

## ISLAND OF RESISTANCE

Robert Anthony ("Steve") Carson was born on May 6, 1923. All the time he was at Coventry Technical College he wanted to fly, but his parents would not let him join the R.A.F., so he went as an apprentice engineer to Morris Motors and was young enough to regard the outbreak of war somewhat as a heaven-sent chance to learn to fly. However, under age and in a reserved job, the way was still barred, so he took to Civil Defence ambulance driving as a sideline and as soon as he was old enough eased himself out of his reserved job and into the R.A.F. He trained as a fighter pilot at Cranwell, was commissioned, joined No. 222 (Spitfire) Squadron—part of the 2nd Tactical Air Force—and went with them, in the Invasion, to fight in Europe.

ON September 29, 1944, Robert Carson was shot down at an awkward moment. He had made two runs over the convoy on the Dutch road, seen his shells slamming into the truck-loads of panicky German soldiers and was running in for the third time when the engine banged frighteningly, something shot out of the flat, mullet-head cowl in front and the Spitfire shuddered violently as the engine seized.

An axiom among fighter pilots says that troops are always eager to meet the man who has been strafing them. Carson swept about a hundred feet over their heads, speed dropping as he used it to claim a little height, trying to stretch his glide as far as he could, though any high performance fighter glides dead-stick like a brick. He swung left towards a field, snapped his flaps down and held her off till she squashed and slid noisily to a stop. Unclipping, he swung out of the cockpit and, looking back, saw the soldiers fanning fast off the road towards him half a mile back. Cursing his clumsy flying boots, he ran like hell the other way. At that time Carson was just twenty-one, compact and nimble, with large, capable hands.

He tore through a hedge, across two fields and dead ahead

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saw a canal about twenty-five feet wide barring his path. Without breaking step or faltering he took off in full run on wings of fear and landed in the middle, going right under because it was deep. The shock of the cold water brought him out of the panic and he half swam, half floundered to the far side, pulled himself on to the bank and was running again. The country was dead flat, like so much of Holland; no cover anywhere.

Ten minutes later he stumbled almost to his knees, feeling he could run no more. The breath sawed hard in his throat and his heart was pounding in his ears. Looking back fearfully he did not see a single German soldier and understood why when a Spitfire rose steeply over the fields, pulling round in a climbing turn at the same moment as the crackle of its distant cannon fire reached him. He wondered which of his friends it was, and, because he had once been strafed himself, felt almost sympathy for the vengeful pursuers caught in the open fields and cringing into the grass as they waited for it.

Half walking, half jogging, he passed some farm workers, who stared open-mouthed, and later saw three farmhouses ahead. They all looked the same; making a quick decision he walked cautiously round the back of the middle one, and a florid, middle-aged man came out in farm clothes, looking startled at the battledress and flying boots. Quick-witted, the farmer grasped the situation instantly, grabbed Carson by the arm and hustled him into a barn by the house. In stumbling English and with gestures he made the boy understand that he was to burrow under the hay if he heard Germans, and then turned and ran out of the barn. In a minute he slipped quietly back through the door carrying over his arm a good brown tweed suit, and as he helped Carson off with his battledress and into the suit he managed to make him understand that he would like the suit back after the war. Carson, who knew a few German words, gathered that it was his Sunday best. The farmer pulled some of the hay aside then and underneath Carson saw a sten gun and a couple of automatics. The farmer handed him a 7 mm. automatic. "Allies," the farmer said, grinning, making signs to indicate that the guns

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had been dropped from the air. Suddenly solemn again he told Carson he was lucky to have chosen this farm. The ones on either side belonged to Dutch Nazis. On a map he pointed with a thick forefinger to show that the spot was about a hundred kilometres from the Canadian troops.

After dusk he led Carson over fields to a house in a nearby village called Krimpen, on the banks of the Lek River, and outside the back door Carson met Dirk, the hearty, burly ship repairer. Dirk took him down to the river where he had his ships and on a barge moored there Carson relaxed in a bunk with some bread and cheese and passed a peaceful night.

Dirk told him in the morning that he would arrange to get him a Dutch identity card. In the evening he came back a little flustered and said the Germans were searching the village. Taking the boy by the arm and talking loudly to him in incomprehensible Dutch, he led him out into the main street, past a disciplined little troop of the searching German soldiers (Carson blushing like a schoolgirl and feeling very guilty) to a schoolteacher's house which the Germans had already searched. Chris, the schoolteacher, was a smiling, obliging, blond man who sheltered Carson for four days till a man came one evening, spoke briefly to Chris, and after he went Chris handed Carson a neat piece of folded green cardboard.

"Rub this in your hands till it looks worn," he said. "It is your new identity card. You are Piet Smit, land worker, and I will call you Piet. Get used to it."

Carson looked at it and said in wonder: "It really looks real."

"It is real," Chris said, "except for the signature. We get the cards from the official stocks. Now . . . we will arrange for you to go north where you will find more food and fewer Germans."

"Away from the front?"

"Yes. You will shelter in a house. It will not be exciting. There is a curfew at seven, the Germans start shooting after it, so your nights will be dull for a young man, but you must wait till the armies catch up with you."

Carson said: "Sorry. Not me. I'm no good at that. I want to have a go at getting through the lines."

"Do not be foolish," Chris said severely, the schoolmaster coming out in him. "You will be caught. Or killed in the battle. Or both. You should do as we say."

"Look, Chris," Carson said, "I do appreciate all you've done but I'd go silly sitting on my bottom all day. Other people have got through the lines. Why shouldn't I?"

"You hear only of the lucky ones who get through," Chris explained. "Not the unlucky ones. There are more of them."

"I was always lucky," Carson insisted.

After half an hour's argument Carson was still stubborn so Chris, slightly ruffled, brought out of a downstairs closet a battered old bicycle without tyres. "It is the best I can do for you," he said, and added tersely, "I hope it brings you luck because that is what you are going to need."

In the morning Chris went out and came back in about half an hour with a sinewy, extremely competent-looking girl of about twenty. She was pushing a bicycle and Chris introduced her as Griselda. "She will guide you south to a house," he said.

Griselda smiled briefly. She was apparently ready to go and five minutes later Carson rode off about a hundred yards behind her, the battered rims of his bicycle wheels clattering over the cobbles so that he thought everyone must be staring at him.

Coming up to the ferry over the Lek he saw a German soldier on board collecting the fares and felt his heartbeats quicken with fear. Chris had briefed him well: Carson handed the German the correct money (it was the first German he had dealt with) and the soldier muttered something at him, but Carson was pretending to look at his front wheel and the German moved off. Two more Germans searched some of the passengers as they got off on the far side but Carson, sweating, landed unmolested. He saw a line of Red Cross lorries waiting on the road; at least they were white, with red crosses painted on the sides. All of them were packed with obviously healthy and well-armed German soldiers.

For nearly six hours that day he rode a hundred yards behind Griselda, who seemed to be tireless. About six-thirty they went through a winding village called Bleskgraaf, and when Carson came out on the other side he could not see the girl. He rode back through the village but there was no sign of her and he started worrying about the curfew. It was so close to curfew time that he guessed this was the village where he was supposed to spend the night. But where?

He rode back through the village again; still no sign of Griselda but a doctor's plate caught his eye outside a house and the name on it was Inglese. It seemed an unmistakable omen; walking round to the back of the house he knocked.

The doctor himself came to the door, a bony, stooped, elderly man. Carson said in stumbling German, "Ich bin Englische Fliegeroffizier," and the doctor said quickly in thick English, "Come inside at once." It never even crossed his mind that Carson might be a disguised German trying to trap Dutch Resistance people. Dutchmen were usually wary of them (with plenty of reason), but the doctor said later he did not think a German could ever have an accent like Carson's.

Shortly after curfew time Carson was sitting down to dinner with the doctor; five minutes later the maid rushed in trembling and said there were two German soldiers at the door. Carson dived out of the French windows into the back garden and hid among some rhubarb. The doctor called him in half an hour later and said the Germans were only making a routine check and now he had been searched it was safer than ever.

Next day the doctor brought an eager youth and a girl in and told Carson they would guide him to an address in the town of Dordrecht. It was the system as before, Carson riding his rattletrap old bike behind the two guides. A German check post gave him a bad fright on the way, stopping him and asking for his papers. He pulled out his identity card, the German looked casually at it, handed it back, and Carson rode on.

In Dordrecht they took him into a grey stone house in a garden back from the road, showed him into a room, smiled

and walked out. Across the room, watching him closely, sat a silent young man; short and thick-set with fair, close-cropped hair. The man merely gazed, tight-lipped, saying nothing and Carson sat in another chair. A quarter of an hour passed; the man had not opened his mouth and Carson felt the silent tension getting unbearable. He was fidgety, wondering what sort of test this was and then he heard the other man say something explosively under his breath. It sounded like "Goddam," and Carson said:

"I say, do you speak English?"

"I sure as hell do," said Lieutenant Grover P. Parker, of California, who had been shot down two days before, been captured, escaped that morning from the Dordrecht lock-up and been picked up by the Dutch.

The tension broke and they each burst into a torrent of words. A few minutes later an English-speaking Dutchman came into the room and apologised for being so long. (They realised later he had probably been listening, waiting for them to talk naturally to each other so he would know whether either was a German "plant".) He said he was going to send them to a place called the Biesbosch, an area of thickly overgrown marsh in the fork where the Waal flowed into the Maas River. There was a well-armed Organisation there, he added, and the Germans were usually frightened to go into it.

Another fair young Dutchman came in the morning and led them for several miles across quiet country till they came out on the Maas River at a spot where a skiff was moored. Across on the far shore they saw a tangle of thick reeds about seven feet high, and here and there a tree. "Biesbosch," the Dutchman said briefly. He rowed them across to a rotted landing stage and led the way along a narrow, beaten path that was almost a funnel where the thick, dry-green reeds crowded in on both sides, curving over their heads. Stagnant canals choked with weeds and reeds kept cutting through the path and they crossed them on narrow planks.

The path sharply spread out into a small clearing and in a canal running along one side of it a man sat in a canoe. "Ach, der Kommandant," the guide said half to himself, half to Carson.

He gave a hail and the man paddled to the bank and climbed out. The guide spoke in Dutch and the Kommandant solemnly shook their hands and said in English with a stiff accent, "How do you do?" He was about forty, fair and sharp-featured with sunken cheeks, wore a thick, crew-neck sweater and had a big automatic pistol stuck in the waistband of his pants. It was a keen face, Carson thought, but "hooded," curiously empty of active expression. He found in the times that followed that the Kommandant seldom let a flicker of emotion show. The main thing for the moment was that he spoke English. He said, "If you will always do as I say you can stay with us. I am afraid it is not comfortable."

The guide turned back and they followed the Kommandant along more winding paths for a quarter of an hour till Carson became aware of the long low shape of a barge lying surprisingly in the reeds. The Kommandant led them on to the deck over a plank and Carson saw that it was moored in another choked canal. She was an old and dirty barge with only a little faded, peeling paint on her.

Looking curiously around they followed the Kommandant along the rusty deck to a cabin at the rear, and as he put his head in the door Carson caught the sweaty smell of bodies. A dozen or so men were lounging inside, some on bunks, a couple at a table, dressed mostly in singlets and pants, and all of them looking unshaven and dirty. With a shock he saw a young woman lying on a bunk; she looked heavy and sluttish.

The Kommandant called one of the men and a big, broad-shouldered young man of about twenty-four swung off a bunk and came over. "This is Jan," the Kommandant said. "He will take care of you." Jan put out his hand and said in a deep voice and very good English, "I do hope you do not mind sharing a bunk."

They found he had been quite a cultured student until the Germans had interrupted his studies; since then he had become a ruthless young man, though to Carson and Parker he was always friendly and cheerful. Like most of the Dutch they had encountered, he was fair-haired.

Jan introduced the others, but they seemed a graceless lot

and all Carson and Parker got were a few grunts. Even the girl was unfriendly. They dined that evening on bread and potatoes, and most of the potatoes were pitted and bad. Carson was oppressed by the smell, the surly carelessness and the general fetid atmosphere of the Biesbosch. He asked Jan how soon they could move on towards the Allied lines, but Jan said that the country further on was thick with Germans and check points and that the Germans were taking savage measures with anyone they caught.

"Stay here and wait until they reach us," he said. "It will not be long now." He added wryly, "We have been waiting a long time and it is worth waiting a little more."

He found them a top bunk and Carson and Parker crammed into it together, though they had little sleep because the girl and another man were in the bunk below behaving with absolutely no inhibitions whatsoever.

In the morning Jan took them off the barge for a walk and led them deep into the middle of the Biesbosch, where they came out of the narrow paths to a peaceful clearing with a canal running through it and a pretty stone bridge arching over the canal. It was warm and sunny and they stopped to rest on the bridge. Jan was saying, "You know we are doing more than just waiting here. There is another barge . . ." He stopped as Carson let out an alarmed little cry. He was looking past Jan's shoulder, and Parker and Jan swung round and saw two German soldiers walking out of the reeds into the clearing. One had a rifle slung over his shoulder, the other wore a pistol holster on his belt. They headed straight for the bridge.

Jan mumbled, hardly moving his lips, "Do not look aggressive. I will do the talking." Carson put his hand in his coat pocket, gripped the butt of his pistol and thumbed the safety catch to "Fire." Parker, he thought, would undoubtedly be doing the same.

He saw that the soldier with the holster wore the skull and crossbones of a Panzer division on his cap. Under it was a thin face and sharp eyes. The other German was younger and looked rather seedy. They walked on the bridge and stopped in front of Jan, looking wary but not truculent. The

man with the skull and crossbones badge spoke. Carson got the bare gist of some question about a nearby farm. Jan answered him in German, and while they talked the two Germans kept watching the three of them.

The older man must have become aware of the atmosphere. He stuck his thumbs in his belt; his fingers lay over the holster flap and Carson saw him surreptitiously pulling the flap loose from the brass stud. Parker apparently saw it too, because he suddenly drew his own pistol and yelled, "Hande hoch!" The younger German gave a little cry of shock, jerked his rifle off his shoulder and it went off point-blank, the bullet passing between Carson and Parker. Then he was running and it all happened very fast.

Carson had his pistol out; he fired and the running German fell on his face and started screaming. Parker was shooting jerkily, his face expressionless. His first bullet hit the other German in the stomach, the second one went through the side of the neck as the German spun round and the third one went through his left hand; then the German went down.

The man Carson had shot was moving on the ground like a weak crab, and Carson thought vaguely, "This isn't like the movies at all. He should be dead."

Parker's man was making a lot of noise and then he stopped yelling as Parker went up to him and moaned, "Bruder, Bruder, nicht schiessen."

Jan said in a worried voice, "I hope there are no other Germans near. We had better go."

"We can't leave these poor devils here," Carson said. He had picked up the dropped rifle, and Parker took the pistol out of the other man's holster. The two wounded had quietened down and were gasping.

A violent rustling sounded through the reeds, growing louder; Carson's scalp crawled with fear and then some of the Dutchmen from the barge burst into the clearing. The Kommandant was with them and looked dispassionately at the two Germans.

"There will probably be trouble," he said. He spoke quietly, with a detached solemnity. Two of his band picked

up the wounded men pickaback and the Kommandant led them all down a new trail.

"What's going to happen? Where're we going?" Carson asked Jan, and Jan grinned. "To the prison camp. You'll see," he said mysteriously.

After about ten minutes the Kommandant turned and vanished off the track into the reeds. The others followed him, and not till he reached the spot did Carson see the big black barge moored virtually alongside the track. It was perhaps bigger than the other barge and lay in a canal which ran about four feet behind the reeds; it was invisible unless you pushed a foot or two into the reeds at the place where the plank led on to the deck. He stepped across the plank and saw the Dutchmen lowering the wounded men into a hatchway; walking over, he looked into the hatch and the smell that came up nearly made him sick. In the square of light, dirty faces were looking up.

"German deserters," Jan said. "We have thirty down there now." He added, grinning, "We had to persuade some of them to desert."

A couple of the Dutchmen slipped down the hatch into the hold, commandeered some of the Germans' shirts and spent half an hour dressing the wounds of the two wounded. Both were conscious and the man Carson had shot was quite cheerful. The other one, hit three times, seemed too weak to talk.

Carson had heard some growling among the Germans below, and when the Dutch came up they said the Germans were angry about the shootings, particularly when they heard that a couple of Allied airmen were responsible. Apparently they did not care particularly about the two men who were shot, but merely regarded the shooting as setting a disturbing new precedent in their cloistered life.

The Kommandant said to Carson and Parker: "The Germans in the village across the Maas will have heard the shots, and when they miss the two men I think they will send soldiers to search. We are going to disperse for a day or two, but as you are really responsible you must stay on the barge and guard them."

Neither Carson nor Parker found the idea appealing.

"What if the Germans below start a fuss?" Carson asked. "If we have to send a couple of bullets down to keep them quiet, it'll draw any searchers pretty fast."

"I do not think these Germans will make trouble," the Kommandant said, with a faint smile. "They are safer here with us than with their own people. I assure you they know that."

When the Dutch had gone Carson and Parker sat in the wheelhouse of the barge with rifles, taking it in turn to watch the hatch. They had to leave part of the hatch open so the Germans could get some air in the foul space below, but they seemed a dispirited lot with no fight left in them. One German stuck his head out of the hatch and tried to pull himself out on to the deck, but Parker pointed the hollow end of his rifle at him, clicked the bolt and aimed with such a methodical air that the German abruptly dropped back into the hold.

The day passed quietly, but about an hour after dusk the German patrol came over. Carson saw the reflections of several lights bobbing over the reeds in the direction of the Maas, and a little later they heard the German shouts. For a long time they watched the lights flickering over the reeds, and gradually the lights were working nearer to them and the shouts getting louder.

Parker kept saying, "They'll never find us here," but Carson thought his voice sounded a little too carefully controlled. He could hear his own heart thudding. The lights came within about two hundred yards of them and then, to his enormous relief, they seemed to be receding again and the shouts became fainter.

In the morning two Dutchmen brushed across the gang-plank carrying some buckets of boiled potatoes, which they shared out impartially among the prisoners below. Only the Kommandant and Jan were left aboard the other barge, they reported; the rest were hiding in farmhouses for miles around.

Carson and Parker did not leave the prison barge until, two mornings later, the Dutch arrived with more food, and one of them took Carson and Parker over to the other barge, where

they found the Organisation reassembling. The two last members arrived just after Carson, and walking in front of them with their hands clasped on their heads were two men in farm clothes. The men behind were sticking heavy pistols into the ribs of their captives and said grimly that they were Dutch Nazis.

Carson, for the first time, saw the Kommandant let his feelings show; talking to the captives his voice was biting and angry, and at the end he turned away with a disgusted wave of the hand and said, "Take them to the other barge."

Several Dutchmen prodded their compatriot Nazis down the trail at pistol point, and Carson and Parker trailed after them. The leaders had just vanished out of Carson's sight round a bend in the trail when a pistol suddenly cracked several times. Carson ran round the bend and saw the two Dutch Nazis lying on the track, quite dead.

One of the guards said, with a grim smile, "They tried to run for it." Carson never found out whether that was the truth or not. They buried them in the reeds just off the track. Two of the Dutch, Carson noted, had been carrying trenching tools.

The man he had shot a few days earlier by the little bridge, and who had seemed to be recovering quite well, took a turn for the worse; his belly started to swell and he was running a high fever. They brought him up out of the hold and put him in the wheelhouse, but there was little else they could do for him. He was in a lot of pain, but they could get no doctor or drugs and he became delirious, getting obviously weaker, and then sank into a coma. In the morning he was dead. They filled his pockets with heavy stones, and one of the Germans in the hold, who had been a headquarters clerk, was brought up to speak a burial service as they dropped his body in the canal among the reeds.

For two or three weeks the days passed with little incident. Carson and Parker did several nights' guard duty on the prison barge, and at other times they stayed on the first barge. The Organisation had brought in several more German deserters and now there were over forty of them crammed into the stinking hold. Some of them had been getting restless,

complaining loudly about the food and conditions. All they got was a few grubby boiled potatoes a day and sometimes some bread. For drinking they threw a bucket over the side and drew up the water that looked cloudy and tasted muddy and was probably responsible for the dysentery some of the prisoners had. The Kommandant let them up on deck in batches for an hour a day for air and exercise and told them curtly that no country infested by Germans ever had enough food. His attitude to them, Carson thought, was like that of a reformatory teacher dealing with dead-end kids.

The Organisation itself had little more food than the Germans. They had to get it black market from surrounding farms and some of the farmers, terrified of being caught supplying them, did not always co-operate enthusiastically. Carson was hungry all the time. Now and then they had the luxury of a little sugar to sprinkle on the bread and Carson came to think that black bread and sugar was better than any cake he had ever tasted. Parker, on the other hand, was harder to please. Every time they gave him a little sugar on his bread he used to say, "Goddam, I hate sugar," and wolf it down.

One day a Dutchman brought in a German officer, an unpleasant, stuffy young man who had deserted his troops but still regarded himself as an important personage, entitled to special respect and privileges. On the way to the barge he had made the mistake of informing the Dutch guard that he (the guard) was lacking in manners and breeding, and when they got to the hatch the guard propelled him into the depths with a shrewdly placed foot.

In a minute the officer was screaming through the hatch that a German officer should never have to live with the troops, particularly in such conditions. He demanded special treatment.

Carson, whose shoes had been falling apart, called him up on deck, took his magnificent shiny top-boots and sent him below again, feeling tempted to speed him on his way with one of his new boots.

Parker said, "Goddam, that guy reminds me of some Cambridge University characters I met once."

One morning one of the Dutch came back from a food expedition and said that advancing British troops had reached Tilburg and Breda—about twenty-five miles from the Biesbosch. Carson, who had been getting more and more restless, thought that was near enough to try an all-or-nothing dash for the lines. Both he and Parker had long tired of the novelty of holding an enclave of German prisoners on German-held territory. Sick of being half-starved and hunted and covered in lice like everyone else, Carson told the Kommandant he and Parker were going to make a dash for it, and the Kommandant said simply: "We need you here. Now that your troops are getting near we can do some things to help them."

German activity was increasing in the area, he explained, and German patrols becoming more common in the Biesbosch. In his unemotional way he suggested that they make the district unhealthy for the Germans by laying some ambushes. He was a strange and compelling personality, the Kommandant. It was not that he begged them to stay. He merely said that there was useful work to do and they stayed.

Jan was immediately keen on the ambush idea and he teamed up with Carson and Parker to make one of the "task forces."

They picked a spot in the reeds opposite the village across the Maas and hid there and watched. On the second morning an old Dutch duck catcher who lived in the Biesbosch panted up to them in their hiding spot and said that two German soldiers were looting his house. They went back with him, told him to keep in the background, and cautiously walked out of the path across the clearing towards the house. The Dutchman's wife came to the window and signalled violently and they stopped, trying to make out what she meant, when a German soldier came out of the door with a rifle. He yelled at them to walk ahead with their hands up, but the three pretended not to understand, turned and were walking away when they heard the click of the rifle bolt very clearly and the shots started as they broke into a run. Carson heard the zip-zip of a couple of bullets and then he and Parker and Jan dived into the reeds, to fall into a canal just behind. Both

Germans were running down towards them now, firing into the reeds. The three tried to move further away, but every time they moved the reeds rattled and shook on top, giving them away.

The Germans were panting and tramping just behind the reeds, and then the shots started again, zipping through the reeds and tearing white furrows on the water. Sinking their bodies in the stagnant shallows, Carson and the other two watched the reeds, keeping their pistol hands above water, waiting for the chance of a shot. Slowly they squirmed back and back until they were across the canal.

An occasional shot still came through the reeds, but the Germans were shooting blindly as they walked cautiously along the bank, listening, and the nearest bullet slashed through the reeds a good thirty yards away. After a while Carson slowly hauled himself through the reeds on the other side of the canal, and the other two crawled after him. They ran down the paths to try and intercept the two Germans on their way back to the village but the Germans must have taken some other path because they did not see them.

A day or two later they had better luck. Watching across the river from the spy nest in the reeds they saw four German soldiers get in a skiff and start rowing across the Maas to the Biesbosch. The three of them ran and hid in the reeds by a trail leading up from the river but the Germans chose a different path, and then began a fantastic five hours as the three men blindly tried to shadow the Germans, running along trails, splashing across streams and dykes, trying to head them off, most of the time having only a dim idea of where the Germans were and all the time taking the risk of running slap into them along one of the narrow trails that funnelled through the marshes. Once or twice they sighted them crossing cleared patches of the marshes but never in time to head them off.

Carson was thinking of going back to the skiff to get them on the way back at the water's edge (though it would be in sight of the troops across the river) when the four Germans emerged from the reeds some distance off, strolled across a clearing and entered a small hut. Carson saw, without joy,



Robert (Steve) Carson on the wing of his Spitfire shortly before he was shot down.



Carson, as an instructor on Meteors, February, 1952.

that the soldiers were heavily armed. Among them they had a light machine gun, two tommy guns and a rifle. Carson, Jan and Parker only had pistols.

A broken hay-rick stood near the hut and the three hid on top of it, waiting for the Germans to come out. As dusk fell they saw one of the Germans in the hut going from window to window, and it became clear that he was a sentry and that the Germans would not leave the hut that night. With a sentry it was too risky to rush the hut, so they settled to sleep in the hay and wait for the morning.

Jan, who had been a guerrilla and fugitive for three years, was awake at first light and woke the other two. They watched the Germans moving inside the hut. Jan thought that they were too exposed and isolated on the hay-rick for an ambush in broad daylight, and suggested they go back along the trail that the soldiers would probably follow to the skiff. Backing quietly away, keeping the rick between them and the house, they came to a spot where the ground rose a little away from the trail. On the rise, barely five yards from the track, clustered a thicket of shrubs. It was the ideal spot and they settled behind the shrubs and waited.

It was about an hour later that the soldiers came down the track in single file, the front man carrying one of the dangerous tommy guns. Jan whispered: "I'll take the front man." Parker said: "I'll shoot for a double in the middle."

Carson got a bead through the leaves on the last man about twenty yards back and took up the first pull on the trigger. There was a loud bang beside him as Jan fired and then Carson fired. Parker was standing up firing, head above the shrubs, shooting methodically. On the trail a paralysed fraction of a moment snapped in a flurry of chaos and panic. The front man was staggering, the second one fell instantly, the third bounded into the reeds on the other side of the track and the last man dropped his machine gun and hared off back the way he had come. Carson, furious at having missed, was standing up firing like Parker at the running man, pistol banging like a series of backfires till there was only a click, and the last man also vanished in the reeds.

Carson slid another clip into the butt and Jan and Parker,  
E.O.D.

keeping under cover, fired systematically into the reeds where the third man had jumped. Soon there was a frightened cry in the reeds, "Kamerad! Kamerad!"

Jan yelled for him to come out with his hands up and a moment later the reeds rattled and shook and the German stepped hesitantly on to the track. He was trembling uncontrollably with shock and fright and the tears were running down his face. He looked dumbly at them and at the two soldiers lying on the ground. He did not seem able to talk.

"We got to get the other one," Parker said. "If he gets back and talks that'll be a bad deal."

They walked carefully along the track to the spot where the fourth man had disappeared, prodding the other German in front with their pistols as some sort of a shield. Jan called out in German telling the missing man to come out and surrender, but there was no answer, and after a while they pushed gingerly into the reeds to smoke him out. Carson felt his flesh creep, hoping the missing man did not have a pistol. They searched for several minutes and were about to give it up when Parker called, "Here he is." Carson pushed through the reeds and saw the soldier lying half under water at the edge of a ditch. He had a bullet in the base of his neck and was quite dead.

They went back then with the prisoner to the spot of the ambush where the others were lying. One of them died as they got there, but the other was still alive and conscious, blood gushing out of a bad wound in his chest. Jan said, "It's too far to carry him back to the barge. He wouldn't live anyway."

"What the devil can we do then?" Carson asked.

"Make him kaput," Jan said.

"Oh God, no."

"I'll do it," said Jan. "Don't watch."

He walked quickly up to the wounded man who watched him pathetically and dumbly. Carson turned away as Jan swiftly knelt. The gun banged once and Carson felt he was going to be sick.

Jan said quietly, "Forgive me."

They took the surviving German and the guns back to the barge.

Carson, Parker and Jan went on several more sorties during the next confused days, but there was no more killing, for which Carson was glad. They intercepted a few more Germans, but, backed by moral force of their new tommy guns, they let rip from the reeds with short bursts over the enemy heads and the soldiers dropped their weapons instantly and gladly surrendered. They took them back to the barge. Other Dutchmen of the Organisation brought in more prisoners and by the end of October they counted seventy demoralised Germans grumbling and scratching at lice in the stinking hold.

The deep thumps of heavy guns were coming across the Maas now and at night they saw the glow of fires. Every day the guns sounded louder and every night the fires were nearer. On October 4 they found themselves on the barge in the middle of an artillery duel, shells screeching over them like shrill thunder from the British guns across the river and the Germans behind the Biesbosch. One of the Dutchmen came back from a reconnaissance and said that the Germans had pulled out of the village across the river and that the British were very close to it. Carson had a few words with Parker and then they went to the Kommandant and Carson told him they were going to try a dash across the river just before dawn.

This time the Kommandant nodded. "That is the best," he said solemnly. "You must tell them that we are here and I will send one of my men with you."

He surprised Carson then by revealing that they could start the engine of the barge and that if Carson could send an "all clear" message back by the Dutchman, they could steer the barge out of the canal into the river and across.

An hour before dawn Carson, Parker and a Dutchman moved down the trail to the river, got into a skiff at the old landing and quietly paddled across the river, not daring to talk even in whispers because sound carries so clearly in the stillness just before dawn.

They landed a few hundred yards from the village and as  
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the grey light came Carson climbed a willow to try and see what was happening in the village. In a minute a loud explosion sent up a mushroom of dirt a hundred yards away and then there was another, and then another, rather closer. Carson caught the flashes a couple of miles beyond the village and realised they had been spotted by a British battery. He almost fell out of the tree and they scrambled into cover along the river bank, the Dutchman holding his bleeding hand where he had been hit by a shell splinter.

Crawling towards the village they saw no movement at all. It was silent and seemed deserted, and they crawled under cover to the corner of a house on the outskirts and settled down to watch.

Half an hour later a man darted from behind a house, crossed the street and vanished into a doorway. A minute later he flitted out of the doorway and vanished behind another house, and Carson, heart jumping into his throat, saw that the man was in British battledress.

They watched the soldier work his way down the street, fascinated by the quick, nervous dashes into cover, praying that no snipers were left in the village. No sound or movement came from the houses and when the soldier darted into view again about fifty yards away Carson saw the N.C.O.'s chevrons on his sleeve and yelled, "Hey, sergeant!"

The soldier was instantly out of sight in a doorway. Carson yelled again, "We're Allied Air Force officers escaping. The Germans have pushed off out of here."

There was a brief silence, and then the soldier's voice came : "Come out with your hands up. Walk in the middle of the road."

"Well, for Christ's sake don't shoot," Carson yelled. "Here we come."

They walked up the middle of the road with their hands up and Parker said : "Goddam. I dodge the Jerries all this time and then get captured by the British."

An hour later they were telling a lieutenant-colonel of the Rifle Brigade what they knew of the German movements and

the situation in the Biesbosch. A little after dusk the Dutchman went back across the river and towards midnight they heard the chugging of the barge's engine. It grew louder and louder and after about half an hour the barge moved slowly out of the darkness and grounded on the friendly shore. The Kommandant jumped over the bows and waded ashore, allowing his face to wrinkle into a wide smile as they took him to see the colonel, but the happiest of all seemed to be the seventy Germans in the hold.

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*Carson got back to 222 Squadron so quickly that the Biesbosch was still full of Germans, and he flew over and shot them up. He was awarded the Military Cross for his evasion. After the war he married a Coventry girl, stayed in the R.A.F. with a permanent commission, became a test pilot for a while and then a flying instructor. Transferring to jets, he went to Germany in 1948 as a flight commander in No. 67 (Vampire) Squadron. Later he returned to England to become an instructor on Meteors. His wife is a sailplane pilot and they have one son.*