

# 1

From his height only a hundred feet above the trees, the pilot could see two people running over the ground below – one coming out of a wood, another through a gate in the lane, clinging on to his hat as he ran. Their goal was a long brown tent, set against a hedgerow that marked the border of a field.

Under the canvas, by the light of two kerosene lamps hung from a wooden pole, the surgeon raised a man's arm above his head. 'Hold this here.' A nurse gripped the wrist in position.

'Name?'

'Heideck,' she said, lifting a tag with her free hand. 'Initial, A.'

The surgeon's fingers numbered the ribs. 'Four ... Five. If in doubt, go high.'

'What?'

'Let's go in here.'

A scalpel cut downwards, through a thin layer of fat and into the flesh. 'Where's the sister? I need someone to hold back the muscle.'

'She hasn't come. But I can do it,' said the nurse. 'I can tie his arm like this, look. Then my hands are free.'

She attached the wrist to a tent pole with her belt and put her fingers in the intercostal space. 'Is that all right?'

'If in doubt, aim posterior,' the surgeon said.

'What?'

‘I’m talking to myself. My old instructor in Graz. Don’t pull, don’t pull. Just lift. Keep it out of my way. I’m going to put my finger under here, into the pleural cavity.’

There was a popping of air as the tissue parted. The man on the trestle remained unmoving, his eyes closed, his arm tethered behind his head. Blood came from his chest, first bubbling, then spurting up and falling over the nurse’s shoes and onto the grass round her feet.

In the darkening sky, the biplane banked and turned into the wind, making a long circle over the woods. The pilot could see a vehicle pull up on the farm track. Another man and a woman climbed out and started to run across the field.

‘More light,’ said the surgeon. ‘I must have more light. We need to put a tube in to see if I can drain any fluid.’

He pushed back the left lung with his finger. ‘There’s a fragment of something here. We’re going to have to extend the incision.’

‘What?’

‘Anterior. A long way. I need to get at what’s in there. Is he still out?’

The nurse lifted the man’s eyelid with her bloodied fingers. ‘Yes.’

‘Is there a better scalpel? This one’s not very sharp.’

Breathing in, the surgeon slid the blade through flesh, making an incision round the ribcage, halfway across the back, the skin recoiling either side of the purple wound.

The tent flap banged open and the man and the woman came in, breathing hard.

‘You can wash in that bucket. And there’s disinfectant in the bowl,’ said the surgeon.

While the others got ready, he swept between the ribs with his fingers. ‘Are you all right?’ he said to the nurse. ‘You look pale.’

‘It’s the lamplight. I’m fine.’

‘We need something to spread the ribs. Otherwise—’

‘There’s no equipment like that here. It’s just a tent where—’

‘It’s so dark. I can hardly see . . .’

With the help of the orderly, he pulled the ribs apart enough to reveal the indifferent heart, twitching in its bony cage.

‘He’s lucky,’ said the surgeon. ‘I can see something now. Move him onto his side. Give me the forceps. Don’t twist his arm. Untie it now. You: hold his elbow up.’

Dusk was falling on the field as the pilot, his observations made, banked his plane one more time, gained height and set his course for home, fifteen minutes over the blackened landscape, along the river, using the spire of the church to guide him back to the raised landing strip.

‘I’ve got it,’ said the surgeon. He dropped a piece of metal into an enamelled tray. ‘Help me close the wound. You, stop this bleeding here. Nurse, give me whatever needles you have.’

‘We haven’t got the kind of thread you need.’

‘Just do the best you can. You do know how to sew?’

‘We used to make our own dresses at home.’

‘Do your best.’

‘Is he going to survive?’

‘Of course he is. Poor soul.’