

A Distant Prayer

Miracles of the 49th Combat Mission

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Excerpt from Chapter Two

Words are inadequate to describe the physical and emotional sensation created by the sound, smells, and sight of nearly a hundred military aircraft preparing to launch into action against the enemy. Exhaust fumes filled the hot desert air as our small armada revved their engines in preparation for flight. When cleared for take-off, the throttles were “pushed to the wall” to develop maximum power for a short take-off roll before lift off.

Once airborne, the crew assumed battle positions, connected their electric flight suits and oxygen masks, and prepared their weapons for action. Small talk was exchanged over the interphone. At 10,000 feet the pilot instructed us to don our oxygen masks and test our weapons. Several rounds of ammo were expended from each weapon, with particular caution to avoid a sister aircraft.

My assignment as flight engineer required me to fulfill the dual roles of both maintaining the aircraft in flight and manning the upper turret machine gun to defend against attacks from enemy fighter aircraft diving from above. The weapons in my turret extended nearly two feet outside of the Plexiglas canopy to allow the muzzle blasts to safely dissipate without damage to our own aircraft. I could rotate the turret 360 degrees in the horizontal plane and aim the weapon above the horizon to engage the enemy aircraft. One of the disadvantages of this position was that I could not depress the weapon’s line of fire below the horizon, or it would hit our own aircraft. German fighters would capitalize on this limitation by matching our altitude exactly while approaching from the 12:00 position (directly head on), so that only the nose gunners’ weapons could be brought to bear. It was the game of “chicken” at a combined airspeed of over 600

miles per hour! To maintain formation, our aircraft fired on the intruder, but did not take evasive action, so the approaching fighter had to sheer off at the last possible moment to avoid a collision.

Once we checked our weapons and reported on our individual operational readiness, everyone was pretty much left to their own thoughts. It was quite lonely and monotonous while flying toward the objective. Periodically the navigator advised us of our position enroute to the target, and the estimated time of arrival. We could also monitor his communication with the pilot as he provided headings to be entered into the navigational equipment. In between these stilted conversations, my thoughts wandered home and I found myself praying that no one would be hurt on the mission, and that we would get back to base safely. I also prayed that I would have the courage to do my duty.

I was particularly anxious on our first mission. It would be the first time I might have to fire a gun at another human being in an attempt to destroy his life, and I fretted about it. What I didn't realize at the time was that when the enemy starts firing, something goes off in the mind and one fights back furiously out of a sense of self-preservation. Raw emotion takes over, and reactions to the battle are without conscious thought or remorse.

Regardless of whatever I was thinking at the time, I was almost always startled by the voice of the navigator telling us we had crossed into enemy territory. At that point, everyone on board began straining his eyes to see any sign of enemy fighters. We initiated an assigned drill of periodically confirming our condition so that if someone were injured or killed without getting word to us, we would quickly find out if something was wrong.

The noise of combat is unlike anything in human experience, with the drone of the engines, the screaming sound of fighter aircraft whizzing past at an airspeed of over three hundred miles-per-hour, the rapid fire bursts from the twelve machine guns mounted throughout the ship, and perhaps worst of all, the constant pounding of the Triple A (Anti-Aircraft Artillery) exploding all around. I'll never forget the first time we passed over an area where the Italians fired Triple A at our aircraft. I saw the distinctive puffs of black smoke in the distance, indicating that the enemy had fired flak shells from their ground-based anti-aircraft artillery. Flak is metal shrapnel that is designed to tear an aircraft to pieces when the projectile that carries it explodes near the aircraft at a pre-determined altitude. Flak shells were always fired in groups of three, and we had been trained to watch how the pattern developed. If the second puff was further away than the first, we knew that the ground guns didn't have our range. If the second shot was closer than the first, then it was time to hope that they hadn't guessed our altitude because the third shot was likely to explode very close to our position. Even a near-hit was sometimes enough to destroy an aircraft, since the effect of flying into flak is much like walking into the whirling blades of a table saw. Shrapnel can penetrate the metal skin of an aircraft like a can opener cutting a tin can. A direct hit would rip entire sections off a wing or the fuselage, tearing the aircraft's aluminum skin into razor-sharp strands that could slice through a flight suit, or even a person's skin if he accidentally touched it. If the flak was set to explode at altitudes above our assigned altitude, there was a risk that a well-aimed projectile would tear a hole right through the aircraft on its upward trajectory. It didn't do any good for us to shoot back at the ground based artillery, since we typically flew at

altitudes in excess of 15,000 to 20,000 feet, placing the enemy guns far beyond the range of our .50 caliber machine guns.

One of the most frustrating things about serving on a bomber is the inability to take any offensive action. We always flew in squadrons that required us to maintain formation, regardless of what the enemy Triple A or fighters were doing to us. It was unnerving to watch a German fighter approaching at over three hundred miles-per-hour, knowing that we could not take any evasive action to get out of their way. The reasons were that a bomber was too large to maneuver quickly, and we also had to maintain our position or risk crashing into one of our own aircraft just a few feet to either side. We were forced to use the twelve .50 caliber machine guns that protruded from our aircraft as our only defense. Of course at the speed we were traveling, (approximately two hundred miles-per-hour), it was rare that we'd ever hit an enemy fighter—we could only hope to force them off course so they couldn't get a good fix on our position. It was unnerving to think that another person was trying his best to kill you, and it soon stripped away any sense of excitement we might have held when we first arrived in the combat zone.

Since enemy fighters can swarm a single aircraft and attack until it's destroyed, we always flew in squadrons. Upwards of twenty-five or more four-aircraft groups combined to create a squadron. By flying in a four-aircraft formation, an approaching enemy fighter was confronted not by twelve defensive weapons, but by four times that many, which made their job a lot tougher. It also afforded each aircraft in the group additional protection. The lead aircraft in each formation flew in the forward position with one aircraft to each side and a little behind in the left wing and right wing positions. These three flew at the same altitude and were so close to each other that we could easily

see each other's faces when peering out of our Plexiglas windows. The fourth aircraft flew behind the two in wing positions in a direct line behind the lead aircraft. This position was called the Tail End Charlie. Charlie flew at a somewhat lower altitude. Since the most valuable positions were the lead and tail, we took turns flying in each of the four positions so that each crew had equal exposure to danger. Each position had its own peculiar dangers, but the least popular, by far, was the tail end position.

The advantage of flying in a squadron was that we didn't feel so alone. The bad part was that we were so close to each other that if one of the aircraft got hit, we'd all feel the concussion created by the explosion. It made us sick to our stomachs thinking about the men who had just been killed. Sometimes we'd see parachutes, which was a cause for celebration. If we were still in friendly airspace our radio operator could call out coordinates to help effect a rescue. In enemy territory the navigator recorded the position so we could call it in when we got back to Allied airspace. We had to maintain radio silence in enemy territory, since any electronic noise could give the enemy artillery crews a fixed bead on our position.

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As the only member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in the entire camp, I often stood out from the rest of the group, particularly since I abstained from alcohol and tobacco. At first I felt self-conscious about it, but pretty soon most people came to accept and even admire the standards I lived by. My crewmates would stand up for me if anyone ever teased me or tried to convince me to compromise my standards. While some of the men escaped the stress of battle through immoral behavior,

I managed to resist temptation by fixing my mind on the goal of returning home to Afton, worthy to return with her to the temple.

Some of the men in camp came to view me as a chaplain, and they'd come to see me for advice on a personal problem or to settle a dispute. While I didn't try to draw attention to myself, there were times when even the most hardened men needed to talk about spiritual concerns. I always took time to hear these people out and to try and help them resolve their problems. I was sometimes amazed at how many of the men told me that they didn't really have anyone at home they could confide in or turn to for support. This helped me understand how blessed I was to have a whole family and neighborhood praying for me back in Utah. I always promised the men that I would remember them in my prayers, and I think it offered some of them comfort. On many occasions, in the heat of battle, other members of the crew would ask me to say a prayer through the interphone system, although that sometimes led to gentle ridicule from the bombardier, our self-proclaimed atheist.

From our base in North Africa we flew combat missions to Italy and Southern Germany. About a month after arriving in Africa, we were transferred to Foggia, Italy, to take advantage of the forward position gained by our ground troops. Our new base gave us the opportunity to strike deep into the heart of Germany, taking out war production factories as well as the fuel refineries in Rumania. It also increased the danger dramatically, since the German defenders were more highly skilled, better equipped, and more motivated to protect their homeland than the Italians had been. In fact, because many of the Italians had hoped to be liberated by the Allies to get out from under the

Mussolini dictatorship, they only put up token resistance. But the Nazis were far more disciplined, and could always be counted on to create a fierce defense.

The worst assignment was to bomb the Nazi oil refineries in Ploesti, Rumania. The best way to describe it is as a scene out of Dante's *Inferno*. I'm sure that even the most imaginative vision of hell can't exceed the horror of flying into Ploesti, where the black flak clouds were so thick it felt like we were flying into a deadly fog. When our bombs blew up an oil storage tank, the flames would leap high into the air while black smoke billowed up to obscure our approach.

As the number of missions started to add up, the stress of battle became almost unbearable. One of our crewmates, Tom Hurd, the radio operator, became deathly ill each time we passed ten thousand feet, and eventually received a medical discharge because he just couldn't face the emotional challenge of going into battle anymore. The rest of us stayed at our assignments, but I noticed that my hands would tremble after each mission, when I had time to sit on my cot and think about what we'd been through.

An aircrew in our theatre of operations was required to complete twenty-five missions before they could be reassigned from the combat zone to training responsibilities in the States. There was no one better qualified to teach the responsibilities of each position on the aircraft than those who had lived through actual combat missions. Yet by the time we arrived, the number of required missions had increased to fifty. The mortality rate was so high that they just couldn't bring in new crews fast enough, so the number of required missions was extended to keep experienced crews in service. Fifty missions is an unbelievable number; with such a high injury and kill rate it almost wasn't worth keeping track.

The pace was incredible. After just three months in combat, we had gone on more than forty missions. That made us the senior veterans that the new guys looked up to in awe. It's still hard for me to believe we survived some of the raids we went on, given the damage we had received from flak and attacks by enemy fighter aircraft. Yet somehow the missions added up and we were still together and flying.

It was amazing how much my life had changed in less than two years. I'd gone from a kid who liked working on automobiles and playing football at West High School to a seasoned engineer on a beat-up B-17 bomber. Now that we were getting close to fifty missions, I sometimes let myself think about what it would be like to go back home to the States where I could work as an engineering instructor during the day, and return home to my wife and son at night.

I wanted so desperately to get out of the Italian battle zone, where the civilian economy had been devastated by the destruction of the war, where boys like me were turned into violent killers, and where the threat of permanent disability or death was ever-present. I watched so many friends from other crews being sent home in ambulances it left me almost numb. I couldn't wait to get back to a normal life.

It was about this time that I had an experience that struck me as being symbolic of everything that had gone wrong in a world turned upside down by war. While taking a walk with two of my buddies through Foggia, Italy, we came across a small boy leaning against a tree. He couldn't have been more than eight years old, and he was standing there with his right leg and arm missing. He balanced himself with a stick, and asked if we had any food or money. I went over to him, knelt down, and quietly asked what had happened to him. Since he'd spoken English to request help, I thought he might be able to

tell me his story. In broken English and with a few painful gestures, he indicated that he had stepped on a land mine. I had witnessed wounds and injuries far worse than this, but all of a sudden I found myself sobbing, almost uncontrollably. When I regained my composure I gave him all the cash I had and asked if he'd like me to carry him home. He said no and thanked me as I wiped the tears off my face. Many times since then I've remembered the image of this little boy leaning against the tree with a pitiful look on his face, and I've wept for all the children who suffer because of the dreadful decisions of adults. I went back to my tent that night and offered a prayer on his behalf. With more than forty missions under my belt the war was wearing on me—physically, spiritually, and emotionally. This experience seemed symbolic of everything I was feeling at the time.