Chapter 31
Flying in the Clouds

Flying was always beautiful and I never failed to take a peek. The clouds we flew over appeared so pure and fluffy, so soft. They gave the appearance that just jumping into them would be an ultimate joy. But we had learned in preflight training that every cloud concealed a rock. Flying in the nose, I often felt like I was exploring a new and beautiful, tranquil world never seen before. In combat there was precious little time to dwell on the beauty and the feeling, but I always did marvel, even if only for a few seconds.

At 12,000 feet, the temperatures could drop to well below zero. I wore two pair of G.I. Socks, G.I. Shoes, and four-buckle overshoes on my feet. Sometimes I took the bombsight cover which was heated by electricity, and put my cold feet in it. We had no heated flying suits. I wore long underwear, a sheepskin flying jacket, and silk gloves underneath my heavy outer gloves. I took off the outer gloves when I needed nimble fingers on the bombsight. Later in France I was able to buy a Kapok flying suit, and it was a truly wonderful thing. I wore it to bed at night in our unheated tent in France. It kept me toasty warm. Once I got it, I wore it all the time under my clothes.

When getting into the plane, I would put on my Mae West, earphones, and helmet. Next came the exhausting struggle to get my heavy flak suit on. A flak suite was something like an apron, made of bands of overlapping steel. It was heavy, somewhat flexible, and felt bulky on top of all your other clothes. I was never sure I would be able to muster enough strength to get it snapped on in the confines of the cozy nose. I was usually out of breath but eventually I got it done. I always parked my officer's hat on the round instrument case that stuck out through the cockpit wall behind me. Although I was never hit with shrapnel, one piece did find my hat and put a nice lethal hole in it.

We always hacked our watches to the second. They were cheap G.I.-issue watches with the fewest possible jewels, but they kept perfect time, and I wore mine for about ten years after the war.

There was a procedure for climbing up through a cloud layer. Being in the lead, we would start up first, at a prescribed rate of climb. The planes on our right and our left would veer off at a prescribed number of degrees, and then climb the same as us. The one behind and under our tail would fly straight ahead for the prescribed number of seconds and then climb like us, and so forth for the entire group. Our plane would be the first to break through the cloud layer into the bright sunshine. I would watch for the other planes to pop up. The thicker the layer the more scattered the planes would be. Despite the procedures, I sometimes saw two planes pop up uncomfortably close to each other, but no actual collisions occurred. We were close enough that we could quickly get back into formation before any enemy fighters could arrive.

When we had to bomb under a low lying cloud cover, like on D-Day, the concussion from the bombs could bounce the planes into each other. Our procedure was for the lead plane to instantly climb. The ones to the sides went at angles from their sides. The one just behind the lead continued straight. As soon as the concussions were over we quickly regrouped to defend ourselves from fighters.

I directed all the evasive action and bombing from my seat in the nose. Once I saw some flak coming up through the fleecy clouds at our altitude, but just to the left, (east) of our formation. I thought if I changed course they might discover their error and zero in on us. So I just continued on our course, and they continued popping away just to the left of the formation until we were out of range. That gamble paid off, but you can't always win. All the planes behind me were happy about that.

The other Navigator was Abraham Inkeles who hailed from Brooklyn. Naturally, we called him Inky. The Air Corps knew it would be extra dangerous for Jewish boys to be shot down and fall into the hands of Hitler's henchmen. The Air Corps would have allowed him to request an assignment in a different theater of war. But Inky was a brave lad, and he wanted to go. He felt he should fight Hitler and all he stood for. My friend Bobby Gratz felt the same way, and he did twenty-five missions in a B-17. There were many others. It was real bravery to take the extra risks when they did not have to.

Inky rode in the navigator's compartment where he did the general navigation. He had the radio and Gee box. On our second propaganda bomb mission Abe went back to the bomb bay to watch the bombs go down as I released them. Then an artillery shell came really, really close and exploded, riddling our plane with holes and blowing out a Plexiglas window. It blew Inky way back, almost as far as the cockpit. Inky reported on the intercom that he was bleeding from the back of his head and neck, and the left side of his face. Ray Field, the co-pilot, hurried back and reported that although there was quite a lot of blood, it was not life-threatening and he could wait until we landed. It turned out that there were many, many tiny fragments of Plexiglas imbedded in Inky's neck, face, and the back of his head. By the time I got back to check on him, Inky was busy charting the quickest way to get the Hell back to our base and our hospital. After we landed the doctor had a devil of a time removing it all. Unlike shrapnel which could be removed with a strong magnet, the Plexiglas fragments were hard to see and even harder to pick out one by one. They worked for hours to find and remove them all.

Our doctors were the best. They were twins; one was at our base and the other was stationed nearby. They had a practice in Harlan County, Kentucky, where during the coal strikes they had hoisted a white flag and treated the wounded on both sides. Both sides had guns instead of placards. They said no one would fire anywhere near the doctors. They were gunshot wound experts and that was the kind of expertise we valued the most.

After one mission when we were flying back to base I felt a terrible pain in both ears. We were at about 9,000 feet and descending. I did not have a cold, so I did not

understand why my ears were hurting so badly. Smitty, our pilot, would climb a little and then descend a little, up and down, each time bringing us a little lower. But finally we were low on gas, and had to just go down and land. I had an ambulance ride to the hospital where they alleviated the pain and kept me until the next day. I could not hear for about a week but I could tell when the weather was changing, because of the air pressure. I was like a human barometer. The doctor told me that I had blown both ears out (apparently inward) and that I would have a hearing loss later in life. But of course anything further ahead in time than our next mission was not important to us then. We did not see much use in worrying about bridges that we may never have to cross.

There was some talk that we might become sterile because of exposure to the radar equipment. We did not know whether to take the rumors seriously or not, so we ignored them. After the war, I certainly proved that rumor false, six times.

The government knew they could not ban the shipping of birthday cakes by the mothers and wives of Americans overseas, so they issued instructions. They saved up their rations and baked their son's favorite cake and put it in a box, and then they completely surrounded it on all sides with popcorn. If we were lucky they arrived in about a month and were in surprising good shape and were well shared. Just the popcorn was just inedible. I enjoyed every kernel anyway. Popcorn was a tradition in the Hasey family.

One time, Bomber Command had a brilliant idea for us to try. They wanted a practical way to fly in close formation at night. So up we went. We had no lights that could be seen from the outside, and they even put dampers on our exhaust pipes. The best you could see was maybe a silhouette of an object as it passed in front of the stars, if it was a clear night. We tried this several times, but it was just too dangerous to get real close together in utter darkness. We wished that the command people would come and fly with us. Anyway, they reluctantly pitched that idea in the round basket.

During those blacked out experimental flights we sometimes observed the presence of a round green ball traveling alongside us. The night was moonless and only a few stars were shinning. They maintained a constant distance straight to the side of us, and they turned as we turned. It was some kind of natural phenomenon, I suppose. No one ever came up with a reasonable explanation for our friendly green ball companions. All of us in our crew noticed our green spooks for a couple of minutes, and then we went back to doing our jobs, but we would sneak a peak once in a while.

There is apparently a phenomenon called St. Elmo's Fire, a beautiful, eerie form of atmospheric electricity that appears as blue or green floating globes during stormy weather around church spires, sailing masts, and airplane wings. I suppose similar in effect to the green flash seen at sunset and the green icebergs and thunderclouds. Despite the fact that we were flying blacked out. Apparently the dampers on our exhaust cut out the light spectrum except for the lowest which is green.

Next, they decided to equip our planes with automatic pilot. The pilots had never been checked out on this type of automatic pilot. I had been given a lecture once, but I didn't concentrate on it because it was a pilot thing. Now I had to quickly rack my brain. Somehow we figured it out together. Up we went and tried it out, but we found this type to be useless because the B-26 was too unstable as a platform, with its short wingspan. The autopilot went crazy making constant and hard over-corrections. Combat flying was not a proper use for it anyway, and we never turned it on again.

I can no longer remember all the places and details of our missions. We bombed military targets like marshaling yards, factories, airfields, naval installations, submarine pens, harbors, troop concentrations, bridges, and lots of "Noballs". "Noballs" were V-1 rocket launching sites. They looked sort of like ski lifts made of concrete. In Briefings they showed us a picture of what we called a "Noball" with the correct spelling in French. The French word sounded to us like "Noball", so that was what we called them.