

Columbia Workshop
They Fly Through the Air with the Greatest of Ease
Apr 10 1939

ANNOUNCER: The Columbia Workshop presents, by popular request, "They Fly Through the Air with the Greatest of Ease," first heard as one of Columbia's "Words Without Music" broadcasts. The author dedicates this poem to all aviators who have bombed defenseless civilian populations and machine-gunned helpless refugees.

NARRATOR. Assume it is morning.
You know what mornings are.
You have seen thousands of them:
They rise out of the East, huge as the universe
And stand in the sky till noon.
Oh, you've seen all kinds of them.
[Some come up dirty-faced, as though they had
 spent the night in a gutter between two
 stars;
Some bluster, brandishing big winds;
Some, at dawn, are like a streak of blood across
 where night met doom;
Some are all innocence, surprised to be playing
 morning to such a little earth.
You know what mornings are:]
Their coming and their going is cosmic business,
Yet casual and common and taken all for
 granted,
Having to do with milk trains,
And cockcrows, and street lamps going out,
And alarm clocks.

All right; so it is morning.
It is morning on a level field, still wet with dew;
A field once used for haying, flown over at one
 time by birds going north or birds going
 south to build homes;
A meadow mowed upon by men, buzzed in by
 bees, and lingered on by lovers in the moon-
 light.

Here, where last year stood the windrows of the
 hay,
Is now an aviary of such birds as God had never
 dreamed of when He made the skies.
Look close, and you will see one now.
They are wheeling it out of the hangar,
Carefully.

Oh, do be careful, gentlemen.
It is so dumbly delicate:
Its fabrics and its metals, its gears, its cylinders,
 its dials,
The million dervishes ready to whirl in its
 motors,
The guns fore and aft,
The sights, the fins, the fuselage,
The bomb racks and the bombs.
Do not jar them; [do not jar them, please.]
Be gentle, gentlemen.
This bomber is an instrument of much precision,
A mathematic miracle
As cold and clean and noble as a theorem.
See here: Have you no eye for beauty?
Mark how its nose, be-chromed and tilting to-
 ward the heavens
Reflects the morning sun and sniffs the lucent air.

VOICES. (*Coming on, ad-libbing, during preceding line.*)

NARRATOR. These voices?
 We were expecting them, for they it is who guide
 this big blind bat
And who will take her soaring soon.
They are fliers;
They are officers;
They are gentlemen;
And they are yours to listen to.

PILOT. You couldn't ask for a better day. Not a ripple in the
 air.

[RADIOMAN. A peach, all right.]

GUNNER. With this bright sun there'll be no trouble picking
 up objectives.

MECHANIC (*coming on*). Bomb racks loaded, sir.

PILOT. Have you turned up the engines?

MECHANIC. Yes, sir, they're all warmed up. Both engines
 showed 2100 r.p.m. at full gun.

RADIOMAN. Did you tighten up that loose fair-lead I
 reported yesterday?

MECHANIC. Yes, sir, everything's secured.

PILOT. Top off the gas tanks and check the oil?

MECHANIC. Yes, sir. You have capacity load.

PILOT. Checked your bomb load? Are the releases working okay?

MECHANIC. Like a clock.

PILOT. Well, gentlemen, let's get aboard.

Sound of climbing aboard. Door slams.

PILOT (*projecting*). Wind'em up!

MECHANIC (*well off mike*). Switch off? Gas on?

PILOT. Switch off. Gas on.

Inertia starter; over it, sound of wobble pump worked by hand.

MECHANIC. All clear!

PILOT. Contact!

Motor up.

PILOT. Pull the chocks!

MECHANIC. Chocks clear!

PILOT (*lower*). All set, back there?

RADIOMAN. All Set.

GUNNER. Okay here.

Take off. Level out. Sound of motors as heard within cockpit is cross-faded to exterior perspective and held under:

NARRATOR. So you are off the ground and in your element,

O fighting men!

And are you comfortable now?

You do not mind this rolling on the billows of the air?

Are you as snug within your cockpits as your bomb load in the racks?

Look below, boys.

Behold the moving carpet rolled out over the edges of the world;

The earth, your home;

The earth, in which you were a million eons coming,

Your home for all the balance of eternity.

This is a temporary thing, your being off the
earth--
You will come down, of course.
Whatever leaves the earth is only loaned the air,
Including birds and vapors and ten-ton machines.
You'll home again.

The earth is venerable stuff, believe me, sirs.
It's seen ten million seasons crossing overhead,
And all those mornings that we spoke about,
And mists and clouds and lightnings,
[And moons enough to burst the oceans bubble-
like,]
And galaxies slow-wheeling in the boundless
skies,
And meteors, auroras, rainbows, nimbuses. . . .
All these the earth has seen, but never, until
now,
A bombing plane.

How looks the morning to you, gentlemen?
You there, gunner in the turning tip-up seat,
Were you admiring the sunlight on that river to
the north?
And you with earphones on, what thoughts
think you between them?
Of life? Of death? Of poker hands?
Of breasts? Of thighs? Of furbelows?
Spaghetti? Of your leader? Of the enemy?

Oh, yes, the enemy.
Why, one would think that on so fair a day as
this,
Hostility should scatter like breath upon the air.
Surely this sweet and fertile land can bear no
hate?
Yet you must have an enemy below,
Else why a belly full of bombs, and gun belts
stuffed with cartridges?
Of course, the enemy.

We wonder what your foeman's doing now
where you will strike him down?
What monstrous machinations?
What menacings, what vicious villainies appoint
you to their punishment
And rouse the indignation of your bombs?

Excuse us; we'll go on ahead
To see.

Start fading motors.

NARRATOR. Allow us to precede you.

We flash ahead
As fast as thought anticipates a deed.

Motors out.

NARRATOR. And here we are: the city:
Blinking in the sun
With sleep still skulking in the shadows of its
streets.

This is the encampment of the enemy:
These hostile roofs and threat'ning chimneys,
These trees, like bayonets upraised along the
avenues,
These churches sticking steeple-swords into the
sky,
This is the enemy.

What do they plot
So early in the morning?

Let us investigate downtown,
In that apartment building near the park.

Pick you at random:
Shall we say the base of war
In tenement 3B?
We take you through the wall
While still it stands upright.

See how the enemy is girt for war.

Breakfast table sounds faded in with conversation:

MOTHER. ... feel that way.

FATHER. Just the same, you had no business telling him he
could take the car.

MOTHER. Oh, he's old enough to be treated like an adult. For
Heaven's sake, think of the time when you were young . . .

DAUGHTER. That's right, Dad. Jack's old enough to . . .

FATHER. Nobody asked your opinion, Elly. Pass the toast,
please.

DAUGHTER. I don't know what's wrong with this toaster. The
toast isn't burned enough after all this time.

MOTHER. Well, have some coffee anyway. There's some left
in the percolator.

FATHER (*between mouthfuls*). It isn't the fact that he's

driving the car, it's the principle of the thing!

MOTHER. What principle of what thing?

FATHER. Well, that Jack should ask *you* for the car, instead of coming to me. What's the matter, is he so positive I'll

NARRATOR.
There is dissension in the foe-
man's ranks.
This house that is divided
cannot stand,
And fall it will, with beams
and timbers heaped upon
the breakfast table--
Plaster in the coffee.
Leave off this argument, con-
spirators,
For Jack will sell the car to
bury you.
And let us quit these quarrel-
ers and go
To tenement 5A.

*Music: As the quarrel at
the breakfast table fades
out, fade in piano music.
Some moments elapse aft-
er the music is fully es-
tablished before the Nar-
rator speaks:*

refuse him that he's afraid to
ask my permission? Why,
you'd think I was a tyrant,
the way he avoids making an
issue of things with me.

MOTHER. You're the one
that's making an issue,
not he.

FATHER. You're deliberately
misconstruing the whole
business. Now look:
Who owns the car?

MOTHER. You, obviously.
(Fading.)

FATHER. Who pays the re-
pair bills?

MOTHER. Get to the point.

FATHER. Who pays the ga-
rage bill ? Who buys gas
and oil? Who pays for
the tires when Jack has
a blowout? I do! And
therefore when he wants
to take out the car he
should ask me, not you.

NARRATOR (*over music*).

Are these your drums and trumpets, enemy?
Is this your war song, coming from a baby
grand?
Is this your reveille, your charge, your anthem?

Music: Continues.

NARRATOR. What kind of soldier trains
By practicing sonatas in the morning?

Music: Continues.

NARRATOR. Play on:
The movement ends before it's meant to end.
A great fortissimo
Will twist your hands
Inextricably in the strings.

*Music: Begin cross-fade to crying of baby.
Over both:*

NARRATOR. And here,
Cross-fading in,
Is tenement 8F.

*Music: Piano out.
Crying up.*

SECOND MOTHER (*wearily*). I give up. You take her now.

SECOND FATHER. I should think after crying all night, she'd get tired and fall off to sleep.

SECOND MOTHER. Her teeth are bothering her, poor lamb.

SECOND FATHER. I'll bet if I rubbed paregoric on her gums she'd go to sleep.

SECOND MOTHER. No, dear, I tried that. Didn't work. Just walk her up and down; she'll fall off.

SECOND FATHER. All right. (*Goes on and off mike chanting "Ah, ah, ba-by," while crying of child follows in relatively same perspective. Bring down for:*

NARRATOR (*over effect*).
Be patient;
The little enemy will enter soon her longest
sleep.
And you will enter with her.
A matter but of minutes,
For even now the Sandman hums his level tune
Within the city's limits.

Exterior motors in slowly.

NARRATOR. We are caught up with; [the plane is fast.]
The crew is taut and eager,
Silent and intent,
Like pointers in a hunt.

Cross to interior. Motors under:

[NARRATOR. And now they speak the jargon of the kill.]

PILOT. All right! This is bombing altitude. You can set up your bomb sights.

GUNNER. Okay, sir. I'm going to use that church steeple as a marker. Will you steer close so as to pass over it?

PILOT. Okay. (*Pause.*) All set with that bomb sight?

GUNNER. [All set now, sir.] Got the steeple traveling right

down the groove.

PILOT. That's fine. You can count on the same wind when we reach the downtown area.

GUNNER. Okay.

PILOT. Put your sights on that apartment building near the park; that's the first objective.

GUNNER. A little more to the left. *(Pause.)*

PILOT. How's it now? *(Pause.)*

GUNNER. We're right on, sir. *(Pause; then quickening.)* Hold that heading!

Clanking sound as bomb is released.

GUNNER. First demolition bomb gone. *(Five-second pause.)*

Dull boom, not too clearly audible over motor.

PILOT. Nice work, fella. Right on the nose.

GUNNER. Interesting pattern, the way that wreckage is flying outward.

RADIOMAN. See how deep that crater is. Must have been soft earth under the house.

PILOT. All right, Carlo, put your sights on that red warehouse. We bomb the market place now.

GUNNER. Steer about ten degrees to the right. *(Pause.)*

PILOT. How is she now?

GUNNER. Just a touch more to the right. *(Pause.)* Okay, we're on.

PILOT. Let go four incendiaries this time.

Sound of bomb release.

GUNNER. Salvo released! *(Five-second pause.)*

Series of booms, not far apart but not evenly spaced, as bombs strike.

PILOT. Beautiful! You're sure hot today, kid.

GUNNER. Thanks.

[PILOT. Alec, notify headquarters we've bombed the objectives successfully.]

RADIOMAN (*perfunctorily*). Plane No. 6 calling Headquarters 9th Bombardment Group. We have bombed both objectives successfully. Proceeding with attack. No enemy planes in sight. Acknowledge, please.

FILTER VOICE. Headquarters to Plane No. 6. Your Message No. 1 acknowledged. (*Pause.*)

Cross to exterior motors.

NARRATOR. It is acknowledged that the baby sleeps.
It is acknowledged that the toast is burnt.
It is acknowledged that the piano's out of tune.

O winged Victory!
The Spartans would have coveted
The courage of your combat!
Just think:
Ten thousand savage rooftops, tarred and tiled,
Against a single plane!
There is a ratio to Valor.
Heroes are made by odds:
The lad who slew the giant with the slingshot,
 he was one;
Horatio, outnumbered at the bridge;
And you, three men and half a dozen bombs
Against the regiments of tenements, arrayed
 between the banners of their wet wash,
The bed sheets and the shirts and pillow slips
Snapping defiance in the fresh-sprung breeze.
Not even these bold oriflammes can daunt
Your purpose and your cause.
Your Message No. 1 has been acknowledged,
 gentlemen,
Your heroism noted and approved and filed
 away,
Next week to be submitted to the Ministry of
 War
With other matters of routine.
The State is pleased.
Proceed with the attack, O Bomber No. 6!
What new scents do you pick up in the traces of
 the air?

Cross to interior motors.

PILOT. Say, there are an awful lot of people on that road, aren't there?

GUNNER. Looks like some more refugees. We sure got 'em on the run this morning.

PILOT. Okay. Set up your sight. Pick the center of the mob.

GUNNER. All right. Just keep her over the road. (*Pause.*)
Hold that heading. (*Pause.*) Stand by. (*Pause.*)

Sound of bomb release.

GUNNER. Well, there she goes. (*Pause.*)

Dull boom.

PILOT. Gee, that's fascinating! What a spread! Looks just
like a budding rose unfolding!

RADIOMAN. Must have been two-three hundred in that crowd.

PILOT. Okay. Man the guns. No point letting any of the rest
get away.

*Plane dives suddenly. Machine-gun fire in. Two guns in
four-second bursts; hold for at least twelve seconds. Plane
climbs and levels out.*

PILOT. Well, that's that.

GUNNER. Yeah.

PILOT. Let's call it a day, huh? Gettin' on toward lunchtime
anyway.

GUNNER. Yeah. I'm getting kinda hungry.

RADIOMAN. Chicken Tetrizzini today.

PILOT. Come to think of it, that was a pretty thorough job
of strafing. Y'know, that work always reminds me of mowing
wheat--as though some invisible mower were cutting
across the field.

RADIOMAN. Nice symmetrical pattern, isn't it?

Cross to exterior motors.

NARRATOR. It is. It is.

A symmetry of unborn generations,
Of canceled seed.
The dead below, spread fanlike in their blood,
Will bear no more.
The pattern is symmetrical indeed--
Of ciphers linked, repeating down infinity.

How can we justly celebrate the odysseys
Of demigods who finger destinies upon their

trigger tips?
With wreaths of laurel?
Laurel withers fast.
By sculpturing in bronze?
Too cold; too passive;
Also, in emergencies, it may be melted to make
 other things.
Rechristen with your names a public square?
That's vulgar;
Furthermore, no single square is big enough.
A poem, perhaps?
Aha, that's it! A poem!
A verse or two that will contract no rust,
A bombproof ode, whose strophes will stand
 stout
Against all flood and famine, epidemic war,
And pox and plague and general decay.
Yes, poetry's the thing.
It has served soldiers far beyond their shields.
Where would Achilles be without a Homer?
Hector? Agamemnon?
Why, no more numbered in the lists of immortal-
 ity
Than those immobile refugees whose bodies
 stiffen as we speak.

We're right; we're right;
An ode's the only vessel fit to bear so much of
 honor.

But we must get away to think:
The music of the motors is monotonous;
Our meter will be influenced. . . .
So you continue home, now, bombing plane--
Give us a while to mint a metaphor.
We'll overtake you later.

[Let us withdraw to some precinct of peace
To meditate, for poems are materials of mood.]

Motors fade out.

NARRATOR. Yes, this is better;
It is silent here.
The cogwheels of the brain turn quietly.
Let's think this out. . . .
Let's see, now. . . .
Where shall we begin?
Mm.
It's harder than it seemed, a moment back,
To conjure up conceits.
What words can compass glories such as we have
 seen today?

Our language beats against its limitations.

Some things defy description. This you know.
Do you contend it? Well, has beauty ever been
described by "beautiful"?
Can phrases tailored to a patch of earth
Be stretched to fit the sky?

Our rhythms jangle at the very start,
Our similes concede defeat,
For there is nothing that can be compared to
that which lies beyond compare.
You see? We are reduced already to tautologies.
It's awe does that.
The wonder of it all has set us stammering.

Compare these men to whom?
Olympians?
No, that won't do; these Jupiters could blast
The peak right off Olympus.

To Icarus?
Worse yet.
These gentlemen know how to navigate.

That settles it!
We cannot undertake this ode.
Let's drop this random dreaming and return to
things we're sure about--
To the familiarity of Bomber No. 6.

Exterior motors in.

NARRATOR. Ah, here it is, as we expected we should find it:
Unswerving in its homeward course,
Its fuselage impeccable, its tail raised proud.
The sun is higher now.
It spills its benison
Upon the curving earth
And down the edges of the hemispheres.
But here the morning is mature.
It smiles a slow seraphic smile
And spangles the propellers with its gold.
Far to the south
Some clouds are having traffic with a current of
warm air.
There is a tendency toward noon.

Bear home, bear home, O Conquerors!
Fly by your spellbound compass
To the midday meal. It's in the ovens now.
A toast awaits you,
Pledged with rich red wine
To him who leads you.

Then comes the soup and then the meat
And after that the fruits and cheeses.

Tonight there will be music in the quarters;
Books to read;
Perhaps a letter to the folks:

All prospers well upon the farm, you'll want
to know?
No trouble with the bugs raiding the vines
again this year?
Are Father's cows giving more butter to the
hungry state?
Has Mary seen her husband since he volunteered?

And then to sleep
Between clean sheets
The deep, untroubled sleep
Of tranquil consciences;
The mind released, the eye unfocused, and the--

Cross to interior motors.

NARRATOR. What bothers you, O gunner in the turning tip-
up seat?
Why do you peer behind?
What is it you're about to say?

GUNNER. There's a fighting plane on the right side. Distance
about one mile, heading this way.

PILOT (*concerned*). Where?

GUNNER. Right over there. Just over the wing tip now.

RADIOMAN (*hopefully*). Maybe we're getting an escort.

PILOT (*alarmed and excited*). We're not getting any escort!
That's an enemy plane! Man the guns! We'll run for it!

*Interior motors pick up to maximum speed, then cross to
exteriors.*

NARRATOR. No, no.
There must be some mistake here.
It is the victor who pursues;
The vanquished breaks for safety.

One moment:
Let us get this straight:
Is this a sparrow rushing down upon a frightened
hawk?
Or is this some maneuver
Leading up to ambush?

And yet the pilot said to run for it.
Can we have heard correctly the command?
To flee this antic rooftop, coming to avenge
The market place?
What frenzied, wild delusion beats the wings of
the pursuer?
Has he not heard, does he not know
That you are armored with invincibility?
That you are of a race of warriors above all
others and imperishable?
Does he not know you are equipped with slender
guns and coiling cartridge belts
Spitting two thousand mortal venoms in a
minute?
Leave well enough alone, O lonely wasp, or you
will lose your sting,
And all else with it.
No: I see Death sucks you down the skies as
flame intoxicates a moth.
Oh, well, there'll be a churning of the air when
you engage.

Cross to interior motors.

GUNNER (*anxiously*). He's gaining on us!

PILOT (*coldly*). Stand by to open fire!

Cross to exterior motors.

NARRATOR. Stand by? ...
Your only adversary up to now
Has been the force, invisible, anonymous,
Of gravity.
Now you must reckon with some upstarting fool
Of no especial lineage;
A driver of a truck, perhaps, in lesser times.
Stand by to open fire, gentlemen,
For even now he closes range.

With perspective always on the bomber (including interior motors), open fire with on-mike guns.

Bring in sound of attacker's motor quickly up and down to indicate passage close to bomber during the fighting. At height of this effect, open fire with attacker's guns through filter, to distinguish from guns of bomber. Overlap both of bomber's guns in random pattern, always being sure to maintain short bursts of fire.

Bring whole effect down and continue behind:

NARRATOR. Only in lists of love and war

Is there such burning concentration.
The warriors in Bomber No. 6
Now lack the luxury of time to contemplate the
 patterns of the banking foe:
They watch his loops, his climbing and his dives,
With little eye to form.
The free and flowing curves of his maneuvering
Are not felicitous--so far from this,
That prickles stand upon the pilot's nape.
The tenement's avenger flies too close;
He must be brushed away.

Combat effect up.

PILOT (very excited). Get him! Get him! Get him! He's getting
on us! Watch your tracer, Carlo, you're . . .

*Sharp burst of filter gun. Scream of pain, as from Pilot
mortally hit by fire. Gunfire out. Motors begin to cough.*

*Effect of uncontrolled spinning, which builds into a long,
slow crescendo until the crash at the conclusion of the follow-
ing speech of the Narrator:*

NARRATOR. This is humiliating, gentlemen,
To reel so drunkenly
In sight of all the sober earth:
There's apoplexy in your motors now
And they will not recover.
Sirs, I speak to you:
Be calm!
Compose yourselves!
Keep down your sudden nausea!
Unclutch your frantic hands!
Be calm, for there is beauty all about you:
The sun, the air, the earth,
They're all the same.
It's only you have undergone a change;
Be calm:
Sit back:
There still is time
To see
A final symmetry:
The spiral of your spinning
Is a corkscrew in the sky.

Be hopeful, gentlemen;
Perhaps the government will help you now;
The ministry of war will buoy you up;
Your press will warn the earth against this act;
Perhaps your Leader, thundering a threat,
Will terrify all gravity.
Be hopeful, boys. . . .
Your people are supreme in war!

Tremendous crash; then absolute silence--several seconds of it.

NARRATOR. That's all.
That's all the fighting they will care to do.
They have a treaty with the earth
That never will be broken.
They are unbeautiful in death,
Their bodies scattered and bestrewn
Amid the shattered theorem.
There is a little oil and blood
Slow-draining to the ground.
The metal still is hot, but it will cool.
You need not bother picking up the parts.

The sun has reached meridian.
The day is warm.
There's not a ripple in the air.

ANNOUNCER: You have been listening to the Columbia Workshop's presentation of "They Fly Through the Air with the Greatest of Ease," an original radio verse drama written and directed by Norman Corwin. The role of the Narrator was enacted by House Jameson and the sound effects were performed by Ray Kremer and John McCluskey. John Dietz was the studio engineer.

CBS ANNCR: This is the Columbia Broadcasting System.