

PREFACE

My father used to tell me it was up to me to finish his World War II memoirs. I would laugh and say, “Sure,” convinced I’d never have to do it.

Fate deemed otherwise and my dad died in 1993 at 69. He left a box full of typescript – written on his crotchety old Olivetti electric – with squiggles in the margins, evidently attempts at editing. Some of it was written on blue paper, some yellow, some actually on boring old white. None of it was organized and the topics were mixed, so you would be reading happily along about Midland Army Air Field, go to the next page, and make an astonishing jump to Snetterton Heath, England. He did put headings on some of the pages, and a few were numbered, but the whole stack resembled a well-shuffled deck of cards. So after an attempt at organization, I took a stab at rewriting. Then I took another stab. Then several more. The problem, I finally figured out, was that I had no business trying to rewrite his recollections. My attempts were false and read like it. He had to tell his story in his voice.

After reaching this conclusion several decades too late, I gathered everything I had into one stack and typed or scanned it into the computer, making only such changes as I deemed necessary for clarity. There are some glaring omissions only obvious to me, who heard the stories. I know, for instance, that they had to ditch a B-17 in the Channel on one mission. On another, they landed on the Continent and wandered around for a couple of days in a captured Mercedes staff car. They visited the “Flak House,” a rest center located in an English country home. He and his pilot, Charlie Shinault, took up an Aphrodite B-17 and lived to tell the tale. There are others, none of which I can recall clearly enough to add to the book. It wouldn’t be right for me to do it anyway.

So here are Fred Huston’s war recollections, fragmentary and incomplete as they may be. I hope you enjoy them, as I finally comply with one of my dad’s last wishes.

Thanks to Wilfried Eck, for giving me the assistance and gentle urging to get this done. I am solely responsible for any errors or omissions. Republication of the book or any portion of it is prohibited.

Jeff Huston
Tulsa, Oklahoma

EAST OF THE RHINE

By Fred Huston

We've been in the air now for what seems like a year. Guess that some of the more golden-worded War Correspondents would have a far more graphic description than this ... how long it seems since we left Great Yarmouth to cross the Channel ... what Germany looks like five miles up.

This Limey oxygen certainly doesn't improve with age. The longer you suck that hose the more vile it becomes. They must have a bunch of scientists over here that sit up nights figuring out ways to make these chocolate bars taste worse and oxygen smell like a rendering house on a hot day.

Getting pretty cold now. The higher you go, the colder you get. See by some of the ads in the stateside magazines where GE has a heated suit that keeps "Our Airmen" warm at any time, at any temperature. ... This suit was made by GE. Wonder where they're sending all the warm ones.

Been in enemy territory entirely too long for comfort. There hasn't been any chatter on the intercom for a long time. Guess it's high time someone pulled an oxygen check to see if everyone feels the same about Jimmy Doolittle and the extra five missions he's tacked onto us. Called us the bush leagues. Maybe he's right. If so, I hope they never send us to the majors. Can't see that sort of thing. I'll go on and fight this easy war where the losses have only been seventy per cent for the last couple of years. ...

Better make that check. "How about you, Ayres? Everything O.K.?"

"Yeah."

Birdmen all say "Roger," so I've been told. Don't think there's too much hope for this bunch ever to become birdmen. Not built right.

"How about you, Foxy?"

"O.K., but I can sure as hell think of better ways to spend a birthday."

Foxy is the grand old man of the crew. He hit twenty-five today. He had a wife out in Oregon somewhere, but she ran off with a sailor. Foxy doesn't care much for women, other than Piccadilly Commandoes.

"Frenchy, you still with us?"

"Hell yes, but this ball isn't any good."

"Same old story, huh, Frenchy?" This from Ayres, who always claimed Frenchy was too yellow to fly the ball but took the job to have something to brag about. Frenchy claimed it wasn't true, but he did have a complex about it. So do I. No one could pay me enough to fly in that thing.

"Every time I get to sleep you have to butt in with that damned check. A man can't get any rest at all in this airplane."

"O.K., Bill?"

"Yeah." ... Lots of military courtesy on this crew. You live on your rank, according to the base sector wheels. Can't fraternize with enlisted men. Just so happens that if those enlisted men don't get back in good shape, neither do the officers. Well.

Watch that navigator. He's given up trying to get any blips on his G box. We're getting pretty deep. Lead ship wheels a little as we hit propwash. You can fight propwash, but there's

nothing to do about flak. Just sit there and take it as long as they want to shoot it up at you. I'll take propwash every time.

Reached our altitude. Feet are numb. Hope they don't freeze. All I need is a set of frozen feet.

"Here come some fighters."

"What are they?"

"Little Friends."

Quite a relief, that. For a long time we didn't have any fighter support at all. Once when we didn't have any friendly fighters in the air we lost all of our outfit but six crews. Makes a guy kind of wonder what the coach has in mind for you. Must be something big when He gets all of those good boys and leaves you.

"Twelve minutes to the IP," says our boy Rex.

Start hunting around in the nose for that 'chute. Got an odd theory on parachutes. Figure that if the government was generous enough to supply one, I should certainly be polite enough to wear it, even if it is a little uncomfortable under the flak suit. Rex started wearing his one day up at Stettin. The only time you ever saw the guy act as though he gave a damn whether he lived or died.

"Five minutes to the IP."

High time I crawled into that nice GI steel suit. Not that I'm yellow; just plain scared. The leak on the interphones picks up the lead ship on VHF. Vampire Red is starting a turn in thirty seconds. In the movies one would say, "This is IT." Not here; everyone is too busy. Bomb doors open ... check with Frenchy to see if they opened. They did. One worry gone.

That black stuff is starting to break a little bit around us. Not close, but close enough. The group up front is the 388th. They're catching several types of hell, mostly with flamers. Good boys in that group. They throw fine parties. All of them rookies, though. They got kicked pretty hard at Brux the day the Colonel wanted to be a hero. He's dead now.

They're getting a little hotter with the flak. Little more nervous. ... Try a little prayer on for size ... fits well. Not the kind of prayer you hear preachers say; they kind of a prayer that a guy who feels awfully alone uses to talk to the Boss. You try to sell the Big Man on the idea that maybe you should go back to the base and write a letter home to the folks.

On the run now for about five minutes. That leaves six or seven to go. The first five seem like an eternity ... double that and you have the last few. "BANDIT!"

A 190 has broken through the fighters ... tries to make a pass but slips under the formation. Guns are rocking the ship, but when the guy throws his tin belly up on you it doesn't matter how much you shoot at him. Can't hurt a 190 with his belly up. Those Jerries believe in lots of steel on their airplanes. Gone now ... fighters are on him. Brave man, that. He's up here without a chance in the world to fly home.

That black stuff has gotten entirely too close. Can still see it in front of us. That's the kind that doesn't worry you. It's the stuff you can only hear that worries you sick. Besides that, the stuff you can hear is pretty close. People have been known to be killed by flak that got that close.

Only a few more seconds now. Still with the boys, but that's no guarantee that we'll be here in the next second or so. A hit in the tanks or one in the bomb bay would make us just so much more meat.

"There they go."

Smoke bomb drops from the lead ship ... hit the salvo switch ... ship jumps as they leave the bomb bays.

"How about it, Breezy? Did they all go?"

No answer.

"Get the hell on the stick back there. Did they all go?"

"Yeah, they all went and watch your language."

"Are the doors closing, Frenchy?"

"Yeah, they're closing."

Chatter starts on the interphone. We're out of the flak. A load of high explosive is out the ship ... everyone feels much better. That oxygen is still foul, but I don't notice it so much now. Not even as cold. Pretty soon we'll be letting down. Then we can smoke and eat that candy ration. It won't taste good, but it beats going hungry. Come to think of it, we haven't eaten in the last nine or ten hours. Glad the Jerries didn't make a bunch of heroes out of us and send us limping home with an engine or so shot out. Beginning to think that this war is nothing but hard, dirty work. Better than the Boss. No chance. The co-pilot and the tail gunner are singing their post mission duet over the interphones. Oh, well, sleep tonight after the Casino game.

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