

**Bernard Palmer**

**Visibility Zero**



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# Visibility Zero

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# Visibility Zero

By Bernard Palmer

AUTHOR, *PARSON JOHN*, *STORM WINDS*, ETC.

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# Preface by Lutheran Librarian

In republishing this book, we seek to introduce this author to a new generation of those seeking spiritual truth.

BERNARD PALMER (1914-1998) wrote many religious novels, mostly for young people.

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# Note

This novel could not possibly have been written without the active assistance and technical information given by Staff Sergeant Roger Dale Palmer, ball turret gunner on a B-17, who is now stationed “somewhere in England.” He has received the Air Medal with three oak leaf clusters, the Distinguished Flying Cross, and has also been recommended for the Silver Star for exceptional heroism in battle.



# Dedication

THIS BOOK is respectfully dedicated to the men and boys of Phelps County, Nebraska — many of whom I know personally — who have left farms, small towns and schools to flock to answer the call of the air force for personnel.

They have no desire to kill or maim, and get no morbid satisfaction from watching an enemy crash to his death. They kill because there is no other way to keep the oppressor's heel from American soil. They bomb cities because planes or tanks or guns are made there — matériel that one day would wreak havoc among American troops. And they strafe troop transports and communication lines to keep those enemies from spilling American blood.

Theirs is no easy task; living in the stinking tropics of the Solomons or the cold and desolation of the Aleutians; going continuously into hostile skies, braving ack-ack and fighter planes without complaint.

This book is not intended to be an authoritative treatise on the war or aerial warfare. Such a task is better left to posterity. Rather, this is the story of those who fly. You all know them — the boys who live around the corner or up the street from you. They feel the giddy, bewildering, unstable pace of the times with its confused standards. They know the tense excitement of bombing missions and the unceasing, gnawing desolation of fear. Life for them is stripped of gaudy trimmings. They see it as it is with all of its uncertainties. And many of them see, for the first time, their need of the Lord Jesus.

# One

GRAY, ICY FOG was everywhere. It dripped from the caves of buzzing hangars and squished underfoot in the grass along the narrow, flare-lined runways that stretched hazily into the infinity of space. Motors made muffled and eerie sounds, and British lorries, moving in an unending stream towards town, loomed up suddenly and faded away, their blackout lights pricking pin holes in the opaque curtain before them.

The meteorologist told of headwinds across the channel and of rain and poor visibility over target areas. Flight officers and commanders conferred, and the big Lancasters and Sterlings of the RAF wheeled into position. Ground crews returned to the warmth and light of their barracks, and fliers filed reluctantly out of the alert rooms where they had been briefing for the evening attack. Their objectives would have to await a more favorable night. It was not fit weather for flying.

In the American base close by, mechanics were swarming over the group of B-17's which had returned from a mission over occupied France just before the fog rolled in. It had been a rough afternoon and the big planes bore silent testimony of the flak and fighter opposition. Great jagged holes were blasted in the tail assemblies and the skin of the planes was riddled and curled by cannon fire. Wing sections were damaged and motors impaired before the group came limping home. Now the ground crews were sweating to put them into serviceable condition once more; they were repairing each damaged part and adjusting each motor with the accuracy and skill of a watchmaker. Lives depended upon their work on the ground, and they proceeded painstakingly, testing each section and tuning each motor until an exacting crew chief gave it a "Roger." All their ability went into the ship, and then they waited, and hoped, and prayed that she would come winging back.

Some of the planes had not come back. Their battle-scarred wreckage had rested on the floor of the storm-tossed channel or had been cremated beside the target they had set out to bomb. Others had felt the sting of flak

and cannon. They had felt them steal away their power and foul their controls with jarring blows. These weary planes had stumbled on as best they could, lagging far behind their flights and losing altitude. It was for these that the ground crews waited. Still clustered in little knots between the landing strips, they tried to talk about other things, but always drifted back to the subject of planes and men and sounds of familiar motors. The wind had lifted the fog somewhat and it began to rain. But the dim outline of the field was still visible. The field lights were still on, and flares still marked the landing strips in the vain hope of guiding a wounded bomber back to her haven.

The chaplain was still at the base —he always was when some of his boys were out -drifting from one tense group to another, encouraging his men with a reassuring smile, word or pat on the back. He had been stationed at the field since the first contingent of American airmen joined the RAF after Pearl Harbor, and a little piece of his heart had gone up with every plane. He knew and shared the anxiety of the ground crews who waited like a mother for her only child. He rejoiced when a big bomber circled the base and landed, and he sorrowed when a plane was reported lost.

Stories were beginning to filter through as to the fate of some of the big Fortresses. The pilot of the Cherokee Bell saw Poor Willie crash in flames, and had counted at least five parachutes billowed white against the green terrain. The navigator of an unidentified B-17 saw another hit by cannon fire and explode in the air. No parachutes had fluttered from it. And the men in the two remaining planes in flight five had grim word for the mechanics who were waiting for the *Terrier*.

She was hit by flak her first mm over the target area. The number three motor was silenced, and a gaping hole was blown in her belly just aft of the bomb bays. How many were killed or injured no one knew. She completed her run and turned with them, fighting to keep her place, when a pair of Focke Wulfs dove on her, raking her unmercifully. One enemy fighter did not pull out of his screaming dive as the tail gunner caught him.

The flight pulled into a tight protective V, and dared the enemy plane to make another run. He caught the challenge, weighed the possibilities as he cruised along just out of gun range, then dipped his wings and veered off to find less formidable prey. Few fighter pilots would run the gauntlet of

Fortress fire in an attempt to break the formation. They were at their best picking up cripples and stragglers.

The *Terrier's* crew battled valiantly to keep abreast of the flight, but she continued to lose both altitude and speed. The number two motor almost tore itself loose from its moorings before the co-pilot feathered the prop.

The other two pilots insisted upon staying with her to screen her from fighter attack, but Madden was adamant. He was the senior officer in the flight. The crew had to admit the logic of his order. The *Terrier* was cumbersome and unwieldy with two of her power plants gone and a wing flap control all but cut in two. There was considerable question as to whether she would reach the base of operations, excluding the ever-present possibility of fighter planes pouncing out of the sun. The three bombers waddling along just fast enough to keep in the air would be like ducks on the water to speedy Focke Wulfs. And they were still five hundred miles inside an enemy territory that bristled with fighters and ack-ack. It was better to lose one bomber than to risk losing three. Reluctantly, the other two had left her to her fate.

The ground crew took the news silently, with tight lips, and, perhaps, some misty eyes. They all had friends aboard the *Terrier*, for they had played "nursemaid" to their "baby" for weeks.

The chaplain came and stood silently among them; beads of rain dotted his weathered face and soaked through his light coat, chilling him. It would have been pleasant to go into operations headquarters or one of the hangars where it was warm and light, but his boys needed him. They were comforted knowing that he was there, ready with a prayer or a word of encouragement. He sensed their dependence upon him and the Master, and he thanked the Lord for it. It gave him opportunities for presenting the Gospel that were often lacking at home.

There was a faint hum of motors in the distance, a mere suggestion of sound that was snatched away instantaneously by a jealous wind. Men looked from one to another quickly, wondering whether it had really been a plane or was merely a fantasy, born of hope. Faces that had lit up expectantly at the sound tensed once more. Conversation that had been cut off suddenly began again, desultory and uninteresting. Everyone was listening beyond the sound of voice for the deep-throated roar of the *Terrier*.

In a moment the sound returned, a slowly crescendoing roar that came from the east, somewhere in the cloud banks above the arc of lights that was the airfield. They waited; suppressed emotions charged the air as the men strained to see into the darkness.

The plane was coming in low, and the sound was steadily growing louder. But it was not the full, vibrant hum of a four-motored B-17. It was high pitched and thinner, like a B-25 or one of the British Mediums, or perhaps an injured Fortress with half her power plants blasted to uselessness.

“It’s the *Terrier*,” someone said hopefully. The words were half question, half statement of fact.

“Thank God.” The voice was hushed and humbly grateful.

The remaining motors were limping badly, and the plane was still swallowed by clouds towards the channel. She faltered an instant, and the men stood breathlessly until the laboring motors began to purr again, after missing only a stroke or two.

The big Fortress exploded suddenly out of the mist and darkness — so suddenly that the men gasped.

It was the *Terrier*, and it was obvious, even from the ground, that she had taken a terrific pounding.

She came in over the hangars like a gaunt brown ghost and dipped sharply towards the ground. An involuntary cry sprang from the lips of her ground crew, and a prayer arose from the chaplain’s heart. Those in the path of the disabled craft scurried for cover. After fighting through five hundred miles of bristling enemy territory she was going to crash at her base of operations! But the pilot eased back — carefully, for fear of severing his already crippled controls, and the plane responded.

The *Terrier* shuddered from one Wing tip to the other as she leveled off, with wheels almost touching the spongy, rain-soaked ground between the runways. Madden opened the throttle and coaxed an additional ounce of power from the protesting motors and climbed in order to come in up-wind and on a landing strip. He made a clumsy turn, skimming the treetops, and went into a steep glide. The big Fortress bounded into the air like a frightened rabbit, in spite of its thirty-two tons, and smacked the concrete strip a second time, crumpling the landing gear. With that she careened off the runway, plowed a furrow in the grass with a wing tip and finally nosed over.

An ambulance and a fire truck had been waiting on the edge of the field and they screamed out towards the wrecked plane even before it came to a stop. Every man at that end of the base raced towards the wreckage. Often the difference of a second or two meant the difference between life and death. A little gasoline from one of the big tanks had only to drip on a hot motor to turn the ship into a raging inferno.

The men in the *Terrier* were fortunate in that respect, for, although the plane was badly damaged, there was no fire. By the time the ambulance arrived the crew was beginning to climb out of the B-17. They climbed out wearily, men who had waited and fought and prayed to the point of exhaustion. Chaplain Davies began to count them as he ran, just as he counted the planes in returning formations, fearfully and thankfully. There were five — six — seven. The medical detachment went into the wreckage. Three of the *Terrier*'s crew must still be inside.

The ground men clustered about the plane, marveling that even a pilot like Madden had been able to bring it back. To them he was the most skilled pilot in the group, and almost the best at the base.

"It must have been a rough afternoon, sir," the crew chief said to Captain Madden.

"Yes, Sergeant, it was that. And I'm afraid we didn't do your airplane any good, either."

Sergeant Byler surveyed it cryptically. "I wouldn't want to fly in that thing, sir. It leaks."

The pilot's face twisted into a crooked, infectious grin, more like his twenty-four years than the grim cut of his jaw and his grey-flecked hair. The last thirty-seven weeks had been thirty-seven years to him.

Sergeant Byler, a veteran mechanic from the last war, was glad to see "his boys" laugh. It eased the tension. "Maybe it'll keep some of these grease monkeys out of mischief for a couple of days, sir," said Byler.

"I think it will — if you put it in order," Rex replied doubtfully.

"Oh, we'll do that, sir, if we have to jack up one prop and drive a new plane under it."

Rex turned to his crew. "Let's go over to intelligence and get the report off our chests."

They obeyed mechanically. It was impossible to brush death one moment, seeing buddies die, and then laugh lightheartedly the next. But for the grace of God anyone of them might be lying back there in the *Terrier*.

And they had to go out again, and again, and again — playing with death, tempting it.

A flier could not allow himself to think, and yet how could he help it when his most intense desire was to live? Even the veterans had times of abject terror, when life was the most important thing in the world. Christian men and boys turned to their God, finding the ever-present Lord Jesus a source of strength and courage, but the others could only turn, in hopelessness and despair, to themselves.

The fliers filed into the little frame building that served “intelligence” as an office and stood about the long, narrow table in the center of the room, still bundled in their heavy flying togs. Several officers were waiting to complete the history of the night’s operations.

The major asked them to be seated. Informality was the rule at the base, and not a few straight-laced West Pointers would have been rudely shocked to see the officers fraternizing with enlisted men. But form and military convention had little place at this base of operations where enlisted men and officers alike were flying and fighting and dying hourly.

Major Apel surveyed them carefully, searching each taut, sallow face, looking into the eyes that reflected some of the horror they had seen. Sympathy lurked behind his military manner. He had talked with many crews in just that same situation, had seen them fighting for self-control while they waited to tell their stories.

“Let me congratulate you and your crew, Captain,” he began. “You’ve done a fine job in bringing back your plane. We’d almost given you up for lost.”

“Thank you, sir.”

The major looked at him and smiled. “Was that for the commendation or for giving you up?” he asked. Then he turned to the business at hand. “I understand that you had some nasty going, Captain Madden.”

“It was pretty hot, sir. They almost had our number.”

“The other boys had quite a tussle with fighters. I suppose you saw your share of them, too.”

Briefly, haltingly, for the memories were still white-hot in his mind, Rex Madden related what had happened. He told about the fighter opposition and the ack-ack batteries they had encountered.

Major Apel was particularly interested in the increased numbers of fighters and the new anti-aircraft batteries.

“Jerry must be beginning to smart a little,” he observed, “or he wouldn’t be shifting so much stuff from Russia.”

When the bomber pilot told of their own injuries the intelligence officer sobered noticeably. He told how a direct hit in the radio compartment had killed Staff Sergeant Hemingsford and Sergeant Johnson. At the mention of Johnson, young Georgie Stebbins winced. He was only nineteen and Mitt Johnson had been his pal. They had enlisted together, trained together and had contrived to be assigned to the same bomber. Together they had manned the waist guns, Stebbins as assistant engineer and Johnson as armorer.

Rex went on with his story. A cannon shell had splintered, ripping into the nose and seriously wounding Lieutenant Meyers, the bombardier. Navigator Norgren narrowly missed being killed when a fragment raced past his head and tore through the top of the plane, tearing a jagged hole as big as his fist.

Major Apel sat quietly, asking a question now and then and making cements as the story unfolded. The other crew members supplied details until the account was complete.

“Well, I guess that’s all, boys,” the major said as he gathered up his notes and handed them to an attaché. “You’d better turn in now and get some sleep. You’ve had a big day.”

Georgie Stebbins was still sitting stiffly in the chair as the men arose to go. He was staring at the blank wall before him, struggling to control his nerves. His hands were clasped so tightly that the veins stood out, and cold beads of sweat dotted his face.

“Boy, this is big time, ain’t it?” he mumbled incoherently. “Nobody here plays for fun. No, sir, this is for keeps.” His lower lip was quivering and he strove to stem the flow of words. The men about him watched, tight lipped and sorrowing. They understood just how he felt. “No, sir, this is for keeps — this is for keeps.”

With that he threw himself across the table and began to sob — long, dry, heart-rending sobs that tore at their souls. One of the men went to call Chaplain Davies, who had sensed he would be needed and was standing just outside the door. He talked with the young soldier a moment, until the sobbing ceased, and then helped him to his feet and brought him to the barracks. The slim shoulder was still trembling under his arm.



Major Apel stood there silently until he and the captain, Rex Madden, were alone.

“Was this his first mission, Captain?”

Rex stared out at the darkened field, going back to a day when another flier, a pilot, had come back from his first tough journey over a target area. The memories were heart-searing.

“Yes, sir,” he replied.

# Two

REX MADDEN walked slowly back to the officers' quarters, dragging his feet through the thick wet carpet of grass. The field lights were off now and the landing flares had been snuffed out, to be lighted again another night when other bombers would come wandering home through the fog.

The planes not yet reported in would have, long since, run out of fuel; so they must be considered lost. The barracks and officers' quarters were shrouded in darkness, but not all of the men would be asleep. Some would still be fighting — fighting bitter, heart-searing memories. They joked and laughed and fought by day, and battled with terror by night.

Captain Madden's straight, broad shoulders sagged forward and he held his cap carelessly in one hand as though he lacked the strength to lift it to his head. With his face streaked and dirty, and his whiskers bristling, he looked more like his father shuffling home after a hard day at the mill than the dapper, well dressed young lieutenant who had landed in England months before. Excitement and fear had pumped their stimuli into his blood, and he had felt no trace of weariness during the perilous flight home. But now, after the interview with intelligence, the dikes which had held back the fatigue burst under the weight of it, and weariness came pouring out, flooding his soul.

There would be letters to write in the morning. How he dreaded that ordeal! Letters to mothers, wives or sweethearts telling them that their world had been broken in two. With a few short words and empty phrases he would try to lighten their burden. It was easier when Rex knew the flier had been a disciple of the Lord Jesus, for then he could write of the promises of God. But if the dead man had scoffed at Christ, as so many did, the task was doubly difficult. There was then no hope, no words of encouragement he could give except the time-worn phrase "He died a soldier." With all its wealth of meaning and honor that phrase is empty and hollow indeed to a mother who has lost her only son.

There had been many letters in the past weeks. There was Bartlett, Sims and Ronnquist of his first crew. And a little Jew with a German name he could never pronounce. He had been a tail gunner replacement and had gone out on only a couple of missions. There were others, too, whom it hurt to remember — splendid, fun-loving comrades who seemed to be too young and brave and manly to die.

He stopped momentarily at the door to the officers' quarters. There was a voice at his elbow. "Is that you, Rex?"

"Yes," he replied hesitantly. It sounded like Gaslin, his co-pilot, but in the darkness he couldn't be sure.

"I've been waiting for you." He swallowed hard. "I couldn't sleep."

It was Gaslin. He hadn't been with the crew long, and this had been his first bloody mission. Rex leaned against the door casing and tried to make out his companion's face in the shadows.

"What's on your mind?"

"It's Dixie. Have you heard how he is!"

The thought of Dixie stepped him short. He had not really remembered his bombardier until that very moment. What Mitt Johnson had been to Georgie Stebbins, Dixie Meyers was to Rex. They were buddies, and had been since that first day when they were given their wings and put into the same crew. They had been together constantly.

It was strange that he had forgotten about Dixie, and yet, there is no explaining what a man will or will not do under stress of battle. To be sure he had made the report about Lieutenant Meyers to intelligence, but that was mechanical — an inanimate thing void of emotion. It had been related in the same expressionless voice in which he had told about the damaged motors and the deaths of two men in his crew.

In that instant the soldier became a man again and he felt an overwhelming impulse to find out about his bombardier and friend. Why, he did not even know if Dixie was alive! Fright clutched at his heart as he remembered that Norgren had been pessimistic in his report over the interphone after the hit. A piece of shrapnel had almost severed the bombardier's arm and he had lost considerable blood before the navigator had applied a tourniquet and forced him to swallow a sulfa pill. Now the whole picture came rushing back to him.

Deliberately he forced every trace of emotion from his voice before he spoke. "I haven't heard a word yet."

“I thought maybe you’d go over to the hospital with me to find out,” Gaslin suggested. “You know your way around here a lot better than I do.”

“Let’s go.”

They turned and walked side by side over to the base hospital, a rambling one-story building set apart from the others and clearly marked with big red crosses on the roof. They were supposed to protect it from bombing when Jerry came over.

“That was tough about Johnson and Hemji, wasn’t it?”

Rex did not answer at once.

Gaslin repeated the question.

“It was that.” Suddenly he became angry with his co-pilot. Sure, it was tough about Johnson and Hemingsford. It was tough about all of them, but a fellow couldn’t think about that if he wanted to hold down his berth and keep flying.

At the hospital a gruff, dour head nurse met them in the corridor. “It’s after visiting hours,” she snapped before they had an opportunity to speak.

“May we see Miss Patterson, please?”

The stubby little first lieutenant drew herself up haughtily and glared at Rex as if he did not realize what a heresy he had committed in asking to see one of the nurses in the middle of the night. He smiled a little. This particular supervisor had a wide reputation for grumpiness, but the men liked her in spite of it. She looked like Napoleon barring the door.

“Miss Patterson is on duty and very busy. You may see her any time after hours.”

“I know she’s busy,” he conceded, “and we’re sorry to bother you. We only wanted to find out how the last patient that was brought in this evening was getting along. Perhaps you could tell us.” When she looked at him quizzically he added. “He was on that bombing mission this afternoon. I was piloting and Lieutenant Gaslin, here, was the co-pilot.”

“I see.” She softened a little, but her manner served warning that her generosity was not to be abused. “If you’ll just wait a moment.” She whisked efficiently down the long hallway and into the room at the end, her starched skirts rustling. In a moment she was back. “Were you inquiring about Lieutenant Meyers?”

“Yes, that’s him,” Gaslin blurted eagerly.

“I got the right one then,” she said, scanning the chart. “Hmm. This doesn’t look too good. He had lost a lot of blood when they brought him in,

and there's a notation here to watch for signs of infection. They gave him a transfusion immediately and have one scheduled for ten in the morning. He's awfully weak, but he's resting quite well now."

"Will he lose his arm?" the co-pilot ventured.

"We are interested in saving his life first, Lieutenant. Then we will worry about his arm."

"Thank you," said Rex, turning to go.

"Oh, Captain?"

"Yes?"

"We'll do all we can for him, sir. You both can be sure of that."

They were walking in silence across the field. The nurse had given them news of Dixie, but as Rex mulled it over he could see that she had told them nothing except the fact that his chum was seriously injured. And that much he had known already. There was a satisfaction in the knowledge that Dixie was at a hospital where he would receive the best care in the world in spite of over-efficient nurses. It would probably be several days before the bombardier would be out of danger, and in the meantime there was nothing to do but to watch and wait and pray.

Gaslin grasped him by the shoulder, jerking him out of his thoughts. "Captain," he said in a strange, taut voice. "How do you manage to carry on as you do? There's your best friend, dying for all you know, and you go calmly back to your bed as though nothing has happened. What are you made of? Stone?"

"No, Don," Rex replied. "I'm just as worried as you are. Right now all I can think about is Dixie and how he'll get along."

"But what keeps you from showing it? Why, I can hardly control my nerves tonight, and you're as cool as ever. Have you always been like this?"

They were at their quarters now and Rex sat down on a top step, crossing his legs and dropping his cap over one knee. Don Gaslin squatted in front of him.

"I think I've been more upset than you'll ever be," Rex told him. "But would you really like to know what has given me self-control?"

"Of course I would. I'd give anything for it."

"That isn't enough, Don. The question is: Are you Willing to give everything?" He leaned forward and pressed a small oblong khaki book into the co-pilot's hand. The latter knew what it was by the feel of it. "The answer is here. Read this Testament every day; when we're in the air and

when we're on the ground. Follow its teachings and accept its Christ. Confess your sins and pray! That is my way of going on missions repeatedly regardless of what happens."

"I know about the prayer meetings your crew holds before going upstairs." He could have added that he had loitered, purposely, in the briefing room to escape that prayer meeting only this afternoon. He was new in the squadron and the other boys had lost no time in telling him about the type of plane to which he had been assigned.

"I can truthfully say," Rex went on, "that if it weren't for the grace of the Lord Jesus I would not be flying today. I'd be at home and out of the army; probably a disgrace to myself and the squadron as well."

Lieutenant Gaslin fingered the Book meditatively before following his captain into the long narrow building. Prayer meetings and fighting sounded incongruously silly, but when you put it that way...

The next morning Rex was up and over to the hospital by the time Mildred Patterson came off duty. She was a pretty girl, even in the drab uniform of an army nurse. It was small wonder that Dixie Meyers had fallen in love with her. Half the patients on her floor dreamed of her at night. Dixie had met her in the States, and Rex could never decide whether it was coincidence or clever contriving that stationed them at the same base. If it had been anyone else, Rex would have said that a second lieutenant could not pull enough strings to get a favorite nurse assigned to his base. But Dixie Meyers had never heard of the word impossible. So the question still remained.

Patty's dark hair had been caught up hurriedly and pinned. It was supposed to stay in place, but it poked out from under her cap in an alarmingly feminine and unmilitary fashion. Her eyes were usually dancing, but this morning as she came out of the hospital, they were drab and lifeless.

"Good morning, Captain."

"Hello, Patts." He fell in beside her. "How's our favorite patient this morning?"

She tried to speak, but could only shake her head. The tears were brimming. In a moment she gulped them down and managed, "There's no change, Rex, except that he's a little weaker."

"I'm going to write his mother and I thought I'd find out before I did."

“Thanks,” she smiled. “That’ll save me from writing to her until... until we know for sure.”

“I suppose the War Department will send her a cable in a day or two.”

She nodded, and Rex squeezed her arm in sympathy. There were no words for the occasion.

The letters to Johnson’s and Hemingsford’s parents were comparatively easy to write, but he dreaded the one to Mrs. Meyers. Perhaps that was the reason he left it until the last. Mrs. Meyers’ husband had been killed at Belleau Wood in the other war without ever seeing his son, and now Dixie was wounded and might be taken from her.

Rex reached for another V-mail blank and filled his pen with black ink, for Mrs. Meyers’ eyes were tired eyes.

*Dear Mrs. Meyers:*

The War Department has undoubtedly informed you that Lee has been seriously wounded. I can’t begin to express my sympathy to you. He has been more than a friend to me: he’s been a brother.

He is getting special care as he was put on Patty’s floor and she is taking care of him. All of us are praying for his recovery.

I know that you will be pleased to know that Lee has been active in bringing many of his companions to Jesus Christ — including myself. His great spiritual fortitude has been his richest blessing. He is confident of his Lord and Saviour.

SINCERELY,

REX

Before folding it he read it over a third time. Why did letters sound so cold and formal? Why could he not express the feelings in his heart?

It was towards evening and the letter had already gone when an enlisted man came in with word of Dixie. After the second transfusion he had rallied instantly and was getting stronger. The doctors expressed confidence that he was on the way to recovery.

Rex was surprised to learn that the Napoleonesque supervisor had sent word over to him as soon as she came on duty.

# Three

THE NECESSITY of writing to Mrs. Meyers brought back memories of training days when he and Dixie and the rest of the *Terrier's* first crew were assigned to duty together. It was years ago instead of months, if time be measured by events. Half of that group were dead, and two others were in the hospital, probably never to fly again. Only Trout, Rogers and himself were left. They had never expected anything like that while making operational flights back in the States. Theirs was a charmed crew in a charmed plane, destined to go sailing blithely through flak and fighter opposition without mishap. But it was not long until their faith in their own select invincibility was shattered. Bill Jordan saw to that.

The climax of Rex's early training came the night he was assigned to a combat crew at the crew-forming base out of Cheyenne. He had spent seven long arduous months in training, studying mathematics, learning motors and flying under heartless instructors who discharged a man at the first indication of weakness. They had to be heartless, for the cadets would some day be turned loose with a quarter of a million dollars' worth of airplane and an incalculable sum in men. But that did not make it any easier for Rex, wondering whether he would still be at the field. Those wings meant a great deal to him.

He made it easier than he had ever dreamed possible, and then he was sent to Cheyenne where nine other men, as eager as he, were assigned to fly with him.

Captain Doyle, who was just home from duty in the Solomons, introduced them to each other.

"There's one thing you birds want to remember," he said. "There isn't any such thing as rank in the air corps. All the brass and saluting stay on the ground. A Jap or Jerry slug'll kill a major just as quick as a buck private, and if one man on the plane lays down, it isn't safe for any of the rest to be in the air. Suppose one gunner quits. It leaves a pretty good hunk of airplane open to attack and makes it a lot riskier to complete a mission.



“That’s why the air corps doesn’t tell you who to fly with, or when. If you’ve got a hunch you ought to stay on the ground, that’s your privilege; and if there’s a member of your crew you don’t like, you don’t have to fly with him.” He paused a moment while they mulled over his words. “You guys are going to be eating and living and fighting together from now on, so you’d better be getting acquainted.”

In the days to come they were to feel a bond forged about them, and between them, to weld them into a single fighting force. They were to stand by one another with far greater loyalty than they had ever felt for their fraternity brothers in college. If one of them got into an argument he would immediately have nine firm supporters. And if another had trouble with his girl, nine kibitzers would be available.

However, for the present the conversation was reluctant and stiff. Other crews were talking animatedly in the long barn-like structure, but the ten men who were to fly the *Terrier* stood about awkwardly, looking one another over and making sporadic halfhearted attempts at conversation. Sentences dangled in the air, unsupported by interest or continuity, and fragments of speech trailed off into nothingness. The situation was becoming embarrassing.

Lieutenant Meyers, a gangling farm hand turned bombardier, stood with his hands on his hips and appraised Rex Madden with exaggerated severity.

“So you’re the guy who’s going to drive for me?” he mused, his slow drawl accentuating each syllable.

“What do you mean, drive for you? I’m the pilot. I’m going to be the boss of this airplane crew.”

“Ah-ah-ah,” he shook his finger at Rex. “You remember what the captain said. You got to play nice with us.”

They all laughed a little at that and some of the stiffness disappeared. Meyers shoved his cap back on his head in a very nonmilitary manner, to expose a sheaf of curly blond hair. He was warming up on Rex and the crew loved it.

“Besides, I’m your bombardier, Mr. Airplane Chauffeur. You got to be extra special nice to me or I won’t drop any eggs where you want ’em.”

“And I’m liable to warm me a bombardier right in the seat of the britches with a two by four,” Rex bantered, “if he tries that.”

The bombardier scratched his head speculatively, “You know, fellows, I don’t think this guy knows much about airplanes. He don’t look much like a

flier to me.”

“Come to think of it, he doesn’t,” the co-pilot put in.

“Nope. His ears aren’t big enough.”

“My mom warned me about guys like him. She said, ‘Now Lee Allen Meyers, don’t you let them put you in no flying machine ’less you’re sure the man who’s runnin’ it knows how.’ I’m going to take her advice.”

“You don’t suppose they made a mistake at the training field?” the radio operator said. “They’re turning out pilots awful fast. Maybe it’s like automobiles. Every once in awhile up turns a lemon.”

“And you think we might’ve got the lemon, is that it, Sergeant?”

“Could be.”

“Just wait till I get you guys up there with me,” Rex said, laughing. “I’ll show you whether I can fly or not.”

“And by that time it might be too late,” Meyers countered with mock sincerity. “What do you say we make him fly first? Maybe the CO would loan us an old B-17 so’s the loss wouldn’t be so big, just in case— There isn’t any use of wasting a good airplane and ten good men just to find out if a pilot knows the score.”

“Now you’re talkin’.”

“It’s all right with me. I’ll fly her blindfolded with my hands tied if that’ll make you feel any better.”

“You just fly her, Lieutenant. We’ll ride in her.”

“I’ll bet you’re from Georgia or Texas or Arkansas,” Rex said, mocking his dialect.

“You aren’t even close,” he contradicted. “I’m a Swede from Minnesota.”

“With that accent?”

“Okay, Yankee, I’m from Alabama.”

“Now that’s more like it. Come on, Dixie, let’s treat the boys to a coke.”

They got their own trim, olive drab “baby” to pamper and coax and abuse. She was an old plane that had seen her share of combat and had retired to quieter climes; but they could not have loved her more if they had put her together rivet by rivet, and tightened each nut themselves.

After a few leisurely, exploratory flights, during which the boys began to apply theory to actual experience, the training began. They were flying daily, from Cheyenne to Amarillo to Spokane to Los Angeles and back again. They sped across the desert on simulated bombing runs, dropping

live hundred-pounders among the wooden practice bombs and navigating by instruments and dead reckoning over unknown terrain. Then they flew out over the ocean some six or seven hundred miles to an infinitesimal heap of sand that thrust itself a bare twenty feet above the ocean level, there to land, refuel and return. Operations kept a constant check on the plane by radio, but Eddie Zorn plotted the course alone and hit it right on the nose. That was the proof of a good navigator. The crew cheered him as they circled the landing strip.

They turned north to battle snow flurries and south for thunder storms and high winds. In combat they would be operating in bad weather as well as good, and they had to learn to ride out storms and get the feel of their plane as she bucked headwinds. It meant something quite apart from bombing and war to sense the smooth, delicate, irresistible response of the B-17, even in nasty weather. As the young crew piled up the hours, their confidence in the big ship grew. It was an exhilarating thrill to be in the air in her. They all felt it.

The time not spent in flying was devoted to mechanics and the lecture room. Every member of the crew had two jobs which he had to learn thoroughly. Intelligence brought in men who had flown in combat over enemy territory and had acquired priceless knowledge concerning Jap and Jerry fighting planes and ack-ack. They reported the latest patterns of attack used by the enemy, and the methods that had been worked out to counteract each new trick.

A Captain Smith, slight, bronzed and prematurely gray, told of living three months in the hills of France with peasants and townspeople who risked their very lives to shelter him. Even the children knew of his presence and kept it secret. A Lieutenant Carmichael told of escaping an Italian prison camp and making his way to Switzerland and freedom. After each lecture the boys were better able to take care of themselves.

The crew expected furloughs when they completed the second phase of their training, but had to be content with three-day passes instead. Only the assistant engineer, who was near his home town, was able to visit his family. The rest went up into the mountains to a spot where a nameless stream spilled out of Bear Lake, tumbling downward in a series of rapids.

Some thoughtful mountaineer had built a pair of cabins beside the lake, anticipating, perhaps, a tourist rush that did not come. The road he had hewn into the side of the hill was overgrown with brush, and the cabins

were in poor repair; but, amply fortified with netting, the little shelters did keep out the mosquitoes. And the fishing was good.

For three glorious days Rex, Dixie and the crew forgot about planes and missions and bombs. They even forgot to be homesick, and the one thought that was weighing upon their minds was gone for a time. The second phase of their training was completed.

The third would be over in a whirl of operational flights and they would be ready for a new B-17 with the latest improvements, the routine Shakedown and then — overseas.

The second evening they learned that Dixie Meyers was different from most of them. They were sitting about a campfire swapping yarns and singing when he got out his accordion and began to play. It was a small box and his big hands seemed to swallow the keyboard as he gripped it.

In the west the sun was coasting cloudlessly behind distant hills, splashing gold and shadows on the cliffs. The wind was teasing pine needles in the trees above and they whispered their protestations. Now and again little ripples would go skittering across the water. It was getting colder, and one by one the boys slipped into their leather flying jackets and moved closer to the fire.

Dixie began playing softly, old haunting melodies that blended into the serenity of the evening. He drifted from song to song, singing snatches of them and humming when he did not know the words. Several others joined him, their subdued voices mingling in obligato to his rich full tenor. When he stopped playing they talked quietly of home and sweethearts and pleasant things.

“Let’s sing another, shall we, Dixie?” Rex asked after several moments of silence.

“All right.” He adjusted his accordion and sounded a chord with hushed feeling. His voice thrilled with love and devotion to the words. The soft accordion accompaniment was so soft as to be indistinguishable in itself. Yet it was there, lending color and harmony and beauty to the song.

I come to the garden alone,  
While the dew is still on the roses;  
And the voice I hear, falling on my ear,  
The Son of God discloses.

And He walks with me, and He talks with me,  
And He tells me I am His own,  
And the joy we share as we tarry there,  
None other has ever known.

He speaks, and the sound of His voice  
Is so sweet the birds hush their singing,  
And the melody that He gave to me,  
Within my heart is ringing...

The boys looked from one to another, startled by the sudden change of tempo. It had been quiet before, but now the silence, except for Dixie's gentle tenor, took on new majesty. The patch of grass and the campfire became a hallowed place, a chapel with trees for walls and the starlit sky for a roof.

It seemed that the Holy Spirit had descended to lend reverence and peace to the little group. When Dixie finished singing, the boys sat without talking, awed by the strange new feeling that had come over them. Some of them knew little of Christ Jesus, and yet they felt the glory of His Presence.

After a minute or two Bill Jordan got to his feet noisily. "I think I'll go out and have a smoke," he said.

Time slid silently by. The Wind stirred sleeping trees and fanned the dying embers of the fire. From a distant crag came the haunting howl of a wolf.

"I've always liked 'In the Garden'" Rogers said quietly, his tones matching the evening's sacred mood. "It's been my mother's favorite. She always sings it when she's troubled about something."

"The words do have a lot of consolation," Dixie agreed. "Isn't it wonderful to know that we have the privilege of walking with Him?"

"It sort of makes a fellow think, doesn't it?"

"You know I used to refuse to go to church with my girl," the radio operator observed. "But here I sit listening to you guys and loving it. It's hard to believe there's even a war on anywhere in the world, it's so peaceful here. Why do you suppose God lets things get into such a mess, anyway?"

There was a long silence.

"I don't think it's God; I think it's us," young Rogers replied. "Hatred and greed and sin have caused this war, just like all the rest. It's man who's to be blamed, not God."

A shooting star streamed across the heavens and vanished; their eyes followed its flaming path.

“Looks just like a tracer, doesn’t it?”

“I wonder if they’ll seem that harmless and pretty when Jerry starts arcing them up at us?”

“We ought to know before long.” Dixie’s eyes wandered over the group, resting on each tanned face. “I wonder how many of us will come back?”

They stirred momentarily, jarred back to the immediate present by his words. If anyone else had talked in such a manner they would have hooted him down, but this was Dixie. His warm quick smile and his understanding had made him one of the most beloved in the crew. His reputation among them gave weight and dignity to his words.

“It isn’t pleasant to think about, I know, but it’s something we’ve all had on our minds for weeks. While we’ve been sitting here, warmed by the very Presence of Jesus, I’ve been wondering how many of us are prepared for the things we’re going to have to face.”

“Of course we’re prepared, Dixie,” Rex cut in. “We’ve been in various kinds of training more than a year already, and we’ve still got one phase to complete. We’ll be ready.”

“Yes, we’ll be prepared physically, and as mentally ready as possible, but will we be prepared spiritually? Will the Lord Jesus Christ mean anything to us?”

Bill Jordan had sauntered back to the circle and was leaning against a tree. He would have spoken tauntingly, but no one gave him attention. Their interest had been captured by Dixie.

“Without thinking of Him and His power to save and watch over me, I’m terrified at the thought of flying over Germany,” he went on. “We’re going to need Christ over there more than we’ve ever needed Him before. I don’t think it’s out of keeping for each one of us to search our hearts tonight. If there isn’t a place for Jesus in your hearts, then make one for Him. Confess your sins and let Him show you the way of salvation.”

He picked up his accordion and played the hymn through again, restrained and meaningful, and sang the chorus.

“Let’s have ‘The Old Rugged Cross’ before we turn in,” Bob Trout suggested.

The entire crew, with the exception of Jordan, sang as much of the song as they knew. When it was finished they got to their feet, kicked sand over

the last red coals of the fire and trooped silently into the cabins. The evening had made a profound impression upon them.

At the door of his cabin Bill Jordan stopped and called to Dixie, "Good night, Reverend." His voice was mocking and edged with sarcasm.

"Lay off that, Bill," Trout ordered, out of the darkness.

"I suppose you like to be preached to?"

"What I like or don't like is my business. You just lay off of Dixie."

The next morning the crew paired off and went fishing. Dixie and Rex were together as usual, walking downstream to a trout pool they had discovered the day before. They had taken a number of fish, and the rises had been frequent and vicious enough to bring them back.

The trout were as wary as they were bellicose and it took a deal of fishing to fool them. Dixie was standing close to the shore, shivering in his waders for the water was cold, and Rex was near the middle of the stream.

"I didn't know you were planning to go into the ministry," Rex said by way of opening conversation.

Dixie snap-cast a royal coachman out into the clear cold pool and twitched it tantalizingly, his arms poised for the strike. "I'm not," he replied. "I've never even considered going into the ministry. What kind of a fly are you using?"

"Silver doctor." He was standing knee-deep in the stream, adjusting his leader. "But I thought... last night..."

Dixie laid aside his rod and sat down on a boulder. "No, I haven't even thought of being a minister. Why?"

"I guess I was taking it for granted after the things you said."

"I only said the things that were in my heart. I know what believing in Jesus Christ has done for me, and I know some of these youngsters are going to need Him when the going gets tough. That's the reason I spoke as I did."

"I can understand that," Rex replied, in a tone that revealed quite plainly that he did not understand at all. "But I've been wondering whether it's good for the crew or not. Bill Jordan took offense last night, and I'm afraid he won't forget it very easy. He's quite a hothead."

"I'm sorry about that, Rex. I didn't want to offend anyone."

"I know you well enough to know that. But we can't have any ill feeling in the crew, even if it is all one-sided." He was finding it difficult to put his thoughts into words. He did not want to hurt Dixie, but he was the skipper

“of the crew, and they could not have trouble.” Maybe we’d better kind of drop the subject of religion while he’s around. How about it?”

“Anything you say,” Dixie said soberly. “But I wish it were possible to get him to realize what he’s shutting out of his life. I think he must have been under conviction last night or he wouldn’t have been so irritable.”

Now that he had said what he felt impelled to say, Rex Madden directed the subject to other channels. Dixie’s vibrant living faith annoyed him almost as much as it had Jordan, but not for the same reason. It pointed to the shocking contrast between the way Dixie Meyers was living the Christian life and the way Rex was living it.

Rex had believed himself to be a Christian since he had become a member of church. He had acquired a working knowledge of the Scriptures and salvation. He knew the meaning of being “born again.” Then he settled down to living an exemplary virtuous life that had earned the commendation of the mothers in his home town and his own unspoken but nonetheless evident self-approval.

To Rex, being a Christian had never meant speaking out for the kingdom as Dixie had done the night before. His Christianity seldom concerned itself with others. It had been definitely a personal affair. It had hurt to have Dixie, by his actions, point so glaringly at the holes in his armor.

That evening they packed their bags and went back to the base for the third and final phase of their training.



# Four

DURING THE NEXT FEW WEEKS they were in the air every day, flying singly and in formation, doing high-level bombing, and diving low to skim whitecaps with the big ship's belly as they skip-bombed.

Skip-bombing was one thing for a fighter plane, or even the heavier B-25 Medium, and quite another for the four-motored thirty-two-ton Fortress designed for high altitude operation. But under fire it proved as successful as it was dangerous, so it was given an important place in the curriculum of crews who might see action against surface craft.

Of all the tasks they had to perform that was the most breath-taking. The squadron came in at high altitude, drawing enemy fire and keeping attention, as long as possible, from the lone plane that was plummeting out of the sky for the kill. The crew, except for the ball turret gunner, would be at their regular battle stations, with nerves taut and breath coming in short quick gasps. The ball turret gunner would be straddling the open bomb bay to kick out the bomb at precisely the right instant. The crew laughed at the way Rogers sweat before going to his post, but none of them envied him his job. It was enough to feel the heavy plane hurtling down towards the water, and to see the ship that had been selected as a target loom up suddenly before their eyes. Although they trusted Rex to pull out in time, they all breathed a bit easier when it was over.

Every phase of the training was intensified a dozen-fold and carried out as nearly as possible under actual war conditions. They went into alert rooms to be briefed for missions, there to remain until the hour to take off. They flew under sealed orders, not knowing their destination until they reached an altitude of five or ten or fifteen thousand feet and opened their orders.

Whenever they came in at the base a ground crew swarmed over their plane, tuning it to minute perfection. It was always ready at any time to fly for an hour or as long as the gasoline in the tanks held out, depending upon the occasion. The crew might fly to Alaska, Miami or circle the field twice

and land. They never knew what to expect when they climbed into their plane.

Before each flight the doctor examined them. Even a cold can have serious consequences in high altitudes. A trace of alcohol was enough to upset the most physically perfect flyer. Even the heaviest drinkers in their squadron soon learned, from being ordered to stay on the ground, that abstinence went with flying at thirty thousand feet.

The crew took on a new seriousness as they realized that the day was nearing when they would head out over an ocean for the “big show.” Rumors were rife at the bases where they landed. Somebody heard they were being sent to Alaska, and another had inside information that they would be based in Greenland on patrol. And a third soldier, who claimed to have been the crew chief for General Marshall’s personal plane when it was at the base a short time before, said that he had on absolute authority — the name was missing, but he left no doubt as to who the authority was—that all the B-17 crews were to be ordered back to training in some new and terrible type of bombing. The grapevine had it that they were going to England, North Africa, Egypt, Australia and the Aleutians, in that order. At first the boys repeated every story breathlessly, their spirits soaring or falling, according to the location of their supposed destination, but they soon learned to correctly evaluate the rumors. Only a select few knew the actual destination of individual planes and they were not given to careless talking.

Dixie Meyers heeded Rex’s request and said nothing to the young tail gunner regarding spiritual things, but the situation did not ease. Time only aggravated it.

Bill Jordan looked down upon the Southern boy disdainfully, as if being a Christian pointed to a serious flaw of character. It was obvious that he felt himself above and beyond Dixie’s radiant faith in the Lord Jesus. Although Meyers outranked him, rating a gold bar to his own three stripes, he never missed an opportunity to insult him. On the ground he persisted in ridiculing the bombardier, and in the air he made slurring remarks into the interphone.

“Tail gunner to bombardier, tail gunner to bombardier, go, ahead, bombardier,” he said into the throat mike.

“Bombardier to tail gunner. Go ahead, tail gunner.”

“How about it, Dixie, are you going to pray for all those little Huns and Japs you drop your bombs on?”

"Of course I will, Bill. And you might like to know that I'm praying for you, too. I'm praying

that you will confess your sins and come to the Lord Jesus on your knees."

That ended the conversation, for Bill switched off his interphone. Later in the week they were all sitting in a café in Salt Lake City on one of their rare evenings off when Bill, his ribald voice carrying to the surrounding tables in the crowded café, opened the subject again.

“Tell me, Dixie,” he asked, leaning forward in his chair importantly, “how do you live with yourself? Dropping bombs in the daytime and praying at night. Is it ‘Let not thy right hand know what thy left hand doeth’?”

The crew would have risen as one to silence him, but Dixie seemed capable of handling the situation alone. Rex started to interfere, but changed his mind. After all, Bill was asking for it.

If he was expecting his bombardier to pounce upon the tail gunner verbally, he was wrong. Dixie spoke with the sincerity of one who assumes the sincerity of his companion. His voice was not loud and boisterous, but he, too, spoke clearly enough to permit those at the tables close by to hear what he had to say.

“To my way of thinking there isn't any contradiction between being a bombardier and a Christian, Bill,” he replied. "We didn't start this war, and we didn't start the bombing of cities. You and I and the rest of the crew aren't going to get any fun out of killing. It's just a job that's got to be done a messy, dirty job that's ruthless because all fighting for survival is ruthless. Every time we drop a bomb on a Jerry factory or ammunition dump, we're contributing just that much to the shortening of the war. And whenever we destroy a submarine we're removing one more menace to American shipping and American lives.

“You asked me the other day if I was going to pray for the victims of my bombs. Of course I am. I'm going to pray that my bombs may hit their targets and spare innocent women and children. I'm going to pray that the bombs I drop will wreak great havoc among enemy war industries so that all free people may worship their God in safety and peace again.”

His argument left Bill Jordan unconvinced, for he had not opened the subject to be convinced of anything, but only to ridicule. However, the force of Dixie's convictions left the arrogant little tail gunner without words to continue the attack.

Presently dinner was over and the crew scattered for the evening. When Rex and Dixie were alone the pilot said, "I'm going to have Bill taken out of our crew, Dixie. He's a trouble maker and a hothead. This affair tonight was too much. I wouldn't have blamed you if you'd knocked that nose of his clear down his throat."

The bombardier smiled slightly. "It's not as bad as all that. If he gets any fun out of riding me, he's welcome to it. He doesn't bother me."

"Just the same I don't like it. I'm going to have him moved." "

"I wish you wouldn't, Rex. He can't get me mad at him, but he's going to think I caused him to be removed from the crew. I wouldn't want that."

After considerable persuasion Rex decided to let Bill stay.

The next morning before dawn they were called into the alert room and briefed for a trip to the Kearney Air Base, a new field just completed on the Platte River between Cheyenne and Omaha. All forty five planes were on the line, their tarps taken off and their engines warmed; great prehistoric monsters of the air squatting uncomfortably along the runways, as though they sensed their uselessness upon the ground and were impatient to be away. Looking at the rows of somber, olive drab planes, one was profoundly impressed by the huge tails. The fins rose from the sleek fuselage like hills rising out of nowhere on the flat, level desert, or like a row of cottonwoods standing proudly alone, and in a line along a prairie fence. They were spectacularly impressive, the first thing one saw and the last thing he forgot about the Flying Fortresses.

One by one the big ships caught the signal, taxied down the runway and took off, circling the field. Then they maneuvered into formation in groups of three and headed out across the mountains, the mighty tattoo of a hundred and eighty motors presaging their coming.

The meteorologist predicted cross-winds and rain with considerable electricity in the mountain region around Yellowstone, and he warned of dust storms on the plains beyond. But the time had passed when they became upset at the weather.

The air was rough and the swirling clouds gave evidence that the storm predicted might not be long in overtaking them. They were flying high

through opaque cloud curtains to avoid the mountains, and the navigator was charting the course without the benefit of landmarks. That, also, had become routine, for church steeples and creeks have a tendency to blur into the terrain at twenty or thirty thousand feet.

The navigator in the flight commander's plane was doing the work, but Eddie Zorn followed through for the practice it afforded.

The crescendoing cross-wind was pushing and clawing at a forty-degree angle and it became increasingly difficult to hold the planes together and on their course. Under orders the planes began to spread out, each allowing itself more space in the formation. The danger of a collision at close quarters was infinitely greater in a storm.

Lightning was cleaving the heavens with a blinding flash to wreak its vengeance on some unsuspecting spot below, and the darkness was deepening rapidly. Rex Madden's crew could scarcely make out the wing tips of the planes at either side. The big craft was being tossed and rolled by the winds like a toy boat in the gutter.

"Flight commander to all planes! Flight commander to all planes! Disperse and proceed to nearest airfield."

"Roger," they chorused.

"And may God go with you."

"What're we going to do, Rex?" The voice was tense and hysterical on the interphone. "What're we going to do?"

"Pilot to tail gunner! Go ahead, tail gunner!"

"Go ahead, pilot." The panic was still there, suppressed but breathless. A word of sympathy or assurance might provide the spark.

"Is that the way you were taught to use the interphone?"

A hesitant "N-no, sir." The "sir" was not required, but Rex's forcefulness commanded it.

"Then don't go bellowing into your mike like a scared calf. Use it in regulation manner."

There was no answer.

"Roger?"

Reluctantly, "Roger."

Rex was already switching his attention to other things. The rest of the group had been swallowed by darkness as they fanned out in the perilous search for a haven, and Rex's ship was left alone. He was glad to know that Eddie Zorn was sitting up front at the navigator's table. On trips like this

the navigator's ability to pick up their exact position in the sea of indigo and guide them safely to a landing strip could mean the difference between life and death to all of them.

"Pilot to navigator. Pilot to navigator. Come in, Eddie."

"Navigator to pilot. Come in, Rex."

"Where's the nearest airfield, kiddo?"

"Mileston, Montana." He had been anticipating such an action by the flight commander, and had already made the necessary calculations; "It's west and north of here, but we'll have a tail wind."

"O.K., you give me the course and we'll go home to mama."

"Roger."

They negotiated a turn and rode with the wind, their tired engines coasting. It seemed that the fury of the storm lessened as soon as they ceased battling it and turned about. The strain was less on the plane and men alike. They began to joke a little over the interphone, kidding one another and singing snatches of songs. However, they noticeably avoided any mention of Bill Jordan's near hysteria. His voice, usually so prominent, was scarcely heard at all, and then it was strained and unnatural.

As they neared the base Rex called the radio operator. "Come on there, fellow, you've got work to do. Identify us and get some landing instructions."

"Boy, I'm glad to hear them kind words. An hour ago I was wondering if I'd. ever hear them again." In a moment he was back. "She's dead as a pickled catfish, Rex."

"Can you fix it?"

"Give me fifteen minutes and I'll tell you."

Rex looked at his gas gauge. The engines had really been sucking up the fuel during the storm. He had been watching the gauges for a hundred miles, calculating and hoping and calculating again. The co-pilot saw it too, and their eyes met questioningly. He would have told the crew, but with Jordan on the verge of hysteria he decided against it. Now they were nearing the field and it did not matter.

"We've got about five minutes' gasoline to spare. It looks like we'll have to drop in unannounced and surprise them."

"Anything, anything," the radio operator said with mock resignation. "Just so we get both feet on the ground again."

They dropped out of the clouds and circled the base two or three times, getting the lay of the runways. There were several long ones suitable for bombers, but they were blocked with planes.

“It looks like one of the baby ones for us,” he muttered under his breath. “Everybody at crash stations. Susan hasn’t used such a little stall before.” He turned and began to glide downward. “Here we go!”

The wheels touched lightly on the ground and the tail settled back as daintily as a swallow descending to her nest. The crew relaxed, but only momentarily.

“Look out!” the co-pilot shouted.

“Grab the brakes!”

The landing strip was rapidly running out, and at the end a cliff sliced down a hundred and fifty feet. There was a screech as the emergency brakes locked; the plane careened and went up on its nose, sheering two props and damaging the superstructure. The crew crawled out, shaken but uninjured.

It took two days to put the big craft back into flying condition. New parts were flown in by plane from Denver and mechanics worked long hours repairing it.

Other planes in the group had not fared so well. One had been struck by lightning and burned in the air, and another crashed into a mountainside, and all the crew were killed. The Fortresses were spread over a five-hundred-mile circle, scattered like chaff by the wind.

Rex communicated with Salt Lake City immediately and was ordered to leave for Kearney as soon as the plane was repaired.

For two days the crew relaxed and enjoyed themselves. They slept and ate without thought of time. They had been putting in stiff hours since their little jaunt into the mountains before the third phase began, and they were nearly exhausted.

Rex sought out Bill Jordan the morning after they landed and apologized for being so rough with him.

“You know I didn’t mean what I said, Bill,” he told him. “But you sounded kind of excited and I wanted to make you so mad at me you’d forget the storm for awhile.”

“That’s all right.” But his tones lacked their former confidence. His eyes were listless and his face pallid and drawn. He was still visibly shaken.

The pilot watched him carefully, not liking what he saw. The fellows had been talking about Bill the night before. They all knew what had happened and were concerned about him. It reflected upon the entire crew to have a man dismissed for lack of courage, and above anything else, they wanted to prevent that.

“What’s he going to do when we go overseas?” the armorer asked.

“We’ve got to have a gun in that tail we can depend on. Why, it might be curtains for the whole flight if he’d go to pieces on a mission.” And that was no exaggeration, for the flights were arranged in groups of three so that each gunner could cover a segment of the skies. One gun out left the entire flight vulnerable from that position.

“He’s just a kid,” Rex put in. “He’ll come out of it once he gets a little seasoning under fire.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure of that.”

And so the conversation went. There seemed to be no solution, only concern.

It was Rogers who suggested that Dixie talk with him.

“I’ve tried to,” he protested, “but you know how he acts to me. I wouldn’t be able to get near him at all.”

“I wish you’d talk to him anyway,” the ball turret gunner insisted. “I know what he needs, and so do you.”

Dixie nodded. “I know what we all need.”

“And you’re the only one who knows enough about it. I’ll go with you if you want me to.”

The rest of the crew agreed heartily. Even those who were definitely not Christians could see Bill Jordan’s need for Jesus, although they could not see their own.

Dixie prayed long about the arrogant tail gunner. The task of talking to him of Christ had to be done delicately. It would not do to force the discussion, or begin while others were present; if he did, he would be finished before he began. He would have to pry in at the corners of the door with which Bill Jordan had shut out the Lord. He would have to pique his interest and gain his attention so that he would hear him out. So he prayed and watched and waited.



# Five

REX THOUGHT they would get away Monday evening, but the crew chief had not finished the repairs.

“We’ve still got a little more to do on her, sir,” he told Rex. “The oil pressure’s weak on number four,” and I don’t like the way number one’s new prop is adjusted. But the boys are working on her and she’ll be gassed and warmed up and ready to go anytime you want her after four in the morning.”

“Thank you, Sergeant. We’ll be out at four.” He turned to Dixie. “Well, it looks like we don’t go upstairs tonight.”

“That’s all right with me. I can use a little sleep.”

Back at operations the officer in charge said, “I was just going to look you up, Lieutenant. Do you need a little ballast on your trip tomorrow?”

“I don’t know. Why?”

“I thought you might have room in your bomb bay for about a hundred and seventy pounds of army nurse. She’s going to Kearney too, so I took the liberty of telling her you’d give her a lift.”

“You bet we will. I’ll have the engineer put her name on the flight list.” He thought a moment. “Did you say she weighed a hundred and seven pounds or a hundred and seventy?”

The officer laughed. “She’s married, fat and forty, so you can put the old charm back in moth balls.”

“That’s just my luck. The last woman who rode with us was a skinny old spinster who persisted in calling me the driver and the co-pilot my helper; and him with brand new gold bars. You should have heard him rave!”

The next morning at four, Lieutenant Mildred Patterson was shivering in the darkness outside operations, waiting for the crew. Down on the line the big motors were idling and the crew chief was checking the action of the troublesome oil line and the faulty prop.

When the boys came out of the little office the nurse stepped up to Dixie, who happened to be the closest to her.

“A-are you with the crew of the plane that’s going to Kearney?” A nurse was supposed to carry rank equal to that of commissioned male officers, but she had not yet learned to assume it.

“Yes, ma’am. I sure am.”

The others stopped and crowded close, trying to make out her features in the dim light.

“I’m Lieutenant Patterson. Operations told me they were sure I could ride with you. I’m being transferred to the Kearney Base.”

Rex elbowed his way to the front. Even in the darkness he could see that operations had been deliberately deceiving him. He knew that she must be beautiful from the sound of her voice.

“I don’t believe it.”

She drew herself up to his shoulder and stared into his eyes. Her voice was sharp and indignant. “I have my papers right here, Lieutenant. And I’m not used to being told I’ve lied.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean that. The fellow at operations who talked to you told me you were married, fat and forty. I don’t believe it.”

When the laughter died away she said coldly and impersonally, “You still haven’t told me whether I may ride with you or not.”

“Well, that depends. What’s it worth to you?”

“I didn’t know the army was allowing its pilots to haul passengers for hire. It must be something new.”

“No, they just let us take a little bribe now and then to get a name put on the flight list by the engineer. Like your having dinner with me this evening, for example.”

“If the engineer is the one who puts my name on the flight list, perhaps I should have dinner with him.”

“Now you’re talking, Miss,” Bob Trout put in. “This lug doesn’t know how to treat a lady.”

“Oh, you wouldn’t like going with him,” Rex continued, ignoring his engineer. “He eats garlic and dunks his bread in his coffee. Besides, he’s got a girl who just sits home and cries every time somebody tells her that her ‘flying Casanova’ has had dinner with another girl.”

Trout opened his mouth to deny it vehemently, but Dixie took over before he could say a word.

“Why don’t you just put both of these guys on ice, Lieutenant?” he asked. “Besides, if you tell one of them you’ll have dinner with him now

you might be sorry before evening comes.” He took her by the arm and began to lead her towards the plane. “Now if you want a good seat in this B-17 you can get up in the bombardier’s compartment with me. We sit right out front where you can see everything. You wouldn’t believe it, but the whole airplane was built just for the bombardier’s compartment...” They passed out of hearing of the rest of the crew.

“I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t seen it,”

Rogers breathed admiringly. “Fat chance any of the rest of us’ve got as long as he’s around.”

They got into the plane and Rex took off into a stiff west wind and circled to ride with it over the hills. Flying at dawn, with motors adjusted to such precision they would respond to a feather on the controls, he felt a sense of strength that did not come to him on the ground. He was beyond the reach of man. Nothing could touch him or the plane he flew.

The crew chief had done an excellent job on the B-17 and they cruised along at two hundred miles an hour, just below the altitude that would force their guest to use oxygen.

Patty was delighted with the trip. (Dixie was calling her that before they had taxied to the end of the runway.) It was the first time she had been in a B-17 or anything half its size, and it seemed to her that the bombardier was right when he said that the whole airplane was built around his compartment.

The world stretched out beneath them, a mottled hodgepodge of color and shadows in the early sun. Lilliputian towns pushed up from the green forests to establish minute claims on the hills. The sordidness and dirt were bid from such heights and they looked fresh and clean and beautiful. Silvered threads twisted down the mountainsides to form Silvered rope in the valley.

“Oh, it’s marvelous!” Patty murmured.

Dixie was silent. While she was engrossed in the scene below he studied her carefully. There was no doubt that she was a newly appointed army nurse, just out of school somewhere and going to her first post. There was a stiff uneasy newness about her uniform, and her cap lacked the jaunty confidence time acquires.

There was also a freshness about her; the clean wholesome look of the girl who lived next door or up the street from home. She was not classically beautiful, he decided. But her attractiveness was all the more captivating

for it. That deep-throated laugh and the smile in her eyes welled from a happy soul.

“I notice, Lieutenant,” he smiled, “that you’ve got the pocket of your blouse unbuttoned. Regulations, you know.”

She blushed and fumbled with the pocket flap. “I’m afraid I’m going to be court-martialed before I learn all the regulations.”

“They couldn’t court-martial the prettiest nurse in the army. Why, there’d be a revolution.”

“Oh, go along with you.”

“I’ll bet you picked up that phrase from your grandmother. Mine used to say that every time I teased her.”

Patty nodded, smiling.

“But to get back to that pocket. I’ll bet you’ve got either cigarettes or a Testament in it?”

“And why not both?”

“I don’t think they go together very well, do you?”

She laughed. “It’s my Testament, Mr. Detective. I was reading it before going to bed last night.”

“I thought so. I could see it in your face.”

“That I was reading it before I went to bed last night?”

“No, that you placed your trust in the Lord.”

“I didn’t know it showed.”

“But it does. Everything you are or have been shows in your face — sorrow, worry, sin, faith. You can’t hide it.”

“You’re a philosopher as well as a bombardier, aren’t you?”

He would have answered, but there was a voice on the interphone. “Pilot to bombardier. Pilot to bombardier. Go ahead, bombardier.”

“Bombardier to pilot, go ahead, Rex.”

“If you interfere with my date tonight I’ll grind you to a pulp.”

Dixie looked over at his companion and grinned. “I haven’t taken care of that matter yet, Lieutenant Madden, but I’ll do so immediately. I’ll call you as soon as there is anything to report.”

Without turning off the interphone he said, “I’ll bet I could find a swell little café in Kearney if I had you to help me hunt for it. Do you think that could be arranged, Patty?”

“You double-crossing Irishman!” came over the interphone. “I’ll get even with you! I’ll...”

“Thanks, Dixie,” Mildred Patterson replied. “I’d like to, but I really feel obligated to go with that Lieutenant Madden, or whatever his name is. After all, he did get me a ride, and I’ve enjoyed it so very much.”

“But you’d rather go with me, wouldn’t you?”

Her eyes were teasing him. “I’ve never been with him, so how would I know?”

“I can tell you right now you wouldn’t like him. He...”

Everyone was talking over the interphone at once.

“And I thought we were pals,” Madden moaned. “Just listen to him, and after all I’ve done for him too. He ought to be lynched...And you will be when I get my hands on you, Dixie Meyers!” he promised darkly.

“Give it to him, Rex, pour it on.”

“Too bad you can’t go up there and protect your interests with that Dixie terror on the loose,” someone chortled from his post.

“That’s all right, Dixie,” Bob Trout put in. “Hold your ground, don’t let him scare you. Why, he knifed me the same as you’re doing to him, so what’s he got to squawk about? Take her away from him. I’m for you!”

Dixie Meyers muffled his throat mike with his hand. There were some things a fellow did not want even his friends to hear.

“You know, Patty, Rex is just kidding about all of this. Why, he didn’t even get a good look at you this morning before we took off. I’ll bet he wouldn’t recognize you if he met you on the street.”

She turned, smiling. “You put up a convincing argument, Lieutenant. Do you always double-cross your friends?”

“I reserve that for special occasions,” he replied, “when there’s a pretty girl like you involved.” He could see she was weakening and he pressed his slight advantage. “Besides, this might be the only night we’ll be at Kearney. I think we’ll be there longer, but we’re getting ‘hot’ and they don’t leave us at one place very long. If you don’t go into town with me tonight we might never see each other again.” Dixie stopped short. “There is a town close to this base, isn’t there?”

Patty thought a moment. “I think there must be. I’ve got a girl friend who’s going to school in a Kearney, Nebraska. The base must be quite close to have the same name.”

“That settles it,” he announced. “You call the girl friend for Rex, and you go with me.”

“I’m not sure I can locate her,” she protested. I haven’t heard from her in months. She really isn’t my girl friend; I just know her a little. She might be home on a vacation, or she may not have even come back last fall.”

But Dixie would hear no excuses, and he planned gleefully for their date.

As soon as they landed and crawled out of the plane he grabbed Patty’s bags and shuttled her away from the crew towards the hospital where she was to report for duty.

“I’ll see you at supper, young lady,” Rex called after her.

“Don’t count on it,” she said.

Rex thought it strange that Dixie gave in so easily when he announced that he was taking their passenger to dinner.

The bombardier had answered very resignedly, “She’s calling a girl friend now. We’ll meet you at the PX about four-thirty, after you make your report.”

It was as simple as that, and Rex had not suspected a thing, even when he walked into the PX and approached Dixie and the two girls. One was Miss Patterson, trim and efficient in her uniform, and the other a very attractive young blonde who was wearing a cool white dress to bring out the brown of her eyes.

Dixie came forward to meet him, with the little blonde in tow. “Miss Banks, I want you to meet Lieutenant Rex Madden, the best pilot in the 85 Bomber Group.”

Then he saw what was happening, but by that time it was too late. Dixie and Miss Patterson had fallen in behind him and Wilma Banks, and the four of them walked over to the bus stop. Not that he minded it at all, for the blonde was beautiful. On the contrary, he was glad it happened, for she was different from any girl he had ever met.

He had never known anyone quite like her, so sweet and innocent, and so utterly charming. When he teased her a little her eyes grew wide, as though tears trembled there, while she studied his face to see if he meant what he was saying. Her heart was as tender as that of his big springer spaniel at home. Old Jake had looked at him with much that same hurt, hopeful expression in his eyes when he donned his hunting clothes and, just in fun, ordered the dog to the house.

“I’m not the one who was supposed to be with you,” she told him seriously. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“Mind? Why, of course not,” he said, meaning it. “I’d a lot rather be with you than Mildred Patterson.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean her.” In her seriousness she did not catch the implication. “You see, Miss Patterson called the dormitory for Beulah Johnson and I answered the telephone. Beulah was gone, so Miss Patterson told me who she was and asked me if I’d like to go out with a handsome young officer for dinner. I don’t usually go out on blind dates, but I’d heard Beulah speak of Mildred Patterson, and with her recommendation and all — well,” she gave an embarrassed little laugh, “here I am.”

Rex squeezed her arm in answer. It made him feel good to know that she did not make it a practice of blind dating, and that she felt obligated to explain her presence to him.

He did not know when he first decided he had fallen in love with her. It may have been as he walked across the rough floor of the PX to meet her for the first time, or it could have been the evening they went for a boat ride on the reservoir north of town. Or perhaps when they walked hand in hand up and down the broad tree-lined streets and talked of many things. He did not know when or why, but only that he felt he could not live without her.

There were little indications that she returned his love, for instance, the night, some two weeks later, when he told her about the new planes.

“We got a little surprise today, Wilma,” he said casually. But it wasn’t a casual thing to him, and the importance he gave it was reflected in his voice despite his efforts to keep it down. “They gave us a new B-17, just off the assembly line. It’s got everything—or will have when they get through with her at the base. Believe me, we’re really getting ‘hot.’”

She tried to be brave about it. “What does that mean?”

Rex smiled tolerantly at her ignorance. “A ‘hot’ squadron is one that’s about ready to go over after a little of this action we’ve been training so long to get.”

“I don’t want to hear about it, Rex,” she said softly, her voice catching with emotion. “I can’t stand to think of your going away.”

“But, honey, we’re going in the safest plane in the world. Why the B-17 can’t be shot out of the air. It’s safer than your rocking chair at home. You don’t need to worry about me.”

“You will come back to me, won’t you?”

“Of course I will.”

She turned, and he kissed her tenderly, lingering, as if it might be the last time as well as the first.



# Six

IT WAS EVIDENT to everyone at the base that the laughing, grim young men who made up the 85 Bomber Group were soon to be transferred overseas. New clothing was issued to them in quantities: gabardine coveralls; fur-lined flying suits with an arrangement of zippers that permitted the wearer to shed it in the air in case he should be forced to bail out over water; poleroid sun glasses with unbreakable lenses — the best money could obtain, for Jerry fighters like to hide in the sun and pounce down upon unsuspecting bombers; and new leather flying jackets as soft as the skin on a baby's cheek and as tough as the armor on the fuselage of their favorite planes. Anything fliers could want or need was issued freely. If something should happen to them “over there,” it would not be because of lack of equipment or preparation.

The magnificent new B-17's had nearly finished the Shakedown flights, and Dixie had yet to contact Bill Jordan. He had been watching for the opportunity, and once or twice would have attempted to talk with him, but he seemed more inaccessible than ever, his dark eyes flashing defiance whenever the bombardier approached. He sensed Dixie's motives and resented them.

The crew was growing increasingly concerned about their tail gunner. He had associated freely with them before, joining in the fun and seeking companionship for infrequent sorties into town, but now he was taciturn and preferred to be alone.

Shadowed crescents crept into the hollows above his cheek bones, darkening his pallid face; and the marks of strange emotions could be seen on his narrow lips and in the corners of his eyes. They all knew those emotions well, for they fought against them constantly — worry, futility, indecision, homesickness, the overwhelming desire to exist and, worst of all, fear.

Fear can be an uncontrollable, ugly thing, stampeding reason and crushing self-respect. It can seize minds and paralyze muscles until man

becomes a cringing, helpless creature. It can gnaw at courage with an insatiable appetite, once man gives in to it and begins to think about himself and the immediate, unpredictable future. That was what worried the crew. They feared that Bill was beginning to think and to brood.

The bombardier had almost given up trying to contact him, when they met quite unexpectedly in a café on Central Avenue one evening. At least it was unexpected to Dixie. He tired of army food and had come to town for a steak that tasted like a steak.

Mildred Patterson had planned to come in with him, but she was forced to remain on duty for an unscheduled appendectomy. So the bombardier came in alone.

He saw Jordan when the latter first entered the café, standing to one side of the doorway, scanning the tables and booths; and he was surprised when the gunner made his way over to the booth where he was sitting.

“Hello, Dixie,” he said casually. “Are you alone?”

He nodded and replied, “I was just wanting company. Won’t you sit down?”

The conversation was disconnected and strained. Their many slurring remarks and the bitter derision could not be put aside in a moment. They ate in comparative silence and were dawdling over their coffee when Bill said suddenly, “Dixie, I’ve got to talk to some one.” All bravado was gone and his voice was hushed and tense.

Dixie looked at him sympathetically.

“What’s the matter with me?” he demanded. “The boys are afraid of me. They’re afraid of what I’ll do when we get overseas.”

“If they’re concerned, it’s because they like you, I’m sure.”

“Or maybe they want someone else in the tail gun. Is that it?” But before the bombardier could speak he hurried on, the words tumbling over themselves in haste, as though they had been too long suppressed. “Do they talk about you like that? Do they get together in huddles and then shut up when you come along?”

Dixie reached for his check. “Let’s go out for a walk, Bill, where we can talk without interruption.”

The distraught gunner followed him outside, and they walked west and north towards the park.

“Oh, Heavenly Father,” Dixie prayed silently, “Help me to show him the Way.”

They stopped in an empty corner of the park and sat down at a picnic table.

“What’s wrong with me?” Bill asked again as soon as they were seated.

“Well,” Dixie began, choosing his words as carefully as a mechanic chooses the tools to assemble a motor, “the boys are concerned about you, that’s true.

They don’t want another tail gunner or they’d ask for one. We don’t have to fly with anyone we don’t want to fly with, you know. They’re afraid, from the way you’ve been acting since we’ve been getting ‘hot,’ that you’ll crack up when the going’s tough.”

He expected Jordan to speak loudly in denial, but instead he clasped his hands so tightly together that the finger tips showed white. “I’m scared, Dixie,” he choked. “I’m scared to death.”

“There’s not a thing I can do for you, Bill,” Dixie answered. “I can’t even help myself. But there is One to whom we both can turn.” He took a thin limp leather Bible from his jacket and thumbed through it to the book of Isaiah: Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness ’...For I the Lord thy God will hold thy right hand, saying unto thee, Fear not; I will help thee.

“I wish I could believe that,” Bill Jordan said fervently.

“You can,” Dixie replied. “When I think of going into combat alone I get weak with fear. But the knowledge that the Lord Jesus is with me constantly — that I am His, and that my life is in His hands — permits me to go anywhere with the blessed assurance that God is watching over me.”

“It must be wonderful to have faith like that.”

“It’s wonderful to have a Christ like that, Bill.

And the best part of it is that it’s ours for the asking. It can’t be bought with church membership or earned by good works. It’s a gift from God, given freely to any who sincerely and honestly seek it.”

Dixie hesitated, studying the tail gunner’s face. Turmoil was reflected there.

“I want to believe that God —that somebody’s watching over me — but I don’t. I’m afraid I don’t follow you at all.”

“It’s really very simple. You have only to search your heart, confess your sins and accept Jesus Christ as your personal Saviour.” He could almost feel Bill Jordan bristle. And then he knew that Jordan had truly been under

conviction that night on the mountain. That had been the thing which had caused the antagonism. He could not endure the feeling of guilt which Dixie's words aroused. "The Lord Jesus died on Calvary that we might have eternal life if only we believe on Him."

"I just wanted a little advice and help," he said belligerently, getting up from the table and walking away. "I didn't want to be preached at."

"None of us do, Bill, because we don't like to be told that we've been living in sin. But the Word of God tells us that it's true."

"Well, you can have my share."

He began to walk rapidly up the street towards town. Dixie fell in beside him. If only he could do or say something to break down the barrier Bill had erected against the Lord! If only he could get the right quotation from Scripture, or say the right word to show his companion the Truth. But the tail gunner was already shutting his heart against Christ, and each step he took without speaking to Dixie placed another bar on the door. Uptown he stopped before the USO.

"I'm sorry I unburdened to you, Dixie. I feel a lot better now," but his eyes belied his words before they were spoken. "I haven't heard from home in quite awhile and I was kind of low. I'll be all right."

"I wish you would let God help you, Bill.

He laughed shortly. "Maybe I will, some day — when I get too old to have fun any more." Then he added seriously, "You won't say anything to the crew about this, will you?"

"I won't tell anyone except Rex, Bill, and I think he ought to know. But I can vouch for him. He'll never say a word to them about it."

Rex was disturbed by what Dixie told him. He had been so engrossed in Wilma that he had thought but little of his crew. Of all the crew he was the only one who had not noticed Bill's strange conduct during the past two or three weeks.

"I'm sorry to hear that about the kid," he said. "I was in hopes the whole bunch could stay together. Do you think he'll fizz out on us?"

"Frankly, I don't know. He's not in very good shape. And I couldn't get near him at all. As soon as I mentioned Christ and following Him, he froze up."

"That's too bad." Rex thought a moment. "I believe you used the wrong approach on him. If he'd been kind of the type like — well like you, all that religious stuff would have been O.K. It might even have done him some

good. But he isn't, and he shed everything you said. Now, if I'd been talking with him, I'd have taken him all over our new plane. I'd have shown him how strong it's made, how well every position's armored, how safe it is. That would have been my idea of the way to buck up Bill Jordan."

"There are B-17's shot down, you know."

"Yes, but not these new ones," he grinned proudly, "with Rex Madden at the controls and his crew manning the guns."

"You can have faith in that plane if you want to," Dixie said. "But as for me, I'll put my trust in the Lord."

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Although Dixie and Mildred Patterson did not rush breathtakingly into love, as did Rex and Wilma, their friendship deepened with each successive day. Patty questioned his sincerity at first — or pretended to — and laughingly called Dixie's attention to his approach at their first meeting. It infuriated him until he realized she was only doing it to hear his vehement denials.

There was a definite source of pleasure and satisfaction to them in their mutual love for Jesus. He forged a bond about them and between them, enhancing the attraction they felt to one another, and giving depth and spiritual fiber to their affections.

Dixie had been reared in a Christian home, and had learned to follow Jesus so slowly and naturally that he could not put his finger upon the exact date at which he was "born again." By the time he was accepted into full church membership he knew the fundamentals of the Christian's faith and accepted them all without reservation. The prayers and teaching of his mother and pastor had home fruit, almost before they realized it themselves. One day his young mind had been grasping feebly at the Truth and the next it had such understanding as to amaze them.

But Mildred, who had also been reared in a Christian home, had only lately come to Him. In the church which her parents attended, she accepted Christ on the Sunday before she left for her army post. Then she came face to face with reality for the first time; she realized her sinfulness; she realized that she" was stepping into an unknown and unpredictable future; she realized that life resolved itself into one simple, unchangeable fundamental, the saving grace of the Lord Jesus.

Although Dixie and Mildred had come to the ' Saviour by different paths, they both arrived at the same destination. They were Christians, saints, whose sins had been washed away by the blood of Christ.

They enjoyed each other's company immensely, looking forward to the brief, uncertain moments to be snatched hastily at odd times between their busy schedules, and dreading the torturing hours when they were apart.

Neither of them spoke of love, but it was there, the stronger for restraint. There was no need for caresses when the caress lingered in her eyes. There was no need for words when quickening heartbeats spoke so well.

They felt the surging unrest and hurry of the times, and eagerly wanted to live to the fullest in the days or hours that might already be rapidly running out for them. They wanted to live, just as Rex and Wilma did. They talked of marriage casually, of the responsibilities and joys of building a home, inserting exploratory little phrases into the conversation to feel out each other's opinions about marriage built on uncertainties. Without ever having spoken of the matter openly, they both decided that, whatever might be right for others, it would be better for them to await calmer days.

# Seven

IT SEEMED that Dixie's talk with Bill Jordan produced results after all. The young tail gunner was less morose and seemed to mingle with the crew a little better, although it was impossible to tell whether this was the result of forced bravado or genuine self control. At any rate, the boys began to feel better about him. Perhaps their imaginations had caused them to think he was upset about going into combat. But Dixie was still concerned about him, for he was positive that this change was in his head and not his heart.

He wanted to seek Bill Jordan out and talk with him earnestly and seriously about following Jesus. He had sensed the impact which his words were making on the gunner. He had seen conviction stamped upon the lean white face when he turned away, and sensed that Bill was on the threshold of yielding. But that was not enough. Unless he took the final step and confessed his sins in penitence, accepting the cleansing of the blood of Christ, previous efforts were futile. For that reason Dixie sought another opportunity to talk with him.

None was available.

The gunner was cordial enough when they met casually on the street or at the field, or when in a crowd together, but he refused to remain alone with Dixie. He avoided him studiously, as if he feared him and the things he would say.

Rex had a talk with Bill shortly after Dixie's unsuccessful effort and he was quite pleased with the result.

"Have you noticed a change in our problem child?" he asked one evening when he and Dixie were alone.

"A little," the bombardier admitted.

"I had quite a talk with him. I told you that you were handling him the wrong way. Why, I took the fear right out of him when I showed him the plane and how invulnerable we are. Don't worry about Bill. We aren't going to have any more trouble with him."

"I hope you're right," he replied doubtfully.

The base at Kearney was filled with rumors that seemed to be fairly well authenticated. The grapevine had it that another group of B-17's would be in to be fitted for combat in about ten days. New wingtip tanks had been coming up by the truckload for a week and warehouses were being crammed with spare parts. The group commander sent his wife back to California to live with her mother. It all added up to the fact that the 85th Bombardment Group would be out of Kearney and on its way before the new flight of planes arrived.

The entire group had been expertly trained and the feeling of fitness and ability had made every man eager. Even Bill Jordan caught the excitement. He boasted proudly to gunners in other crews that their squadron leader was a twenty-two-year-old lieutenant colonel of the famous 19th Bombardment Squadron that did such heroic work in the Pacific. He bragged about the *Terrier*, her pilot, her navigator and even her bombardier — although something in his conscience pricked at the thought of Dixie. The latter represented an unpleasant experience, a nightmare of fear swallowed by excitement, and he did not like to be reminded of it.

Rex Madden thrilled with anticipation while making last-minute check-ups and going over plans with other pilots. It was a big task to transport forty-four four-engine bombers across the ocean, and it required much careful planning.

But his heart ached at the thought of leaving Wilma. Something about her had seized him forcibly until it threatened to drive all else from his mind. Both of them had known that parting was inevitable. They talked about it laughingly and with a seeming lack of feeling, but that did not make it any easier when the time came for him to tell her that this was it; that at best they had only a few short hours to be together.

"I might not get to leave the post again," he told her, the first evening of his weekend leave. "When we go back Monday morning we aren't even allowed to make a phone call out, until we leave."

"Are you going to miss me?" she asked, winking to keep the tears from her eyes. He must not see her crying now.

"You're the only thing that makes it hard for me to leave," he said huskily. "I want to go over there, but I want to be with you too."

"I'm glad," she smiled. "I want to be missed just a little." A long while later she asked, "Do — do you know where you're to be sent?"

He nodded hesitantly. "It's hard not to tell you, Wilma dear."



“I know — regulations.” She strove to keep the bitterness from her voice.

She moved closer to him on the davenport, nestling contentedly into the crook of his protecting arm.

“I wish we could stay like this always, and not ever have to think about your going away.”

“Do you think you could be happy with me — always?”

“Of course, darling.”

“Are you sure enough of it to marry me tomorrow?” He had said it. He had not intended to ask her to marry him tomorrow. He had not even intended to propose to her at all. He had told himself often enough that he would not marry until the fighting stopped and the smoke cleared away. But he had proposed to her, and at that instant he knew he wanted to marry her more than he wanted anything else in the world.

“B-b-but, Rex,” she protested. “I don’t know what to say. We’ve only been acquainted such a short time. I don’t know anything about you, and you don’t know anything about me. I want to be sure when I marry.”

“We know enough about each other to know that we’re in love. What else matters? We’ve got to work fast and live fast, Wilma,” he said fervently. “We’re living on a volcano. Any minute it’s liable to go off and destroy one of us. Don’t you see — if I don’t come back, we will have had one weekend of happiness anyway.”

“Rex, don’t talk like that.” Tears trickled into the corners of her mouth. She threw her arms about his neck suddenly and pressed her cheek against his. “Don’t ever talk about not coming back! I couldn’t stand it!”

“Of course I’m coming back,” he said reassuringly. “But there’s always that remote possibility. Why after a few months they’ll probably send me home as an instructor somewhere. They’re always doing that. Then we could rent a little apartment and be together.”

Wilma Banks needed no urging to marry the handsome young pilot. She would have rather had her father and Rex’s parents at the wedding, but there was no time for that. A weekend is tragically short for a honeymoon.

They were married early the next morning at the parsonage. Rex routed out the county judge at six-thirty and talked him into going down to make out a license.

“Why can’t you soldiers decide to be married at a decent hour?” he grumbled good-naturedly, pulling out the marriage license book. “You

couldn't have waited two and a half hours and let a man get his sleep out, now could you?"

"We're terribly sorry," Wilma apologized, radiant as only a girl can be on her wedding day. "But Rex is shipping out soon, and we only have this weekend."

"O.K., I guess we can fix you out this time," he said amiably.

Rex wanted to have him marry them at the courthouse, but Wilma demurred.

"I wouldn't even feel as though I were married," she told him, "unless a minister married us."

"That's all right with me, honey. Anything you say."

Dixie and Patty met them at the parsonage at eight. It had taken some string-pulling to get her off duty, for the head nurse was particularly unromantic. She could not understand why anyone would want to married in the first place, let alone go to a wedding.

"I'm making allowances this time," she snapped, "because you're leaving us soon. If you were assigned here permanently we would have to abide explicitly by the rules."

Reverend Kernan, a strong-faced young minister with a vise grip, invited them into the quiet of his living room.

"Before we begin the ceremony I want to ask you some very pointed questions. Betty," he called to his wife, "would you please entertain this other young couple in the kitchen for a few moments? ... Thank you."

When they were gone he turned once more to Rex and Wilma. "A lot of soldiers come to me to be married, and I like to marry them. The Lord instituted marriage because He saw that it wasn't good for man to be alone. But we've got to be very careful that the sacred vows we take are premeditated and final. I have no desire to feed the divorce mills with marriages that should never have been consummated."

They sat there uneasily. Rex felt a wave of doubt engulf him while she listened fearfully, afraid that the minister might refuse to perform the ceremony.

"How long have you young folks known each other?"

"About three and a half weeks."

"Hmm," he eyed them thoughtfully. "That's not very long. Are you positive you love each other?"

They nodded.

“I’ll bet you’re shipping out soon,” he said to Rex.

“That’s right, sir.”

“Do you plan to be true to her?”

Rex nodded affirmatively, his face tense.

“And you, Miss. It’s hard for a young girl to put aside going out with other young men after being married such a short time before her husband leaves. Do you plan to remain true to him?”

“Oh, yes, I do.”

The minister smiled at her positive, eager answer.

“It’s a great responsibility for a minister to be called upon to marry young folks under these conditions. I’ll tell you what I’m going to do. I’m going over to my study in the church for about fifteen minutes. I want you to talk over what I’ve said, and pray over it. If you still want me to marry you when I return I’ll do so gladly.”

Doubt was chilling Rex’s heart. Did he really love Wilma? Or was it only infatuation born of unrest and an unpredictable future? Was it fair to her to tie her down when he might never return?

But the doubt was dispelled when he looked into her starry eyes. Even if he did not love her at all he would have felt obligated to marry her. She was so happy and so beautiful he could not have done anything to shatter her happiness.

When the fifteen minutes had nearly passed he asked softly, “Do you still want to get married?”

“Of course I do, darling.”

They borrowed a car from a sympathetic brother officer and spent a deliriously happy honeymoon at Grand Island and Hastings. Precious golden minutes slipped by silently, and with inexorable swiftness. Before they could bring themselves to realize it their brief respite from reality was over and they were separating.

Their goodbyes were poignant and sad. Wilma sobbed passionately as she clung to his blouse. It pained him to leave her.

# Eight

A CERTAIN TENSENESS emanating from the command enveloped the crews Monday and spread to the mechanics who had been working constantly on the planes when they were on the ground. Truckloads of gasoline were wheeled onto the field and gas tanks were crammed with 100 octane fuel, the kind demanded by the powerful motors of war planes. Equipment was stored aboard with care, and special mechanics inspected the engines thoroughly. There was no doubt that they were moving.

Rumors were thick. And, as usual, they meant nothing at all. On only one thing did they agree: that something big was afoot.

Patty and Dixie met for the last time at the Kearney Base after hours Monday evening. He waited for her at the hospital and they went over to the PX together for a coke. The building was crowded with loud-talking crews and Dixie could find no place at all for the things he wanted to say.

“Let’s see if we can’t find a little privacy,” he suggested, steering her away from the counter.

“Do you have any ideas?”

“No, but we can find something better than this.”

They found a jeep pulled up beside one of the hangars. It was just what they had been looking for. Dixie ushered Patty into the back seat and climbed in beside her. She seemed more beautiful than ever to him. The rich tan of her face and arms accentuated the starched whiteness of her uniform.

“I just want to sit and look at you,” he told her, “so I can remember exactly how you look sitting there.”

“After you see all those pretty little foreign girls you probably won’t even want to remember me.”

“You know better than that.” His voice was harsh.

She nodded, smiling. “I’m sorry, Dixie. I shouldn’t tease this evening.”

“It might be a long time before we get to see each other again. Will you wait for me?”

“I’ll wait for you as long as it takes, Dixie.”

“It sounds good to hear you say that.”

“May God take care of you,” she said prayerfully, “and send you back safely to me.”

“It’s wonderful to be able to trust in the Lord, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know how anyone who doesn’t can stand up under the things that’re happening today.”

“Neither do I, but there’re a good many who try to go it alone.” There was a short silence and his face grew even more serious. “When you’re saying your prayers, would you pray for me?”

“Why of course, Dixie, I always do.”

“I know. You pray for me to come back safe and well, like Mother does, but there’s something that’s more important to me than that.” He was speaking as one who had been thinking long and deeply. “Would you pray that God may give me the courage and strength to do my job regardless of what happens?”

She reached for his hand and squeezed it tenderly. He smiled weakly in return.

“I can’t bear to think of what will be happening or where I’ll be in six months — or six weeks for that matter.” Lines deepened about his eyes as he went on. He had always seemed so brave and able to care for himself that this new mood was startling. “I must be the biggest coward on the plane. The only way I can carry on is to live from day to day.”

She must have been looking at him queerly for he hastened to add, “No, I don’t mean ‘eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die.’ But whenever I get up in the morning I pray that the Lord may go with me through every minute of the day, protecting me and giving me courage to carry on just for the hours that lie directly ahead. It’s all up to Him, for I don’t have any strength of my own that’s even worthy of the name.”

“I think that’s a beautiful way of living, Dixie,” she replied, “and I’ll be praying for you constantly.”

“Thank you, darling.” He leaned over and kissed her lightly on the lips. She clung to him with tears fighting their way to the corners of her eyes.

“I don’t want you to go, Dixie.”

“And I don’t want to go either, Patts. But we’ve got to.”

“I know.”

“I suppose you’ll be shipping out soon too.”

“I wasn’t going to tell you unless you asked because I didn’t want to worry you, but we were alerted yesterday. I don’t know whether it means anything or not. Some of the girls say they’ve done it several times before.”

“Yes, that’s been happening right along. I’ve been alerted a dozen times when we didn’t go any place.”

“It doesn’t matter, I guess. I’m as ready to go now as I’ll ever be.”

“I wish all the boys in our crew could say that.”

“Why? What do you mean?”

“There’s Bill Jordan, and maybe Rex. I haven’t made up my mind about him. But we shouldn’t be spending our last evening together talking about them.”

“If there’s any way I can help —”

“I would appreciate it if you’d include them in your prayers — that they might find Jesus before it’s too late.”

He took her back to quarters about ten minutes before the lights went out and kissed her goodbye. It did not seem possible that before they saw each other again the war would likely be over.

The crews were routed out and briefed at four o’clock Tuesday morning. Most of them did not have to be awakened, as they were positive Tuesday would be the day, whether they were sent to Australia, England or Timbuktu. And they were lying awake eagerly waiting for the morning. Only Jordan seemed disturbed, and his restless tossing in bed could have been due to excitement. The very air was alive with it.

“You men probably know,” the operations officer began when they were all packed into the long, narrow room, “that this is no ordinary routine flight. This is it — the thing you’ve all been training for. I may as well tell you now that you won’t be stopping in New York longer than it takes to gas up and check the motors. You know, without my telling you, that there’s to be no letters, telegrams or long distance phone calls. You can all cable your folks and sweethearts when you reach your base.” He paused, looking over the grim, drawn faces. “The next time you take off your shoes you’ll be in England.”

The word rippled through the group of men as their destination was announced. Enthusiasm was running high.

“You’ll fly to the designated base along the Atlantic Coast as a group, and there split into squadrons. The pilots have their instructions and the navigators have their maps. Are there any questions?”

“Do we carry ammunition, sir?” an eager young aerial gunner asked. He was a private, and not long out of gunnery school. Expectancy was stamped on his face.

“Yes, soldier, that pea shooter of yours will be bursting with shells.”

“Thank you, sir. I wouldn’t want to be up in no airplane over there without ’em.”

“We wouldn’t want you up there without ’em either,” the officer laughed, “and I wish you good hunting when you use them.”

“Thank you, sir.”

There were no more questions.

“I almost forgot to tell you the most important part of the trip.” His manner indicated that he had not forgotten at all, but was saving the information for the climax. “You are carrying passengers.”

“Passengers, sir?” one of the squadron leaders exclaimed.

“Yes, Major, passengers. And don’t sound so horrified. I know it’s irregular, but these army nurses are needed in England, and you men can get them there quicker than any other way.”

The room buzzed. Nurses. And they thought they were leaving the feminine sex behind for the duration. Crews eyed their pilot officers guardedly with threats unspoken if they failed to get one of the passengers assigned to their ship.

“There’s about seventy-five of them and the group commander will assign them to the planes. That’s all, boys. Godspeed.”

Dixie punched Rex in the back and grinned as they went out of the long tar-paper covered building and down to their planes.

“I’ll bet Patts is in that bunch,” he chortled. “They were alerted Sunday. This couldn’t happen again in a million years!”

She was one of the nurses selected to go, along with others that came in by train Monday night, but Dixie did not see her until after they landed at the base in England.

Rex was a little nervous and excited at first, but two hours in the thin high clouds calmed him. Wilma would be in school by now, trying to study French or English Composition or whatever she studied between ten and eleven. He tried to picture her sitting at her desk, pulling nervously at her blonde curls as she strove to keep her thoughts from him; but he could not call her to mind. It was surprising how quickly the image had disappeared.

The nurses on the *Terrier* were not particularly attractive, but they wandered about the big B-17 asking questions and joking with the crew in a way that made the hours roll.

The B-17's were on the ground three hours in New York and nine on the tip of Newfoundland where they were grounded because of strong headwinds. By the time they reached that isolated spot the excitement had worn off somewhat and they all went into the barracks and got five or six hours of rest.

Several nurses were left behind at the far northern base where a stove had exploded in a barracks a day or two before, killing seven and seriously burning forty or fifty more. The nursing staff was pitifully inadequate to take care of the regular patients as well as the victims of the explosion. The tired, pain-twisted looks of gratitude that the injured gave them fully repaid the nurses for their hard years of training, and the arduous duty they were accepting.

The remainder of the flight was uneventful. But for the determined faces and swift efficiency of the men — duties were dispatched with a snap and interest not readily apparent during training — it would have seemed a routine training flight, like the one to the little island in the Pacific or to Henderson Field at Pearl Harbor.

The navigator in the squadron leader's plane charted the course, but the others kept a constant check on position. Now that they were actually heading into combat, their work would become increasingly important. It added purpose to efficiency.

Two hundred miles out of Iceland an RAF patrol plane, one of America's Catalina flying boats, met them and escorted them in. Another picked them up over the rockbound coast and flew with them for approximately a hundred miles towards England. The crew was made up of grinning young men who waved and gesticulated as they flew along. There was a certain feeling of kinship between the RAF and the American Air Force that brought them very close together. The rivalry was friendly and based upon a keen appreciation of the other's ability.

As the B-17's approached Britain a fog rolled in and they had to pick out the flare-lighted field with instruments. But, even in the fog, all found the base and landed without difficulty.

The American boys already based there swarmed about the men, questioning them eagerly. They asked, with a touch of homesickness poorly



disguised in their voices, of home and friends. They wanted to know what things were like back in the States, what rationing was doing to the people, whether the sacrifices they were making were being appreciated. They asked if anyone knew what became of this or that friend who was in one of the schools with them. Many met boys with whom they had trained, and, even though they had been mere acquaintances, the distance from home welded them together, and they met with the happiness and enthusiasm of long separated brothers.

While the veterans wanted to know of the States, the men of the 85th Bombardment Group were eager to learn of England. They wanted to find out about the country and the people.

Dixie was probably the only single man not interested in English girls, and why should he be when the prettiest nurse in the whole American Army was waiting for him somewhere in that maze of buildings.

# Nine

FOR THREE WEEKS OR MORE the new group of bombers were sent up only on patrol flights and short exploratory hops to get the crews acclimated, as much as possible, to England's obstinate weather.

Mechanics were assigned to individual planes and allowed to become familiar with the one placed under their care. A car mechanic could be slipshod and careless, but the mechanic who worked on the bombers that were to fly over enemy territory had to be constantly alert, and a perfectionist in his trade. Fully as much responsibility rested on every turn of the wrench as with the pilot who would take the Fortress into battle.

The crews spent those first few weeks getting acquainted with England and finding it different than they ever imagined. Most of them had thought the average Englishman to be a cross between a cockney and an English bull pup, but they found him very similar to the average American. They were a little aloof, perhaps, and spoke with an accent, but were courteous and kind and human.

Dixie, Patts and Rex rented bicycles and peddled down narrow country lanes and through picturesque English villages that looked as though they had been transplanted from illustrations in old folk tales of England. They stopped to visit with shopkeepers, farmers and laboring men and women who worked in the big factories that had been dispersed the length and breadth of the island fortress. Inevitably the subject turned to war. Many of them had lost husbands and brothers, even children, and had ceased to count the bombings. Yet their bitterness was slight. They agreed with the Americans that cities must be bombed without mercy, but they made no pretense of enjoying it.

"I know what it's like to hide in shelters and cellars when Jerry was coming over every night," one wizened old lady told them when she learned the boys were part of a bomber crew. "And I can't help but feel sorry for them as is going through it now. Not that I'm wantin' it stopped till Jerry's brought to his knees, mind you," she added hastily, "but I think the good

Lord's going to remember who started bombing cities first, come Judgment Day."

The faith of some of the English people was astounding to Rex and gave Dixie Meyers and Patty further testimony of the power of Christ in time of trouble. They visited a church that had been hit directly by a high-explosive bomb. A section of the roof was blown off and a big hole gaped in the stone wall to one side of the choir loft. But those simple English villagers had cleared away the rubble, erected a new pulpit where the old one stood and still worshiped their God in the same church on Sunday morning.

"You can't beat a people with faith in God like that," Dixie remarked reverently, as he saw evidences of their belief in the Lord Jesus.

"That might be," Rex replied laconically. "But they didn't drive off Jerry with prayers. They used Spitfires and ack-ack."

"I'm not so sure that God didn't have a lot to do; with it," Dixie told him.

Patty cast a quick sidelong glance at the bombardier and he knew that she was remembering his request to pray for the pilot. She thought of Bill Jordan too, whom she had never met.

Back at the base the big bombers were being made ready for their first real trip over enemy territory. They had edged over the coast of France and poked timidly into Holland, but this time they were being loaded with bombs to be sent on their first important mission.

Bill had been drawing within himself once more, and that harassed restless look came into his eyes again, but the rest of the crew, flushed with the excitement of a new strange land, noticed little difference in his actions. He would come down from the barracks, for at this particular base the carefully camouflaged barracks buildings and hospital adjoined the field, and watch the mechanics working on the *Terrier*.

Big planes would take off bravely, heroically into the sun, to come straggling back past midday, empty of their destructive loads, but often bullet-ridden and coughing. There were occasional empty places in the neat formations where a plane had been blasted to the earth or so badly crippled that it had been left to crash or struggle on alone.

Bill Jordan saw all of that as he watched them work on the plane. Those giant chariots of the sky which he had learned to call B-17's were only mortal things. Antiaircraft and cannon fire could destroy them, with all their armor plate and high altitude. Enemy fighters could sting them hard, with

shells ripping through the fuselage to get at the crew. The B-17's were not invincible! They could be brought down!

Bill saw them remove a man from the tail gun of a crippled Fortress — or, what was left of him. A twenty-millimeter cannon shell exploded in his face, tearing the upper half of his body away. A neat sympathetic note would be dispatched to his mother, telling her that her son had been killed in action, but ignoring the information that they had to glean his identity from his dog tags.

Bill's face blanched and his stomach bunched tightly above his belt and turned over. If that plane had been the *Terrier*, and it could have been, he would have been the one they were taking out of the tail.

They were alerted and briefed for a ten A.M. flight over Antwerp. It was the first mission for all of them and they were nervous and jumpy while they waited. Intelligence did not add to their peace of mind.

“You'll fly in regular formation in step-down flights of three. You've all been over this before, in practice, so there's no need to go into a lot of detail. If one plane is aborted the other two in the flight are to return to the base with her. There's one thing more to keep in mind. You've had your targets pointed out to you. When you get over the target area drop those eggs and get for home. Don't hang around to watch the fireworks because Jerry'll be on your tail every minute of the way back. You'll run into plenty of ack-ack along here.” He indicated the spots on the big map hanging to one side of the table against the wall. “And fighters most of the way home,” he added.

They emptied their pockets of all personal belongings and took an escape kit instead. It contained the latest cloth maps available of the territory over which they were to fly, Dutch and French currency, a steel hacksaw blade, a knife and emergency rations. It was a bit sobering to take those items along, for it emphasized the possibility of being forced to parachute onto enemy soil.

They split into groups, talking about everything but the one subject that was in all their minds, while waiting for the orders to leave.

Bob Trout and Rogers were sitting together and Rex and Dixie were standing in one corner aside from the rest.

“I got a V-mail letter from Wilma today,” Rex said without interest.

“That's great. I'll bet you were glad to hear from her.”

“I don’t know,” he replied, running his fingers through his stubby brown hair. “I guess I ought to be.”

Before Dixie could answer, the word they had been waiting for came.

“O.K., fellows. You know your targets and you’ve got your bombs. It’s time to go. God bless you.”

They went out of the building hurriedly, brushing past the chaplain who had been waiting to see them off.

The motors were warmed up, and one by one the big planes roared down the runway and climbed into the air. They formed into flights of three and moved towards the coast, climbing steadily. At ten thousand feet, in accord with army regulations, the pilots adjusted their oxygen masks, and at twenty-two thousand the planes leveled off, cruising directly towards the target. Lone raiders might succeed in slipping in undetected, but it was almost useless for a group of B-17’s or Liberators or Sterlings to attempt to reach the target without the enemy being aware of their presence. The big British saturation bombers depended upon darkness rather than surprise, and the Americans relied on their armor and bristling cannon and machine guns for safety.

The men tried to occupy their minds with routine matters; gunners checked their guns and the navigator calculated their position time after time, estimating mentally the number of minutes it would take to reach the target. The boys in the power-driven turrets tested them carefully, whirling rapidly to draw a head on an imaginary foe, and Dixie, with an unspoken prayer on his lips, dry-bombed his way out to sea.

England stretched below them, an orderly patchwork of color in squares and angles, and beyond the rocky coast lay the channel.

“Take a good look at her,” someone said. “It might be the last time we’ll ever see her.”

“Whoever that was, shut up!” Rex snapped into the interphone. “I took this airplane off the ground, and I’ll put her back on her own base under her own power. Just remember that.”

He could not let them dwell on such things.

Wilma’s letter had been left at the base, together with Rex’s billfold and other personal belongings, but it kept running through his mind as if he were still reading it. He had received it without visible interest and read it through a second time and yet a third, but it had not awakened his heart as it

should have. But, if he was beginning to question the wisdom of their marriage he was alone in his doubt. There was none reflected in her letter.

“It still seems like a gloriously happy dream,” she had written. “But it’s true, which makes it all the more wonderful. I didn’t realize love could come so swiftly. One moment we didn’t know each other at all and the next we were in love. Daddy was furious at first, but when he saw how it is between us he realized it was all right. V-mail gives so little room to write the things I want to write, I’m going to send you a regular airmail tomorrow. So goodbye for now, darling.”

She was such an innocent, helpless child, and so utterly dependent upon him that he could not bring himself to voice to her the doubts that were, of late, prying in at the corners of his mind.

The *Terrier* lurched a little and Rex looked quickly at the co-pilot. It was too sharp and light to be an air pocket.

“What was that?”

“It felt like it was in the tail.”

“Pilot to tail gunner. Pilot to tail gunner. Come in, tail gunner.”

There was no answer.

“Come in, tail gunner...Come in, tail gunner.”

“I can’t get Bill to answer,” he said to the co-pilot. “Take over for a minute. I’m going back to see what’s wrong.” With that he took a walk-around bottle of oxygen and snapped it to his mask.

“What’s up?” the radio operator asked as he went through the radio compartment.

Rex shook his head and continued along the catwalk to the tail gunner’s position.

He could scarcely believe what he saw! The parachute was still in place and the oxygen mask was laying beside the gun handles. The catch on the tail door was unfastened. But there was no one there!

His first thought was that Bill had left his post to go forward, but that would not account for the oxygen mask or the ship’s sudden lurch as though it had been lightened in the tail. He might have fallen out, but that scarcely seemed possible.

Then the truth came to him. Bill hadn’t fallen out. He had forced the door open with almost superhuman strength against the slip stream of the propellers, and jumped out. He had been terrified by the thought of going

into combat and chose the only way he could escape it without undergoing the jibes and disdain of his companions.

Rex rushed back along the catwalk to his seat in the plane and switched on his radio to command. He had to contact the squadron leader at once.

“538 to Colonel Mowry. 538 to Colonel Mowry.”

“Colonel Mowry to 538. Come in, 538.”

“This is Lieutenant Madden.” The words were tumbling in their haste. “Our tail gunner has just committed suicide by jumping out, sir!”

“Suicide! Are you positive, Lieutenant?”

“Yes, sir. We felt a slight lurch and when I could not contact him on the interphone I went back to investigate. His parachute and his oxygen mask are still in the plane. But he’s gone!”

“That’s too bad, Lieutenant, a regrettable accident. I’m ordering your flight back to base. Report to operations as soon as you get down.”

“Roger.”

In a moment the colonel’s voice was heard ordering flight three to return to the base.

The crew was stunned to hear of Bill Jordan’s fate. They began to remember little things that should have indicated his mental condition. They had noted them once, but when he seemed better they supposed it to be merely a case of excitement spawned nervousness that was over and done with.

The first hypnosis of shock lasted until they were on the ground and reported to operations and intelligence. Then the rush of sympathy and regret flooded their hearts. The officers were gentle, but probing with their questions and they were not satisfied until Bill Jordan’s complete history was in the records. But the boy’s parents would never learn of it. They would hear only that their son, William, was killed in action.

Rex Madden choked twice when he made the report, but his superiors were kind enough to pretend they did not notice.

The crew sat around in silence, each one blaming himself in varying degrees for not seeing what was happening to the tail gunner and trying to prevent it. Rex was probably the worst, for he saw the fallacy of the arguments he had presented to Bill. He knew, as though the distracted gunner had told him himself, that the shock of seeing the invulnerable B-17’s come in shot to pieces had something to do with the accident. Bill put all of his faith in the plane with its cannon and machine guns, which

theoretically protect every position in the ship. He trusted the plane in which he flew until he saw what could happen, what might happen to it on that very flight. And it had been too much for his distracted nerves.

Dixie Meyers took out his Testament. This time Rex welcomed it. Perhaps it had something for him. Perhaps there was something there that would lift the icy fingers of grief from his heart. Bob Trout coughed nervously, and the navigator blotted a tear from the corner of his eye with a forefinger.

...And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever...

When Dixie finished reading from the fourteenth chapter of John they all felt better.

Operations wisely grounded the plane for several days and gave the crew leaves to see London. When they returned a new tail gunner would be assigned to them and they would take their regular place in the squadron, but it seemed advisable to give them a rest.



# Ten

THOSE FEW DAYS IN TOWN did a great deal to bring the shaken crew back to normal. One of the boys, an enlisted man and quite young, could be heard sobbing quietly into his pillow at night, and Rex and Eddie Zorn looked as if they had not been asleep.

Dixie Meyers was bothered too, but for an entirely different reason. If he had talked with Bill Jordan just once more, if he had not allowed the rebuff to so injure his pride that he would not mention Christ to him again, if he had not given up so easily at the first sign of opposition, Bill might have been alive today rejoicing in the assurance of salvation. On his knees that night Dixie vowed tearfully to God that he would never stop speaking to one whom the Lord had laid upon his heart. How many others had been lost because he refused to tell them of Jesus and His saving grace he did not know. The thought was terrifying in its implications.

By the end of the week the crew had control of themselves once more and were ready to fly again, which was gratifying to operations. Such incidents at the beginning of combat duty could well ruin all of them — which would mean an appalling waste of money and time. It had been said that infantry divisions could be held on the front against their will by machine guns trained on their backs. But not airmen. They fly willingly or not at all.

Rex answered Wilma's letter immediately, for he knew she would be counting the days until she heard from him. He tried to match her enthusiasm and expression of love, but his efforts sounded hollow and empty — almost as empty as his heart.

Patty, Dixie and Rex went in to London together. It was at Mildred Patterson's insistence that they took Rex with them.

"He looks so lonesome," she told Dixie. "Let's take him along."

"I'd sure like to. He doesn't pal around with the other fellows very much. I'm afraid he feels his marriage is tying him down."

"Oh, that's too bad. But I suppose he does get terribly lonesome."

Rex liked being with them. He enjoyed sharing their companionship and fun, jostling along odd little streets and eating in out of the way cafés where more often than not the food was bad. They missed the Nebraska eggs and thick steaks which they had enjoyed in comparative abundance, even during rationing, and they longed for the ever-present fried chicken on the Nebraska menus. But such a small item as food could scarcely dull their enthusiasm for the evening.

They joked with waitresses, heckled cashiers good naturedly as they struggled with pounds, shillings and pence, and laughed gaily with the crowd in the parks. It was almost like being in the States again, Rex found himself thinking. If only he had a companion too. In spite of their attempts to include him in the fun and his real enjoyment of being with them, he felt somewhat left out — a hanger-on who had been invited out of pity.

It had been that way ever since he married Wilma. She was not there to go out with him, and yet she effectively blocked his finding enjoyment and the pleasure of taking new girls to dinner and going out like the rest of the crew. She was tied down too, but it was different with him. He was not among friends or relatives and his time of leisure was short. It was not fair.

His face must have reflected bitterness for Patty asked, “Why so glum, Rex? A penny for your thoughts. Or should I say a shilling?”

“A shilling, penny or counterfeit franc, you’d still be getting cheated. I was just thinking of a terrible mistake I’m afraid I’ve made.”

Dixie seized the conversation nimbly before Rex could go on or Mildred could ask questions. There are some things that are better left unsaid, that will smolder on unspoken and perhaps die away; but once uttered aloud they take on added importance and weight. Dixie knew what Rex had been going to say. He had seen it growing in his eyes all evening, every time he looked at Mildred and saw how happy they were together. Lonesomeness will do strange things to a man.

“Well, it won’t be any worse in the morning. I’ll remind you to worry about it, beginning right at ten.”

“O.K., O.K., I guess it doesn’t matter much anyway,” he said with forced cheerfulness. There’s nothing I can do about it.”

“Where do we go now?”

“I think our young lady ought to decide. After all, she’s paying her third of the expenses, isn’t she?”

“Not so’s I’ve noticed,” Dixie replied. “But those army nurses make enough money. I think she ought to.”

“Maybe we ought to charge her for showing her London. It’s worth something to drag her around, you know.”

“Well, I like that. And to think I turned down a perfectly good proposal from a soldier in Ward B only this afternoon!”

“By the way, most of those nurses we brought over were scattered all over England. Which one of you pulled the strings to get you stationed at our base, Miss Mildred Patterson?”

“We’ll never tell, will we, Dixie?”

He only grinned.

“Whatever you did, it must have been good.”

They stayed in London three days, visiting Westminster Abbey, St. Paul’s Cathedral, Commons, everything that was suggested to them, until buildings began to blend into one another. Historic spots became as meaningless as so many toy blocks, and museums and art galleries served only to drug their sensibilities. Memory would one day separate the jumble until they could recall with pleasure the things which they had witnessed. But, by the time they had returned to the air base, they had looked until they were tired of looking.

The new tail gunner reported to Rex the morning, they returned to the base. He was short and rather fat, with a ruddy complexion which gave concrete evidence of twenty years on an Iowa farm. He was good-natured and steady, with little imagination — just the kind of man for the tail of a B-17.

Their first mission after the leaves went off smoothly. They were briefed before dawn and sent with the squadron to bomb harbor installations at Dunkerque and Calais. It was a short flight that encountered a minimum of opposition and helped to bolster the faltering confidence of the *Terrier* and her crew.

While they were waiting in the cold damp morning air Rogers said to Dixie, almost timidly, for he was uncertain of the reaction of the other fellows, “I’d like to have a word of prayer before we take off”, wouldn’t you?”

Bob Trout and Eddie Zorn nodded quickly, and the new boy from Iowa voiced his agreement. They all knelt in the wet grass, except Rex, and he turned away. He did not want to parade his faith before the men of the other

planes. Besides, they were all watching now, probably laughing at the crew of the *Terrier*.

“Oh, Heavenly Father,” Dixie prayed, “Thou knowest the kind of a mission we are going on. Thou knowest that innocent men and women and children are going to be killed, even though our bombs hit their targets. We would ask Thy forgiveness, O Lord, for the things we have to do. And we would pray for those whose lives will be taken. May their number be small, and may those who die know Thee and Thy way of salvation.

“We would ask Thee to bless each member of the crew. Watch over us and care for us as we go through the valley of the shadow of death. Search our hearts, O God. If there be one among us who has not given his life completely to Thee, we would ask that he come to Thee now, while there is yet time. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.”

Then they got to their feet and clambered into the plane. The tension seemed to be gone as they checked equipment and made ready to take off. There was none of the tense nervousness of the other mission. They were confident, relaxed and unafraid.

The prayer bothered Rex as he piloted the big craft into the clouds and above them. At first the spectacle at the field annoyed him. He was concerned about what the others would think and say. But that had been supplanted with something more. He felt that prayer pointed right at him, knifing through his smug complacency to point at the sin in his life. But he was a Christian, he told himself doggedly. He went to church and repeated the Apostles’ Creed. He had been baptized as a child. Why, then, did conviction plague his soul?

It became a regular practice with the crew of the *Terrier* to hold prayer meetings before each mission. Sometimes Rex joined them, kneeling self-consciously at the outer rim of the little group. Gradually the entire crew, with the exception of Rex, took part in the prayers. He wanted to pray but the words clung to the roof of his mouth and refused to be forced out.

The boys were quite surprised to find themselves admired — not ridiculed — by the other crews. Now and then, before a particularly dangerous mission, other fliers or whole crews joined them in their sessions of prayer. They discovered that, far from making them weaklings, a strong, prayer-based faith in Christ made them work harder and fight better.

Dixie tried to talk with Rex several times, but got the same quick answer. “I am a Christian, Dixie,” he would protest in a way that precluded

further conversation.

But there was something in Rex's manner that brought doubts to Dixie's mind. They were little things that all fitted together: his obvious dislike of the prayer services and his reluctance to join; his complete confidence in the plane they flew and in his own ability; his sporadic church attendance. The bombardier prayed often for Rex. Something fundamental was lacking in his faith.

As the number of mission symbols grew on the side of the plane week after week, and the *Terrier* continued to come back unscathed, she began to earn the reputation of a "lucky" ship. Not a member of her crew had been injured. Not a bullet had marred her dull olive drab skin.

Pride welled within Rex as the reputation grew. He was the pilot of a lucky ship. The *Terrier* could not be hurt. As his confidence in his own ability crescendoed, the conviction that had been developing in his heart during every talk with Dixie subsided.

The stream of letters from Wilma continued. She spoke of her love for him, and of her growing faith in the Lord Jesus. She had drifted away from the church in her college years, but now that he was in mortal danger day and night she came to realize how great was her need for Him. She spoke of what she had missed in those years of indifference and backsliding, and how full and happy her life was now.

"I know everything's going to be all right," she wrote. "Now that I have both you and Christ."

That letter contained a picture of her, her blonde hair pushed back from her face and her large brown eyes sparkling. It brought back memories.

He answered her dutifully, but if his letters sounded insincere it was not for lack of trying. He wanted desperately to love her, but now that he was away from her and the spell of infatuation, doubt was turning to certainty. He was bewildered. He wanted to do the right thing. He wanted to go back and make a home for her, loving her as much as she loved him, but how could he when he did not even know her? Their courtship had been measured in hours and minutes; their marriage was the result of hasty thinking.

Her letters began to hint of something important, a "surprise," she called it. She wrote asking for his parents' address in Kansas City. She was going south for a few weeks and wanted to stop and visit with them.

He had never thought that they might want to get together, his mother and Wilma, although they spoke often of wanting to meet. He cabled the address to her immediately, and in about ten days he got an answer, a V-mail letter written in a painstakingly beautiful hand. She had written small to get it all on the page, and he borrowed Dixie's magnifying glass to read it. Her letters were always beautifully written, each Word formed perfectly, and paragraphed with neat precision.

Darling,

I am writing to you now because I am going to visit your family and I want to be the first to tell you. I haven't written before, because I didn't want to worry you. You have enough on your mind without thinking about me. But you musn't worry one little minute.

Rex darling, we are going to have a baby! I hope it's a boy — as brave and as strong and as fine as his daddy. I'll be praying. for the three of us every minute...

A baby. Rex's face blanched and he read the letter over again. Dixie sat down beside him.

"What's the matter? Bad news?"

Without speaking Rex handed him the letter.

"Why, that's splendid," he exclaimed. "We haven't had a father on our plane yet. Wait till the rest of the fellows hear about this...I hope it's a boy."?

His enthusiasm died away as he looked at Rex's downcast face. "Don't you want children, Rex?"

"Of course I do." There was a long silence. "But I always planned on *loving* their mother."

# Eleven

REX WAITED A FEW DAYS before answering Wilma's letter. The baby should make a difference to him. He had always dreamed of having a little boy of his own some day — one who would look up to him and try to pattern his life after his. Whenever he took a fishing trip he thought how pleasant it would be to have a boy of eight or ten or twelve along to keep him company.

But the news that he was going to be a father only served to confuse him more. At times he was positive he did not love Wilma. ' Then again, when he would get out her picture to look at it, or one of her old letters to read again, he did not know. Those smiling dark eyes haunted him, and he could almost hear her laugh. After the first letter or two, when she began to write with breathless interest of the things that were happening at home, when she told of amusing little incidents, he found himself looking forward keenly to hearing from her. Her letters were like a breath of cool fresh air on a stifling afternoon.

He missed her, that was true; but perhaps he was lonesome and wanted company. Regardless of whether or not he regretted their marriage, he respected the vows he had taken to be true to her. Perhaps what he felt was only a natural longing for feminine companionship. A fellow could get so tired of being around men day after day. He envied Dixie and all the others who had dates during their nights.

He must have thought something of her once, but was it enough to form a foundation for a marriage? Or was it only a memory? Now that he was away from her he felt the tremendous pull of uncertainty and the pressure of the times. Probably neither one would have been serious under ordinary circumstances. Surely he would not have been so eager to rush blindly into marriage. He would have taken enough time to be certain he loved her.

Now the situation was complicated a hundredfold. He felt keenly his responsibility to both Wilma and the child. He could not desert her now.

But could there be any happiness for a little fellow in a loveless home? Questions tumbled and rolled without answer through his mind. What should he do? What was right?

Rex wanted to talk the matter out; to sit down with some interested listener and pour out the confusion and tangled emotions of his heart. He needed help in straightening his thoughts and adding insight to his judgment. Ordinarily he would have gone to Dixie, for he had always respected his utter honesty and straight thinking. But this would only give the bombardier another opportunity to preach at him. And Rex had had his fill of preaching.

He found himself recalling passages of Scripture which Dixie quoted during some of their more serious talks, which occurred at times when Rex could not get away from him without appearing rude. Dixie had been tactful in his approaches, and he made Christianity attractive. His voice thrilled as he spoke of the love of Jesus. It did not sound emotional or maudlin when he spoke of it, but rather it became the most practical thing in the world. Christianity was not a Sunday emotion to be displayed at funerals and church; it was a practical Way of Life.

Rex had always imagined himself a Christian until the quiet-spoken Southerner joined his crew and showed them Christianity at work. It meant something in his life. Doubt began to cast a shadow over the pilot's mind, even as separation was casting doubt over his love for Wilma.

That evening he wrote a letter to his mother, saying all of the things he would have liked to have told Dixie.

“...and, Mom,”

he wrote,

“why don't you ask her to come and stay with you until after the baby's born? I feel an awful responsibility for that poor kid, and the baby too. It would probably have been better if I had never met her...”

After mailing it he felt better. Mom would know what to do.

The *Terrier* took part in several unimportant and uneventful sorties over enemy territory during the next month. All of the planes in the squadron came through unscathed, and the ground crews began complaining good-



naturedly of having nothing to do. But there was something big brewing. Intelligence was putting in long hours poring over maps and the latest reports from Germany, and the top officers in operations were unusually preoccupied and grim. Colonel Brighton and his aide made half a dozen mysterious trips to London, and after each there was an important conference at the base.

Rex heard from his mother the day the flight orders for the big mission were posted on the bulletin board. In a conspicuous place outside the interrogation room a board was mounted where they posted the orders for the coming twenty-four-hour period, together with the numbers of the planes to take part and the the of briefing. The pilot had stopped before the board to search for the *Terrier's* serial number when Sergeant Ellson, the tail gunner from Iowa, approached him with the letter.

"This came for you this morning, sir. Lieutenant Zorn asked me to take it to you."

"Thank you, Sergeant. I see we're listed for the big show tomorrow."

"Yes, sir," he grinned. "It looks like everything but the hangars'll be over Kiel in the morning."

"I'm going to be counting on you to keep Jerry off the back of my neck."

"I'll do my best, sir. I'm right proud to be flying with the *Terrier*. She's a lucky ship."

"That's right. She's a regular homing pigeon."

When the sergeant went back to the barracks Rex opened the letter. It had been ten days since he had heard from Wilma and a month since his mother had written. The opportunity to move in with his parents had been made her. Her own mother was dead and she had felt the need for an older, sympathetic woman to whom she could turn for advice. Mrs. Madden and Wilma became fast friends, and Rex's mother insisted that she stay, at least until after the baby was born.

"You couldn't have married a girl who would fit in with our family better," his mother wrote. "We've already come to love her as our own flesh and blood, and she adores you...In writing about her you sounded confused, son. I can't tell you what to do, but you want to remember that we're living in unstable times and most of the world has a false set of standards. Look to the future and set your mind upon doing the will of God...He can bring love for her to your heart, my boy, even as He brings salvation to those of us who will accept it.

“...The best advice I can give you is to pray without ceasing...Your father and I will remember your problems in our morning worship...”

Even his mother preached at him. He put the letter aside, but its contents plagued him through the day. He had the growing conviction that all was not right with his faith.

They were briefed at three-thirty the following morning. Every plane that was able to leave the base was going to take part in the raid, the largest the Americans had ever carried out alone.

Dixie went on sick call the night before with a cold, and so a replacement bombardier was filling in. The rest of the boys laughingly accused the Southerner of pulling a “fast one” to get to spend the day with Mildred Patterson, to which he readily agreed.

“Yes, sir, when you guys are up in that old airplane you can remember I’ll be right here in this comfortable little bed with the prettiest nurse in the army to hold my hand.”

“I’ll bet nobody else on the floor gets any attention out of one Miss Patterson while you’re here.”

“Not if I can help it,” he admitted cheerfully. “I take a lot of carin’ for, believe me.”

Rex would have felt a little better with his regular bombardier at the bomb sight. They were used to working together and on a raid like this teamwork counted. But a man could not fly with a cold.

“This isn’t an ordinary mission,” the officer who was briefing them said. “We’ve been planning it for weeks, and there’s more just like it to follow, only bigger. We’re going over Kiel by groups and we’re going to give that submarine base everything we’ve got. The red flak’ll be thick enough to walk on and the aim’ll be good. Jerry’s going to protect his submarine docks and yards with the best ack-ack available and enough of them to throw up a curtain of steel. Going in we’ll probably stir up every fighter plane in the area, and we’ll have to battle them on the way out.”

He showed the crews the points of heaviest ack-ack and the location of enemy fighter nests along their route. There was no guesswork involved. Secret service agents risked their lives to make that information available, and it was accurate.

"This whole venture depends upon split second timing. It’s up to the navigator to keep you on the course selected, and the pilot must see that the

time schedule is strictly maintained. Ten or fifteen minutes off can upset the whole mission.

“And you new men remember that if a Jerry fighter flies alongside of you let him go. He can’t hurt you with his stingers pointed the other way. We’re sending you on a bombing mission, not to see how many fighters can be destroyed. And you may need every round of ammunition you’ve got before you get back to the base.” He stopped and looked about the crowd of men.

“I think we’ve covered everything. Are there any questions?”

A minute or two passed and no one spoke.

“If there are no questions, let’s go.”

The planes climbed to eight thousand feet and headed up the North Sea. As they neared the target they would go up to twenty thousand. They were to stay out of sight of land going over, cut across the thin waist of Denmark and swoop down upon Kiel from the southwest.

It was bad flying weather, with headwinds and fog over the water. At times they could not make out the planes flying alongside of them. Rex wished Eddie Zorn was plotting the course — not that he did not trust the squadron leader’s navigator, but he had seen Eddie work under adverse conditions in the States. He knew what he could do.

Regardless of conditions over the North Sea the meteorologist had assured operations that the weather over the target would be favorable, with good visibility, the prerequisite of precision bombing. Clouds and rain along the way would only help to conceal the mission.

The first planes had already reached the target and completed their bombing runs when the *Terrier’s* group arrived. And Jerry was wide awake. A few fires had been started at widely separated points and smoke was billowing into the clear, still air. Flak cascaded upwards, seeking the heavy bombers, even before they reached the target area. There was a veritable wall of it. Black puffs showed in the air about them as ack-ack exploded uncomfortably near. Intelligence had been right. Kiel was well protected.

Fighters were climbing rapidly to the right, acting as if they were intent upon braving their own heavy flak in order to get at the Fortresses before they dropped their loads.

“Hang on, fellows!” Rex yelled exultantly into the interphone. “Here we go!”

The big B-17's went into their bombing runs in a step-down formation at twenty-one thousand feet. The bombardier in the squadron leader's plane was directing the bombing and the *Terrier's* substitute bombardier was sitting tensely at his earphones waiting for the order to drop his eggs.

"Look at that flak," an unidentified speaker exclaimed into the interphone. "Walk on it? Why, you could drive a jeep on it. Yes, sir, you could drive a jeep on it. You could drive a jeep on it." And nobody thought it sounded strange at all.

An ack-ack shell exploded just under the wing of the *Terrier* as they approached the target, and ripped away a section of the flap. The big plane rocked violently. Rex fought her back to an even keel, and the bombardier cried, "Bomb's away!"

The salvos dropped easily from the ship and angled, nose down, towards the target, screaming their warning as they neared the ground.

It was the first time a plane Rex was piloting had been hit in combat and it frightened him. He had been depending, more than he realized, upon the "good luck" of the *Terrier*. He had an almost overwhelming impulse to leave the formation and make a run for it alone, forgetting the safety of his men, the flight, everything except an uncontrollable will to exist.

Before he had time to calculate the damage done someone yelled into the interphone: "There's a Yellownose coming in at ten o'clock!"

"And an ME 109 at seven o'clock," came from the other side of the plane.

Their machine guns chattered as the gunners set the cross lines of their Sperry gun sights on the enemy craft. The motions were the same as those in practice, and it was hard to believe that the flashes from the Jerry fighters were actually bullets aimed at them.

The first plane veered away with smoke showing about his motor cowling after a short cannon burst that did no harm, but the Messerschmidt kept boring in, his cannon shells crashing through the skin of the *Terrier*. The big ship rocked and quivered with each new hit. The number four motor conked out and Rex feathered the prop to keep from tearing the engine loose from its moorings. It had only been a few seconds since they entered their bombing run but the B-17 was a shambles. The co-pilot was slumped in his seat and the waist gunners were sprawled on the floor, their guns forever stilled. Rex could only imagine what had happened to the stocky Iowa lad who had been manning the tail gun. It was impossible to

contact any of the crew on the interphone. That must have been damaged too.

The flight had salvoed its bombs and limped out to sea to lick its wounds before starting back. The group had scattered, leaving each flight to get back to base as best they could.

“Flight leader to 925. Come in, 925.”

“925 to flight leader. Come in, flight leader.”

“How badly are you damaged, Mike?”

“Just a little flak in the skin. I don’t think it’ll cause us any trouble; but I’ve got a couple of badly injured boys in the crew.”

“That’s tough. But you think you can make it all right?”

“Yes, sir. I could fly this baby around the world if the gas held out.”

“That is all.”

“Roger.”

It was the *Terrier’s* turn next. The flight leader called her numbers and Rex answered, his voice trembling.

“What did they do to you, Madden?”

“We took quite a pounding, sir. Half the crew’s dead.”

“Never mind that now,” he said impatiently. “What’s the shape of the plane? Can you make it?”

“I’m not sure.” He looked at the gas tanks and tested the controls carefully. “Number four conked out, a section of the right wing flap’s blown away and the hydraulic controls are damaged. I’ll have to have a man check them to see how bad. But the gas is OK. and the other controls seem to be working all right.”

“Whew. Boy, they really pasted you, didn’t they?” In a moment he went on. “We’re all set to head for home. I’m going to go back across Denmark and pray that Jerry’s pea shooters are busy somewhere else. You were the worst hit in the flight, Rex, but we’ll stay with you for awhile at least. Try to keep your speed up and maintain as much altitude as possible. That could be the deciding factor for you.”

“Roger.”

“And may God bless you and your crew, Madden.”

That from a flight leader who had never been to church, to Rex’s knowledge.

The engineer found two bad leaks in the hydraulic lines and wallowed in greasy, slimy fluid to tape them. Rex tried the controls cautiously, holding

his breath. They worked, but it would take pampering to make them hold all the way home.

They ignored the ever-present danger of fighter opposition, heading across Denmark and directly for England. The altimeter drifted slowly downward as their speed fell off. It was impossible to keep the heavy plane at high altitude with three motors.

The wind that had been against them on the way over was friendly now, and the crippled Fortress rode on its back, thankful for the assistance. It would need everything to get them safely down again.

The rest of the flight stayed with the *Terrier*, risking their own lives in doing so, for they knew that packs of Focke Wulfs and Messerschmidts would be scouring the skylanes for stragglers. Medals were not given for such heroism as that. The airmen shrugged it aside as routine. Its very frequency made it commonplace.

Rex's mind was stunned by what he saw on the *Terrier* — his *Terrier* — the lucky ship. He was flying by instinct alone, with only the most frenzied will to live keeping him at the arduous task of nursing the controls, watching air speed and fighting to keep altitude.

After what seemed an aeon of flying they reached the rocky storm-swept coast of England and safety. Rex dropped onto the first available base and his companions circled the field, waved their congratulations and flew on.

# Twelve

REX FLASHED the “wounded aboard” signal as he came in over the field, and an ambulance was waiting for them on the landing strip. Before the big propellers stopped turning a medical detachment swarmed into the plane to administer first aid. Their task was to wait for just such emergencies, which happened oftener than any of them liked.

The interior of the B-17 was not a pleasant sight. The blood of dying men was spilled in dark blotches on the floor, and their lifeless bodies were slumped grotesquely at battle stations — shapes of flesh that looked but little like the men they once were.

Trout, Benton, the bombardier who had filled in at Dixie’s post, Rogers and Rex were the only uninjured men in the crew. Eddie Zorn had caught a piece of shrapnel in his arm when a twenty-millimeter cannon shell crashed through the bulletproof glass. The radio operator had stopped a machine gun bullet with his hip. But both of them had stayed by their guns until the enemy had been driven off, and then they had gone back to their jobs, to work doggedly, until they reached the ground.

It did not seem possible that those carefree boys who had so eagerly left the alert room could have gone so quickly. But they were. Their lives had been spilled out in a brief, furious battle against men whom they had never seen, let alone learned to hate. Hatred was for those back home. They could smear yellow paint on the homes of German Americans and thump their chests with patriotic self-righteousness. But it was enough for the bombing crews to hate the ideology the enemy represented and do the job they were trained to do.

After caring for the wounded, the medical detachment began to remove the others. There would be a grave-digging detail before dark, and, as the mists began to fold over the burial ground, a short prayer service would be held by the chaplain. And four new men would be called for from replacement to fill out the crew again. It was ever thus. Without voiced

regret or outward sorrow new men filled the thinning ranks and carried on as though they had been there all the time. That is the way wars are fought.

Bob Trout, Benton and Rogers crawled out of the door and slid quietly to the ground. They expected Rex to follow, for the pilot, like the captain of a ship, is always the last to leave. But instead he remained seated behind the controls, staring, dazed and unseeing, at the floor.

A sergeant with the medical detachment tapped him on the shoulder. "Are you all right, sir?"

"I-I don't know. I guess so."

"Hadn't you better get out, sir?"

There was no answer and he repeated the question.

"Look at her," Rex said bitterly, as though he had just found voice. "She's a lucky ship. A regular homing pigeon. You can't hurt the *Terrier*. She's lucky." His face twitched convulsively and his lips were quivering under the attempt to stem the flow of words. "I told them I took her up and I was going to bring her back again. I brought her back all right, but I didn't bring them with her." Hysteria was lurking just below the surface.

"Hadn't you better get out now, sir?" the sergeant repeated softly. "Your buddies are waiting for you."

"Ellson's gone. Bartlett's gone." All of the strain of the past few hours was released at once now that he was on the ground, and he felt the soul-twisting shock of reality. He was just realizing the consequences of their mission over Kiel. "And so are Sims and Ronnquist. Sims was a waist gunner," he continued in an unnatural monotone. "He stood right back there. And now he's gone. That's where my buddies are. They're all dead!"

The sergeant grasped him tenderly by the shoulders and guided him to his feet. "You ought to go in and get a cup of coffee, sir. You've had a pretty tough time of it."

Two men on the ground outside the door helped him down.

In the interrogation room some time later he tried to add his version of the raid to those of his three living companions, but he could not. He tried to command his tongue, and tell a logical story in a calm, subdued voice, but he repeated the same things again and again. His tortured mind snatched fragments of events and churned them about until he was unable to recall what he had said and what he had not.

The men who were listening watched with pity as he strove to control himself and the meaningless flow of words. They knew what he was going



through. One of their number had gone through it himself. All of them had seen men who had not been able to master it; whose minds refused to come under control again. They had to be sent back to the States and discharged, of no use to the air force, and of very little use to themselves.

After a few minutes intelligence saw that Rex was unable to give a coherent account of what had happened. He was taken over to the hospital, put to bed and quieted with morphine.

When he was gone, one of the aides turned to the officer in charge. "Will that boy ever fly again, sir?"

The officer shook his head. "I wish I could answer that. The only way we can be certain is to put him in a plane again."

"I'm no doctor, but I would have sworn he was insane. I've never seen a man act so strangely."

"You'll see a lot of strange things before you've been over here very long, Captain," he smiled. "This boy wasn't himself tonight, but that doesn't mean he's mentally unhinged. You want to remember he's been through a lot the past five or six hours. Four men in his crew were killed, and the pilot always feels responsible for his crew. He's been through a lot and he's seen a lot — almost more than one man can stand. I suppose you could call this a form of shell shock."

"But to get over it so he could fly a plane in combat again," the captain said doubtfully. "It just doesn't seem possible."

"That's true enough. And maybe he can't. I'll admit the odds are against him. But if he can conquer this and gain enough control over himself to go out on another mission he'll come out of it a better pilot. Whatever happens now is up to him."

They notified the *Terrier's* base of Operations of the location of the plane, the extent of damage and injury to the crew. Word came back for the uninjured fliers to remain with their plane until it was determined whether or not it was repairable.

Rex got up late the next morning after a drug induced rest. The nurse thought he should be kept in bed for another day or two, but the doctor examined him thoroughly and pronounced him physically fit. It would be better for him to get out among the boys where he could get his mind off the ordeal of the day before, rather than to lie in bed and think. He left the hospital and joined his crew — or what was left of it — to eat dinner.

Although he was quiet and more composed, he was still suffering from nervous shock. The words were slow in coming when anyone questioned him and his voice was dull and lifeless. At the long table in the mess hall he scarcely heard the voices of those about him. He was flying the *Terrier* again, hearing those awful groans and feeling the big plane quiver as it was hit. He remembered hearing his co-pilot cry out softly between clenched teeth and slump forward with blood staining the back of his flying suit.

He went over the battle continuously, from the first exhilarating moment of the bombing run until they followed the flight leader out to sea.

"Ellson must have been hit first, or the Messerschmidt could not have gotten in at such an angle. There was no blind spot on the *Terrier* from that direction — or from any direction, for that matter. And Trout in the top turret must have been concentrating on the other plane. Sims probably got it a split second later, leaving the whole side of the plane unprotected. If only he could have sneaked into a cloud bank! It was strange, but he could not even remember whether there had been any clouds or not. If only he had moved in to close the V so that the crews of the other two planes could have helped fight off the Jerry!

He could not bring himself to accept the fact that the *Terrier* was anything but invulnerable, and so it must have been something he had done or failed to do that caused the debacle. He went over the scene again and tried to find the cause.

Rex and his comrades walked over to visit the injured members of the crew, both of whom were responding to treatment. The doctors had removed the bullet from the radio operator's hip and had treated the wound on the navigator's arm. Both of them were talking about the time they could be released from the hospital. Rex felt somewhat better after leaving them.

The other three boys understood how it was with Rex and they did their best to keep his mind from himself and the men who had been killed. All of them felt the loss, but they did not have the shattered illusion of invincibility to battle nor the responsibility for the crew.

They wished that Dixie could have come with them, for he and Rex were close friends. They felt that he might be able to do something to ease the pilot's tortured mind.

Rogers was the least affected of any of them. When they marveled at his self-control he seemed surprised. He had not noticed that he was different

from the others, but they had noticed it. He had the same qualities of composure that marked Dixie's life. They envied him.

A Boeing specialist from London flew in that afternoon to look over the *Terrier* and determine whether or not it could be made to fly. A year before a plane damaged in such a manner would have been condemned and wrecked for salvage, but the "bomber doctors" had improved their technique a thousandfold in wresting damaged planes from the junk heaps.

Civilian employees of the factory that built the B-17 went into the battlefields all over the world to repair the big planes and make them fly again. Where they lacked tools they used a screwdriver and a pair of pliers, and where they lacked parts they made them or took them off another plane with similar mechanism. There were many Flying Fortresses operating in the Middle East which were patched with parts taken from captured German or Italian planes. Given a dozen army-trained mechanics and a little time, these mechanics could put most any plane back in good repair unless it was burned or a pile of wreckage.

The specialist went over the big B-17 hurriedly, but with the practiced eye of an expert, noting the parts that could be repaired and those that would have to be replaced. The skin could be patched very well with aluminum taken from wreckage and the tail assembly could be repaired. There was a condemned Fortress at a field near by which would provide bulletproof glass to put in the bombardier's compartment, and the line for the hydraulic controls. Only a new number four motor would be needed and they had those in the hangar at the field.

"I'll have her flying in a week," the specialist informed the crew chief who had been assigned to him, "if you can get me a good bunch of men."

"I can have as many as you want," he said proudly. "We've got some good mechanics at this field."

They went to work on the plane immediately. Rex and the boys watched them tear away the bullet-riddled skin and put in smooth aluminum patches.

The work was as carefully done as it was speedy. Other mechanics had brought a heavy hoist up over number four and in a matter of hours had removed the old motor, mounted a new one and had it adjusted perfectly. The Boeing man was all over the plane. One minute he would be supervising the work on the tail and the next he would have his hands plunged in grease up to his elbows as he helped swing the big engine into line.

The CO suggested that the crew go fishing up into the mountains of Scotland while they waited for their plane.

“It’s the best trout fishing in the country,” he explained. “A lot of the boys from here have been getting swell catches.”

They were interested, but Rex could not bring himself to think of fishing. The time was rapidly approaching when he would have to get into that plane, start the motors and take off into the wind. The very thought chilled him. Trout and Benton decided they could not go and leave him alone, and Rogers readily agreed.

The expert had overestimated the time required to put the big plane into flying trim by two days. A proud crew chief informed him that his boys would be done by noon the next day, just five days after they had started work on her.

“Didn’t I tell you I had the best mechanics in the business?” he asked. He did not mention the fact that he and three volunteers had been working an extra five or six hours a day to get it finished.

The next morning the riddled crew of the *Terrier* got their things together and were ready to leave when the plane was finished. Only a co-pilot was sent along with the four members of the crew. Operations was still dubious about Rex’s ability to handle the big B-17 after his nerve-wracking experience.

Sweat rolled down his face as he got into the pilot’s seat. He had to get the plane off the ground. They started the motors one by one, and the big Fortress moved slowly up to the runway. Rex was tense at the controls and the boys sensed the things that were going through his mind. Rogers and Trout were praying silently for him to conquer the fear that threatened to ruin him as a pilot.

At the signal from the flight control tower Rex opened the throttle and the plane began to roar down the runway. His face was set in a grim hard line.

“This is the time,” he told himself. His future career hinged upon the moment. It was just a simple thing. Let the plane gather speed, tucking air below the wings as she gained momentum. And then ease back on the controls. It was easy as that. He had done it a thousand times, on snow-swept plains and dangerously short mountain runways where the down draft is liable to dash one into a mountainside if he is not watchful. He had flown in wind and rain and fog. This was merely routine. Any cadet with a dozen

hours in a B-17 could do it easily. Just get up speed and slowly move the controls. The plane would do the rest. But thoughts of the dead in his old crew blotted his vision and hysteria began to attack reason. He had been responsible for the deaths of those men. He could never fly again. He could never fly again!

He cut the throttle and applied the brakes slowly as though something had frozen his will to fly. He sat there trembling.

The control tower began to clamor for information. The plane had been recently overhauled and such action indicated trouble.

Bob Trout patted Rex on the shoulder and the copilot looked back at the engineer and nodded understandingly.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said into the radio. "It was Just a false start. There's nothing wrong."

Such an explanation would scarcely satisfy operations and he knew that he would have to answer a host of questions when the crew landed at their destination.

They wheeled the *Terrier* back to the end of the runway and took off easily. She flew as smoothly as she ever did. To handle her no one would have known she had been riddled in battle, although she still showed evidence of the ordeal.

When they were in the air and out of sight of the base the co-pilot turned to Rex. "Won't you take over now, Lieutenant?"

"I-I couldn't." His face was still ashen.

"Of course you can." The co-pilot got up. "Go ahead and fly her. I'm going to go back and have a look at the tail."

Rex could not fly the *Terrier*. He would crash and kill them all. He had only to throw in the automatic pilot and let it hold her on the course until the copilot returned. That was what his fear commanded him to do. He leaned forward, and in so doing moved the right rudder. The plane veered slightly to one side. He straightened quickly, startled at the movement of the ship. It would respond to his touch. That fact seemed almost incredible.

Gingerly he took the controls. He tried the rudders and pulled back on the wheel speculatively. The *Terrier* lifted her nose like an Irish setter pointing partridges. He pushed forward and she angled gracefully down. There was no sluggish hesitation or faltering. She behaved like the queen she was. A little confidence came back to him, and a bit of the thrill of

commanding the giant craft. He hitched himself straighter in the seat and relaxed as he handled the controls.

Bob Trout, watching breathlessly from the spot behind him, grinned. The ruse had worked.

Rex was flying again.

# Thirteen

DIXIE WAS OUT OF THE HOSPITAL and waiting at the field to welcome them when they landed. He had heard that the crew had been badly handled and was anxious to see who had been spared. It was gratifying to learn that the man who had been sent in his place had come back safely. And he thanked God that Rex had not been taken in his unbelief.

Rex was loathe to talk about what had happened. He did not feel the awful fear or the dread of flying that he had before, but he could not dwell on the horrible nightmare over Kiel without feeling his stomach tighten into a knot.

He had been counting on a letter from Wilma when he got back to the base, but there was none. He was more disappointed than he would have admitted, even to himself.

“It’s getting time for that boy to arrive,” he told Dixie. “I can’t understand why they haven’t written to me or something.”

There was a long silence. Then Dixie said, “I thought you didn’t love her.”

The phrase slapped Rex hard. He got up from the chair and walked over to the window and back again.

“I’m so mixed up, Dixie, that I don’t know what I want, or why,” he said. “One day I think I can never love her regardless of what happens. But I get to looking forward to her letters and worry like everything when I don’t hear from her.” He sat down and crossed his legs.

He did not hear from her the next day, and the next they were slated for an important mission. The new members of the crew were introduced and shown the plane. They had been thoroughly trained at home and were ready and eager for their tasks. That their predecessors had been killed in a raid made no difference to them.

The flight orders slated the briefing for an hour before dawn. It was to be a small raid and highly secret. Their destination was not to be revealed until they reached the briefing room.

Dixie had been talking with Rogers and Trout enough to learn what had happened to Rex after the Kiel raid. He seemed calm enough now as they talked of common things, but how would he act over a target area? Would he be able to hold his course firm and true? Or would he falter when the flak got thick? And, more important than all the rest, was he to gamble with death again without the assurance of salvation? Dixie prayed long about his friend that night. He had to talk with him.

He made the opportunity the next morning before the briefing. Rex had not slept well either and they both were up in the chill night air. Rex, too, was wondering what he would do over the target area. With grim determination he resolved to hold straight to the course. He was bigger than the things which had happened to him. He was stronger than Jerry flak. They could shoot up his plane and kill his men but he would still come boring in. The one false note lay in the whiteness about his lips and the tremor in his hands.

Dixie opened the barracks door and stepped out into the fog beside Rex.

“You’re up early, Dixie.”

They could just make out each other’s features in the darkness.

“Yeh, I couldn’t sleep very well last night. I seldom do before a mission.”

“I couldn’t before this one.” His voice was taut and he strained to keep it calm.

“The boys were telling me you had a rough time over Kiel. You shouldn’t feel responsible for those fellows’ lives. You were doing your duty and they were doing theirs. It’s just part of the horror of war.”

“I keep telling myself it wasn’t my fault, but then I see them lying there in the plane with blood all around them. Dixie,” he said suddenly, “how do you stay so composed? Nothing seems to bother you.”

Dixie thanked God for presenting him with the opportunity to talk to Rex. The pilot was asking for help this time, for he already knew that the bombardier attributed his serenity to his faith in God.

“It’s nothing I can do for myself. It comes from putting my Whole trust in the Lord Jesus. Without Him I’d be much worse than Bill Jordan ever was, I know. We can’t trust ourselves and our weapons in something like this. Don’t you see that this thing is too big for us? Don’t you feel the need for His guidance and help?”



Rex hesitated momentarily, and Dixie waited, watching the effect of his words.

“I’ve felt the need of someone, or something, Dixie, that would give me back the confidence I’ve had in myself, but I don’t think I ever really defined it as God. I don’t know just what I did expect. It’s been rather vague.”

“Jesus Christ has what I needed, and He has what you need, but He won’t give you confidence in yourself. He’ll give you confidence in Him.” Rex sat down on the step and Dixie sat down beside him. He talked in low tones, but enthusiasm colored his words. “The Lord has laid it on my heart to talk with you, Rex. I guess you know I’ve tried it before, but you’d never really felt the need for Him and I couldn’t begin to get you interested. Now you do feel that you need Him. What happened over Kiel has shown you that you were trusting in sands instead of rock. There’s one answer, and only one, to the fears that’re torturing your soul. Confess your sins and accept Christ as your personal Saviour.”

“But I do believe.” Impatience crept into his tone. “I am a Christian.”

“Do you believe enough to place Him first in your life? Do you believe enough to cast your sins upon Him and let Him wash you clean? Do you believe enough to give yourself entirely and completely to Him. Do you believe enough, Rex?”

There was a long silence. Rex Madden knew what Dixie was thinking. He had been thinking the same thing about himself. He was seeing the sin in his life — the smug, complacent sin that rested upon his vague belief that he was a Christian and thereby above and beyond such things as confessing sins and asking forgiveness.

“Will you show me the way, Dixie?” he asked, his voice soft and charged with emotion.

“Christ is the Way. If you would have salvation, confess your sins with the prayer of the sinner, ‘God, be merciful unto me.’ Ask for His strength and courage and peace.”

Dixie opened his Bible to the fourteenth chapter of John and read quietly: Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.”

That verse seemed to open the floodgates of Rex’s heart. Without moving from the steps he bowed his head and began to pour out his soul to the Lord. Once Dixie was about to suggest that they kneel, but something

stayed him. A wrong word or an inopportune suggestion might well destroy all that was being accomplished.

As Rex prayed, softly and vibrantly, his turbulent heart stilled. It was as the Southerner had said; with the confession of sins and the acceptance of Christ as his Master the load he had been carrying slipped away. Peace and happiness came to him, and with them, courage. He knew then that, regardless of what happened in the future, he would never fear flying again. Someone would ride beside him, guiding him and helping him. Christ would guide as he piloted his plane.

He prayed, not for safety for himself, but that he might adequately discharge his duties regardless of the odds against him.

Some minutes later he got to his feet a bit unsteadily. At that moment one of the crew came out to where they were.

“Oh, there you are. I thought I’d have to hunt for you,” he said to Rex. “We’re going in to be briefed now.”

“Thanks.”

The officers in charge of the briefing were unusually grim.

“This is a light raid, if we measure it by the number of planes that will take part, but it’s an exceedingly important mission. We’re only sending over two squadrons, and so you can see the responsibility that rests upon each plane. There’s no need in my telling you it’s dangerous. But this time, in view of the small number of planes taking part, all flights are to continue to the target. If any of you are aborted on the way over you’ll have to get home as best you can alone. The rest of your flight can’t be spared from the mission.”

When they were filing out of the room after the briefing one of the officers called Dixie aside.

“How’s Madden, Lieutenant?”

“I think he’ll be all right, sir.”

“The co-pilot who helped bring the plane here reported that Madden was afraid to take her off.”

“I wasn’t there, sir, but that’s what I understood. He was just a little upset after the Kiel affair. He’s all right now.”

“Are you sure of it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Sure enough to fly with him?”

“That’s right, sir. I’d fly with him anywhere.”

"Does the rest of the crew know what happened to his nerves?"

"Yes, sir, and they're all willing to go with him."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. We've been concerned about him since we got the report from the base where he landed, and the additional report of the co-pilot. I shall want a detailed report of what happens on this mission from your co-pilot. I've talked to you about this because I understand that you're Madden's best friend and would most likely know his condition better than anyone else."

"I don't think you need worry at all, sir."

As they were climbing into the *Terrier* a private came running up. "Is Lieutenant Madden here?" he asked breathlessly.

"I'm Madden." Rex turned and stepped towards him.

Rex took it hastily. It was from his mother, and had been mailed two weeks before.

"There was a cablegram for you too, sir, but I didn't bring it with me."

"Why not?" Rex shouted at him. A cablegram could only mean that the baby was born.

"I would have had to wait for it, sir, and there wasn't time."

Rex started to retort sharply, but the co-pilot called from the plane, "They're about ready for us, Madden."

There wasn't time to go after the cablegram. He knew it was about Wilma. It had to be. And he would have to wait for five or six or seven hours to find out what it said.

When they had taken off and fallen into formation Rex turned the controls to his co-pilot while he read the letter from his mother.

...Wilma asked me not to write to you, but I had to, son, in case things should go wrong. She hasn't been well, in spite of what she's been writing to you...I'd feel so much better if you were here. She loves you so much...

Rex choked. He could not read any more. As the shackles of sin slipped from him a few moments before, just outside the officers' quarters, so did his doubt about loving Wilma disappear now that her life was in jeopardy. For weeks and months doubt had piled upon doubt. Every attractive girl he saw made him sorry that he was bound by matrimony to be true to a girl he scarcely knew. Every time he saw Dixie and Patts together, or one of the other fellows with a little English girl, he had longed to be in their places.

Lonesomeness had dwarfed his affection for Wilma and had magnified his desire to seek other feminine companionship. Even the knowledge that they were to be parents had not changed the situation. But now the rude shock of learning that she was risking death brought him sharply to his senses. Now that her life was hanging in the balances he knew he loved her. The confusion and bewilderment of the past few weeks was gone.

He did not know whether he had always loved her and was just realizing it, or whether he was just beginning to fall in love. But it did not matter. There was no doubt in his mind or heart. He loved her deeply.

Word was waiting for him back at the base, but the hours seemed to stretch into days before they landed again.

The raid went over nicely and the *Terrier* was fortunate to bring her crew back without a scratch. They picked up a little flak and a temperamental motor that had to be coaxed all the way home, but those were little things. Rex urged the big plane on as fast as he could, itching to leave the formation and dash back to the base to get the cablegram.

It might contain news of the birth of their child, or it might... He dare not think of the other possibility.

Finally the flight arrived back at the base, and Rex hurried to get his cablegram. It was from his mother.

Baby son born Tuesday. Both doing nicely.

The tears sneaked from under his eyelashes as he read.

“Thank God,” he breathed softly. “Thank God.”

# Fourteen

THE FOLLOWING DAYS passed smoothly for Rex. He had gone through his great trial and had come out with a new faith in the Lord Jesus. Not that there were not rough missions. At times when he was over the target area and the flak was blasting holes in the air about the *Terrier*, he was so frightened he felt it would be impossible for him to work the controls. But, like Dixie, he had a Source of strength that never failed him. Whenever the going was toughest, there was always a prayer on his lips.

Their plane was shot up now and again over Europe. Men were killed and new ones were sent from replacement to fill out the crew, but never again did Rex have to battle within himself to control his mind. That battle had been fought and won by Christ Jesus.

He found renewed comfort in the letters from Wilma, and his love for her increased as the days went by. She wrote often, telling him about the little fellow who looked like him. But he did not believe it. All little babies he had ever seen looked like no one at all, excepting another baby. But it flattered him just the same. She promised to send a picture as soon as she could get it taken and he could scarcely wait to see him.

Gaslin, the co-pilot on the mission on which Dixie was wounded, had marveled at Rex Madden's control. And Georgie Stebbins, whose buddy had been killed, and who was fighting against hysteria, grasped eagerly at the faith which Rex possessed.

"All of us are afraid, Georgie," he said sympathetically. "I went through just what you're going through now, not so long ago. And Dixie Meyers showed me how to lick it." Briefly he told the young aerial gunner what had happened to him. And as he spoke of Christ and His saving grace the boy's face relaxed its taut, strained look and became calm once more. "If we try to fight fear ourselves we're licked before we start. I tried it; so I know. The Lord Jesus alone can give us strength to carry on."

Together they knelt on the barracks floor. Men coming and going in the long narrow building hushed their talking and stepped quietly past. One day

they might have laughed, but they could not do that when one of the men was a buddy who had lost his best friend, and the other a veteran captain who wore the Distinguished Flying Cross and an oak leaf cluster on his blouse.

“You have only to accept Him as your personal Saviour, Georgie, confessing your sins and praying for forgiveness. Then you can pray for strength and the courage to go on. He’s not only the Christ of the weak and homeless. He’s the Christ of fighting men.”

# Glossary Of Aeronautical And Military Terms

**ABORTED** — to be forced to return to the base of operations by mechanical difficulties before reaching the target area.

**ACK-ACK** — anti-aircraft guns.

**ALERT** — state of preparedness before going on a mission or before going overseas. When a company or crew is alerted they are on a moment's call and cannot leave the camp or communicate with anyone on the outside.

**ALERT ROOM** — room where pilots and crews are briefed for missions.

**ALTIMETER** — instrument for measuring altitude.

**BARRACKS** — enlisted men's quarters.

**BASE** — airfield where ground crews, operations, intelligence offices, flying crews, etc., are stationed.

**BASE OF OPERATIONS** — generally same as above.

**B-17** — Boeing Flying Fortress.

**BOMB BAG** — portion of the airplane where bombs are carried.

**BOMBING RUN** — a steady, level trip over the target area, in high level precision bombing, during which the bombardier directs the flight.

**CONKED** — a term generally used in referring to a motor silenced by enemy action, although it can refer to any mechanical difficulty that causes an engine to quit in the air.

**CONTROL TOWER** — tower on the airfield used to control the landing and taking off of planes.

**CREW** — in a B-17, 10 men: pilot, co-pilot, navigator — gunner, bombardier gunner, engineer-upper turret gunner, 2nd engineer-waist gunner, armorer-waist gunner (checks ammunition, arms, bombs, etc), radio operator, 2nd radio operator-ball turret gunner, tail gunner.

**FEATHERING THE PROP** — changing the pitch of the propeller.

**FIGHTER AT TEN O'CLOCK** — an example of the method used for pointing out quickly the direction from which an enemy plane is approaching. Lay a

watch down face up, imagining that twelve o'clock is on the nose, three on the right wing, six on the tail and nine on the left wing. Hence a fighter coming in at ten o'clock would be approaching the plane at an angle just ahead of the left wing.

FLIGHT ORDERS — orders given for the conducting of a flight, course to follow, speed, landing points, etc.

FLAK — fragments of anti-aircraft shells.

FORMATION — an established flying order for several planes, one of the most successful of which is a V or combination of V's.

FOCKE WULF — a very formidable German fighting plane, often called Yellownose by Allied airmen.

GROUP — several squadrons of planes.

HOT — a term used in describing a crew or crews about ready to go overseas.

INTELLIGENCE — portion of the army that provides information regarding targets, anti-aircraft placements, dispersal of fighter strength, etc. A part of their information is gleaned from returning crews, but a great deal of it comes from daring undercover agents working in the occupied countries and even in Germany.

INTERROGATION ROOM — room where returning fliers are quizzed by intelligence.

INTERPHONE — communication system linking 3 crew members together.

MEUERSCHMIDT — German fighter plane.

MINION — major operation against an enemy target, usually with a large number of planes.

OPERATIONS — much the same as headquarters in a ground army. With the aid of intelligence they plan missions, sorties, etc.

OPERATIONAL FLIGHTS — training flights designed to give fliers training in every type of flying and under every condition they are likely to encounter in combat.

PRECISION BOMBING — high altitude daylight raids in good visibility, for which the flying fortress was originally designed. The use of the famous Norden bomb sights making such risky raids worth while.

PX — post exchange.

REPLACEMENTS OR REPLACEMENT CENTER — base that supplies crew members to replace those injured or killed.



ROGER — O.K. or “I understand.” Used extensively in interphone conversations.

SALVO — to drop all the bombs in the plane at one time.

SHRAPNEL — slivers of high explosive shell or bomb.

SKIN — thin aluminum covering on the plane.

SKIP-BOMBING — a highly dangerous type of bombing in which the plane dives down within twenty or thirty feet of the water to drop the bombs, thus causing it to “skip” into the ship in the unarmored side just below the water line. It is an American maneuver, developed in the Australian theater and proved highly successful against surface craft in the battle of the Bismarck Sea.

SQUADRON — nine planes.

SORTIEE — minor operations against enemy installations, strafing, etc.

THROAT MIKE — microphone that fastens about the throat, used with interphone.

TOKIOS — extra wing tanks.

WALK AROUND BOTTLE — bottle of oxygen to snap to oxygen mask when wearer wants to move from one section of the plane to the other, beyond the reach of the oxygen hose.

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# How Can You Find Peace With God?

The most important thing to grasp is that no one is made right with God by the good things he or she might do. Justification is by faith only, and that faith resting on what Jesus Christ did. It is by believing and trusting in His one-time *substitutionary* death for your sins.

Read your Bible steadily. God works His power in human beings through His Word. Where the Word is, God the Holy Spirit is always present.

Suggested Reading: [New Testament Conversions](#) by Pastor George Gerberding

## Benediction

Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, To the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen. (Jude 1:24-25)

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