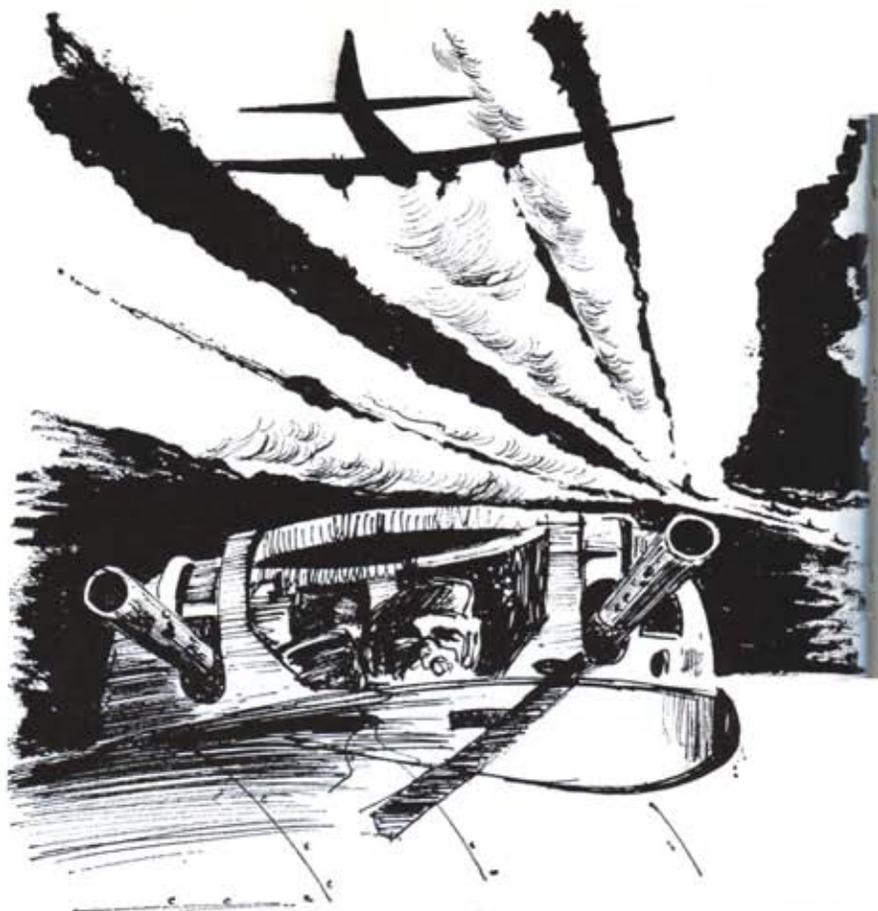


A look back, to the  
Schweinfurt mission  
of October 1943 . . .  
twenty years ago . . .

# THE FORTS COME HOME



Illustrated by Cliff Prine

Twenty years ago . . . on October 14, 1943 . . . the United States Army Air Forces mounted a great bombing raid against a German city. A total of 291 Eighth Air Force B-17 Flying Fortresses out of bases in England fought their way 200 miles into south-central Germany to strike the industrial center of Schweinfurt, the city that produced nearly half of the Nazi war machine's ball bearings.

That October 14 raid is one men still speak of. But few boast of Schweinfurt; the cost to the AAF in men and machines was enormous. The raid was called the Second Schweinfurt Mission. It furnished, in the words of one historian, "final and terrible evidence of the perils in unescorted daylight bombing attacks against German industry."

Part of the story of that mission—the return of the bombers—is told on these pages by Martin Caidin in a selection from his book *Black Thursday*. *Black Thursday* was published in 1960 by E. P. Dutton & Co., N. Y. The following excerpt is reprinted by special arrangement with the publisher. Mr. Caidin is well known as the author of numerous books on aviation and space, among them *Countdown for Tomorrow*, *The Night Hamburg Died*, and *A Torch to the Enemy*.

The Eighth Air Force had hit Schweinfurt before. Two months earlier, on August 17, a combined blow was struck at the Schweinfurt ball-bearing complex and at the Messerschmitt plant at Regensburg, 100 miles beyond. German fighters destroyed twenty-four of the Regensburg bomber force of 146, while thirty-six of the 230 Schweinfurt B-17s were lost and many more crippled. It was clear to Eighth Air Force Commander Ira Eaker and his planners that another such week of operations would mean the end of the Eighth as an effective combat force.

Then Schweinfurt came up again as a target—on October 14, "Black Thursday." Two giant air task forces took part: The 1st Air Division provided 149 B-17s from nine groups

(the 91st, 92d, 303d, 305th, 306th, 351st, 379th, 381st, and 384th); another 142 Forts came from seven groups of the 3d Air Division (the 94th, 95th, 96th, 100th, 385th, 388th, and 390th).

For one reason or another, forty-eight bombers from the 1st AD failed to bomb the target. Of the 1st AD force, forty-five B-17s were destroyed and five more either crashed or crash-landed on their return to England or were abandoned over the island. Only fourteen of the 3d AD's planes failed to attack the target, but of the 128 that did, fifteen were lost. Sixty-three 1st AD planes and seventy-nine from the 3d were damaged. Thus, of the total force of 291 bombers, sixty-five were destroyed and 142 damaged. Only twenty-nine percent of the outgoing force escaped damage.

The toll in human lives was even higher: five men killed in action, forty wounded, and 594 men missing in action.

Aggressive German fighters caused most of the damage. Fighter attacks began at the German border, beyond range of Allied P-38s and P-47s, and continued almost without letup until the B-17s, struggling back from Schweinfurt, were able to pick up their friendly escort again. Part of the answer to this problem came a few months later when P-51 Mustangs began reaching England in numbers. The longer-legged '51s did much to make possible the "Big Week" of February 1944 when streams of Allied bombers escorted by hundreds of fighters began the systematic destruction of German aircraft factories.

So Schweinfurt went into history. Now, twenty years later, the Editors of AIR FORCE/SPACE DIGEST take this means to pay tribute to the hundreds who died in the air over Schweinfurt and to the other hundreds who lived through the Black Thursday mission and went on to help gain the final Allied victory. We do this through the words of Mr. Caidin and the sketches of artist Cliff Prine.—THE EDITORS

**B**RENNAN'S CIRCUS, B-17 Number 383 of the 332d Squadron, 94th Group, failed to bring her men home to England, but she brought the crew close enough, and not a man had anything but kind words to say about their valiant bomber.

Ten minutes before the target run the fighters shot out the first engine, which burst into flames. For another five minutes the pilot, 1st Lt. Joseph Brennan, twenty-one years old, struggled to keep up with the group formation. The Fortress was sluggish and unresponsive, and both Brennan and his copilot, 2d Lt. Gordon E. White, twenty-two years old, were forced to work at the controls together. But even with the throttles jammed all the way forward, the crippled bomber couldn't make it.

Their only chance of remaining with the other bombers, of continuing to fly under the protection of the massed fire screen, was to jettison the heavy bomb load. Brennan ordered 2d Lt. Joseph E. Genone, twenty-four years old, to salvo the bombs. Unhappily, the Fortress was in far worse condition than they realized, and the bomb-release mechanism was a shambles of twisted metal. "I decided right then that we had to peel off," Brennan said. "We were far behind the rest of the formation by then, and the fighters were making terrific passes at us. We were at 25,000 feet when I swung her over and let her go."

Shaking badly, shivering from nose to tail in a series of eerie vibrations, the *Circus* swooped down in a dive, and quickly reached a speed of more than 350 miles per hour—still with her lethal bombs in the bays. Seeing the burning engine and the sudden plunge, the fighters closed in, blasting away with guns and cannon. Then four more FW-190s swept in while the gunners were engaged. Four rockets whipped past the B-17, blazing fiercely. They missed.

TSgt. Willard R. Wetzel, twenty-three years old, the radio operator-gunner, was on his twenty-fifth (and final) mission. As the *Circus* dropped away, the target of the furious German attacks, Wetzel had one of the worst moments of his battle-studded combat career. "The pilot kept circling as he went down," Wetzel related back in England, "because if we had gone down in a straight dive, all a fighter had to do was get on our tail and stay there while he was letting us have it. As it was, the Jerries managed to hit another engine. The prop began to run away at such a speed it made the most horrifying noise I have ever heard. I didn't know then it was the prop. I thought the wings were falling off. I was all alone in the radio compartment and didn't have my headset on. I thought, with the wings falling off, the pilot had ordered us to bail out and I hadn't heard him. I opened the radio compartment door and looked to see if the bomb-bay doors were open. They were. I thought then that I was left all alone in the ship, with no one at the controls.

"That really hit me. I turned to ice.

"I fumbled around, finally managed to plug in my headset, and called the pilot. There was a minute—one hell of a long minute, too—before he answered, and I think I kept holding my breath. Then he said, 'Stick with us.' Boy, was I relieved!"

As the *Circus* swirled around steeply in her spiral, the bombardier finally managed to jettison the several tons of high explosives. Almost as if she was glad to be rid of the bombs, the *Circus* responded faster and more effectively to the wrestling motions of Brennan and White in the cockpit. Still the bomber fell, while the navigator, Lt. Verne D. Viterbo, shouted to Wetzel to get him a radio "fix" to home on.

"Things were rapidly going straight to hell"—so the

pilot later described the moments of the spiral from 25,000 feet down to the ground—a spinning blur of flames, exploding shells, singing bullets, the roar of the engines, the shouts of the crew, and the blasting noise of the run-away prop. The *Circus* had only one chance, and Brennan took it by diving the battered Fortress right to the deck—scarcely fifteen feet over German soil.

From then on this B-17 certainly had what must be described as one of the "hairiest" flights in bomber history. With one engine out and its prop spinning crazily, another worthless and streaming flames, the B-17 lit out for the Channel with the fighters on her tail like a wolf pack in full cry. The shells and bullets crashed into the wings like hail, but the fighters could not make steep diving attacks and had to slow down as they came in, for fear of striking the ground. All the gunners blazed away and finally the fighter pilots, either discouraged or else convinced that the Fortress didn't stand any chance of making it home, turned tail and went after fresher game.

With only his two good engines and the *Circus* resembling something that had gone through a meat grinder, Brennan coaxed the staggering bomber directly among the trees and buildings. Frequently he had to lift a wing to clear a tower or a church steeple, missing the ground obstacles by scant inches.

By the time the *Circus* was floundering its way across Holland and Belgium, ground fire replaced the attacks of the Luftwaffe. The area was so strewn with small fighter airfields that it proved impossible to avoid all nests of flak and, occasionally, a half-hearted pass by a single fighter plane whose pilot must have stared in some disbelief at the wreck hedgehopping over the land, leaving behind it a long pall of smoke.

Low as it flew, the thunder of the *Circus'* two remaining motors was heard for miles ahead. People rushed out of their homes and shops, jumping up and down in excitement, waving happily, and raising their arms in "V for Victory" salutes to the bomber. Everywhere the people appeared—men, women, and children—and their reaction was spontaneous. The sight of an American bomber so close to the ground—with the crew members leaning out of turrets and hatches and waving back!—was cause for cheer. But there were enemy troops on the ground, too.

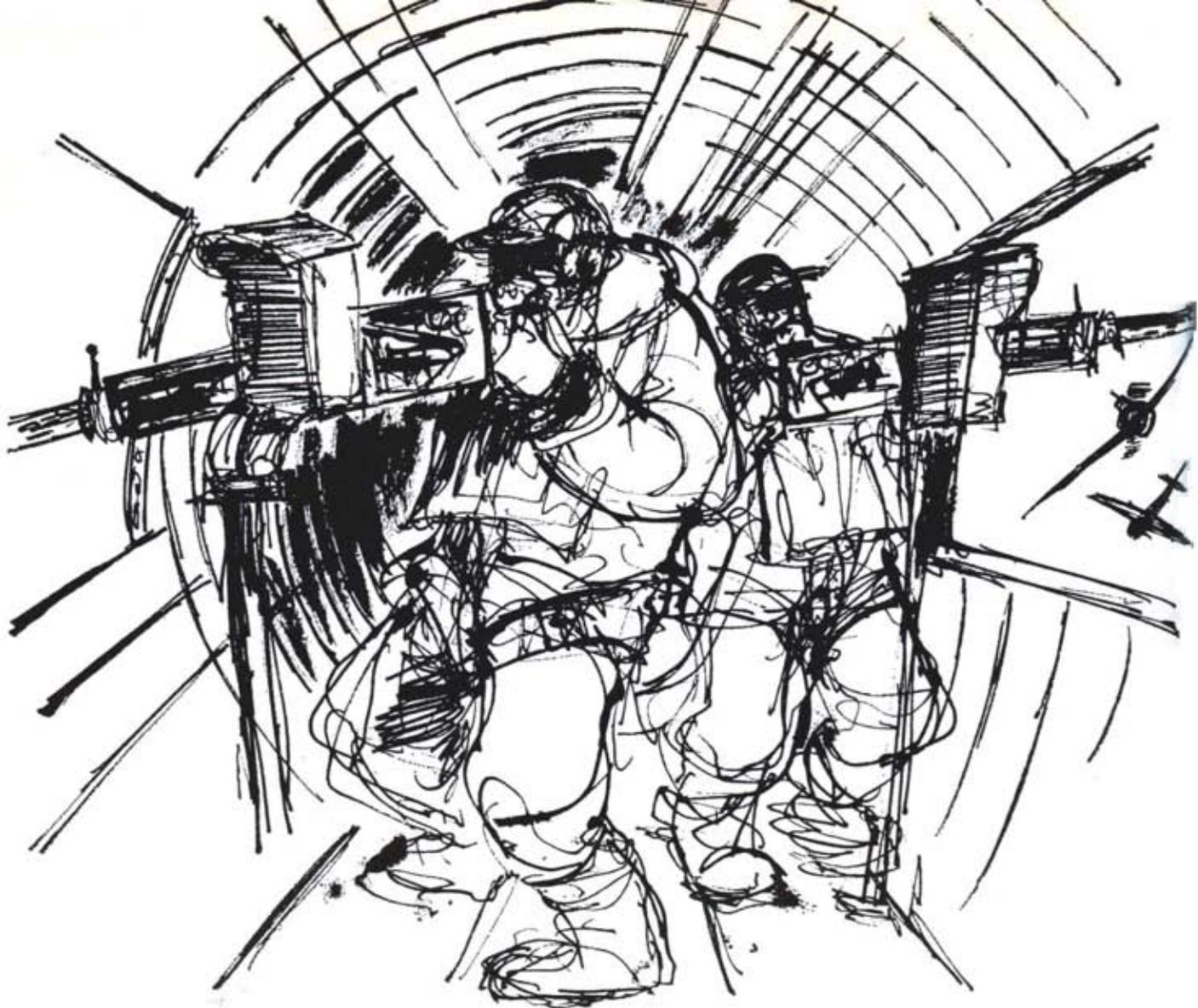
"They fired everything they had at us," said SSgt. Denver A. Nowlin, the right waist gunner. "We were so close to them that the noise was terrific. They were firing machine guns and everything else. Troops were lined up on rooftops and in the streets and fields, blazing away with rifles. Their officers also were outside, firing pistols. If they'd had more time, they probably would have thrown rocks at us also."

The *Circus* took a terrific beating from the withering ground barrage. If she was cut up before, now she began to fall apart. Pieces of metal curled up on the wings, gaping holes appeared magically in the wings and fuselage, and bullets twanged through the ship like a swarm of bees.

Then a final barrage struck home. A waterfall of tracers soared up from the earth and smashed into one of the two remaining good engines. The *Circus* faltered visibly as the third engine cut out, then struggled on—carried by only one engine.

It is impossible for a B-17 to fly on one engine but maybe Brennan in the cockpit hadn't read the book that said so. Revved up to maximum power, that engine dragged the Fortress away from the land, while the tail-turret gunner cheerfully described the hail of bullets splashing in the water behind them, unable to reach the

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## THE FORTS COME HOME

CONTINUED

staggering bomber. Wetzel had already flashed out the plane's identifying radio signal to British shore stations, saying they would be coming in right on the deck. But the *Circus* just didn't have it any more; she began to lose the precious few feet beneath the wings. Brennan told Wetzel to flash the Mayday distress call; they would have to ditch in the Channel.

Only five miles from the British coast line the crippled bomber gave up the ghost. Brennan and White held the nose high as the crew gathered in the radio room, and then they settled her gently to the water. She drifted down like a feather, trailed a high plume of spray, and slowly came to a stop. As the *Fortress* began to settle, the crew cut the dinghies loose and climbed aboard. Not a man got his feet wet. Within an hour a British rescue boat picked them up.

• • •  
Lt. Miles McFann was a navigator aboard the B-17 named *Paper Doll* on Mission 115; it was his seventh—and his most memorable—attack of the war. Before training as a navigator in the Army Air Forces, McFann had flown airplanes—little light planes with sixty-five horsepower that might do eighty miles per hour if you flew them straight down with the engine shaking itself loose. But he came back from Mission 115 as a pilot, simply because there wasn't much choice.

The pilot was dead, the copilot was badly wounded and bleeding profusely, and the *Paper Doll* had 132 big holes in her. McFann brought the battered *Fort* down on a strange field to write another epic chapter of Mission 115.

*Paper Doll* flew the trailing position in the lead element of the attack. Through the worst of the German fighter attacks and flak barrages over Schweinfurt she sailed along with what seemed like a sorcerer's ability to dodge bullets, shells, and flak bursts. Seven minutes from the French coast on the return leg her luck gave out.

"Everybody was happy," related the weary McFann at the end of the flight. "We'd been through a tough time in the target area, but things were going nice and we hadn't even been hit once. The bombardier asked me how long it would be before we got out of the danger zone. I calculated that we'd be over the French coast and out of the mess in seven minutes. Then flak started popping up and our right wing was hit."

That's when everything went to hell. *Paper Doll's* pilot threw the big *Fortress* into wild, evasive maneuvers; the flak batteries had the bomber pinned neatly, and unless it evacuated that block of airspace, it was only a matter of seconds before the shells must score directly. So violent were the flak and the pilot's reaction that when the crew looked around again they were alone.

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The formation was far off in the distance, and at that moment everyone began to feel distinctly uncomfortable. They had good reason to be.

Without warning two fighters flashed in to attack directly out of the sun—their shells crashing into the B-17 even before anyone called out their positions. As the crew hastily swung their guns around, another fighter raced up from beneath and stitched a deadly wreath of holes in the Fortress's belly.

The fighters making the attack from out of the sun had rockets, and one of these flashed brightly before it exploded with a thundering roar against the right side of the cockpit canopy. The bomber reeled wildly, out of control as steel fragments screamed through the cockpit. A moment later a 20-mm. cannon shell slashed in between the copilot and the back of his seat, exploded, and almost tore the pilot—Lt. Robert H. Bolick—to pieces. Shell fragments ripped his face all over, struck his neck, and opened deep wounds in his leg. There was no respite; cannon shells exploded in the bomb bay, blew holes all through the rudder, and turned the number-one engine into spinning junk.

The stricken Fortress skidded to the left, dropped her wing, and began to slide earthward. McFann called desperately to the cockpit, but the exploding shells had knocked out the interphone system. The navigator clambered up to the cockpit and stared at the bloody mess in front of him. Bolick was slumped over the control wheel, but even with all his wounds and the terrible loss of blood he straightened up, grasped the controls, and righted the B-17 from her fall. Weakly he motioned to the copilot, Lt. Edward F. Downs, to take over the controls; then he slumped over again, unable even to hold up his head.

"See—see what you can do for Bolick," gasped the copilot as he grabbed the wheel. McFann stopped short as Bolick raised his hand once more in an effort to take over the controls. It was his last effort. He slumped once again over the wheel, and fainted.

All this time Downs had only asked that Bolick be given assistance. Then, quietly, he informed McFann that he would need some help. The navigator looked in wonder at his copilot; Downs had been hit in the right arm, the right side, in his right leg, and in both knees. Blood trickled down from multiple wounds in his head.

The engineer and bombardier came to McFann's assistance, and the three men, as gently as they could, moved Bolick from his seat and carried him into the nose. The pilot did not regain consciousness again; several minutes later he died.

McFann climbed back into the cockpit and moved into Bolick's seat. On several previous occasions the pilot had let him fly the Fortress, but only in straight and level flight, many thousands of feet above the ground. But if Downs didn't get any better, McFann was going to have to fly this airplane right onto the runway—or else everybody was going to hit the silk. One of the crew attended Downs's wounds as McFann held the airplane in a steep glide, dropping below the thick overcast.

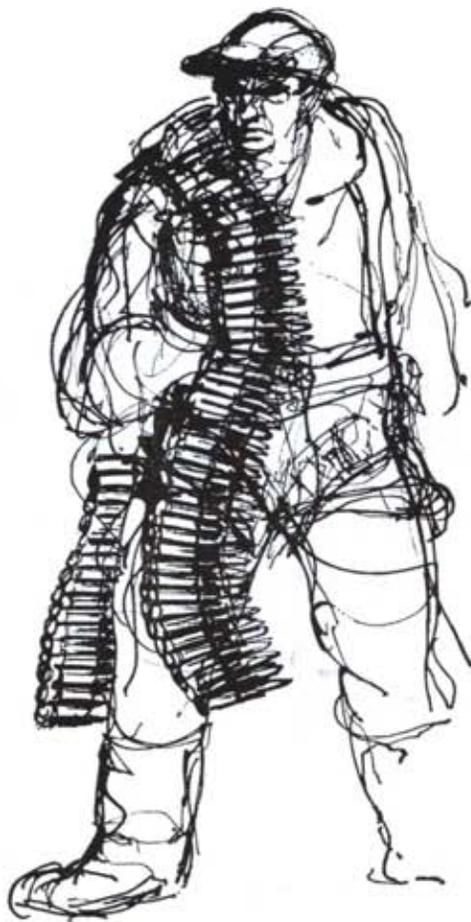
McFann lit a cigarette and handed it to Downs. When the copilot made no move to take the cigarette he had just requested, McFann knew he had real trouble on his hands. Bolick was dead, and Downs, unconscious and bleeding badly, close to death.

"Fred [Downs] would go in and out; he'd be conscious a while and then pass out again," McFann related. "Whenever he came to he tried to give me advice on flying the Fortress. I couldn't see a thing and wasn't certain exactly where I was, because in the thick of the fighting,

I didn't have time to keep my navigation up to date.

"So I got the radio operator to send out an SOS. We finally got an escort of two Spitfires, who guided us to a Royal Canadian Air Force field with long runways which could handle the big Fort. Fred was conscious at this time and told me to put down the landing gear. Then, through sheer guts—for his right arm was ripped from the elbow to the shoulder—Fred put both hands on the controls to help me.

"He couldn't do much talking, so he'd shake his head as a signal to retard the throttle, and nod it to signal me to give it more gas. As we neared the ground, he



tried to pull back on the wheel; I helped him, but two-thirds of the way down the runway we still hadn't settled.

"I could see Fred was trying to pull the wheel all the way back, so I yanked hard on it and pulled it all the way back into my stomach. The plane settled okay, but Fred was so weak he couldn't handle it well. It veered slightly, but I kicked right rudder and got it straightened out and safely stopped.

"When we had all this trouble, we could have bailed out, of course, instead of risking a possible crash-landing. I suppose a lot of fellows wouldn't want to take a chance on having a navigator act as pilot, but they weren't sticking because of their confidence in me.

"They all knew that Bolick was dead inside that ship, and none of us was going to bail out and leave him in there. We just wouldn't do it, that's all."

*Brennan's Circus failed to reach England on her re-  
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turn from Mission 115, but she brought her crew right to the doorstep. *Paper Doll* made it home, by little more than the insane courage of her wounded copilot and the amazing pinch-hit flying of Lieutenant McFann.

There was a third B-17 that, by all the odds of combat, should have made the losses in combat for Mission 115 a total of sixty-one bombers. Again the crew provided the difference when everything was held together by little more than the sinews of courage. This B-17, nameless but affectionately called just 741 by her crew, did *Brennan's Circus* one better in the mad dash over occupied Europe. Where the *Circus* barely cleared obstacles on the ground, 741 dropped a little lower and literally clipped treetops across Germany and France. She did so with her metal skin torn to fragments and with several of her crew badly shot up.

For an hour and a half 741 with the rest of her



formation bore the brunt of furious attacks by waves of German fighters. On the bombing run their luck ran out; a fighter hosed a stream of cannon shells into one engine, and the pilot, 1st Lt. Harold R. Christensen, shouted to the copilot, 2d Lt. Stuart B. Mendelsohn, to feather the battered engine. Mendelsohn hit the feathering button, the fuel cut-off switch, and chopped the throttle.

What should have happened didn't. Instead of the propeller blades turning slowly to knife into the wind—useless but presenting little drag—the blades stayed at the same angle, windmilling and imposing severe drag on the Fortress. One of the gunners stared out at the windmilling blades and muttered to no one in particular on the interphone: "Something tells me we have bought the farm. We ain't going nowhere with that god-damn fan doing that out there. . . ."

For twenty minutes, adding power to the other three

engines, Christensen managed to keep 741 within the protecting firepower of the rest of the formation. Then the other Fortresses began to climb, and the ghost was up. The bomber simply didn't have the power, and an unhappy crew watched the rest of the B-17s pulling away. Suddenly the sky seemed very big and 741 very small and naked.

The German pilots called out the news of the cripple, and at once the Messerschmitts and Focke-Wulfs closed in like sharks for the kill. They were good, and so was their aim.

In the midst of the running fight the ball-turret gunner, SSgt. Walter J. Molzon, gasped suddenly with pain. A moment later he called on the interphone to the bombardier, 1st Lt. Homer E. Chatfield. "I've been hit," he grated. "I'm coming up to have you dress the wound." Molzon extricated himself from the turret, staggered forward through the lurching bomber to the bombardier's station. Chatfield attended his wound, bound it tightly, and Molzon went back to his turret and climbed in. Moments later his guns added to the ear-blasting din.

The Fortress could not survive these attacks for long, and Christensen dived wildly for clouds beneath the bomber. He didn't make it in time. Three ME-109s dived almost vertically after 741, pulled out on her tail in a wide fan, and blazed away. Within seconds the rear compartment of the Fortress was a sieve, with more and more daylight showing through the airplane's ribs as bullets tore through the skin and the cannon shells exploded. By some miracle the tail gunner, SSgt. James J. Sweely, suffered no more than minor wounds. Almost every inch of metal around him was dented or cut up by the exploding shells.

The Fortress slewed around crazily like a cork in a storm as Christensen evaded constantly to throw off the fighter's aim. Then the wonderful oblivion of grayness within the clouds surrounded the bomber. The crew nearly cheered with relief. In the nose the navigator studied his maps of Switzerland, for there was now serious doubt that the Fortress could make it back to England. Christensen called the crew on the interphone, and told them they could have their option—bailing out over Germany, heading for Switzerland for internment, or trying the unlikely task of making the English coast.

"Home, James, home!" shouted a gunner, and a chorus of assent decided the issue. The best chance was a hedge-hopping flight to avoid being spotted by fighters. Despite very poor visibility, Christensen pushed forward on the wheel and dived 741 for the deck. Brushing the treetops, he eased the crippled Fortress from her dive and raced for the Channel.

"In France we swept over one small hill and almost ran into a city in the valley," Chatfield later explained. "A nest of machine guns and light flak opened up on us with everything they had as we passed over—and they had plenty. A shell tore a big hole in the side of the cockpit and hit Chris in the upper arm. He stayed at the controls until the ship was over the next knoll and out of range of the German guns, which actually were firing right through French homes at us as we left them."

The copilot, Mendelsohn, took over the controls as Christensen crawled down from the cockpit, collapsing in the entrance to the nose. He was wounded more seriously than anyone had imagined. The bombardier and navigator made him as comfortable as possible, applied a tourniquet to his arm, which was severely lacerated and spurting blood. Then they injected a shot of morphine to deaden the pain.

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The outside visibility grew steadily worse with each passing minute, and Mendelsohn was in trouble attempting to stay near the ground. He swept over a hill, frantically hauling back on the wheel, but not in time to avoid smashing into the top of a tall tree. The Fortress shook with a terrible roar; the entire plexiglas nose was smashed in.

Then the coastline was in sight, but not the end of the fight. Machine guns and light flak opened up with a terrible barrage, and again the airplane shuddered from the impact of bullets and shells. Mendelsohn banked the plane to give the radio operator—the only gunner with any ammunition left—a chance to fire back. He picked off several German gunners along the edge of the sea wall and the others scattered. Then they were out of range.

Their ability to reach England was doubtful. Empty fuel gauges stared at the worried Mendelsohn, who lost interest quickly in that problem when a gunner called in that one of the engines was burning. Somehow, 741 made the coast, and her copilot headed straight for the nearest British airfield. The visibility was lousy, the wind howled in through the smashed nose, a tire was flat, and the engines were coughing dryly as Mendelsohn brought her around. It wasn't the best landing, but 741 stopped right side up. They were home.

Lieutenant Christensen died the next morning.

• • •

At the fields in England, still lying hidden from the broad sweep of the sky by the thick haze and fog, everything goes on as normal—if the feeling of suspended animation can be accepted as normal. For this is the time—waiting for the Fortresses to come home—when the long hours become unbearable, and men are afraid to think, because thinking means they may imagine all sorts of things that have happened "out there." The waiting is hateful, because the man who waits is helpless. There are friends out there above the haze, and brothers, and men who are closer to each other than brothers.

Along the flight line, in front of the hangars, on and near the vehicles, at the hardstands, are small bunches of men. Ground crews, mostly. But you can see the rest of them as well, all waiting, all hating every minute, all frightened for their friends—even those they do not call by name and do not recognize by face. The administrative personnel are out. Armorers, drivers, the cooks, and the KPs. The control tower balcony again holds its knot of men, the operational staffs. In the tower the Flying Control Officer waits, standing by a special short-range radio so that he can "talk down" someone who may be in serious trouble.

The meat wagons are ready, the big red crosses on their sides ominous with meaning. The crash trucks wait, motors running, drivers at the wheel, ready to roll with no more effort than a foot slammed down on the accelerator. The firemen, who may have to push into the center of a raging holocaust fed by gasoline, are attired in their asbestos suits, only the headpieces waiting to be donned.

Everyone studies the sky, and waits, and feels the knot of fear twisting harder and harder. . . .

Then, quietly, a man says in a dead, flat voice: "There's one."

It is only a single bomber, and she comes in low and fast, away from the rest of the formation. The B-17 rushes across the field, winging into a bank, and then is hidden from sight by the line of trees at the edge of the field. As she comes back, the engines cough and backfire in the glide—and suddenly all eyes are riveted to the sight of a red flare racing out from an open hatch

of the bomber, arcing up and over. Inside the B-17 a man is white-faced. He is bleeding to death.

The ambulance races down the runway. The Fortress comes in, one wing dragging low. She hits on the low wheel, rocks to the other, wobbles dangerously, and then settles down, trailing dust. She is 3,000 feet down the runway when the squeal of brakes hits the ears. The bomber is a sieve; she turns slowly and swings onto the turf. The medics are running to the door before the crew has a chance to step out.

They come in steadily. Tiny spots in the sky, growing bigger and bigger. They wheel, and turn. Battered airplanes. Holes and gashes and smashed plexiglas, stripped metal, long scars, the deep and angry marks of fire. But there are too few, too few!



The *Windy City Avenger* came in on her final approach to the landing field more a junk heap than an airplane. One elevator was shot to ribbons, but remained in a locked position. As the Fortress settled down in her glide toward the runway the elevator "went completely berserk," and at the impossible height of only 150 feet the terrified crew prepared to abandon their wild-flying bomber. But in the cockpit the pilot and copilot, white-faced and scared nearly to death, brought the ship out of her gyrations, and managed to climb to 1,000 feet. When the pilot shouted to everyone, "Let's get the hell outa here," the airplane was empty in seconds. Everyone got out, and the airplane crashed in the mist.

At Grafton Underwood the haze was so thick that only the lead Fortress, with Maj. George W. Harris, Jr., at the controls, returned to the field. The other survivors landed at emergency fields. That night the crews on the ground received the news. Six bombers down over Germany. Sixty empty bunks tonight.

"It is little wonder that airmen of Grafton Underwood  
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have by this time developed the idea that it is impossible to complete a full tour of duty," wrote a man in despair that night. "It has come to be an accepted fact that you will be shot down eventually. The 384th entered combat four months ago with a combat flying strength of 363 officers and men. In these four months we lost more than we started with. We are just as strong, due to replacements that are continually coming in, but there are few originals left. . . ."

At the Thurleigh Airdrome the feeling of a crushing disaster overwhelms the men on the ground. This day the 306th Group has lost ten bombers—100 men are never coming back. Fifteen four-engine B-17 bombers had gone on the raid—only five returned.

"You never forget those sights, and I know I never will," one of the ground crewmen at Thurleigh that day recalls. "The day was wet and cold, and in that biting wind the field was ringed with little bunches of men peering anxiously at the low gray clouds. Our planes are five minutes overdue . . . and there they come now, but only five of them.

"Red flares pop up, and the meat wagons dash past us. The watchers turn to pick out the other planes that are expected. The roar of engines approaches, a welcome and warm sound; these *must* be ours. No, they pass on, and the cluster of watching figures grows tense.

"From the first plane to land word trickles back. 'Those god-damn rockets! They hit a plane and it just disappears. Seventeens blowing up all around. Never saw so many god-damned fighters in my life, the sky was saturated with 'em.'

"As the crews come in their faces are drawn and wan, not just from weariness, but because too many friends have gone down in flames in front of their eyes. Too many. Jerry had thrown so many planes at them they were bewildered. And for another reason. There was still tomorrow, and the tomorrow after that. What answer could they find to this kind of stuff on the next raid, perhaps even tomorrow morning?"

And then there is the airdrome at Chelveston, home of the 305th Group. Sixteen bombers took off. One aborted, returning early with mechanical troubles. Fifteen Fortresses went on.

Two bombers returned on schedule to land at Chelveston. Where are the others? Have they landed elsewhere? Where are they?

*There are no others.* Of the fifteen heavy bombers that left Chelveston this morning of October 14, 1943, twelve fell in flames before the crews ever saw Schweinfurt. Another made its bombing run and then plunged earthward, torn to pieces by a salvo of rockets.

The 305th Group is virtually wiped out. One hundred and thirty men! The men in thirteen ground crews stare at each other in stunned disbelief. It cannot be; *it just cannot be.*

But it is. Thirteen crews, 130 men. Men they have worked for and worked with, waved good-by to, shouted greetings to on their landings.

The concrete, stained with oil and grease where the big bombers have stood, is empty, a terrible, aching void. The ground crewmen scuff their feet aimlessly, walk off. Every man looks as if he has just lost his brother.

Fifty-nine Flying Fortresses went down over German-occupied Europe, or over the Third Reich itself. One crippled and battered B-17, *Brennan's Circus*, made it back to the Channel, and ditched, saving the lives of its crew in its amazing struggle to remain airborne.

Three bombers have been abandoned over England,

low on fuel, lost, their pilots not daring to hazard a landing in the murk covering their fields. The empty airplanes crashed and exploded, with a sudden glare of light in the fog.

Two others make it down, and their pilots lose all control. The bombers careen wildly, and crash. They are destroyed.

Sixty-five Flying Fortresses gone forever. Seventeen more that come home are so badly shot to pieces, so ruined and slashed and battered and cut and burned, that they will never fly again.

Five hundred and ninety-four men of the VIII Bomber Command are "missing" over Europe, an unknown number of them prisoners. In the bombers that return there are five dead men. There are also ten men so badly wounded that their survival is questionable. There are thirty-three more suffering to a lesser extent from wounds.

Three Thunderbolts are gone. One fighter pilot is missing, one is dead from his crash in England.

Two hundred and fifty-seven Fortresses made up the combat force that reached into the enemy's airspace. One hundred and ninety-seven returned, and five of these were abandoned, or crashed. That leaves 192 bombers of the combat force. Of these, 142 are damaged. Only fifty bombers—in the wings that miraculously escaped with only negligible opposition—were not punctured by the enemy's defenses.

There is one last episode to which the surviving crews must contribute. This is the debriefing. Intelligence must get its information at once, before the crews are relieved.

In the debriefing rooms each crew collects at a large table. The questions are asked quietly, with more than a little consideration. But the answers must be obtained now. It is vital. The war still goes on.

"What was your bombing altitude? Your magnetic heading? Your position in the formation?"

"How many fighters? What types? What kind of attacks? What kind of weapons? Any special markings?"

"What about flak? Where? What kind? Accurate? How much?"

Hot news is flashed to Air Division. The flak reports are shuffled together by Intelligence; a new pattern emerges. Tomorrow's briefings will be altered. In the darkrooms nearby sergeants and corporals swirl paper in developing baths. The pictures begin to emerge; outside the doors, a "hot messenger" waits, ready to rush them to Air Division.

"Any comments?"

"Yeah. Jesus Christ, give us fighters for escort!"

Usually the debriefings are less solemn. The men are relieved to be home, to be alive. On this afternoon the relief is buried deep, swamped by the shock of the mission. Few of the men can find it in themselves to laugh, even with a touch of hysteria, at the mad thrill of just being *alive*. Many of these men still don't believe they are here, safe, on the ground.

They are tired and bone-weary and they are sick. Their faces reflect death. It has missed them but it has struck down their friends, their brothers. They stare at the floor, suck on cigarettes, tastelessly drink coffee. They answer the questions numbly, hands moving in fitful jerks, eyes glazed.

In one room a pilot abruptly moves back his chair and leaves his debriefing table. He shuffles awkwardly to a corner of the room, where he hides his face. Wordlessly his crewmen stare at him, then turn away. The lieutenant is weeping.

He cries for all of them. . . .—END