

Back to War

by Harvey Huddleston

June 25, 1944

I know Morse check. I can hand-send check. It's climbing back into a B-17 I'm not so sure of. First training flight on the radio in the morning so it all comes down to this.

I'm thinking about that Red Cross girl back at the flak house. My last day there she's in the dining room off at a table by herself so I sit down. She tells me her RAF husband went out over France the day before. No chutes but it's night and no one sees his plane go down either.

I tell her that last part is good. Guys go out all the time and then show up sometimes weeks later in a POW camp. And then some never get caught at all. I tell her how we got agents all over Europe working to bring these guys home.

She asks about me and I tell her I'm off to radio school. She listens real close but that don't match up with what she just told me. Then I get it. She's still trying to do her job even with what she's going through.

She's no quitter and I ain't either. Thing now is not to forget it.

June 26, 1944

Sorriest excuse for a B-17 ever. No name. Peeling paint. An old E series used only for training.

Pilot out on the tarmac says we'll be fine except for the flak over Long Island. Lousy joke but the trainees all laugh. Most never even been on a B-17 and this thing's got them even more worried than me.

I climb in and take a look out the waist port. So far so good. Lift off is smooth. Then all us trainees take our turns at the radio. Checklists switches frequencies.

We all do some hand-sending and give our position over the headset. Then they open the bomb bays and we learn about hang-ups. How to pry bombs loose with a six foot crowbar while standing on the catwalk between bomb racks. Looking down at Long Island Sound it somehow don't seem near as deep as that Channel.

Everything goes better than I expect and I wonder if it has to do with this notebook last night. I was a nervous wreck before writing in it but then after I fell right off to sleep. Who knows but it sure can't hurt to keep it up.

Back at the flak house in my last meeting with Spencer he asks how I feel going back. I say it reminds me of high school football. How after our first practice I'm covered in bruises but then after a few more the bruises are all gone. I say there has to be something inside us that tells our muscles to toughen up and not show the hurt.

Spencer says primitive brain. I laugh and then he talks about how each cell in our body is a living organism unto itself and how they all work together to keep us alive.

I tell him how at one practice my arm swole up to twice its size but then the next day I'm back out on the field like nothing happened. That's how it feels going back. All my cells are working together now to make me stronger.

June 27, 1944

Still haven't written Betty. It was up on the deck of that ship bringing us stateside when I figured out why.

Those last letters between us were all about our plans for the future but that's where it went wrong. All I really need to do is climb back into a B-17 and finish my tour. And I ain't even started yet so that's when I stopped even trying to write.

Staring out from that deck. Waves just go on and on and on.

It was on that deck when news of our landing at Normandy came over the loudspeaker. Some of those yahoos think it means the end of the war but I say all it really means is if we're still on that beach in the morning we're staying.

One report has the Luftwaffe going AWOL. Funny how they always told us our job was to destroy the German war machine but we all suspected it was really to lure up their fighters so our new Mustangs could get a crack at them. Live bait some said. So now I think maybe being bait ain't so bad if it cleared the sky for this invasion. And so maybe something is finally making sense.

One nice thing here at Mitchell is all the newspapers. New York Times and five or six others. My first week here all the headlines were about Normandy. Now they're all about trying to break out from those beachheads. And casualties. Lots of casualties.

Another trainee asked me if I want to go into New York City if we get the chance. Says he knows this club where they blow some smooth horn. That's how he says it. Smooth horn. I say sure if we get the chance but it don't matter. Only thing now is getting back to England.

July 2, 1944

Cornwall.

We did a refuel in the Azores so I go take a look at this little town next to the airfield. Dirt streets. Wooden wheel carts. I mean those people are poor.

This church has a sign out front saying Columbus stopped here so I go in. A priest is setting up the altar so I'm there in a pew when what has to be the whole town comes crowding in filling up the church. Then the coughing starts up until the whole church is hacking away. I have to push my way out afraid of catching double pneumonia.

Off the English coast we get some weather. Big boomers and lightning. My stomach flips and I can't figure it. Storms never caused me a problem before.

Now I think maybe it was those numbers running through my head. Back at Mitchell I heard that a B-17 crew member has a fifty percent chance of making it. Since I'm a quarter of the way through that means up to now I only had a twelve point five percent chance of going down. Not so bad but then every mission after that the percentage goes up until it's nothing to bet the farm on.

Need to avoid that stuff in the future.

Train to London in an hour. Switch there then on to Kimbolton. First I'll find the guys. No old home week. Just see how they are. And then Betty's letters. I'll write to her after I see what she says.

On the other hand there might be a Dear John waiting but I can't think about that. Can't think about any of it. Just have to see when I get there.

July 5, 1944

A Corporal checks the active crew list. Then he checks another off to the side and there they are. Last mission to Hamburg was a week ago.

Talk about a kick in the gut. It's not like they were long lost buddies but we were crewmates together for over a year. Guess I just wanted to see someone I knew for a change.

They got me in an orphan barracks. No set crews. Just guys to fill in where needed. It's different here. Everyone off in their own world. Reminds me of boot camp. Back then it was my cousin Burton on my mind.

Six years older than me he took me around in his hot rod. Still remember the time he stops at his girlfriend's house and she comes running out in just her bra.

Then he's off in the army and I get a letter saying he needs two hundred bucks. Mom says I'll never see it again but I send it anyway and then every month after that a nice crisp new twenty shows up in the mail.

He's in the Philippines when the Japs overrun it. About two years later Aunt Leeya gets a letter from this guy who escaped saying he and Burton were on the same

prison ship when they see an island in the distance. Burton jumps overboard trying to swim to it and the Japs shoot him dead in the water.

I enlist in the Army but the Air Corps needs volunteers. Never could land a heavy so they send me off to gunnery school. Got those wings on my chest. Who the hell did I think I was? But Betty liked them so I guess they served their purpose.

One night at Jefferson Barracks outside St. Louis her brother Babe takes me home with him for dinner. She's the youngest of five so we all go out to this Italian place for drinks. Hard to believe it was only a year ago.

I got some letters here on my bunk. I'll start with the oldest first and work my way up to the latest. That way I'll find out where I stand in her own time.

July 8, 1944

Full bird Preston is at his window when I walk in. He says have a seat and then sits down across from me. He mentions me being on Schweinfurt Three. I say yes sir and he says I flew lead that day. I say yes sir. I know.

He stares at me a second and then touches my file on his desk. You know I played high school football too. Quarterback. California State Champs.

If that's what he wants I can talk football all day so I say tight end. Memphis City Champs.

He asks about my training. I go through it but see him glancing out that window more and more. No mission today so it ain't B-17s he's looking for. He turns back to me.

Guess you want to know why I called you in. There's been some changes since you were here. Crewmen come in younger all the time and it would be a big help if you could give these new guys the benefit of your experience.

He searches my eyes. Is this what he wants? I say I'll help where I can.

He says good and eases back in his chair. So how was Mitchell? I answer they kept me busy. And now you're back. Ready for work? Just waiting on my name to be called.

Well we're even busier now since Normandy so that shouldn't take long. Glad to have you back Sergeant.

At that he stands and I get up to salute but he reaches over and shakes my hand. Then he says something I don't expect. If anything comes up stop back in here to see me. Anything at all. You know where I am. I say yes sir and pull the door closed behind me.

At a distance Preston is all starch and creases but face to face like that he's okay. And no one can accuse him of leading from an armchair. He flies lead on the toughest missions and you don't mind following someone like that.

So any time now. Feels like I'm finally where I should be. Just a little behind schedule is all.

July 14, 1944

Three straight days to Munich.

Funny how they bunch them like that. No time to think. And it works too. You eat. Fall in the sack and next thing you're back in the air.

We flew middle position all three days. Day two we lost a fort on the edge but none on days one and three. I didn't even fire my Fifty until day two but those Focke Wulfs were so far off it was mainly practice.

Every half hour I send out coordinates. About half way there the target's cue signal is triangulated from England and I pass it along to the navigator. He guides us in and then hands off control of the plane to the bombardier who sights on the target and releases our bombs.

I see what Preston means about the new guys. Before take off this rookie waist-gunner is looking for his chute so I tell him I put it in the radio room. He thinks I'm trying to steal it so I ask if he wants to trip on it while at the Fifty. He still doesn't get it so I finally yell at him I got my own. I feel bad about it but how the hell can he get this far without even knowing where to stow his chute?

I go back to offer him a stick of gum. He takes it and then I give one to the tail gunner and bottom turret too. I figure why stop there so I make a trip through the bomb bay and up to the rest of the crew.

All three days my hands are okay so maybe Spencer was right. Eleven down and nineteen to go. It's okay to keep count so long as I take them one at a time.

July 16, 1944

In Betty's last letter she says she hasn't heard from me in so long all she can think is I'm too busy to write.

In my letter back I say I'm sorry. That I was thinking about us and our plans so much I got distracted and it was dangerous for me and my crew. I tell her how I went through a rough patch but I'm past it now and want to be with her more than ever.

I don't say what that rough patch was but here's my take. I froze on that Fifty because our plans for the future didn't line up with me being dead the next few seconds. I can be either here or there but not both places at once.

Whether that's true or not doesn't matter because so far it's working. There might be a future out there for me but for now it doesn't exist.

July 21, 1944

Two days ago the train hub at Frevent. Then yesterday Leipzig. Number thirteen. I never paid much attention to that number before but maybe I should have.

A thousand heavies with a five hundred fighter escort. FWs and Me109s harass us all the way there.

On the runway before climbing up the tail-gunner tells me he has a bad feeling about this trip. Says these 17s feel like a coffin to him and he'll bail out at the first sign of trouble. I say we all will as a last resort but see he's not listening so I shut up.

We're on our bomb run when the left waist-gunner calls out over the headset he's hit. I look back and see a four foot hole where my right waist gun was. Then I see him down on the deck holding his leg.

It's a gash below his knee but the artery's okay. I flush it and sprinkle some sulfa. Then I press a bandage to it and motion for him to keep up the pressure. That's when I see that tail-gunner hovering behind me so I wave him back to his gun.

When I get back to my headset the pilot's yelling for everyone to shut up and give him a head count. We all sing out except for that tail-gunner. Pilot tells me to check on him so I start back and that's when I see him.

He's sitting motionless in the back of the plane like a statue so I get back to my headset and tell the pilot but he goes quiet. Guess he decides to just let it go until we get back.

Some morse comes in that fighters are massing over the Channel so we should take the North Sea route back. I pass along the new coordinates and we brace for the long ride home with that hole in our side dragging us back.

I take a hypo back to check on the waist-gunner. His face looks like a kid who just got slapped and don't know why. No pain though so I skip the morphine.

Our engines rev overtime to keep up with the others. Just before the North Sea some flak starts up and their fighters meet us. I hear FIRE over the headset and see flames shooting back past that hole in our side. Pilot says prepare to bail out so I grab my chute but then he says DO NOT BAIL OUT! IT'S THE FORT IN FRONT! I REPEAT! DO NOT BAIL OUT!

I look down the fuselage and see that tail-gunner hooking into his chute. He's got his emergency hatch open with his eyes glued on those flames streaming past. He looks ready to jump but that don't make sense until I see he's not wearing his headset. He can't know those flames aren't coming from us.

I yell and wave but he don't look. I beat on the fuselage with a wrench but he still don't look so I start back. Then he does look. He looks straight at me and goes out the side.

I scan below for his chute but see only the North Sea. Survival time down there is maybe a minute.

I report he's bailed out and send the coordinates. Coming into Kimbolton I shoot a flare out my top hatch to signal we have wounded but it's not just us.

One fort skids off into a field with smoke pouring out. I see men piling out running for their lives. That fort on fire in front of us didn't make it back either.

Yesterday puts a stop to any idea I had about a quick end to the war. Seems like it just started all over again.