

## **'Pursuit' by Chris Crowther**

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This is the first of the author's books I have read out of his list of ten. It is an intricately plotted tale including First World War flying adventures, historic commercial stories and more recent legal intrigues. It is not a mix of Biggles and John Grisham, though there are elements of both. It is set in wartime Europe and the United States. Its theme is a friendship between two men forged in war but continuing, on and off, over decades.

The book is set in three distinct time periods. The word intricate can sometimes mean irritating and incomprehensible but not in this book. The author's first person style using the simple American idiom sometimes called 'gum-shoe', and the clever way he handles the transitions between time periods, means that you are never lost.

I loved the wartime flying tales. They are superbly researched as is the later commercial flying. He manages to stop short of the super-hero spirit of Lee Child's Jack Reacher though once or twice only just. The author clearly has one of those brains that gathers and structures information, adding his own panache. I checked quite a few of the facts in the book with wiki and duckduckgo and found them to be sound. One name popped up that triggered a memory – Bill Stout. After dredging my brain I remembered that he was the man who invented the phrase 'Simplicate and add more lightness', when working for Ford aviation in the 1920's. Those wise words are part of the philosophy of we who fly model aircraft and was for Colin Chapman of Lotus Cars when designing his formula one machines.

The author mentions the battle of Verdun several times. This vile battle is pretty much unknown except to the French. To learn more about its horrors read Alistaire Horne's book, 'The Price of Glory: Verdun 1916'.

I had some problems with the spelling. There are a few typos but they do not intrude. However I found the text to be a mix of US and UK spelling. Does it matter? Not really, except to a pedant as I can be sometimes. Generally the text flowed effortlessly.

The author's only 'literary' habit is the use of French and German words and phrases. We who speak some French can feel superior and thankfully the author adds translations for my very rusty German. Anyway we all now have phone apps for translation and can use the book as a chance to learn more words. One French to English translation is a key to the story.

Like all the best legal plots this book has a profoundly surprising ending. As I read the first half I thought I knew how it finished. How wrong I was. As I finished it I noticed that the clock said 12.30 am. That speaks volumes for how compelling I found it. Many thanks to Chris Crowther for this fascinating book.

And now, with the author's kind permission, is a short extract from the book that does not reveal any plot, and some pictures.

An oil painting-style illustration of a man in a blue military uniform and cap standing in a field, looking at a biplane on the ground and another flying in the sky. The man is in the foreground, seen from behind. The biplane on the ground has a French flag on its tail. The sky is filled with dramatic, grey and blue clouds. The overall mood is one of anticipation and adventure.

# PURSUIT

AIRBORNE ADVENTURE AND INTRIGUE  
IN THE LAFAYETTE FLYING CORPS

CHRIS CROWTHER

I'd thought that cloud-cover was total, but now, through ominous gaps, I caught glimpses of our front-line trenches surrounded by the usual sea of mud, but strangely pristine in a first dusting of snow. Life down there must be as horrendous as it could get, but at least it was life, which was more than Mark Kingsley would be experiencing much longer if I didn't soon lose myself and those well-flown Albatrosses.

They were even closer now, the leader seemingly almost set to chew my empennage with his prop. I resisted the temptation to give another jink, choosing instead to keep up my speed to the cloud now just a hundred feet below. Another burst of sparkling flame reflecting in my mirror from his muzzles told me that might just be a hundred feet too much. It was a fear soon accentuated by the disintegration of one of my interplane struts as his three second burst turned it to flying matchwood.

And then I was in the cloud, its clammy but blessed interior enveloping me in a vapour so dense that even the Hun behind was now lost to sight. Reprieve. I eased out of my dive like my aircraft was made of glass, at the same time throttling back the Le Rhone. The stress of anything more violent would have been critical to even an intact Nieuport, but to mine, with a good chunk of its rigging now flapping in the vortices of the wing's trailing edge, it was a tightrope walk between delicate control and total disintegration.

I flew on, airspeed slowing faster than my heartbeat and with no conception now of position, attitude or direction, but content to be alive and still flying... just. But for how much longer? I eased up the revs to a low cruise and tried to keep on an even keel. Not easy with my world reduced to a goldfish bowl of freezing milk and my senses scrambled to jelly by the tumbling confusion of that mad free-fall around the heavens.

The Huns were gone from sight now. In fact, everything was gone from sight leaving me bewildered as to whether I was even right side up. It didn't feel I was, because strange sensations and even stranger sounds were affecting what little I had left of my natural senses. I held the stick in a white-knuckle grip that said more about my state of mind than any sort of technique, but the sound of wind in the wires was rapidly building to a scream accompanied by a protesting vibration from the ever-speeding two-blade prop in front.

A quick glance at the instruments told me why: height was peeling off like a falling rock while the airspeed had pegged at a number way above that which the Nieuport usually started shredding itself. But, this wasn't a straight dive, because the compass too was turning faster than a demented carousel. We were spiralling down and I needed to stop it before this cloud gave way to solid earth. I hauled back on the stick and all that happened was the spiral tightened while my cheeks and mouth seemed set to sag through the bottom of my face.

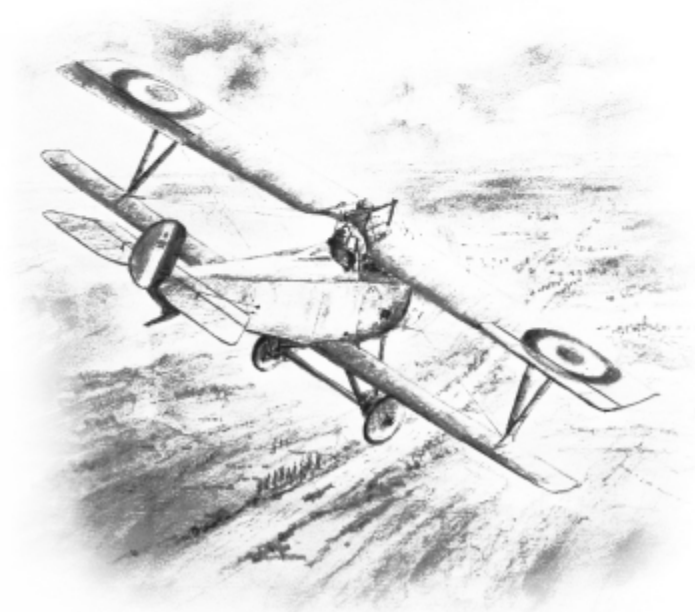
Perhaps everyone experiences a sudden clarity in the last seconds of their lives. In mine, I knew my first priority was to stop this turn. Against every instinct, I eased the back-pressure on the stick and instead moved it sideways to roll into what I hoped was level flight. Straightway, I felt my body-weight decreasing, while a glance at the compass showed the turn slowing and then stopping. We were still diving though and, disregarding my shot-up rigging, I hauled back on the stick.

Too much, because, as the altitude started once more climbing, so the airspeed dropped away at a rate that told me the nose must be near damn vertical. I gunned the throttle and pushed the stick forward but, even as I lifted out of my seat to the limit of my

harness, so another sensation overwhelmed all others: a violent flick as one wing dropped away and the other rolled over me.

Those wings were still attached to the fuselage, but that was little comfort as the whole contraption now rolled and dropped at a rate gut-wrenchingly more violent than that previous spiral. For the first time since I'd entered that cloud, I knew exactly what the aircraft was doing: it was spinning to oblivion.

Round and round we dropped as one wing stayed stalled and the other followed it. I'd spun before, sometimes as a way of escaping pursuing Huns, but this time, cloaked in the all-enveloping cloud-mass, I experienced complete disorientation. Which way was I even spinning? In what might well be the last few seconds of my short flying career, I pulled back the throttle and gained at least some consolation in the immediate cessation of that throaty roar. Oblivion was now doubtless only seconds away, but at least it would be more peaceful.



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