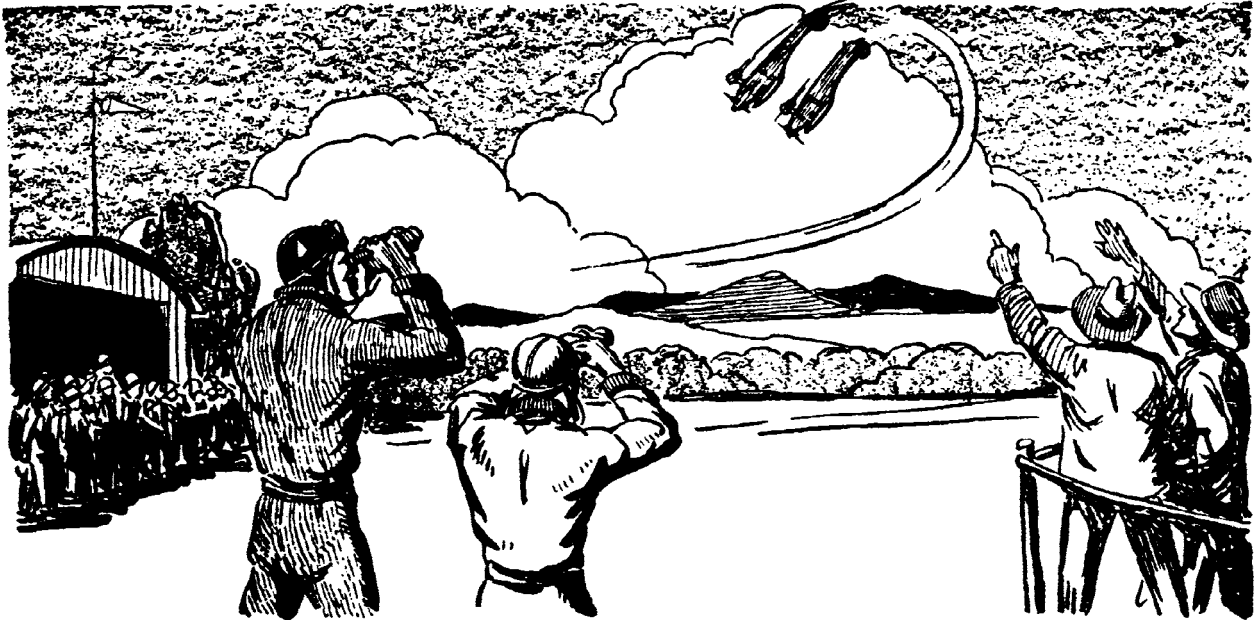


# Winging Back



*By Robert J. Hogan*

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Cadet Eaton was a wildcat on wings when dual control ruled the air -- but only hope's flailing backwash could drive him to solo.

**A**T the west end of Jackson Training Field a primary training plane came gliding in for a landing. Two heads protruded from the cockpits. Eaton was taking his instruction as usual.

Buck Martin, veteran instructor, spoke through the tube that ran between the two seats.

"Coming in fine. That's perfect. Couldn't do better myself. She's all yours. Bring her in just as though you were alone."

Cadet Eaton stared ahead, calmly flying the ship with perfect ease. His hand was firm, sure on the stick. He had plenty of confidence—as long as his instructor was with him.

The trainer slid over the boundary, glided nearer the ground. The nose came up slowly. It slowed. A couple of feet above the smooth surface of the field it settled faster. The nose pointed higher. It struck the ground lightly. Wheels and skid touched at the same time. It rolled for some distance, slowed and came to a stop.

"Good," came through the tube into Eaton's ears. Buck Martin twisted round in his seat and

grinned at his pupil. "Now one more like that and I'll let you go."

Eaton's face turned a shade whiter. His hand trembled on the stick. He made no answer but nodded his understanding. His gun hand shook as it reached for the throttle, pushed it open. The Hisso blared into action. The ship gathered speed. The tail came up. Eaton brought the stick back toward him uncertainly as the ship raced on. It grew light. He pulled it off with an effort, holding her nose a little high while it climbed.

A thousand feet or so from the boundary he banked into a wide, cautious turn and thundered along the side of the field, climbing as he flew. Another turn and he came gliding in for his landing.

This time the ship glided in fast. He was flying fifteen miles an hour too fast for a landing. He pulled the nose up to check the speed. The trainer began to settle. Nervously he pushed the stick ahead. The nose dropped and it picked up speed again.

It neared the ground. Eaton's hand shook as he tried to pull the stick back evenly for a good landing. He couldn't seem to fly the thing now for some reason. A few feet above the ground he brought the stick back sharply. He misjudged. He had more speed than he had thought. The ship wasn't ready to set down yet.

The nose came up. The trainer leaped a few feet in the air, stalled for a moment. Then dropped five or six feet, striking the ground in a hard pancake landing. Martin was twisted around in his seat.

"Now what the devil did you have to do that for?" he challenged. "You can fly like a fool most of the time. What was the trouble in this last landing? Anyone would think that was your first. Well, just to show you I'm a good guy, I'm going to let you go anyway."

Martin climbed from his cockpit. Eaton stared at him. His lips trembled as if to say something; then he gulped and turned his face. Martin stepped to his side.

"Take everything slow and easy and you'll be O. K. If you don't fly perfectly it isn't because you can't. Good luck to you!"

Eaton shuddered with fear. He knew he could fly, but somehow he also knew—had known for some time—that the minute Martin stepped out of the cockpit and he was left alone he'd go haywire. Still, he was game.

**H**IS teeth clenched together with determination. His trembling hand felt for the gun, batted it open. Agonized fright clutched at him. He tried to move the stick forward slowly for the take-off. But the nose dropped with a jerk. The prop narrowly missed digging into the ground.

Frantically he pulled back on the stick. He shuddered as he felt the skid strike the ground, dig in. The ship rolled faster and faster in spite of its wild bobbings about the field. He felt it getting lighter. His eyes bulged from his head. His pulse pounded in his temples. He was scared stiff and he knew it.

He pulled back on the stick. The plane came off the ground with a jerk. He tried to hold the nose down so it would not stall. It dropped like a plummet. The trees of the boundary were just ahead. Wildly he yanked back to clear them.

His brain was whirling. His face was marble white. He was alone!

The terrible thought struck fear to his heart. He felt the plane leap over the tree tops as they

seemed to reach up to claw him down. He roared on. He must turn and go back some time.

The idea of trying to land the plane numbed his brain. He muttered incoherently to himself, wanted to scream in terror. His foot kicked the rudder to the right. He tried to co-ordinate the stick with it. The turn was a hopeless failure. The trainer slithered around at ninety degrees, skidding dangerously.

Eaton felt the wind on his cheek. His mind was in such a tangle that for the moment he could not think what to do in a case like that. Should he rudder into or out of that skid? In desperation he leveled the ship and thundered on straight ahead. But he must get back to the field.

He gritted his teeth and kicked the rudder once more. This time his turn was more of a success from the standpoint of changing his direction. He tried to become angry with himself for being such a fool. Tried to tell himself that he could fly as well when alone as he could with Martin in that empty cockpit ahead. With all his arguing the fact still remained that the cockpit was empty and he was alone.

He had reached the far end of the field. He must turn again and come in for his landing. He stared down at the field in horror. His head whirled. Black specks flashed before his eyes. He felt as though he were going to faint.

With all his strength he forced himself to shove the stick forward into a glide. He pulled back on the throttle recklessly. He must make it! Then he saw the ground tearing up at him. His hands were shaking so he could hardly hold the stick.

Eaton was mad. He couldn't seem to bring himself to get that plane down on the ground. Cold sweat stood out on his forehead, ran down under his goggles, steaming them so he could hardly see. It didn't matter. He wasn't himself.

The trainer came closer to the ground. Eaton pulled back on the stick. He couldn't make himself bring the ship in. He thought he was near enough for a landing. His insanity played him dirt.

The PT settled rapidly. He didn't feel the sloppyness of his controls that warned of a stall. Down, down it fell; twenty—thirty feet. A sickening crash rent the air. Eaton felt his body being thrown through the bottom of the plane, saw the wings collapse on top of him.

He was caged in wreckage.

Sound of running feet. Shouts of friends who were coming to pull him out. Eaton was shaking so

that he could hardly see. Strong hands pulled the wreckage away, hauled him from the cockpit. He stood wobbling on rubbery legs. His head began to clear with the feel of solid earth beneath his feet.

Rogers, his buddy from his own home town, was there before him, helping him stand. He was talking to him. Eaton tried to catch the words.

"You're all right, old timer," coaxed Rogers. "Just a couple of cuts and shaken up a bit. You'll be O. K. in a minute. There, take it easy. Lean on me. That's right."

Eaton turned to his pal, tried to smile. It was a struggle. Rogers was walking him about the field. Martin came running up.

"That's right," he encouraged. "You'll be O. K. Just a bad break. Well have another crate out in a minute and we'll try it again."

Eaton tried to shake his head in refusal. He didn't want to go up again right now. Martin winked to Rogers and took Eaton by the arm himself. He walked by his side, talking encouragingly to him.

He knew the feeling. He'd been there once himself after a bad crash. The shock sometimes made hopeless cases out of good pilots. Get him into another ship right away. That was the only way, before he had a chance to develop that terrible dread of flying.

ANOTHER ship stood on the line warming. Martin led Eaton toward it. He was coming round again, acting more like himself. Martin helped him into the cockpit before he realized what was going on. Eaton stared at him wildly for an instant. Then color came back into his face as he saw his instructor climb in up front.

"Taxi her down to the end of the runway and take her off," came through the tube into Eaton's helmet.

Eaton was steadier now. His hand did not tremble as he felt for the throttle, the PT lumbered down the field and turned into the wind. Again the Hisso barked. The plane gathered speed, rose, and climbed evenly. Eaton banked into a perfect turn at the end of the field and came back. Another perfect turn and he came gliding in evenly for his landing. His wheels and skid touched smoothly at the same time. The plane rolled to a stop. Martin turned in his seat. His face beamed.

"Great," he cried, "Why the devil didn't you do it before when you were alone?"

Eaton shook his head in bewilderment.

"Guess I'm just yellow," he admitted "As

soon as you get out of that front seat I go hay-wire."

"Want to try it again?" Martin asked, still grinning.

Eaton's face turned white.

"With you in the front seat, yes. If you don't mind, I'd like to try some stunts, I'd feel better."

"O. K.," came from Martin as he turned and settled himself in the seat. Eaton felt for the gun again and shoved it ahead. The ship gathered speed, lifted, and climbed steadily. He kept the nose well up until he reached three thousand.

Suddenly he cut loose with a series of loops, rolls and tight spirals. Every one was good. He flew evenly and smoothly through each. Then he cut the gun and pointed the nose of the ship down.

Two large, even turns over the field and he came gliding in for another landing. Martin sat still in the front seat and let him go. It was up to Eaton. He was flying the ship and making a good job of it.

His landing was like the other; just like laying a carpet. The ship stopped its roll. Martin leaped out before it had hardly stopped.

"So long," he called as he walked away. "And good luck this time."

Immediately Eaton began to tremble. Fear clutched at him again. His face turned ashen white. He could not control himself. He put a shaking hand on the cowling, lifted himself from the seat.

"I—I can't do it," he stammered, stumbling after his instructor.

Martin argued, pleaded, with him. But it was no use. Eaton hadn't the nerve to go through that terrible experience again.

Later he and Rogers were alone in their quarters. Eaton sat on the edge of his cot in the depths of despair. Rogers was trying to talk him out of his crazy idea of himself.

"It's no use," Eaton lamented. "I'm done, washed up with flying. I'm afraid. Just a plain yellow mutt that's scared to go up alone. I know that everything you say is true. I can fly perfectly as long as Martin is up front. But when I'm alone it just can't be done. I guess," with a catch in his voice, "there's nothing to do but go home a failure."

"Now listen, you fool," snapped Rogers angrily. "Any more of that sort of talk and I'll sock you. Get some of those crazy ideas knocked out of that thick skull of yours. If you don't want to try to fly now, stay in the game. Go after the groundwork for a while. But stay in the game. You'll stay with it and make good before you're through. I'd bet

money on it. You're a pilot now. The trouble is, *you* don't think so."

Eaton brightened at this. He hadn't thought of the mechanical end of it. Maybe Rogers was right. He might get his nerve so that he would be able to fly before he got through.

Next morning Eaton donned a pair of overalls and went to work with the grease-balls. He could not keep his mind on his work. The drone of a plane was the sign for him to stop and stare up into the sky. It was in his blood. But still he could not force himself to solo.

**A** WEEK passed in this way. Two. Then the news came that the entire flying personnel was to fly to an airport dedication at a town some fifty miles distant. The last flying squadron that had come into the field for training, which was Eaton's own, was sufficiently advanced to go along.

Eaton was thrilled with the excitement on the morning of the flight. Jackson Field seethed with racing motors; planes taking the air. One by one the PTs, Hawks and Falcons zoomed into the sky. Eaton stood by the side of the PT that Rogers was to fly. Every pilot at the field was going, taking nearly every ship with them. Two or three PTs stood on the line without pilots to fly them.

Rogers was one of the last to go. He climbed into his cockpit slowly as though he had all the time in the world. Then, suddenly, as though he had forgotten something, he called Eaton from where he stood at the front of the prop to the side of his cockpit.

"This crate of mine's been throwing oil of late," he announced. "See if you can find me a rag in the hangar, a clean one, will you, old kid?"

Eaton trotted toward the open hangar door. He was gone for some minutes. A clean rag in the average hangar is hard to find. Then he came back with the rag in his hand. Rogers took it from him with thanks.

"Wish you were going along, but it probably won't amount to much," he consoled his friend.

Eaton did not answer. He stepped to the front of the engine once more, placed his hands on the prop.

"Contact," he shouted.

"Contact," came the answer from Rogers.

The prop whirled. The Hisso caught, sputtered, then roared. It had already been warmed. Rogers checked his instruments, whirled the plane and thundered into the air.

Eaton watched him climb to the west. Suddenly his heart leaped. Something was falling from the plane, turning over lazily as it dropped to the ground. Eaton stared wildly at the object, then at the plane. It was a wheel. Rogers, his best friend, had lost a wheel! Didn't know it. He might be killed when he tried to land that plane without a wheel if he wasn't aware of his danger.

Eaton's mind was working like mad. There was not another pilot at the field. The rest were out of sight by now. There would be no one to warn Rogers of his danger. Something had to be done. Right now!

Eaton shot a wondering glance at the three trainers standing alone on the line. They represented the only things left at the field that were in flying condition. He leaped forward, raced toward the nearest. It happened to have a J-5 on the nose instead of the regular Hisso. His voice barked an order to another mechanic.

One frantic leap and he was in the cockpit. The mechanic grasped the prop.

"Off," came the questioning shout.

"Off," snapped Eaton. He had forgotten about himself. His thoughts were centered on that last ship, flying to her doom with only one wheel.

The prop whirled. The engine gasped, sucking in the charge.

"Contact!" came from the mech.

Eaton answered the call as he snapped on the ignition switch.

The prop whirled again. Motor sputtered—roared. Eaton sat tense. He pushed the throttle open as much as he dared with a cold motor, and waited. His eyes watched anxiously for the temperature gauge to rise. It seemed to take years for that engine to warm. A minute sped past. Two.

He muttered angrily to himself. It would be foolhardy to take off with a cold motor. It wasn't warm enough yet, but he couldn't wait longer. His feet released the brakes. He kicked the rudder, spun the ship half around, tore down the field cross wind. He didn't even dare wait to taxi down the runway.

The plane was sluggish. It lifted reluctantly. The motor was not turning up full yet. Frantically, Eaton pushed on the gun. He was his old self. Not once did it occur to him that he was flying alone. His mind was far ahead. Would he be in time?

The J-5 picked up speed and hurled the trainer along wide open. He knew how to get to the town where the air dedication was to be held. It was straight down the double-track railroad that skirted

the field. Couldn't go wrong.

His hand felt for the gun constantly —pushed on it, trying to get more speed out of the ship. His eyes were glued ahead. He could not find Roger's plane. He must be far in the lead by now. He should be, with four or five minutes start.

Eaton held the ship down to within a hundred feet of the tracks. He didn't dare waste time to climb for safety. If his engine cut he would have to do the best he could. He raced on.

**M**INUTES passed like hours. He didn't seem to be getting anywhere. Then his steady gaze ahead was rewarded. He saw a ship. It would be Rogers. At the same time he saw other ships farther on. Rogers was going down. He had reached the field. He was gliding down.

Eaton raced on. Would he be too late? He sat crouched over the stick. His pulse raced. He dropped the nose a bit and lunged on. Rogers was getting lower but he had come over at better than three thousand feet. It would take him some time to kill his altitude.

Eaton was gaining on him. He could see the ships at the field. Almost all had landed. There were none near enough to Rogers to warn him of his danger. It was up to him. He must get to him; let him know.

Eaton was under him, low, roaring wide open. Rogers was coming in to land. He was just at the boundary. Eaton stuck the nose below him, kicked over into a vertical, flashed in front of Rogers just as he began to level off.

Eaton waved him up in the air frantically as he roared across his path. For an instant he could not tell whether Rogers had gotten his meaning. He could only hope to get him to circle the field again. That would give time to warn him.

Eaton took a long breath as he saw the prop on the other trainer whirl into action. Rogers had gotten his meaning. He had pushed on the gun and was climbing. Eaton whirled and tore alongside. Frantically he pointed to the wheels. For a moment Rogers shook his head. He did not seem to understand.

Then, he looked at his landing gear. He turned his face toward Eaton again and grinned.

They circled the field together. Rogers cut his gun and turned into the wind.

To the landing.

Eaton held his breath while he watched his pal come in for that hazardous one-wheel landing. It was bad at the best, even though he knew. Rogers

glided in over the boundary slowly, cautiously. As he neared the ground he kept the wing in the air on the side where the wheel was missing.

He glided closer and closer to the field. His ship seemed to hang in mid-air. But it had flying speed and was making the most of a stiff breeze on its nose. His lower wing and the one good wheel touched the ground at the same time. The ship rolled on the one wheel. Its speed slowed. Laboriously it settled on the bare axle. The steel dug into the ground. The trainer slithered round in a slow ground loop. Stopped.

Then, for the first time Eaton realized that he was in the air alone. This time there was no fear in that feeling, only a great exultation of joy. He was soloing—and how!

He stared about him, trying to make up his mind what to do next. Should he land or what?

The wild gyrations of several ships high above him caught his eye. For a moment he hesitated. Then his pulse raced again and he climbed. That was just the thing he had been looking for. Something to do to celebrate.

The J-5 roared wide open into the blue above. She climbed rapidly. In another moment he was in the thick of the looping, rolling mass of roaring ships. His ship was whirling too, with the rest. His loops were tight and perfect. His snap rolls made some of the others look sick. He hadn't had much practice in stunting, but now he seemed to feel just like it. In fact, nothing had come so natural to him in his life as turning this old PT inside out. Minutes passed and still he tossed the ship about. Others left their stunting and landed. Eaton stayed and continued.

At last he tired. His hand felt for the gun, yanked it back. He felt as though he was sitting on top of the world. He could fly! He had soloed! He had to land but he knew there was nothing to fear there. In great, graceful spirals he killed his altitude.

At the boundary he kicked over into a steep side slip and slithered into the runway. He placed his wheels and skid on the ground lightly at the same time, and taxied alongside Roger's ship.

"Gee," he cried, as he climbed out of the cockpit and looked down at his pal, "Gee I'm glad you lost that wheel."

**S**OMEONE with an official badge was crowding through the press that formed about him. He was holding something out to him: a silver cup. Eaton stared at him, bewildered.

"Here's your prize," the man informed him, "and allow me to state that the judges want you to know that your performance was the greatest show of stunting they have ever seen in the junior class."

"P-prize!" stammered Eaton. "Say, what the devil are you talking about?"

"Why, you won first prize in the junior stunting contest."

Eaton stared at him blankly, but he was wise enough to say no more. He hadn't even been entered in the thing.

Martin, his old instructor, was coming toward him. He held out his hand and grinned.

"Congratulations, pilot," he boomed. "Rogers and I thought you'd come through this time, but we sure didn't think you'd come over here and win the stunting prize to boot."

There was something between these two that he wasn't in on, Eaton decided.

Martin looked at Rogers and winked. For the second time, blank astonishment crossed Eaton's face.

"Say, what's going on here?" he demanded, still in a fog.

"Why, you poor hunk of cheese," Rogers grinned, "you've been framed."

He and Martin burst into loud laughter.

"And it worked, too," gasped Martin, shaken with mirth.

"And how!" cried Rogers. "Martin and I planned the whole thing. I pulled that wheel off with a hunk of wire it had attached to it."

"B-but that was an awful chance for you to take, man, just to get me to solo," stammered Eaton, gratefully.

"Chance!" boomed Martin. "Why, Rogers has been practicing one-wheel landings for the last week over at another field."

