

## **To my Grave by Jane V Adams**

“For Christ’s sake hold the wings up,” the old man’s voice bounces off the walls of the ward as a nurse hurriedly pulls curtains around his bed. As he shouts his head thrashes from left to right, “hold the bloody wings up!”. Eyes wild with fear and excitement, he plays out a scene only he can see as his wife hovers helplessly by his bedside.

The Humber estuary is the reason Killingholme exists. A pin strategically placed into a map by a naval commander in a London office. Uninhabited marshland, drained and quickly smothered in a blanket of concrete so that a hangar could be placed just where the pin met the paper. Grimsby’s cranes pierce the industrial skyline down river, upstream the people of Hull fear bombs from Zeppelin airships. There are no trees. No hills. Just concrete, water, metal and men.

Within the hangar, three flying boats are being readied for their first Zeppelin patrol of the day. Outside Ben leans against the wall. His wiry frame huddled into an oversized woollen coat, the brim of his flat cap purposely hiding his face. Deep in a pocket his cold fingers fumble for a tin. Springing the lid he feels for the warm tobacco, pulls paper from a packet, and with one hand and a lick, skillfully rolls a cigarette. He stamps his feet, encouraging a surge of hot blood into his steel-capped boots. Hand cupped against the north sea wind, an explosion of match-light briefly illuminates his grease-smearred face. Hungry for warmth he drags hot smoke into his lungs, then steps back into the shadows.

Ben hadn’t needed to enlist. He’d seen the ‘Kitchener needs you’ poster, and, although most of the lads from the engineering works had heeded the call to arms, he was older, married and had no desire to be a hero. The company even rewarded him for staying with a promotion to chief engineer. For a few months his life had been good. Even when conscription arrived at the beginning of 1916, his reserved occupation had saved him from having to sign up. Then Jessica had fallen pregnant.

He had longed for a son, but he’d known from the day of his daughter’s difficult birth that she wasn’t healthy. Her endless cries had gnawed into his soul. Her frailness had terrified him, so much so he’d eventually ended up enlisting just to escape his feelings of helplessness. A month later, his tiny daughter had died from convulsions.

There'd been no coffin, no funeral, no compassionate leave, instead newly-trained, Acting Air Mechanic, Ben Adams had been posted to Killingholme, a naval air station two-hundred miles north of his grieving wife.

Light and sound flow into the darkness as a small door in the hangar wall is pulled open. "Ben, you out here?" the voice is urgent, "Flight's looking for you".

Flight is Flight Lieutenant Claver Banister, an American, popular with the men and admired for his airmanship. As a former test pilot for the new American H4 Flying Boats he'd helped with the shipping of three H4s over to England in 1916. The three bi-planes, and Banister, had eventually found their way to Killingholme, where he'd started piloting patrols and training junior pilots.

Ben takes a final long drag on his cigarette before grinding the glowing tip into the concrete and following the retreating outline of Sam, his team's second mechanic, back into the hangar. He immediately walks into Banister.

"Is she ready?", Banister asks.

Ben nods, "Yes Sir, the lads are getting the ropes ready and we'll be pulling her out".

Banister nods and goes in search of his co-pilot, a timid youngster with only a few hours flying experience.

With the hangar doors now pulled back, humanity and machines begin to spew into the bleak flat landscape. Ben walks to the front of the hangar where the concrete hard-standing slopes steeply down to the Humber's edge. The first glint of winter sun pushes above the stark horizon illuminating the metal rim of Killingholme's hangar. Inside three mechanical birds sit like roosting swans, their underbellies waiting to be dragged to the water's edge to stretch their long delicate wings.

On heavy-wheeled trollies, three teams of men each thirty strong, haul the avian machines from the hangar. They pause at the top of the slipway. Ben climbs up onto the right-hand wing of his plane, and begins the process of starting one of the two engines. He holds both hands over the air intake of the carburettor while Sam loops rope over the end of the prop and swiftly jerks it down. With a splutter the Anzani engine bursts into life and his attention is taken by a movement beside the hangar.

Banister is arguing with his co-pilot who's taken off his flying coat and leather helmet and has pushed them into the older man's hands before striding away towards the officer's billet.

"He's chicken", screams Banister over the drone of the engine as he jumps up onto the wing, "You're going to have to take his place Adams".

Ben stares, not sure if he's heard the words correctly. Him, a mechanic, co-piloting a sea plane? If this ever got out there'd be trouble. Banister hands him the coat and helmet, "Get these on and don't breathe a word of this to anyone", before he turns and clammers down into the cockpit.

"I'll take it to my grave" Ben mutters under his breath, taking off his own coat and cap and handing them to Sam. The two men exchange a look, "You're in charge of ground crew," Ben says, "make sure you keep the wings level as we go down the slipway, tell the boys, and don't take any of their lip".

Fabric over a wooden frame is delicate as hell, one knock on the slipway and it would be game over, Ben prays they keep the wings level. He cranes his neck to watch as the team attach ropes to the back of the trolley. Other men are positioned along the wings steadying them above their heads, then there's a jolt, and his plane slides over the edge of the slipway. Men strain on ropes to keep the trolley's descent into the water controlled, but like a mismatched tug-of-war the flying boat drags them off their feet and descends faster and faster towards the water, the wings flex and sway as the men struggle to keep them level.

"For Christ's sake hold the wings up," Ben screams, "hold the bloody wings up!". They plough into the water, bob up, then float off the trolley and taxi away from the shore. With his heart pounding out of his chest and thoughts streaming through his brain, Ben knows any flight is dangerous, knows some don't return, knows the unreliability of the French Anzani engines, realises his life now relies on his own, and his crew's, hours of preparation.

"Ready?" shouts Banister.