

THE MIGHTY EIGHTH

THE AIR WAR IN EUROPE
AS TOLD BY THE MEN
WHO FOUGHT IT



GERALD ASTOR

Author of **Crisis in the Pacific**

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR
**THE MIGHTY
EIGHTH**



“No one does oral history better than Gerald Astor. Here the men of the mightiest air force ever built tell their story in their own words—of trials, tribulations, triumphs, terror, and tedium. Great reading.” —STEPHEN AMBROSE

“Bold, brawny, epic in scope, *The Mighty Eighth* is oral history at its very best. Astor captures the fire and passion of those tens of thousands of U.S. airmen who flew through the inferno that was the bomber war over Europe.” —STEPHEN COONTS

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After the devastating surprise attack at Pearl Harbor, tens of thousands of American men volunteered for the glamour of flight training with the Army Air Corps. Along with a handful of pre-war fliers the first airmen joined the newly created Eighth Air Force stationed in Britain. These daring souls began flying planes borrowed from the British before getting their P-38 Lightnings, P-47 Thunderbolts, P-51 Mustangs, the four-engine B-17 Flying Fortress, and the B-24 Liberator to carry the war through the dangerous skies of occupied Europe and eventually Germany itself.

Until World War II aircraft had played only a minor role in combat, but with the RAF and Luftwaffe fiercely dueling in the Battle of Britain, it was apparent that air superiority would be a deciding factor in the war. The Eighth Air Force quickly grew from its first modest effort into the mightiest aerial armada in history, eventually launching thousand-plane raids. While Fortresses and Liberators attacked factories, fuel supplies, and transportation networks, Lightnings, Thunderbolts, and Mustangs shot enemy fighters from the skies.

But the road to victory was paved with sacrifice. From its inaugural mission on July 4, 1942, until V-E Day, the Eighth Air Force lost more men than did the entire United States Marine Corps in all its campaigns in the Pacific. *The Mighty Eighth* chronicles the testimony of the pilots, bombardiers, navigators, and gunners who daily put their lives on the line. Their harrowing accounts recall the excitement and terror of dogfights against Nazi aces, maneuvering explosive-laden aircraft through deadly flak barrages, and fending off waves of enemy fighters while coping with subzero temperatures.

Beginning with the opening salvos from a mere dozen planes, crewmen describe the raids on Berlin and Dresden, the fiasco at Ploesti, Romania, and Black

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Thursday over Schweinfurt. They tell of the horror of seeing aircraft destroyed—helplessly watching as comrades crash and burn, or parachute over enemy territory, where they will attempt to evade capture through the underground. Others tell of mourning downed airmen murdered by vengeful citizens and soldiers, and of those who endured captivity in POW camps.

Equally compelling are the colorful personalities of the courageous flyers: Billy Southworth, the cocky bomber pilot whose father managed a World Series baseball team; Tommy Hayes, who learned to fly from a barnstormer and went on to become a fighter ace; Bob Johnson, second in aerial victories in Europe, who shot out the lights in his quarters with a .45; and navigator Jon Schueler, possessed of a poet's heart and a painter's vision.

From the first tentative raids to D-Day and the surrender of Germany, *The Mighty Eighth* provides a gripping account of the emotions, memories, and valor among men tested again and again in the fight for freedom.

GERALD ASTOR's four previous military chronicles have been praised by the *Washington Post Book World* as "oral history at its finest" and by the *New York Times Book Review* as "wonderfully entertaining." Astor is a World War II veteran and award-winning journalist and historian whose articles have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Playboy*, and *Esquire*. He makes his home in Scarsdale, New York.

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Bombers by Dick Bowman



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June 1942 { The travail with the Fort continued. A subsequent trip to Salt Lake City forced a landing with only two engines and then on a flight to Alamogordo he had barely enough power to reach the runway. The dutiful Means supposedly said, "That was perfect. If you can handle jams like this now, combat will be a cinch. You sure are good." In fact Southworth was skillful enough to coach other pilots new to handling the B-17. Others were not so proficient, and the Southworth diary contains many laconic mentions of companions who had washed out or died in accidents, like Hudson who criticized an earlier Southworth landing.

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"Dad paid me a visit. Autographed Reber's and my plane. He's the grandest guy I know. Sure tired of sitting around. I want to go into combat. That's where the real work lies and where things must be accomplished.

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tently to me last night, second date. She's very pretty but wouldn't have her on a silver platter. There's Ann, wealthy in looks but lacks something. Ruth had everything but was too fond of herself. Betty a swell gal but too set in ways and lacks oomph. Cliff might be a possibility, sure she cares, haven't known her long enough. I'd like to get into this damn war and return so I can settle down."

On the final day of October, Southworth could scribble notes about the last legs from Newfoundland to a field near Liverpool. "Got off on instruments and was in the soup three-quarters of the trip. It took us ten and a half hours. Dillinger, my copilot, slept most of the way. Means, the sergeant engineer, did likewise while Doughty, radio, and Schueler, navigator, did a bang-up job. Jon missed his ETA by one minute. Land was sighted, all men were alert at their stations ready to fire (save Means, asleep). We were impressed by the jagged shores [Ireland], green hills, hedge fences, beautiful estates, picturesque with ancient moats of King Arthur's time surrounding them. Airports then littered the way to Prestwick."

The 303rd made Molesworth its home and Southworth reported to his diary early in November, "Rained every day since we've been here. These muddy days, a foot deep in places I'll never forget. Cold, wet, and black nights, cold wind stinging your face while your feet just get used to that dead cold feeling. The British are a fine people. Take the bitter with the sweet, defeat and victory without feeling—they hang on, just keep hanging on. They aren't deceiving, love their country and are proud of it. We'll win this war but it will take a long time."

Southworth expressed unhappiness with his superiors. "Lt. Joe Haas got Dumbell [award for a blunder] after Captain Blythe and Major Calloway snafued a situation worse than Joe. Told Colonel Wallace [group commander] of a desirable landing procedure also the desirable way to fly a formation. It wasn't appreciated nor listened to but I'll wager that they'll adopt it as their own idea . . . God damn!! Flew with Major Calloway's outfit and he snafued as usual. He led a very poor formation and was lost nearly all the time . . . Flew No. 2 with Major Sheridan. Dillinger is the poorest excuse for a copilot that I've ever seen. He went to sleep three times this morning on our flight." The Southworth crew named its B-17 *Bad Check* in the obvious hope that it too would always bounce back. But throughout the war men often flew different aircraft, sharing them with other crews when one was in reserve or taking up another one because of malfunctions or combat damage.

The winds of war blew together an unlikely companion for Southworth in the person of Jon Schueler, the navigator for Southworth's plane. In place of a famous father who brought his boy to the office and even on

business trips with the ballclub, Schueler grew up in Milwaukee as the son of a widowed, self-made businessman, a somewhat distant father who struggled through the Depression. After his father remarried, Jon described his relationship with his stepmother, a woman of beauty and frugality, as a series of "battles." He remarked, "When I was in high school, I had to go to bed at eight-thirty and all my clothes—terrible clothes were chosen for me.

"I went out for basketball in high school but I wasn't any good. I went out for track and became a miler, but I was never in any races, because no one else had a miler. I had worked one summer selling ties and shirts and when I graduated they asked me to stay on. That was pretty depressing. Then my stepmother gave me the money to enroll at the University of Wisconsin. I went a little crazy. I joined Alpha Delta Phi, the best drinking house on what may have been the best drinking campus in the country. But it's a good thing I cut loose, because I had been treated like a twelve-year-old at home."

After trying journalism, then economics, and finally obtaining a master's in English, Schueler entered the Bread Loaf School of English in Vermont, waiting on tables to pay for courses in how to write. By September of 1941, the draft loomed over him and Schueler enlisted in the Air Corps. "I tried like hell to think like a soldier. At one time I was appointed platoon leader and overnight lost all my friends because I started acting like a Prussian general. I thought that's what one was supposed to do to win the war, and was quite hurt at all the criticism. Fortunately, I was demoted soon enough."

Astigmatism in one eye eliminated pilot training and Schueler attended navigator classes. "I was so rigid about wanting to do everything right that for a while I was terribly slow at learning. But somewhere along the line I got the sense of it and became a pretty good navigator. One night marching with the platoon to a class, I realized that for a moment that terrible pressure to *do* something wasn't there. All I had to do was move along where the orders took me and I was a free man. In the Air Force all decisions were taken out of one's hands, except for those within the larger framework of the discipline.

"Everyone approved of me for the first time in my life," said Schueler. "I was one of the boys. I was Uncle Sam's boy wonder. My father, God bless him, was proud. My stepmother couldn't say much. She had always said, 'Well, Jack, I guess you will always be a failure.'"

Schueler was well aware of the differences between him and Southworth. "My pilot was a Jack Armstrong-type named Billy Southworth. Billy and I hated each other's guts. He was the cocky son of a bitch, the pampered son of the manager of the St. Louis Cards. Our backgrounds

and personalities couldn't have been more different, except that we were both prima donnas of kinds. Billy was a hard-driving guy, very ambitious and driven to try to be the best. I probably have many of the same drives but they're confused by the complexities of my being, fears of failure, depressions, impulsive responses to the world, inner contradictions. We didn't get on too well at first, particularly after I had messed up on a training flight and he said to me in plain hearing of the crews, 'I don't suppose you know where we are?' One day on a cross-country flight to Chicago we took off in perfect weather but about two hours east of the base we saw a front rising in the distance. From the time we flew into the clouds I navigated on dead reckoning. I kept the radio silent. About two hours later we were still in total cloud, silver grayness pressed against the windows, opaquely glowing, holding us mysteriously. We couldn't get out of the stuff. Billy kept calling to ask where we were in a voice that plainly suggested I wouldn't have the faintest idea, and I was getting more and more enraged. I kept working, and the line of the plotting moved steadily along the charts. quite

"The next thing I knew the plane started flying all over the place. Billy was no longer following my directions, but had decided that we were lost and was trying to pick up the beam. There was nothing for me to do but track him. The line moved crazily over the chart until he picked up a radio beam and turned, headed back toward the base. He'd call up and taunt me once in a while and finally asked me for a position report. I told him we were about one minute east of the little town of C_____ and by the grace of God, in one minute the clouds parted below us and there was the sweetest little town west of the Mississippi. I wish to hell I could remember its name.

"I called Billy on the intercom and said, in as matter of fact a tone as I could manage, 'We are now flying over C_____ and our ETA Boise is at 15:36.' 'Roger,' he said and he didn't say one damned word more for the rest of the trip. When we landed, Jimmy [the copilot] stopped me and took my charts and told me that he wanted to show them to Billy so that he could see what had happened. I didn't wait for the demonstration but walked past Billy without saying a word.

"That night at the officers' club I was sitting at the bar properly brooding when I noticed that Billy was standing next to me. He ordered a drink, and then he said, very quietly, 'That was a great bit of navigating you did this afternoon.' I said, 'Thank you, Billy,' and from that moment he became one of the closest friends I have ever had."

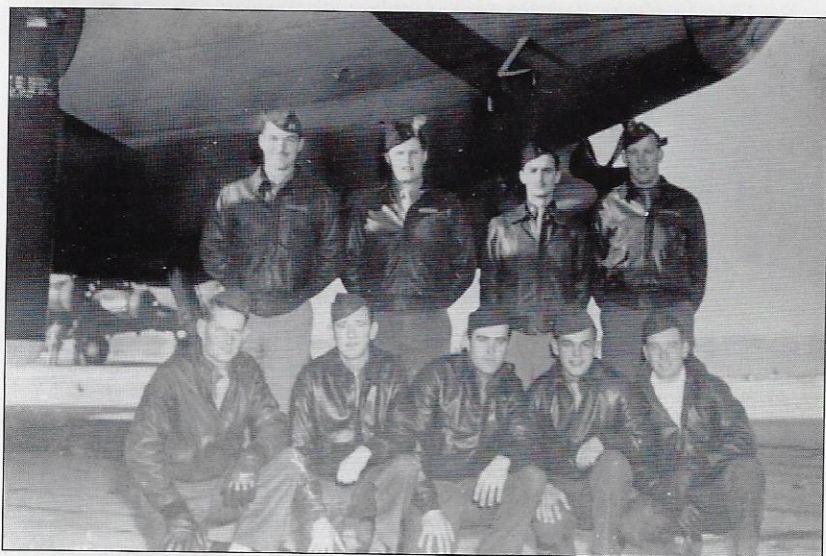
Like Southworth and the other young males in uniform, Schueler also partied enthusiastically when not carrying out his flight duties. "All of us knew we were flirting with death from the moment we saw the planes. It

Joe Bennett, a replacement pilot with the 56th Fighter Group, survived two midair collisions. The first dunked him in the North Sea; the second put him in a prisoner of war camp.

(Joseph Bennett)



At the Molesworth base, Bill Fleming checks the ammunition for his .50-caliber machine gun. *(Bill Fleming)*



The original crew of the 303rd Bomb Group's B-17 *Bad Check* included (*standing, left to right*) pilot Billy Southworth, co-pilot John Dillinger, navigator John Schueler, and bombardier Milt Conner. Kneeling are engineer L. Means, radio operator Ed Doughth, tail gunner Waldo Brandt, waist gunner Bill Fleming, and ball-turret gunner Jack Belk.

(Bill Fleming)

pairs and large numbers. Six of our ships took positions on our right and an even level (piss poor). Another bunch [was] on our left and level—stinks. The Huns bore in. Here come four at me, firing across my nose from one and two o'clock. Our guns, top turret and more guns blasted a steady stream. My window, already cracked, became streaked with cracks at which I became furious at Sergeant Means [top turret] for disobeying orders, firing forward as his zone was rear. The ball turret reported out of order.

"Flickenger received the shots meant for my ship. One engine smoking, he disappeared behind me. Another moved up into his place. Frequent attacks came from the rear. The Spitfires had left us to return home. Continual attacks were made by the yellow nosed FW-190s, often from the nose." Southworth had observed the latest wrinkle in enemy tactics. The Germans had become aware that the front end of the B-17F was the most vulnerable point if attacked head-on at a slightly elevated angle. Only the top turret could then get a clear line of sight. The machine guns installed for use by a bombardier were .30 caliber and could not focus on hostile aircraft directly ahead.

Southworth's complaint about his bomb group maintaining the same altitude was justified. He remarked, "Our Forts were so close and on the same level that [they] seemed to lose effectiveness as the gunners couldn't fire and few turrets could be brought into play. We made a turn for evasive purposes and L slid over, into me, missing by inches. I tried to get Dilly to watch him but he didn't and then again this numbskull slid fifty yards out of his formation and into ours. I skidded out of danger, extremely lucky to avoid a terrible crash. He hit our horizontal stabilizers, putting a damn good dent in it. I'll take a bow for being on the alert and saving our necks there.

"Flickenger, hit with shells, peeled off to the left, one engine afire. Frost down below came up above me, directly atop, not ten yards [off]. I read his ship's nickname *Werewolf*. Unbeknownst to me, two of his crew had bailed out, his bomb bay doors were open, the ship out of control. I saw him slide off to the left; he peeled off into a long spiral, all engines going, men jumping in parachutes. Six or eight got out."

Bad Check managed to dump its cargo in the vicinity of a railroad complex and fought off enemy fighters until Spitfires met the returning bombers. Although they had lost two aircraft with their crews, the surviving pilots buzzed the airdrome before settling in. "There was Schueler to meet us," wrote Southworth. "He's my boy." On the ground the pilot reported relatively minor damage to the planes that completed the mission. He proudly contrasted the effort of the 303rd with that of the 91st

assigned to the same target, where only six of its twenty-one aircraft crossed the Channel.

ON JANUARY 3, as dawn neared, an exultant Southworth scribbled in his diary, "Will be copilot with Colonel Wallace [Group CO]. We will lead five groups, twenty-one planes each. General [Haywood] Hansell, two-star boy will fly with us." Hansell served as head of Eighth Air Force planning. Southworth blithely remarked on the briefing data, "Smile lady luck. Over flak area of fifty-six heavy guns plus mobile installations of guns. Loads of fighters and loads of fun. Submarine installations and torpedo docks will be 'leveled.' What a red-letter day."

Indeed it was a momentous occasion. Acting as copilot while Wallace sat in the left seat, Southworth maneuvered a different plane than *Bad Check*, one he lists as number 619, to the French coast. In an elliptical and disjointed account he reported, "It seemed to be deadly peaceful. There was no escort. The general seemed to be a good stick. We got on a four-minute bombing run. The colonel thought he heard someone say, 'Bombs away' and he turned off the run a couple of seconds early. He had a fit but cooled down. All going too perfect, then here they came. Four FW-190s from the front. [They] shot two down. Of our first nine ships over the target, four were shot down; they got seven in all. We've now lost nine crews and ships in combat on eight missions." }

"The general served sandwiches on the way home. The general said that we had some good Indians on our ship. 'For plain unadulterated guts,' he said, 'you boys have it.' Schueler did a fine job. Was pleased until I found out our losses. Sheridan and Goetz gone. Sure will miss Goetz, one of my best friends. We were all at the club after dinner. Bought Schueler a drink. Then a bunch of us began to flip coins. Loud singing began. More liquor was ordered. At 10:00 we left for Diddington and the nurses. There were loads of us. I was drunk for the first time. Don't remember a thing. Guess we tore things up, running in and out of huts while girls screamed. One walked me around while I staggered. Wow! Got home—said 'Do I live here?' Froze at night, had a cramp." }

According to Fleming, the facts of war came stunningly home to him on this, his third mission, after he missed several with the *Bad Check* crew because of illness, including one sudden onset of severe pains en route which earlier had forced Southworth to abort a mission. "By this time we had experienced some antiaircraft fire, but not enough to make you think somebody was trying to kill you. It wasn't that bad. The third mission [for Fleming] to St. Nazaire was the shocker for all of us. Over the target the antiaircraft fire was very heavy and it was hitting the planes; we started to

realize somebody was really shooting at us. All of a sudden the plane on our wing, the squadron leader, Major Sheridan's took a direct hit and completely blew up. Pieces of it flew all over our plane, knocked holes in the wings and the stabilizer. It was a terrible shock to see. None of us could believe what had happened. But by the time we got off that target we knew Germany was no playground anymore. When we got back to our field, the ten empty beds from the lost crew made everybody realize what could happen."

Navigator Schueler described the routine of these first forays and his reactions. "We'd be awakened at 2:30 A.M. and we'd dress in the cold of the room and slog outside into the rain and muck and we'd have our breakfast and then we'd go to the briefing room. 'Attention!' We'd pop to and the colonel would stride down the aisle and mount the platform and announce the target. 'St. Nazaire' and we'd groan and laugh at the same time. From then on it was business. We'd be told the time of takeoff, the time and place of rendezvous, the point of crossing the channel, the initial point, the target, the procedure and route back. Then we'd go to individual briefings, navigators' briefings, gunners' briefings, pilots' briefings, bombardiers' briefings. All night long the bombs were being loaded and the ground crew was working on the planes. We could hear the engines being revved up.

"As long as the momentum of activity was going, everything would be OK. I felt the excitement, the blood coursing through my veins. I felt the intensity of it. We would start the engines revving and I'd lay out my charts and have everything ready, oxygen mask, parachute. Check all the dials. Computer, pencils, Weems plotter. Milt Conner would be making wisecracks. We could feel the plane being readied, we could feel the vibration of readiness of men moving back and forth at their dials, controls and guns. Everything was OK. We were a team and we knew each other and loved each other. The men were truly noble. The planes themselves were noble.

"The B-17s are scattered around the field and it is seven in the morning, the first dim light of day. The first dim, gray silver light, mists rising from the fields. And then you hear engines starting here and there, some close, a roar, and then rrrrrmmmmmm, ready on one, ready on two, contact, ready on three, ready on four. And the four engines of the B-17 slowly throbbing, vibrations increasing, a spitting and grumbling, a lust for the morning air, a waking from the dead, a waking from the night, a waking to life, the life of the new day, of the throb, the heart throb of the plane, four engines beating, four propellers whirling, engines revving, echoing each other across the field.

"The olive-drab B-17s would slowly move, brakes screeching, the

ground crew watching, one of them helping to guide the plane around the circle onto the tarmac path to the perimeter track. One after another, lumbering out onto the track and then all of them, single file on each side of the field, two files moving, lumbering slowly toward the takeoff point at the end of the runway. All of them, engines growling and propellers twirling. The nose of the B-17 in the air, the body sloping down to the rear tail wheel, already in an attitude of urgency, of wanting to rise into the gray morning sky. Because of the morning light, because of the vast, flat stretch of the field, the planes looked larger and more powerful than they actually were.

“Men. Each an individual who lived and suffered, who had a woman or women, who sweated, crapped, lusted, who drank and got cold in the damp billets, who tried to light the stoves, who sat around and talked into the night, talking about the raids, and latterly, about the chances for survival. It really was beautiful, beautiful in many, many ways.”

In a more prosaic tone, Bill Fleming reminisced, “Some of our equipment bothered us as much as the Germans. Our planes were open [at the waist positions for the machine guns] so the temperatures at 30,000 to 32,000 feet were forty to seventy degrees below zero. We had to dress very heavily. I wore long underwear, and a uniform shirt and pants, an electric suit over that, plus a fur-lined flying suit on top of it. On my feet I wore silk stockings, wool stockings, electric shoes and fur-lined flying boots. My hands had silk gloves, wool gloves, electric gloves, and then the fur-lined flying mitts. You could barely move a finger and you always left one free to work the trigger of the machine gun. We didn’t dare unplug the electric suits which were connected to the battery system. Without heat you would freeze to death in a matter of minutes. It was funny to look at the man next to you and see his eyebrows white with frost. There were several severe cases of frostbite. You did not dare fly while you had a cold because if you did, your oxygen mask, which was the old bag-type, would freeze with ice and cut off your oxygen. We lost two gunners out of our squadron that way. One was a ball turret and the other a tail gunner.

“We had to clean our guns after every mission using the solvent carbon tetrachloride. That kept the guns dry because any kind of moisture on them and they would freeze up. Later, of course, in the U.S. factories carbon tetrachloride was banned as a deadly poison. I wonder how many of our guys got sick from it. I remember over Halle, Germany, during one mission when it was so cold that our guns wouldn’t fire. Fortunately for us, the Germans couldn’t fire theirs either.”

The astute if acerbic Southworth expressed his continuing exasperation with his superiors for their refusal to consider more effective formations, “What a bunch of little tin gods. I like the colonel but there sure are a lot

B-24, knocking them both off. The FW-190 seemed to fold up and then go into its last dive. With part of his wing gone, the big B-24 dropped away like a fluttering leaf, finally going into a tight spin—its fate sealed. None of the crew were seen to jump. Captain Wilkenson, a very swell fellow and friend, was the navigator in Sullivan's ship.

"As the attack continued, many of our ships were shot up, but no more were knocked down. Captain O'Brien had a waist gunner and bombardier killed and his navigator wounded. Nearly every ship had a hole in it somewhere, Billings having a shell come up through the cabin between him and his copilot." Aside from the two B-24s described by Adams, Curtis LeMay's 305th Bomb Group had a B-17 shot out of the sky. The Americans claimed to have destroyed twenty-two enemy aircraft, probably knocked down fourteen more and damaged thirteen. Captured German records examined after the war indicated a loss of seven aircraft that day.

The critique of the mission, organized by Southworth's former passenger and sandwich purveyor, General Hansell, sounded some ominous themes. "The Combat Wings on this mission did not keep close enough together to give shielding protection, one to the other. Fifty-five aircraft in a formation are not enough aircraft to be able to defend themselves. It is felt that most of our losses were the result of poor formation flying which resulted in aircraft becoming separated and an easy prey to fighters. ||

"Gunnery must be stressed. Even when a formation brought all its guns to bear on some of the attackers during this mission, the enemy continued to come in firing. Poor visibility at the target made the bombing very difficult. A target as small as this one should only be assigned when the weather is very clear and visibility is good." For all of the theories of LeMay and the high command which agreed with his precepts, the air crews of the Eighth obviously required continued training and a more focused effort.

AS JANUARY DREW to a close, Southworth recorded a dismal inventory. "We arrived as a complete group on October 31. In three short (or long) months the group has completed some eleven raids and lost over 50 percent of the [organization]. We average about fifteen planes per raid which means that we have lost about 120 percent of our combat equipment and are operating [by using] reserve. We still lack nose guns. Eighty to 90 percent of our losses have been from nose attacks on our squadron. Nine pilots were lost." n6

A bout of the flu mandated a hospital stay for Southworth. In his absence, *Bad Check's* usual navigator, Jon Schueler, volunteered to fill in with another crew out to slam St. Nazaire once again. The experience

shattered Schueler. Years later, he wrote a surrealist account of what became an extended nightmare. "Billy had been sick and was off flying. I had a cold too, and was off flying but I wasn't in the hospital. We were called upon for a raid and we could only get a few ships out of the group in the air—because of lost ships, because of badly shot-up ships, because of shortage of personnel. Either shot down or sick. Two minutes before St. Nazaire, the squadron is seven ships. At St. Nazaire it is two. This was the raid in which we headed into a steep descent down to the deck from 20,000 feet after dropping our bombs and the pain shot through my head like I had never before imagined."

Savage as the reception was at St. Nazaire, another calamity struck on the voyage home, a headwind at 120 miles per hour. The hapless bombers, reduced to the pace of a tortoise, crawled toward sanctuary while predators stalked them. "I see the clouds, the clouds building up so that we couldn't see the ground, we had no sign of movement, the B-17s standing still and the Focke Wulfs and Messerschmitts coming in to meet them, coming in to knock us out of the sky.

"For a moment, for a long moment, I was not navigating, I was watching the planes falling, the head-on crash of a fighter into a B-17, the exploding, burning, war-torn falling planes, all too often no chutes in sight, the lonely men, held to their seats, to the walls, to the roof of the plane as it twisted and fell, sometimes with machine guns blazing, and a spume of smoke for a long moment. It seemed endless. It seemed as though we would never get home. I was looking out of the window at the endless blue sky and white cloud beneath us. We waited for the Focke Wulfs and the Messerschmitts and we watched the Fortresses fall. Falling Forts. I wanted to hold them. I wanted to go down with them. I wanted to go home. I prayed. I prayed, please God, I'm bored, please don't make this go on and on and on, it's boring, it's ennui. I can't stand this boring repetition, please God, get us out of here and get this over with. I was probably frightened too, although I was seldom scared while actually flying.

"Had I been able to feel the fear, call it that name, I might have been able to feel the rage. Had I been able to feel the rage, I could have poured out the machine gun fire. I could have slammed bullets into the sky, into the waiting Focke Wulf. In combat, I could not feel the fear or the rage and therefore the love, the love and excitement of what I was doing. I was quite cool in combat. I'd always be so goddamned busy with charts, mental averages, counting and noting falling ships. I was a cool cookie. And I lost everything in my cool. I drowned myself in it. I lost my way."

With Southworth temporarily disabled, waist-gunner Fleming made this mission as a crewman for the B-17 piloted by Glenn Hagenbuch. "He

told us we would have a general on board that day, Brigadier General LeMay. We were all kind of excited about having a general aboard until LeMay climbed aboard wearing two parachutes, both a chest and a back parachute. "I'd like to have had three of them on myself," says Fleming, "but it was unusual to see a man with two. It was the first time we saw anyone with both on. He took his seat behind the pilot and everything went smoothly for a while. Then things got really warm over the target, they were ready for us with those yellow-nosed Messerschmitts and Focke Wulfs and plenty of anti-aircraft. They gave us hell when we were dropping those bombs. We wore throat mikes, and understanding what was said over the intercom was hard enough, but if someone got excited, you couldn't understand anything. Right as we were directly over the target, someone started yelling over the intercom, 'Get us out of here! Get us out of here! Get us out of here!' We had a hot-tempered flight engineer, our top turret gunner, Lucian Means. All of the crew knew who was doing the shouting but none of the officers would do anything. Means finally cuts in and tells the guy to shut up or he'll knock his teeth down his throat. When it's all over the general wanted to know who said it but nobody would say. That's not to knock the general. Hell, we were all scared. What disturbed me and the rest of the crew, even though we laughed and joked about it, was when we picked up a *Stars and Stripes* newspaper and it had an account of him being awarded the Silver Star for leading this group back through enemy flak and fighter fire. Although he did a wonderful job after that and in the Pacific, everytime I saw him and looked at that medal on his chest I thought of the St. Nazaire mission."

Upon his return from St. Nazaire, inner demons overwhelmed Schueler. "I started to feel guilty, responsible for every death. I was not sleeping, afraid that I'd make errors and cause the death of many. It could happen—navigation errors, pilot errors. Ending in death. Planes falling, planes shot down. So many were dying and I felt responsible. But I felt more responsible for those who might die. The flight surgeon gave me sleeping pills and talked to the group commander about taking me off combat for a while to rest up. I had lost twenty pounds or more and was skinny as a rail. They needed an operations navigation officer and I was made that.

"We sent out as many planes as we could muster on a mission and instead of being on it myself I was left on the base. At the end of the day I was on the tower, looking to the sky, watching for the returning planes, counting when they appeared. One, two, three, four . . . nine ten eleven twelve . . . twelve . . . twelve . . . there are no others. We look anxiously, scanning the sky. Then the planes are flying in low over the field. Then there is a flare from one and he's moving right down the runway

without permission. He's floating down, landing, another flare denoting wounded on board and the ambulance is rushing toward the plane even as it rolls to a stop. The group is badly shot up. One plane is missing."

Transferred to the VIII Bomber Command in High Wycombe, Schueler became increasingly uncomfortable in the almost luxurious surroundings, a private room, "superb food" and an office in an air-conditioned hillside burrow. The meetings and briefings took on the atmosphere of theater. "It was as though I was moving onto a stage, parts to be played until no one could clearly remember the reality. The reality of flight and fear and death, but also the reality of comradeship and effort, and being alive, and meaning, and strength. I felt dead amongst the living. I felt weak, washed out, through." Schueler contracted mumps and collapsed into a depression complicated by a second childhood ailment, chicken pox. He entered a hospital.

Fleming comments on the status of the outfit. "In March of 1943, Lieutenant Schueler and Lieutenant Conver had left our crew. It was nothing against Schueler that he was grounded. All of our nerves were affected. We were now down to only three of the original nine crews in our squadron. No replacements. It wasn't anything to see some guy break down and cry. I felt like doing it myself many, many times."

Subsequently, the waist gunner himself began to fall apart. "Things were not looking good," says Fleming, "I was having blackout spells, running a high temperature. They put me in a hospital. They couldn't find out what it was. After six weeks, a young doctor discovered I had an infection of my inner ear that upset my sense of balance. They treated me and released me. By that time I had completed fourteen missions. We had lost four of our nine crews, and were down to fifty of the original crewmen. There were no replacements available at the time."

mission the next day and was shot down. I was only twenty-three and had a wonderful adjutant, an older guy named Ed Miazza. He helped me write letters to the families of everyone lost from my squadron. I would write them in longhand, trying to soften the blow, saying how sorry I was that the person had been shot down and that he'd done so much for the squadron.

"We did have people who could no longer take it. They would ask permission to get off flight duty. We'd take their wings, put them on ground mechanical duty. Many would ask then to be put back on flights."

Bill Fleming, the waist gunner for Southworth aboard *Bad Check*, remembers his build-up of stress. "I had taken a spell when I had blackouts and I wondered if combat fatigue was getting to me. I would run a high temperature and black out. They finally sent me to Wilford Hall, a castle converted into a hospital and I stayed there for approximately six weeks. A young doctor discovered I had an infection in my inner ear that upset my sense of balance. They treated it and I returned to my group. At that point I had to have eleven more missions to finish.

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Cloth } "I hated to leave my regular crew; I had been very friendly with Waldo Brandt our tail gunner. We went on many passes together and Jack Belk our belly gunner and Edward Doughty the radio operator. Conner and Schueler too; we always made a lot of jokes about our copilot whose name was John Dillinger. He was a nice guy [Dillinger's actions as a copilot had been unsatisfactory to Southworth].

1943 } "I was assigned to a crew with Major Hagenbuch and we flew General Eaker to North Africa and back. He went to Casablanca for a meeting with Churchill and Roosevelt. They were to decide whether to go ahead with a plan to bomb Germany night and day, with the RAF making its raids after dark and the Eighth Air Force during the day. That's when they finally agreed to give us replacement crews. It was a highlight of my life to meet those two gentlemen, Churchill and Roosevelt.

"Our losses originally figured that one out of three would be lucky enough to finish a tour and then it went down to one out of five. One incident disturbed all of us. Lieutenant Stockton had flown on all of the group's missions. Instead of taking passes he'd make the missions. He was on his twenty-fourth, and would have been the first pilot to complete a tour but he was killed. They released the cause of his death as due to a 20 mm cannon shell hitting him, the autopsy report which was never made public, showed a .50 caliber machine gun bullet killed him. This wasn't unusual. I'm sure a lot of people got hit by their own shells; there were so many guns firing in so many directions in such a heavy formation of planes that it was bound to happen. His death upset everybody."

glad to be alive. I slept soundly until transported to the interrogation center at Frankfurt [the same site to which the more abused fighter pilot John McClure had been taken].”

WHILE BILLY SOUTHWORTH having completed his tour with the 303rd as a command pilot, applied his knowledge and experience to a staff post, and Jon Schueler entered the medical system because of his emotional stress, Bill Fleming served on other B-17s seeking to fill out his quota of missions. Having overcome an inner ear infection that grounded him for several weeks after he shorted out his electrical heating system in his flight suit, Fleming was still with the 303rd on October 14, hoping to complete his tour with the mission to Schweinfurt.

“When we saw the lines on the map that morning at the briefing, it was a horrible feeling. It began funny and ended funny. When we took off that morning, our escort left, and there was no enemy anti-aircraft fire or any German fighters that usually would fly alongside giving our direction, speed, altitude and other information back to their bases. Everybody thought it was awful quiet. About 100 miles inside Germany, it was reported that waves of fighters were coming in on us and there were about 200 of them. We expected that; it was not out of the ordinary. Fighters would attack for thirty to forty-five minutes before they had to land and refuel. We knew if we could survive that long, they would have to leave. They hit us, took out several of our planes. As they were leaving, we all kind of relaxed until somebody hollered, ‘My God! Here comes another wave!’ This continued all the way in to the target and by the time we got there, we’d lost twenty-five airplanes, 250 men. We bombed, turned, came back and on the way out, the same thing, one wave after another. Fleming

“We found out later the Germans knew ahead of time we were coming and positioned their planes to attack us in waves. It was one huge fight for six hours. Finally, we ran out of ammunition; there was only one or two guns firing out of the formation. All they had to do was come in and shoot down what was left of us because there was nobody to fire back. Evidently they were just as tired as we were, because they broke off. It wasn’t just the number of planes lost over the target that hurt us, sixty in enemy territory, we also had another twenty-seven crash-landed back in England plus the battle damage to other planes, and the wounded. There was more wounded on that day than any previous mission. That was the one time that I got so scared I vomited all over myself. The calamity and disaster of it was learned when an order came down to see how many planes could be mustered for another attack. Only about 15 percent of the crews and planes were available.”

increased the chances of survival it was reasonable to tack on the additional number.

Even with the change from twenty-five to thirty and subsequently thirty-five punches on a mission card to qualify for rotation home or transfer to noncombat duty, some early air warriors left the scene. The crew of 91st Bomb Group's *Memphis Belle*, the first to go the full twenty-five without losing a man had gone home in 1943 to sell war bonds. Billy Southworth, who had flown his final mission for the 303rd in the summer of 1943, hung around in a staff position until early in 1944 when he too chose to return to the States. His first navigator, Jon Schueler, a casualty of emotional stress, had been invalided to a military hospital in the U.S. before receiving an honorable discharge in February 1944. Their former gunner, Bill Fleming, remained in England as a gunnery instructor.

John Regan, a green second lieutenant when he started to fly B-17s with the 306th in 1942 and by April 1944 a twenty-four-year-old lieutenant colonel commanding a squadron, made no less than five attempts to round out his tour [he flew actually twenty-five but received credit for thirty under a system where flight leaders were awarded a premium] before he achieved the goal in a raid near Brussels. Feted by his associates with boozy parties, Regan admits, "I had extreme difficulty unwinding when I came home. When I got to the U.S. and after I had been with my family for a while I just about had a nervous breakdown. I was in a train station and felt I wanted to stand there and scream. Nowadays, this would be called post-traumatic stress syndrome."

The ordeals that drove Regan to the breaking point and Schueler beyond it were only partly mitigated by the living conditions of the Eighth Air Force flight personnel. "When not flying," says Regan, "my life was quite relaxed. My associates and I lived in barracks with about thirty-two men. Eventually as squadron CO I had my own place with its potbellied stove to keep me warm."

Some airbases provided separate accommodations for officers and enlisted men. At the 96th Bomb Group home, Archie Old said, "We kept the crews integrated, the whole damn ten-man crew sleeps and lives in the same quarters." Old stressed the value of noncombat support. "If you feed them better, pay them better, clothe them better, house them better, transport them, this sort of stuff, the better this part is, the more relaxed they are. There will never be another war fought like that one we had over there. We lived as good or better over there than we did at home." In point of fact, there was a great disparity in the accommodations with some men housed in splendid castles, regular beds with sheets and convenient bathing and toilet facilities. Others froze in tent cities, slept on cots under

station attendant Leroy Kuest, Cleveland cop Paul Krup, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania clerk Harry Serotta, California junior-college student Wil Richardson. The mix included minor-league ballplayer Billy Southworth Jr., English teacher Jon Schueler, civil engineer Archie Old, former seminarian Paul Deininger, son of a rabbi—Manny Abrams—and the offspring of a Protestant minister, Dave Ferguson.

Geographically and ethnically, they were, like the rest of the U.S. armed forces, a sampling of the melting pot with the notable exception of African Americans. [The military was rigidly segregated during World War II, with nonwhites largely restricted to noncombat organizations and the only men permitted flight duty assigned to a few all-black units in the Fifteenth Air Force.] Induction into the Army brought the disparate parts of America together. Heath Carriker, the North Carolina farm youth, says, "Up to this time I had never had any contact with Jews, Italians, Poles and Yankees. Although I took a lot of teasing about my accent and Southernness, I ate up this expansion of my world." It is safe to say that few men from these ethnic backgrounds had much previous contact with a man who could say, "There is not a more satisfying work than turning land in the spring with a good pair of black, 1,200-pound mules."

It is a measure of the U.S. during World War II, that Jews were viewed as a novelty to many from areas away from the urban centers. In a number of anecdotes, the storytellers feel obligated to describe an individual as Jewish, although there is no pejorative element to the tale. [Because of the high premium Jewish culture placed upon education, it would also seem, at least anecdotally, that more Jews volunteered and qualified for the Air Corps.]

Frequently, discord rather than unity marked the beginnings of a crew. Billy Southworth and Jon Schueler, so different in their upbringings, mutually detested one another at the start of their association but over time became fond and respectful of each other. Even those who seemingly had similar roots differed. Bomber pilot Ralph Golubock recalls, "Our left waist position was manned by Wallace Kirschner of the Bronx, New York. He was the only other Jewish member on the crew. He was brought up in a very tough section of New York and was what we used to call a typical New Yorker. He looked tough and talked tough. It was difficult for me, a Midwesterner, to understand him."

The discoveries of Carriker and Golubock were typical, but nothing bonds individuals like a common purpose and confrontation with a common threat. This was particularly true of the bomber crews whose survival depended upon one another and who physically were together far more than the fighter pilots. "We adhered to military discipline when that was necessary," says Barky Hovsepian, radio operator. "Otherwise, we were

of the moment. We had more than our share of extroverts among bomber pilots."

The job shaped some personalities. Recognition that one was responsible for the lives of eight or nine other human beings in the back of the bus, to say nothing of the hundreds in the entire formation, undoubtedly helped sober some to their position. Fighter groups counted their human losses by ones, bomber groups by tens.

The exigencies of the times also changed behavior towards other people and not necessarily for the better. "We were an endangered species," says Prager, "and we had to cram in every kind of pleasure possible before a leave or three-day pass was over. We had unlimited money (by British standards) and we were able to spend a month's pay on one three-day pass in London. The girls loved us because we were not only young, superbly healthy, and unusually horny, but we could take them to night clubs, restaurants and other haunts they normally could not have hoped to see. We had never run into girls like the English where even the ghetto poor were blonde, blue-eyed and pretty. Brought up on American high school and college girls—'Don't you dare touch me there, you dirty pig!'—English girls would say, 'Hey, that feels good! A little more to the left.' At twenty-two I didn't know girls like that existed." Judging by the adventures implied in the memoirs of both Billy Southworth and Jon Schueler there may have been less difference between the American and British women than Prager believes.

Along with sexual release, many airmen pursued the oblivion granted by the period's drug of choice, alcohol. There was little concern about alcoholism during the World War II era. While no one approved of obvious drunks in the cockpits, few recognized the impairment in those who appeared "man enough" to hold their liquor. Drinking was encouraged with shots issued as rewards after missions. Prager notes, "When we weren't flying, we were either dead drunk—I'd never been drunk before the war—or in bed with some girl, any girl. Each of us had his own girl in the local village, and we were welcome there because we had access to booze, coffee, butter, and if you wrote home to a friend in the U.S., nylon stockings. The girl selection in London was unlimited. Thus we found the women in England to be hospitable, the men grudgingly so because it was hard for them to compete."

His description of life suggests some means for coping with the pressure. Many obtained surcease by different means. "Some of us, right after briefing," says George Odenwaller, "saw their ministers, rabbis or priests for prayer. Actually, these three sky pilots stood two-thirds of the way down the runway holding up a horseshoe as we sped past on takeoffs, even in the dark rain and cold." Tommy Hayes says, "When I left the

ever success I enjoyed throughout the last fifty-plus years." Active in the Reserve after the war he went on the retired list as a colonel. He was employed by the telephone company for thirty-five years and now lives in Diamondhead, Mississippi.

Sanchez, Myron. Gunner, 385th Bomb Group. A railroad worker before enlistment, he returned to the Atcheson, Topeka and Santa Fe until he became a plumber, starting out with his father-in-law. He retired in 1985 and lives in Albuquerque.

Schueler, Jon. Navigator, 303rd Bomb Group. Discharged before the war ended, he became an artist. He worked on the West Coast, New York, France and Scotland and his paintings were exhibited internationally. He died in 1992.

Serotta, Harry. Engineer/gunner, 379th Bomb Group. He owned a supermarket, then a snack-food business before retiring in Hewlett, New York.

Shanker, Herb. Engineer/gunner, 303rd Bomb Group. After separation from the service he went to college on the GI bill and then became an accountant, first in the public sector and then for corporations. His home is in Mashpee, Massachusetts.

Smith, Lewis A. Pilot, 385th Bomb Group. "My war experiences greatly influenced my life. They rapidly matured me—made a man out of a boy—and they taught me the value of an education. I have been grateful for and proud of the experiences." He earned a degree as a doctor of optometry and practiced for forty-eight years. He lives in Wichita, Kansas.

Snyder, Howard. Pilot, 306th Bomb Group. Shipped back to the U.S. after his seven months with the underground, he remained in contact with other survivors as well as the family of his copilot, George Eike, murdered by German soldiers. Derwood Eike, the father of George, invoked the aid of Sen. James Mead to get a full investigation of the deaths. The bereaved father then advised the living crewmen and the families of the slain of the details. In his letter to all he wrote, "As you know, we lost both of our boys in the war. Our son Richard was a pilot of a Fortress and was shot down near Aachen, September 28, 1944, and was killed when the plane exploded. Knowing the facts does not only help the deep sorrow that has come to all of us, but it does help to know that they did not suffer long and the mental agony they might have had was of short duration. We pray that they did not die in vain and that generations to come will never forget their great sacrifice." Snyder's home is in Sedona, Arizona.

Southworth, Billy. Pilot, 303rd Bomb Group. Rotated home, and promoted to major he became a B-29 pilot but was killed while attempting

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