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# The Making of a War Memoir

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# SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

**"The Making of a War Memoir"**

written by

**Mary Smethers**

and submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for completion of
the Carl Goodson Honors Program
meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

Dr. Chris Mortenson, thesis director

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April 16, 2012

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# The Making of a War Memoir

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Senior Thesis Paper

Carl Goodson Honors Program

Ouachita Baptist University

Spring 2012

Each of us is able to experience only small slices of history. We live only a shade of the painting. This does not give us a false perspective, but a unique, slim portion of the bigger picture. Though many of us live through epic periods of history that have been enumerated in many millions of pages, it is only a few dozen of those pages that we can actually point out as moments that we lived. Each memory comes with its own perspective. We can only experience that moment of history from the view of the life that we lived within it. Whether happy, sad, or indifferent, we can only describe it through the emotions that it stirred within us personally. To tell what effects it had within anyone else is to simply write someone else's history. That is what I set out to do in this research, to write the history of someone else. In the meantime, I lived a story of my own, one of a young woman who heard and was able to imagine the lives from a time that I cannot experience myself. I can never live the stories I have been told, I can merely listen and let their impact make an impression on the story of my life that is constantly being formed.

Made grander or given a sadder twist, stories by soldiers are told through the search for a specific perspective. When written in literature, the work of soldiers as authors reveals a hunt for meaning in their experiences. They are not simply chronicling a history, but they are dialoging with it. It is impossible to separate someone's voice from the stories they tell.

In his book, *The Things They Carried,* Tim O'Brien gives brief and chronologically jumbled glimpses into his experiences surrounding and fighting in the Vietnam War. In his book, he often and unapologetically mixes reality with fiction. His readers are left not with a precise picture of his memories of the war, but with the emotion of his memory of it. Near the end of his book, O'Brien says this about memory: "The thing about a story is that you dream it as you tell it, hoping that others might then dream along with you, and in this way memory and

imagination and language combine to make spirits in the head. There is the illusion of aliveness."[1] In these two sentences found near the end of his own memoir, O'Brien seems to capture an important aspect of memory and war.

Those who tell gruesome or awe-inspiring war stories from their own firsthand experience are not merely relaying a story; they are reliving those moments and inviting the audience to participate in their memories. I may tell you a story of an occurrence in any of the wars that have been fought in history, but to me, it remains simply a story. While it may well have deep emotional impact in the meaning behind it, while I tell it, it remains simply a story. Though I may participate in the memory in that I have created mental pictures and imagined details of the events, I am not reliving the sequences in my head as I describe them. I, as a secondhand story teller, am merely describing them. This is something that is often forgotten in the world of war stories. In our quest for grandeur and an emotional impact from an artful yet raw story of wartimes, we forget that those who are still alive to tell us the firsthand insider accounts are reliving them with every telling. What they are telling is not just a story of the war, but *their* story of the war.

One distinction that should be made is that this paper does not seek to examine how histories have been and are to be written. Instead, it is to focus on the ways in which soldiers and others involved in war tell their own stories. While the art of history writing seeks to tell as factual and objective a description of concrete events as possible, those who tell of their experiences on battlefields are instead merely relating what happened to them. Historians go to great lengths to distance their writings from the telling of myth or folklore. A historian's goal is for his audience's understanding of a particular historical event to be as factually close to the

[1] Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (Mariner Books: New York, 2009), 218.

reality as possible, while those talking about their own lives want the audience to experience the events through their eyes. The distinction of who this paper focuses on must be made: It is not the war historians that this paper seeks to analyze, but the average man who tells his story to any of those who wish to listen. It is in his stories that we may not find the most concrete truth, but it is in his experience that we find the most meaning behind the events within a war. While the truth of an event is not to be made irrelevant, readers of war memoirs must also remember that there is a spirit of a man behind every story found within their pages.

In his book, *War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussel writes this statement: "The further personal written materials move from the form of the daily diary, the closer they approach to the figurative and the fictional."[2] It is in the separation of time that the difference between an author's perspective on an event in his life and the factual occurrence of that event is most evident. It should not be disputed that time allows contemplation. The contemplation of an event and its meaning within a life are often the basis for the writing or the recollection in the first place. Once again, it is the search for meaning within war that brings many soldiers to pen their experiences. One of the biggest differences between a diary kept while serving and the writing of a memoir after having left the battlefield is one of time. It is the thoughts and opinions formed between life on the field and the one after that bring the perspective of an author to his book. Raw authenticity of emotion can often be found in the pages of a war diary, while wizened perspective is more likely given by one who is later writing his memoir.

Fussell makes the argument that writers on war often find it necessary to employ fiction in their writings in order to truly capture the mood or emotion of war. While memory of an event can be compelling, often it is an injection of a fictional account that truly brings home

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[2] Paul, Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford University Press: London, 1975), 310.

either the gravity or a simple beauty within war that makes the work memorable. The employment of such a concept can be easily seen in O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* when he blends his memories of the Vietnam War with fictional occurrences within his platoon. Throughout the work, O'Brien is unapologetic about the question of the validity of all of his stories. He treads lightly between his desire to give an account of the war and his desire to show both his emotion and opinion toward the war itself. For example, in order to portray the true fear of the soldiers in the platoon, O'Brien gives an account of just what each is carrying on his person at all times. This invented element of the book actually serves to carry one of the main themes of the story: that though each soldier wore the same uniform and lived out similar existences on the battlefield, the way they dealt with and felt towards the war was vastly different and can be evidenced in the objects that they carried with them. O'Brien enters the psyche of one particular soldier in order to show his love for a girl back home and how he carried her photo through the many miles and hardships that he endured. This is clearly an exaggeration, if not an element of complete fiction, for this man did not relay these inner thoughts to the author. Instead, the experience of this soldier served a functional purpose within the war account to demonstrate another aspect of a soldier's experience.

Though possibly fiction, this should not invalidate the stories of O'Brien. There are emotions found within war that cannot be discovered or embodied in only the personal accounts of one individual. Each soldier may experience the feeling of longing for those back home, but not everyone has a personal story that could relay that experience.

Man's stories of war can be fit into two categories or definitions of the word experience: there are the experiences that we live through, the physical hardships or triumphs that can be described in a physical capacity, and there are the experiences that only occur in the mind, the

emotions that they experience within the war. While there are ample stories of the first kind, it is the latter that is often the most difficult to relate. That is why even in the fiction of some memoirs, there is often easily seen truth, as well.

In memory, elements of war become embodiments of other aspects of life. In a way, war becomes myth.[3] The seemingly endless march becomes a sort of modern slavery,[4] the trenches represent frustration and often the shortness and grimness of life[5] and the return home becomes a symbol for a life given back and second chances soon to be taken. While in the throes of a battle, a soldier's experience will likely focus most on survival, but it is when he is later recollecting and writing down his memories that his perspective switches from the importance of mere survival to the contemplation of life and death themselves. It is in memory that death becomes a spectre, more than a physical reality that one might cease to breathe. When one is removed from the immediate grasp of death, out of the reach or path of an enemy's bullet, that death becomes more of an impersonal idea. It is not that the ex-soldier is somehow belittling his experience or doing himself an injustice, but with the absence of the need to duck from the graze of a bullet comes the ability to philosophize about life and death itself.

Often death can seem more impersonal in memoirs as well. In Robin Olds' memoir *Fighter Pilot,* he talks of the men he saw die throughout his time in training. They are given one short paragraph, and the idea that accompanies their mention is that they had to simply learn to deal with the loss. His last sentence on the subject quips that though he was "sorry to lose a

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[3] Ibid., 311-312.

[4] O'Brien, 2-7. In the book, the term "humping" is used to refer to the act of carrying the things that the soldiers had at all time. There was not a choice for many of the items, and the humping is referenced in an endless drudgery with no choice type of action.

[5] Siegfried Sassoon, *Picture-Show* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1920).

good friend…glad that it wasn't me who had bought the farm." This is not an example of a cruel response to death, but merely a callused one. Olds did not go unaffected by death, but he had to come to accept it as a part of life and war.[6]

War memoir exists as a unique literary form that cannot be duplicated. While anyone can write a novel or story, there are a limited number of veterans in the world. It is within these potential authors that the personal story of war exists. Exaggerated or not, it is only these few who have the unique opportunity to write war stories from memory, and not merely from imagination.

The second part of this paper is admittedly a second hand account of a soldier's experiences in World War 2. It is based on hours of interview spent with my grandfather, a man who lived through adventures of many kinds, and is truly a war hero. As a bomber pilot stationed in India throughout the war, he lived through many of the kind of harrowing experiences that are often found in the accounts of the China-Burma-India theatre. He has given me his stories, and from them I have attempted to craft a memoir based on his experiences. Unlike the accounts that I have analyzed here, it is not an autobiography.[7]

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[6] Robin Olds, *Fighter Pilot: The Memoirs of Legendary Ace Robin Olds* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010), 21.

[7] This is unlike a standard autobiography in the sense that my grandfather did not write it himself, but as I took the stories from his interviews, it became more of a ghost writer experience. Though this introduction looked into the sometimes fictionalized work of Tim O'Brien, the memoir that I wrote remains very close to the transcript of the interviews it was based on, and the details found within it are not fiction.

William Edward Wood

Enlisted 1942, United States Air Force

Bomber Pilot, B25, Burma

We remember the moments when we thought we might die, but not often do we contemplate our own death. Even when faced with heading to a war, it is the everyday things that occupied the time of my mind. Memories of near death experiences are often the highlight of a person's life. They are told around dinner tables, reunions and even in eulogies. But those are often the closest we humans get to really contemplating the end of a life. And if we really think back to those moments when we thought we were most near the expiration of our lives, either from stupidity or from the very real fire of an enemy's gun, it is in those moments where our life feels the most real. It is in the moments when our hold on life feels the most tenuous, that we feel the need to grasp it that much harder. Those are the moments that I remember, but not the ones I often tell. But that habit ends today.

It is the mixture of the usual and the near death that I intend to tell in this memoir, because that is how I lived in the war. Stories of drinking, catching snakes, and meeting movie stars were followed the next day by stories of bullets hitting the wings of my plane. Any attempt to tell my story of the war must include it all: the times that I laughed and momentarily forgot that I was in a war, as well as the times that I shuttered at the fear of my own death and knew that if I survived, that moment would follow me forever.

When I went to enlist for the war, I didn't know which branch I wanted to join. I spoke to the Air Force recruiter and he asked me, "Why don't you join the Air Force?" I replied, "What is that?" He answered right back, "It's where you learn to be a pilot, to fly a plane." This

might seem like a mundane conversation, but in reality it was the one that was to shape my life. For though I told him that I didn't particularly want any part of airplanes or even flying, he convinced me with these words, "I tell you what, if you get through and get those silver wings, you'll have to fight the girls off with a stick." To a young man who had come here with expectations of simply serving his country and hadn't totally thought through the implications of what exactly that meant yet, the only possible response to such a recruitment pitch was to ask, "How do I join?" and "Where do I sign?"

I joined the Air Force in July, but wasn't called up for testing until February. I had received a letter that told me to report to Lubbock, Texas to be tested. There were twenty-six guys that started in with me that day, but only three who passed all of the examinations. We took tests all day, of every kind imaginable. The standards were so rigid and high for whom they would take that by the end of the day, twenty-three sturdy young men had been washed out of the system to go do things in the war other than fly airplanes. A good friend of mine went with me that day because we had in mind to join and fly together. He didn't get through the morning session, however. The Air Force washed him out, and he later joined the Navy and became an aero gunner. He spent the war shooting machine guns backwards from our planes in dogfights. He ended up seeing a lot of action in his part of the fight, and I was never jealous of him.

The three of us who were to become pilots were loaded up in the next few days on a train that was to take us somewhere unknown. When we got on that train, we didn't know if it was going east or west across the country, but we all guessed that the train engine was pointing westbound. Later we found out that we were headed to Santa Anna, California. We spent about two days on the train getting there, and, when we stepped out, they started issuing us clothes and

shoes. The very next day, we found ourselves taking even more tests to gauge our ability to be in the Air Force and to determine what our job would be while serving there.

There were two hundred and fifty guys taking the tests that day, and you can't imagine all of the sorts of exams we had to complete. All day long we took tests for color blindness, reaction times, and all of that kind of stuff. Every day we performed calisthenics for half of the day, the other half we took more tests and attended ground school instruction. We did this for three months until one day they announced that our assignments had been posted on the bulletin board. We had to go to a meeting, and each man was given a manila envelope that would tell him in what way he would be fighting in the war, and what stories he would tell all of the future women that would ask him about his military service. I wanted to be a pilot; I suspect that most people did. When I opened the folder marked "Wood, W.," I was excited and yet also felt a slight trepidation to discover that I had passed and achieved the ability to become an Air Force pilot.

In basic training, strict physical appearance regimens were not meant to be varied. They would line up the guys from the tallest all the way down to the shortest. There was a guy named Woody right beside me in all of the formations because we stood near to the same height. Woody was a Texan from a line of pistol champions. Woody saw himself as the best pistol shot in the state of Texas, and I believed him. I was glad the skill of the gun-toting, hunter-turned-soldier Texan was on our side of the fight when it came to that. Every day for formation, we were to have our shoes shined to near perfection in case of an inspection, and usually I did so with no problems. There was one day that saw both my GI shoes and I failing miserably in this area, however. As my GIs were lacking their splendor, I put on my civilian shoes to wear into formation. I said to Woody, "You better watch out, I'm gonna get you in trouble." He said,

"Nah, I'll be alright," and put on his civilian shoes too. Sure enough, we had inspections that day and we were both kicked first for the scuff of the GIs we had left back in the bunk and second for wearing civilian shoes in a place that was very un-civilian like. Sometimes it takes a kick for wearing civilian shoes to remind you that you no longer are a civilian yourself. We were on a military base being prepared to go to war. Whether you were the greatest pistol shot in Texas or not, we had to be reminded that our cowboy boots were being left behind in favor of shoes that best fit the forested damp terrain of Burma instead of the flat dry farmland in the place we called home.

In basic, there was an important run that we all dreaded. It was one of the toughest things about basic. There were around two hundred and fifty guys that started the run, and less than fifty who finished it. I was one of those fifty. And if it wasn't for the head in the GI shoes, I wouldn't have either. While we ran forward in tennis shoes, he ran backwards in those big clunky GI shoes. He ran backwards just to see that we stayed in formation. As I ran, I would think to myself, "Well, I'm not gonna do this. I'm gonna quit." But I would look out there and that guy would be running backwards in his GI shoes. His encouragement to us was this, "If I can do it in these shoes, you can hang in there." There were less than fifty who hung in. An ambulance carried the rest of them to the hospital as they dropped out of formation. He ran us for miles, far enough that I never knew the real distance.

I came to find that war just makes some people go crazy. One day in drill, they will be marching right next to you, same as you, and the next they crow like a rooster. That is what happened to Mack Wood. He was from Dallas and I didn't know him. He was a little guy; if I had to bet, he didn't weigh over 140 lbs. In the middle of physical fitness drills, he got to crowing like a rooster. He lost himself in that rooster. He started running and they had to get

two ambulances to chase him down and take him to the hospital. I don't know how many miles he ran, and the guy would run for a while, fall down, and pass out. By the end of it, they simply let him run and crow it out and then they took him to the hospital to sort it out. The next day we ran in drill with one less man, who had seemed just like us. It seems that even the preparation for war makes some people go crazy.

There was an instructor who crashed his plane. It wasn't just that he crashed it, but that it wasn't fully an accident. The guys telling the story say that he just went crazy. People started noticing that he was doing steeper and steeper turns. He got so low and close to the ground that his wheels nearly ran along the side of the building. His flying just kept getting more uncontrollably erratic and dangerous; he started flying upside down while executing turns. He was up for thirty to forty-five minutes. They couldn't get him to come down for so long that they brought out his mother and girlfriend to talk to him on the phone to get him to land. They tried everything, but eventually he just crashed. No one ever figured out what went wrong or set him off. It seemed to me that every once in a while something will just get to a perfectly normal soldier, and he just won't be able to shake it. That is when you have guys that start crowing or flying their planes on the sides of buildings. The war never got me that mentally lost, but there were plenty of stories floating around bases of a guy losing it on what people thought was a normal day.

The next step, ground and flight school in Columbia, South Carolina saw us training nearly around the clock. I would fly in the mornings and then get in more hours of flight time at night. It was not unusual to come in to base at midnight and then be drilling until two in the morning. Then the very next day, you would have to be up by seven in the morning to return to

ground school. If you had a day when you flew in the morning, then you could always expect to fly that night as well.

Before I came to South Carolina, I had some loud-colored shorts made out of some crazy material. I figured that I would just need some color in my clothes to distract my eyes from the drabness of our GIs. We could open the sides of our flight suits, so we usually wore shorts underneath them to stay decent. I wore my crazy colored shorts a lot, and many of the guys liked them and wanted to get pairs like mine. Well, one day I had left engine trouble, and I happened to have had on a particularly loud pair of the shorts underneath my GI pants. From then on out, both my commander and my engineer said, "I won't fly with you ever again if you wear them crazy shorts." So that was the end of my crazy colored shorts days. Honestly, they were so popular before that, if it hadn't of been for that left engine, I might be rich off of soldiers tired of drab colored GIs. But, maybe they were right, and luck wasn't with those crazy colors.

It's funny that those are the kinds of superstitions that stick with you when you realize you could've died. We didn't swear off airplanes, though they were the direct source of the terror, but instead we pegged the shorts as an indirect cause of the whole incident. I'm sure if a shrink dug far enough, he would conclude that there is something in that, but I just think that it was small superstitions like that that got us through the war. No one wanted to blame the plane for malfunctioning because we all knew in our gut that we couldn't control that. It was bigger than we were. But I could get rid of those unlucky shorts. I had control over their fate, and it was with that idea that they were soon trashed. Yet again, I never had another engine problem, so maybe there was something to those being unlucky shorts.

I had a friend in basic that we all called Chief. His real name was William the 3rd. Right beside the mess hall was a patch of watermelons. We would steal the red watermelons and slip them in our flight suits. We knew that the place where we would fly in the afternoons to practice was over a field of haystacks. We would fly to that field and practice bombing with our stolen watermelons. There are not too many things better than watching a watermelon hit a haystack from one thousand feet up. I was twenty-one, old enough to know how to act better. But I was also twenty-one, young enough to crave the immaturity of stealing watermelons with my friends and throwing them out of my plane.

In flight practice, Chief and I would make sure we were at four thousand feet and three hundred feet apart, and then start doing loops. We could talk to each other back and forth on the radios while we flew. One of us would dive down and do a loop, and then the next would. The whole thing actually was practice; we would later do such maneuvers in combat. The guys who were in dogfights would do loops and incredible steep turns around enemy planes all the time. They were always trying to roll over the planes to stay behind them as much as possible.

There were two guys in South Carolina who were related to a general on base. The general must have had a great deal of pull with the heads because they did not have to have flight instruction with anyone but him. They were instructed together because there was no one else with that general. When they got overseas, there were assigned to another squadron, the 434th. I heard later that they went on target one day and took a direct hit, and that was the end of both of them. I don't know why I mention that story, it just always struck me as having some sort of poetic irony that they trained and died together. There was no good to be found in it, in war and death there never is, but still the strange lives on in a story, and eventually someone who barely even knew them records it forever in his memoir.

I met George Montgomery, a famous movie star at the time, when I was later stationed in Savannah, Georgia for a few weeks respite from Columbia, South Carolina. The barracks we had been assigned were a little over a mile away from where we had to meet every morning for roll call. It was important to be at roll call because that was when they called out whose crew was going to ship out next, and you had to be ready when they called you to go overseas. One morning we were walking to the mess hall to eat breakfast then head to our roll call spots when we saw a black jeep passing us by. We were lugging large bags a full mile to the mess hall, so when I saw a corporal I called to him to stop his jeep and give us a short ride. He replied that he couldn't because he was running short on time, but asked us if we would help in a video they were shooting. It was supposed to be a film on the life of a combat crew. It turns out that the guy that I had hollered to and had stopped was George Montgomery. After meeting one, we were one the verge of becoming actors ourselves. All we had to do was come in one door and walk the length of the barracks to the front door. George Montgomery was supposed to come wheeling up to us with his big black Jeep loaded with bags. We practiced it twice, but by the third time, we had had enough of our slice of Hollywood; when we got to through the front door we just kept on walking to the mess hall, leaving behind our chance at stardom for breakfast instead.

The heat in Savannah made a freshly laundered shirt look like you had slept in it in a matter of thirty minutes outside. While I was waiting to be called for active duty, I went down to see the laundry man a lot. Officers weren't then allowed to buy beer, so I would give the guy who worked there money and he would go across the street and buy a family size beer. His job was to wash and iron clothes all day. He also gave two sheets and a pillow to every new man that came to the base. He had to have each man's wash and ironing done quickly because you

never knew if you would be leaving out the next day or not. I went down there to talk to him a lot, and often there was another guy there that was training to fly B-26s. He was always ragging on my B-25s, saying that his planes were faster and could carry a heavier load. We spent many a day drinking beer and debating the merits of our specific planes, just waiting for our names to be called. We were friendly, and the more beer we drank the more we argued. We had no place to go really; we just sat there and waited for things to happen.

One day when the B-26 guy came in bragging, the laundry man surprised us both by flinging a knife into the wall near the B-26's head. That knife went far into the wall. I cannot describe to you the look on that guys face after the knife stuck in the wall near him. Afterwards, I asked the laundry man what he did before he got in the service, and he answered that he used to be an exhibitionist in carnivals. He had an act where he threw two knives at a wall. Well, that incident effectively ended the bragging streak of the B-26.

My next station found me in Ontario, California to enroll in further flight school in order to be shipped out as a bomber in the South Pacific theatre. It was here that we learned that if a pilot had a craving for the death defying and for rule breaking, he was soon to stumble upon buzzing. Buzzing was taking a plane from the base that we had been practicing on and flying it at extremely low altitudes at night. I did this exactly one time and it took only that one time for me to decide that I would never do it again. Honestly, you have to have a touch of crazy in you to take a plane and do it the first time, and a sizable helping of crazy to continue the practice. I happened to be friends with one of those who had been gifted with an extra helping of the stuff it took to become a gifted and notorious buzzer. We called him DD, and he flew a B-25 underneath the Golden Gate Bridge. By the time he landed back on the base, the heads had already identified the plane and pilot. They kept DD back for that stunt, and he didn't go on with

us to South Carolina. We heard later they court marshaled him and fined him two thousand dollars. We only made around three hundred dollars a month, so it took him a while to pay it off. His father was an instructor at 29 Palms, so he knew a lot about planes and their limitations. What he didn't seem to have a full grasp on was the limits of pilots in the United States military.

The first and only time that I went buzzing, DD said to me, "Bill, let's fly up there and buzz that field. I initially said, "Aww, DD, I don't know if that is a great idea" and I meant to stand by that first reservation, but it was a full moon that night and my resistance was looking for a way to break down. Shortly after my show of verbal hesitation, I relented and said, "Well alright, I'll fly with ya." So that night, we took two planes and flew over that field, all the way to Phoenix, and then back to our base in Ontario, California. As we were buzzing up there at a low level, I looked out and saw a flagpole. It was right under my left wing. I think I could've hung that flag from the window of my cockpit if I wanted to. That's how low we were and how dangerous I discovered buzzing was. It was then that I realized the extent of the damage that could be done by buzzing. Later I heard about two flight students who were killed while flying cross country at night. But it was that moment when I realized how close I was to that flagpole and how easily I could have flown right into it that ended my buzzing days, and I took off back across country and to the regularity of the base and the flying orders that I would get there.

In a normal spin, the pilot and crew are in the middle of the spin while the plane is on the outside. Kick the rudder in and point your stick hard to a side and a full and dizzying spin is inevitable. Those are typical, normal spins. It becomes more complicated and nausea-inducing when pilots try to pull off inverted spins. When in an inverted spin, the airplane will be on the inside of the spin while the pilot is on the outside. I did only one in primary, and when I got out I had decided that I was done with inverted spins. While in my spin, I just held the steering stick

straight because the spin scared me so bad. It felt like my neck was stuck completely out of not only my body, but the plane as well. The plane was trying to throw me out like a bucking bronco. Inverted spins are the kind of things that guys talk a lot about, so the next thing you know, you are up there trying it. Inverted spins are not, however, something that you ever try more than once.

Chief was the one that got me started drinking vodka. All of the cadets used to stop at Ford's Bar in Ontario. It was about three or four miles out of town. Once we'd get to the base, the next stop was Ford's. There you could find about half the squadron every Sunday afternoon getting "crocked." Our squadron commander was a guy from Texas and he would say, "Now please guys, straighten up or you'll get us all in trouble." We would all just laugh and finish the Sunday afternoon. I never found out if the heads really did care what a soldier did on a Sunday afternoon. What I always figured was that they had a Ford's Bar somewhere in Ontario of their own. And what they did there was probably a lot like what we did at ours: talk, laugh, and drink like the young men that we were. It is not so much that we did it to forget about the war that faced us, but to live a life within it. I did not think about escaping this life of mine that was faced with the possibility of death, I signed up for this. But my choice did not stop me from being a young man. I was in my early twenties when I signed up, and even now that I know how to fly a plane and shoot a gun, I am still a man in his early twenties. When you are young, it is not in you to always contemplate the seriousness of your endeavors. I was involved in a very real war, but that never stopped any of us from taking the drink or laughing at the joke that would bring us back to the equal reality that was our youth. We were soldiers, and we were young men. Both of those realities accompanied us throughout the next few years of the war.

There is a certain way to drink vodka, and in Ford's Bar we learned that way was tough. They'd take a whole lemon and roll it and wait till it got real soft. Then they would take the handle on the spoon and starting at the end; quickly separate the lemon from the peeling. The peeling would go in with the lemon in the drink. They would just cut the end off and put the lemon in. We would keep going round for round. They made it a certain way and we drank it that certain way. I don't know what it was about that place and that drink, but maybe that is why I like lemon in my drinks now.

Another Sunday event at the base was the 2:00 afternoon parade. If you need an idea of the number of guys involved in this, there were two hundred and fifty men to a squadron and over one hundred squadrons at the base. This weekly parade was a big deal, because the generals would come out and grade every squadron. They would check to see if the lines were straight and that everyone was in step with the others. This was impressively hard to do with so many men. We had heard that they were going to ship out our commander to get our squadron in shape. Maybe they felt sorry for us, or maybe they really needed us to ship out. Our squadron did not have the best history of parade appearances. Some of our guys coming off the base would hustle just to make it in line by 2:00, not to mention being shined and pressed. If you missed roll call or if your appearance was too out of order, you could get demerits. I don't really know a lot about that, because I never got any myself. After the incident with the unshined shoes and wearing civilian shoes to formation in basic, I did not often take my chances with being out of line in either appearance or in action on the base.

My brother, Jack, came up once from Texas to visit. He was used to sleeping late in the Navy, so when the guys would leave from our bunk, we would just let him come and sleep for a while in one of their bunks. After watching a parade one Sunday afternoon, he said, "We don't

have anything like that in the Navy." And I simply thought, "but of course, we are in the Air Force." There were an almost unimaginable number of men marching by with a great, big parade and all of us squadrons marching in line on the base. When I think back to those parades, I think that the only thing better than being a part of them is to be able to watch them, to watch the rows of young men walk in precision in the afternoon sun. To me, those parades showed us that there could actually be some grandeur to training men to fight. Any spectator could see that.

At my base there were AT's, training bombardiers, and B25's all landing and taking off from the same field. I was glad that I was a pilot, and not one of the men assigned to track all of that nonstop plane traffic. Collisions were near inevitable. Once, in the span of thirty days we lost nine airplanes and twenty-one pilots all together. Sometimes there was just too much happening and wires got crossed, or pilots missed their marks. Every mistake counted on a base as busy as ours.

One crew was flying the traffic pattern and they landed one thousand feet too low. Their plane hit the ground and went skidding across other landing strips and eventually even across the highway. I'm not sure how far they skidded to cover all of that ground, but by the time that the ambulances and rescue crews got there, all that was left was the pilot's compartment and the nose. The plane's tail was intact but strewn farther back and off to the side of the skidded path. All we heard that day were reports of a plane crash on base, but that they couldn't find anyone from the wreck itself. For a future pilot, that kind of news report definitely sends some fear through you and puts things into perspective for all members of a flight crew for a while. Miraculously, by the time they got it all sorted out, the pilot, copilot, and navigator were extracted safely from the cockpit. They walked into the hospital with only scratches and bruises to show for the ordeal that they had been through. If you can imagine, they were probably going

at least 100 mph, skidded across three sections of highway, and then walked away with only minor injuries. By the end, except for the substantial financial damage and the loss of a perfectly good airplane, these three pilots could walk away with just a story about the time they used a multi-million dollar airplane to sled across the base.

The walls of our bunks were made of old tarp paper, like the ones used on houses. There were not many secrets to be found within the bunks of soldiers. The night before we graduated, a bunch of guys from another squadron got drunk somewhere down the line in the rows of tarp paper bunks. About two or three who were well beyond what I would describe as roaring drunk began to walk around the bunks. This would have been quite fine, except that in their stupor they did not simply walk the hallways that separated our flimsy dwellings, but marched themselves straight through the walls themselves. And as they made their way through the tarp walls of the bunkhouses, they simply kicked their way through, leaving both gaping holes and astonished, sleep-ridden men in their wake.

As there was no possible way to cover the drunk-men-sized holes in the bunkhouses the next day, which was also meant to be our graduation day, the punishment was obviously severe. The heads took all of us who were to graduate that day and began to drill us at 8:00am. We drilled straight through until noon, ate lunch, and then promptly started drilling all over again. The heads would say, "Now we know who done it, but we just want someone to admit it." No one would say anything about their fellow soldiers, even if they had gone into town and got so looped that they destroyed the walls of the tarp house you had slept in the night before. You just did not do that. We were in that together, punishment and all. It is not that we necessarily had an us versus them mentality when it came to the commanders, but there were just certain codes and ways that you acted that somehow aligned you with those of your rank. The commanders

understood this; they were once in our shoes. I wondered if, while they asked for us to rat our fellows, they were remembering an incident of their own when they stood for hours on behalf of a stranger's stupidity. I would not go so far as to say that this is how the military works, but it is how we men operated.

They gave us one break at 2 p.m. for a cigarette that day. That is the only break we had all day, and it was only for a cigarette. But nobody said a word the whole day about who did the drinking or the wall smashing. Nobody ever said a word, and we drilled all day- the day before we were to graduate and move on to the next step of our approach to the war. The next day, we graduated and got our commissions, even those guys who kicked big holes through the walls of those tarp bunks. Lots of guys thought it was funny. I did too at the time, and I never did know who did it. It wasn't in my building. But I stood through drills all day like the rest, and that fact wouldn't have changed if I had known the names of the tarp-tearers, anyway. It's just how we men operated, and we had to stick together, no matter if we were strangers or daily companions.

We weren't allowed to fly over a town unless you had at least one thousand feet of altitude. Once when I was briefly stationed at Deming Air Field in New Mexico, I took a B-25 out on a practice flight. I flew over and buzzed my parents' house and went back over the railroad tracks. Though my father was working on a well in Mexico, I knew that my mom would be home and I hoped that she would be either amused or impressed by the flying antics of her pilot son. A train was coming when I flew over, so I thought that it would be fun to get down really low and sort of fly head on towards it- kind of take the train on with my airplane. After I had my fun, I flew back to Deming and the base. When I got back, I called my mother and she said, "I'm going to give you a good whipping!" I didn't understand her anger until she told me that right after I had buzzed the house, she had heard a report that a B-25 had crashed near the

base and she thought that it was me. It was then that I realized the effect that my enlistment had on my family. Not only had I made a contract with my country to fight its wars, but, when I signed my name on that line, I involved them as well. While I did the fighting, they did the constant worrying and the searching for news of what was happening in my part of the war. I had only slightly considered before that my every new stationing brought me closer to deployment and the chance of being shot down in real battles. I now realized that with my journey towards the battlefield, my family had to face the idea of my death as well. I almost began to see a divide, even a dichotomy of sorts, between who caused the anguish of others in this world wide fight. While it was a foreign enemy that could directly lead to my downfall, it was my choice to enlist that could bring sorrow to those I left behind.

My second flight instructor was a guy who made and sold caskets and coffins in his time off. About once a week, he would tell me that he could go ahead and make me a casket. He would say to me, "Well, you'll need one, one of these days." During instructions, we would fly over his house, cut the engine, and he would holler down to his wife that he would be home in forty-five minutes. Then he would give the plane gas again and we would finish up the lesson and head back to the base in Deming so that he wouldn't be late for dinner.

In all, I did a lot of traveling for the war. After finishing flight school in Savannah, we took a train down to Miami. We stayed there about two or three days until we shipped out. They allowed each of us only fifty pounds for clothes and things, not counting the six pounds of weight that were our GI shoes. We flew to Bermuda, ate, and refueled. We had a civilian flying the C-54 taking us there and I thought he was going to kill us before we ever got to the war. I was watching and he couldn't get us quite lined up with the runway. Next we took off and went on to Casa Blanca for about ten days. The whole time we just saw thousands of pilots and

crewmen of all kinds going everywhere imaginable to fight. Tons of them were headed to Europe. We left there and headed to Cairo, Egypt, and then Iran. When we landed in Iran, you couldn't touch the airplane it was so hot. The water that came out of the drinking fountains was almost too warm to drink. We only landed in Iran to refuel before heading on to Karachi for about two or three weeks. Two little Chinese boys used to come by once a week to shine our shoes there. If you didn't let them shine your shoes that day, they would throw cow manure on them so that you would have to get them shined. Then we flew all night and landed in Burma the next day. We slept on the floors of the planes all that way while headed to Burma.

When I stepped out in Burma, the war became very real. The crazy thing was that it wasn't a feeling that made it more real than it had been only a few minutes before, it was the actuality of where I was. As a twenty-three year old man, here I was standing across the globe in a smelly country that I didn't recognize, and somewhere out in this mountainous jungle were people that I had been trained to shoot at and were aiming to shoot right back at me. It was no longer just a feeling that this war was real; I had grasped that long ago, but now it was a total reality. I was standing in it.

Every bomber plane carried twelve bombs, and each bomb weighed 265 lbs. We carried two main kinds of bombs: fragmentation and RDX. Fragmentation bombs were wired with cast iron shrapnel pieces. When the bomb would go off, it flew into a thousand pieces with that shrapnel ricocheting everywhere on the ground. It reminded me of what would happen if you took a large glass bowl or cup and dropped it on the ground to watch it shatter. That type of bomb was meant to be dropped on soldiers, and when a large cluster of them were on target, there was no telling how many were killed, crippled or maimed. RDX bombs were the most powerful of the bombs we carried. They had six sides, and would be in a case of twenty four, all

clustered together with steel cable holding them together. It looked and dropped like one bomb, but it was actually twenty-four bombs strapped together. It was made of magnesium and napalm, so that when they went off on the ground it was near impossible to extinguish their flame. It was like a jelly, but it burns and you can't put it out. Not even water would douse them. It'd burn a hole right through a concrete wall. We would drop them at low level, and you could just watch it spread out like a wildfire. We would try to drop them on motor pools or supply piles. Thinking back, it is hard to imagine the sheer number of bombs carried by all of the planes on one single mission. With twelve bombers fully loaded with fragmentation and RDX bombs, devastation on the ground was easily achieved in a single mission.

On almost every mission we would also drop pamphlets to the ground. I don't know exactly what they said because they were in either Burmese or Hindi, but they were some sort of propaganda. We wanted the natives on our side if possible, and dropping pamphlets into their villages must have seemed to the heads to be the best way to do that.

Every mission saw us stuck in our seats for hours at a time. The longest mission I ever went on had me strapped in the seat for 6 hours and 10 minutes. That is a long time to sit in one seat without being able to move around. On really long missions, we would sing songs on the plane intercom system. We would never dare to break radio silence to communicate with the other planes, though. The Japanese were monitoring every possible air space to try to locate bombers, so, once a mission started; you talked strictly to the two guys who were in the plane with you.

We bombed a lot of railroad bridges so that the Japanese couldn't move their ammunition, food, and everything else. We bombed right through the middle of Burma. We

would go out to targets that we knew were filled with anti-aircraft guns. I flew two missions like that. Though these were guns meant especially for shooting down airplanes, it required the airplane bombers to disable them. It is the same thing on the ground. The only way to disable the person meant to shoot you is for you as a person to put yourself in moments of danger in order to eliminate them as a threat. We spared no bombs when it came to missions. It was someone's job in the war to make the bombs, and it was ours to blow things up with them.

The British had an oil refinery, but we couldn't bomb that. Though the Japanese were using it to make gasoline, we couldn't bomb it because it would cost us too much money to rebuild when the war was over. I never considered the confidence that came with such a military strategy until now. There was something in us that told us that we were going to win, that eventually this war was to be ours. That really all of these bombings and missions would someday end and our side would be declared the victors. Sometimes at the base, it was easy to forget your place in the bigger picture of the fight, but I never really lost the confidence that one of those days there would be some meeting or a memo on a board that said the Japanese were tired of fighting us, and that it was time to head on home. That must have been what the British were thinking too. They knew that they were about to win this thing, so we should leave that oil refinery so they could use it later.

When I was flying, I simply bombed the things assigned in my mission and flew back to base. It wasn't that I was a trained brainless machine that simply followed orders, but I also understood that it wasn't my job to run this war. There were other men whose job it was to decide what was meant for destruction. Frankly, I loved flying and I was never jealous of the heads who had to sit and strategize over this target or that.

I remember the first time I saw my name on the board for a mission; the hair on my neck came up and I thought, "Boy, they'll be shooting at me tomorrow." I went over to Burma around late August or early September, but I didn't have a mission until October. A new pilot had to fly formation with three or four older pilots and they had to pass judgment on you before you got your chance to fly a mission. They were like instructors who analyzed once again how you flew formation, took off, and landed. This wasn't like basic or flight school, this was a real war, and they had to be sure for themselves of the guys they were being sent to fly next to them. All you would do was fly because they wanted to be sure that you were capable before they let you go. Everyone did it; once I was established as a pilot, I was sure to check out any new member of my flight crew. The expertise of everyone around you matters when one mistake can either cost you a bullet hole or a trek through the jungle after a crash.

The one thing that kept me awake at night more than anything else was the idea of having to bail out of my plane, either into water or over land. The mere idea of having to eject myself from the plane was one that I could never quite get out of my head. I guess it's natural though; they did train me to fly inside the plane, so it felt wrong to consider flying through the air not surrounded by that plane I had spent the last few years in. The thing about bailing out is not the falling through the air necessarily, but actually getting out of the plane to begin with. You have to either go through the top or the bottom of the plane, and just to move around inside one of those planes was not an easy feat for us guys who were north of six feet and built to match. And it is not like attempts to get out of your plane occur when you are in the best of situations; no, they always happen when you are not in control of the plane. There were two tails in the back of the plane and one in the front, and I was sure that any attempt I would make to leave the plane would immediately send me into any of the three. The idea of bailing out would not just keep

me awake at night, but often I would awaken thinking about the possibility of it for my flight the next day. I used to worry about that more than anything else. You'd wake up in the night worrying about it too. I never did have to bail out of my plane, and I never regret missing out on that particular war story.

One of my bombardier navigators had to bail out of a plane. He was flying out to Mexico and got back within about five miles of his base's field before bailing out. It took two days for them to get him and his crew out of the jungle. When he told me about it later, he said, "I got out of there. I just pulled my rip cord. My sunglasses come out and seemed to just float next to me so I just reached out and got them." Still, I just knew I never could have gotten out of one. I didn't want any part of that bailing out.

We had one guy that got shot down in Burma. He was gone about a week or ten days before he came walking back into base. After that he would walk around and you would hear him say, "You sorry sucker, you got my shirt on." He had to give this speech all over base until he got all of his stuff back. Other guys had taken his shirts and pants because they assumed that being shot down and gone for so long meant that he was dead.

The things they gave us before we flew out was always telling of the kind of mission we were about to go on. A lot of times when you had to fly on a long mission, they would issue you a Benzedrine or a sulfate pill. They were meant to make you alert, and they worked. After they gave you one, you couldn't sleep if you wanted to. Taking one at night means that you will be awake and alert until the next morning. They found out after the war that they were habit forming and extremely bad for a man to take. But they were necessary if a pilot and his crew

wanted to stay awake during a bombing. We had to take it thirty minutes before we got to the target so that we could stay awake and we were guaranteed to be alert.

On every mission, you were also issued a money belt, a wide canvas belt that could go under your clothes for easy concealment, which held two thousand silver Rupees and cocaine. They checked the belt out to you and when you came back in they were sure to check it back in. They would look at it to see that it had not been opened when you landed back at base. Use of pills to keep you awake was fine, but cocaine would not be tolerated. If we were shot down, had engine problems, or were faced with any of the various ways we could possibly find ourselves behind enemy lines in the jungle of India, we had dope to trade with the natives. There were thirteen dialects over there in Burma, and all of which sounded totally different to me. Offers of thin white packets of cocaine seemed to transcend all thirteen of those dialects, though. Also, if we were caught in the jungle, there was a big flag sewn on the back of our jackets that said we were Americans. It didn't do a lot of good, however, because while we had two thousand silver Rupees, the Japanese would be given a reward of three thousand silver Rupees for every American the natives turned in.

Though we had our doubts, we hoped that the dope and money would suffice if we found ourselves in a pinch with the natives. The stories we heard of people captured had us placing a lot of hope on that cocaine and money. When we went out on bombing missions, P47s would fly escort for us to keep the Japanese off of us as we approached the target. One of my escorts was shot down from fourteen thousand feet. When he was caught on the ground, they used ropes to tie him down and prevent him from escaping. They put ropes on the arms of each in the crew and pulled them apart from each other with ropes to insure that they could not fight back. After he was caught, he was kept in a little box that was made from bamboo and fashioned like a cage.

It wasn't tall enough for him to stand up or big enough for him to lie down. You just had to squat to do the best you could. Luckily, he escaped. One day they took him to the muddy river to take a bath and he dove underneath the water and swam far enough away to get away from them. Hearing that story cemented it for all of us, the Japanese were mean and we would rather fly fourteen hundred feet above them than chance being captured by them in the jungle.

One of the scariest things to ever happen to me while flying was the time that my bombs did not deploy properly and were left to hang in my plane until I landed. We were carrying one hundred pound practice bombs. The first bomb I was to drop got hung up in the chute and did not drop out of the plane. The arm of the bomb had two wires that ran through pins on the bomb and the little propeller that you see on the outside. Well, when you drop the bomb, the wire is supposed to stay in the airplane while the bomb falls through the sky to the ground. So once the wires release the bomb, the propellers start spinning and eventually the bomb will go off on impact. That is what was supposed to happen. But I came to find out that I do not always live my life in ideal situations, because that first bomb did not follow the protocol that it was supposed to. It just stuck to my plane hanging in there, while all of the other bombs in my load hit up against it. When I shut the door of the compartment holding the bombs again, I knew it would shut on the bomb. I knew I would have to carry that bomb and come in and land. These two things I knew for sure. What I did not yet know was whether the bomb was armed yet or not. If it had not malfunctioned in any way in its release, then it was most surely armed and my land would set off its explosion. What I desperately hoped was that it had malfunctioned just enough to have not fully gone through the process of the wires and becoming an active bomb ready to detonate on impact. It was the hope that mine and my crew's lives depended on. Either the tail

of my plane was actually an activated bomb or it wasn't, and I could only fly towards home and wait to find out when I landed.

After I landed, there was a definite moment when I realized that I had not blown up inside of my cockpit. This was to be one of the few times in my life when the cliché "I dodged a bullet" could be used. When we landed, I didn't look to see if the bomb was armed or not, I didn't want to know just how close to incineration I had come. I just got down out of that plane and walked off. To this day, I do not know if that bomb had fully activated or not. What I do know is that there was a definite possibility that day that I was flying with an armed bomb that I could not shake, and that I had no other choice but to pull out of formation yet continue flying and land the plane back at the base, armed or not. If I would have made a rough landing, it probably would have gone off, but I just don't know how close my possibility was to that reality.

There are a lot of situations that you just did not have time to dwell on their danger until after they are passed. The time that I lifted my wheels for takeoff at the same time that my left engine quit was one of those times. I had no choice but to break formation as I kept full throttle and full RPM on that plane in the hope that my wings would not hit the rapidly approaching trees. Torque is what makes an airplane with a propeller on it pull to the sides. Without a left engine, I was being pulled erratically towards a grove of palm trees that would not have fared well with either me or my plane on impact. I kept expecting at any moment to hit those palm trees with my wing, but I finally and I think miraculously got the plane up to one thousand feet. After that, it was comparatively easy enough to circle back, land and wait to be given another plane. I landed, was given another plane with a functioning left engine and flew out again. It was just one of those things that you don't think about too much till after it is over.

There was one mission that I flew to Mandalay that had us bombing a town with a moat. The moat was all the way around the town with a big dam built up like a dike. The English didn't think that we could blow a hole in that dike, so that they could get in to the town. I was flying on the left hand side of formation because I was trying to check a new pilot out who was flying in the center, with our squadron leader rounding out the right side. Well, my bombs and the new pilots' went into the moat and only blew some water into the air. It didn't do a bit of good. But the squadron leader, who dropped the bomb from the right wing, hit the exact target we were all meant to be aiming at. He blew the inside of the wall, blasting a hole at least one hundred yards wide. The English could now walk right across the moat and into the town unobstructed. And that was the plan for the next day. It was standard and expected for us to never know the body count of the Japanese resulting from each bombing, because they always took their dead with them when they fled an area. We never were really sure of the damage we inflicted on the enemy. But, when the English troops went inside the town the next day, they counted eleven hundred dead Japanese. They figured that the Japanese were in such a hurry to leave the city that they were not able to carry away the eleven hundred. We knew the body count that day and we knew the damage that we had inflicted.

On my way home, on the ship, I met a Greek guy from somewhere up near Philadelphia. He was a parachuter who went into Burma. His job was to find the targets to bomb and radio back to the base their location, so that we could finish the job. The trees of the jungle were so thick that it was nearly impossible to see what was happening on the ground floor. That was why the jobs of parachuters were so important. He said that he could never stay long in one place because the Japanese were so desperate to find and kill him. They were literally after him all of the time. He had killed twenty-six Japanese soldiers in hand to hand combat alone. His

job was on the fringe, one of the most dangerous. Without him in the jungles, sending us targets, we wouldn't have known where to bomb.

They taught us some hand to hand combat, but nothing like that Greek parachuter was trained in. Though we were mainly flying, we did have to know enough to survive if we got shot down and were trying to get back. There were so many mountains and jungles and Japanese to avoid that there was no way of predicting how long it would take someone to make it out if they went down. There was one guy that took five months to get back through the hills and to the relative safety of our base.

The closest I ever got to being shot down, I did not even know about until we landed back at the base. We did a lot of low level bombing work. This time our mission was to bomb and shoot up a particular village. We had the Japanese pulling back at the end of the war and this village was already pretty beat down. The Japanese could hardly even get there because we kept the bridges and all other accessible means consistently knocked out. They simply couldn't get enough ammunition, gasoline and groceries to keep the village going. While we were bombing and shooting at it from a low level, my tail gunner, Smitty, called to me, "We're getting shot up quite a bit." He said it just like that, no drama, just the facts of the situation. I yelled back, "Well, where is it coming from, Smitty?" Either he didn't hear me or he did not know, but he did not answer right away. I was ready to make a circle around the village to search out the gunner when Smitty finally said, "Alright, we've got shooting coming from that metal building out there and about a mile out of the main part of the building." I told the crew that we were going to make a pass at it, so I went right out towards it. They shot that anti-aircraft cannon gun twice and sent barrages of machine gun fire into the side of our wing, but we dropped bigger ammunition on them when we let loose with our bombs. It was a direct hit, and that took care of

it. Well, when we got back we had five precarious-looking bullet holes through the wing. That right there was the closest I ever came to being shot down.

Other close calls came when we were shot at by antiaircraft guns. On one mission, we were supposed to bomb on a southwest heading, but the clouds were thick and the bombardier couldn't get on target. So we made a big circle up there and bombed on the northwest heading instead. Amidst the clouds, two anti-aircraft bursts went off right in front of our plane. They could get us because they were right on our altitude. When we made a turn, I looked back and it was solid black where they had been shooting behind us, as well. When I saw that big swelling cloud of smoke, I thought for sure they were going to get us with the next one. As we came back around from our circle, I knew I had to put on my armored vest. Everyone in the plane was assigned an armored vest as well as a helmet, but I had yet to put mine on as I thought we were at an unreachable altitude. I thought that they couldn't shoot us through the thickness of the clouds, but I quickly realized the error in that naïve summation. By the time the blasts came back around, I had put on my helmet and flak suit in a hurry. After that, they asked me to come up and give a demonstration of how to put on a flak suit in front of the guys at the base. My instructions were simple: "I didn't know how to put on an armored flak suit, but when they start shooting at you, you'll get it on. You'll put one on in a hurry." My tail gunner used to sit on his, and once when he sat down on it, he felt something on it. Well, when we got back to base, he lifted it to discover that a huge thick piece of shrapnel was hung up in the suit. If he hadn't of been sitting on it, it very well could have gone up his butt, and he probably would have bled to death before we could have gotten him back. That is definitely no one's ideal way to die. Needless to say, it only took one harrowing mission for us to see the value of those previously clunky and inconvenient armored flak suits.

One mission had us flying an intricate flight pattern. Twelve planes would be sent out, but when we got to the target, only three would go in while the other nine stayed and circled. Then three more would go in, and the remaining six would continue to circle above. We would repeat that process until we were all down near the target. I was the tail end Charlie and made up a part of the rear echelon that day. My flight leader, Sydney, was leading and I was on one of the wings. The plane on the other wing side had engine trouble, so he was forced to turn around and go back to base. So that left the flight leader and I as the last two planes going in. We were supposed to drop bombs on 128 miles of Japanese railroad tracks. They wanted us to bomb the tracks, shoot up the box cars, bomb the villages, and just plain burn things.

The plan was for the group of three to go in with one plane flying lead, accompanied by two wing planes flying beside. They would fly in at an altitude of only a thousand feet to begin dropping their bombs. When the lead plane would finish his bomb run, he would pull out for the next plane to go in, and the next, and so on until all twelve planes had descended and completed their bombing run. It was an intricate process that was designed to keep as many planes safe as possible while still enacting a massive bomb drop on the area.

Sydney and I were the last two to go in. There is a time in every mission, when it becomes clear that the enemy on the ground has been hit, but that they are now beginning to fight back. The first wave of bombs comes as a sort of shock to those being attacked. There are a few moments when they seem to duck their heads and flinch for impact; but, after a few minutes, they have regained their defenses and begin to fight back. By the end of a bombing run, the enemy on the ground has hit that point of regained composure and are fighting back. The first village that I came to, I could see so many guns that I knew that when I dove down I would have to fly up into the tree line to give myself a chance at not getting shot down. Though we

would have to stay down low to drop the bombs, they couldn't directly shoot at us for long because of the trees. I had to watch Sydney in the lead plane to watch for when he pulled out so that I could go in and deliver my bombs. I had eight five-hundred pound bombs to drop before coming back up and out of the flight path. Out of my eight bombs, we put five of them straight between the rails of the track. If we would come to box cars, my gunner would shoot them up; if we saw a village, we would shoot it up too.

There were these new bombs that some guy in Calcutta had dreamed up. They were bombs that had huge spikes on them. The idea was that the spikes would keep the bombs sticking up in the air on impact. I was carrying these bombs once, and I suspected that at 200 mph they would just shear off the pins on the bombs and propel my plane in the opposite direction of the force of the drop of the bomb. That is exactly what happened when the bombs went off. The left side of my wing was forcefully pushed up and got me off balance. To correct, I just rolled the plane over and got back on the path of the railroad tracks. Then all I had to do was set my altitude, line up with the tracks, and then these new kinds of bombs we dropped would deal out their destruction. So I just kept up this routine of resetting my plane's direction and altitude through the whole mission with the new and slightly annoying bombs. I had a photographer in my plane to document the effect of the bombs for the 128 miles of the bombing path. The point was that it would take them an immeasurable amount of time to patch the places where we had blown the holes in the track. They needed those trains to haul ammunition, gasoline, weapons, and even groceries to their base camps. That is the way we bombers wiped out the men on the ground. We got the enemy to where they could not do anything because they were so destroyed and desperate for supplies that they had to move and give up ground. That is how our bombers worked our way through the jungles of Burma.

Bombing at night was difficult because there were no lights in the villages. Everything was just solid darkness. Once I was given a mission to bomb three little villages at night. We were meant to just shoot each up and drop whatever bombs we could. We would blow up some of their trucks or shoot up another railroad so that they couldn't move. Though it was harder to make accurate runs at night, a large part of the point was that we would keep the Japanese up all night just listening to bombs fall around them.

I flew with a copilot named Walt once. He was a really likeable and popular guy on base, but he was known for being nervous all of the time. He was always sure that something tragic was going to happen to him. He had already flown plenty of successful missions, but the fear of something going wrong stuck persistently to him. Well, I flew with him right out of my three weeks of sick leave for food poisoning and that made him nervous. He was flying copilot my first mission out and he asked, "Wood, how long has it been since you flew a mission?" My answer of three weeks undoubtedly had an unsettling effect on an already nervous guy. That was also the mission that we flew only three minutes late over the target. Only one hundred and eighty seconds too late. So the flight commander wouldn't let us drop the bombs. We had to fly all the way back to base and I had to land with a full load of bombs as well as a nervous copilot. He was so nervous about me having to land that airplane that Walt just sat there shaking while we approached base. He needn't have worried, because that was one of the smoothest landings I ever made. I made such a landing that I hardly knew when I had touched down. If there was ever a time that I deserved a promotion from our stingy commanding officer, it was right then as I safely touched down with a full load of bombs and a once again breathing copilot.

I loved flying. I didn't love getting shot at while doing it, but the pure flying got me through the war. I signed up for missions, not because I liked participating in the war, but

because this was one thing that I could do really well for my country. There was a navigator named Rose. He had a queer disposition, in that he signed up for every mission available, so that he could fill his quota and head back for home. It was not that he didn't want to fly and I never heard that he particularly hated being there, but it was that he wanted to get done with his duty as fast as possible. He flew as somebody's navigator every day so that he could get his missions in and go home. At night or in the afternoons, you could find him walking to get his mind off of things. Or maybe he was imagining what he would be doing right then if he was home. Our base in Burma was surrounded by a bunch of rice patties. The natives would build dams that would hold water and they would then plant rice in the plain all around them. We watched him one afternoon with a pair of binoculars- watched him walk around the rice patties, climb up one of those dams, and then just walk around some more. We watched him meander between the rice patties till he went clear out of sight and the sun went down. I never knew when he came back, and I never asked him why he took so many long walks away from the base. When you are fighting a war, you don't often ask the reasons behind the strange actions of others. Any oddity is usually attributed to the way they cope with even fighting in a war. We all did it in some way, whether through smoking, making pets, writing letters home, or processing thoughts on a long walk away from base. Looking back, I think the point was to get away. All of those things, even the smoking and making of pets, were attempts to recover a hint of the domesticity that we had once known back home. What we searched for was a way to get away from that base, to escape from thinking too much about the war. And the way Rose did that was to walk between the rice patties in the dusky sun.

Life back at base was definitely an interesting dynamic. To take showers, you had to go into a small tight stall made out of bamboo in the middle of the camp. They kept a native out

there at all times so he could step on the water pump when someone wanted a shower. So you would walk up to the hut and yell for the native to come keep the almost always cold water flowing. We didn't have a lot of interaction with the locals, except for the odd jobs they did around base. Some would be out working on the runway, pounding rocks, or making simple repairs. They made fifteen cents a day, and that was big money for them. Everywhere we looked in Burma we saw destitution. Even in the animals. One time we were leaving to fly practice bombing routes and passed a freshly killed cow carcass surrounded by at least five hundred buzzards. Maybe an hour and a half later, when we returned, that carcass was spotless except for the bones.

There was a guy in Burma that we called Bub, because he would stay drunk on the Indian gin all of the time. He was also a little on the chubby side. He was a good pilot, but he was always drunk. Some guys would go get drunk when they saw their names on the list to fly the next day. One of the bomber navigators I had would go straight to the bar for a twelve ounce glass of whiskey when he saw his name up there. He would just drink it straight down and by the end of the night would end up so drunk that he'd fall off of his stool. You could always tell if Bub had a mission the next day, because it was those nights he would have to be helped back to his room from the bar.

I guess you could say that a lot of tension was relieved with alcohol. If you needed to, you would just have a few drinks. Right after the mission briefing, where they would describe to you everything in the flight plan for that day, the medical team would come out there, line us up and give us a bit of whiskey. When you would come in from a mission, they'd give you another to settle your nerves back down. None of my flight crew usually drank the whiskey, but went instead for a simple beer. While I drank the whiskey, I was also happy with a great glass of beer

just the same. I'd often take my drink to the shower and drink it while I bathed after the mission. After that, I would sleep the rest of the night away. All of it was to relieve our tension because those missions made us as tight as a fiddle string.

Attempts to make the local animals pets were a common thing on the base. My bunk had its own mongoose. She had come into our room with her babies, so we set her up a bed in one of the drawers and she was officially ours. Most of us would walk around with one of those babies in our pocket for when the locals came around with a basket of snakes to be eaten. They would gather loads of snakes up in baskets and put a rag over it. When they would come around to us, we would just slip our mongoose out of our pocket and that mongoose would kill the snakes in nothing flat. Those mongooses were not much more than the size of a squirrel, but there was no doubt they could kill even a snake as big as a cobra. Lots of times when the rains would come and the ground would be filled with mud, we would throw our own kind of rodeos with the locals' baskets of snakes and the mongooses. Not since Burma have I seen rodeos with quite that kind of entertainment offered.

Another guy I knew used to try to train birds. There was this one limb with lots of branches that six or eight birds would always sit on. One of those birds in particular he trained to catch a ring that he threw in the air. The bird would catch that ring and bring it right back to his hand.

We were always just looking for any little thing to entertain us. Sometimes we would rent bikes and ride around all day. There were shows to go see, but they were always speaking either Burmese or Hindi; we couldn't get much out of them. Other times, we would pit

squadrons against each other in short games of softball. I say short because, with all of the airplanes flying, hitting balls into the air was not often a possibility.

Once we spent an hour carrying and pouring buckets of water from a lake into a hole that we had seen a coyote run into. He must have had another hole somewhere down the tunnel, because even though we poured for a long time, he never came up and we never seemed to be able to fill the hole. It was just an activity to entertain us in the long stretches of down time in between flights. We had pistols that we could hunt with, but the heads were not really keen on giving out much ammunition. I got someone to give me a box of ammunition one time, and while it was fun to be hunting again, shooting a duck with a pistol did not result in much of a left over duck. I just was not the best results to shoot a duck with a .45 pistol. A group of us were even granted a shotgun once to go shoot pigeons. The place was designed to be a dove calling and hunting station, but all we ever saw were these huge parrot-footed pigeons. Each guy would get three shots and then we would swap off until we ran out of shells. We didn't eat them, and I don't remember what ever became of those shot pigeons. It was a great way to spend an afternoon of down time in the war. It was the kind of activity that reminded us of hunting back home, and, for an afternoon, it was like I was back in Texas and not Burma.

There was a kind of snake in Burma that was so poisonous that death was more than a possibility if you got bit by it. They weren't big, and would lay around on bamboo trees and things. Everyone bought a pair of riding boots for twelve dollars that went to the knee. We wore them all of the time so that nothing on the ground could bite our legs. One native got bit by the snake, and he didn't walk twenty-five feet before he was on the ground dead. I don't know why we used to do this, but we would hunt them. We tried to be really careful, and as far as I know, no one in our squadron ever got bit by one.

I have never once missed the food we ate in the mess hall. We had men assigned especially to cook, but even so about all we ever had for breakfast was dehydrated potatoes, powdered eggs, and one slice of bread. We never had anything like bacon, but we did each get a sausage. We had pancakes a lot for breakfast too. If we had a mission, they would cook them the night before, so they would be sitting out until the next morning. By that time, the pancakes would be about the consistency of a round slab of rubber. People talk about MREs a lot when discussing the war. My experience with them was that they were old and lacking much in the way of any actually edible food. I often found that I just couldn't eat them. The only thing that ever seemed fit for human consumption was the cheese. The crackers were just like flour and water rolled out. After the ship ride to Karachi, Pakistan, and the truck drive to Burma, those crackers were so dry you just couldn't eat them.

The natives that worked for our squadron were named Abdul and Sammy. Sammy was about sixteen and already had a couple of kids. Abdul was somewhere around his forties, and was always trying to hit us up for extra rupees. He said that he was saving for seventy-five so that he could buy himself another wife. The natives that worked for the base would do jobs like room cleaning, sweeping the floor, and laundry. You had to let them wash your clothes, because there was no other way to get them washed. It wasn't the greatest service, though, because the way they beat clothes on rocks to get them clean wore our clothes out pretty quickly. There would be two or three families that lived right near a water hole, so they could bath and wash clothes. They would be set up in two or three shacks and these little groups of native workers would be spread out all around the base.

Somehow, it was common knowledge on base that the life expectancy of a native in that area was twenty-four to twenty-seven years old. I'm not sure why they told us that, but they did.

They never said anything about our life expectancy, or talked about the chances of us Americans dying over there. It just wasn't something that was talked about it. I guess I can't even really think of a time when someone would've brought up such a topic. It is definitely not something that is just discussed over a breakfast of rubber-like pancakes before a mission. I never really had the feeling that something was going to happen to me. Other guys did. I don't know how many navigators or gunners that I took on their thirteenth mission. I remember one flight officer named Russell who went out with me on his thirteenth. I thought he was going to cry. I said, "Come on, Russell, ain't nothing going to happen. I won't let anything happen to you, so come on, let's just go." His reply was a simple, "I can't Bill, I can't." Well, since not going based on superstition wasn't a real option, he did go on his thirteenth mission and lived to talk about it. He told me when we came back that he was glad that it was me that he had gone with. I didn't really understand why or see the point in it, but some of the guys were just superstitious for some reason.

I've seen mosquitos so thick that you could reach your hand out and grab a few hundred at a time. There were puddles of water everywhere that brimmed with the annoying bugs at all times. A lot of our walking was around edges of puddles of murky water, so the environment was right for the unbridled growth of the mosquito population of Burma. Every day when we went to the mess hall, they would issue you a little yellow pill that was supposed to keep you from getting malaria. Really all it did was keep the symptoms of malaria undercover so that you could continue to fly or go about your job without getting too visibly sick. We laughed about the pill because so many guys would take it and act like they were swallowing it, and then simply thump it out to get rid of it. We told the base doctor that the reason the water around the camp was turning yellow was because we put so many pills in there.

I think the heads were most concerned that if we contracted a bad case of malaria that we would have to be sent home and they would lose soldiers that way. We had been flying a mission one day, and three or four of us were just sitting in the big room relaxing with drinks when one of the Majors named Hatchet came by. He reprimanded us for not wearing shirts to ward off the mosquitos. He usually had mosquito repellant that he rubbed all over the place. He said, "See, now fellas, you're not supposed to be out here like this, you know." We just laughed at him because we didn't care if we got malaria or not. We told him that he could send us home then. His only response was to go about rubbing more of that repellant all over the place and on every guy he could.

The worst sickness I ever got saw me out of flying shape for three weeks. Eat food that is no good for so long and eventually you will get sick with some sort of food poisoning. I was lucky, though; some guys' stomachs never did seem to adapt to being in Burma and they seemed a bit sickly all of the time.

We couldn't often see the people on the ground as we shot at them. It was a rarity really. One time I was actually flying copilot and we came out of the clouds at four thousand feet. I could see a Jap down there turning one of those hand crank guns. I always kind of felt sorry for them because I didn't imagine that they could take cover in a foxhole unless they had one really close. I could see them trying to fight back at us where I usually couldn't because at four thousand feet we were much lower than bombers normally kept. It felt strange to see people on the ground. For a very small bit of a second, you forget that they are your enemies and you wonder what will happen to them as consequences of the fire that you are sending their way. I often thought that it would be harder to shoot someone if you were in the Army. Where we were was kind of impersonal; we were up there so high that we normally could not see the people that

we dropped the bombs on. We had the location of the target, and it was often afterwards in debriefing that we discovered just how much damage we had inflicted.

There was one time in Burma when the Japanese got close enough to our base that we could hear their gunfight with the British. The Air Force was renting this British airfield for ten thousand dollars a month, so the British had the ground troops to protect it. It was also an incredibly rainy and therefore muddy night. I tried to run up and check my plane's gun magazines, but when I would run I would just skid across the wet muddy ground. We had to stay the night on the airfield. We couldn't help because the only weaponry we had were the magazines in the planes, and in the slick mud we could not maneuver them. I slept outside of my airplane on the ground, so that I could run easily back to base if the Japanese came. I didn't want to get inside of my airplane even though it was raining hard that night. I wanted to be where I could run and get away if they moved in. I was afraid that if they got close enough and I was in the airplane, they would just throw a hand grenade or a bazooka to blow up the plane with me inside. No, I thought it a better idea to stay outside of my plane. I used my parachute for my pillow and just slept on that wet muddy ground as it rained all night. Even for a grown man in a war, the sounds of close gunfire were chilling. We could hear them shooting out there, the English trying to keep the Japanese out and the Japanese trying to get in. We lay there listening to the guns go off. The next morning it quit raining, the ground dried off, and the Japanese were no closer to the base or the airfield.

My guys and I once burned up fifty-seven 50 caliber machine gun barrels in one mission. It was really my fault, because I knew that if you fired it too long it burns up the barrel and burns the rifle out so it can no longer shoot straight. I just knew that the more we shot at them, the

more they would stay in the rat hole. They didn't come out while we shot at them, but somehow when we got back to base, we had still managed to pick up bullet holes on the plane.

I once traded three or four bars of soap to a few guys who had somehow gotten their hands on a Japanese rifle. I took it back to base, cut the end of the barrel off, and sighted it in. It worked so good that if I shot at a silver dollar from forty yards away, all five bullets would hit it. There was Japanese writing on the side of it, but I never found out what it says. The metal on that gun was so cheap you could take a file down the bolt where you lock it. It was soft metal, not real metal like on American or German guns. It was meant to be a sniper rifle because it had a real long barrel on it. You could shoot a long ways and kill one guy at a time.

As I was an officer by then, I could see to the sending of my own mail without it being checked thoroughly. So I sent one piece home to my dad, waited and then sent another piece. If I had sent it home complete in one package, someone would have stolen it. But one piece of a cheap Japanese sniper rifle wouldn't do anyone any good, so piece by piece that rifle made it home to my dad. He always felt like that rifle was his, and as far as I was concerned it was. I have it now, and still have a little bit of ammunition for it.

When I was a Captain, I won a landing competition. They placed a long string six feet high across the runway. When you came in to land, you had to fly over the string but they would measure the distance from your parked plane to the string to see how quickly you could get your plane on the ground. If you went too far it counted against you. I was the best in the whole squadron. I was real lucky, though. We didn't have any wind that day, which was uncommon for that part of the country. Usually if you wait until the afternoon heat wave to fly, your plane will just jump around and make steadying it a terrible chore. It got so bad one day,

that I was half sick the whole afternoon. I was also the first one to attempt the tight landing in the competition. It was like riding a horse in a barrel race, whoever runs the arena first has got the advantage because there haven't been any other horses to tear up the ground. So when I came in first with no wind, I knew that I had a chance at winning. They scored us by how many feet it took to land. If you come in too fast and you couldn't get the plane down, you had to go further down the runway. I came in barely dragging it above stalling speed, and down I went, nearly a foot shorter than any other guy. I didn't get anything for winning; I think someone just came up to me and kind of announced that I had won and we went about our day.

The amount of flying we had to do to be done with our deployment seemed to be always changing. When I first got to Burma, it was twenty-five missions. Then by the time I had twelve, they raised it to fifty. When I got close to fifty, they raised it to three hundred combat hours. I always seemed to be chasing the number that meant I could go home. Don't get me wrong; if the decision to enlist and go to war came back to me a second time, I would do it again. I had chosen to go there in the first place by enlisting, but I guess sometimes it takes upping the ante of how much you must achieve before you realize that you really don't have the choice of when to come back.

Sometimes people ask me if, despite it all, was it cool to see bombs drop and watch the explosion blast and the smoke rise. Honestly, I don't know. In the moment, we were too busy flying and keeping everything else going to look down too much. Often it was not until later conversations with your bombardier navigator that you discovered if you hit anything successfully or not.

After I was through with my missions, I still had to do quite a bit of flying. Even after the war was over, we had to fly down to Calcutta to fly in formation with the Army. I remember thinking that this would be a terrible time to have an accident, when we were so close to heading home. Even though I had flown in so many during the actual fight, I wish that I would have flown more missions because after those were past I was put to work test hopping planes. Test hopping is necessary when you change the engine in a plane. Someone had to be the first to fly the plane, to check that the engine was working right. Once I took off and the left engine of the plane suddenly quit, and by the time that I got to four thousand feet, the right did as well. There is nothing to do in that situation but to circle the plane and go back for a landing. I never liked those assignments; I preferred to get into a plane knowing that everything was adjusted correctly, so that I could be sure of my machine.

The ship ride home after the war was twenty-eight days and nights of cramped living space. I couldn't stand it on that ship. There were too many guys too close together. Beds made out of pipe slept guys five high up the walls. Twenty guys would be sleeping in an area that you wouldn't think could hold them if they were standing up. You couldn't see the floor because of all the duffle bags strewn down there and air circulation was nearly nonexistent. I slept on the deck until we got to the Mediterranean. Every afternoon I went down through five holes and stairs to meet the Chaplain. He slept with the same bunch that I did, and, like me, couldn't stand it. He had a case of Indian gin stashed down there, and every afternoon we would meet at two o'clock to have a drink. We didn't tell any of the other guys because, in a ship of that size with so many men crammed in, that gin would have been gone in one sitting.

There was a musician on the ship that was meant to be some entertainment for us. We all thought he was pretty great until we realized that we were hearing him sing the same song over and over again. For twenty-eight days we heard that same song every afternoon.

I heard a story about an old veteran from the First World War named Eddy Rickenbacker who lived down on the coast of Florida. Every day he could be seen walking the docks with a bucket of shrimp feeding the sea gulls. People in the town would wonder why he fed the seagulls; when they asked, he told them about how he was stranded at sea. For twenty-two days, he and a few other men were stranded in a boat with no food or water. He said that while all of the men were praying, a seagull came and landed on his shoulder. They ate that bird and used its guts to catch fish to eat and stayed alive until they were rescued. Eddy and the men ate the fish raw, but if you got hungry enough, you would too. So then Eddy always felt a kind of connection, a sense of due to those seagulls. People wondered why he would walk up and down the docks every day before, but after they heard his story, they understood too.

While I was waiting to be called up for the war, we had a "going away party" nearly every weekend. There were quite a few of us young men who were just waiting to receive the call from whatever branch they had joined. So about every Sunday, we would gather at a bar outside of town and say, "I may leave this week, so come on let's have a beer." We would stay out there and drink all afternoon. Our attitude before the war was quite different that after it. It wasn't so much that we were somehow depressed or solemn after we came home, but that there was life that needed us to move on to. People ask me if I partied much when I got home, and we didn't really. I never understood, because it felt to me like the party was over already. We didn't party, we went to work. It is not that we traded the fun-loving twenty year olds for hardened twenty-five year olds when we left, but that the celebration was in the act of even

coming home. There weren't a lot of parties that could capture the spirit of that. We were in parades and things, though. Before we left, we could toast the unknown, but now we knew, and with that came the simple fact that life had to go on after the war. So, like other soldiers, I found a job and worked.

When the war in Vietnam rolled around, they tried to get me to come back. Told me that they would make me an instructor. Around that time, there were a lot of guys who wanted to become instructors and go back overseas. I never wanted to do that, though. I didn't even want to go back in. I had done my part when I was a younger man. During my war, I never really volunteered for anything; but, if they told me to do something, I did it with no problem. But I had a life now, and it wasn't, nor did I really want it to be, connected to my time in the Air Force. I loved flying and I truly did cherish being a soldier, but I was a civilian by then, with a family and a career. I figured one day that I would consider my time in the military and write down my stories, but I saw no need to create any more of them. So that is where I am today, remembering adventures and perils, and chronicling my time as a young man living and fighting in World War II.

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