

# Tail Gunner



We are taxiing. Squeals from the B-17's hydraulic valves assure us that brakes and flaps are working. We are number one for take off. We leave the runway and begin a climb to ten thousand feet. The coast of England recedes beneath lumpy white and gray clouds and we are flying over the English Channel. Deep throbs of the bomber's four engines fill my ears. I stretch my legs, preparing them for the next five hours of flight.

Nine young men are riding a winged fortress with ten machine guns and a bomb bay full of bombs to administer death to the Germans. I'm the tail gunner. The bomb bay contains several tons of the gray and yellow lethal weapons. Many of the people we'll kill on this flight are innocent of atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis, but they will die the same as the guilty.

Captain Elliot's baritone voice echoes in my headphones. "Gentlemen, put on oxygen masks and test guns. And for God's sake, don't hit any of our planes."

The odor of gun grease is sucked through my nostrils as I put on an oxygen mask. I straighten the belt of shiny .50-caliber bullets. Our B-17, christened *Avenger* by its first flight crew, shakes as the nose guns peel off their rounds, followed sequentially by machine guns in the top and bottom turrets and then steady pulses from the waist windows. I wait a few seconds, pull the trigger, and smile as my gun hiccups and then chatters. I let my thoughts drift into the past.

*Two weeks ago I was home on leave visiting Suzie and my family. And only nine months before that I was walking through the school auditorium to receive a high-school diploma. I couldn't wait to be part of the war and enlisted a week after graduation. Texas patriotic fervor brought most young men from my class to recruiting offices. I chose the Army Air Force. I wanted to shoot down those surly Arian Nazis and yellow Jap bastards. Hitler and Pearl Harbor woke a sleeping*

*giant and I planned to be one of its weapons. My country called and I answered.*

Wavy static crackles in my headphones adding another sound to a surreal setting. I curl my cold toes several times to keep blood flowing. I pull off a heavy glove and pick at a pimple on my neck.



*B-17 Flying Fortress*

We are only one B-17 of over two hundred on the way to bomb Kiel, Germany's main seaport. Colonel O'Connor told us at the briefing that our squadron would be leading the bombers of the 8<sup>th</sup> Bomber Group. He said that a battleship, two cruisers, several destroyers, and possibly a submarine or two were in the harbor and dry docks. He continued the briefing. "We'll climb to ten thousand, be at fifteen thousand over the coast of France, and climb to twenty thousand when we reach the German border. Stay at twenty thousand over Kiel, drop your loads, and get the hell out of there."

The colonel hesitated a few seconds, his dark brown eyes slowly roaming over the assembled group of warriors, and said, "We'll have heavy flak approaching Kiel and Intelligence said we should encounter at least four Focke-Wulf fighter squadrons." He sucked in on his pipe and exhaled. Smoke curled above his head. He smoothed well-trimmed moustaches and said, "Good luck men and God bless us." He strode stiffly across the platform and

down the stairs; we stood at attention as he walked toward the door.

This is my first flight as tail gunner. Adrenaline makes up so much of my blood that both ears ring. Sweat covers my forehead. I wipe it off with a leather glove.

The *Avenger* already flew twenty-seven missions over France and Germany. The old bomber was repaired so many times that the ground crew lost track. One time, for example, it landed on two engines after an early morning raid over Hannover. Another time it landed without wheels, sending sparks flying as it slid along the runway. Ground crews had the bomber repaired and back on flight schedule in three days.

I smile as I think of my fiancée: *Suzie was, without doubt, the most gorgeous girl in our senior class. I dated her the entire last year of high school and we wrote letters back and forth every day during basic training, flight-crew school, and first assignment in Omaha. She promised to marry me the next time I'm home. Her bright blue eyes sparkled when I asked. She hesitated, gazed into my eyes, and said, "Yes! Yes! Yes!" Her long blonde hair was suddenly all over me. I swept it to one side and turned her face toward mine.*

I tried not to look into eyes of other crewmembers as I tumbled into our plane. Men in flight crews stay aloof and detached from one another and don't form close friendships because of the ever-present finger of death that flies with them.

I am the fourth tail gunner assigned to *Avenger*. The other three were killed. The man I replaced died during the plane's last mission. Shrapnel from flak flew through the tail and ripped his body apart. I was told that he loved poetry and, just before the pilot asked for radio silence, would recite a stanza from Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade" over the radio. Lieutenant Simpson, the *Avenger's* co-pilot, said a hose was used to wash away the blood and guts after they landed. He watched my eyes as he explained the tragedy.

I didn't look away. I nodded and said, "I'm sorry."

"Okay, you blokes," the captain's voice throbs in my headphones, "we are over the Kraut border and climbing to twenty thousand. Maintain radio silence until we have to break it. Put on flak jackets."

I put on a flak jacket and buckle the belt that holds me in a small horizontal

cot. It's cold in the tail turret. At this altitude it's about sixty degrees below freezing outside and probably ten below inside. My teeth chatter as I stretch my legs. I had been warned to wear two pair of long underwear and two pair of socks, but I only put on one of each. Next time I'll listen to the bombardier.

My thoughts wander to the best baseball game of my life: *The baseball seems to rise forever. That would teach the pitcher to throw a fastball on full count. I knew it was coming, I just knew it; I choke up on the handle and place the fattest part of my bat squarely over the middle of the strike zone. Roars from the stadium reach my ears as I round first base and see the baseball clearing centerfield fence. It's the Texas high school championship and bottom of the ninth inning with two out, three teammates already on the bases, and we're behind by three runs. I round third base and see coaches and teammates waiting for me at home plate.*

A glow settles over me like a thick warm blanket as I think of that moment and my toes are no longer cold. I breathe in the welcome oxygen and shake my head to clear it.

The bombardier breaks radio silence. "Bandits at twelve o'clock." Captain Elliot acknowledges, "Roger. We have them in sight. Give 'em some lead, men." The nose and top turret guns pour bullets at the fighters.

The right waist gunner screams, "Three bandits at four o'clock." Lieutenant Holmes, the engineer and top turret gunner, says, "Roger that."

Guns from the right waist and bottom turrets join the others. I put the index finger of my right glove on the familiar trigger and scan the sky behind us. Below and to our right the colonel's bomber is hit. Smoke spouts from both engines on the right wing. The bomber turns 45 degrees to the left, rolls over, and plunges. My eyes follow it into the clouds and no one bails out. Another bomber, this one off our left wing and above, struggles to maintain altitude as smoke engulfs it. Then it also plunges. I shift my eyes away from the mayhem and concentrate on a search for enemy fighters.

Gray mushroom clouds surround us and flak hits the *Avenger's* fuselage. The plane jerks, rolls, and then stabilizes. Bomb-bay doors groan open as though in agony upon waking. I glance below the plane and follow the gray and yellow bombs as they wobble downward, lethal darts under a relentless pull of gravity.

The bombardier's voice is welcome, "Bombs away. Let's head for the

barn.” We turn west toward England. Below us smoke billows from the battleship and a cruiser. Fires rage all around the harbor.

A Focke-Wulf fighter comes at our plane from six o’clock. He’s firing at us. Red flashes charge from the plane’s nose and tracers converge in the airspace before me. I aim about two hundred feet in front of the plane and above it, then squeeze the trigger. The fighter flies into my tracer bullets, which dance across its fuselage and finally reach the canopy. The pilot slumps down in the cockpit. Smoke cascades upward as the plane shudders, turns over, and dives toward the ground.

I think: *My first kill! By God, bring on some more!*

Another fighter, diving on us from above, sends bullets through the *Avenger’s* tail and shreds its elevators. I feel a sharp tug in my right leg and see blood spurting out through my pants and spreading over the cushion.

*Is that my blood?*

The *Avenger* shudders and noses down about ten degrees as the captain tries to maintain altitude. Broken cables rasp along metal. The nose angle steepens further. We are going down. That calm baritone voice rings in my headphones, “Prepare to bail out.”

I unbuckle the belt, pull off oxygen mask, flak jacket, and headphones and slither backward into the guts of the *Avenger* along its tilted deck. I reach up, grab a parachute, and put it on. I collapse. I look at my right leg. A blood-covered bone protrudes through the flight suit. I hear the captain yell, “Bail out—now.” He pushes me through the open hatch. I drift downward with explosions twinkling in the smoke surrounding me. I breathe deeply to keep from passing out. I see other parachutes above and below me. German fighters strafe us. I close my eyes, expecting impacts of German bullets.

*Mom is holding a chocolate ice cream cone in one hand and pointing with the other. “Kids, kids, look at that! Wasn’t that a great burst? Did you see all the colors? And, did you see the red, white, and blue explosions over there? Isn’t this a grand Fourth of July celebration?” I glance at a sky filled with exploding fireworks, and bend over to lick a dripping ice cream cone.*

Wind is pulling me along the ground with the parachute. Captain Elliot grabs my parachute and unhooks the harness. He pulls out a .45 automatic and helps me to my feet. I put my right arm over his left shoulder. Burning

airplanes dot the sky and vivid black and gray explosions light up the smoke-filled air. Anti-aircraft guns boom nearby and bright yellow flashes erupt out of long barrels as ground shakes from the barrage.

“Droppen sie gun. Puttin’ up sie hands und surrender.” The English is spoken with a heavy German accent and I know enemy soldiers surround us. Captain Elliot throws his gun to one side and raises his right hand. I raise my left hand. German voices compete with distant explosions as German soldiers spin around me in a tightening vortex. I fall to the ground. They grab under my arms and stand me up. Guttural voices merge and float off into the distance as they drag me toward a waiting truck.

*A blazing Texas sun casts a long shadow off the stadium’s roof as I cross home plate. Dad has his arms around Suzie and they are jumping up and down. Coaches hug me and teammates pummel my back and shoulders. It is the happiest day of my life.*