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AN EIGHTH AIR FORCE LIBERATOR STATION, ENGLAND.

(THE FOLLOWING ACCOUNT OF AN AERIAL BATTLE BETWEEN A GROUP OF ~~XXEROMRXNR~~ B-24 LIBERATOR BOMBERS AND MORE THAN 100 GERMAN FIGHTERS IS BY STAFF SERGEANT THOMAS G. SPERA, SON OF MR. AND MRS. BENJAMIN S. SPERA, 2437 SOUTH 20TH STREET, PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA, WHO FLEW AS PHOTO-OBSERVER IN THE LIBERATOR "TERRIBLE TERRY'S TERROR".)

WE WERE ONE OF TEN CREWS OUT OF THIRTY-FIVE TO GET THROUGH A BITTER BATTLE FOUGHT RECENTLY IN THE AIR FOUR MILES ABOVE KASSEL, GERMANY. IT ALL HAPPENED AFTER WE HAD DROPPED OUR BOMBS. UP UNTIL THAT TIME I HAD CHALKED THE MISSION UP AS A "MILK RUN". THEN SUDDENLY ALL HELL BROKE LOOSE, AND THE INTERPHONE WAS BUSY WITH URGENT VOICES CALLING OUT FORMATIONS OF FOCKE-WULF 190'S. FROM MY STATION IN THE WAIST I COULD SEE THE AIR FULL OF EXPLODING SHELLS BEING LOBBED AT US. THEN THEY CAME IN, RIGHT THROUGH OUR FORMATION. IN LESS TIME THAN IT TAKES TO TELL, THE SKY WAS FULL OF DEBRIS FROM EXPLODING SHIPS.

THE LEADING LIBERATOR, ON FIRE FROM NOSE TO TAIL, CAME SWINGING TOWARD US LIKE A SEVERELY WOUNDED ANIMAL, THEN PEELED AWAY AS IF TO PICK A SPOT AWAY FROM US TO DIE. THE NEXT BOMBER MOVED UP IN ITS PLACE. THEN WE WERE HIT OURSELVES. A 20-MILLIMETER SHELL TORE THROUGH THE BOMB BAY, RIPPING OFF THE DOORS AND SEVERING FUEL LINES. TWO FIRES STARTED SIMULTANEOUSLY IN THE BAY. WHAT STRANGE MYSTERY OF FATE KEPT US FROM EXPLODING I'LL NEVER BE ABLE TO FATHOM. THE ENGINEER, TECHNICAL SERGEANT ROBERT H. RATCHFORD, GASTONIA, N.C., THREW OFF HIS PARACHUTE, GRABBED A FIRE EXTINGUISHER, AND PUT BOTH FIRES OUT BEFORE THE 100-OCTANE GAS HAD BEEN IGNITED. THEN HE ATTENDED TO THE LEAKS FROM WHICH FUEL WAS POURING OUT LIKE WATER FROM

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A FIRE HYDRANT. GASOLINE HAD SATURATED THE THREE OF US IN THE SHIP'S WAIST, AND WE ALL HAD A DIFFICULT TIME MOVING ABOUT. THE TWO WAIST GUNNERS WERE SLIPPING AND SLIDING AS THEY SIGHTED THEIR GUNS. A LARGE PUDDLE OF GASOLINE ACCUMULATED ON THE CAMERA HATCH, BLOWN IN BY THE SLIPSTREAM OUTSIDE.

THINGS WERE HAPPENING SO FAST THAT IT'S HARD FOR ME TO RECALL THE EVENTS IN ANY FORM OR SEQUENCE. ONE LIBERATOR WITH TWO ENGINES ON FIRE ON THE LEFT WING CAME UP FROM BELOW US TO EXPLODE WHEN IT HAD REACHED OUR LEVEL. A HUMAN FORM FELL OUT OF THE ORANGE-COLORED BALL OF FIRE. AS HE FELL THROUGH SPACE WITHOUT PARACHUTE OR HARNESS, HE REACHED UP AS IF TO GRASP AT SOMETHING.

IN OUR SHIP, A BULLET FROM A FOCKE-WULF PROBABLY SAVED MY LIFE. MY OXYGEN MASK HAD BECOME DISCONNECTED, AND BEFORE I REALIZED IT I WAS LOSING CONSCIOUSNESS. A 20-MILLIMETER SHELL CAME THROUGH THE WAIST ABOVE THE HEAD OF WAIST GUNNER STAFF SGT. JOSEPH K. SELSER, JENKINTOWN, PENNSYLVANIA, AND CAUSED STAFF SGT. ROBERT J. CANNON, 14300 MAIDEN AVENUE, DETROIT, MICHIGAN, TO LOOK AROUND FROM HIS POSITION AT THE RIGHT WAIST GUN, NOTICE MY TROUBLE, AND CONNECT THE OXYGEN LINE AGAIN.

I GAINED CONSCIOUSNESS TO FIND THE BATTLE CONTINUING. SECONDS SEEMED LIKE HOURS, MINUTES LIKE DAYS. ENEMY FIGHTERS CAME ROLLING THROUGH THE FORMATION SO CLOSE THAT ONE COULD ALMOST SEE THE COLOR OF THE PILOT'S EYES. ONE FW WHO SEEMED TO HANG BY HIS PROPELLER ONLY A FEW YARDS OFF OUR LEFT WING, WAS RIDDLED BY FIRE FROM OUR TOP TURRET GUNS, MANNED BY STAFF SERGEANT ROBERT W. SARBER, 1012 BEAVER AVENUE, PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA. ANOTHER KILL WAS MADE BY STAFF SERGEANT FRED C. SCHAFER, JR., 3203 SPRING GARDEN AVENUE, PITTSBURGH.

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ONE WAVE OF ENEMY FIGHTERS FOLLOWED ANOTHER, UNTIL AFTER SIX MINUTES THE ATTACKS CEASED AS SUDDENLY AS THEY HAD STARTED. WHERE THERE HAD BEEN THREE SQUADRONS OF BOMBERS BEFORE, NOW TEN SHIPS WERE ALL WE COULD SEE. THOSE WHO COULD CLOSED IN AS IF FOR COMPANY ON THE THREE-HOUR FLIGHT BACK TO ENGLAND. (WE LATER LEARNED THAT THREE OF THEM LANDED IN FRANCE, THREE CRASH-LANDED IN ENGLAND, AND ONLY FOUR MADE IT BACK TO THE HOME FIELD, WHERE THOSE ON THE GROUND WAITED IN VAIN FOR MORE TO FIND THEIR WAY BACK.)

IN SPITE OF THE LOSS OF ONE ENGINE, OUR SHIP MANAGED TO KEEP IN CONTACT WITH THE OTHERS FOR A WHILE. WHEN THE NAVIGATOR, 2ND LT. ROBERT H. KAEMS, 1502 SOUTH DENVER STREET, TULSA, OKLAHOMA, INFORMED US THAT WE HAD REACHED FRIENDLY LINES, THE SICKENING FEELING RELAXED ITS HOLD IN THE PIT OF MY STOMACH, BUT A DRY MUDDY TASTE REMAINED IN MY MOUTH. IT PROVED IMPOSSIBLE TO STAY WITH THE OTHER BOMBERS FOR LONG, AND AN ESCORT OF P-51 MUSTANGS PICKED US UP IN ANSWER TO A CALL FROM TECHNICAL SERGEANT JAKE S. MONZINGO, MINDEN, LOUISIANA, THE RADIO OPERATOR. WE WERE APPROACHING A LANDING FIELD IN NORTHERN FRANCE WHEN THE SECOND ENGINE ON OUR LEFT WING CUT OUT, AND A THIRD ENGINE SPIT AND SPUTTERED. THOSE OF US IN THE WAIST RUSHED TO CRASH-LANDING POSITIONS IN THE NICK OF TIME. LOSS OF A SECOND ENGINE HAD MADE IT IMPOSSIBLE TO REACH THE LANDING STRIP, AND OUR PILOT, 1ST LT. WILLIAM F. HUNTER, ESSEX JUNCTION, VERMONT, CLEARED A CLUMP OF TREES BY INCHES, CLIPPED A SET OF HIGH-TENSION WIRES, AND BROUGHT THE SHIP DOWN ON A POTATO PATCH, SKILLFULLY JUMPING SEVERAL DITCHES, ONLY TO HAVE ONE WHEEL CATCH IN A HOLE, DUCKLE, AND DIG THE RIGHT WING INTO THE GROUND. WE ALL TOOK A SEVERE BOUNCING, BUT OUR ONLY CASUALTY WAS A CUT HAND FOR THE BOMBARDIER, 2ND LT. GEORGE E. SMITH, 7000 OZARK AVENUE, CHICAGO.

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CIVILIANS FROM A NEARBY TOWN WERE HESITANT AT FIRST, BUT ONCE THEY RECOGNIZED US AS AMERICANS, STOPPED AT NOTHING TO MAKE US COMFORTABLE. WE WERE INVITED TO THEIR HOMES TO WASH AND EAT. HOT COFFEE, AND GIFTS OF BEER, CHAMPAGNE AND WINE WERE PRESSED ON US. ELDERLY FOLKS BROUGHT FRUIT AND GAVE IT TO THEIR YOUNGSTERS, URGING THEM FORWARD TO OFFER IT TO US.

THE FRIENDLY WELCOME WAS MARRED ONLY BY THE DISAPPEARANCE OF MY AERIAL CAMERA, WITH PICTURES OF THE BATTLE. THE FRENCH POLICE AND HALF THE CROWD THAT HAD GATHERED SET OUT IN PURSUIT OF IT, AND SUCCEEDED IN RETRIEVING IT FROM A MAN WHO CLAIMED IT HAD BEEN GIVEN HIM AS A SOUVENIR. HE WAS PROMPTLY HANDCUFFED AND LED AWAY, AS THE CROWD JEERED "BOCHE" AT HIM AND MADE MOTIONS AS IF TO CUT HIS THROAT. THEN THEY APPLAUDED US ENTHUSIASTICALLY, KISSED US AND SHOOK OUR HANDS.

TOWARD EVENING WE WERE ON OUR WAY TO AN ~~KYXX~~ R.A.F. BASE, LEAVING "TERRIBLE TERRY'S TERROR" UNDER GUARD OF ENGLISH SOLDIERS. WEARINESS HAD DULLED OUR REALIZATION OF THE DAY'S TRAGEDY. WE LEFT FRANCE STILL WONDERING TO FIND OURSELVES ALIVE.

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