



FOREVER

A True Story of Love and War

A life of love, devotion, and faith

Daniel J. Quinley

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Chapter 1

8 October 1943

The air was crisp and clean as the formation climbed through the clouds over the North Sea. Contrails formed behind the mass of B-17 bombers that were struggling ever higher with their heavy loads. A deadly giveaway to the enemy that would see them because of it. Higher and higher they climbed as they made their way toward Germany, and their destiny:

The day started like any other when we had a mission to fly; it began the night before. We knew that a mission was called for October 8th, but we didn't know where we'd be going, or any further details. Our destination was always a closely guarded secret. Although our enemy always seemed to know more than we did. It was about 0400 hours when I woke up with a light shining on my face. I say woke up, but there was no real sleep the night before a raid, not for the veterans who already knew what to expect, not for the sober. October 8th would be my 14th mission. Some of the crew had more mission credits than I did, so we all knew what we'd be doing in a few hours and that made sleep hard to come by. The man holding the flashlight was Lieutenant Robinson, the 532nd Squadron Operations Officer. His flashlight scanned each bed in our Nissen hut as he called out each name when the light hit our face,

“Lieutenant Pry, Lieutenant Quinley, Lieutenant Burwell, Lieutenant Snyder, wake up, you're flying today! Briefing at 0600!”

He did the same to Captain Baltrusaitis' crew, who we shared the hut with. We'd been flying a pretty light schedule for the last part of September because of the Schweinfurt and Stuttgart losses, so we knew our luck would be running out soon. I stayed behind on the October 4th mission to Frankfurt because our ship was flying deputy group lead. Lt. Colonel Hall flew in my seat. During the flight Jack lost the number two engine to a mechanical failure and barely made it back to Ridgewell by diving and cloud hopping to dodge German fighters that were trying to get at him. He and Lt. Col. Hall fought about it because Jack said that they'd gone too far to turn back. It would have been safer to stay with the formation, even with only three engines, but the colonel ordered him under threat of court-martial to turn around. So instead of having the safety of the formation, they had to run from fighters by themselves, all the way back to the channel.

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Jack was considered one of the best pilots in the 381st. He was a perfectionist and knew just about everything there was to know about a B-17. Jack Pry entered the service as an enlisted man and worked his way up. He was a sergeant and aircraft mechanic before he went to cadet flight school, and he had even become a B-17 instructor at one point. When I was assigned as his co-pilot at Walla Walla, Washington, I actually outranked him. He was a flight officer at the time, but was promoted to 2nd lieutenant just prior to our leaving the states. My main goal, as was everyone's, was to survive the mandated 25 missions so I could go home. I graduated single engine school and, although I wanted to transition into the twin engine P-38 fighter, my instructor told me I was probably too old to get the appointment. I would have been 28 by the time I graduated, an old man in fighter pilot years, which is what earned me the sometime nickname Pappy. Instead of risking it, and getting something I really didn't care for, I put down B-17 or instructor on my wish list shortly before graduation from pilot training. What I hadn't counted on was being dropped into Jack's lap as an inexperienced co-pilot who had never flown a multi-engine plane. Jack wasn't happy to see me at first and I can't say that I blamed him. I think at this stage of the game the co-pilot should be able to fly the airplane, but I guess there was a shortage of co-pilots right then due to the push to get more crews ready for deployment to England in a big hurry. Nearly my whole class was in the same boat as I was. The scuttlebutt was that I'd be getting my own plane and crew on my next mission, but for the time being I was happy flying with Jack and the boys. Captain Baltrusaitis had me fly with him on a recent mission to see if I was ready. He had me fly left seat and he didn't do anything I didn't ask him to do. "Baldy," as we called him, was a rough and tough man of Lithuanian descent and was one of the original pilots of the 381st Group. He flew hard and drank hard, as did many of us who watched our friends die nearly every time we went up.

The engine problem Jack encountered on the way to Frankfurt had been fixed and the ship was ready to go, so we figured we'd be flying today. The first order of business was to get cleaned up, shaved, and dressed. We shaved before a mission because it made our oxygen masks seal better on our faces. Long johns and two pairs of socks were typical. Coveralls and a jacket would go over our regular clothes, but not until shortly before take-off. If we bundled up too soon we'd begin to sweat, then the sweat would freeze when we got up to altitude where the temperature could reach thirty to fifty below zero. We rode our bicycles to the combat mess. The base was large, and soon after our arrival in July we learned that obtaining a bicycle

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was the best way to get around. At combat mess they served us bacon and real eggs which, although was much appreciated, was never a good sign. Real eggs meant we were going to be assigned a rough mission, probably somewhere deep in Germany, surrounded by hundreds of fighters and thousands of anti-aircraft gun emplacements. I had two or three cups of coffee to try to wake up. For some reason none of us were our normal selves. There was an uneasiness about the morning. An unspoken anxiousness that wasn't usually there. Normally, we were all a pretty sad bunch trying to wake up. Today, everyone was quite chipper, chatting non-stop, making nervous gestures and talk. It doesn't sound alarming to the casual observer, but it just wasn't normal, not for us, not before a raid. If you weren't superstitious when you arrived in England, you soon were. It could be a distraction, or it could be something to hold on to when you needed it. A false sense of security, I suppose, but it was what we had. After breakfast, with my Chesterfield smokes in hand, we made our way to briefing, chain smoking the entire way.

Jack, Ted, Roger, and I took our seats in the mission briefing room. Colonel Nazzaro, the 381st Group Commander, walked through the door and the room was called to attention. He advised us to be seated and he stood there on the stage for several moments looking around the room. That was unusual too. He normally pulled the curtain right away and got right to the briefing. After his dramatic pause in front of all the officers he exposed the huge map on the wall at the head of the room. When he did so there were the usual collective moans and groans from all in attendance. The moans were a normal reaction, but today they were louder and longer than usual, reflecting the distance and increased dangers of today's raid that was now in full view of us on the map. There were long pieces of string indicating our route into and out of Germany. Our minds were still fresh with the memories of the disastrous Schweinfurt raid where we lost so many ships and friends. Colonel Nazzaro spoke,

“Gentlemen, our target today is Bremen, Germany.”

The radio and intelligence officer gave us the usual information about weather, launch times, form-up procedures, our route to and from the target, expected enemy fighter numbers and so on. It was going to be a rough one alright. We were going all the way to Bremen, where the city is surrounded by some of the heaviest concentrations of anti-aircraft batteries in Germany. It had all the makings of another Schweinfurt.

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Since arriving in England I tried hard to write to my wife every day. It was a tradition we'd started even before we were married. It was tough to do sometimes, because I was so limited on the information I could share from the war zone. I wouldn't have time to write before leaving today, but I'd finished one yesterday and got it mailed off just in time. It was a short letter that I'd planned on adding to, but something told me to just seal it up and drop it in the outgoing mail. It was on my mind as we left the briefing.

Hello again, darling! Here it is another night, so I'll tell you once again that you are my sweetheart and that I'm still in love with you an awful lot. Even if I didn't get any mail from you again today, because I know that it isn't any fault of yours. Although, I wish it was your fault, because then I know it would be remedied right quick, but probably tomorrow I'll get some. Sure haven't any news again tonight, so this will naturally be another short note. Just got in and had chow and it's already time to get myself into bed just in case I have to get up before breakfast. I sure did have a dream last night. I dreamt that it was Christmas day and I came flying into Sacramento and you were down in Ceres, so I went out and hitchhiked down there. Then I came walking in and you greeted me with open arms. That's when I woke up, but it was swell while it lasted. No fooling, wish it would all come true. I'll say goodnight now darling, much as I hate to, but I don't have any news, anyway, except that I love you, and I said that once, but it's still very much true. Also, naturally, I sure do miss you too. God bless you darling. Love and kisses, Cecil.

After getting the rest of our gear we hopped a truck out to the hardstand where we found the enlisted members of the crew readying their guns. Jack briefed them as I performed a walk around inspection of our ship, the "Feather Merchant." She was one of the original ships of the 381st Group that came over from the states, a B-17F (42-30009). I could hear Jack telling the men, over their own moans and groans, what we'd be facing today. With all the groups combined our force numbered just under 400 B-17 and B-24 bombers and about 250 P-47 fighters. There'd also be the usual Spitfires from the RAF to escort us across the English Channel until the P-47's could join up. On today's mission the fighters would stay with us to the border of Holland and Germany, probably farther than they'd ever escorted us before.

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But after our “little friends” leave us, we’d have to fight the rest of the way to the target and back without fighter cover until they could meet up with us again on our way home. Our launch time was scheduled for 1115-1130 hours. Our squadron, the 532nd, would be flying the low formation at about 26,000 feet, and we’d be carrying twelve 500 pound bombs. Low formation made us easier targets for the flak gunners. I was assigned left seat on this flight because we’d be flying second flight lead. Jack had to fly right seat so we could keep proper position from the squadron lead plane. In this case that was our roommate Captain “Baldy” Baltrusaitis in “The Joker.” Jack just hated giving up his seat for any reason, but I have to admit, I liked seeing him get antsy in the right seat, It made me chuckle. Make no mistake about it though, it was still Jack’s ship, he’s just that way. The “Feather Merchant” became our assigned ship about two weeks after the Schweinfurt mission. Our first assigned ship was “Ole Flak Sack,” another 381st original, but she’d received some pretty extensive damage during a belly landing by our friend Lt. Leo Jarvis, who was getting some training time while his ship was having battle damage repaired. We flew “Ole Flack Sack” in training and on our first three missions. Our other ships were “The Hellion,” on the Schweinfurt raid and, much to the dismay of our wives, “Old Coffins” a couple of times after that.

Shortly after being assigned the “Feather Merchant” we experienced severe oxygen problems that forced us to abort two missions which we never received credit for. Jack managed to get those ironed out. Not without difficulty, however. The maintenance major kept insisting that there was nothing wrong with the system, but we kept running out of oxygen way too soon. The major never actually said it, but he acted like he was questioning our aborts and whether or not we were telling the truth about the leak. Jack was called into Colonel Nazzaro’s office and read the riot act and practically accused of being a coward because of some aborted flights. It was a mistake for the major to question Jack’s bravery regarding the aborts, and his perceived notion that there was nothing wrong with the oxygen system. I think the major resented Jack because of his expertise and prior experience as an aircraft mechanic. Certainly, some career officers didn’t much care for the guys who worked their way up through the ranks like Jack did. On this occasion we tricked the major into coming on a check ride with us that turned into, well, a kidnapping. We took him up to 25,000 feet out over the North Sea to prove our point. Sure enough, at altitude, we began rapidly losing pressure in the oxygen system, just like we’d been telling him. The major kept yelling at us to land the aircraft and was getting awfully upset

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with Jack and I, but Jack would have none of it. He told that major we were going to keep flying until he admitted there was something wrong with it and promise to fix it, instead of claiming we were cowards behind our backs, and to never question his or our bravery or resolve again. At first that he did an awful lot of yelling for us to land the plane, and Jack did an awful lot of yelling back at him. I could see my career flashing before my eyes. Eventually, however, the major finally calmed down, admitted he was wrong, and promised he'd get the system fixed. Thank God for that, I thought we were going to get court martialed for sure. The "Feather Merchant" was repaired that same day and we never heard another word about the kidnapping. I think Jack and the major made a deal that Jack and I wouldn't get court martialed and no one would hear about his crew not being able to fix the plane, or his excitable nature up at altitude when he thought he was going to die without oxygen. From then on, the maintenance crew took Jack seriously when he said something was wrong with the aircraft, but they still didn't like him much.

Chapter 2

Bremen

I was thinking what a beautiful day it was as we climbed out over the English Channel. We were flying at an indicated 160 knots, or about 185 miles per hour. The colors were amazing and were the bluest I'd ever seen. Once we reached land the sky was contrasted with the lush landscape below us. The white contrails were amazingly beautiful and there were even circular contrails coming off the props of the ships around us. It was magical, even mesmerizing, and hard to imagine that soon there would be a sky full of enemy fighters intent on killing us all. During long flights you have to remain observant but your mind can't help wandering to things you'd rather be doing; places you'd rather be. There were usually always delays of some sort after all the pre-flight checks, and then what followed was the infernal waiting. Sometimes Jack and I would talk; sometimes we'd be off in our own worlds. We'd write letters, or read letters. Ted would most likely be taking a nap and Roger reading his navigation charts. The rest of the boys would be gabbing in the back, maybe playing cards. Today, while waiting for the green flare that signaled engine start, I was reading the last letter I received from Margaret. My mind drifted back to it as I stared out the window at the rest of our squadron.

Hiya Honey. Greetings on our 53 month anniversary. I still love you, darling, very-very much, and miss you as much, or more (if possible) than ever. But there is some consolation in the realization that these past few months apart are that much closer to the day when you'll be home again. Sure hope it will be real soon too, because that would really make me a happy gal.

I didn't get a letter from sweet you again today. Darling. I know this isn't much of a letter, but I'm awful lonesome for you tonight. So much so that I can't think of anything but you to write about. I sure hope and pray that this old war will end in a hurry (now) so that you and a lot of other boys can come home. Things look good in the news tonight. At least we're holding our own against the Germans, and Japs too. You boys did another nice job over France last night. Congratulations and stuff.

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It's only 9 O'clock dearest darling, but I'm tired, so I'm going to dash to bed after a nice bath. I'll do better on a letter tomorrow, honey. I'm not much of a morale builder tonight. I love you with all my heart and visit the cathedral twice every day to say a couple of extra prayers for my sweetheart. Hope they help a little to keep you safe. Until tomorrow, and always darling, May God bless you and protect you and bring you home to me very soon. Good night for this time honey-bun. All my love and kisses. Margaret.

My day dreaming was interrupted as a few enemy fighters showed up over Holland and tried to get to us, but our P-47 little friends kept them away. As we approached the German border, however, our little friends reached the limit of their fuel supply. If they were to safely make it back to base they'd have to leave us, and just like that, they were gone. Now, every eye in our ship scanned the sky intently looking for little black specks that would turn into enemy fighters hoping to chalk up another B-17 kill for their Fatherland.

We were late taking off, something to do with our decoy force, so we figured the Luftwaffe would have plenty of warning that we were coming. They'd be ready for us. As I said, Jack didn't seem himself today. No one did. There was a lot of talking on the intercom and the noise was getting on our nerves. Finally, he yelled at everyone,

"Can the chatter. Watch for Jerry fighters. Call out when you see them."

We were headed toward our turning point at Rastede, Germany. From there we'd head to our Initial Point (IP) at Vegesack and turn south toward Bremen for the bomb run. At that point I'd turn the ship over to Ted, our Bombardier, and the ship is controlled by autopilot through his Norden Bomb Sight. Just as we were afraid of, though, as soon as the P-47's left the Jerries were all over us. There were twin engine ME-210's and JU-88's firing rockets at us from our six O'clock, just out of gun range. Tex, our tail gunner, was swearing up a storm because the Jerries were too far away to hit with his twin .50 caliber machine guns. It was frustrating for the gunners. They could see the Jerries back there, but they couldn't do anything about it. I hated the rockets, they were like flying death goblins. They didn't fly a whole lot faster than us, at least it seemed that way to me. If coming from behind, they'd appear out my side window and pass on by, like a faster car

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passing us on the highway. Your natural instinct was to veer away from them, but there was only so much evasive action we could take in a tight formation, and staying in a tight formation with an overlapping field of fire from our gunner's was the only real defense we had against fighter attack. It was the Schweinfurt mission when we first saw the rockets, but on that day none of them came close to us.

The FW-190's and ME-109's finally hit us from every direction. The yelling on the intercom was intense but determined and reflected how this once rookie crew had become veterans of these raids.

Al, Smitty, there's a 190 at 9 O'clock low! Ted, 12 O'clock level, get him! Tex, he's head on but he'll be coming your way, watch your left. Eddie got one, he's smoking and spinning. I got one, I got one! That's confirmed Carl, I saw it--

There was still excitement in everyone's voices, but not panic like there was over Schweinfurt, and Roger didn't have to smack Ted anymore to make him set down his rosary beads and remind him to shoot back. Then, as fast as the Jerries were on us, they were gone. Approaching the IP the flak started exploding all around us and was especially thick. So thick you could walk on it, we would all say. Deadly puffs of black were all over the sky. They contained shards of metal fragments. Shrapnel that could tear through a human like a hot knife through butter. So far so good, but bumpy as hell. You could hear the shrapnel bouncing off the plane or scraping down the sides of the fuselage as we flew through it. If a shell exploded under us the ship would lurch up violently from the shock wave.

"Bomb bay doors open," Ted announced.

We had our eyes fixated on Baltrusaitis' plane as we made the run into the target. It only took a few minutes, but it seemed like an eternity when death was exploding all around us. A short time later Ted said,

"Bombs away."

As the lead ship dropped its bombs, Ted dropped ours and the "Feather Merchant" lurched upward from her sudden loss of 6,000 pounds. We started a slow turn to the southwest with the formation. Everything was looking good and it appeared as though we may just get lucky again. Our thoughts turned to the Jerry fighters that would be waiting for us on the other side of the flack field. We were just about through our turn when we saw Lt. Arthur Sample's plane, our old ship, "Ole Flak Sack," get hit. He

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was still flying with us, but it looked bad. She was smoking heavily out of her open bomb bay doors and waist windows. The bomb bay doors must have been knocked from their mechanism because they were flapping in the wind as the ship rocked back and forth. Art wasn't going to be able to keep up with the formation and he'd be a sitting duck after he dropped out. Then, a deafening explosion rocked our own "Feather Merchant." Had it not been for my belt I may have been knocked on top of Jack. It threw me sideways, to my right. The noise and concussion brought my attention back inside our own cockpit and away from Art. The controls were nearly torn from my hands. There wasn't time to worry about Art anymore. I scanned the engines in the direction the noise came from and I could see that we took a direct hit on our number two engine. The number two engine was right next to my seat and there were holes in the side of the cockpit now, with cold air whistling through. There was a burning and tearing pain in my leg. Some red hot shrapnel went into my lower right leg just above the ankle. I felt it travel upward and settle just below my knee. It was a tearing, burning pain, like I'd never experienced before. Man, I couldn't imagine taking something like that in the gut instead of the leg. I yelled at Jack that I'd been hit. He asked how bad it was as he took control of the ship. I said it's my lower leg and it felt like blood was running down inside my trousers. I could still feel everything and move everything. It hurt like hell but I didn't have time to worry anymore about it. The good news was that the freezing air would go through the same hole on my trousers that the shrapnel made, and it would stop the bleeding, hopefully.

There was oil flying everywhere out of the number 2 engine cowling and splattering over the wing. I told Eddie, our flight engineer and top turret gunner, to check for fire and other damage. It was smoking, but at least there wasn't any fire showing. It was imperative now to get the prop feathered. Feathering turns the edge of the prop into the wind so the wind won't catch the blades and make them turn. That would cause drag on the ship, slowing us down. It could also cause the engine to windmill out of control and could even take us down. I tried feathering the prop and all was going well as I watched the rotation slow and the blades turn a little, but then our fear was realized as it began to windmill. The oil pressure must have run out from the damage right before it completed feathering. Instead of a safe low drag prop we had a prop that caught the wind and spun the engine faster and faster. I couldn't help but think this was the same engine that quit on Jack just four days ago. I could feel the vibration getting worse. This was a bad situation. Jack and I were both swearing and tried again to feather it but we knew it

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wasn't going to happen, it was just too late. This was the beginning of the end for our "Feather Merchant." The high pitched whine that was coming from those blades hurt our ears, even over the other sounds of the engines, exploding flak, and Eddie's twin .50 caliber machine guns that were now blasting away again right behind and over our heads. The vibration was shaking the hell out of us and our ship-our ride home! Then the inevitable happened. The engine flew apart, tearing itself from the mounts as it separated from the aircraft. Pieces of the disintegrating engine hit the side of the plane and tore through the fuselage. The propeller flew up and backward, over the wing. We lost contact with Ted and Roger in the nose. Jack called them over and over on the intercom, but there was no answer.

"Pilot to Navigator, pilot to bombardier, check in! Roger, Ted, come in!"

God, I hoped they were alright. The shrapnel flew right into their compartment. I yelled at Eddie to get down there and see if they were alright, but then there was another flak hit and explosion right underneath and behind my position that rocked us upward so hard it jarred my back, knocked the wind out of me and knocked Eddie off his feet. My head was pounding like I had an ice cream headache, and then everything went suddenly quiet. I remember looking out the top Plexiglas window at the sky, and then there was nothing.

"Quinn! Quinn! God damn it Quinn! Wake up! Eddie! Get up here and give me a hand with Lt. Quinley! Quinn! Cec! Cec!"

Everything was surreal and dream like. Things weren't noisy anymore. I could still hear the explosions and the guns firing, but it seemed far off. My mind drifted back to Sacramento and my wife. We were walking by the lake in the park. Everything there was so colorful. Was that Jack's voice telling me to wake up? Why is he telling me to wake up, and why is he in Sacramento?

"Quinn! Snap out of it! Cecil! Look at me!"

He sounded like he was a block away. I felt a pressure on my face and it felt like I couldn't breathe. As I began to snap out of it and my senses slowly returned I could hear Jack telling me that I was unconscious because my oxygen was shot out. That's a bad thing at 26,000 feet. Jack noticed my head dangling backwards with a blank smile on my face looking out the top Plexiglas. He thought I'd been hit again and was dying but when he checked me out looking for injuries he found that my oxygen tube had been severed

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by shrapnel at the control valve. He put his oxygen mask on me while he was yelling until I woke up. I could see, hear, and think, but my body wouldn't do what I was trying to make it do. I could still hear Jack telling me to get myself on oxygen, over and over. Finally, I found a spare emergency oxygen tube that was working and put the tube between my teeth to hold it there.

We slid out of formation and things were looking pretty grim. A lone B-17 was a sitting duck and a golden invitation for the Jerry fighters to cut to pieces. We were being shot all to hell as those fighters were coming at us in swarms and from every direction. They knew we were hurt, and they were like sharks after blood. It all seemed like an eternity, but was only a matter of minutes. Our friend Art Sample in "Ole Flak Sack" was hurt too, so he slid down next to us to make a two ship formation to double our firepower. Good old Art. A gentlemanly southerner you could always count on. A couple big ole lumbering injured bombers must be quite a temptation to a fighter pilot, even if those bombers are shooting back. Smitty, our ball turret gunner, wasn't answering his com anymore and we assumed he was dead because he was no longer firing his guns. We'd been raked by 20mm fire from an FW-190 all along the bottom of the plane. One round went right between Jack's legs and turned his face white as a ghost, a close call. Also, the waist gunners told us that a rocket had hit us and exploded right near the ball turret. Our last communication with Smitty was right after the bomb run and before we were hit. Normally, we'd have the radio man, Sgt. Russ "Frenchy" Frautschi, check on Smitty, but he was busy firing his guns. Everyone was busy firing their guns-except Smitty.

Chapter 3

Fur Sie ist der Krieg uber

How's my man this very warm evening? We have had two very hot days this week. Our new office is in room 907 and the telephone number is 3-8747, in case you get a chance to call while I'm at work. We certainly drew the sevens, didn't we dear? Here's hoping they will be always lucky for both of us. I have been preparing some candied figs for you the last three days, it takes four days to make them. They are for your Christmas package. I didn't get a letter from my darling today but I reread the three that came yesterday so that is almost like getting new ones. They are swell letters, honey, all of them, so keep them coming. There was a nice letter from Polly today, and she is as excited as ever over 'junior's' arrival, which may be any day now. She hears from Jack quite regularly, and that makes her happy.

You know honey, I have been having nightmares about you! For about the past week it seems like I dream every night about you, and you're stepping out on me a-plenty! Sunday morning I woke myself up crying like a baby! I dreamed that you came home (I always dream that part) but just long enough to tell me you wanted a divorce and were going back to England to marry some RAF flying gal! Gee whiz it was so real! Don't do that to me darling. Then there have been blondes and brunettes and redheads just about every night, so you've got me worried. I won't think too much about it, though, darling. I really trust you, honest!

I see where you boys haven't been out on a raid since last Thursday, on account of weather I suppose. Bob Metcalf, a little short guy who used to be at C.W.S.L. when I was there, is now a bombardier on a Fortress over there, was awarded the DFC recently, and also was promoted to 1st lieutenant. I imagine he's okay because he was a pretty nice kid in the old days. Maybe you've seen him there. Guess I'd better be signing off, dear. I love you 'muchly' as

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always, and hope this old war will end soon so that you can come home. I miss you heaps, but I know you'll be flying home very-very soon, so I'll be waiting patiently but anxiously. Until then, and always, May God bless you and watch over you. Goodnight honey. I'll be seeing you soon 'in all the old familiar places.' All my love and kisses. Margaret.

We were all fighting for our lives and the gunners were shooting non-stop. We'd loaded extra ammunition because of our destination today, and that was proving to be very fortunate indeed, because there were no ammunition conserving short bursts now. No worries about damaging the barrels. Things were looking pretty bleak as we took one hit after another. It was all about survival now. The ship filled with the smell of acrid gun smoke and empty brass casings were raining down onto the floor. The gun barrels steamed in the iced air as the boy's valiantly tried to save our "Feather Merchant" from her inevitable fate, and ours. The Jerries were on us thick and the gunners were blazing away as much as they could, it was our only hope. Our old gal was taking a beating, her worst one yet. Al, on the left waist gun, was yelling over his intercom,

"I got one, I got one. That bastard won't be bothering us anymore!"

All of the gunners were shooting with deadly accuracy today. The Jerries were going to get as much as they gave. I heard no fewer than twelve shouts of "I got one!" But our girl was coming apart piece by piece. Jack was having trouble keeping her level as she shuddered all over the sky. Finally, it was time. Jack sounded the bail-out bell and yelled at me to prepare to get out. I got up and was behind the cockpit seats trying to get my parachute buckled onto my harness rings but I kept getting knocked to the floor by explosions and turbulence. Eddie shouted that another rocket strike just blew off half our vertical stabilizer and rudder. Soon after that, part of the right horizontal stabilizer was hit and separated from the ship. Another rocket hit the left wing and everything outboard of the number one engine exploded and fell away from the plane. Somehow, the number one engine kept running, even with fifteen feet of wing missing. How the "Feather Merchant" stayed in the sky was something only God could answer, I was sure of it. It had to be like balancing a diner plate on the tip of a pencil. Our guardian angels must have been holding her up with their wings so we could get out, for surely our girl's wings couldn't be holding us up on their own, it had to be impossible. Jack again ordered us to abandon ship and said he'd

try to hold her steady while we all got out and then he would follow us. Art's ship had been dropping out with us the whole time and she didn't look long for this world either. "Ole Flak Sack" was still smoking badly and now had two engines on fire. Art was our roommate in the Nissen hut back at Ridgewell. He had been Baltrusaitis' co-pilot but was just promoted to first pilot in early September. This was his sixth mission as first pilot over-all, but his very first mission with his newly assigned crew, his 24th overall. He only needed one more to go home! Jack thought I'd already bailed out but I was sitting on the floor behind my seat still trying to strap on my parachute. I was having a hell of a time trying to get it buckled to my harness as the ship bounced violently with each explosion. Plus, I was still a little rum dumb from the lack of oxygen and the injury to my leg made it hard to move around. When Jack noticed me still there he yelled,

"Hurry up and get the hell out of here!"

I saw that some of the shrapnel had hit my parachute from one of the direct hits. That's not the kind of thing you want to see just before jumping out of a plane. I didn't know how much altitude we'd lost but we started at 26,000 feet. It scared the hell out of me, but the alternative was to stay in the plane and die. Stay and die for sure, or jump and maybe die, maybe live. I know it doesn't sound like there's anything, really, to consider. But, when you have very little oxygen in your brain, your reasoning powers get a little mixed up.

Eddie LaPointe came down out of the top turret right when I finally got my parachute buckled on. He checked his chute and started toward the bomb bay. I guess that was just the wake-up call I needed, to see someone else doing it, so I followed him. When we got to the bomb bay Eddie tried to open the doors by pulling the emergency release, but the doors were stuck. Great, I thought, Art can't close his bomb bay doors and we can't open ours. We were getting thrown all over the place by the turbulence while standing on the slim catwalk in the bomb bay. God, what else could go wrong? I was feeling okay now after having moved around some, and getting my blood circulating in the -30 degree temperature. After trying the emergency release handle without the doors opening a few times Eddie gave up on it and headed on through the bomb bay toward the rear of the plane. It's a good thing he did because he found Carl, the right waist gunner, injured and having a hard time getting his parachute secured good. The gunners wore their parachutes loose so they could move around while firing their guns. Carl had taken a shrapnel hit in his groin and was hurt pretty bad. He was

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pretty miserable with pain so Eddie helped him get his chute fixed right. They were yelling and screaming back there. I tried to follow Eddie through the bomb bay but something was wrong. No matter how hard I tried I couldn't get going and something kept pulling me back. I finally noticed that I still had that damn oxygen tube clamped between my teeth so hard that it kept pulling me back when it stretched to its limit. If it weren't for the circumstances it would be funny. Jack would shake his head think me an idiot but Roger and Ted would get a great laugh out of it, I'm glad no one saw that. I took the tube out of my mouth and was going to get a portable walk around tank for bail out. We were still at about 22,000 feet, I guessed, and that's way too high to go without oxygen. I figured I'd get one on the way to the rear hatch, but right when I was going through the bomb bay the number one engine took a hit from a rocket and it was knocked clear off the wing. The shock from that hit threw me to the catwalk in the bomb bay. The jarring also shook the bomb bay doors open. Without thinking, and without a portable oxygen tank, I got up and dove head first through the opening and into the ice cold rush of air.

As soon as I cleared the bottom of our ship I saw "Ole Flak Sack" explode in a huge fireball. I could feel the heat and concussion of the blast. She just disintegrated right in front of my eyes, there was nothing left as the flaming pieces fell to earth! My god, I thought, Art is gone! As sudden as that, Art is gone! I wanted to vomit but I just kept falling and tumbling through the cold air. I remember thinking, holy shit! I hope that plane doesn't fall on me! The panic I felt just isn't describable. Eventually I regained enough of my senses to start thinking again and I made a decision not to open my parachute right away. We'd all heard about some German fighter pilots shooting at our guys in their chutes. Plus, somewhere up here with me is a crap load of debris that used to be "Ole Flak Sack" and I didn't want any of those pieces hitting my silk canopy and ripping it up. Falling was the most peaceful, yet eerie feeling I'd ever known. Being without oxygen was undoubtedly contributing to my euphoria, but what a feeling it was. Fortunately, the lower I got, the more I woke up. I remembered this guy in our outfit that used to test parachutes. He would tell us about how you could use your arms in free fall to help steer yourself. I tried doing what he said and, to my surprise, it worked. It was almost like flying, but in those brief glimpses of clarity that interrupted my euphoria there was the realization that I was flying-straight down! I'm glad that getting lower meant more oxygen and better thinking ability. The euphoria I was experiencing could easily take hold of a man too strongly. Oh how easy it

would be to just forget the situation and keep falling, until it was too late. I could see the ground below me and it was getting closer. I also saw some clouds below and I just kept falling toward them. Then, before I knew it, I got into one of those clouds and lost sight of the ground. It startled me, because I didn't know how high I was at that point, so I pulled the rip cord. I never did see any German fighters, or debris, or any survivors from Art's ship. Now I was descending much slower, hanging under my silk parachute, and I remember thinking how lonely it was. One moment you're part of a team of ten men, friends who all count on each other, and the next you're all alone in the sky. I'd survived so many other missions already, including Schweinfurt and Stuttgart, but now I'm all alone, falling through the sky and only two minutes ago I was standing in the "Feather Merchant." Fifteen minutes ago we hadn't even been hit yet. Where's the rest of the guys? Did Roger and Ted make it out, or were they killed when the engine flew apart? Did Jack get out or did he stay too long to save the rest of us? Then, I was awakened from my self-pity by the realization that I was beginning to swing back and forth pretty violently. I pulled the shroud lines to stop the swinging and it worked just like it was supposed to. It straightened me right out. It must have been pretty windy, though, because I started swinging again. As I pulled the shroud line a second time to stop it I looked up and I noticed that the damaged canopy was trying to curl over on itself and I could see that it was full of holes from the flak, so I didn't do that anymore. I would just have to deal with the swinging. I was getting close to the ground as I continued to swing back and forth and was coming down toward what looked like a barbed wire fence just before a ditch, and I was falling fast. I pulled my legs up underneath me as high as I could and just missed the fence, but I hit the ditch bank with my legs still tucked up underneath me and bounced several feet in the air, then flew down into the ditch landing on my head. The impact knocked the air out of me and everything went black for a while. I don't know how long I was out. I just remember laying there trying to regain my senses and catch my breath. Eventually, I climbed up out of the ditch and saw a huge pile of brush and slash from where it looked like someone had cut down some trees. I hobbled over to it and buried my chute there.

"So this is Germany, huh? Shit!" I said.

I could see two men in the distance walking toward me. I tried to stand up and run away, but the pain in my leg and back was overwhelming and

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there was no getting away, so I just sat down and waited. Like the Germans were fond of saying:

“Für Sie ist der Krieg über! For you, the war is over!”

I’m glad I mailed that letter yesterday. It’s going to be a while before Margaret gets another.