



Between combat tours, I had a month's marriage leave in the U.S., after I volunteered to go back and fly 22 more secret

missions, Florence and I celebrated a birthday. The flights were part of the "Swedish project." We flew wearing civilian clothing from Bond Street, as government civilians with passports. We only flew in bad weather or in the clouds, because the Nazis had night fighters in Norway. We were briefed that the Germans would kill us if they shot us down. (*Art Shay*)















(Legendary Chicago-based photographer Art Shay has taken photos of kings, queens, celebrities and the common man in a

60-year career. This week, Art reflects on the 69th anniversary of the Normandy invasion.)

Two years after D-Day which came exactly 69 years ago this morning, I wrote a Whitmanesque poem to my beautiful new bride, Florence, to tell her, er, *something*, about June 6, 1944 before the memory faded.

I was the navigator on a B-24 named *Sweet Sue*. The crew that *Sue* safely brought home a few missions prior used to take another *Sue*—a rangy Texas beauty of a nurse—on illicit showoff practice missions. They would set the Lib on automatic pilot and, at 10,000 feet, just short of oxygen level, against the rolled up yellow life raft in the crew compartment, show her why we would one day be called the Greatest Generation. Col. Jimmy Stewart, one of our four squadron commanders, knew about it but didn't tell. He realized we were all high strung and needed outlets for our burgeoning emotions. He himself would bike into town, we suspected, to get laid in a church attic, his organ (we crudely gossiped) sharing the loft with one from Hammond.

None of this was any of my wife's business. We were, after all, men and our particular corner of the war had a 71 percent rate of attrition. Some 9,000 of us Eighth Air Force kids would be lost or captured in the war. We had to fly 30 missions, but statistically were programmed to die before number 24. Of course we all expected to beat the odds, being 20-25 years old. And as Jews, the dozen or so enlisted Yids in our group knew what was happening in Germany and France.

To my surprise, the Sunday Washington Post ran my poem, a full page, and heavily censored my naughty asides. And gave me \$100 to boot, and offered me a job as a feature writer.

They splashed a banner headline as "H-Hour (Do You Remember, Dear?) Was a Million Minutes Ago." And I became a celebrity at the Pentagon where I was stationed. I still haven't done the math.

D-Day

There is the boy-voiced orderly who stumbles in your sleep and checks your face with something halfway down his list.

The hut is cold and English rain has lost its kiss, is
vicious on the metal roof,

And you live between two air raid shelters.

He came in an open jeep, his young face smarting
with the weather and his own awakening.

First nudge and he's your little brother waking you
in time for school,

Transferring your mother's admonition half the
Nissen-hut length all the way to home.

"You're flying, sir," he says. "Briefing at 3."

"Roger," you say, "Roger."

*(One of those war words, darling, easy to say, caught on
quickly, like "Veteran" and "GI Joe.")*

You stumble from the hut to washing . Bare feet take squishy
traction on the wet grass, then waking to the little,
chatter of the others, cold with the same dull fear,
frozen by the sacramental tap-water. Maybe today.

*(Your morning kiss is warm-awakening from the happy
catalogue of our marriage, My joy assailed only by our
homelessness, framed for me in my eye's dim compass of
these dirty walls. Nor have we a kitchen in which to build a
chain of breakfasts together in our sleeping clothes.)*

* * * *

They hand you breakfast, casual as automats. You
smile. *(KP's are meagerly repaid And by the way, how do the
British win their wars with food like this?)*

Listen to the stumble-conversations, subway talk
between the stations as you studied on the train.

The raucous yell, "Big B today!" The lollards, those
with time for cereal and cream, think not.

The coast- a milk-run-maybe, at the worst, Calais,
Where all the flak is accurate but bunched.

Or will this be the Day of shining effort, D-Day, and
thrust across the water?

Rumors spiked, destroyed and thrown at the German,
sitting on positions heavy with four fat years.

*(Darling, the Chinese are still fighting in the hon-orable
shadow of their crude wall, Defense project of a thousand*

*years ago. Great walls are quickly obsolete, for ladders are
groats in history.)*

* * * *

Ask a general. *(That's what they told me, sweetheart, when I
tried to buy a car, A surplus car, and a surplus typewriter for
our busi-ness. If we ever find a surplus office.)* Ask a general.

Once a general gave me some medals. He said
"Thank you" and shook my hand. A swell guy—*(there's no
caste among officers.)*

He'd shake hands again if I saw him, but the cars
are in Atlanta and that's far away.

*(Berlin was 1200 miles away, but a state of peace exists
and Atlanta's in Georgia and the papers are filed on
the West Coast.)*

* * * *

Briefing room, annoyingly like what the movies
think- *(Haven't seen Van Johnson in an Air Force picture in a
long time.)*

Wall-map, half a world on half a wall. The business of the
meeting is brief: If you don't hit this, hit
something.

Bombing is blind man's buff with radar.

Outside the many-engined hum, insistent spinners
sipping fifty gallons in a rainy dawn, just warming;
Cocktails for four drunken engines.

The major jests—no fighter cover. Cheek-face major,
he who led the last-time raid, describes the target . . .
*(What sort of job can a raid-leader have now? Oh- this one
died three missions on.)*

“. . . forty flak guns, important rail and communica-
tions target, making it easy for the TASK FORCE.”

Invasion. Invasion. It is a little word with a large
tail. This is the day we spit in Hitler's eye.

Will they put it off? Should have been yesterday,
you know. Weather? Equipment?

Certainly not a manpower shortage, and don't tell us
men are readied and lubricated for battle quicker than
machines.

(Who knows? Maybe a fist war would be over in a day.)

* * * *

“You’ll be skirting Paris—lots of pretty babes
down there, don’t hurt ‘em.”

*(The impossible we do at once. Hurt? As if we were equipped
with pain to give and take. It’s hard to hear a scream at twenty
thousand feet, but I heard you scream, Florence, getting the
telegram, Closing my life account with Living, Incorporated. A
million telegrams could say not a single word past “one of us
is dead.”)* Like planning a snowball fight in an alley. We’re
the good guys.

Brother-winks of bombardiers, union in profession,
death-dealers to the throne, by appointment only,
And they only work here like the rest of us.

Maps are marked “restricted”—did you know?

AS IF THEY DON’T KNOW WHERE WE ARE!

Brave New World, Limited.

The documents are signed and we are almost ready.

Received, three hundred thousand dollars worth of
plane and bombs, ten men.

*(“Six months at the least, mister. Lots of veterans. Lots of
applications—has to go through channels and it will cost
plenty”.)* What channels lie between zero and twenty thousand
feet, and how much per foot is altitude on two engines?

* * * *

Lorry ride across the bumpy ramp to Sweet Sue. Solemnly
ten kisses on her nose.

A secret rite performed in the privacy of a cold
hardstand.

*(Did not Hannibal fondle his elephant? And you can’t feed a
Lib sugar.)*

Take-off!

Pushing from the callow earth with muscles wrought
by women sixty hundred miles away at Willow Run.

*(Are they still working there, honey, or do men build Kaiser
cars? Did Mr. Seybal make another pass at you? I’ll kill him
when I get back. When I get back. We’ll have each other, and
the world will be for us. Darling, have you stormed a nylon*

line?)

* * * *

The low dawn rises, gold upon your silver, clashing
in a fairy-story forge.

*(If this be my last dawn, assuredly I'll not die alone. Beaches
will be blood- crimson as we cross them, Death will comb the
Norman beach, tide will race him for the spoil, war's
omnipresent surplus.)*

Will the boys down there look up and call us lucky?
We who sleep in English beds and fight an eight-hour
day?

* * * *

Your voice is metal, slowly sharpening to the micro-
phone. You call the compass heading, thwart the
crafty wind.

Pilot answers "Roger." settles down. Ten men become
one instrument, a hundred planes are ten.

Gunner spots the London Bridge, looks down.

"Blimey," someone laughs.

A thousand ships sit in the dirty Thames without a
Helen.

Finally the coast at Land's End. Now we are of the
countless men who left England on brave purpose.
There they are, thick in the channel and four abreast.
Two thousand at least.

History for the looking. Like cars from a tall build-
ing, crawling down Broadway.

Kiddie-cars, each with its toy balloon and apostrophe
of smoke.

Busy-bee fighter planes, like hawkers at the Stadium,
selling safety to the convoy, hovering at three hundred
per.

Up and down.

Ahead the broken-cup coastline, and look at the dots
on the beach.

War's punctuation and Hell's private diacriticals.

The parade moves slowly.

Le Havre sits off the left wingtip, Cherbourg upon

the other, Caen over to the west.

No flak yet, save the spineless stuff that breaks too low.

(Are we feeding them breakfast today, and have they forgotten how to hit a Liberator?)

Your shadow moves across an undercast. The ceiling changes. In navigation school you didn't fly on cloudy days.

A thousand years ago in Texas.

(Remember Mary Anne in Texas? You were sojealous, darling.)

Remember the Alamo?

* * * *

Take your flak suit off, be brave and throw it on the floor.

Nudge the bombardier aside, his work comes later—

(Chuck Bunting is still in the hospital-broke his back on a training mission, crashing on Tom Paine's farm! These are still the times that try men's souls! And we owe him a letter. He's never gotten over the Dear John letter his wife sent to him)

—after all, we're paving the way as the Colonel said, paying with rubble.

Bet you a million dollars we'll rebuild the whole mess.

Try to see Alencon from out the nose—the goddam clouds again.

You order turn on time. Distance, rate, and time.

Was it seventh grade? No pigtails to pull in flying school.

Change positions. Steady now. Chartres is dead ahead. Initial point

* * * *

You call for bomb bay doors to open *(somewheretoday is a navigator now a doorman?)*

Then you're on your run.

Bombardier is on his knees across his Sperry sight.

The other ships will bomb on us today. We drop smoke flares with every load-

When the lagging planes fly through our contrails, POW, they drop their bombs too.

“Flak!” a gunner says, “at three o’clock.” All eyes turn right.

Six black puff-clouds, close but high, no damage.

Then a dozen bursts (*those boys are sharp*)

And metal bounces through the ship, no damage

Tracking fire! Lib aflame at nine o’clock—two chutes.

We are ducks and they are hunters—from an airfield, Ecrosnes you say, as if it helped.

Hold the course and hold the airspeed, bombing is an art, an art.

Saint Cyr bears east—French West Point, you know, the German billet ...

Bombs away! Tag, you’re it!

Tail gunner sees them hit.

You chart the bursts on target photos; were people riding in those trains?

More flak. Group astern is catching Hell.

The Eiffel Tower - straining you find it north of target.

Flak again.

“Three-thirty-two—Three-Three-Two,” you say, allowing time for turn. Now!

* * * *

The pilot turns. Your buddy Cecil, swings your thirty B. Isom of Ennis, Texas ,

Swings our tons of death to north and west. Guided by a kid from the Bronx who had trouble passing plane geometry!

Sweet Sue is going home.

Les Champs is straight and white, can’t find Les

Tuilleries. (*From where my Dad went up in a hot air balloon in 1917.*)

Beauvais to the right. Four degrees left.

Another turn. Some flak from near Dieppe, then out into the blessed Channel.

* * * *

Alter course for home. You breathe again and oxygen is sweet.

Wagner asks, "Sir, we getting back in time for chow?"

Tail says, "Z for Zebra's falling back, two engines feathered."

Formation loosens, boats again—two hundred, four abreast, and steaming south.

Letting down, thirty-three minutes to base. Another windshift, alter course again.

The coast, the beautiful English coast.

We cross it lower than before, the pattern varies, but who questions St. Peter at the gate?

Then homeward, over eight green airfields, ours the ninth.

(Sweetheart, airfields look alike, like soldiers and problems form a distance.)

Camouflaged, but unmistakable, home.

Peel off, using east-west runway. Down.

* * * *

Ground crew, eager for the damage, counts us as we touch to earth. Our commander, Col. Jimmy Stewart, will debrief us!

("Did you actually see where your bombs hit or are you assuming lieutenant?" That shyly concise movie smile. He'll be a general before the year is out.)

Ambulances wait. Red-crossed horses at the barrier.

We've started to reverse the Hitler legend. This putsch is on us.

"How's the invasion, Lieutenant? This your tenth mission?" says the crew chief, fingering a flak break.

Interrogation, hot coffee. Dull today. Photos will supply the answers. Flak here and here and here and here. You transfer X's from your map to his.

Beaming Major feeds you candy bars.*(Did you have a shortage here, darling?)*

Little boys come home for dinner, errand flown as briefed.

Food and sleep.

* * * *

And overheard the buoyant Heaven holds cheapest

that to it most dear. The lives of young warriors.
(I'm afraid to fly now, sweetheart, and I won't if you say.)
The pattern of the Free New Europe, thrust upon
another generation.
(Where are the million unborn families escaping the famine?)
To blackened Ruhrs and shattered Hamburgs, east
to proud Berlin we march.
Little boys with man-hearts, *(We're older now, wife, and our
hearts are fires of impatience.)*
Playing death-tag with the kids across the way in
thunderous millions.