

WHAT IF

By *Alan Bell*

The fire burns it makes it hot
The skipper says “Be gone”
The parachute is half clipped on.

The night was dark and lonely
And to protect our underside
A banking search we’d done
First to the port and then the starboard side
We banked and peered into the night
Then as we flattened out and settled back on course
Two thumps and fire inside the kite
Disturbed the even tenor of that night

The fire burns it hotter gets
I have to move away
And as I move I glance astern
And vaguely through the flames I see
The second pilot, slumped and still upon his seat
The engineer, a vague form on the floor
While Maurie calmly pilots on
And once again repeats
Emergency! Jump! Jump! Jump!

The fire burns it hotter gets
The milliseconds they flash by
The way for me is clear.
Pull the toggle, drop the hatch – be gone
The milliseconds they flash by
Five others out this hatch should come
The milliseconds they flash by
Get out the way and let the others come.

The milliseconds they flash by
The fire hotter gets.
Just pull the toggle, drop the hatch – be gone
So toggle’s pulled but the hatch not gone
So stomp the foot and the hatch is gone.

My memory has forsaken me
But some way out that hatch I must have gone
Oh! That black flash above
The kite it must have been
So now I'm clear and as I see the stars above
Upon my back must be
So if the chute is pulled
It flies away from me
So chute is pulled and out it goes
And SLOWLY I FLOAT DOWN TO EARTH.

The night is black. I swing alone
I see no others floating down.
And as in my chute I swing
I see our kite, on fire
Flying off afar –
And then I see it crash
the bomb load still intact
The flash – Oh! it was huge
No Mother's son could from that great flash
Return to meet or greet their kin
But I in wonder in the chute
Am slowly swinging down to earth.

Of course they did not welcome us
But we survived our prison term

Then at the end they flew us back to base again
And back at base our "Nav" I meet
Of eight of us, four only have returned
But pilot Maurie is not here among the four
In Nuremberg he died.
Maltreatment, burns and shock
he could not overcome
And then in milliseconds swift
Astern within the flickering flames
A small hand held extinguisher I see
What if I'd used it
Would Maurice have survived?

What if! What if! What if!

The answer to this question
I will never know
But with this question, I live on
What if! What if! What if!

At last to my own home I came
But who was there to tell it to
They would not understand
They could not understand
For only I was there
While Maurie in some German field
I trust rests on in peace
But what if!

While still at home, the days go by
I take the gun and wander in the hills of home
And my “what if!” just tags along.

Now as I live in this wide world
a living I must earn
So with the Public Service
An interview arrange
And there a Service Chief I see!
Ah! Yes there is a job for you
On bottom salary you must start
For you've been home six months
And have not worked for us.
I wondered if he knew
That some had been at war!
So home I go and walk the hills some more
“What if!” still walks with me
but sometimes I walk alone.

At last a job I get
where no-one knows “What if”
The others at that job did not
my gremlin know
They did not give “What if” a single thought
They had not felt the heat
or seen the body slumped
nor he who kicked upon the floor.
So when a decision I must make
They did not understand my hesitance.

Because I'd been away so long
I had a lot to learn
So hard I worked and often crowded out
“What if”
But then in moments unforeseen
up would float what if

And though the “What if!” is all my own
I know that I am not alone
And many other men when they came home
Their own “What ifs” they brought along
And though I’m often unaware
“What if!” is always lurking there.

When the young
who’d never been at war
Decided that on Anzac day
We glorified the war
I thought of Maurie somewhere
In a foreign field
And inwardly I cried
For Maurie and the others were not there
With some hostility I thought
 they were not there
 they did not know
 they would not know
 they could not know
 they did not feel the heat
 or see those sights astern
 Nor Maurie calmly flying on
And so I sighed and wondered on in life.

Now though those scenes are far away
in time and space
Those scenes live on in me
But for the young they never did exist.
Though the years have made it less
I still review the scenes
 The fire
 That glance astern
 Wherein I see
 That fire extinguisher in the flames
 And Maurie calmly flying on
And silently I recant
 What if

And Maurie though you’re dead
Within my mind you still live on
No doubt you’d rather be alive
And let me live alone
But Maurie I can’t let you go
And cannot bring you back
“What if!”

And as the days and years roll by
The fire it still burns
The milliseconds they flash by
And in that glance astern my mates I see
The fire hot and in it see
My curse – that fire extinguisher.
The flames increase
The milliseconds flashing by
The escape hatch sticks
The chute jerks open
And as I swing alone I see
From that perch up in the sky
The mushroom of heat
As 9JM explodes
And then I think
 Where did the others go
 “What if?”