




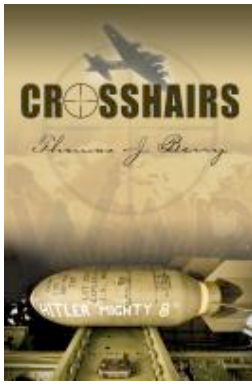
CROSSHAIRS

Thomas J. Berry



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Crosshairs

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ISBN: 978-1-63490-042-3

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

Booklocker.com, Inc.

2014

First Edition

Chapter 1

Baltic Sea
24 miles southeast of Copenhagen, Denmark
April 9, 1944

“**B**andits at one o’clock! I count three Me-210’s,” shouted 2nd Lieutenant Don Malloy as he sat in the co-pilot’s seat of their B-17, an albatross of a plane carrying ten men high over the freezing waters of the Baltic Sea.

They were on the return leg from a bombing run on the Focke-Wulf aircraft plant outside Poznan, Poland. They had already flown five and a half hours deep into the heart of Nazi-occupied territory. Now they were looking for a way out. The longest mission in the history of the 8th Air Force was about to reach new heights.

Instinctively he checked the fuel gauge on the instrument panel to his right. Four large 1200hp Wright Cyclone radial engines turned the eleven foot high propellers mounted two apiece on each of the massive wings. Stretching 104 feet across, these wings gave lift to the twenty ton bird that carried a massive payload of ten 500 pound bombs to their target. But Malloy frowned when he saw the readings. Engines one and three showed thirty-two percent of fuel remaining but number two was down to twenty percent. The gauge on engine four had remained stuck on forty-six percent two hours ago. Who knew what was left now. Evasive action would push these finely-tuned machines even harder.

“I see them,” the man to his left replied calmly. The pilot and commander of the plane, 2nd Lt. William Potter, smiled thinly behind his oxygen mask.

“I count four coming in high from eleven o’clock,” came a deep-seated voice over the intercom.

“Roger that, Cox, four bandits at eleven. That’s seven total. What’s their distance?” responded Malloy evenly. “Bandits” was a nickname for German fighters among the aircrews, an environment where codes were paramount and secrecy a must. It was considered more respectful than “Jerry” or “Kraut”, terms often used by infantry soldiers.

“Still out of effective firing range, maybe 200 yards distant,” Cox replied back. Twenty-two year old Technical Sergeant Dorris Cox, hailing from Abilene, Texas, was the crew engineer and top turret gunner. Standing at his station a few feet behind the pilots, he manned a twin .50 caliber

machine gun protruding from the top of the aircraft. Accurate to within 150 feet, the armor-piercing guns of the bomber can bring down smaller, more maneuverable fighters if they strike in the right place.

“That’s not going to keep them from firing at us, though,” Potter said grimly. “Their 20 mm cannons can hit us from long-range.”

“What’s the situation behind us?” Malloy called out through the intercom. This time another voice spoke up.

“All clear from behind, Red!” came the jovial voice of the tail gunner, Staff Sergeant Bengt Halberg. A native from Norway, the twenty-three year old tall, blond giant came into the service of his newly adopted country with a marksman’s eye – as well as an eye for the ladies.

Malloy smiled at the remark. Standing at a modest five foot six, the intrepid co-pilot of twenty-three years sported a close-cropped head of red hair that would make a Scotsman beam with pride. However his roots hailed more from the Emerald Isle than the hills of the Highlanders.

“Another two down below! Coming up from six o’clock! Making a slow climb.”

“Acknowledged, Gutmann.” Malloy said. “Two more at six. Keep them in your sights.

“Always, sir,” replied their ball turret gunner, twenty-one year old Staff Sergeant Henry Gutmann. A German by birth, the scrappy youth immigrated to California several years ago. He loved his position under the airplane, a confined space that most men vowed to stay away from.

Suddenly the plane began taking hits, the metallic strikes making all ten men in the bomber seethe with frustration. The German pilots knew the limited capabilities of the American guns and were flying just out of range, striking with impunity.

“We’re sitting ducks, sir!” came the voice from their navigator sitting with the bombardier in the nose compartment below and in front of the pilots. A thin, rounded Plexiglas shield was all that separated 2nd Lieutenants Loren Merritt and James Calire from the freezing conditions that existed at 28,000 feet. Even the heavy, sheepskin-lined jackets and gloves were not enough to keep out the cold and frostbite that had been known to affect crewmembers.

“Shit! I see one bomber on fire! He’s going down on the right!” Staff Sergeant Clifton Reneau cursed across the connected channels from his position as waist gunner. Manning the .50 caliber machine guns on the open right door of the plane, ten feet behind the bomb bay, he had a clear view as one of the nine ships that remained of their squadron met an

untimely end. Flaming out, the plane turned slowly to the right before it began to spiral down into the cold Baltic Sea below them.

“I count six chutes, sir”, he said weakly. At least they had a chance but it would be slim at best in these conditions. Far from rescue, in hostile waters, the men who survived the drop into the sea would have very little time before hypothermia set in. Drowning with their full gear and parachute was equally heartbreaking. They were certainly not the first to perish on this mission; nor would they be the last.

The bomber crews were helpless to counter this long range German artillery, and every man among them knew it. But no one ever dwelt long on their own odds of making it back home. It was always someone else who got shot down, another poor sap whose luck finally ran out. Never themselves. The folly of youth and confidence made brave souls out of men. Who else would dare to risk their lives time and time again in the face of overwhelming odds?

“I see another falling behind. His number three engine is smoking up a storm!” replied Hallberg from the tail.

“Let’s see if those bandits like eating artillery as much as shooting them!” Cox said, just before opening up with two long bursts from above. It was more an emotional response than logical, but it served its purpose. The crew began to rally.

“Loren, see what that new chin turret can do!” Malloy called down to the navigator. “Hope the piece hasn’t frozen up yet!”

A new feature on the upgraded B-17G model, the chin turret sported a twin .50 caliber machine gun under the nose, giving them a more potent frontal offensive. When the thin plating under their feet began to shake, Malloy smiled. The new guns were ready and working fine.

For all their bravado, they could do little to change the course of events. The German Messerschmitt fighters still remained unaffected and maddeningly out of range. Their 20 mm cannons had already hit three of the twelve ships in their formation. It wouldn’t be long before those explosive weapons brought down their own bomber. The Me-210’s had a length of thirty-six feet and a long wingspan with dual propellers. Their two-man crew were veterans and well-trained.

Suddenly, Malloy spotted several contrails below and to his left and he groaned silently. More German fighters, by evidence of the thin trails of smoke left on the air. This time close and underneath. He was about to call out to the crew on this new development when he noticed something that startled him. A formation of fighters burst out from underneath the bombers

heading straight for the Germans! The yellow nose on the single engine planes and the markings on the grey fuselage let him know these were our boys.

A squadron of twelve P-51 fighter planes let loose a volley of .50 caliber ammunition into the heart of the enemy Me-210's, forcing them to scatter abruptly. The P-51's had escorted the bombers on the first leg of the mission from England and across the North Sea to Denmark but had to turn back due to fuel constraints. Now they had returned, picking up the bombers for the return journey just in the nick of time!

Every member on board breathed a sigh of relief as the skies cleared. But the journey was far from over. England was 700 miles away and the entire stretch of North Sea still lay ahead. At 150 miles an hour, they still had four and a half hours of flight time left. Bill Potter gripped the control handles of the tough four engine bomber and held her steady. The sun was going down quickly now – it would be dark within thirty minutes.

Several hours later, as the impenetrable blackness seemed to blend into the cold sea 5,000 feet below, the co-pilot was getting worried. With Potter at the controls, Malloy tapped the fuel cell indicator for engine four. It had been stuck for hours, and there was no telling how much of the precious gasoline they really had left. Engine one and three were down to fumes and number two engine wasn't much better. He checked his watch. 8:45pm. A little less than an hour to go. Maybe.

"Loren, what's your status?" he called over the intercom to his navigator in the nose compartment.

"I've plotted the shortest course to England but we'll have to hope someone on the coast has their ears on."

"Bill, I recommend we lighten the load as much as we can." Malloy stated to his friend next to him. "We're out of enemy range, so we can ditch the guns. Every ounce of dead weight we don't need should go in the drink."

"Does that include the enlisted men?" Loren Merritt said with a laugh. A few chuckles emanated from the intercom from various positions on the ship.

"Let's keep that as a last resort, Merritt," he said with a smile.

"Agreed," Bill Potter said. "Let's ditch everything we don't need. But keep the enlisted men...they'll take us for a beer when we get back tonight!"

With that, everything on board that was not essential to their immediate survival was tossed out the two waist doors, or through the nose cone hatch.

Crosshairs

The bombardier insisted that Merritt's navigation table go as well, but Loren wasn't having it. He held on to the top of the small wooden desk with one hand while reworking his figures with his pencil in the other.

Heavy machine guns were unbolted from the deck and tossed into the cold North Sea. Boxes, crates, and ammunition quickly followed. Even the chair in the radio room was not immune to the order.

"That might buy us some time," Merritt said, "but it..."

"Blast!" Malloy announced suddenly. "Number four engine just died!"

Potter looked at his co-pilot grimly.

"We just might need to make an emergency ditch after all, Don. Let's get the RAF on the horn."

"Loren, can you give me our current position?" Don asked over the intercom. "Give it to Lyskawa in the radio room."

"Working on it! Let's hope to hell someone's out there. It looks like the blackest night I've ever seen," Merritt replied.

Chapter 38

North Sea
46 miles due east of Suffolk, England
February 10, 1944

Four large birds soared one thousand feet above the freezing waters of the North Sea. The fierce arctic winds churned the surface of the water, bringing high peaks and deep troughs that were visible even from that height. The birds were spread out in two lines, symmetrical to each other. They had just started their search now, despite the late afternoon hour. In only a short time, the ten man crew of the downed bomber would disappear into the dark waters forever. They couldn't afford to wait.

"Sy-pin, what do you see?"

"Nothing but blue water, lieutenant, and lots of it," came the reply from the bombardier over the intercom.

2nd Lt. Robert McCauley, sitting in the co-pilot's chair of the B-17 Flying Fortress, looked over his instrument panel in front of him. They had only been airborne for twenty minutes and they were not heading into combat on this day. There was no fear of being shot down. So what was he so keyed up about?

"If those fellas managed their life raft, they still have a shot," Richard Lindahl said quietly to his left. The 30 year old pilot from Rock Island, Illinois, whom everyone called "Lindy", had broached the subject Bob did not want to contemplate. If they had been unable to launch the boat, the freezing waters would have doomed the entire crew long before any rescue boats got to them. McCauley felt a shiver up his spine as if he himself were floating far below on the surface of the North Sea.

"We'll get to them, sir," Bob said, trying to force optimism back into his voice. For Lindahl, McCauley and the rest of the men, this rescue mission represented their first operation together as a crew since arriving from the States last month. It was an important undertaking for the rookies, who were determined to perform well.

"Let's continue the grid pattern," Dick Lindahl said. "Navigator, plot the next turn." The four large steel birds and their respective crews were searching a grid ten miles long by five miles wide, at a distance of 1,000 feet. They would make successive grids after exhausting each one. With

luck on their side, they hoped to spot the downed aircraft soon. But the choppy seas were making visibility poor.

Finding a large B-17 in the water was one thing. At 74 feet in length and a wingspan almost 104 feet across, this Flying Fortress was a huge aircraft, but its muted paint design did not stand out against the dark water below. Besides, it was in all likelihood at the bottom of the ocean right now, Bob thought grimly. Even so, the design of the Flying Fortress gave crews a greater chance to ditch their aircraft intact than did its B-24 counterpart. Due to its strong frame and hydroplane construction, a B-17 that landed in the water rarely nosedived or broke apart.

The sleek, low-riding wings helped absorb the impact away from the fuselage which kept both aircraft and crew together. This was a bone of contention pilots often had with the high-winged Liberator. In many instances, it was not uncommon for undamaged Fortresses to remain afloat for thirty minutes, giving the crew time to get their inflatable life rafts adrift.

The airmen were looking for a pair of bright yellow rafts, standard five-man issue, measuring eight foot by five foot. Hopefully the men would have their radio on board, a SCR-578 nicknamed the Gibson Girl, although McCauley had not received that information in their briefing.

This emergency radio was lightweight and waterproof, using dry cells powered by a hand crank on top to transmit an SOS signal on a frequency of 500 kHz. It had a range of 200 miles, but was dependant on a strong signal which required the use of attaching a stainless steel wire antennae 260 feet in the air to a box kite, or two hydrogen filled balloons if there was little wind. Without these accessories, the radio wouldn't generate a signal very far.

The four crews were scanning the water from both sides of their aircrafts, overlapping their sight points but after completing the first grid, they could report no signs of the downed crew. Lindahl signaled for his co-pilot to coordinate with the other planes and prepare for their next grid pattern.

"Coming around, sir," McCauley announced, as the lead plane to their left gave the new search pattern. He pulled his warm gloves further down on his hands, absently projecting the freezing temperatures on the water's surface. I wonder what they're experiencing, he thought with more than a little trepidation.

The day had started off well enough. His crew was not slated to go on today's mission, which he later found out had sent twenty-two B-17's to

strike the industrial areas in Brunswick, Germany, joining 147 Fortresses from bases around Britain. Five aborted shortly into the mission and returned to base without incident, including one of the two Pathfinder planes leading the way. The Fortresses departed Knettishall Airbase outside Suffolk by 0740 hours and the first planes began arriving back from Germany around 1550. Unfortunately, twenty minutes before they landed, the control tower received radio transmissions from two crews who reporting seeing another Fortress in distress, heading towards the water five thousand feet below.

While the British search and rescue teams prepared to launch, Dick and his officers received orders to report to the briefing room immediately. The Americans were assigned for aerial surveillance of the last known area of the bomber. The crew of the doomed aircraft was not identified. They did not know at this point which base it had originated, but that was irrelevant. They were airmen and they needed help or they would surely perish. That was enough.

As the second grid vanished behind their plane without spotting the telltale yellow rafts, McCauley wondered to himself if anyone would find them. The crew prepared for their third grid adjacent to the first two, sweeping the water in another ten mile by five mile area. The sun still had a few hours left to shine but the minutes were ticking away for the men far below.

Their crew had worked well together in training missions so far, but today was a true test; though not of combat, for that was yet to come. Rather, Bob saw the men focus their efforts in new directions this afternoon and work as a team with a single goal in mind. He only hoped their efforts would pay off.

In the nose cone was 2nd Lt. Joe Sypin, their bombardier. He was 25 years old and, like Lindahl, an Illinois native. There was no ordinance to drop today. He used his position in the forward hatch to look for signs of the crew through the clear Plexiglas in front on him. Just behind Sypin was their navigator, 2nd Lt. Elton Matthews, 22 years old, from Dover, New Hampshire.

Behind the pilots sat their Engineer and top turret gunner, Staff Sergeant Walton Bass from Nevada, Missouri, and in the radio room was Staff Sergeant Warren Jennings from Darby, Pennsylvania. Both men were 19 years old. Jennings was keeping in contact with the control tower at Knettishall, while the rest of enlisted airmen kept search over the waters below.

In the Waist were the two gunners, 26 year old Staff Sergeant Henry Works from Upshur County, Texas, and 19 year old Staff Sergeant Leo Milanowski from Cook County, Illinois. They looked to the right and left of the great bird, hoping to use their positions to spot the missing crewmen. Only two members of Lindahl's crew were missing today – Ball Turret gunner, 20 year old Staff Sergeant William "Woody" Wood from Sacramento, California and their tail gunner, 19 year old Staff Sergeant Michael Sergakis from Salt Lake City, Utah. Since this was not a combat mission, they were not included in today's activities.

The men were tense, as their long albatross of a plane continued flying along the northeast to southwest lines of their third grid pattern. No one wanted to miss any sign, if there was anything out there left to find. Their navigator, Lt. Matthews, looked over at his charts, and let out a deep sigh. He knew it was time to plot the next set of grid patterns, but he had hoped the mass effort would have already located the downed airmen.

Bob looked out the window to his right, the only one where he could see the ocean from his co-pilot's seat. Lindahl had control of the plane for the moment, and Bob was free to observe at his leisure. The North Sea seemed endless, even from a thousand feet up, and the white caps below made visibility on the surface more of a challenge.

Suddenly Bob spotted something...or at least he thought he had. He squinted against the waning rays of the sun and looked harder.

"There!" he cried. "I think I see something! Two o'clock from our position! Something colorful in the water. It may be a raft."

All eyes on board the aircraft turned towards the position he indicated and after a moment, he received confirmation from both Sypin in the nosecone and Henry Works at the Waist.

"That's a big affirmative, lieutenant!" cried the bombardier. "I see two boats in the water. Not sure how many men are in them yet."

"Sypin, lay down a flare near their position," Lindahl calmly announced. "Jennings, inform base of our findings and give them our coordinates. Have them send out a rescue boat. We'll circle the area until they arrive on site."

Bob was beside himself with joy. They had done their job and located the crew. As a result of their efforts today, ten men would return to see another sunrise. Men who were saved by the efforts of the airmen high above. It was their first mission and one Bob would never forget.

Chapter 64

February 21, 1944
Anzio Beachhead
22 miles south of Rome, Italy

“Get down! Take cover!”

The sharp command was almost lost in the thunder of the German artillery barrage which had suddenly rained down on the small company of men. Dressed in green army fatigues, they blended in well among the sea of tall grass and rolling pastures. A small river cut a swath through the disused barley fields but short bushes in the area provided scant cover.

Three men dove into a shallow foxhole to their right while the rest scattered. Hunkered down, they waited for the bombardment to cease and their hearing to return. It was always this way. Listen and dive. Wait and return.

Slowly the men began to emerge once again, covered in mud and dirt, but no worse for wear. All eyes turned toward the north, past the small river and the forested hills half a mile distant which provided cover to the enemy.

“Is anyone hurt?” a man asked as he stepped out from under a mechanized loader. The single gold bars on his shoulders marked him as a second lieutenant. Standing six feet tall, with brown hair and a handsome complexion, the officer’s green uniform shirt looked a size too big for his lean frame. His brown eyes gave his shallow face another deeper, dimension. 2nd Lt. Michael Vincent Krause, all of 26 years of age, was the platoon commander. Folks back home in New Jersey called him Vinny but he was known to his army buddies as Mike.

“I think we’re all good, boss,” replied a short, compact bulldog of a man to his left. Older than the officer, James ‘Arnie’ Arness had the single stripe of a corporal. Suddenly he flashed a wide smile showing white pearls and a chipped tooth in front. “Got to love them jerry bombs! At least you can hear them!”

“It’s the ones you can’t hear so good – the ones that just flutter close to you – that’ll get ya killed, ya bloody a-hole,” a sergeant retorted sharply. Danny McLeod wanted to get home in one piece and made sure the newbies understood just what it took to survive out here. He was due to rotate out next month. The lessons he’d learned from North Africa were going to get him home, he swore. At 23 years of age, he had seen men die

in more ways than anyone ever should. He certainly didn't want to buy the farm in a mud hovel in the middle of nowhere. Not by a jerry bomb. Not like this.

"Alright, let's get back to work," bellowed the lieutenant. The firestorm that had rained overhead had been earmarked for parts south of them. Only one had come close to their position, but you duck all the same.

The men returned their attention to the river and the problems at hand. Their mission that afternoon was to repair the damaged bridge that spanned the eight foot wide waterway and have it serviceable for large troop transport trucks by midnight. A series of steel crossbeams and wooden planks littered the area near the water, and the mechanized loader sat nearby. One man jumped into the machine and started the engine. Without waiting, he turned the big rig around and headed back south along the length of the river. His delivery was complete; it was up to the assembled engineers to finish the job.

Vinny looked around him as six men picked up a section of heavy crossbeam which would constitute one of the sides of the Bailey Bridge. These pre-fabricated wonders had revolutionized the way modern armies moved about the landscape. No longer were battalions held up for days until bridges could be repaired or rebuilt. The timetables had been cut back considerably. Almost as quickly as the Germans destroyed them, the Americans and their British allies could make them serviceable once more.

It was the British who had actually come up with the idea of lightweight, mobile bridges, and they had erected the first one last year in Tunisia. Patent pending, these little numbers were being introduced into army plans across the Italian campaign. Spanning sections ten feet long, the crisscrossed steel sides and bottom girders gave the structure its support. Slap on wooden boards to act as a floor and you have yourself a bridge. For longer crossings, these sections could be joined together with a few pins. pontoons in the water gave longer sections added support.

The lieutenant smiled as he watched his men work. They had come over on the latest Allied invasion almost a month ago, this time deep behind enemy lines between the sleepy resort towns of Anzio and Netturo. The American commanders had made their first European assault in the southern boot of Italy back in September but the strong Nazi defensive position had proved a tough nut to crack. The hills in this part of the world gave ample opportunity for small German patrols to ambush and hold off a much larger force.

The engineers had spent their time defusing mines, repairing roads and bridges, laying communication lines...even acting as infantry units when the need arose. Vinny and his team had done it all in a short span of time. Survival was often bought and lost with experience in the field.

In wartime, plans were fluid and often changed on a dime. Hoping to catch the Fascist troops off guard, the idea of striking behind their lines had quickly moved into detailed planning stages during the winter months. The 36th Combat Engineer Regiment had been given only a few days to regroup from the Italian hills and mobilize on large PCT vessels at Naples. From there, they hit the waters of the Mediterranean for the short trip up the shoreline, and landed once again on the cold night of January 22nd.

The Fifth Army established a beachhead fifteen miles long and seven miles deep within the first twenty-four hours. The 36th Combat Engineers were attached to the 56th Infantry Division, fording rivers and waterways, making roads through muddy pastures, and clearing mines from the sandy beaches.

With the swampy Pontine Marshes to their right and the Moletta River to their left, the American troops crossed the flat pasture regions largely unmolested as the German troops tried desperately to regroup. Their vaunted Gustav line was now severely threatened and the roads that lead directly to Rome itself were but twenty miles inland. Capturing those vital arteries would serve twin purposes – sever the German supply line to the south and create a relatively free passage to the Italian capital. The march on Rome would begin!

The small tributary Vinny and his merry band of engineers were now spanning was an offshoot of the Incastro River, marking one of the northern boundaries of the American beachhead, nine miles north of the small village of Anzio. The 36th Combat Engineering Regiment had been called back on February 10th to serve as infantry along a four mile stretch of this northern line. German forces continued to try to penetrate their beachhead defenses and push the Americans back into the water.

Vinny looked up into the clear sky and was grateful for a respite from the rain. The winter months had been cold and wet, and the smell of the men in his platoon was worse than any damp mutt he had ever encountered. Without a way to stay dry, many soldiers came down with trench foot while dysentery and malaria brought down a considerable number of others. Men like McLeod discovered ways around this, such as taking off your socks at night and sleeping with them pressed against your skin. Others filled in the gaps in their boots with straw or grass to keep out excess rain.

He wondered what his family back home was doing now. His two brothers were all he had left in the world after his parents died and they had yet to get involved in the war effort overseas – something he was thankful for. War is hell, he thought. Hadn't he read somewhere that General William Sherman said that in the Civil War? Well, it was true then and nothing had changed in almost eighty years to improve upon it.

His ears picked up the sound faster than his brain could process it. The high-pitched whine of the jerry bombs – incoming. Listen and dive. Wait and return. “Damn! Incoming!” he yelled, as he scrambled for cover. The loader was gone, so Vinny turned and scrambled across the pasture, diving behind a low hedgerow. How were they expected to get any work done this way?

Crosshairs

*September 12, 1942
Camp Dix*

Dear Mom,

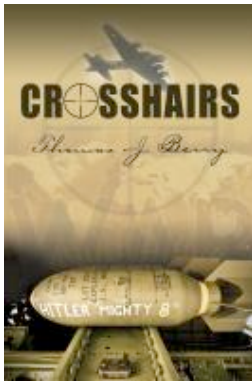
I am now at Camp Dix (excuse this pencil, I can't locate the ink). Everything is ok and the food here is swell. They give you enough to feed two people and ice cream for dessert.

I don't know how long I will be here. Sometimes it is only for a few days. It all depends on where they send me and what they want me to do.

I will write more later when I have been definitely stationed and I will send my address. Give my regards to everybody and tell them I will write when I get settled.

*Love,
Your Son,*

Vin



Three young men take up their country's challenge during the Second World War. Two join the Air Force, flying bombing missions over Europe against Hitler's vaunted Luftwaffe. As one is taken prisoner behind enemy lines, the other is sent on a top-secret mission. He is joined by John F. Kennedy's older brother, Joe Jr., a navy pilot groomed for the White House. A Silver Star recipient fights numerous battles on the craggy Italian peaks.

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