

*Paul West*

## **The Light Militia of the Lower Air**

**G**roping at memory's far end, I try to fix the point at which flying machines invaded my head, never to vacate it, but can muster only a pudgy seven—or eight-year-old hand clutching two wooden clothes-pins spliced together at right angles through the forks. This primitive, weathered cross flew, even when atop the snapping sail of a sheet in the washday breeze, it bossed the kinesis in the line. As if it had absorbed the wind's force, it later on, when freed, became a magic rotor. There was a humanesque bonus too, in that the pins resembled splay-legged, armless people whose heads were flat on top. Potentially, the two crossed were airplane and pilot in one (plus a co-pilot), a boomerang and a downtwirling ash seed. Up soared the child beneath his five-inch windmill, like the little devil Asmodée in an early Spanish novel who flew up to, then lifted off, the roofs of houses.

In middle boyhood, somewhere between my first taste of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and my first attempt to smoke cinnamon sticks, two tin badges gave me less elemental aerobicic dreams. Free gifts with weekly adventure comics that had few pictures and much tiny print, they primed us in 1941 and 1942 for the insignia of the King's Uniform (inevitable in view of a war that threatened to reach into 1950). The bronze-looking one was two torpedo-like bombs colliding nose-to-nose, at an oblique angle, beneath a pair of corrugated wings: an amphibian emblem. The silver-looking one had bigger wings, clipped at the root to flank an uncial capital P. With both attached to the breast of my shirt, the silver above the bronze in accordance with an alchemy shading over into caste esthetics, I fantasized airborne feats with easy zeal, fired by the Battle of Britain.

I saw planes as swordfish or condors crammed with privileged momentum. I knew why they flew or crashed, having built numerous models from kits, even going so far as to design my own "austerity" glider (obechi wood instead of balsa), the plans for which *The Aeromodeller* magazine printed a couple of years later in return for a five-guinea check. I knew too that, in some corner of a foreign field (or a domestic one if the war went badly enough), my Supermarine Spitfire awaited me with Rolls Royce pistons greased. About the engine I had inside information, having at school drawn

a finicking cross-section of one that stood on wooden blocks in the dining hall, intended as a still reminder of British power, but an evident dud for not being at twelve thousand feet. Whatever this engine's defect, my two-foot square drawing, lovingly intricate labor of leisure, failed to reveal. As for the Spitfire's slender fuselage, elliptical wings (later clipped for extra speed), skimpy tailplane, outward-retracting wheels, and eight machine guns mounted in the wings, I already knew from non-flying models which stood on little hollow plinths on the piano, like some well-tempered light militia of the lower air.

Overhead, Flight Lieutenant Eric Plumtree, a neighbor who had become an air ace, used to roll and bank a real Spitfire at only five hundred feet, flaunting its duck-egg blue underside and the red-white-and-blue roundels on the wings. When he thus beat up the village, everyone turned out to watch, deciphering that inhuman engine as safety at its most intimate, himself as the parish David to the Luftwaffe's Goliath. But I could only think, as Plumtree's pell-mell war machine stormed over with its wings waggling: It is where *nothing* was before; it doesn't *fall*. Months later, after being awarded his first Distinguished Flying Cross, he was still performing once weekly above the village street, although few gave him more than a glance; he had become part of the scenery, like Blue Man's Bower, a prehistoric earthwork in the depths of the local woods. If he died, I thought, "killed in action," they would notice him again, just once, and try not to catch his mother's eye when she shopped. But he survived and rose to the almost inconceivable height of Air Marshal soon after I took my degree.

My imagination had already incorporated him into Paul Nash's famous oil painting, "Battle of Britain," in the bottom of which a river meanders, through a terra-cotta landscape capped with barrage balloons like finned bubbles, toward its mouth. Above, against a background of enemy formations that taper all the way back to the horizon, invisibly combatant fighters and bombers make freehand white doodles on the unvariable cobalt of midsummer. Descending signatures of mauve-red smoke record the count of kills. Salmon-milky clouds blend in above the estuary, in which one shot-down plane has just flung up a waterspout like an icicle of death.

I was years from reading Nash's definitive essay, "The Personality of Planes," in which he explored resemblances that dragged at many pairs of eyes not belonging to the Observer Corps, whose role it was to spot and identify approaching planes. I no longer remember in detail the temperaments he developed from aircraft physiognomies; but the principle holds, now as then. The Diamant 18 high-performance sailplane, of the lordly-brawny wing, seems a lobotomized shark, with the whole top of its head replaced by a prosthetic see-through canopy. Frozen in a tubular hare-lipped yawn, the Saber jet's face has nothing to say, and cannot receive. On

occasion, I have thought the Boeing 747 Jumbo jet has a startled, raised-eyebrow face, as of a farouche cockatoo, whereas at other times it has been the head of a fat matron whose naked skull peaks upward in shock as an alien hand paddles lasciviously along its underbelly. Whimsical, of course, but no more so than the pragmatic analogies of war, when the glamorous Spitfire seemed to smile, the all-work-and-no-play Hawker Hurricane gave its hump-backed frown, and the pale-blue enemy Messerschmidt 109 sneered, like an adder nibbed.

Demechanizing the flying machine, we persuaded ourselves we were not at the mercy, as it often seemed, of engines just as prosaic as the steam-roller or the locomotive. Contrariwise, as if to augment the lethal with the feral, American pilots had ground crews paint jagged teeth and sharks' eyes on the air intake ducts beneath the noses of Curtis Tomahawks and Kittyhawks (the latter's a big bulbous aluminum goiter). Fighter planes added individualist ferocity to themselves whereas bombers flew emblazoned with nudes, cartoons, names of sweethearts, mothers, and actresses, and gurning affable animals (a much wider spectrum of adornment, as if the bomber's ego needed less of a boost). Pilots of in-between machines, however—say the twin-engined Beaufighters, Lightnings, Mosquitoes, and Whirlwinds, the one-engined Fairey Battle Bombers—must have been in two minds, wondering whether they were pursuit or delivery, whether whipper or St. Bernard.

For reasons that reduce to the difference between monarchy and republic, British taste required all planes to have names, whereas American satisfied itself with letters and numbers. I confess to preferring, for no doubt callow and operative reasons, Fortress to B-17, Mustang to P-37, Dakota to DC-3. Had British practice been otherwise, I would never have become expert in such exported chunks of the homeland as Baltimores, Bostons, Catalinas, Marylands, and Harvards, or taken so much to heart my own national heritage of Blenheims, Hampdens, Lancasters, Wellesleys, and Wellingtons (as if half of British history had sprouted wings). Nor would I have added to my vocabularic reserves, relishing their primary identity at a dynamic remove, Corsairs and Martlets, Skuas and Typhoons, or fleshed out my arsenal of mere oppugnancy with Airacobras, Avengers, Gauntlets, Marauders, and many more. Poring over annual Christmas volumes of *Aircraft of the Fighting Powers* (whose cardboard casings became successively flimsier with each year of war), I found little other pageantry of naming: only the Focke-Wolfe Kondor, the Japanese Zero, and the "Stuka" divebomber. Other nations took the war seriously and used abstractions about it, in abbreviated form, whereas the British, ever ready for gestures of heroic levity in which the color of the medieval tournament fused with flag-wagging royalism, nicknamed their paladins' mounts in much the same mood as they

domesticated Hitler into Adolf, Goering into Hermann, William Joyce the wireless-traitor into Lord Haw-Haw, the German air force into “Jerry,” and Stalin (through some mind-wrenching gullibility that knew no history) into Uncle Joe. But then, Winston Churchill was Winnie, after all (a Pooh by local extrapolation), and war could be endured in bloody-minded joviality, “eked-out” through cozy sobriquets. The stereotypes of peace are mindless, while those of war are the mindless breath of panic held.

“Channel Fog: Continent Isolated,” ran a turn-of-the-century London headline, epitomizing a blasé heritage that few Englishmen outgrow. Even now, I cannot help feeling that, in a way both perverse and Wagnerian, the insular English (though not their British neighbors) paradoxically warmed to the attention that the war brought them. It was an excuse to live spontaneously again, with the class—and jingo—barriers down, like a symphonic ovation greeting my father’s quip that war brings people together. What he meant, I think, was that for once the subjects of the reigning majesty had a goal that was neither Imperial nor Home, but just a smack exotic in a local way. In their respective roles the classes harmonized better than ever, and, far from breaking down as a system, rigidified.

One icily-raining day in November, when I was eighteen, I presented myself at one of the country’s obsoletely-named Labor Exchanges (where people used to change jobs or go on the dole) and registered for deferred military service, blithely entering my preference on the khaki-colored postcard as Royal Air Force, no reasons given because none requested. There were no guarantees, I was told, and I already knew that Ministry illogic should just as readily stick an air-minded youth into the infantry as into a Miles Magister training plane; even an Icarus (no doubt with inadvertent prudence) into the Coast Guard. But it was worth a try: surely all my previous attentions to the household gods of aviation would pay off when the moment came. Flight Lieutenant Plumtree, with his atavistic harvest of a name, had paved the way in the back of beyond, and a youth with only the merest inkling of the sublime would long to join him there. But then, of course, he flew a desk as dull as mine.

**S**pare time, says Heidegger, is ecstasy; I believe him. Of both the commodity and its complement I had a lot during my seven-year-long university career, warned about a less ecstatic kind of time only by renewed deferments of national service that led up to the day when I was commanded to “proceed” from Oxford to London, on a railway warrant supplied by the Air Ministry, for interviews and med-

ical testing. Along with several other marked young men from my own college I took the train to Paddington, checked into a mediocre hotel that reeked of greens and cocoa, and took the Underground to RAF Headquarters. It looked as if my expressed preference of years before had met with a friendly eye. Or was I being steered toward some unspeakably menial core such as painting aircraft hangars in camouflage green and brown?

The interviews were meant to establish whether or not we were officer material. Moustachioed *roués* in blue barathean tunics with dazzling light-blue rings around the sleeves guffawed at jokes of their own making as I obliquely answered vapid questions about the Oxford tutorial system, Oxford cricket, and how much easier it was to win a Blue at hockey, say, than at rugby. I wondered how many hours of flying, now many wounds, how many marine immersions, how many waterless days in the desert, their battle ribbons had cost them. Among five officers there were three Distinguished Flying Crosses (a ribbon of diagonal white and blue stripes) and one Air Force Cross (diagonal white and red), but nothing higher: no Orders of the British Empire, not even the Distinguished Service Order. Good men all, they weren't among the veteran cream. So I looked at them by rank. The presiding officer was a Squadron Leader, of equivalent rank to a Major, while the others were Flight Lieutenants, which is to say Captains (although not of the Navy variety). So, regarded quantitatively, my modest Star Chamber added up to one respectably decorated five-star general, whereas the ranks averaged out at Captain, with just a few years' seniority. I opted for the composite brass hat and conducted myself accordingly, my mouth aimed at an abstraction whom one could outstare by looking just above the median of the senior man's centrally parted brylcreemed hair, whereas he thought (I thought) I was looking him in the eyes all the time, as a potential officer should. No looking down or away. No shyness. No nervous blink. The truth was that, during this time, I was going through the motions of a compensatory private diversion, allegorizing myself as a pale-faced person who pretended he wasn't there—an *albino*, so to speak—and was almost, in a festally morbid way, eager to get on with the medical part of the tourney. But first came a skimpy lunch at a pub round the corner among heavy-suited John Bulls who, with their umbrellas hung on their arms like private stalactites, munched roast-beef and cheese sandwiches while standing at something between attention and at-ease. I suddenly realized that I wanted to fly, but without joining anything at all, an anarchist among aviators, not even furnished with letters of marque or a neatly folded flag to be buried under.

I am always being amazed, which makes of me, I suppose, a steadily rejuvenescent naïf. When I think of the sophisticated people I've met, I real-

ize their condition consists in nothing's being able to amaze them, largely because they've dismissed a meal's taking two weeks to pass from one end of a sloth to the other, or the uncanny exact balance of neutron and electron, without which the regions of primeval hydrogen in the universe would never have condensed into stars. This is why, for me, definitive contact with Being seems always further on, not now, whereas most folk credit themselves with it (or a caricature of it) at a fairly early age, and close themselves around it: all of Creation in a dixie-cup, whereas the cup is really a chimerical bauble, with next to nothing in it, afloat in the All of created and creatable things. I believe in the open-ended universe which enables me, I know not how, to entertain just that notion of an open-ended universe, when in fact the notion may be quite wrong.

Such animadversions ("turnings-of-the-mind-against") multiplied apace during my air force days, in which whatever was mercurial or undulant in me swam as best it could past or through the fish-traps of regimen. At first, however, the sense of novelty prevailed, especially as a euphoric holiday from the Bodleian Library and its predominant dark browns. I wanted to fly, I'd told the Board, and as pilot: even the role of navigator seemed somehow second-hand, an amenity for arithmeticians. Yet the prospect of pilot-training flew out of the window almost at once. Stationed at one end of a dark tube in which occasional numbers appeared like cash-register ghosts, right against the eyeball (as it seemed) and then, a mere second later, indecipherably in the distance, genuine light years away, I failed the aircrew medical. This evaluative kaleidoscope had mimicked approach speeds of from two to six hundred miles an hour, and somewhere around the three-hundred mark I had "crashed," as the medical technician melodramatically put it. My sluggish eye muscles had let me down, refusing to alter focus fast enough. I tried again, with identical result. Aerially speaking, I was one of the blind, and in spite of my 20-20 vision (of my slow-motion sort) I felt at one with the legion of the sightless all the way from Samson to my father.

In a fit of apocalyptic self-scorn, I told myself I had looked up a long blind tunnel to the grave, and just in time. Then I got on with the rest of the examination. Reflexes, senses, and co-ordination all proved satisfactory (indeed, my smell and hearing have always been over-acute: always the first to know when the milk is off, I dread the ticking clock). For ground duties I was exemplary, coded G.I., whereas my air-rating was A.4., or perhaps even A.13., bumped into the underworld by my eventual reluctant admission that I was liable to attacks of ophthalmic migraine which rendered me half-blind for several hours at a time and had plagued me since puberty. I marvel now at the gall of volunteering myself as a pilot, I who during the worst attacks couldn't even see my own hand within the fortification spectra around it. In the end, of course, I did fly, quite a lot, mainly

as a passenger, marking papers at five thousand feet for a change, but sometimes illegally at the controls of an Avro Anson with a seasoned pilot watching me hard, usually Pete Wildy, of the saffron moustache, who used to fly Sunderland flying boats to Singapore.

One other thing I learned about on that inauspicious day with the doctors: a scar deep in quest of an itch while I was writing an examination answer. The group of us spent the night in London, on the town, none of us very hearty, swilling beer like transvestite peasants and observing women of the evening ply their trade (this was before London denied them sidewalk *Lebensraum* and relegated them to doorways, windows, and incitational cards in the display cases of run-down shops). Exhausted and giggling, we ended up—surrendered to—the dream chamber of an Odeon, addressing ourselves to the bloated froth of a John Wayne war movie. Our gauche pre-militarism watched his niftily orchestrated *macho* mania, but we were too tired to wonder at the restricted mental range of so expensive a turkey, or even to wince yet again at another vicarious consummation for *hypocrites*, The Actor, who (one heard) had never borne arms in his life.

I returned to Oxford and soon afterward sailed to New York aboard the *Mauretania*, a ship which invented the twist before the dance was known. In fact I wasn't inducted until the March of 1954, when I had to present myself at the RAF's Officer Cadet Training Unit, Jurby, Isle of Man, for three months' basic training. Months before that, however, as an officer-to-be in the *Education* Branch (oh, what a falling-off was there: no cockpit, but a blackboard!), I received a uniform-allowance and one January day, among enviable snowflakes, took the double-decker bus into Sheffield to be measured by a tailor who, although on the Air Ministry's recommended list, had not made an RAF uniform since 1939. Had I, however, required cavalry breeches, a busby, and an epauletted Horse Guards tunic, thick with piping and velvet insets, he would have known exactly what to do. I even think he had bargain cuirasses in the rear of the shop, in case a real gentleman should happen along: a knight of any order, or a time-traveling crusader. Such was my impression when he looked me up and down with unchivalrous hauteur that said they would commission anything nowadays, even a dandiprat with a phony American accent and hair that needed not so much cutting as burning-off in order to clear the ground for a new crop.

Gradually, as he warmed to his sartorial calibrations, asking which side I "dressed" and administering a none-too-gentle hand-stab into my groin to

find out, he began to speak to me as if I were going to be a corporal at least. There I stood, like the marooned fetus in the border of Edvard Munch's lugubrious *Madonna*, answering, "No, *no* medals," to his sardonic inquiry, and being obliged to raise my voice when he insisted that I could not, absolutely not, enter the Royal Air Force (said in full) as a Flying Officer; the lowest commissioned rank was *Pilot* Officer, didn't I even know? What he didn't know, having dealt only with young men destined for Sandhurst or Cranwell (*echt* military colleges), was that a Student-Officer, such I was going to be, went in at a rank equivalent to the aforementioned Flying Officer and was paid accordingly. It was one of the ambiguous privileges of having degrees. He finally agreed to sew, on the sleeves of the jacket and on the shoulders of the greatcoat, the broad braid of the *Fg. Off.* and not the narrow one of the *Plt. Off.* Either way, it was azure within black braid, and my mind wouldn't leave well alone the penguin irony of the epithets: I would be neither Flying nor Pilot, except in some national disaster. A month later, he turned out an impeccably cut article, at three times the price I might have paid for an only slightly inferior item at one of the big military outfitters who had little shops at the camps. Not only did I not need a dress uniform beforehand; I could have kept the unspent balance of the allowance for carousing and books. There was still, however, the matter of shoes, which (unlike shirts, ties, socks, and pullover) I had to buy. Did officers (or penguins) wear capped or plain fronts? That was the iron question. No-one seemed to know. An ex-RAF shopkeeper in the village, who just happened to sell shoes along with millinery and fishing poles, said *plain*. I bought two pairs. He was wrong—because, my mother said, in a tremendous and scathing access of snobbery, he had been just an airman, and that was what airmen wore. As it turned out, I slunk around "incorrectly dressed" for a couple of years, at first trying to mask the toes with my trouser-bottoms (which made me stoop), then walking even more pigeon-toed than nature had made me, hoping through some miracle of light (with the line of my pants' cuffs reflected on the convex toecap as the stitching of Oxford front) to deceive critical eyes. But no-one seemed to care, and after an interval neither did I.

Leaving home at midnight, on the last bus, I went by train to Liverpool, where I had a four-hour wait in the herring-rich aroma of its railway station before taking the dawn boat to Douglas, Isle of Man. I might have been going to Siberia for all the cheer I felt; the boat, named *King Orry* after an ancient Manx king, ran into a decent gale soon after leaving the Mersey, and the remainder of the four-hour voyage became a tilting diorama of muted Dante. Babies keened in private staterooms. Blue-blazered military-looking paragons, to whom my next years of play were already forfeit, braced themselves against lifeboat davits or, in the carpeted lounge, the

white-painted iron pillars of the ship's rib-cage, and wore an air of officious nonchalance. Short-haired ciphers in little corduroy or felt caps, whom I mistook for cadets returning from leave, whereas they were prematurely shorn new ones (pawns wanting to get off on the right foot), studied and copied the paragons: the ostentatiously worldly-wise pucker of the mouth; the imperiously narrowed eyes; even the self-congratulating sentry stance. It was the beginning of the end: no-one, I knew, could survive such companions, and I thought tenderly of exuberant passengers on other ships I had been on. Charon himself must not be far away.

Unconversing and blurred on the fringe of this microcosmic nautical tableau, I sat in a deep chair and skimmed the Appointments page of *The Times*, loaded, it seemed, with irresistible jobs in Lisbon and Cairo and Hong Kong, London and Cambridge, that demanded my reprieve. Homesick for America, Manhattan in particular, I fought off *mal de mer*, in spite of the bile tang in the lounge, and manfully chewed a pair of incinerated lamb chops at a table, having decided that speaking to the soldiery before I had to would turn me into some kind of pornograph. Thus heroically invested with the last perquisites of civilian vanity, I hummed and gulped, careful not to watch the tumbling wet verdigris outside.

**A**t Douglas one took a cab to the railway station, from which a tiny red and black steam engine with a brass dome dithered its way, ahead of four uncushioned carriages, up the island to Sulby Glen, a mere map-point, where the apprehensive cadet-to-be transferred to a blue-gray omnibus which lurched off to the camp itself, a dreary immaculate settlement of low huts that really belonged at Novosibirsk in Siberia. Already I had seen and heard Warrant Officer Phillips, a tall corseted looking stoic of dauntingly coarse grain, whose look alternated between aloof despair and mastered exasperation. Bridlingly polite, he yelled orders in a stud English on which he remained to the end of his days there the one authority. In fact, as I later discovered, he thought mainly of retiring and then raising (I think) cucumbers in the Welsh hills.

That night, aghast at the stark lack of privacy, although amused to have been waited on in the Mess by Manx civilians (a "high tea" of eggs, sausages, ham, baked beans, woolly white bread, and tea but no coffee), I reviewed barracks life and found it poor. Next day, after sullen NCO's had kitted us out with ill-fitting battledress (which the camp tailor would adjust for a few shillings), there began a madhouse program of polishing, pants-

pressing, communal shaving, and imbecilic rural hikes intended to test the number of OQs (Officer Qualities) in each of us. Raked by the tops of compulsory boots, my ankles bled, so I put on my plain-toed shoes and kept the boots for ceremonial purposes, having learned from an old pro (warrant officer turned cadet at forty-six in order to retire on a junior officer's pension) how to veneer and buff the toecaps with flame, sputum, and velvet. One highly evolved cadet achieved such a sheen he was able to use it, as a demonstration proved, to shave by, while those watching with contemptuous envy wondered at the future of such a shoeshine wizard.

We consisted of student-officers (officers in name only) and officer-cadets (by far the larger number): S/Os and O/Cs, Souls Occarinas to me, the first different in having cap-badges that needed no polishing, the second a motley group ranging from obedient boys fresh from school and wily non-commissioned retreats. In command of each hut was a senior man who had a room to himself, in which the more pretentious held petty court, uncouth *couchées* especially; and our own, a master-pilot given to martial simplifications, was the first military person with whom I had an outright row, I forget what about, but he was loud and blunt while I (I hoped) was calm and mordant. Of course, he and I became friendly after that mutual baring of claws: one did, too much involved with others in such communal living, and too dependent on them in scores of ways, to cherish grudges. Against such pragmatic sodality one must reckon, however, the corrosiveness of the male ghetto. Crude pranks rent the night. One over-vocal masturbator climbed into bed ("pit") one night and upturned a maliciously planted can-lid full of white liquid polish, only to find his cries of dismay brought a dozen of the mock-censorious upon him, braying, "Look, he couldn't even wait for Lights-out!" Crypto sexual scuffles forever happened around one youth who had a pathic squeak. Anti-semitism, like an eructation from the Berchtesgarten lavabo, wafted through the long shiny room, closely followed by philistine cheers on the part of the unlettered. Ultimately, though, one was too busy ploughing through "précis" on Air Force law and Air Force history, the mysteries of etiquette and equivalent ranks, to have the energy for vendettas or crusades. In rare moments-off, either in Douglas at the Majestic ballroom (where the tables had telephones so that the cruising sexes could anonymously accost one another) and the local Beehive café, where home cooking boosted our rations, one vented one's assorted frustrations. Against this there was no taboo, except against venting them in uniform: a joke because, even in mufti, cadets looked just like cadets, in caps (which one raised when encountering officers), unworn-looking suits, and fastidiously carried gloves (to be worn only when downhanding duchesses from pumpkin coaches, or so I presumed). What a gaggle of tinpot soldiers we were, the intelligent bored silly, the

mediocre exhausted, and the dense frightened out of their wits. It was hard to average more than five and a half hours' sleep or not to wad one's raging appetite with too much bread and potato. I lost weight but regained my wind, and even managed to develop a masochistic fascination with the almost daily rain blown horizontal by the wind off the North Sea.

Every three weeks a Board of Review met, and cadets were passed, failed, or re-coursed: justice and injustice, history, bigotry, bluff, and benefit of doubt, all in one rough-and-ready stew. 503524 was the number on my 1250 (an identity card that procured cheap railway tickets); Yellow 2 was my squadron. My only usable skills there were some ability in public speaking (out of Prodicus of Keos' famous fifty-drachma show-lecture, disparaged in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, honed by Oxonian debate) and a knack for extemporizing scurrilous doggerel in speeding omnibuses. A slovenly cadet who could not remember the jargon of the drill manual, I one day stood before a squad, had them salute as one, for practice, and then, unable to recall the terminal formula of the whole daft pantomime, said simply, "Hands down!", a Westian inversion I was rather proud of (as if I had lowered my six-gun), but it launched Warrant Officer Phillips into an excommunicative frenzy. I redeemed myself the day I had to improvise, after five minutes' warning, the AMGOT (Allied Military Government) procedures and protocols for a hypothetical, recently occupied enemy island. Trapped in front of a lectern, sixty cadets, and two officers, I let my imagination skip about, filching things here and there from *Rasselas*, *Candide*, *Erewhon*, *Gulliver's Travels* and even, addictive paradise of boyhood, R.M. Ballantyne's *Coral Island*, and larding the whole spoof with special measures concerning the islanders' exotic religion ("Deontism"), their cannibalism (mermaids only on holy days), and Phlogogloss, their undeclined, non-conjugating, tenseless, and primarily erotic language. The reward for this effrontery was no parcel of eggs, cakes, and sweetmeats (as it is for the Sicilian game known as the cottabus), but, presumably because I must have evinced a quantum of non-negative OQs, an order to lecture the same class, a week later, on American Foreign Policy, about which I knew nothing nor even if there actually were one. This lecture was the hobbyhorse of Exeter (as he must be called here), a sibilantly dapper young fellow addicted to golf. I fudged up a series of jokes and reminiscences, and let it go at that, convinced I was being vetted for treason, schizophrenia, or indelible levity. With Macbeth, I felt it easier to cross over, having already damned myself half-way.

Arcane rumors abounded, as in encampments of all kinds: a "neutral" Scots accent was to be preferred over all others, even over an Oxbridge or BBC fanfare of languid diphthongs, and a North American burr—Canadian rather than Yankee—was a help. Equally unreliable yarns confirmed that

only six-footers could win the Sword of Honor; that, by 1960, the entire Air Force would be computerized, which meant that all pilots were obsolescent and would have to be remustered as accountant and equipment officers, or as chaplains; that no cadet who broke a bone during training (as distinct from when in his cups or reeling from brothel to brothel) was ever failed—his commission came with his plaster cast. One pressed on through a maze of marksmanship, military tactics, formation drill, weapon-stripping, fatuous gymnastics, and Procrustean General Knowledge tests concocted by lackadaisical but implacable Flying Officers with degrees in non-literary subjects: the lame, righteous one who doted on two ferocious boxer dogs who ate doors away; the plethoric, tallow-haired one who seemed somewhere to have failed a freshman course in *The Smile*; the elongated Channel Islander with the kindergarten face and the complex, juicy manner; the bluff Scottish goblin with the ingratiating conversational baritone and hair bristling gold from his ears; and, of course, Exeter, supply urbane because he alone knew how deadly he was going to be once in Parliament. These appraisers amused me with their sophistries gleaned from the student unions of yesteryear, their lectures on current affairs (culled with astute echolalia from the pages of *The Economist*, *The New Statesman*, and *The Observer*), their paramilitary flourishes, in which something myopic or giddy exposed the recent graduate. But they terrified others, and I heard of one indecorous plot, devised by a quorum of master-pilots for the day they became his fellow-officers, to seize Exeter in Douglas and subject him to a bicycle-pump-and-whitewash enema in a comfortable hotel room over afternoon tea. Perhaps he heard of it: he certainly stayed close to home and moved his rear with a weaving tautness, like the head of a featherweight boxer. He always began his first lecture (was this the rub that hurt the listening veterans?) by unsheathing a sword and jubilantly crying: “Attack!, gentlemen, is the only form of defence.” Not everything he uttered was quite so galling or so fatidic, some of it even edging past aphorism into epigram, no doubt in emulation of his intellectual hero, Walter Lippman: but almost all he did was just as extravagant, including the remarkable habit of addressing his wife as “Boy,” as if she were canine (but promoted male to soften the relegation). Exeter was an entertainment, and he looked healthy, like a piece of euphoric earthenware: a cheering fact because it seemed to prove that an eccentric could now and then survive, or even prosper, in that honor-mad enclave of six hundred homesick souls whose obligatory motto was *per ardua ad astra*: through toils to the stars, as if one were Wernhervon Braun entangled in camouflage netting.

Privately I managed to read a few pages in my copy of Jean Cocteau's *Opium*, in French, heady fodder for a military dormitory. I have recently unearthed a photograph of myself, passport size (and genre), from this period; I look shorn and skinny, world-wearily abstracted; the lean chin has a frail juvenility; the bagged eyes are dead, the frown aches. Opium indeed! I have never been so tired since. But perhaps that picture corresponded to my first brush with eschatology in the company of Cadet Sulfur (as I dubbed him), with whom I was deploying a mortar and smoke bombs on the firing range at the Point of Ayre, a windswept barren that Druids would have spurned, where we sometimes encamped *en masse* for toughening up exercises. Sulfur would hold and direct the barrel of the weapon while I dropped the bomb in and pulled the firing string, an arrangement that worked until, for once, his grip loosened, the finned bomb leapt out and invisibly grazed my brow in passing. Bless Sulfur for missing. From the pneumatic thump of the charge, I was deaf for a whole day, and when we fired Sten submachine guns on the range, soon after, I somehow avoided him. But it was not he who turned around from the butts to point at us the cocked Sten that refused to fire; explaining, even as he pumped the trigger, he saw a score of denim-clad cowards hit the dirt, bulkily horizontal and shrieking stale imperatives. It should have been this one who pulped his thumb in the ejection chamber of that trashiest of weapons, but instead it was one of the more prudent cadets, just short enough of sleep to let his mind wander while perforating a painted plywood homuncule. That first casualty was our last, though I think it might not have been had we ever used hand grenades, and I heard it said that many a newly commissioned officer left the island with a vintage chancre for not having heeded the lurid, *caveat-fornicator* movies we had to sit through, caught between retch and snigger.

Airplanes one hardly ever saw. There was more chance of finding a respirator in the Black Hole of Calcutta. Reminded of these desirable objects by the wings on the breasts of our instructors (who toward the end of my stay acquired, perhaps in fact stole, a communications plane in which to earn their flying pay), I found them doubly vivid in the talk of the Polish cadets: refugee veterans of the annihilated Polish Air Force, their insignia had been a quartered red-and-yellow square. Hefty Mickiewicz had broken his back against the tailfin when baling out of his Spitfire and had briefly found himself hinged against it. He did nothing by halves after that, one of his escapades being to climb up the façade of a Douglas hotel and mount a balcony, upon which (so the tale ran) he twice settled the hash of the wench who had taunted him as he waddled rubber-jointed past. Much qui-

eter, Vic Miliewski, a pensive political theorist who won the Sword of Honor, smoked a pipe and ruminated on death, Chopin, and fidelity; he died in an air crash a few years later, one of many Poles who survived war only to succumb to peace, as if something retributively pedantic in fate were using their brio, their gutsy panache, against them. I wish I still had his letters; in him, heroism had become a fine-tuned harmony of all the things a man just had to do. The Poles, for reasons good enough, were the drinkers who set the pace during the virility-liturgies called dining-in nights, when cadets wore black bow ties and white shirts instead of blue, horse-played with chairs and rolled-up carpets, and made compulsory speeches while standing amid the cheap cutlery on the long white-clad tables.

On one such occasion, I was heard to be quoting from Oscar Wilde's *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (something about a little patch of blue, garbled), but I can recollect nothing of the speech, thank heaven, laced as it must have been with facetiae and bits of Greek intended to baffle. That quarter-year, which permanently broke the pattern of my life as it had been from fifteen to twenty-four, remains a shattered glyptograph, its outline clear, its largest fragments etched with rigid hubbub, its splinters mere spoiled stuff from among which, especially when not trying to remember, I retrieve the ghost of the officer who invariably introduced himself to a new audience of cadets by saying, "Gentlemen, *my* name is ...," and then had to look in his pocket for the card which told him. Some laughed at this con; I wonder now if it was only the gullible who felt sorry for him. Such egregious poppies apart, there is still Wing Commander Proop, his face that of a suntanned tortoise, who, gravely returning one's salute, proved he knew an open hand hides no pistols. Had he known more of assassins, he would have revised service custom and had one remove one's headgear as well.

**H** haunted by the buzzing phantoms of dead aviators I knew and did not know, whose images even then undid and re-formed themselves under the auspices of boot-camp, I returned, like a porous mutant, to my six-year-long and by then nearly metaphysical affair with a BOAC stewardess whom I had first met when we were undergraduates. Reconstructed according to King's Regulations, would I seem to her man of action or newly automated fool? Would my parents detect a new, crisp pellicle around me? I went on leave with a nagging sense that my life had snagged itself on a node in the brute world's weave. At the dining-in, after the passing-out parade, Wing Commander Proop read out, in alphabetical order of names, the postings

of the graduates: to Malaya, Iraq, Christmas Island, Germany. Only one of us would return, newly appointed to the Unit staff. Up went a howl of sympathetic derision from the outbound company of one hundred, as if they knew their combined trajectories would force me outward after them.

**Paul West**, a frequent contributor to **WLA**, is the author of some 40 books, the most recent of which is *The Immensity of the Here and Now*, a novel of 9.11. During the fall of 2003, an international conference on the the works of Paul West was held in Tours, France.