



The Zeke never straightened out of its plummeting dive, but went almost straight down

# LESSON AT LUICHOW

By MICHAEL CATES

*Navigator Rick Lambert, who washed out in Ground School  
but thinks he can fly, suddenly gets his chance for glory!*

IT WAS a strange country to Rick Lambert. Most of the men were strangers, too. They were a young, eager lot who sang and laughed over their jing-bow juice while all hell was getting ready to break loose from Kweilin, a scant 100 miles away. They were at Luichow, the last of the American forward bases in China. Before Rick had arrived, the Japs

had already pushed them out of Kweilin. Now the drive toward Luichow was beginning. The Japs were bent on driving a corridor through to French Indo-China. This base was next on the list.

Now, seated in the briefing room, Rick waited with the rest of the crews. This is what they had loaded for the night before. Today Rick would get his first taste of

action. They said there were two bad missions, the first and the last! Well, it was a long way from his last, Rick hoped, so today he'd see.

"All right, men," the operations officer said. "Intelligence is ready to give you the poop. But first I want to add a line on this mission. I don't know if I have to tell you that this just about winds us up here at Luichow. We've got to delay the Japs as much as possible. So let's make this a good show!"

The S-2 officer stood up and took over.

"The Japs have been moving men and equipment up to Kweilin, preparatory to launching the drive on Luichow. We believe that most of their stuff is concentrated at Ling-ch'uan, not in Kweilin itself." He indicated the position of the village on the plexiglas-covered chart that spread over the wall behind him. "Now that they have Kweilin, the Japs have moved some heavy guns into it, so you're not to fly over the city. Rendezvous at I-ning, ten miles west of Kweilin and go into the target from there. Try to smear Ling-ch'uan with everything you've got! If you do, you'll slow the Japs down, maybe a week. Take off in thirty minutes. That's all!"

Rick spread his chart out over the bench in front of him and drew the short line that separated them from the target while he measured the course and distance, pushing back a shock of brown hair that tickled his forehead as he bent over the map. The coolness of his quiet, observing eyes over the straight nose, the firm mouth and square jaw belied his inward feelings. This was it—Mission Number One!

The crew chief had just finished the pre-flight when they climbed up the stubby ladder through the escape hatch into the B-25. Rick had read the name as

he passed the nose, *Bucket of Bolts*. Not a very reassuring name. Sounded like it was ready to fall to pieces! Bainbridge, the pilot, called back.

"Lambert, this is the real McCoy. Keep your eyes open. We may end up coming back alone!"

The navigator's compartment vibrated and rattled as the pilot gunned the throttles and moved the B-25 out onto the runway to line up with the rest of the flight. Only six ships were going out and Rick knew he was lucky to be on one of them. They were the last to take off.

**B**AINBRIDGE poured on the coal and the B-25 started down the runway, gathering speed to the tune of its powerful roaring engines. They pulled up and around, joining the formation. Then they were off for the target!

Rick threw his navigation kit into the narrow tunnel that led up into the nose, pushing it ahead of him as he crawled up. Somehow the first excitement had worn off and his mind turned to the same old thought: "Me, a navigator! I ought to be flying this baby."

He remembered what had happened back at the school.

"Aviation Cadet Richard Lambert," the Commandant of Cadets had read from the paper in front of him. "Character, superior; military bearing, excellent; scholastics, excellent; flying, unsatisfactory: Reason: Insufficient progress. Have you anything to say, Mr. Lambert?"

Rick had wanted to tell him what had happened, to ask for a little more time. This was basic. He couldn't wash out now.

"I can fly," he had wanted to shout out. "Give me a chance; I can fly!"

Instead he heard himself answer:

"No, sir."

It didn't take long. A minute later he was through with flying for the Army.

*Washed out! . . .*

Rick forced his mind back to his chart. It was lazy work following the lead navigator—gave him too much time to think. He watched the ground carefully. Might as well do a little navigating. Soon they were coming in over I-ning, ready to turn on to the target.

“Pilot to crew—pilot to crew!” Bainbridge called over the interphone. “Turning in on target.”

As if to add meaning to his message, dark puffs materialized to the left beneath them.

“Flak. Low at three o’clock.” Rick called to Bainbridge.

The dirty smudges of anti-aircraft fire continued to trail them without, however, getting in very close. It was 75 mm. stuff and the Jap was serious when he used anything over 40 mm. There must be quite a concentration of men and supplies in the village of Ling-ch’uan which they were almost upon now.

Rick knew that his hands were trembling. Am I afraid, he wondered, hoping that it was the excitement of his first taste of combat. Still, he decided not to watch the deadly little bursts.

Sporadic, but increasingly heavy flak, followed them until Rick saw they were just outside their objective. As he watched, the tempo of the bursts increased and the flight settled down for the bomb run. They were in the midst of an inferno of flak.

The ship tossed and pitched like a T-model on a rocky road. Through the jolting, Rick watched the lead ship. He was to release his bombs when they dropped. He wanted a cigarette badly, but he was afraid to take his eyes off them. Now they were dropping. The bombs were tumbling out. Quickly he squeezed the bomb release to drop his own. Bombs away!

Dense smoke mushroomed out below

them as the bombs “walked” across the target. Already it was beginning to climb up toward them. Incendiaries found hidden stock piles, raising billowing clouds of black smoke through which could be seen devouring flames.

“Direct hits!” Rick shouted into the inter phone. “We knocked the devil out of them!”

“Settle down, Lambert,” Bainbridge cracked back. “We’ve had it pretty easy so far, but look at Loving in Three-Twenty-Four.”

Rick snapped around to find the right engine of the first element’s Number Two ship sending off ominous streaks of smudgy, oily smoke. The power seemed barely on in it, yet the prop whirled furiously. Something else was wrong, he realized at once. That prop should have been feathered so that it was still as the B-25 rushed through the air. But it spun like a runaway. The feathering mechanism must be shot out!

Then the power cut off in the crippled engine. The unfeathered prop continued to spin furiously in the air rushing over it, turning against the dead engine. The resistance set up a vibration that perceptibly shook the whole plane. As he watched, the right wing seemed to disintegrate and the bomber fell off in a sickening, spinning dive.

Rick turned away, then forced his eyes back in time to see the startlingly white puffs of the crew’s parachutes as they opened.

But now a new menace presented itself. The airfield at Kweilin was considered still unserviceable for aircraft from the damage done to it by the Americans before they evacuated. Nevertheless, three Zekes had gotten off the ground from somewhere, and now buzzed angrily toward them. One of the red-sunned hornets dived upon the

parachuting crew of 324. Before their eyes, one of the chutes suddenly collapsed. Helpless to aid them, the crew turned to the defense of the ship, while the Nip machine-gunned the descending airmen.

**T**HE *Bucket of Bolts* was in for it and might soon well deserve the name. They were logical bait as tail-end Charlie in the low-Joe element. Rick flexed the nose gun. It was a futile gesture, for the Zekes were coming in from behind. It was a devil of a helpless feeling—not being able to get a shot in!

Rick could see the Zekes as they streaked past under him after finishing their run, offering only hopeless deflection shots. A burst came crashing through the plexiglas framed nose. It was a horrible sensation—being trapped in the nose! If only there were something he could *do*, Rick thought.

A sudden slap threw him half-way around and a burning pain in his side warned him that he'd been hit. A second later a Zeke screamed past below them. Rick glanced out through the splintered plexiglas in time to detect the tell-tale trail of oily smoke that streamed out behind it and knew that their gunners had scored.

The Zeke never straightened out of the plummeting dive. Almost straight down it tore. Then it fell off the right wing and went in with a splintering crash. One more Jap would never again hear the scream of the air over the prop.

Rick called forward to the pilot, conscious of the burning pain in his side. "Pilot from navigator. Pilot from navigator. Do you read me, Bainbridge. Come in. Over."

No answer came either from Bainbridge or the co-pilot. He called again and again with no success. Maybe their interphone was out. But a premonition of something worse hung heavy upon him.

He threw off his headset and scrambled back through the tunnel into the navigator's compartment. When he raised his head, his worst fears were realized.

There was an ugly, ragged hole through the protective armor of the copilot's seat that spelled a lucky cannon hit by the Zekes. He was reassured for a moment when he saw Bainbridge's hands still on the controls, but a closer look confirmed his fears. The pilot was unconscious, his flying suit a sullen red about his right shoulder. Thank God Bainbridge had locked in the automatic pilot before losing consciousness or the plane would have been hurtling down, out of control, long ago!

He turned to the co-pilot. There was an awful mess where the co-pilot's chest had been. Waves of hot nausea flowed over him, but he forced himself to pull out the torn figure and put him back in the navigator's compartment. He was glad to turn his attention to Bainbridge.

Rick nervously opened the pilot's flying suit and experienced a recurrence of nausea when he saw the mess of shoulder and chest. He broke open a first aid kit and did what he could to stanch the steady flow of blood. Venous bleeding, he made a mental note. Tourniquet below wound. Compress bandage on wound.

"How does it look, Lambert?" The voice startled him. Rick looked up and saw Bainbridge was conscious and smiling weakly.

"You'll be all right," he reassured the pilot uneasily. "Just take it easy and I'll clean you up a bit." Rick slid the seat back as far as it would go to ease Bainbridge's cramped position. The pilot slumped gratefully and sighed.

"Well, don't waste too much time on me," he whispered, plainly in pain. "This baby can't fly out of trouble by itself with those Zekes popping all around us. We'd

better bail out.”

For the first time Rick remembered the enemy attackers and missed the chatter of their own guns. He called over the interphone, then turned to Bainbridge.

“We’ve beat ‘em off! We’re in the clear!” he cried out.

The pilot sighed his relief. Painfully he turned to Rick who was lowering himself into the right seat.

“If and when we get back over Luichow,” he said, “we’re bailing out. You can fly it back with my help, but that’s where we get off. Get me?”

“Sure, sure,” Rick agreed hastily, itching to take over the controls. “Sure, Bainbridge. Anything you say!”

He was going to fly again! It was a delicious, intoxicating elixir that made Rick’s head spin and set his heart to beating wildly.

He was going to fly again!

Reaching forward to unlock the gyro controls of the automatic pilot, Rick winced at the pain and stiffness in his side. Bainbridge noticed that for the first time. He looked at him through narrowed eyes.

“Why the faces, Lambert?” he asked. “Did you get hit?”

“Just a nick—I’m all right,” Rick assured him quickly. He had forgotten everything—the mission, the dogfight, his wound—everything but that he was flying again. He wasn’t surprised to find that they’d lost the rest of the flight. He didn’t care. He calculated rapidly and made his heading, exulting at the pulsing power under his fingers.

“You skidded on that turn, Lambert,” Bainbridge said in a lecture-room tone. “Hit the rudder and stick together. You might as well learn something today. And look at your altimeter. You lost four hundred feet.”

A HOT reply rushed to Rick’s lips, but he controlled himself.

“Okay,” he answered shortly. But his mind went back in spite of himself, to his check ride—the one that had washed him out.

“Insufficient progress,” the young lieutenant told him as they walked back to the ready room. “Take those S-turns. You led with the rudder too much on everyone and consistently lost altitude. Sorry, mister!”

“Sorry?” Like fun he was sorry, Rick thought. He was just one more Joe to go through the “Washing Machine.”

The time had passed quickly while Rick was engulfed in his thoughts. He began to watch the fuel gauge. The minutes that had sped by while he dressed Bainbridge’s wounds, not wasted, but gone beyond recall—miles of useless penetration that had to be retraced—precious flying time while he checked his faulty flying against his dead reckoning and pilotage—all added up to trouble!

At last Rick got a fairly good pilotage check and groaned. He’d figured the elapsed time from leaving the target until they’d gone off automatic pilot and turned back toward Luichow. It had been longer than he’d thought. For this short mission they’d still had an hour’s extra fuel. Now he knew they’d just make it back.

An hour since they’d left the target and they were only now just south of Kweilin, a few miles from the bomb run! Rick didn’t dare turn over to the railroad that the charts showed led down to Luichow. He’d simply have to check carefully. There wasn’t gas enough to spare for a search. Still they flew on. Bainbridge was watching the fuel too, not speaking. Perspiration stood out upon his brow and he seemed much weaker.

At length they saw up ahead of them the easily recognized bend in the river that

curled around Luichow. Bainbridge spoke weakly.

"This is it, Lambert. We'll bail out here where the ship can't get into trouble when she crashes. Call the crew. Series of short rings, prepare to abandon ship—at the continuous ring, abandon ship!"

"But you can't jump in your condition," Rick protested to the pilot.

"That can't be helped," Bainbridge answered. "I can make it with your help."

Rick said nothing. This was it. The joy ride was over. Suddenly, a bold thought struck him. He sat motionless.

"Did you hear me?" Bainbridge snapped. "Call the crew!"

Rick flushed, but held his tongue. The idea in the back of his mind was fast taking shape and it held him in its spell, fascinated him. They'd washed him out of flying, said he couldn't fly. But he was flying, right now! And he'd seen these B-25s flown so many times—all through replacement unit training.

Now he knew why he'd asked so many questions, why he'd watched the pilots so carefully. It was just for such a moment as this. Bainbridge shouldn't jump, anyway. And the Government had a lot of money invested in this plane. He could land it! Rick turned to the pilot.

"I'm sorry, Bainbridge," he said quietly, "I can't seem to hear you. My ears must be stopped up."

The pilot blew up.

"Look here, Lambert," he shouted, his anger showing clearly in his eyes and the set of his mouth, "I'm hurt now, but I don't intend to die until I'm hurt a lot worse. Now, by gosh, you'll do as I tell you or—or—" He searched for the words. In his mind he knew that Lambert was set on flying them all to their deaths. He tried another approach.

"Now see here," he said soothingly, "I've got a pretty good idea how you feel.

You were eliminated from flying," he carefully avoided using the words *washed out*, "and now you're dead set on proving to me and the rest of the world that you can fly. Maybe you're right! But, Lambert," he continued earnestly, "don't try this! If you don't kill us all, you'll only be washed out of flying for good. Is it worth the chance?"

Rick set his jaw grimly. He had no answer. He knew that it wasn't because Bainbridge was hurt that he wanted to land the B-25—nor that it would save the Government's ship. But his course was set for him by his confidence, his knowledge that he *could* do it. No longer was there any confusion or bitterness in his mind, no more futile waiting. This was it.

"I can fly!" he breathed to himself.

OUT of the corner of his eye, Rick was conscious of a look of incredulity on Bainbridge's face, a look that gradually changed to revulsion. The pilot muttered, groaning at his helplessness to intervene.

"You jackass, you've lost your mind. You can't fly!" Bainbridge slumped back still further in the left seat, exhausted from arguing. His strength was leaving him fast.

"We're coming into the field," Rick said. Bainbridge marshaled all his strength in a last attempt to dissuade the navigator.

"For the last time, will you listen to reason!" the pilot cried. "Think of the crew. You've no right to risk their lives. Have you asked their wives and sweethearts and mothers for that right—which even they couldn't grant! Think what this will mean when we crack up—and you haven't the remotest chance of setting this plane down in one piece!"

I can't stop now, Rick steeled himself. I'll put this ship down. I've seen B-25s set down as gently as a baby in a cradle. I've watched too many times not to know how to handle her.

He called into the tower. They wouldn't know who was at the controls. He made the turn into the field and started bringing the bomber down. With painful exertion Bainbridge raised himself again.

"You fool!" he shouted. "You can't do it! This isn't a training ship. It's a two-engined bomber!"

The B-25 was coming in too fast, Rick knew. The ground was leaping up at them. Instinctively, he pulled back on the stick. The bomber soared up and he leveled off desperately. Now he was settling better. But the plane was mushing too much. Oh-oh!—He suddenly knew it was going to stall. He looked at the airspeed indicator as he poured the gas to her. One-twenty—right on the stalling point! For a moment the bomber hung on her prop tips. Then they grabbed and she roared over the field, a scant fifteen feet off the ground!

"Pull her up!" Bainbridge shouted. "Can't you see those hills at the end of the runway! Do you believe me now? Climb back up and we'll jump."

"It's too late," Rick answered dully. The fuel gauge hovered on empty. "We couldn't get high enough if we tried. I'm going to make another pass at it."

With the bitterness of that first failure, Rick desperately resolved to try it again. He had to make it this time. What had he done, he groaned to himself. He'd been crazy to think that he could land this job!

His lips bled from the nervous bite of his teeth. Every muscle in his body ached from the strain of fighting the ship in every inch of the way.

And now he had to be lucky if he didn't lose both engines. He tore his eyes away from the fuel gauge and made the turn into the field. The ground was coming up too fast again. He knew he was diving it straight into the earth. Cold terror seized him. He was going to crack up!

"Lambert," the pilot shouted, "Pull her

up a little—just a little! You've made it, but you've got to level off more. For God's sake, man, *hurry!*"

To Rick, he sounded miles away. Nothing mattered any more. He was to kill them all because he was obsessed with the idea that he could fly. A deadly lethargy seized him and he sat frozen to the stick.

Bainbridge propped himself. With a curse he pulled back on the stick with all the remaining strength he possessed. He groaned as stabbing pains shot through him, but the force and suddenness of his move forced the stick back precious inches.

The B-25 leveled off clumsily. The wheels touched. The ship soared up from the jolting contact, then fell back on one wheel. The other struck the runway savagely. The left tire blew out and the ship canted crazily. The tail whipped around as the left wingtip bit into the ground. The propeller on that side crumpled grotesquely. Then miraculously, the B-25 shudderingly skidded sidewise to a grinding halt, while the left engine flamed dangerously.

Rick sat rigid and wide-eyed, paralyzed—frozen to the stick. He came to life as the meat-wagon screamed over to the plane-long enough to reach up and cut off the switch, too late, for flames poured from the burning engine. Then everything went black.

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"Heaven only knows how he landed the plane," the voice was saying, "shot up as he was and weak from the loss of blood."

He must have been hurt worse than he knew, Rick thought, content to lie still with his eyes closed as they stripped off his flying suit.

The voice went on:

“And when we got inside, there they were, both out cold. The co-pilot was done for, but the rest of the crew were okay. Bainbridge was slumped in the pilot’s seat and Lambert was stretched out cold, wedged in between the seats.”

**R**ICK was shocked from his apathy. Bainbridge must have pulled him out of the seat before the ambulance arrived. As far as anyone knew, the pilot had landed the plane. Nobody knew what a crazy fool he’d been—insubordinately and stubbornly flying them all to their deaths! He deserved to have everything in the book thrown at him. Instead, Bainbridge had covered up for him. He felt a heavy load go off of him. The thing that had stupified his reason and dominated his emotions for so long would never trouble him again. Gratefully, he sank back into unconsciousness. . . .

“Well, I guess the excitement was a little too much for you,” the doctor said. “Of course,” he continued, “you did get a nasty burn across the ribs. A few inches

closer and—” He didn’t bother to finish the sentence.

“How’s Bainbridge?” Rick asked anxiously. “Is he okay? When can I see him?”

“Hold on there,” smiled the doctor. “You’ve got to get a little rest yourself. Your pulse was beating a cool one-twenty per when we got you in here. Bainbridge is in no danger. A little careful surgery on his shoulder and he’ll be up as good as new in a couple of months.”

Rick breathed a sigh of relief.

“Say,” asked the doctor, curious, “Did you ever do any flying? Must be great stuff!”

“Who—me?” Rick answered easily. “Yeah. I flew once. Washed out in basic. Insufficient progress. These pilots can have it. I’m a navigator.”

The doctor went away.

“Yeah,” Rick whispered softly as he turned over in the comfort of his hospital bed. “Yeah. I’m a navigator. And I like it!”