

# Colin and His Compass

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A Children's Story

*Peter Holdroyd*

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*By Peter Holdroyd*

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Colin Daynes was fourteen when he discovered the temporal glitch at the bottom of his dad's allotment. Dad was growing strawberries again, ready for Wimbledon Fortnight, when he and mum traditionally took the second week off work so they could watch the finals on television. Now, in early June, the crop was starting to ripen, and Colin was in the habit of popping into the allotment – usually when his dad was not around, and couldn't therefore give him something to do – and picking one or two of the bright red fruit. Next to the strawberries was a briar which bore large juicy blackberries every year, months earlier than it should, and Colin would leaven his strawberry diet with one or two of these.

On this day, there was a particularly large and juicy pair of berries at the back of the briar, and Colin had to press into the bush, against the prickles, to be able to reach them. As he did so, he became aware of a noise: it sounded like a screaming engine, and it was coming from behind the briar. Grabbing the two berries, and transferring them to his mouth, he leaned further forward. Suddenly, he experienced a spinning sensation, and moments later he found himself squashed and terrified on the flight deck of an aeroplane. Even as he realised where he was, he became aware of the deck tilting and plunging, whilst next to him a man in a flying helmet and leather jacket was struggling with the control column, fighting to prevent the aircraft dipping into a dive. Glancing out of the window, Colin understood why: the sea was whipping past them at high speed. They were low enough for spray to be drawn up and dashed across the windscreen by the slipstream, and the tip of the left wing was almost dipping in the water.

The racket of the straining engines was deafening Colin, and the constant lurches towards the grey surface of the sea were frightening. Suddenly the pilot saw him and stared for a second, during which the plane lurched again. Colin, cramped into the tiny space beside the airman, leaned forward and grabbed the control column, covering the pilot's hands, and together they heaved it across to the right. It wasn't so much the left wing lifting as the right wing dropping down which levelled the aircraft. Now it was even nearer to the sea, and the pilot glanced quickly left and right to judge how close his propellers were to the breaking swell. Assisted by Colin again, he managed to pull the nose of the aircraft up, and they regained some altitude.

'Where did you come from, kid?' the pilot shouted.

Colin only just made out the words. He shrugged. 'I don't know. I was in my dad's allotment, then I was here.'

The pilot stared for a brief moment. Then a voice spoke tinnily in his headphones and he pulled the microphone across his lips to reply.

'Roger, got that: steer two-eight-five.' Colin looked for the compass, and saw what was left of it, its cover shattered, the delicate needle missing, and all the damping fluid that had kept it steady gone. Most of it, he noticed, all over the pilot. The airman spoke to him again.

'They – the guys in the back – don't know I've lost the compass. It was shot up by the ack-ack from the convoy.'

'Somebody shot at you?' asked Colin, bewildered.

The pilot grimaced at him. Colin didn't know whether it was the strain of fighting the control column, or something he said.

'They do that, the Jerries,' said the man.

'Jerries?' asked Colin. Then he recollected his grandfather talking about the war. 'Do you mean Germans?' he asked.

'Who else would be shooting at us. Come on, kid, what planet are you from?'

'Earth. Why, where's this place?'

'This is the bloody English Channel, 9<sup>th</sup> December 1940!' the pilot shouted.

Colin stared. 'But it's not 1940, it's 2004. And I was in my dad's allotment in Hellesdon.'

'Well, you're not there now! Bloody fairy-stories!'

Colin was annoyed. Why wouldn't the man believe him? It was very frustrating. He wondered if he had anything in his pockets that might prove it was 2004. There was nothing that would do that... but he found his orienteering compass which they'd used last night at Air Cadets. He held it out towards the pilot.

'Is this any use? My compass?'

The pilot spared a glance and his eyes lit up. 'That's great, son. Can you set it up so that it points to bearing two-eight-five degrees?'

'Sure can,' said Colin, pleased to be able to help, and he began to twist the bezel round so that it pointed almost north-west. He held it where the pilot could see. The needle began to swing away from North.

'It's the metal in the instruments and panel,' the pilot explained. 'You'll need to hold it as far as possible away from any metal surface. Then just point me in the right direction.'

Colin did, and soon the coast of East Anglia came into view. The pilot managed to lift the nose of the aircraft so they cleared the cliffs near Southwold, and the engines droned on into the night. Occasionally, a correction to the course was received by the pilot, and relayed to Colin, who would point out the new line of travel. Outside the cockpit canopy, now lashed with rain, the clouds were louring, black and heavy.

At last, the pilot declared that they had reached their destination. He pulled the microphone across his lips again, and told the crew, who Colin hadn't seen, but whom he presumed were in the rear of the aircraft, below the flight-deck, to brace themselves. Then he glanced at Colin again.

'This is going to be bumpy. I can't put the undercart down, so we're going to land on our belly. There's nowhere for you to sit. You'll just have to hold on. Get behind my seat if you can.'

Colin was alive to the situation. As the boundary hedge of the airfield passed under the aircraft, he wedged himself as tightly as possible behind the pilot, and clung on. The port wing dipped, threatening to destabilise the plane, but the pilot fought with the control column, and managed to level up as the propellers hit the earth, and hurled pebbles and clay at the fuselage and cockpit canopy.

Turf flew up past them as the plane dug its nose deeper into the ground. The deceleration was swift, the plane bouncing and banging through the landscape. It burst through the further perimeter fence, and crossed a main road into the parish of Hellesdon. The two blisters either side of the occupants on the flight deck were torn away, but then the aircraft came to a stop.

The pilot opened his restraint at once and shouted to Colin to get out. For a moment, the man tried to open the canopy top, but the roller guides were twisted and it wouldn't budge. So they both turned to the holes left by the missing blisters. As Colin crawled through his, there was a repeat of the disorientation he had felt in the

briar bush, and instead of falling to the ground outside the plane, he found himself landing amidst his father's strawberries.

His head was spinning. He checked his pockets, to discover that his compass was missing. He stood up and leaned over the briar bush again to see if he had dropped it there, but had to accept that it was gone, and he would have to get another.

Over dinner that evening, he asked his dad if there had ever been a plane crash at the nearby airport, which, in 1940, had been RAF Horsham St Faiths. His father was used to fielding his son's sometimes unusual questions, and said he'd try and find out. The records of the RAF base, just over the road from the allotments, were available at the county record office. They made the journey to read them, and eventually, there it was: on the 9<sup>th</sup> December 1940, a Blenheim aircraft had bombed a convoy in the English Channel, being badly shot-up in the process, but its pilot, Flying Officer J D King, got the damaged aircraft and crew back, finally executing a wheels-up landing, during which the plane slid through the perimeter hedge and shot across the road which separated it from the neighbouring parish. The report recorded that the aircraft's compass had been damaged by enemy anti-aircraft fire, and it was a tribute to the navigator and pilot that they had managed to find their way back to St Faith's.

No mention was made of the help provided by Colin and his compass.

*Author's note: The remarkable incident described in the final paragraph above actually happened. It is one story among many in Ian McLachlan's book, Final Flights (Patrick Stephens Ltd, 1989). The idea of strawberries and blackberries fruiting at the same time, outdoors, in June is pure fiction.*