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The Shape of Fear: A Novel of World War II

By Charles McNair, M.D.

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A NOVEL OF WORLD WAR TWO



THE SHAPE OF FEAR

The Battle of the Huertgen Forest:
90 days that broke the Wehrmacht's back.



Charles McNair

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Chapter One: The Bouncing Betty

The sergeants came through the 100th Bomb Group enlisted men's tents awakening them in the damp darkness of the airfield at Thorpe Abbots, Norfolk, East Anglia, at 0300 hours. They were, as always, right on time. The airmen shrugged into their flight suits and trudged to the mess hall.

“Just another day in paradise,” said Technical Sergeant Luis Ramon, left waist gunner on the *Bouncing Betty*, as the cook slapped a watery mound of reconstituted scrambled eggs on his platter.

The cook looked up at him. “Three hots and a cot, that’s what Uncle Sam promised. Enjoy.’

The 100th Bomb Group, the “Bloody 100th” as it was known, a name earned in the flak- and fighter-filled skies over more than fifty German cities, railroad yards and oil refineries since its arrival from Nebraska a year before, was being roused to do battle one more time. Assigned to the 13th Bombardment Wing with four squadrons, the 100th sustained more losses than any other bomb group. Losses of a dozen planes, each with their ten-man crews, were not uncommon. The worse raid was on Munster, Fall, 1943, when only one plane, the *Bouncing Betty*, of the thirty-four

that left Thorpe Abbots in the predawn darkness, limped home with two smoking engines. The large black “D” in the white square painted on her tail was laced by a Messerschmitt 109’s 20mm cannon. Two nearly dead waist gunners lay on the vibrating deck, shivering with cold despite their heated flight suits and jackets. The *Bouncing Betty*, a B17F veteran of twenty-seven missions, more patch than plane, had made it back one more time.

Betty Grable’s swimsuit clad image was lovingly painted on both sides of the nose with jiggle lines outlining her rounded parts, denoting her bouncing qualities. A rite of passage for each new crew member of the plane had been established. Before his first flight on the *Betty* the new crew man had to take a running leap and slap his hand on the highest part of Betty he could reach. After the ship returned from that day’s mission, the drinks were on the new guy.

Thirty-five crews had ferried the 100th’s B17s to Thorpe Abbots airfield in February, 1943. By the end of the first Munster raid, August, 1943, only five of the original crews remained. It was not only the high loss rates the 100th sustained over targets that awarded them their name. During a return flight from Bremen, a shot-up B17 running on one engine was shadowed by a Focke-Wulf 190. The bomber had indicated it’s surrender by opening its bomb bay doors and descending. The German pilot was escorting the bomber to a safe landing and internment in occupied

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Belgian. The fight engineer was able to get another engine running making it possible for the plane to get to England. The waist gunner opened fire on the fighter shooting him down. This breach in the rules of engagement so enraged the German fighters that they made the planes of the 100th their special targets. The black "D" on their tails made them easily identifiable.

Now there were near daily long-range unescorted missions with planes and crews lost on each one and no end in sight. So, the major who led the pre-mission briefing was not surprised by the collective groan that arose from the pilots, co-pilots, bombardiers and navigators who faced him in the ready room for the pre-flight briefing.

"The target for today is Munster."

"Oh, come on. Are we the only fucking group bombing that fucking place?" Lt. Toland, the *Betty's* bombardier, who also manned the right cheek gun, sitting in the back asked in a not so quiet whisper. "What is it? Six or seven times now?"

"Is there a problem with the assignment?" asked the briefing officer, sardonically. "Now admittedly there were three missions scratched over the target due to clouds..."

"Clouds don't stop no radar guided ack-ack fire," another voice called out. "We still lost seven ships."

“It is a tough, but important target. Most of the remaining tank factories are around Munster, it is a major railhead...”

“Yeah, and we got most of them already. How many crews we gonna lose to bomb rubble?”

“That’s right,” chimed in Lt. James Flanagan, the pilot of the *Bouncing Betty*, “we and the Brits are bombing those sonsofbitches around the clock, all over the whole fucking country and they won’t quit. How’s rearranging their brick piles going to change their minds?”

The briefing officer realized that a certain amount of grouching about missions was a vital safety valve and tolerated it more than perhaps he should. He also knew he was losing control of the session and what was coming next was not going to make the mission any easier. His empty right sleeve bought him some credibility, but bomber crews had short memories, a necessary world view of “That was then, this is now and ‘now’ is fucked up”.

“You are correct. Most of the hard targets have been damaged, but not put out of commission totally. So, we are changing it up this time.” He pulled back the black curtain covering the photo-recon pictures of the cathedral in the center of the city. “We are going after the one remaining major resource left: the workers. Munster supplies the majority of the workforce to the industry surrounding the city. So far, the Eighth Air Force has avoided civilian targets.

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That is a nicety that the Germans have never observed. We are hoping to send the message that nothing is off-limits any longer.”

“Is that a church?” asked one of the pilots in the front row.

“Munster Cathedral. It is our aiming point for the raid, the front steps, actually. The raid is planned for noon Sunday, when the workers will be coming out, in a state of grace, one presumes. It is expected that with this change in strategy, the German High Command will begin to rethink continuing the war.”

“So, let me get this straight. We are purposely targeting civilians,” the Sweet Emily’s pilot said with increasingly incredulous anger. He had risen to his feet, his face red and veins bulging. “For the first time in the war, the 100th is bombing civilians unrelated to any legitimate war objective?”

“Take a look around, Lieutenant, next time you’re in London or Coventry or Bristol or Manchester. Do you think the Krauts took any great pains to avoid civilian casualties? And the objective, Lieutenant, is to end the fucking war as quickly as we can. There is no indication that the civilian population’s support of the German war effort is slacking off. The thinking is that if we make them pay a price, that may change.”

About half the assembled flight crews saw no problem with bombing civilians, agreeing that there were no innocent German civilians at this point in the war – just abettors.

“Major, if I may,” a voice from the back said.

“Attention!” the Major shouted.

The men in the room stood as one, staring ahead. Brigadier General Curtis LeMay, commanding general of the 3rd Air Division, strode forcefully to the front, turned to face the pilots, saluted and said, “Take your seats, gentlemen.” LeMay was known as a no nonsense, hard-ass commander who led by example and frequently flew on missions himself. He was the author of the strategy to bomb civilians specifically. He had chosen the 100th BG to lead on the mission because he felt the high casualty rates they had sustained in raid after raid would make them looking for some pay back. He looked over the aircrews as he lit his third cigar of the day.

“Smoke ‘em if you got ‘em.”

“This is an important mission,” he continued, his voice a gravelly snarl, “a change in tactics that the Germans cannot misunderstand. The Major is absolutely correct. The Krauts understand only power and the fact that we have tried to spare the civilian population is interpreted as weakness by them. And you,” he said, singling out the angry

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Lieutenant, “are also right. We have destroyed the majority of Germany’s industrial base. Now, we are ‘bombing rubble’, as you say. That makes the civilian workforce as the only significant resource they have left.

“I don’t have to tell you men that the Eighth Air Force has decimated their factories so much that they have pulled their anti-aircraft 88mm batteries back to surround the remaining targets, increasing the price we pay to ‘bomb the rubble’. It is simply the law of diminishing returns. So, we have to adjust. You all know they are not protecting their cities, cynically exploiting our humanity. That ends today.”

Comments like “‘Bout time... fucking right...a taste of their own medicine...How does that make us better than the Krauts...” drifted from the aircrews towards LeMay.

LeMay paused, gazing at the mixed reactions to his orders evident in the faces of his command.

“Machts nicht,” he thought, “I’m not in the convincing business. I’m in the commanding business.”

“I will be flying with you in the *Bouncing Betty*,” he said aloud, “That will be all. See you on the flight line.”

“Attention!”

With that, LeMay strode out of the stunned briefing room. The Major took over to finish the briefing, designating the assembly point, a radio beacon beamed

skyward called the “Buncher”, and the IP, the “initial point” where the bombers would make their turn on the final approach to the target. He noted that the fighter escort of P-47 Thunderbolts would be able to accompany the bombers only to the German border.

“At least we know where the Krauts will be,” said Lt. Flanagan, pilot of the *Bouncing Betty*. Flanagan was almost the Hollywood picture of what a pilot should be. He was tall, over six feet, grey-green eyes and the red hair of his Scots-Irish forebears, driven from their homeland by the potato famine in the 1840s to settle in North Carolina. He had joined the Army after one year in college at NC State and was selected for pilot training. He had the trust of his crew because they knew that if anyone could get them home again, it was Flanagan.

The enlisted men had their own briefings consisting of weather information over the target and the most likely times they could expect the fighters and then loaded into the jeeps to be taken out to their planes. Sergeant Joe Hanover loved this period of quiet during the ride. He loved England, the flat green of Thorpe Abbots, the mist stranding over the fields reminded him of his farm outside of Twin Forks, Indiana. He was stocky, almost square from the work in the fields haying and baling then tossing the hay into the waiting wagon. His black hair and dark blue eyes peering from his open, unlined face were arresting. He had a farmer’s tan: face, vee down the front of his throat to his

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upper chest, both forearms to calloused hands. Under his shirt, his trunk was white as the clouds floating in the endless blue sky over his family's farm. From the first time he saw a crop duster biplane, Joe wanted to fly.

This was his favorite time of day: early morning in the mist before dawn, the silence untrammelled by the great bombers' engines, riding with the rest of his crew in the jeeps out to the flight line. Then looming, out of the ground fog, the sudden, primeval presence of the B17s, pointing skyward, huge birds of prey waiting to start the hunt once more.

Each man had his own pre-flight ritual. Joe's was to formally salute Betty Grable's lovingly painted anatomy. She was painted in her famous swimsuit pose, looking demurely over her right shoulder, hands on her ample hips, positioned just forward of the cheek gunner's window. Twenty-seven yellow painted bombs trailed from her derriere. Fifteen red swastikas swarmed around the cheek guns.

During the night, the ground crew and armorers had prepped the *Betty* for her flight to Germany. Each of the eleven .50 caliber machine guns had 450 rounds. The wing tanks were topped off. There were ten tanks in each wing plus two more in the bomb bay giving a total capacity of 3,700 gallons. The roundtrip flight to Munster would need most of the fuel as it was.

In the predawn gloaming, LeMay's staff car pulled up to the *Betty's* forward hatch. He was thirty-eight years old but took pride in maintaining his fitness. He tossed his flight bag to waiting hands in the plane, jumped up and grabbed the lip of the hatch, and swung himself into the dark interior. The eighteen-year-olds of the crew were impressed. He would be flying in the co-pilot's seat. Lt. Herman Lewis, the usual co-pilot, would make the mission sitting aft of the cabin, ready to fill in wherever a need might arise. The men were at their positions doing their own pre-flight checks during which they let each other know how they felt about LeMay flying with them.

"It's not like it is bad enough flying lead with the Norden, we've got this uptight brass along for a joy ride," complained TSgt. Paul Phillips, radio operator and left cheek gunner.

"And if word got out about it, every fucking Me 109 and FW 190 in Germany is going to be gunning for us," replied TSgt. Luis Ramon, left waist gunner.

"Yeah, you're right. Shooting down LeMay would probably be worth some bratwurst and beer for any Kraut pilot, I would think," finished TSgt. Raymond Gilbert, the tail gunner.

Joe Hanover checked to be sure he had the ammo belt coiled in a plywood box attached to his gun and that it would play out smoothly when he started firing. He pulled

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back on the retractor slide to make sure of its easy play and fully opened the breech cover. He put the gun through its full range of motion and sighted down the barrel. He had faith in the armorer and ground crew but it never hurt to double check. The flight crew had finished their pre-flight check and waited on the tower to give them the “start engines” signal. General LeMay, seemed relaxed and satisfied with all the activity around him. He competently ran through the co-pilot’s pre-flight checks so that even Flanagan began to relax a little.

“Start engines,” came the command from the tower followed by a green flare. One by one, the engines came to life belching black turning to grey smoke. It was still dark and fifteen minutes before the *Betty* was to taxi into position at the head of her flight of thirty-six B17Fs. Hanover felt the plane roar into life, shaking and rumbling. Then the jerk forward as she moved down the approach lane and turned to face the two-thousand-yard concrete runway. Flanagan pressed down hard on the brakes as he gunned the four Wright Cyclone engines to full power as one final test of their readiness and to build the power for take-off. One final check with the tower for clearance and the *Bouncing Betty* surged down the runway, gathering speed lifting almost imperceptibly into the air. The entire flight of thirty-six planes was airborne within ten minutes.

The basic formation was composed of groups of three planes flying in a “V” shape. They climbed more than five

miles to get above the cloud cover and formed on their usual rally point, "Buncher 28". This was a radio beacon beamed skyward and was the first step in gathering together the 100th Bomb Group. The group then assembled as a wing of seventy-two bombers at "Buncher 23", and finally as a division over Southwold where the entire three hundred plane division would be joined with other divisions from all over England, forming a thousand plane flotilla as a maximal effort to bomb major sites in Germany. It took about an hour of flying time to get the flight organized, even with the experienced pilots of the 100th. This burned precious fuel and added to pilot fatigue but was the most workable system to get the bombers in the best formation for both bombing and defense against fighters. The 100th did not use a "Judas plane", a garishly painted retired B17 upon which the rest of the flight would group. "Judas" because it was leading the bombers to death and destruction which it would not have to face. This time, just the 100th BG was headed to Munster.

When fully formed, the 100th's thirty-six bombers were grouped into three twelve plane groups all flying in a box that was two hundred yards tall by five hundred wide by two hundred-seventy-yards deep. The *Betty* was the lead plane in the center group. She had the target acquisition radar and the Norden bomb site. All the other planes would drop their loads when she dropped hers. This system gave good massed bombing accuracy as well as maximum

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defensive fire power against fighters while presenting a dispersed target for the flak gunners on the ground.

This tight formation flying required faith in the competence of the experienced pilots flying in clear weather but maintaining it became essential in the shrouding clouds, under fighter attack or the when the flak found them. Formation flying was essential to all the planes' survival. A lone bomber had no chance against fighters and any breaking out of the formation meant almost certain mid-air collisions with the death of the crews. Once formed, the formation had no choice but to fly straight and steady, depending on their gunners for defense.

The bombers joined up with their fighter escorts of P-47 Thunderbolts as they crossed the English coastline and out over the Channel, then across the Netherlands and onto Munster. Flanagan came on the intercom.

"Look alive. We have our little friends with us," referring to the fighter escort. "We've got them until we hit Germany." Hanover looked out over his waist gun to see the Thunderbolts flying in formation. He noted that they had two bombs under their wings. By this time in the war, it was rare to encounter German fighters over France so the Thunderbolts had taken to carrying the bombs for ground targets they encountered on their return flights. If they did

have to fight off some German fighters, they would jettison the bombs and engage.

Growing up in rural Indiana, Joe spent a good deal of his time with a twelve-gauge double-barrel shotgun, hunting the ruffed grouse that were in the woods surrounding his farm. Acquiring, tracking and shooting a fast-moving target was second nature to him and made him an excellent waist gunner.

The end of the escort flight over Belgium was signaled by the peeling off of the Thunderbolts near the German border. They had used up half their fuel and were turning for home. Flanagan came on the intercom again.

“Ok, there they go. Look sharp. Permission to test your guns.” Short bursts of .50 caliber machine gun fire erupted from the eleven guns on each of the planes, four hundred thirty-two .50 caliber guns in all from the Bloody 100th B17s. Such massed firepower gave Joe Hanover and the rest of the crews some comfort. This would be soon stripped away.

“We have entered German airspace. Should not be long now. Call them out when you see them.”

Each of the gunners hunched over their machine guns, squinting into the empty skies, wishing for telescopic vision. Joe was aware of the top turret gunner, TSgt. Jason Abrams, who was also the engineer, turning his turret through its

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full 360 degrees. He knew that the other gunners at their stations were all moving their guns through their full range of motion. Luis Ramon was the left waist gunner, Lt. Stanley Toland, the bombardier, took his place as the nose gunner crouching ahead of TSgt. Paul Phillips, radio operator, at the left cheek, Lt. Samuel Topman, the navigator manned the right cheek gun and literally bringing up the rear, TSgt. Raymond Gilbert, the tail gunner. All the guns were successfully tested. All waited on their targets.

“All planes,” Flanagan called out, “we have reached the IP. Begin your turn now.” From here onto the target, the formation would be flying straight and level.

First to engage was a Messerschmitt, bf 109G, nicknamed “Gustav”, diving through the formation from out of the sun. He streaked through the middle flight of B17s scoring some hits on aft fuselage of the *Boston’s Pride* without doing much damage. He flashed by Hanover’s gun before he could even register that he was there. Hanover’s quick eyes noted the green heart painted on the side of the fighter. The German fighters now were swooping, diving and turning throughout the tight formations of the bombers. Answering fire streamed from the planes. Inside the *Betty* was a cacophony of noise: voices over the intercom, the deep rapid thuds from the .50s and the metallic rain of the shell casings from the guns. The air battle was now fully engaged. Smoke began to stream from the 17s’ engines, 109s disappeared in balls of flame. The

Here We Are began to lose altitude, flames visible from her two outboard engines. She was followed by the *Sheila's Rose, I'm Packin'* and the *Stormin' Norman*. Bombers were dropping out of each of the formations but there were no deviations from the flight plan. Pitifully small white dots of parachutes blossomed from some of them sustaining hope, floating down towards the green earth amidst the plummeting planes trailing fire in which burned the crews of friends and enemies alike.

"Joe, Joe, have you got him? Coming round your side."

The question was answered by a cascade of spent .50 caliber shells as Joe Hanover ran a rope of tracers though the retreating "Gustav". He was rewarded by a plume of smoke then the fire ball that had been the German Messerschmitt bf 109G.

"No 'chute from this one," he thought as he scanned the skies over the barrel his .50 caliber through window of the right waist. It was his fourth confirmed kill.

Joe then picked up the black and white spiral painted nose of an oncoming bf 109, closing fast. The German was firing all he had: the twin 15.1 mm machine guns in the engine cowling and the single 20 mm cannon through the propellor hub. Downing this one would all be on Joe. The 109 was on line with the bomber so the upper- and lower-gun turrets could not engage. The German's rounds went screaming through the quarter-inch aluminum of the

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Betty's fuselage and out the other side. Panicked voices filled his headset.

"Do you see him, Joe" ..." Sweet Jesus, kill that sonofabitch" ..." Fire him up, Joe, fer Chrissake..."

Joe made sure of his aim, knowing he and the *Betty*, had one chance at this bastard.

"Joe...Joe...why aren't you firing?" The voices stopped when he depressed the Y-shaped trigger with both his thumbs, sending a streak of tracers into the 109's engine and cockpit. The fighter exploded 500 yards from the ship, its fragments carrying on to strike the *Betty's* sides without damage. They were not out of the woods. .50 caliber shell casings rained down from the top turret.

Voices called out fighters as they flashed by on all sides of the heavy bombers. Joe watched as smoke began to pour out of the *Sweet Emily's* inboard port engine followed by flames then the wing exploding. No chutes were seen. The 109s were joined by Focke-Wulf 190 Ds, the lethal "Doras", armed with two 13 mm machine guns in the engine cowling and two 20 mm cannons in the wing roots climbing from below the B17 formations, hidden beneath the bombers' contrails. The Doras were the beasts of the fighter squadrons. The huge engine drove the plane at a speed and rate of climb that outstripped all but the newest Spitfires Mk IXs and the P-51 Mustangs. It had a tighter turn radius than either of them as well. The FW 190's engine also

protected the pilot from frontal attacks and in crash landings.

Frank Paglia of Little Italy, New York City, was the belly turret gunner and he would have to bring down the Dora on his own. Already, the German had his 20mm rounds screeching through the *Betty's* midsection and out the top, barely missing the top turret gunner. Frank was an ideal belly turret gunner, standing 5'4" and 120 pounds. His small stature allowed him more freedom of movement in the tight turret and more agility in shooting down the attackers.

"Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed..." Frank prayed as he tracked the German fighter. He was a long way from assisting at Mass on Sundays in St. Patrick's Old Cathedral, back home. Unlike the waist gunners, Paglia had an electronic sighting mechanism. His twin handles with the triggers for his two .50 calibers, moved a lighted box which he could expand or contract to fit the enemy fighters' wingtips. When he had them "lit up", the Sperry aiming computer took over and automatically gauged speed and direction thereby calculating the proper lead distance.

"...art thou among women..." When Frank pressed his triggers, the guns fired. All the gunners were trained in two second bursts to save the gun barrels and ammunition. The approaching Dora was unusual in that Paglia had a few

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more seconds than usual to track the plane, making a kill all but guaranteed.

“...and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus...” He liked the belly turret better than the top because the sunlight dimmed the light box gunsight, called the reticle, and he had a harder time aligning it with the fighters which generally slashed through his field of vision in a matter of seconds. That and the fact he was too short for the top turret. The top gunner stood on a platform with his head and shoulders in the turret so height was important.

“Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.”

The twined tracers laced into the Dora’s engine and wings, exploding his fuel tanks. There was little left of the plane for Paglia to follow down.

“Amen.”

The *Betty* was in the lead box of the thirty-six-plane flight. Paglia had an unobstructed view of the rest of the formation and took comfort in the massed firepower a formation of ‘17s could produce. When *Sweet Emily* spiraled down, her spot was taken by tightening up the formation to minimize the loss of her eleven .50 caliber machine guns to the formation. Paglia could also follow the burning hulks of all the bombers lost so far. They were still a full hour from Munster.

“Fighters at twelve o’clock!”, shouted Flanagan. He had spotted a line of Doras coming straight for them.

The Germans knew that by coming straight at the bombers, the amount of firepower was limited to the nose gun and the two cheek guns. The top and bottom turrets could not converge on the 109s. It was up to Toland in the right cheek, Phillips on the left and Topman in the nose to bring down the attacking Doras. The Germans would try to hit the formation between the IP and before the flak over the target when the bombers were flying straight and steady. There was usually one pass at a closing speed of over six hundred miles per hour. The bombers’ single .50 in the nose and each .50 from the cheeks opened up. The *Betty* was responsible for the middle two Doras, her wingmen for the outer two. A total of nine machine guns sought out the German fighters.

The Doras did not try to evade or maneuver. A perfectly straight line of machine gun and twenty-millimeter cannon fire unleashed across their front streaked towards the bombers. There was no time to think, no time to breathe, simply react to the approaching row of death. Tracers laced into the Americans in less than a second taking out the bombers on either side of the *Betty* using their twenty-millimeter nose guns with perfectly aimed hits to the cockpits. The *Betty’s* nose .50 took out the Dora to her front. The rest of the flight sped past on either side as well as above and below. Puglia was ready for his Dora which

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did not continue turning as he was trying to line up a shot on another B17. Puglia's guns turned the fighter into a fireball. After twenty minutes of swirling air combat, the FW 190 Doras and the bf 109 Gustavs broke off their attack. That meant the anti-aircraft gunners surrounding Munster would now take over.

Hanover knew when they entered the flak box because the plane began to buck, shudder and reel from the bursts which were getting ever closer. The news at the base in Thorpe Abbots was the anti-aircraft fire was so much more accurate because the gunners had radar attached to their 88mm guns making the targeting that much better – good news for the Germans, not so much for the Americans.

“Flak! Flak! Flak! Nine o'clock high and three o'clock low.”

Joe Hanover hated flak. He fumed at every irregular black cloud that appeared like malignant popcorn in the airspace ahead, above and below them. They had passed the IP, the initial point, made their turn and now flew straight and level on their bomb runs. They had survived the Gustavs and Doras. Now, there was nothing Joe could do except wait to be blown out of the sky.

“The fuckers have got us bracketed already,” yelled Lt. Stanley Toland, the bombardier. He moved from his seat manning the .50 caliber in the nose to his Norden bombsight. The *Betty* was the lead plane in the diminished

formation. All the other B17s would drop when she did. There were two other planes in the lead formation with Norden bombsights in case the *Betty* was shot down. Toland adjusted his Norden's gyroscope by touching the knobs with a light touch so as not to accidentally throw off the sighting. The twin square towers with peaked green copper rooves of the Munster Cathedral came into view and crept across the bombsight until they were directly under the crosshairs. Toland flipped up the red guard covering the switch that would arm the bombs. He had control of the plane on this final approach, keeping it level and steady until the target was under the crosshair. At that moment, Hanover hated Toland with all his body and soul. He knew Toland kept them flying straight and level far longer than he needed to out of spiteful bravado. He switched off his throat mic and began to scream into his mask.

“Just drop the fucking bombs, you son of a bitch! It's all fucking Germany down there – just drop 'em. Even you are bound to hit something, you sorry cross-eyed bastard. That way, you might not get us killed, you chunk of officer puke.”

Toland pressed the bomb release and felt the *Betty* lighten immediately as the eight five-hundred-pound bombs fell away. Behind him, the rest of the group's bomb loads followed his down on the workers leaving their Sunday service twenty-five thousand feet below.

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“Bombs away,” Toland shouted into the intercom as he released control of the plane back to Flanagan. Immediately, the wild gyrations began to try to avoid the flak. They made a tight turn to the left and climbed in an attempt to lose the flak. Three more planes fell out of the sky from Hanover’s squadron alone. Paglia in the ventral ball turret watched four more bombers begin to smoke, then slow, lose altitude and begin their final dive from twenty-five thousand feet. A few ‘chutes appeared but not nearly enough. With the bomb load gone, the *Betty* was livelier and while the flight-maintained formation, each plane had more room for maneuver. The flight, fewer in number by six, soon cleared the flak box and headed at top speed to the border and their waiting “little friends”, the Thunderbolts.

“Alright, look alive. We’re clear of the flak so that means we’ll be picking up the fighters soon. You may test your guns, again.” Flanagan knew he had one of the most experienced crews in the Bloody 100th and they knew what to do without him telling them. He did it mainly to calm himself and the rest of the crew. They all knew getting out of Germany was as dangerous as getting in. Like clockwork, the first Dora now refueled and rearmed slashed by the cockpit from out of the sun.

“Jesus Christ! That was close. Abrams,” he called the top turret gunner, “anymore up there?”

He was answered by a torrent of shell casings raining down. All the guns were manned and firing. The FW 190s and bf 109s swarmed the bombers, their nose and wing guns aflame as they tried to down as many Americans as they could. They had a closing window of time before the bombers' escort P-47s would re-appear to drive them off.

Now the intercom was alive with urgent voices, strident voices, shouting voices but none betraying fear or panic. They were all too busy for that.

"Comin' round your side"... "Pick him up, pick him up"... "two Me's on the starboard"... "Dora diving out of the sun"... "there goes 'Black Sheep'"... "any 'chutes?"... "shit,shit,shit get that bastard"... "I see him"... "sonuvabitch, that was close"... "they got *Party Girl*"... "our port outboard engine is smoking"... "extinguisher, shut it down"... "Dora dead ahead"... "Left cheek gun is out"... "Herman get down there and see if Phillips is ok, get that gun back in action"... "Jesus, *Dolly's Car* just blew up"... "got that motherfucker"... "n'other one diving on the port side"... "I got him"... "Christ almighty, come on, guys, we're not the only fucking bomber up here..."

The 109s were from the Jaggeschwader III/54 Staffel or fighter squadron. Their planes had a green heart painted on either side of the engine, marking them as the "Green Hearts of Thuringen" squadron. Unlike their American

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counterparts, there were no American stars or British roundels marking German victories, just simple vertical lines on the rudders. But there was no doubt of their formidable lethality.

Hauptman Jans von Rindel, a veteran of the fight since North Africa, becoming an ace on the Eastern Front, achieving one hundred-fifty of his two hundred kills against the Russian Air Force during the opening stages of Operation Barbarossa, downing Lavochin, La-5 and MiG-3 fighters over Kursk and Leningrad. But when the Ilyushin Il-2, the Shturmovik, fighter joined the fight in ever increasing numbers, the Luftwaffe's bf 109Gs were finding themselves overmatched. Only the most talented or ruthless German fighter pilots could hold their own. Von Rindel was both. The easy hunting days against the older Yak-1s and slow Yermolayev-2 bombers were gone.

In 1944, Hauptman von Rindel and his staffel were transferred to the Western Front for the "Defense of the Reich". Here they faced the American p-47 Thunderbolts, the P-51 Mustangs as well as the Supermarine Spitfire Mark IXs of the RAF flown by well-trained pilots and in seemingly limitless numbers. They protected the fleets of B17s and British Avro Lancasters which sustained the day and night bombing of Germany.

Captain Hauptman was a classically trained pianist from Heidelberg. His father, a Prussian of the old school, was an

ace from the Great War, with twenty-five victories in his Albatross D.2 biplane. When his son, Jans entered the Heidelberg Academy to pursue music, his father disowned him. Von Rindel was of average height, tall enough to see over the engine of his Messerschmitt. His long tapering fingers grasped the joystick lightly and during times when there was no combat, he tapped out Beethoven symphonies in his head. The 7th, the “Pastoral”, was his favorite.

Von Rindel’s staffel was a combined group of FW 190 “Doras” and bf 109 “Gustavs”. The loss of fighters and their airfields meant the Luftwaffe could not sustain individual fighter groups. Hitler prioritized bomber production over fighters so the staffels shrank as a result. The staffel flew out of Elsenborn near Monschau and Aachen. His wingman was a young Lieutenant named Hans Griebel. The nimble Gustavs protected the Doras which pressed the main attack against the bomber formations. The Germans knew they had only a small window of opportunity between leaving the “flak box” over Munster and reaching the border with France where the P-47 Thunderbolts would re-join the fight to escort the remaining bombers home.

The German pilots were used to flying in loose formations that broke apart when they attacked the bomber formations, each plane becoming a lone hunter. Von Rindel’s bf 109 swept under the belly of the *Bombs Away* sustaining some hits from the belly turret and drove

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up through the formation taking advantage of the stacking of the bombers so that three B17s were in his sights before he broke through the top of the formation. All too soon for the German fighters, the Thunderbolts were back. He peeled away in a tight barrel roll hoping to shake off any P-47 that was waiting for him. Von Rindel looked around as he came out of his roll. Off to his left were two P-47s, known as “Jugs” because of their squat, squared off profiles. They seemed not to have seen him yet. The top turret gunners on three B17s had not lost sight of him, however, and were concentrating their fire.

Lieutenant Flanagan of the *Bouncing Betty* keyed his mic to the inter-ship frequency. “Eagle Flight 365, this is lead ship, *Bouncing Betty*, I’ve got at least three Doras and four Gustavs on us. Can you give us a hand?”

“Roger, *Betty*, on the way.”

One of the P-47s stayed above as the “cap” while four others from “the neighborhood” swept down on the beleaguered formation. On the first pass, one Dora went down in flames. Von Rindel shoved his stick hard to port and down, diving for the deck. Three P-47s followed. Although, the Messerschmitt could out dive the Americans, they had the advantage of already being in their dives and gaining speed. Von Rindel cranked his stick hard to starboard and pulled back, hoping the Americans would fly by him. One of them did, two did not. Von Rindel stayed in

his tight roll taking advantage of the shorter turning radius to get behind the Thunderbolts. The two Americans flashed into his gun sight and he let loose with his twin 7.93mm MG17s mounted in the engine cowling. The tracers streamed into one of the Americans which began to trail thick smoke from his engine and almost immediately began his final dive. His wingman climbed hard and to the right but Von Rindel had no trouble staying with him. Short bursts flew passed the P-47 as he engaged in more frantic evasive maneuvers. They dove for the deck together, twisting and turning, the American slowly pulling away. Von Rindel concentrated, trying to anticipate the American's next turn.

“Come right, this time,” he said to himself, “and I’ve got you.” The American did pull right, von Rindel slowly squeezed his trigger but his aim was pulled off by the arrival of the other P-47 on his tail. Von Rindel put four to five rounds into the notoriously tough P-47 before a stream of .50 caliber rounds struck his tail and right wing. The Messerschmitt shook, the cockpit began to fill with smoke and von Rindel knew it was time to go. He did not know how much time he had before he exploded or the bf 109 became uncontrollable. He put the nose down and dove for the deck. The P-47 Thunderbolt stayed with him, still firing. Von Rindel pulled his nose up with difficulty and blew the explosive bolts of his canopy. Smoke billowed out around him as he struggled with his harness. Finally, he was free,

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stood up and jumped out of his cockpit. The P-47 pilot took one more fly-by when Von Rindel's parachute opened, pulling him away from his plummeting plane. The thought that the American might finish him off ran through his mind but the American instead pulled a hard right and climbed back into the fight. Soon the only job for the Thunderbolts would be to escort the remaining B17s back to England.

Von Rindel was uninjured. The sharp upward jerk of his open 'chute was the best feeling in the world. He was unsure how high he was when he bailed out but the frigid air rushing by him and his gasping for breath let him know he was still above eight thousand feet. Far below, he saw black columns of smoke from the crashed fighters and bombers. Now that the P-47s had arrived, von Rindel knew the rest of his squadron would be heading back to their airfields. His job now was to make it to the ground safely and avoid capture by the Free French forces who had no love for Germans generally and flyers in particular. He was more worried about freezing to death during his fall to the ground. His relatively thin flight suit had depended on electric heat from his plane that was now smoking rubble on the ground. He gathered himself into as tight a ball as he could to conserve heat and concentrated on his strategy for evasion once he was on the ground.

As he descended, he began to pick out features on the ground. He maneuvered towards the woods. Landing in trees was very risky but at least offered concealment from

the Maquis, the Free French resistance fighters. Trees could beat you up but they did not shoot you on sight. In pre-flight briefings, the Luftwaffe major put particular emphasis on need for caution once on the ground. It was likely that if shot down, the pilots would still land on German occupied territory. But the Maquis fighters were increasingly everywhere, emboldened by the Nazi retreat after Normandy. The trick for von Rindel was to find the German Army before the Maquis found him. He also knew that many sets of eyes were watching what and who fell out of the sky during the air battle.

He landed about twenty feet up in the tree and cut himself free of the parachute harness. Climbing down from the last branch, he heard muffled voices which appeared to be coming towards him. His ears were still blocked due to the pressure change. Von Rindel retreated further into the woods, gripping his 9mm Luger pistol. He finally cleared his ears only to hear, a German voice say, "Hande hoch: Hands up" with an encouraging poke in his back from a rifle muzzle. He dropped the pistol and stood slowly up.

"Oh, excuse me, Herr Hauptman. I did not recognize you. Are you hurt?"

Von Rindel relaxed and smiled at the flustered infantry private. "Don't worry, Private. Can you bring me to your officers?"

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They gathered in the parachute and within half an hour, von Rindel was having schnapps and wurst with the infantry company commander. Transport back to his base was soon arranged and he was flying again within a week.

Joe Hanover felt he could relax when the last of the fighters had peeled off. He put his .50 caliber on safe and turned to talk with the left waist gunner, Luis Ramon. Joe had felt the *Betty* take several hits but as there did not seem to be any decrease in her speed, he dismissed them as not serious. As he turned around, his foot slipped on the pile of spent shells, lying in a pool of blood. Luis' head had been taken off by flak sometime over the bombing run. Everyone on the *Betty* was so intent on fighting off the Germans that no one noticed the left waist gun was inactive. Now there was nothing to do but lay Ramon out and cover him. The job of retrieving his head from rolling around the deck was up to Hanover. He tucked it under Ramon's arm and pulled his flight jacket up over his shoulders.

"Everybody call in," said Flanagan over the intercom. One by one the positions reported. Joe came last.

"Hanover, right waist, I'm ok. Luis has bought it."

LeMay chimed in, "Make a proper report, airman. Give his position and nature of his wound." Everyone on the plane was affronted by the rudeness, General or no. It was clear, LeMay had not been a crew member for a very long time. Hanover remained silent.

“Well, report his condition,” LeMay persisted with growing anger.

“Left waist. Flak blew his fucking head off,” Hanover said angrily, whispering, “You prick.”

After a pause during which Hanover assumed LeMay was working on his courts marshal charges, LeMay keyed his mic and said, “That’s ‘flak blew his fucking head off, Sir.’”

Things began to fall apart, literally, for the *Betty*. She had taken more hits than, in the heat of battle, the crew had appreciated. The port outboard engine was dead, smoke and flame came from the left inboard, which the extinguisher in the wing put out, the tail was nearly shot away and they were losing airspeed and altitude. Flanagan felt it likely they would have to ditch in the Channel, with LeMay on board. Flanagan cared more about his crew than the General but realized losing the commander of the 3rd Air Division would not be a career building move.

“Everyone, we’ve got to lighten the ship. Throw out whatever you can. Phillips, get on the horn and let Air-Sea Rescue know our position. We’re about eighty miles from home. We’ve been through worse than this.” The *Betty* shed her machine guns, extra ammunition, any flight gear and finally the Norden bombsight. They would dump their fuel when they got closer. That only slowed their rate of fall. No one knew if they had bought themselves enough air to make it home over the cliffs of Dover.

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The shuddering of the ship worsened, smoke began to stream from the port inboard engine, low oil alarms were going off in the cockpit. Flanagan glanced over at LeMay and was heartened to see that “Old Iron Bottom” seemed shaken. They were now over the Channel with a max speed of one hundred fifty knots but that was dropping. Toland shouted, “There are the cliffs.” Their base at Thorpe Abbots was another ten miles inland. Hope began to rise that they might just make it. Flanagan was fighting the *Betty’s* strong pull to the right due to her damaged tail and stabilizer. Their speed and altitude continued dropping raising the real possibility of crashing into the Dover cliffs. They were already too low to safely bail out. It was on Flanagan to get them home. Toland in the nose could see flocks of sheep grazing and small farmsteads that they would plow into if they could not maintain some speed.

They cleared the cliffs by one

hundred feet, scattering the sheep. Up ahead Toland spotted the field. “Thorpe Abbots ahead,” he shouted. Flanagan was pulling back on his wheel and turning it to the left with all his might.

“Wheels down?” asked LeMay, his hand on the levers.

“No, the drag will drive us right into the ground.” To the crew he said as calmly as he could, “Prepare for wheels up landing. Brace yourselves.”

Throughout the *Betty*, the crew jammed their feet against the bulkheads and wrapped their arms around anything they could. Hanover hung onto his gun mount and braced against the ribbing of the fuselage. They were now at one hundred feet, making barely one hundred knots. The calculation was between maintaining enough forward movement and speed versus hitting the ground so hard that the *Betty* would flip over. Flanagan cut the two remaining engines, dumped the remaining fuel through the fuel vents under each wing and nudged the stick forward, keeping her as level as possible.

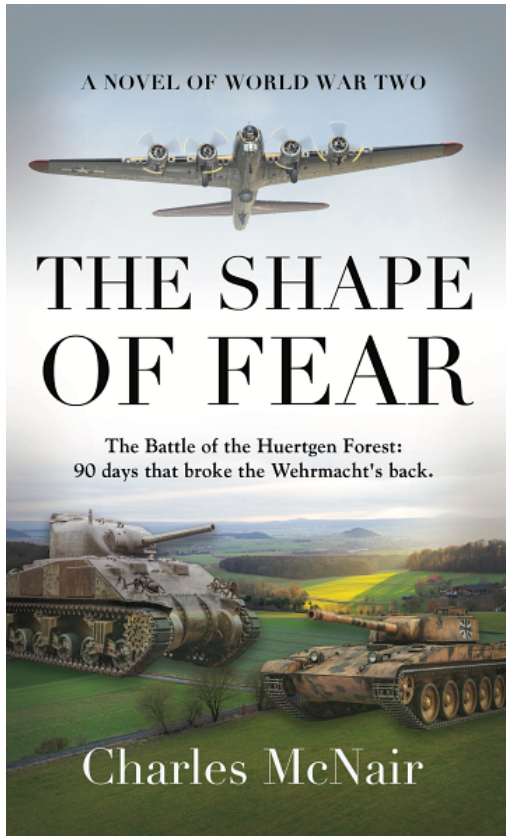
“Brace for impact,” he shouted. They were a quarter mile short of the runway, too far for the crash crews to be of any help. The belly turret hit first and was sheared away. The nose dipped and the propellers dug into the soft earth. She bounced twice and skewed to the left before coming to rest.

“Everybody out”, he shouted but no one needed any prompting. The crew gathered one hundred yards from the smoking *Betty*. The fuel dump had prevented her from exploding. The fire trucks came careening over the rough pasture land but were not needed. The ambulance collected Luis Ramon. The crew accepted a ride back to the field while arrangements were made to bring the *Betty* in for possible repair or scavenging her usable parts.

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Two days later, Flanagan was surveying the damage with LeMay who had understandably taken an interest in the *Bouncing Betty*. She did have an impressive number of holes in her but the repair crew chief assured Flanagan that they could get her flying again.

LeMay made a big show of pointing out all the holes he thought should be patched. The grizzled sergeant leading the repair efforts said, “No disrespect, General, but we ain’t gonna patch those. We’re gonna up armor the parts not shot up. After all, she made it back here, didn’t she?”



This novel completes my trilogy, which follows the Davis, Aiken, and Hanover families through three wars.

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