

A Jewish-American officer tries to escape from Nazi Germany in 1943.

THE BOMBARDIER

by Anthony Genualdi

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SECOND EDITION

ANTHONY GENUALDI

The Bombardier

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ISBN: 978-1-64438-550-0

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

This is a work of fiction. It contains some actual places and events from World War II, but is strictly from the author's imagination.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2019

Second Edition

CHAPTER ONE

“Captain Rosen? Sir?”

Rosen murmured, “What? What the hell?”

The corporal shined his flashlight into Rosen’s eyes and repeated, “Captain Rosen? It’s 4 A.M., sir. I need to wake you and the Deputy Lead Bombardiers. Where are they?”

Rosen sat up in his bunk and pointed two bunks to his left. “Lieutenant Rafferty. He’s a Deputy Lead. Ask him where the other one is.”

“Yes, sir.”

Rosen blew out a breath and sat up to get dressed and put on his boots. This would be his first mission since being promoted to captain and being made Lead Bombardier of the 819th Bombardment Group (Heavy). Today was July 29, 1943. Rosen was with the 605th Bomb Squadron, flying out of the base RAF Ipsom, in Suffolk County, England. The 819th Group flew the B-24 Liberator. They used to share their base with a group of B-17’s, and there was a British outfit nearby that flew the Halifax bomber on night missions. When the British came back from their raids, it was usually time for the 819th to get up and get ready for their own raid.

“Huh,” Rosen could hear from two bunks over.

“Time to get up, Lieutenant.”

“All right, all right.” The twenty-one-year old Rafferty sounded like he’d been woken from a great dream that he didn’t want to end. Rosen got himself together and waited for Rafferty. Once Rafferty was dressed, he walked up to Rosen. “Good morning, sir.”

“Good morning, Rafferty.”

“Um, do we go eat first?”

“No. Come on. Let’s get to the S-2 Library and look at the maps. We get to eat in a couple of hours.”

“OK, sir.”

Rosen and Rafferty left their tent and headed for the S-2 Library. This was where the maps for Germany were kept and the bombardiers for the group would be preparing for the flight. They got to find out the target before anyone else in the group. As they walked, Rosen thought he should get to know the new guy. “So, where you from, Rafferty?”

“Chicago, sir. And you?”

“I live in Skokie.”

“Really, sir? Um, Cubs or White Sox?”

“Baseball is for crap,” Rosen shot back.

“Oh. Well, what sport do you like?”

Rosen hesitated for a moment, “Well, where I grew up, we called it football. In the U.S., it’s called soccer.”

“Where did you grow up, sir?”

“I grew up in Leipzig.”

“You...you grew up in Germany?”

“Yes, I did.”

Rafferty didn’t know how to react. “Wow. I didn’t know you were German, sir. Well, if you don’t mind me asking, don’t you feel bad about bombing your old country?”

Rosen looked Rafferty in the eye for a moment, then looked away and replied, “I’m Jewish. I don’t have Germany for a country anymore. Not since ‘37, when my parents and I got out.”

“Well,” Rafferty said, “I guess this means you’ve got a real purpose in doing this job. I mean, they’re killing your people.”

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“I know. I left a fiancée there, and I left my grandparents. Both sets of grandparents. If they’re not all dead by now, well, I guess they will be, and soon.”

Rafferty chewed on that for a moment, then said, “Well, I guess you were waiting for us to get into the war, weren’t you?”

“No, not really. I guess if I’d wanted it bad enough, I’d have gone into Canada.” As Rosen said this, a four-engine plane roared overhead. Pointing up, Rosen said, “I’d probably be with those Brits or Canucks right now.”

“Was that a Lancaster,” Rafferty asked.

“No, the Brits that fly from that base close to us use the Halifax. Just like our B-24s take a back seat to the-17, so the Halifax lost the limelight to the Lancaster.”

“Oh. So, what did you do when you got to America?”

“Well, my father has a cousin who owns a delivery truck service. So, I drove for him to try and pay my way through university. I want to teach arithmetic when the war is over.

“So, when Pearl Harbor happened, most guys tried to join up right away. I waited. Japan isn’t trying to kill off my people, but the Germans are. I thought I ‘d wait until Germany was at war with the U.S. before going to enlist. When that came, I went out the next day to join up. My father had been in the navy, the German Navy, in U-Boats. I thought I’d join the U.S. Navy and sail on destroyers. But the line at the recruiting office ran around the block. I hate to wait in line. The Air Corps office only had five men waiting, so I joined up there.”

“Did you want to be a bombardier, or something else?”

“What about you, Rafferty?”

“Well,” Rafferty thought for a moment, “I thought about being a pilot. You know, everyone wants that. But I was good at math, so they put me in navigator school. They changed their minds when I got there and shipped me off to bombardier training.”

“I thought about my arithmetic skill, and they said I could be a navigator,” Rosen said. “Then I told them about my history, and how I’d like to get back at the people hurting my people. So, I asked if they could make me a bombardier, and they gave it to me.” Rosen looked to his right and saw the S-2 Library. “Ah, here we are. After you, Rafferty.”

“Thank you, sir.”

CHAPTER TWO

After they had checked out their maps, fixed their mission folders with the copies of the recon photos, and plotted the course from the coast to their target, Rosen and Rafferty joined the rest of the crews in the Mess Hall to have their breakfast.

As they got their trays loaded, Rosen asked Rafferty, "You very nervous?"

"Yes, sir."

"This is your first time as a Deputy Lead, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"I know you will be all right, and I think I'm more nervous. This will be my first time as a Lead Bombardier."

Rafferty smiled, "At least we're both nervous for a good reason."

The two men sat down with their trays piled with scrambled eggs, toast that dripped with butter, and bacon as floppy as wet noodles. Rosen was about to start eating when he saw Rafferty bless himself to say grace. Rosen stopped while Rafferty prayed, and when Rafferty blessed himself again, Rosen said, "Good for you. I used to say a sort of *Grace* back in the old country, but when I came to America, I'd stopped."

"Why?"

"I guess I didn't feel so thankful to God after having to flee my birth country. But, when I think about it, I should thank Him."

"I have to admit," Rafferty said, "sometimes I wonder what I should give thanks for. I mean, I left home for the first time in my life, thinking of nothing else but

how I was going to win the war. I turned my back on my girl, my family, my job, everything, and sometimes I felt stupid.”

Rosen replied, “You would have gotten drafted anyway, think of that. You took yourself away from your home because you wanted to, not because your homeland had gone mad and made you leave. Remember that, just as I remember that I’m fighting to redeem my birthplace.”

Rafferty thought about it, and said, “I guess so, sir. Thanks.”

As they were eating, the two men chatted about happier subjects. Rosen started:

“So, did you get into town last weekend?”

“Yeah, I did. Nice town, friendly people. I don’t care for the damn warm beer, though.”

“I know,” Rosen laughed. “I don’t drink it. I stick with cognac or whisky.”

“I’ll try and remember that. Have you been with the group long, sir?”

“Yeah, I was with the group from the start.”

“I like Colonel Bilders, the CO. He’s good people, don’t you think?”

“Yes. He’s been the groups only CO. Today makes the twelfth mission I’ll have flown with him, and my first as Lead Bombardier.”

“Have you made any friends in town? I mean, of the female kind?”

Rosen smiled at this. “Well, there’s this blonde girl, Amy.”

“Is that the plump barmaid at the Red Horse Pub?”

“The very one.”

“‘Once in love with Amy,’ right sir?”

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“That’s a great song. But yes, she and I have talked and flirted. I even took her out in the country a couple of times. We found this barn—”

Rafferty covered his ears. “Stop, sir! My virgin ears!” They both laughed.

“Yes, she’s special to me,” Rosen said.

“So, you like a big girl, sir?”

“Yes. What do you like, Rafferty?”

“I like a tall girl, with long legs.”

“Long sticks, you mean.”

“Well, no sir, she can have some meat, just not too much.”

Rosen chewed on his toast, then replied, “I rue the day when a bony broad is looked at as sexy.”

Rafferty stopped a moment before taking on a more serious subject. “I’ve heard stories, sir, about when our guys get shot down and bail out in Germany.”

“What stories have you heard?”

“Well, sir, I’ve heard about some of our guys being, well, lynched by the Germans.”

“I have, too. I think it’s mostly the civilians who do this, and especially to the Brits. You know why?”

“No, sir.”

“The Brits bomb at night, and they attack a whole town just to keep people from having a place to sleep. So, if it were me, I ‘d feel like lynching them, too. Of course, our guys get caught in that, too. My only advice is to only get caught by the Army guys, or maybe the Luftwaffe flak gunners. They wouldn’t hurt you. In my case, it’s worse, since I’m a Jew. If the SS catches me,” Rosen made his hand into a pistol and put it to his head. He lowered his thumb as if it were the hammer and said, “Pow.”

“Yes, I guess you would, sir.”

“But, hey, don’t give it another thought, Rafferty. You’ll go crazy. Just think of when your tour is over. You can go back home and be an instructor.”

“And you, Captain, you’ll do that, too?”

“Yes. America is home to me, so when my tour is done, I will go back to be an instructor. Then, when the war is over, I can go back to college.”

Rafferty drank the last of his coffee, then looked at his watch. “It’s time for briefing.”

Rosen looked at his watch, then gulped down his coffee. “Let’s go.”

CHAPTER THREE

The group was gathered in the briefing building, waiting for Colonel Bilders to tell them what their target for the day was. Rosen knew already, and everyone tried to pry it out of him.

“Come on, Rosen, just tell us,” one of the pilots said, “It won’t hurt anything if we know now.”

“No, it’ll spoil the surprise if I tell you. Wouldn’t you rather hear it from the colonel?”

Another pilot jumped in, “Gee, Rosen, be a pal. Can you just give us a little hint?”

“OK, for you I will.” Rosen glanced around, then leaned up to the pilot’s ear. “It’s somewhere in Germany.”

“For God’s sake, Rosen, come on!”

Rosen laughed. On the one hand, it felt good to be popular for the first time. When he had started with the 819th, Rosen had been made fun of for the trace of an accent he carried with him. Some guys called him “Kraut,” because of his being born in Germany. But his crew would defend him because he dropped his bombs right on the money. That was how Colonel Bilders got to know about him and lobbied for his promotion, so he could become the group’s Lead Bombardier.

On the other hand, the pressure sometimes had been intense up there, over the target. He knew the risk was greater for him than the others, since he had fled from a regime that would just as soon kill him for his religion. In the eleven missions he’d flown before, he had overcome that pressure and succeeded.

Now, Rosen would have to lead the group, and

all of its bombers would drop on his mark. He felt the nerves more than ever going into this briefing. He was going to be in Colonel Bilders' plane. He had to get to know another crew, and Rafferty would have to get to know Rosen's old crew. Rosen had seen to that last weekend, when he bought a round of drinks for everyone in his then crew and for Rafferty, so they could become familiar with each other.

Also, there was the bombardiers' briefing that Rosen had to give before this little session was going to start. He'd had to tell the others about the target before everyone else and made sure everyone had their maps marked right.

Why does everyone have to chatter so loud, he thought. Can't they keep it down? Just once, he thought, I'd like to --

“ATTENTION!”

Everyone sprang to their feet at the word of the group executive officer. Rosen looked straight ahead as he heard Colonel Bilders footsteps, along with the exec and the Weather Officer. After a moment, Rosen could see Bilders out of the corner of his eye as he ascended the platform in front of the curtain, followed by his staff officers. He faced the men and said, “Be seated.”

The group sat down and looked intently upon their commander. Colonel Bilders was six feet tall, with sandy blond hair, blue eyes, and a square jaw. Every fiber of his being screamed that he was a West Point man. His cap was on perfectly straight, without the jaunty tip they loved to show in the movies. His shoes shined like glass. He was perfectly clean shaven, and not a hair on his head was out of place. His voice would boom when he spoke. Bilders held his right arm straight out from his side, and his exec put a pointer in that hand. He turned to his left

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and nodded for the curtain to be opened. "Gentlemen, the target for today is ... Hamburg."

A collective groan came up from the group. They had heard Hamburg was tough. With a quick glance, Bilders said, "Simmer down, men." He stood still for a moment to ensure that the men were listening. He pointed at the map and large photos with the pointer and continued, "To be specific, we will be hitting a factory just southeast of the city here, along the river. This factory, according to our intelligence reports, is engaged in the manufacture of a new type of torpedo. You know how badly we need to stop German submarines from hitting our shipping as we build up on this island. So, the Germans will be defending this factory with plenty of flak, barrage balloons, and fighters."

Bilders turned to the men and continued, "Further complicating the matter for us is the fact that the British have been conducting large scale night raids on Hamburg for the past five nights. Therefore, we can expect the enemy to be prepared to throw more at us than usual."

"Three cheers for the RAF," came a voice from the back, followed by a Bronx cheer. Everyone laughed. Even the colonel managed a smirk. Rosen had a good laugh. Maybe that's what the Halifax group nearby had been part of.

"All right, men, back to business." Bilders pointed to the large photos, which showed the target. "You'll note the battery of flak guns here along the river, and the two additional batteries just to the north of the factory. We will be coming in from the southeast, to try and avoid the heaviest concentration of enemy fire. Once we are over the target, you will release your bombs after our new group Lead Bombardier, Captain Rosen." Bilders motioned for Rosen to get up and face the group.

As Rosen stood, applause came from throughout the room, then someone said, “Hey Rosen, make sure we drop on the factory and not the river so we don’t kill the *gefilte* fish.” Laughter came from around the room.

“Up yours, baby,” Rosen shot back. The laughter got even louder, and as Rosen turned to sit, he saw the colonel was laughing, too.

“All right, men, simmer down,” Bilders said. “I’ll turn things over to Major Parker now. He has the rest of the story for you. Major?”

Parker took the pointer from the colonel as the two men switched places. “Thank you, sir. If you will look to the map--” Parker pointed at the map, which showed eastern England, the North Sea, the Low Countries, northern Germany, and Denmark, “-- you’ll see our route to and from the target. We will be taking off at 06:30 and should be assembled with the other two groups in this mission, the 43rd and 124th, by 07:00. We will head out over the North Sea, and anticipate reaching 12,000 feet, when you’ll be starting your oxygen use, by 07:15. We then climb to our bombing altitude of 20,000 feet. We anticipate being over the first checkpoint—” he pointed to a small island off the German coast— “called Helgoland Island, by 09:30. We turn southeast from there and follow the Elbe River to a point ten miles southeast of Hamburg, where we reach our Initial Point, a small wooded area. We turn from there to hit the target by 10:10, and after the bomb run, we will turn on a northwesterly course back to base, which we anticipate reaching by 14:10.

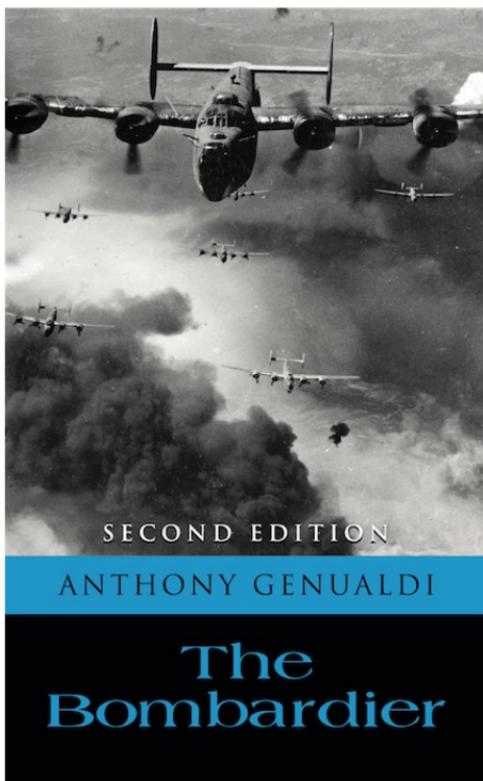
“Our bombing altitude will be 25,000 feet. We don’t want you to come home with your bombs once we’ve reached Germany. If you have trouble keeping up, jettison your load at the first target of opportunity. Our

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group will be in the slot, the 43rd will be the high group, and the 124th will be the low group. As for our squadrons, the 605th will be the slot, the 219th will be the high squadron, and the 84th will be the low squadron. I now give you to the weather guesser.”

Major Parker stood aside as the Weather Officer stepped up. “We have a high-pressure area over Holland that is keeping skies clear over northern Germany. If there are any clouds, they should be 1/10th to 2/10th over the North Sea, clearing by the time you reach the German coast.”

Colonel Bilders stepped back up and finished out the briefing, “OK, men, this will be an all-out effort. We can’t give the enemy any breaks. I know you’ve got it in you. Let’s go.” Major Parker called out, “ATTENTION,” and the men rose while the leaders left the building. With that, the crews filed to the back of the room to drop off their wallets and pictures, which they’d get when they came back for debriefing.



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