watch her close and keep within a quick slip of the ground.

“‘See you later, Lieutenant.’

“The whole lay-out was just made to order. Lake Port was thirty miles north. On the railroad, two railroads, she had lots of outgoing trains.

“When I took off, with Sparks watching me, I flew directly on Lake Port. Then, after four or five minutes, when I knew that Sparks could no longer see my exhaust fire or ship’s silhouette, I flew a low turn, throttled that old Liberty till she purred, and went back to my quiet black boy in the palmetto hummock. And he was still waiting for me.

“First, I rolled the old kid with my boot to make sure that he wasn’t associating with after-dark rattlesnakes. He wasn’t, so I then dragged him out to the plane. It took a stout lift but I managed to shove him onto the lower left wing. From there I heaved Uncle Tom into my front pit. He was the first shine to ever get anywhere’s near a plane without pulling that old one about: ‘No, suh, boss! Ah don’ take no airplane ride les Ah keeps one foot on d’ groun’; no, suh!’

“The black boy had nothing to say.

“I got in the pit after him and crowded his carcass into that space that D. H.’s have under the instrument board and ahead of the rudder bar. He was on his back with his knees in his mouth. It was a tight fit, but, working together—and in the dark, mind yuh—we made it.... How about it—do I get that drink?... Well, I thought so! You bunch of tight tramps!—when the grappa’s almost all gone! Now, I don’t know if I’ll tell you the rest of the story or not. But I might as well, or you won’t think I’m dead.

“**W**ELL, I was all ready to shove off.

I put on the chute that I’d robbed from Scott’s ship, and got under way. It was as clammy as the very devil out there on the barren. Handling stiffis is no fun. There were no controls in the radio pit, the rear seat, so me and the quiet boy had to ride in the same bay. Think that’s fun? Try it. More than a few times in the first five minutes of flight, I almost weakened. I’m not superstitious, but, somehow or other, I felt that it was bad luck to night-fly in the same air-going coffin with a long-dead nigger. And him not having anything to say about it, one way or the other. Tell you what: I couldn’t get to Lake Port fast enough.

“Anyway, I circled wide around Web Field again and flew hard on Lake Port. I knew the country so well that the clouds didn’t worry me at all. And those clouds, a stratus at about 4,000 feet, promised to hold out all the way. Too, I knew they’d be with me strong at Lake Port when I’d need ‘em most. After a while, the old sergeant began to get lonesome. Now and then I took a look at the silent partner. But I didn’t look at him too much or very often. His flying company wasn’t what you’d call elite. There was *one* nigger that Al Jolson wouldn’t care about impersonating, eh?... Do I get another drink ?

“Just to pass the last few miles of my twenty-minute hop, I put on the radio helmet and switched in on Sparks. He was sending such high-powered stuff as: Now is the time.... Four score and The correct Web Field time is... and a lot more blah, but it helped keep my mind away from that cramped pile of stiff just ahead of my feet.

“A few minutes before eleven, just above the houses, I came into old Lake Port. The dump looked like a welcome million to me. I jazzed its main street a few times to attract attention. After a few minutes of that, circling wider, I lost good sight of the burg. I climbed and went through the clouds. That stratus of fluffy stuff was several hundred feet thick. And it was solid. Only a dull reddish hue showed where the town lay below; but it was a good-enough marker for my purpose.

“When I reached 8,000 feet, I figured that I was set to go. You know how the gasoline lines were piped on the old D. H.’s: the feed pipe from the center-section reserve tank came right down to the Lunkenheimer strainer, in the front cockpit. Well, I yanked that gasoline line out of its rubber connection and turned the splashing gasoline all over the boy friend. It went all over the cockpit, too. Then I shoved it back into the rubber connection again, and flew for a few minutes till I’d relocated the town.

“But now I wasn’t so cocky. That old ship, with us two boys up front and no weight in the rear seat, was very nose-heavy. And I had a lot of gasoline on my shoes and pant legs, too. All of a sudden, gang, I realized that I was 8,000 feet in the air and, at the same time, in one hell of a hole. How could I hold that ship’s nose up and at the same time climb over into the rear pit? You see, I had to do that. If I’d tried to drop a match on the

whole works, with myself in the front, I’d never have been able to get away quick enough. No sir, I had too much gas on my clothes to think of even making a try.

“**I** WAS stopped. The whole plan had fused and dudded in my hands—and then the dead man shoved out a foot and saved the day. It was so unexpected that it knocked me off my horse. Yes, sir, that smoke fixed things right. I told you in the beginning that the big boy was laying on his back with his knees cramped into his face. Well, without warning, one of those long legs had snapped out; and the shoe between heel and instep had grooved to the control stick just below the rubber grip. I eased off my hold on the stick; and the leg held it in a position where the ship flew just level.

“‘Thanks, General,’ I said to the boy, and shot a glance at him. He smiled back a smile full of ivory. So help me! he did. He had to smile. He was smiling all the time because a cross-brace wire of the fuselage came just across the upper lip and held his mouth half open. It was a happy sort of a smile, too. ‘Now, Ace,’ I said to him, ‘I’m going to set this throttle in a position where the ship, with your good hoof on the stick, will just fly level; and then I’ll climb over into the back pit. After that, I’m going to step out and turn you loose. And, Happy, be careful on your first solo and don’t run my parachute down with your dive. Got that straight?’ He smiled back and I knew the plane was in good hands—or feet

“Getting over into the rear seat was no stunt for me. I’d done quite a bit of unofficial wing-walking around Web and other fields. Lots of the boys have. Once in the back seat, I located the town again. The ship was still flying O. K—altitude, as before, 8,000. The town seemed to be directly below. That was not so good. I reached over the side, got a good hold on the rudder wires, and helped the new student guide the plane out of Lake Port. Inside a few minutes, the time had arrived.

“Plenty of that gasoline had flown back into the rear pit. The linen under the floor boards was all wet. Then I took a good look at my chute, and half pulled the release ring. Left it right where I could find it. Next, I took my box of matches, caught another peek of the town’s glare, and

touched her off.

“She went with a bang! She blew me out of that cockpit—I’ll swear I don’t recall jumping. Then I remembered to take a long fall before opening the umbrella. I was cooler than I’d expected. I counted 20, not too fast either. The clouds below had a red lining, sailing up; and overhead, somehow falling away from me, was a great torch. Then the torch came down, passed off to what was at the moment my left, and went into the clouds. And about then, for the first time, I noticed that the chute was open. What a feeling that was!

“When I came below the clouds, I could see the plane where it had piled up and was still burning. It was a few miles east of town. Already headlights, and the fire department, were going down the highway in that direction. The noises came up to me. That shine was the only first-solo student on record to come down from his first hop without collecting a bawling out. If I do say it—he had done a good job of work.

“With the clouds as a background, I felt pretty certain that nobody would spot me. All of Lake Port’s attention was in the other direction, toward the fire. I landed in a field near the northbound tracks, half a mile from town. Fifteen minutes later I grabbed a freight going north.

“Next afternoon, I made Jacksonville. I was on the front page of every paper in view. The news told how Lieutenant Sparks had warned me to take my parachute on the fatal flight. I had died in my country’s service, trying to eliminate static from a radio set. And the remains, in so far as the sergeant had no known living relations, would be sent to his point of enlistment, Washington.

“So, in Arlington perhaps, there’s a brave black buck under a small white cross that carries my army name.... Now, how about the last of that grappa? Do I get it? Or must I fight some more for it?”

“Wino,” the elite coterie agreed, to a man, “you win the grappa, the grappa with an asbestos-lined mouth to boot. No argument a-tall!”