First Dogfight

Excerpt from Chapter 9 of *The Aviator*. When Jim McConnell learned to fly, the whole concept of a "fighter plane" was brand new. Jim's training taught him to take off, do a few simple aerobatics, and land without killing himself. Skills such as formation flying, dogfighting, and aerial gunnery were not yet part of the training. Jim and the other American pilots were thrown into the inferno of Verdun, the first major air battle, without having had a chance to learn how to fight in the air. Jim's first dogfight occurred on June 1st, 1916, the day he arrived at Verdun:

Jim and Raoul Lufbery climbed to the designated assembly point, but the other planes never joined them. Then, as Jim had feared, he lost sight of Lufbery as well. Alone, he set off in what he believed was the general direction of the front lines. He saw a plane beneath him and felt relieved to find a "friend." Then he saw the black crosses on the wings. It was the first German he'd ever seen in the air. He realized he didn't have the slightest idea how he was supposed to attack an enemy plane, and he had never fired a machine gun in the air. Nieuports couldn't take the stress of diving with full power and rotary engines had very little throttle control, so "with a queer feeling," he shut off his engine, dove toward the enemy plane, and put his hand on the firing lever for his machine gun. As he got closer he realized the enemy plane was a two-seater. When he was about 150 feet away the observer opened fire on him. Jim opened fire too, but with no results. He shot past the enemy plane, then pulled up and turned to make another pass. The enemy had turned also, and Jim found himself level with the enemy plane, an easy target for the observer. "It was a fool move on my part," he wrote. "I found myself staring into the flames of his machine gun." Jim could hear the "tut-tut-tut" of the German's machine gun and feel the thuds as bullets slammed into his plane. Jim fired a short burst, then turned to his right and dove again. He pulled up and tried to attack from the other side, but his machine gun wouldn't fire. Jim pulled away, tried cocking the gun, but still couldn't get it to fire. He tipped the gun back to the reloading position to examine it, but then he heard a machine gun firing at him from behind.

He looked and saw the German plane was coming straight at him, with the pilot firing the forward gun. Jim dove away and finally managed to lose the German plane. He examined his gun and found the ammunition drum had been knocked off, the cooling fins were loose, and he suspected there was more damage from German bullets. There were also nine bullet holes through his wings on both sides of the cockpit, some within a foot of his body.

Jim had escaped the German, but now he was totally lost. He followed several canals, tried to generally proceed in a south-west direction to get to or stay on the Allied side of the lines, but he could find nothing on his map that matched the countryside he was flying over. (He had been handed the map just before he took off, and he had never seen a map of that sector before.) He was certain he had flown off the map, but he had no idea which way to turn to get back to the map. After searching for over two hours, his engine started missing and he decided it was time to land. He found a grassy field that "looked as if it were made for aviation." He flew over it several times until he attracted the attention of some soldiers. They were wearing blue uniforms, not gray, so he knew he was in French territory. He then made his final approach to land.

Unknown to Jim, the grass hid a line of ridges on the surface. As Jim put it, "the only way to land is from the direction I didn't take." As he touched down he felt "a hell of a bump," bounced back into the air, nosed down, and flipped the plane over on its back. The plane was demolished. Fortunately, Jim wasn't hurt. He was given a ride back to the Behonne airfield, which was about 15 miles from where he landed. There he learned he had been reported as missing and believed dead.