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BACKGROUND PAPER
ON
THE UNLUCKY 13TH MISSION

Summer 1943, picture World War II in the context of half time at a football game. Both opponents are positioned in the middle of the field, the Axis powers have had a great ground game up to this point in the war, but are getting tired. The allies haven't faired so good on the ground but are ready to unleash their aerial game. Early 1942 saw the United States Army Air Force's senior leadership redesigning the air war priority list. The Air War Plans Division (AWPD) has just drafted AWDP-42, reprioritizing targets in all theaters of operation. This prioritized list rank ordered targets to be eliminated of strategic importance to the enemy within the theaters. The most important strategic air objective of AWPD-42 in Europe was to "deplete the German Air Force." (3:103) This would be accomplished in two ways; first, air-to-air combat; secondly, the systematic destruction of Germany's aircraft production capabilities, using strategic bombing. Strategic bombing was made more effective by brilliant, air tactical minded men like Colonel Curtis Lemay, commander of the 305th Bomb Group. After flying missions and studying bomb damage photographs, Col Lemay determined formations were flown too loosely. Col Lemay redesigned the B17 bomber formations into a "Lead-High-Low, wedge-shaped combat box", making the bombers fly closer together, improving defensive capabilities and bombing accuracy. (6:234) These tighter flown formations, enabled the 50-caliber machine guns that each B17 carries, to engage German aircraft penetrating the bomber formations with multiple guns, thus increasing survivability amd enabling the gunners to shoot down more enemy aircraft.. The men behind these guns are the unsung heroes of World War II, much is written about the officers who flew the B17, too little about the enlisted gunners. The following is the remarkable story of one enlisted gunner. A Kansas native who joined the Army Air Force, flew 13 missions, was shot down; evaded captivity for nine months with the Belgian and French underground; was captured and torture by the German secret police (Gestapo) for being suspected of spying; spent nine months as aPOW and survived a 469 mile death march in the dead of winter as the German POW guards retreated from advancing Russian forces, forcing the POWs to march back into Germany with them. During this whole ordeal, he is setting the example for future generations of airmen to follow by maintaining faith with his God, country and

fellow POWs by conducting himself with honor in the face of the enemy.

Sergeant King grew up on a farm in southeastern Kansas. He was a skilled hunter and accomplished marksman, a skill he would need in Europe's skies. He enlisted on 20 May 1941 at Leavenworth, Kansas, completing basic training at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri. He worked as a truck driver at Jefferson Barracks until October 1942. One day as he was passing the bulletin board, he noticed an advertisement for "Aerial Gunners" and signed up. He was transferred to Salt Lake City for Gunnery School, where he placed in the top one percent of his class in marksmanship. After Gunnery School, he went to Wendover, Utah for Armament School. In January 1942, he was transferred to Blythe, California where he received more armament training on machinegun mechanics, bombs, bomb detonations and general functions of a B17 bomber. February 1943, TSgt King is assigned as Chief-Gunner aboard "Chug-A-Lug-Lulu" and the crew is formed. At Blythe, they fly routine training missions, then they are transferred to Pyote, Texas for more routine training and finally receive orders to Pueblo, Colorado for formation-flying training. Once formation-flying training is complete they fly to Smoky Hill, Air Base Kansas to be fitted-out for the flight across the Atlantic Ocean to England.

They are posted to Ridgeway Station in the United Kingdom, home of the 535th Bomb Squadron of the 381st Bomb Group, Eighth Air Force. TSgt King starts flying missions over occupied Europe, 26 June 1943. The morning of 17 August 1943 starts cold and damp, crews are roused from their sleep at 0100 hours for another mission, their third mission in as many days and TSgt King's "13th" of the war. (7:32) The B-17 bomber crews nervously form in the mission briefing room, waiting to discover what fate holds for them. Where will today's mission take them and what will be the target? Will it be a short run across the channel into France? A milk run, as easy missions are called. TSgt King, right waist gunner in the "Chug-A-Lug-Lulu" is by this time a seasoned veteran in the brutal battle for control of Europe's skies. The allies are slowly starting to wrestle control of the air away from Field Marshal Herman Goring's Luftwaffe. The price is high, both in machines, flesh and blood, casualties are running high in the bomber crews. Tension rises in the room as they wait for the operations officer to arrive and start briefing. Finally, they are called to attention as the operation officer enters and mounts the stage. A large curtain is draped over a map on the wall showing today's destination. The operations officer launches into the briefing and finally the

awaited minute, he pulls the curtain back, a groan rises up from the crowd. It's not a milk run, the target "code-named Alabama" is a ball-bearing factory at Schweinfurt, deep inside Germany. It's going to be a long, hard, cold day and some of them wouldn't be returning.

Scheduled take off time is 0600 hours, but overcast skies cause a delay. It's 1100 hours before they are ordered to take off. It takes a painful two hours to form 222 B17s up and finally head across the channel at 21,000 feet. Chug-A-Lug-Lulu is flying in the rear, low right position of the lead group, commonly referred to as "coffin corner". This position earns it's name because it has the least supporting fire from other B17s and the highest casualty rate. German radar detects the force over the channel and controllers start dispatching fighters to intercept at "1426.... the Schweinfurt force began crossing the English coast. At 1439 the Third Gruppe was ordered to take off from Schipol; at 1443 the fighters at Woensdrecht, once again in the bombers, path began taking to the air". (4:188,189) TSgt King's aircraft doesn't see much action until allied escort fighters are forced to turn back, due to low fuel. As soon as the allied fighters turned, back it signals the German fighters to attack the bomber formation in earnest. For the next two hours, gunners defend the bombers against continuous German fighter attacks. German fighter pilots have learned to attack the B17 head on, from this position the fewest guns of a B17 can be trained on them. Because of tight formations the bombers can't take evasive action, they must fly straight and level and endure the fighter attacks. King states "From the Eupen to the River Rhine, the battle was Fierce. This was the greatest massing of enemy fighters they had ever encountered". (5:63) King's crew could feel the plane shake and reel from flak, machinegun and cannon strikes. They were taking a beating, but the engines weren't hit and they were still in formation. During the attacks the nose section, where the bombardier station is, sustains a direct hit. The bombardier is wounded but relates to the pilot he can drop the bombs. After the bombs are dropped and they turn for home, the Pilot orders King to repair the guns in the bombardier section, they were damaged when the nose section was hit and provide first aid to the bombardier.

King finds the nose section in a shambles, he stated, "The bombardier's wounds appeared to be serious. The maps looked like mice had chewed them to pieces". (5:65) He quickly does what he can for the bombardier and repairs the guns. Nose section communications are shot out, so he can't talk to the crew. The plexiglas nose screen is destroyed and the wind rushes in. With the screen destroyed, the temperature

is -30/-40 below zero in the nose, but he is sweating. It's 1600 hours, they are at the Rhine River, halfway back to the coast. He can see German fighters forming up ahead for another attack. Repeatedly they tear through the formation, taking a toll on the "Chug-A-Lug-Lulu", the number three engine is hit and they can't feather it's prop. Drag from the unfeathered prop slows their air speed, pulling the plane out of formation. This acts as a signal for every German fighter to concentrate on them. Another attack, the nose section takes another direct hit, King is wounded in the forearm. The ammunition boxes are destroyed, forcing him to hand feed ammunition into the guns. Another German fighter makes a head on attack, King fires a long burst and the fighter burst into flames. This is his second kill of the day; he had shot another fighter down from the waist gunner position earlier. He has been firing so fast and frequently his gun barrels have burnt out, as he fires he can see his tracer rounds "wobble through the air". (5:67) On another fighter pass, number one and four engines are both hit and are smoking, the plane is losing altitude. King turns to get more ammunition and sees one crew member jump out the escape door. With his communications equipment shot away he hasn't heard the order to bail out. He helps the bombardier into his parachute and pushes him out the escape door. He climbs up and checks the cockpit, it's empty. He quickly climbs down to the bomb bay door and dons a parachute. As he is about to jump out, the plane receives another direct hit. King is hit in his left side by shrapnel, leaving that side of his body numb. Out the bomb bay he goes, clears the plane and pulls the rip cord he prays, "Oh, God, Let it open", when the parachute opens the jerk is so fierce pain shoots through his back. (5:69) As he descends, he watches the "Chug-A-Lug-Lulu" hit and explode in a field near Tongeren, Belgium. The ground is rushing up, he quickly surveys his surroundings, what to do now?

His whole mission in life now, is to evade capture and try to get back to England. On the ground he quickly slips out of the parachute. While descending he saw men not more than a mile off watching him. He crawls into the middle of a sugar beet field, the beets are about 18 inches high and he lays between the rows for concealment. He has been up for 18 hours, the warm afternoon sun bears down and he falls asleep. He awakes after dark, dresses his wounds and sets off. He is determined to put distance between himself and this area. The next three days, he travels only at night and hides during the day. On the evening of 20 August, two Belgian men discover him hiding behind a hedge in a sugar beet field. His luck holds,

the Belgians are members of the underground and help him get into France. Much to his surprise, at a safe house he discovers four members of his crew hiding also. King stays with the underground for almost nine months. However, these are not care free months, Gestapo are looking for downed pilots and force the underground to move flyers frequently. King is shuttled across France to the Switzerland border where he is to be guided across to freedom, but his luck is about to run out. His guides are two teen aged boys, as they work their way up a forest trail they run into a German border patrol. His capture occurs a scant two miles from Switzerland's border.

At first King doesn't realize the situations gravity. He always knew he might be captured, it was just bad luck it happened so close to crossing over into Switzerland. So, now he is a POW, a downed flyer caught trying to escape. Only one problem, he is dressed in civilian cloths. His wounds made a mess of his uniform, plus in the past nine months it wore out. Also, you couldn't travel inconspicuously in an American uniform through occupied France. Be that as it may, the situations seriousness is brought home when a man in civilian clothes enters the room. King tries to explain he is an American by showing his dog tags; the German rips them from his neck, throwing them across the room, stating "You're no soldier! You're a civilian! You're a spy!" (5:112) This could be a problem! He is transferred to Fresnes prison, France's maximum security prison, on the outskirts of Paris. He is held here two weeks until they transfer him to Gestapo Headquarters in Paris. All this time he waits, no one tells him what may happen. When they start interrogating him he, is shocked by the knowledge they have of his past. They know everything about him, where he grew up, when he graduated high school etc. "My God! They must have sent a spy to Chanute to know these things", he thinks. They knew all the names of his crew mates, the day they were shot down, even the aircraft's name. The Gestapo are interested in names of Frenchmen who have helped him since he was shot down. During his time with the French, photographs were taken by some of the Frenchmen he was with. This was a bad mistake, the Germans have captured the Frenchmen and the pictures. The Gestapo wants more information from King about underground members, hideouts and activities. The Gestapo starts beating him, he is considered a spy they tell him, not a POW. The beatings go on for days but he tells only his name, rank and serial number. When they get nothing from him, he is dragged before a panel of five Gestapo agents who will determine his status, POW or spy. On 10 July 1944,

he is awoken and informed he is leaving, the guard relates to him he is now considered a POW and will be transferred to a POW camp.

14 August 1944, King's train arrives at Gross Tychow, near the Baltic Sea. The guards force the prisoners to run to Stalag Luft IV, a few miles away. If a prisoner is unable to keep up he is shot. Don't be confused, the television show "Hoogan's Heroes" did not accurately depict a German POW camp, it is strictly run and rules are rigidly enforced. The camp consists of a headquarters area, four stockades, surrounded by two fences about 10 feet high and a yard apart with guard towers at each corner and a guard tower in the center of each fence line. TSgt King relates each stockade contains "10 barracks, a kitchen, a coal house, a potato cellar, two wash houses and two latrines", each barracks houses 200 men. (5:135) Two battles are waged here, one of idleness, hour after hour, day after day, of nothing to do. The other battle is against hunger, prisoners are constantly hungry. German rations are scarce, the Germans are losing the war and feeding POWs is a low priority. If not for Red Cross food parcels, which arrive very inconsistently due to allied air strikes disrupting Germany's transportation system, the POWs would starve. Entertainment committees are formed to conduct plays. Men teach classes on math, foreign languages, dance, anything to pass time. Early February brings the distant sound of Russian guns to the POW camp and strikes fear into German guards, prompting the need to retreat. The German guards have no intention of surrendering to the Russians. The POWs will fall back with their guards, the only transportation available is shoe leather, prompting some to call the march the "Shoe Leather Express". (5:176)

The march is initiated on 6 February 1945. This is an arduous undertaking for many a POW; they are in a weakened condition from poor nutrition and it's the dead of winter. They march 80 days and "469 miles, in rain, snow, sleet and cold", many suffer from exposure, frostbite, pneumonia, diphtheria and dysentery. (5:196) They augment their meager rations by stealing or trading their few remaining possessions for food with farmers along the route. On 26 April 1945, their German POW guards finally surrender to American forces. The long ordeal is over at last and they will be going home.

Food and going home is all every one can think of. They are watched closely, if they eat too much in their condition it could kill them. King is shipped to a hospital at Rouen, France. His back has given him problems since being shot down. X-rays show he has sustained trauma to his lower back, however there is

little they can do at this point in time. The prisoners are to be shipped out as quickly as possible and 9 June 1945 he boards a ship and arrives in Boston on the 16th. At Myles Standish separation center, he completes his processing and is issued shipping orders. He boards a train and at last is headed home. As he steps off the train at the Santa Fe station in Chanute he is met by his family, home at last.

What does history write of the mission that propagated all this for TSgt King? A mission who's execution cost the Army Air Force "sixty B17s...shot down and six hundred men missing." (1:174) The Eighth Air Force Commander, the day after the mission, summed it up by saying it "has done more than any mission to date by this or any other air force to demonstrate that no German industrial target is safe from our bombing. Your mission will be regarded historically as one of the greatest demonstrations of air power." (2) The commander was proven correct. Over the next two years, strategic bombing increased in intensity, with some raids going into Germany with 1,000 or more bombers, making the 222 bomber force that bombed Schweinfurt on 17 August 1943 look small. Strategic bombing eventually broke the back of German industry, shortening the war incalculably and ultimately destroying Hitler's Third Reich.

When I first met Ernest King in March of 1995, at my parents church, I had no idea of where he had been, or what he had accomplished. He was 77 years old, which surprised me, he looks much younger. Tall, and slim, he carries the years very well. My Dad introduced me to Mr. King, telling him I was in the Air Force, sparking a conversation where I discovered part of his remarkable story. During the ride home, my Dad mentioned Mr. King had published a book about his experiences and he had a copy at the house. I took Mr. King's book "Beyond Fantasy, Story of War and Sex" home with me and discovered the remarkable story of this man. In the final chapter of his book, Mr. King refutes being a hero, I think he is just modest. Any man who serves his nation for over five years; flies 13 missions over occupied Europe, is shot down; evades capture for nine months with the Belgian and French underground; is captured, turned over to and tortured by Gestapo for suspicion of being a spy; spends nine months as a POW, and survives a forced march of 469 miles in the dead of winter, to finally be liberated by Allied forces; is the recipient of the Air Medal with five Oak Leaf Clusters and a Purple Heart fits my definition of a **hero**. He has truly set the example for all future airmen to emulate, during all his trials and tribulations he maintained faith in his God, nation and fellow POW's, even while suffering terrible torture at the hands of his captors.

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