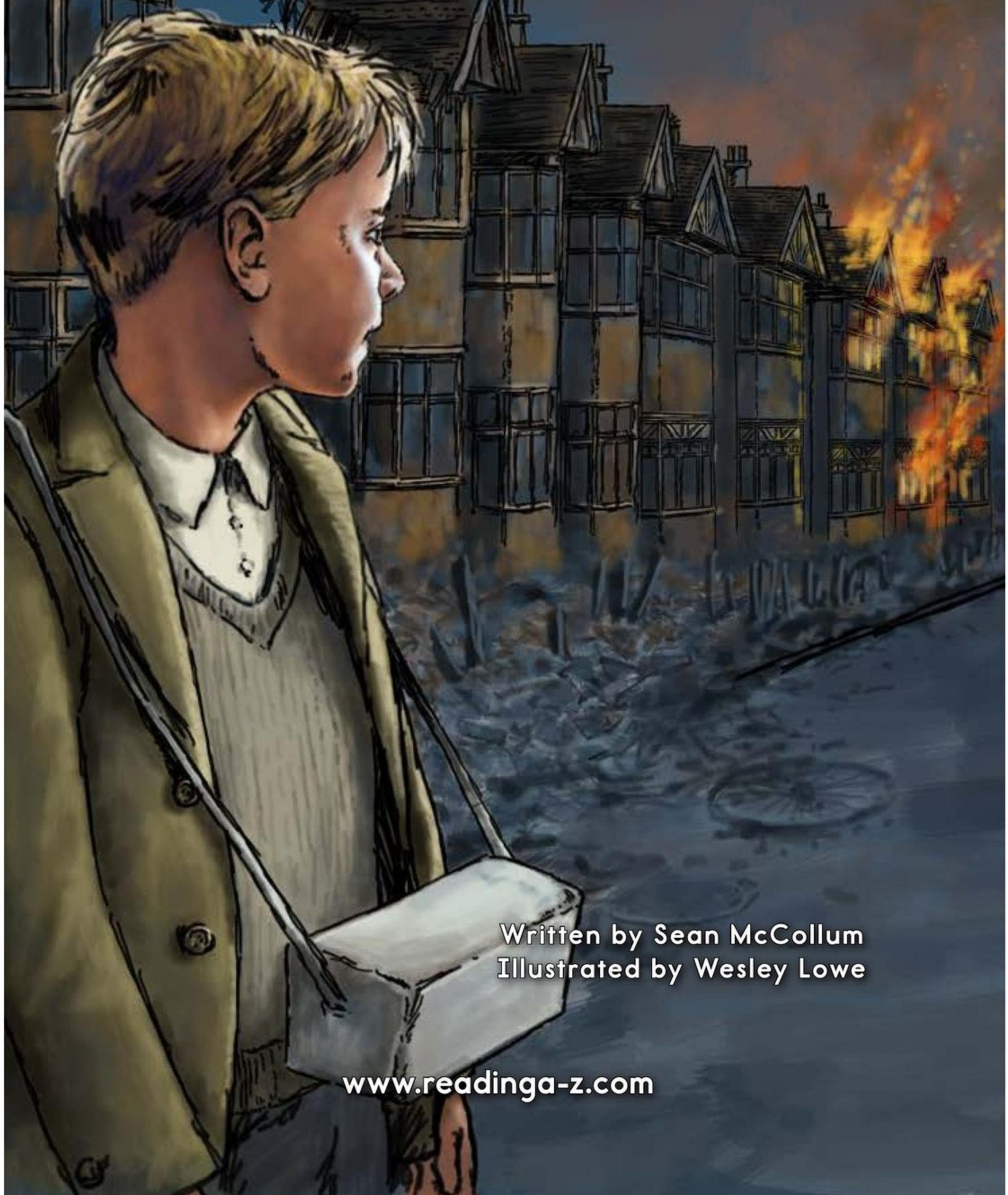


LEVELED BOOK • Z¹

The Blitz



Written by Sean McCollum
Illustrated by Wesley Lowe

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Focus Question

How does the historical setting of the story affect Reggie and his family?

Words to Know

air raid	Luftwaffe
barrage balloons	Nazis
chaperone	obliterated
evacuees	POW
flak	Royal Air Force
gingerly	squadron
intercept	surreal
lieutenant	telegram
loo	warden

The Blitz
Level Z1 Leveled Book
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Correlation

LEVEL Z1	
Fountas & Pinnell	W-X
Reading Recovery	N/A
DRA	60



Reggie waved to his mum through the train window. She held her black leather medical satchel over her right shoulder. These days she carried the kit everywhere. “Be prepared,” she’d say with an impish grin. “There’s a war on, you know.”

Gazing at him from the platform, she used her thumb to push up her jaw. “Keep your chin up,” she was saying with that gesture—stay brave. She did this whenever Reggie was frightened, which had happened often since the Germans conquered most of Europe five months ago. She was a nurse in wartime and had seen awful things, but she was tough. When the **telegram** about Dad arrived, though, she closed herself in the **loo** for what felt like hours.

Now she was sending Reggie out of London, away from the German bombs that fell most nights. By late afternoon he would be among the apple orchards of Somerset, where he would stay with Gran and Grandpa Oxnam on their farm.

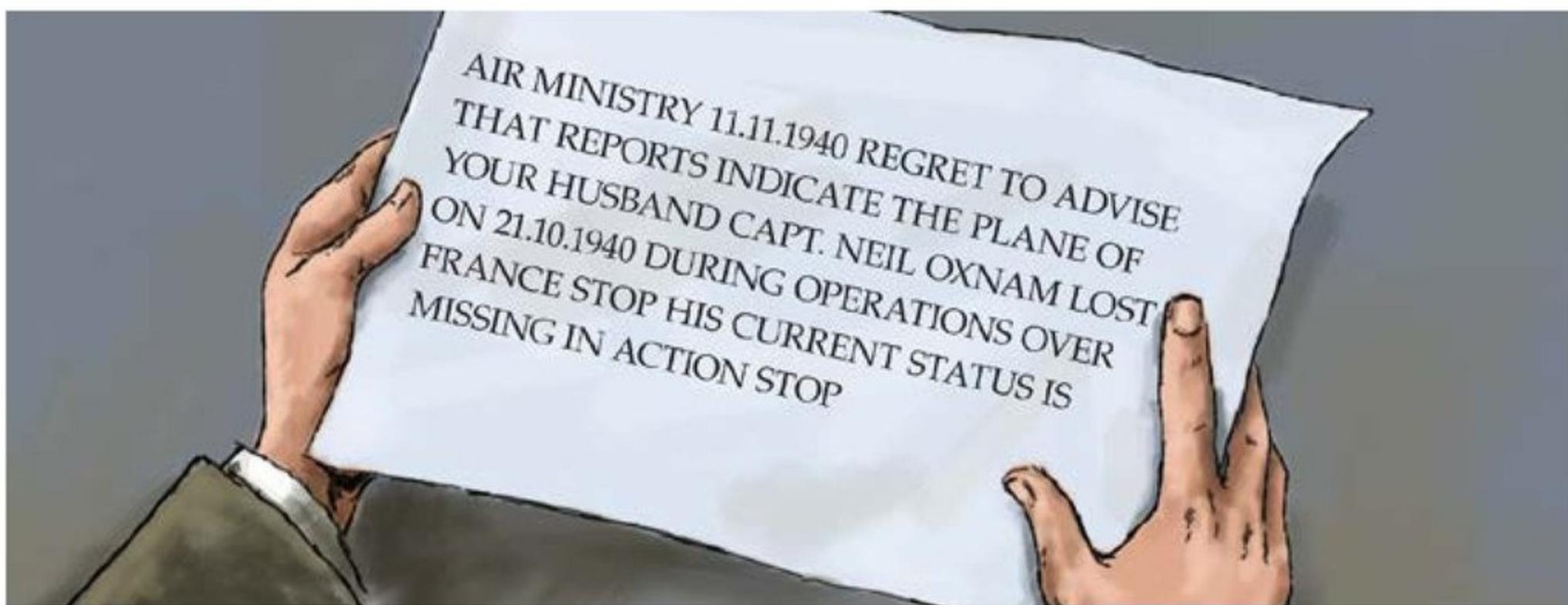
The train jerked, then slowly began moving. Reggie returned his mum's "chin up" gesture. He fought back tears as the train left the station.

The train car was filled with kids like him dressed in jackets and caps against November's damp chill. Most were younger, and many of them had notes safety-pinned to their coats. He didn't. At thirteen, Reggie refused to have a label stuck on him as if he were a tin of biscuits. Next to him sat Clive Bibby, his friend and classmate, who had family outside Bristol. A matronly woman in a blue uniform walked the aisle, counting heads.

When the woman counted Reggie, his throat tightened. *I don't belong here*, he thought. Reggie's mum wanted to send him away as soon as the bombs started raining down on London back in September. The Germans weren't just bombing the army bases and airfields anymore. Reggie dug his heels in, promising to make himself useful around the house and always tell his mum where he was going. Everything would be okay as long as they were together.

Then came the telegram about his father. "I won't lose you, too, Reginald," Mum had said, her voice hard as cast iron.





The train rocked gently on its way out of London. Reggie pulled the wrinkled telegram from his pocket and read it again.

AIR MINISTRY 11.11.1940 REGRET TO ADVISE
THAT REPORTS INDICATE THE PLANE OF
YOUR HUSBAND CAPT. NEIL OXNAM LOST
ON 21.10.1940 DURING OPERATIONS OVER
FRANCE STOP HIS CURRENT STATUS IS
MISSING IN ACTION STOP

Since the war started, Reggie had always been able to picture his dad strapped into his Spitfire plane and leading a **squadron** into the fight. Day after day, night after night, the **Royal Air Force** rose to **intercept** the **Luftwaffe**—the Germans' fighters and bombers. The RAF was Britain's last line of defense.

Now his dad was missing in action. Reading those words for the hundredth time, his heart still sank into his stomach. *Had he bailed out? Had he been captured? Was he . . . ?*

Clive interrupted Reggie's thoughts. "You think the **Nazis** are going to invade?" he asked. Clive's dad was older and served as an **Air Raid Precautions warden**. He made sure people in the neighborhood had their blackout curtains closed so the German bombers couldn't target the lights of their houses at night. He helped guide people to the shelters during raids, too.

"Dunno," Reggie replied. "They would've come across the Channel in summer, don't you think?"

"I reckon," Clive replied.



They were nearing the western outskirts of London. Reggie spotted two dots in the sky growing larger as they approached.

"Spitfires?" Clive asked.

Reggie leaned forward. "A bit slow," he decided. The planes passed overhead, engines roaring. "Hurricanes. Out of Northolt."

Reggie's dad was based in Northolt. He had taken Reggie for a tour there once. Reggie had met some of his dad's mates and even got to sit in his plane. There was a small duck painted on the nose. "'Lucky Duck.' That's what we call your dad," one of the men explained to Reggie. "Best and luckiest pilot here." He had shaken Reggie's hand. "I'm his wingman, **Lieutenant Warren**."

After reading the telegram, Reggie had tracked down Lieutenant Warren's address and written him, asking for any information, but he had not heard back. His mum didn't know about the letter, and now she would be alone to face the news, whatever it might be. He wouldn't be there to help.



After some time, the train seemed to be slowing, and suddenly Reggie's mind was clear. He stood up as the **chaperone** patrolled past. "Are we stopping, ma'am?" he asked.

She patted him on the shoulder. "Just briefly at Reading Station, son, to pick up some more **evacuees**."

Reggie waited for her to pass, then pulled his suitcase down from the rack above. He flopped into his seat, pulled a pen from his shirt pocket, and began writing furiously on the back of the telegram.

"What are you up to, Reg?" Clive asked.

"Huge favor to ask, Clive," he said, still writing. "My Gran and Gramps Oxnam will be waiting at the station in Bristol. They already know about Dad, but tell them I'm sorry and please give them this note. I've got to go back."

Reggie hid in the loo with his suitcase. When the train came to a stop and the doors clattered open, he popped out, rushed through the incoming mob of kids, and jumped out onto the platform.



Another blue-suited chaperone took a step toward him, but Reggie was ready. He picked out a stranger at the far end of the platform. “Gran!” he called, striding toward her and waving wildly. Satisfied, the chaperone turned away, and Reggie disappeared into the crowd.

Reggie made his way to the bus station and bought a ticket back to London, then noticed a man with scraggly teeth selling preserves.

“Homemade raspberry jam? Two shillings,” he offered. Reggie’s mum loved raspberry jam, but it was hard to come by in the city. He withdrew his last coins and handed them to the man.

“Ta,” the man said as he pocketed the coins.

Reggie stowed the jar in his pocket. “Peace offering for my mum,” he said.

“Good luck with that, lad,” the man chuckled.



The Sun was all but down when the bus reached the stop nearest the hospital. It was surreal to approach the city as daylight faded. **Barrage balloons** floated like huge swollen pigs high above the city. They kept German dive bombers from coming in low, his dad had explained, which made their bomb runs less accurate.

Reggie's suitcase swung awkwardly as he hiked the ten blocks to the hospital. Evening fell, but no lights came on. It was as though the great city of London were trying to hide in the dark of night.

Reggie was sweaty and panting when he reached the nurse's station. He dropped his suitcase with a clunk.

"What are you doing here, Reg?" Nurse Flynn asked. "You're supposed to be on your way to the country."

"Is Mum here, please?" he asked, ignoring her question.

"Her shift ended about an hour ago," she replied.

Reggie winced.
"S'okay if I leave the suitcase here? I'll get it tomorrow."



"If you're still alive, you rascal," she answered, shaking her head. Your mum isn't going to be happy to see you, I imagine," she called after him as he raced out the hospital doors.

Reggie ran, the leather of his shoes slapping on the sidewalks. Dark shapes of people came out of nowhere and disappeared as quickly. He reached the shadows of Alexandra Park, where he'd played many a football match before the war. Now its grassy patches had been turned into gardens for the war effort. He scanned the park, still running, and then he felt his foot jerk back as it tangled in the strings of a trellis for beans. He fell forward and hit the ground, barely catching himself.

The air raid sirens went off.

Reggie thought he'd gotten used to the rise and fall of their howls, but he'd always been safe underground by the time they warned that German aircraft had been spotted. He rolled on his back to catch his breath. Then he noticed a dark figure squat down beside him.

"Headed to the shelter, are we?" a familiar voice shouted over the sirens. The man was wearing the bowl-shaped helmet of an Air Raid Precautions warden.



"Mr. Bibby," Reggie gasped. Mr. Bibby pulled Reggie up by his arm, looking closely at his face.

"Reggie?! What are you doing here?"

"Do you know where my mum is?" Reggie cried.

Mr. Bibby helped him to his feet. "First, let's get to the shelter—seems the Jerries are a smidge early tonight!"

Reggie and Mr. Bibby darted from street to street till they reached Bounds Green Station and descended the 169 stairs—Reggie had counted them—to the underground shelter. They were halfway down when Reggie heard the first *crump*—the sound of a bomb hitting up above. *Crump.*

Crump, crump.

Crump, crump, crump! The distant crackle of antiaircraft guns firing.

They got to the bottom. Reggie leaned over to catch his breath.

"I'll go find your mum," Mr. Bibby said. He wandered into the dozens of nests of quilts and pillows where people had settled in.



Reggie waited, trying to think of the right words that could defuse his mum's anger. Mr. Bibby came hurrying back, pink in the face from exertion. "Can't find her," he said apologetically. Reggie felt instant panic run cold down his legs. "She always comes here," he said. "Where could she . . . ?"

Crump. Crump. PHOOM!

Concrete dust floated down from the ceiling. "That's close," Mr. Bibby said with a shudder.

CRUMP. PHOOM! Phuh-BOOM!

Reggie ducked out of instinct when he heard bombs that seemed to land right above them, the ceilings shuddering violently. All grew quiet. Then, without another thought, he was dashing up the stairs two at a time. He could barely hear Mr. Bibby yelling his name over the ringing in his ears.



Reggie emerged into a world transformed by smoke and dust. The explosions seemed to be moving farther away. He sprinted the four blocks toward home, dodging parked cars and the smashed bones of buildings.

When he rounded the corner onto their street, he saw that the houses at the far end were burning. By the firelight, he could see that a bomb had **obliterated** the house three doors down from their own.

He raced to the front of what had been their two-story flat. The right half had toppled forward onto the street, burying their small front yard in rubble. The left half still stood, leaning precariously. There was no time to wait for a rescue crew. Reggie scrambled forward, catching himself as the rubble shifted under his feet.



“Mum!” he called, unsure if she was even there. Then he spotted it in the wreckage—her medical kit. Wherever it was, she was nearby. “MUM!” he called louder, his mind muddled with fear. He began grabbing bricks and tossing them aside, scraping up his hands.

Reggie heard something and paused, listening intently. He recognized her voice, even if he couldn’t make out the words. He redoubled his efforts, digging toward the sound.

“Boy!” A shout came from behind Reggie. “Get out of there! It’s not bloody safe! That building could go at any moment!”

Reggie didn’t bother to turn around. “Keep talking, Mum!”

A hand came down hard on Reggie’s shoulder. Reggie turned and popped the man in the chest. Mr. Bibby stumbled backwards, onto his bottom. His glare could have cut steel. Reggie almost apologized, but there was no time. “Mum’s under there!” he explained, trying not to panic.

He heard his mum’s voice again, clearer now. “George Bibby?! Is that you?” In an instant, Mr. Bibby was shoulder to shoulder with Reggie, pulling away the rubble.



They reached a flattened red door, worked it free, and there she was, covered in plaster dust. Mr. Bibby shined his flashlight where she lay. Reggie gasped at the sight of the blood coating her left leg.

"It's fine," she said. She reached up her arms for their help. "Leg's broken, but it hurts worse than it looks," she joked. "Let's get to the hospital, shall we?" Reggie and Mr. Bibby gingerly helped her to the street.

"I fell dead asleep after work," she said groggily. "Didn't hear the sirens till . . ." By Mr. Bibby's light, she looked at Reggie a bit vacantly as if seeing him for the first time. "You're supposed to be in . . . Oh dear, you're hurt!"

Confused, Reggie looked down and saw that his pocket was smeared with sticky red gunk. He couldn't help laughing. "It's just raspberry jam, Mum."



“Reginald.” Reggie felt a gentle shake on his shoulder. He opened his eyes, saw the white tile walls of the hospital, and remembered he’d fallen asleep on a bench in the hallway.

His mum sat before him in a wheelchair. The white cast on her leg jutted out like a battering ram. Her face and hands were freckled with nicks and cuts.

Reggie sat up. He gently rubbed his eyes with his bandaged hands.

“There’s someone here to see us,” she said softly. Only then did Reggie notice the man standing behind her in the gray RAF uniform.

Reggie blinked. “Lieutenant Warren?”

Lieutenant Warren gave a quick salute with his right hand. His left was in a sling. He pulled Reggie’s letter from a pocket. “Sorry for the delay. Caught some **flak** before I could write you.”

“Dad?” Reggie asked, a lump forming in his throat.

Lieutenant Warren sat down beside him, and Reggie’s heart dropped. That’s what people did before delivering bad news.



"He took ground fire and went down, bellied into a field in France. I made another pass overhead, and he signaled that he was okay. But there was nothing I could do with the Germans on my tail."

"So they got him? He's a **POW**?" Reggie asked frantically.

Warren shook his head and smiled. "French Resistance got to him first. They sneaked him onto one of our subs two nights ago. He'll be here this afternoon."

Reggie buried his face in his hands, tears of relief welling in his eyes. His mum reached out and squeezed his shoulder.

Reggie looked up. "Lucky Duck?" he said, drying his eyes on his shirtsleeve.

A smile cracked across Lieutenant Warren's weathered face. "Luckier than ever, I should say."

Glossary

air raid (<i>n.</i>)	an attack in which military planes drop bombs on a target on the ground (p. 6)
barrage balloons (<i>n.</i>)	large balloons tied to the ground with attached nets or wires that block low-flying enemy aircraft (p. 9)
chaperone (<i>n.</i>)	a person who looks after or is responsible for others, often during a trip or social event (p. 7)
evacuees (<i>n.</i>)	people who are being moved away from danger (p. 7)
flak (<i>n.</i>)	guns, gunfire, or bursting shells used to attack aircraft (p. 17)
gingerly (<i>adv.</i>)	in a cautious or careful manner (p. 16)
intercept (<i>v.</i>)	to stop or take someone or something while that person or thing is traveling from one place to another (p. 5)
lieutenant (<i>n.</i>)	a high-ranking officer (p. 7)
loo (<i>n.</i>)	a British word for a bathroom or toilet (p. 3)

Luftwaffe (<i>n.</i>)	the German air force (p. 5)
Nazis (<i>n.</i>)	members of the ruling political party in Germany from 1933 to 1945 (p. 6)
obliterated (<i>v.</i>)	completely destroyed or wiped out (p. 14)
POW (<i>n.</i>)	the abbreviation for <i>prisoner of war</i> ; a person captured and held by an enemy during a war (p. 18)
Royal Air Force (<i>n.</i>)	the British air force, abbreviated as RAF (p. 5)
squadron (<i>n.</i>)	a military unit made up of more than one small group of soldiers, airplanes, or ships (p. 5)
surreal (<i>adj.</i>)	having an unreal or dreamlike quality; strange (p. 9)
telegram (<i>n.</i>)	a message sent by telegraph and then delivered in written or printed form (p. 3)
warden (<i>n.</i>)	a person responsible for enforcing rules or supervising an event or place (p. 6)

The Blitz

A Reading A-Z Level Z1 Leveled Book

Word Count: 2,450

Connections

Writing and Art

Two types of fighter planes are mentioned in the story: Hawker Hurricanes and Spitfires. Research these planes and compare them using a Venn diagram.

Social Studies

Research to learn more about how people in the London area prepared for air raids during the Blitz. Create an informational brochure on how to prepare for an air raid.

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