

Babyface

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Ahead, I could see a sliver of silver on the horizon. “There’s the Rhine River,” I thought.

I eased my glider higher above the tow plane to get a better look at the formation. It was the Rhine all right. I could see airborne units of

the first wave already dropping on our objective, the East bank of the Rhine River, deep inside Germany.

It was March 25, 1945.

Parachutes were blooming, gliders were winging over and down. I could see the serial numbers chalked to their fuselages as they glided delicately into the battle below. As I watched, one glider released its tow line, climbing straight up until, at the apex of its stall, it broke apart, disgorging a jeep, ammo and men in a long looping cluster until they plummeted out of my sight.

A funereal pall of sooty smoke shrouded the landing zones, obscuring the carnage that was taking place below. The fields below were already a charnel house that would, before the end of this day, gobble up more glider pilots in this one operation than in any other airborne operation in World War Two. The fields were already littered with collapsed chutes and crashed gliders, and looking closely, I could see American bodies everywhere, paratroopers with their chutes fouled in trees, dangling in the rag doll attitude of violent death.

A series of sharp, ripping pops got my attention in a hurry as a Kraut anti-aircraft battery opened up on us. Bullets tore through the flimsy canvas fuselage. I heard the all too familiar “thunk” of incoming 20 millimeter shells. The control wheel vibrated furiously as we took hits in the elevators and ailerons—just about the worst place on the glider to take a hit, next to the fuselage that housed the hapless infantrymen.

The glider infantrymen sank deeper into their own bodies, trying to make themselves smaller as the bullets sought them out. A ricochet hit the metal fuselage frame with an evil whine, and it was then that I

heard the strange mewling sounds behind me, the sounds of the men back there as they froze, anuses tightening in terror.

Soon it would be our turn to land as the sky train crawled forward.

“Biggest ever,” trumpeted the strutting General, Commanding Officer of the First Allied Airborne Army, to the press. “One continuous train of tow planes and gliders, stretching from Paris to the Rhine. Gentlemen, this is Vertical Envelopment!”

I glanced at the Plexiglas bubble on top of the tow plane’s fuselage, watching for the green light that would be my signal to release the towrope and get the hell down on the ground, fast. My left hand gripped the control wheel; my right was on the tow rope release lever, ready to cut loose.

Thirteen men in my glider had thirty seconds left to live.

The green light flared. I hit the release lever and we started down. The ceaseless roar of being towed at 120 miles an hour softened to a gentle whoosh as we decelerated to 60 miles an hour.

But one German machine gun stayed with us all the way down. Bullets and shrapnel were tearing us up. I heard screams from behind me. I did not look back. I knew what they were and what caused them. I had heard them before.

My co-pilot turned to shout something just as he got it in the face. One second he was shouting, and then his face disintegrated. He lurched sideways and what was left of his head snuggled into my lap, and in that split second we hit the ground, sliding sideways. I heard more screams from within the fuselage as the machine gun continued to track us. We spun around three times. Clouds of dirt and dust enveloped the cockpit. Our nose dug in. We were down.

I unbuckled my seat belt, grabbed my Tommy-gun, and dove out the side window of the cockpit just as the glider took a direct hit from a German mortar.

The glider disintegrated, hurling bodies, some still screaming, everywhere. And at that precise moment, I took one in the knee. The pain was exquisite, beyond feeling, beyond comprehension. Dimly, I realized that I had lost all my men except one, and he was a civilian Associated Press photographer who volunteered—repeat, volunteered—for this glider mission.

I realized that we had to get off the field and get to that ditch, which was about 50 yards away. We were in the open field in the beaten zone of that machine gun. We had to get to that son-of-a-bitch. We just had to.

The machine gun was at the juncture of two ditches bordering the field. I could see the flash of its muzzle blast. I kept crawling, dragging my leg along. I was losing blood rapidly and my head was getting giddy. The air crackled inches above my head and I heard the whump! whump! of German mortars as the shells walked back and forth in the midst of our wounded, dead, and dying.

I heard a voice yelling over and over again, “That’s enough! That’s enough!” And suddenly I realized that the voice was my own.

And then I saw Art. Art, my buddy, a cab driver from Menomonee, Michigan, tall lanky, homely as a hedge fence, and fearless.

“Jesus,” he panted, looking at my kneecap, which was dangling by a shred of tissue. I started to look down but he grabbed me. “Don’t look at it!” he yelled. “Don’t look at it!” He twisted his head, scanning the field. “Medic! Medic! Where’s a fucking Medic?”

“Art, you got grenades?”

“Yeah, bagful!”

“Ya spot him?”

“Yeah, corner ditch!”

“We gotta rush him!”

“We’ll never make it, neither of us!”

Art raised his head slightly, “I think I can get him from here!” And at this point we lucked out. The Kraut gunner suddenly shifted his fire upward to rake the waves of gliders still floating in.

Art stood up and lobbed a grenade. At the same time, lying on my side, I lobbed in two grenades. We pressed ourselves into the earth. We heard the whump! whump! whump! Art catapulted up and charged the ditch, firing as he ran. Simultaneously, I opened up with the Tommy-gun, giving him covering fire.

The machine gun stopped suddenly. It was absolutely still. I dragged myself the remaining distance to the gun. Art was already there, standing over the gun. There was a body draped over the barrel.

Art placed his boot on the dead German’s chest and gave a shove. And what a strange sight; the body was badly mutilated, but the face was intact. And it was the face of an angel. It was the face of a child.

“Jesus,” Art said softly. “Look at this, no uniform, just a fucking kid.”

“Yeah,” I said, surveying the carnage out on the fields. “Just a fucking kid.”