

Making Deals

July 23, 1944

Brit paper says when the Nazis invaded Russia they murdered every civilian in their path. But painting all Germans as evil is the same as what Hitler did to the Jews and if we're no better than that how can we expect to win?

Had one on my crew yesterday to Bad Kreuznach. Bragging how much he likes bombing these filthy bastards. Probably hopped up on bennies anyway.

Just across the Channel some of that old stuff comes sneaking in. Out my window is the most beautiful sunrise. Sky a pearly gray with every color of the rainbow. We bank hard. Some sunlight falls across my table and for a second there I'm a normal person in a normal time. Maybe on a business trip to Europe.

Then I remember I'm on my way to kill people or be killed by them. I force myself back but not before that old ache finds its place again deep inside.

July 25, 1944

Less distance allows for more bombs so for Montreuil they load us up with the full four tons. Mission is to destroy a German tank division in a plan to break our guys out of Normandy.

They send us in a solid overcast in the hope it clears on the way but then when we get up there the clouds are even thicker. We're set to be turned back but the order never comes so we go in for our bomb run.

Bombardier asked me earlier to help pull the arming pins since he has more bombs and less time to do it so I pull my pins and drop them in the toolbox.

It's right when our bomb doors open we get that Morse to abort. I relay it to the pilot but the bombardier cuts in saying we need to replace those pins quick. So I'm in the bomb bay shoving in pins when I see the last one missing. I double time it back to the toolbox. Find it at the bottom and disarm the bomb just before the Channel.

Still shaky at debriefing but all they care about is that abort message and each one of them checks my log. Word is there was a major screw up that someone needs to pay for. There's also some talk those guys on the ground already did.

July 28, 1944

I'm on a merry-go-round when the next horse tries to push mine out of the way. I yell at its rider to rein in but then I see it's that tail-gunner just staring at me.

And then there's Fred from my first week asking how I feel about bombing civilians. He had that same look in his eye.

We don't think about the people down there. Only the factories and railroads and bridges but if you don't take into account the people too it's a lack of imagination.

Will I carry this death and destruction forever? I carry everything else in my life with me so how is this different? All we have is what we know and what we do.

July 29, 1944

Worse than we thought. Those lead bombs fell on our own troops.

Next day skies are clear so our group goes back on that same mission. We destroy that tank division so our western flank now is finally moving inland. The plan worked even though we can't send out a goddamn message on time.

August 2, 1944

QUOTA UPPED TO THIRTY FIVE NO GOOD FILTHY STINKING SONS A

August 4, 1944

Half incendiaries for the V-1 rocket site at Coubronne. Guess they figure since we can't hit anything anyway may as well try burning it down.

Corporal says go right in and there I am in front of Preston. I say my first eight missions were without any fighter escort at all and that should be taken into account. By his look I hope he just gets rid of me quick but then he asks if I think everyone here should be treated on an individual basis.

I say no sir but add that just before I got here the quota went from twenty five to thirty. Now it changes again. So how do I know it won't change a third time when I get to thirty five?

He answers you don't and that was pretty much it. Before I leave he mentions seeing a report that my fort had some trouble over Leipzig. I say we made it back but now here on my bunk I remember that's not true. One of us is still back in the North Sea.

Is that how it goes? Time passes until nothing about someone connects to anything else.

Is that how people disappear?

But that's not true either. People don't disappear. We just forget.

August 8, 1944

In my sleep I accuse this CQ of stealing my watch so today he confronts me with it. I show him my watch and he walks off but it's true. He's just waking guys up and I accuse him of stealing. So that's it. I need those pills.

Hit some troop concentrations near Paris. Light flak over the coast but nothing inland. They're pulling out their Eighty-Eights now before they're captured.

August 17, 1944

Can't sleep at all. CQs come and I lie there awake with my eyes closed. Used to sleep when they left but not anymore. Even when they don't come I can't sleep until the first light of morning hits that window.

August 20, 1944

Close call over Maastricht. A fort falls through us just off our wing. As it goes past I see Everybody's Baby on its side. No chutes. Only sure thing about Everybody's Baby is now it's nobody's.

Got those pills. I can sleep now but in the morning feel underwater. One thing though. They sure take the edge off in the dawn's early light with all those hundreds of thousands of horsepower cranking at once.

August 23, 1944

Kimbolton Village. You can see the castle from High Street. It's just a big mansion now but back in Henry's day he kept his wife there so he wouldn't have to chop her head off. Further down High Street is the pub where she works.

She says hello like always. I ask for the meat pie like always and she asks is that all luv? I nod and she gives me that look. She probably keeps about ten guys on the line. She's very pretty.

My first week here Kal sees her through the window and I follow him in. You can tell right off they don't want us there so Kal walks back out but I stay to explain we have the wrong place. That's the first time she gives me that look.

I think the bartender is her father. I was going to ask. And she'd answer too but she's got her whole life ahead of her while I don't even know if it's my last time there. There's a million miles between us and I don't try to cross that distance.

Meat pie has no meat but I still go back now and then.

August 27, 1944

Half incendiaries for the synthetic oil plant at Gelsenkirchen. I see a hole above my window with the edges flared out. Never did see where it came in.

Flight Engineer comes on with a pink teddy bear in his belt. Lots of superstitions here. This ball turret shows me his rabbit's foot and asks if I want to touch it. I still offer gum to everyone but that's mainly to see who I'm going up with. Then again maybe I do have a superstition.

I made a deal today. Not sure with who but I promised to give up smoking if I made it back and to prove it I threw out my coffin nails right then and there. Now what that's got to do with getting back I don't know but that's the deal and I'm sticking to it.

That teddy bear. He brings it in case it's the last thing he ever sees. There's talk whether guys like him with kids should have to fly combat at all but there's another side to it. He already has a kid while the rest of us never even got the chance. Follow that out and maybe we have more of a right to live.

But that don't work either since those guys with kids want back just as much as we do. The truth is you can't put a value on someone else's life. That's your idea of what's important and not theirs.

August 31, 1944

Good news is the Krauts left France. Bad news is they took their Eighty-Eights with them so now they're back in the fatherland waiting for us.

Couldn't shake those cobwebs so I lay off the knockout pills but then I'm staring at that window again. So before Gelsenkirchen I drink more coffee but halfway there I need to pee so bad I use the piss tube in the bomb bay.

So I get it going when some turbulence hits and my dick sticks to the funnel. I have to peel it off before it freezes solid. Back here some Iodine and a band aid help but then I still got those cobwebs from the knockout pill. So before Fiefs this morning I swallow one Benny from my survival kit and by takeoff I'm okay.

New plan. On mornings with a mission one Benny at breakfast.

September 2, 1944

Sat with two guys at chow. One a ball turret gunner I flew with a few missions back.

Before takeoff he sees me looking at the Jewish star on his sleeve and says if he goes down he wants those Nazi bastards to know exactly who he is.

So I sit down and he picks back up with the other guy. Says he'll take it to Preston himself while the other guy steadily shakes his head no. Ball turret then asks me what I think of Preston and I say it depends on what you want.

He says back the Nazis are exterminating every Jew in those camps so we need to bomb them. I ask how bombing them helps and he almost yells at me NOT THEM! THE FENCES! GUARD TOWERS! GIVE THEM A CHANCE TO ESCAPE! So now I know he's nuts since he knows as well as me we can't hit anything that precise. I tell him no one here wants to bomb prisoners in the hope some might escape and he just stares like I'm hopeless.

I don't say much else but I'll bet a paycheck he goes to see Preston and I'll bet two more it don't change a thing.

September 2, 1944

All incendiary for Ludwigshafen. Synthetic oil again. Saw one of their new jets so they keep me at debriefing.

I tell them it's no more than three seconds from seeing it and it flashing past so that's maybe twice the speed of a regular Me109. I say I have an image of it with swept back wings and that nails it for them.

Benny this morning doing some overtime. Waiting for that other one to kick in.

September 8, 1944

Back to Ludwigshafen. Just hope those people had sense enough to stay away. With all the incendiaries we're dropping there can't be much to come back to anyway.

September 10, 1944

Another deal today. That 16 gauge I got for Christmas. Squirrel just being a squirrel when out of nowhere BLAM! I didn't have to kill it but I did.

Some people call hunting a sport but they're liars. Where's the sport in killing a defenseless animal? Killing makes them feel powerful and I shot enough to know. I'll never kill an animal again.

September 14, 1944

Brux Czechoslovakia is over thirteen hundred miles. Then yesterday right back up to Merseburg almost as far. Vibrating in my bunk like I'm still in the air so I take another pill and get some sleep.

Worst flak yet over Merseberg. Estimates have over two thousand Eighty-Eights throwing flak up at us. Fuel production again. Just hope it's worth all these losses.

Over Germany Bass keeps popping up. One day he walks out of the woods. Eats my sandwich and follows me home. I build him a house and then in a hard freeze I run a work light out to keep him warm. He's some kind of bulldog terrier but Tippy calls him Bass because his brown splotchy coat looks like a fish she caught.

In the woods it's just him and me. He's no good at hunting but there's this one thing he can do. In the barn I turn over a barrel and he kills five rats in maybe a second. It's all a blur and I still can't believe he did that.

There comes a day when he starts staying in his house more so I take his food out to him. Then one night he won't eat at all. I sleep next to his house and he goes to sleep as I talk to him. I wake up at the first light of dawn and hear him crying softly.

His breathing is fast but shallow. My hand stays on him as his breaths get weaker. Then they stop but I don't move until the sun is high. I build him a box and bury him out next to the fence.

In that Pentothal session with Spencer when I say it's not okay to cry it's Bass I mean. Crying is to admit he's gone and that's just too much to take in all at once.

September 19, 1944

Betty took her sister Alice to see Gone With The Wind. When it first came out Betty sat through it twice and I ask how she did that. She likes it that's how.

Her oldest sister Carmie has a jewelry store. Betty says only Carmie would open a jewelry store during a war and she hasn't had one customer yet.

Egghead Babe is still doing technical work for the Air Corps while her oldest brother Ray still drives his tractor-trailer. Army says his trucking work is more important than carrying a rifle.

That's how her letters go. Then I write back and tell her what I think. We don't write about the future and her not bringing it up makes me feel even closer to her.

September 26, 1944

Frankfurt. I could say I been there but probably won't. Normal people don't go places to destroy them. No doubt anymore what we're up to. We intend to bomb these cities and then bomb them again until nothing's left.

War is the most useless thing ever invented. Nothing new there but that don't make it any less true.

September 27, 1944

Navigator says Cologne has a flak field continuous for eighty five miles. Seems the more Germany pulls back into itself the more dangerous it becomes.

I have Cologne down as my twenty fifth mission. Need to go over and make sure my count lines up with theirs. Need to double up on these knockout pills too. Or get something stronger.

September 29, 1944

On the way back from Magdeburg I see a Messerschmidt in the distance flying level with us. Then he's gone but when I look back there he is again this time only fifty yards out. I start to squeeze off some rounds but realize he can't hurt us there with his cannons face forward so I let off.

He drifts in closer and then even closer so now I see his face. He's looking straight at me. Then he salutes and peels off without me ever firing a shot.

Back on the ground top turret asks why I didn't fire. I ask him back the same thing so we leave it there. Maybe that ME pilot's as tired of it all as we are. Then again he looked to be enjoying himself so maybe he's just crazy.

October 1, 1944

Muenster. Where they make the cheese. Or used to.

Still thinking about that ME pilot. Us not firing when he's out of range tells him we're not rookies so then it's a game for him to see how close he can come.

You know he's on his throttle the whole time but we still don't fire and that tells him we don't want to kill him if we don't have to. Then he drifts closer to see our faces. Maybe it surprises him that there's still people in the world who don't want him dead.

Not that it matters. He'll kill us tomorrow without hesitation but saluting us like that somehow makes it better after all we done to each other.

October 3, 1944

Another deal today. No more pills. As for sleeping and waking I don't do much of either anyway so what's the difference. I concentrate when I have to.

I'm starting to see it. I try not to look but it's out there. A tiny speck getting bigger and bigger every time up.

Will I see it whole? It's possible. Something has changed.