

FLY (in memory of Johnny Pohe)

1. It begins like this: a man with five sisters and one brother. Things we know: this man was once a boy. Things we don't know: his siblings' names in chronological order.
2. Other things we know for sure: there was a farm near a town and the town was Taihape. Also: there was a war.
3. It hardly matters what day the planes came into it, but it may have been a Monday. Many Mondays from then were full of air and seeing the earth from up there.
4. Johnny was good at seeing the earth from up there. He flew and flew until he was made a flight sergeant. But before that, there were these words: Armstrong Whitworth Whitley Abingdon Handley Page Halifax Honeybourne Vickers Wellington.
5. If you think those are a mouthful, try this: hit and then hit while high in the sky in a Handley Page Halifax. And then falling out of that sky into the English Channel like a plane with one engine down.
6. Things we know about the English Channel: it is cold and uninviting, especially if you're floating in a dinghy for two days.
7. Rescue sounds like miss you, which is also like menu, depending on which way the wind is blowing. These may be some of the words that floated round Johnny's head those two days.

8. Rescue sounds very different in German, which is the language Johnny would have heard when the dinghy was finally made redundant. It may have been a Monday.
9. The German word for rescue is rettung, in case you're wondering.
10. Something else we don't know but might suppose: the Germans weren't saying words like rettung when Johnny arrived at Stalag Luft III.
11. It was a Wednesday.
12. It was 1943.
13. Dozens more Wednesdays went by.
14. On a Friday in March in 1944, Johnny and many other men finished digging a tunnel. It was dark and there was snow. They didn't march, or fly, but slipped out into the night and away from German words like häftling.
15. Suppose it were to end here, with dark and snow and not marching but slipping. And suppose the sun came up and Johnny and his mates kept walking, regardless of frostbite and sirens.
16. And if that were the end, I'd tell you that häftling is the German word for prisoner. But it wouldn't matter.
17. Because that would be, as I said, the end.
18. But instead of the end, there were guns.
19. And behind the guns were men.
20. And there would be no more planes and no more flying. Except in his family's dreams.

by Lynley Edmeades

Fly

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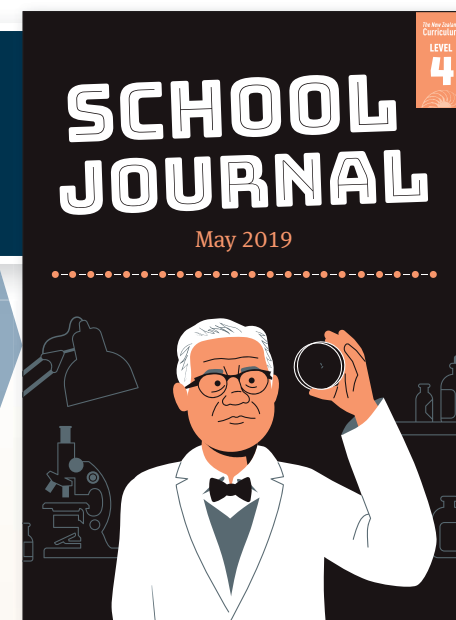
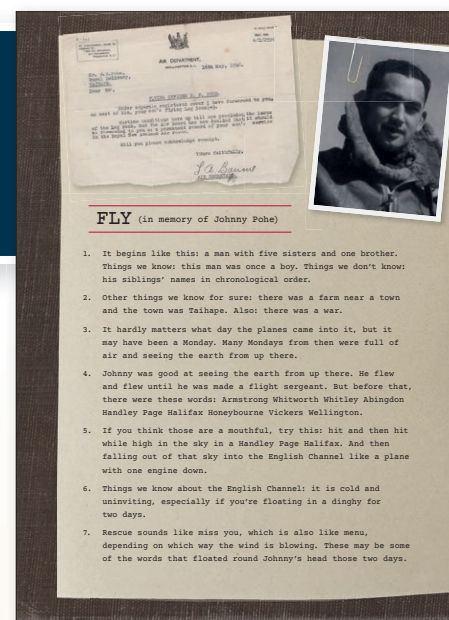
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