

Chapter 1
Philippe Gerard
Summer, 1943

For Lieutenant Philippe Gerard, a permanent darkness cloaked France. He saw his Nazi-occupied homeland only at night, when he flew his Westland Lysander into clandestine airstrips on missions for the British Royal Air Force.

The last flush of daylight faded from the ramp at RAF Tangmere in West Sussex as Philippe ran up his engine for another sortie. He checked his propeller RPM and oil pressure. Wondered whether tonight would be the night he didn't make it back.

He hoped so. Death in combat could clear his name.

Tonight's passenger sat behind him in the Lysander's tandem cockpit. Philippe did not know the man's name. He knew only that the man was an agent in the French Resistance. In the event of capture and torture, the less Philippe knew, the better.

"Are you ready to depart?" Philippe asked over the interphone.

"*Oui*," the agent answered. "*Vive la France*."

Philippe slid his canopy closed and locked the side windows. Under a rising rose-colored moon, he taxied to the departure end of the runway. Observing radio silence, the tower flashed a green light signal for takeoff. Philippe eased the throttle up to full power. Vibration from the big Bristol Mercury engine rattled the instrument panel and set the needles dancing. The Lysander began to roll. A few seconds later, the airspeed indicator came alive and the tailwheel rose. In less than a hundred yards, the gull-winged aircraft lifted into the night.

The English countryside, bathed in moonlight, scrolled beneath Philippe's windscreen. He kept his cockpit lighting dim to preserve his night vision. Only landmarks and an aeronautical chart would guide him to his destination: a reasonably flat pasture owned by a patriotic farmer in Centre-Val de Loire.

Philippe eased the control stick to the right and rolled the Lysander into a bank. The compass mounted between his knees at the base of the instrument panel spun to a southerly heading. No lights glittered from the ground. Under blackout orders to protect from German bombers, villagers kept their windows shut tight. Towns appeared as ghosts of themselves, dark suggestions of gabled roofs, church spires, and streets. Philippe climbed to two thousand feet and leveled off.

With the aircraft trimmed for level flight, Philippe had little to do but steer. The Lysander was a much simpler airplane than the twin-engine Bloch MB.174 he'd piloted in the French *Armée de l'Air*. Philippe and his crew had flown reconnaissance missions three years ago, during the Battle of France in 1940. He felt he'd contributed little to the war effort; the aerial photographs simply chronicled a rout. France collapsed under blitzkrieg in six weeks.

Many of Philippe's squadron mates fell to *Luftwaffe* fighters, left smoking holes in fields and woods. His unit's most famous member, the author Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, described their sacrifices as glassfuls of water dashed onto a forest fire. Saint-Ex was in America now. Though his age could have excused him from combat flying, he'd risked his life for France. Yet there were malign whispers of disloyalty because of Saint-Ex's differences with General de Gaulle, the self-appointed leader of the Free French.

Similar whispers plagued Philippe, for different reasons. Sometimes he wanted to shout into the wind, “Then *you* get out of your armchairs and fly with us. *You* tangle with the Messerschmitts. *You* visit your best friend in the hospital with his face burned off. *You* make life-and-death decisions and then live with them.” Those who did not go to war roared like lions.

Under the faint glow of a cockpit map light, Philippe adjusted the chart clipped to his kneeboard. Placed his finger on the town of Chichester. From Chichester, he would set out across the English Channel to an occupied France.

France was defeated, but not entirely prostrate. Brave men and women like the one sitting silently behind him carried on the fight.

Going in, passengers said little. No doubt the inbound *résistants* were pondering their mission and its risks. Philippe had heard horror stories about interrogations at 84 Avenue Foch, the Gestapo headquarters in Paris. Fingernails ripped off. Eyes gouged out. When one agent reached his pain limit, he leaped from a window to protect his secrets.

Others were less successful, if one could call it that. Some gave up critical tidbits of information under torture. A few, perhaps to protect family members, became turncoats and collaborated with the Germans on a continuing basis. A trusted friend might deliver you into the ropes and chains, knives and needles of Avenue Foch.

Chichester passed under the Lysander’s wings as a jumble of shadows. Beyond the town, the English Channel’s waves crested in moonlight like liquid copper. Philippe scanned beneath him, but no lights appeared. Ships ran dark, hunted by invisible U-boats.

After several minutes over the water, Philippe checked his compass heading and re-folded his chart to reveal the Normandy coast. Glanced at his wristwatch, noted his airspeed.

“An hour and a half,” he announced.

“Roger,” the passenger replied in English.

He's done this before, Philippe thought. Learned flyboy lingo from the Brits. Perhaps a high-ranking officer if he's transiting back and forth. Probably coordinating with the Special Operations Executive about tactics and strategy.

No matter. The procedures remained the same, whether Philippe was flying a low-level courier or Resistance chief Jean Moulin himself. Agents on the ground would wait for the sound of the Lysander's engine, then flash a Morse code signal. If the signal was correct, the pilot would flash a response with his landing light. Then the ground personnel would switch on three flashlights arranged to indicate wind direction. The pilot would land into the wind for the slowest possible groundspeed on touchdown. Roll to a stop in less than 150 yards. Offload cargo or passenger and take off again within three minutes.

Ahead, the night horizon revealed irregular angles, the coves and outcroppings of the French shoreline. Philippe eased back the throttle and descended below one thousand feet. He didn't know if German radar operators would care about something as small as a Lysander; they probably worried more about formations of heavy bombers. Still, he didn't want to make it easy for them. He crossed the beach low enough to watch the surf crash into rocks and slide foaming back into the ocean.

Here, too, blackout orders prevailed. The towns lay dark. That actually made navigating easier for Philippe. He depended not on city lights for reference, but a river.

In darkness, he could more readily spot moonlight on the water. On this southerly heading, he would find the Loire, a ribbon through central France.

Philippe and his passenger flew without speaking for a while. Then a series of flashes lit the horizon, perhaps a hundred miles away.

“*Merde*,” the agent said. “They are bombing.”

“My RAF colleagues,” Philippe said.

Now that France suffered under Nazi occupation—or Nazi *infestation*, as Philippe considered it—the Germans had converted her industry to their war aims. French factories became targets for the Allies. The Lancasters and Stirlings might be pulverizing a Renault plant, the workers mere sacrificial lambs. The RAF struck by night, the USAAF by day. To the strategists, occupied France was an enemy, and they bombed it like an enemy.

The flashes receded as Philippe angled south, and his passenger fell once again into silence. Philippe began to sweat, so he unlatched the canopy to let in a rush of air. He felt hot because he wore two layers of clothing: Underneath his uniform he wore a peasant’s shirt and trousers. If he were forced down, he would burn the plane, lose the uniform, and take shelter with the Resistance. Wait for instructions and a ride back to base.

The agent in the back seat had also taken precautions about clothing and personal effects. His bag contained nothing to connect him with Britain: no tag from Savile Row, no tin of English biscuits. A woman from the Special Operations Executive had searched his luggage to make sure.

Philippe ran his eyes over his compass and fuel and oil pressure gauges. The Lysander was running well tonight, and he had more than enough petrol to get back to

Tangmere. He turned his attention to the ground, scanned the fields and woods. Finally, up ahead, he found his guiding landmark.

The Loire reflected the moon as a dappled orb. Trees lined the riverbanks. Philippe nudged the control stick and rolled into a turn. Followed the river through the Loire Valley.

He had landed several times in this region, but not at tonight's field. He checked his chart, noted a particular bend of the river. When Philippe reached that bend, he turned onto a heading of 150 degrees.

"Ten minutes," he said.

"Roger."

The aircraft crossed a series of fields and hedgerows. Then Philippe found a pasture oriented roughly north to south, perhaps half a mile long and 500 yards wide. More than enough: A pilot could land a Liberator here, let alone a Lysander. He descended low, waggled his wings. Turned for another pass.

The ground remained dark. No signal light. Without the proper signal, Philippe would not land. It had happened before; sometimes a rendezvous would cancel at the last minute because German forces were too close, or worse, an agent had been arrested.

Philippe overflew the field again and worked quick mental math. He had enough fuel to loiter for half an hour and still make it back to England. He would not wait that long, though. That much buzzing around could alert the wrong people. He decided to give it fifteen more minutes.

"I'll give them a few more passes," Philippe said. "Then back to Tangmere."

"*Oui.*"

The man sounded downcast. Philippe understood why. When you had a dangerous mission, you wanted to get on with it. Nothing was worse than the waiting. Philippe remembered the feeling well from his days flying recon missions in the MB.174: *If the Germans must send me down in flames, then damn the weather and let them do it now.*

On his third pass, Philippe spotted the signal light. The light emitted a series of short and long blinks. He didn't catch the pattern at first, so he turned to make a fourth pass and take a closer look. Then he recognized one short blink followed by three long ones: *dot, dash, dash, dash.* Morse Code for the letter *J.* The correct letter of the day.

Philippe rolled into a 180-degree turn to overfly the field again, and he placed his finger on the switch for the landing light. With his landing light, he signaled the coded response: *dash, dash, dot, dot.* The letter *Z.*

Though he understood the reasons for such careful authentication before landing, part of him resented the need for tradecraft at all. The only way he could go home to France was to sneak in like a thief in the night—and he could plan to stay only three minutes.

He pulled up and banked again, waited for the next set of lights. He was expecting three lamps for wind direction.

The field went dark. Philippe circled and waited. He glanced at his watch. Ten minutes had passed since he'd signaled with his landing light. All they needed to do was plant three sharpened poles into the ground with flashlights taped to the ends.

Philippe eyed the field. Nothing looked suspicious, no clues on the ground. That meant little, however. He recalled from his recon days how even a full-on land battle,

especially a small-unit engagement, sometimes offered little evidence to an aerial observer. A wisp of smoke, perhaps. A rare glimpse of tracer fire.

Defeat, on the other hand, was obvious. Abandoned villages burning to keep the enemy from taking shelter in the houses. Streams of overloaded cars and trucks clogging the roadways as civilians fled the German advance. Philippe's unit, Reconnaissance Group 2/33, hopscotching from one temporary base to another as France yielded territory. Headquarters became a farmhouse here, a schoolhouse there. All the while, Philippe and his squadron mates launched on pointless sorties—"awkward missions," as Saint-Ex called them: *The Panzers are ten miles closer than yesterday. What did our general staff expect?*

Philippe had flown over this very region, the aircraft's camera whirring to document capitulation. And now here he was again, as if he couldn't get enough. Saint-Ex would find this droll.

Finally, lights winked on in the field below. But not in the pattern Philippe expected. Instead of a skinny triangle, three lights appeared in a straight line. That made no sense; the wind could be coming from either direction along that line.

"*Stupide*," Philippe muttered.

"What is wrong?" the agent asked.

Philippe explained the foul-up.

"Most of our agents know little of flying," the man said. "Perhaps they are new at this."

Philippe considered the situation for a moment, then asked, "Do you feel comfortable going in?"

"Their letter of the day was correct, no?"

“Oui.”

“Then we land.”

Philippe throttled back to descend for landing. Unlike the MB.174, the Lysander had fixed landing gear. No gear handle to remember.

He lined up on the three lights with no idea if he was landing into a headwind or a tailwind. In this case, it didn't matter much. The long pasture gave him plenty of runway, even with wind on his tail.

At a hundred feet off the ground, Philippe eased the power up to ten inches of manifold pressure. Carrying just a little power made for a softer touchdown. He pulled back the stick to raise the nose into the landing attitude. The wheel came to within inches of the grass.

In the corner of his eye, Philippe saw what appeared as faint sparks.

Muzzle flashes.

Bullets slammed into the Lysander's fuselage. Something struck Philippe's left boot as if smashed with a sledgehammer.

“On nous a trahis,” the agent said. We are betrayed.

Philippe jammed the throttle all the way to the stop. Pulled the nose higher to go around. The Mercury engine screamed as the Lysander clawed for altitude.

Another burst raked the aircraft. Philippe heard rounds punching through the canopy behind him. He pitched for the steepest climb the plane could give him, the faster to get out of gun range.

Several miles from the airfield, he leveled off and took long breaths. Tried to calm himself, take stock of his situation. Checked all his gauges. The engine was running normally, and fuel did not appear to be leaking, thank God.

He reached down and felt his left boot. It was wet. In the light of the instruments, he looked at his hand. Bloody. Philippe had been shot in the foot. No pain yet; he felt only numbness.

“Are you all right back there?” he asked.

No answer.

“Do you read me on interphone?” Philippe asked.

No response.

He turned a rheostat to bring up the cockpit flood light. Twisted in his seat to look behind him.

The agent lay slumped to one side. A bullet had torn off the side of his head. Blood and brains splattered the canopy. *Why could they not have gotten me, too?* Philippe thought.

He turned forward and set a course for Tangmere. He did not look aft again.

