

A Choice

A true story by Morgan Davis

Walt always felt that the orange groves of Southern California were his home despite the fact that he was born in Canada. This evening, as he stood in a familiar grove, a warm Los Angeles breeze carried the orange smell through the air which comforted him as it reminded him of his teen years.

In the period of the Great Depression, he was always assured a free orange after a vigorous day of work for his boss, Hugo. Ironically, Hugo was a German immigrant who valued hard work and believed that physical abuse would make a boy into a man. Hugo had always told Walt that no matter what he had to go to college and build a life for himself. Walt was always positive, saying “attitude is everything” because it genuinely was for him. He would never let a bad review shatter him or an offensive action break him. He always kept his head up high.

Walt would always return to the groves when he needed time to think, be by himself, and prepare for something important. In this case, it was one of the most important things he could ever prepare for; fighting in a war which was the worst war the world would ever know-World War II.

Unfortunately, he would be leaving behind his wife, Elizabeth, and his only daughter Caryl. What if she didn't have a father to guide her through the ups and downs of life? Yet, he knew he couldn't get wrapped up in the "what ifs" and "maybes". He and everyone else knew that the Nazis and Japanese must be stopped. The war wasn't only affecting others, it was affecting him and his family-there were nine Japanese submarines lining the coast of California. If he had to give his life to ensure his family theirs, he would. After months of training in the Army Air Core, he would now take on Europe with his first tour of duty in Italy.

The next morning, Walt was up bright and early to catch a train to New York, where he would board a large ocean liner headed to London. From there he joined other Army Air Core members headed to Italy and Yugoslavia.

Walt opened his logbook. It had been a long journey to get from Southern California to Europe, but soon it would be time for his first mission. He hoped that he made the right choice volunteering to be a search and rescue pilot. It was exceptionally dangerous, but he felt he could do the most good saving people, instead of killing them.

"Good Morning, Officers," said the base commander, "we've just received word that a Douglas A-26 Invader has been shot down and crashed into the Adriatic Sea, east of Venice. Walt," he stared right at him, "I'd like you to take your crew and help them."

"Yes Sir!" Walt responded and turned around to his new crew, "Alright guys, let's go saves some lives!"

All the men flooded into the search and rescue plane, which was a PBY Catalina Flying Boat. Each man in the plane had persistently trained for this moment in their lives, and Walt knew he couldn't let them down. After a few moments of tense preparation and nerves filling the air, Walt took the controls and they flew off.

It was almost serene up at 5,000 feet. As he scanned the horizon, all that could be heard was the sound of the engines running. Surrounding him was a bright blue sky. Walt sighed in relief that he had even gotten this far, but he knew what was coming. He knew that this was the only calm before the storm- and they were heading straight into it.

Everything seemed to be fine so far. But with every passing second, Walt noticed that the bright blue sky, slowly started to be painted black. He noticed that the air started to smell the charcoal. He noticed that there was something that sounded eerily similar to an alarm, but it was only a faint noise. Walt turned around for a quick moment to check on his crew. Everyone was fine. Yet when he straighten out again, his sight was clouded by a dark, heavy smoke. He looked straight at his navigator to confirm he was where he thought he was. The navigator tensed up from the sudden stare, but stayed confident and said, "Not far from Venice, Sir, that could be them." Walt firmly took the controls of the plane and the whole aircraft plunged down at —what felt like—a 90 degree angle. Through the dark grey smoke and chaos outside the plane he couldn't make out much, but as soon as he saw a glimpse of the slowly sinking Invader, it became very clear to him what he must do. He slowed his speed and quickly landed his search-and-rescue sea plane on the frigid Adriatic water. His crew swiftly opened the large door and yelled out to see if there were

any conscious survivors. A few moments passed and as every second flew by, the anticipation that was among them grew larger.

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“Over here!” a weak voice cried, “Everyone else is over here with me, but I don’t think they’re in very good shape.” A break in the smoke appeared and the crew spotted the men who were resting on a large piece of debris. Walt’s crew acted promptly. They rapidly threw out a line, and started reeling in. The men continuously pulled the rope, but painfully slowly. When the resting, distraught men finally reached the edge of the plane, the crew immediately dragged everyone inside. A crew member swung the door shut and banged the side of the plane, signaling to Walt that they were ready to go. With that, Walt revved the engine and instantly took off.

“Well done, men!” the base commander approaching them exclaimed.

“Congratulations on your first combat mission being a success! I heard that all off the men are now conscious and healthy from the infirmary personnel. I must say, I’m impressed. It was your first day in the job and you did extremely well. I’ve never seen a crew pull of a combat mission that well on their first day before.”

“Thank you, Sir, ” they all answered in unison.

The commander hastily said, “Well, I’ve got to go help the others will refilling the oil in the planes, but I’ll see you bright and early tomorrow.”

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Later that night, Walt sat up wide awake on his cot. He was partially relieved that his first mission was over, but the other part of him couldn't believe he just did that- on his first try! Through all the thoughts flying in his head, he got a random idea; he should track each mission! So he got out his logbook and marked one tally representing his first mission, but little did he know that it was the first of many. After a few moments of writing a letter to his family, Walt placed his logbook and paper under his bed and drifted to sleep.

The following afternoon, Walt and his crew were called by the base commander again.

"Afternoon, Officers. We have just heard that a North American P-51 crashed about a mile off the beach in Ravenna. Walt, I think you know what to do," firmly said the commander.

"Yes, Sir!" Walt replied and turned to his men and said, "Okay, men, let's do this!"

The crew rushed into the SAR plane with nothing but pride and just like that, they were off.

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"Very impressive men- another successful combat mission, but was it a smooth journey, or were there bumps along the way?" the commander questioned Walt and his crew. The base commander almost always questioned why people were successful on their few days on the job- he didn't really believe in beginners luck.

"It was a smooth journey, Sir," proudly responded Walt.

"Well, alright then. I'll see you tomorrow," the commander replied slowly and jogged away.

That night, Walt recorded his second combat mission just like the first, with another tally mark.

Yet, laying on his cot, Walt couldn't manage to cease his thoughts. Even though he had only

been gone about two weeks now, he felt as if it had been an eternity. His mind wandered and whirled. He couldn't help but miss his daughter and wife back home. He couldn't help but think about what they must feel right now. He couldn't help but wonder if something would go wrong one day. He couldn't help but wonder if he would ever see them again, but he knew better than to think so negatively. He couldn't just automatically give up on hope! Yet one of these days, he thought he might not return from a mission and never see his family and friends again. A slow, lonely tear streamed down his face at the thought of that. But, before he knew it, he had drifted to sleep.

Days turned into weeks just as weeks turned into months. After every mission Walt would mark a tally for another journey. Even though each mission had not gone necessarily well, each one was technically a success.

Now, there were 72 tally marks on his log book. Along with 72 tally marks, he had made friends...and enemies within the base. Oddly enough, not everyone was necessarily "nice" around the base, but Walt found a way to rise above that. Walt had also become close with his crew through many meals, missions and experiences. Yet with every passing day, Walt knew that he couldn't just have all successful missions, it always nagged him, but this thought wouldn't stop popping up. The thought of his men and himself in a situation where they weren't ready for put a deep pit in his stomach. Why couldn't he think about something other than failing? On the other hand, there have been stories about leaders and their crew being amazing and not failing a single mission. Walt had always wondered which leader he would be.

Walt sat up in his bed wide awake as he marked another tally. Even with now 93 tally marks, he couldn't get his mind off of the idea of him failing a mission. This idea just couldn't be taken out of his thoughts. His mind drifted away and started to think about his family. He missed them so much and the thought of not seeing them for the past many months couldn't compute in his head, but one day this war would have to end. Walt bent over and slid his logbook under his cot and laid on his bed peacefully. He fell asleep to the sound of the crocky fan above him.

“Good Morning, Gentlemen,” said the base commander, “ we have received a report that 11 Curtiss SO3C aircrafts have crashed over Yugoslavia. Even though the Yugoslav resistance is technically on our side, things are tense right now as our intelligence says Tito wants parts of Italy. Walt, you have a lot of experience now, do your best.”

“Yes, Sir!” Walt responded as he always did, but this time, underneath his certainty, he was undeniably fearful. There were a lot of planes down and he knew things were tough over Yugoslavia, but his crew did what they had always done and were soon underway.

The flight to Yugoslavia took time. Soaring in the skies is where he longed to be, and he wouldn't give it up for anything. It seemed to go well so far, bur Walt wouldn't take even the smallest thing for granted. Time passed and nothing happened. Everything was fine...until he heard a very loud bang. After that everything started going downhill. The crew started to shout, but their words were muffled by the sound of the, now, roaring engine .Before he knew it

everything was buzzing everywhere; the plane was shaking rapidly; even louder gunshots surrounded him, and in that moment he knew that he might fall to his death from 5,000 feet.

Seconds later the engine quit, and the small search and rescue plane corkscrewed down from the air. With every foot he uncontrollably flew down, his heart began to race faster. His heart beat faster and faster and faster in his chest. Ahead of him was the tip of unconsciousness as the sun made constant circles in front of him. Fire seared an everlasting smell in his nose. His hands were shaking as he tried to regain the wheel and possible hope. He reached for one switch, nothing; another switch, nothing; another switch, nothing; a flap, nothing; another flap, nothing; a third flap, nothing. He tried absolutely everything he could, but as the plane started to skim the ground in a small clearing, he accepted his fate. Walt closed his eyes, mumbled a prayer and believed.

A banging on the glass made Walt awaken with a gasp. He could make out a few men in uniform through his strained eyes.

“Hey!” a man with a fairly thick accent yelled, “HEY!”

The man held his hand up to the glass window, peered through it, and piercingly stared into Walt’s eyes.

“Yes, you! Get out of your plane.”

Walt’s heart skipped a beat as he realized who it was.

Walt's eyes widened as he mouthed the words, "Oh my gosh."

"I said get out your plane!" said the man.

The broken English and horrible grammar was hard to understand, but the point had still gotten across. Walt weakly pushed open the door and set both feet out of the plane. He was shaking uncontrollably at first, but held it together.

A younger soldier across the grassy field yelled to the man. All Walt could make out from the forgiven language was the name Tito. Walt knew this was the leader of the Yugoslav resistance.

"Ok, American," he stared right at Walt, "Where is you base. I want location your next base!"

Even with terrible English, the desire was clear.

"I can only tell you my name, rank, and serial number. I can't tell you anything else." Walt said as he kept a poker face, but on the inside he was mortified.

In a split second, Tito pulled something from his belt and held something cold and firm up to Walt's head.

"Tell me, or I pull trigger and you die! You want die!?"

The words 'you die' were forever chiseled in his mind; serving as a constant reminder of how quickly things can take a turn. Walt's life swirled in his eyes—every moment, every tear, every laugh, every heartbreak, every sliver of happiness...everything. His mind veered to his family, his young daughter and wife. If he kept his mouth shut, he would never see them again and would never go through the ups and downs of being a family. His heart physically ached just thinking

about it. The men at his base could all be compromised if he gave away too much information about where they were moving. They could all die.

“Sir,” Walt said firmly, with his heart beating a mile a minute, “I will only tell you my name, rank and serial number.”

“Last chance!!! I kill you!!!” Tito screamed with blood shot eyes.

He had to make a decision; he had to make a choice. If he gave away this information he would mostly likely see his family again. He would ensure the safety of his family and friends. But if he kept it to himself, he knew he would die. He knew that if he were to choose this path, he would be giving up his life for others, including his family’s life. He couldn’t bare losing his family. He knew that the fate of World War II was being held in the palm of his hand. So, hesitantly, Walt made up his mind.

Walt knew many might think of themselves first, but he had to be strong. He thought, *I have to do his duty for myself, my family, and my country.*

“Sir, you will have to kill me...” Walt said with a resolute look in his eyes.

“Alright,” said Tito.

Click

This was his decision; this was his choice. It was his role to play. He knew he was accepting death- it was staring straight at him. But he knew had to.

“It’s good to have you safely back on base,” said the base commander exclaimed, “We had a scare when you were shot down. It’s a good thing Tito found you, rather than the Germans. Tito wants to know all of our plans, but he is not dumb enough to kill an American officer at this point in the war.”

“Yes Sir,” Walt replied, “I had no idea the gun wasn’t loaded when he held it to the temple of my head. When I heard the click and he started to laugh I guess I figured I might make it home after all. Boy, I have never been so scared!”

“Good job Lieutenant,” said the base commander, “I had been debating this earlier, but now I know for sure. Because of your countless acts of patriotism and your willingness to give yourself for your country, I’m going to recommend you for promotion.”

Walt went on to serve a distinguished military career in the United States Air Force. He achieved the rank of Colonel and was nominated for General just before retiring to return to California to focus on his family, which had grown to three daughters. He also started a foundation called the Milburn Foundation because of his love for his second oldest daughter, Catherine Milburn, who was diagnosed with inflammatory breast cancer. That foundation is now run by his only grandson, Bryon Davis. Walter passed away on December 30, 2013 at the age of 94 and was buried in the National Cemetery in San Bernardino CA, not far from the orange groves.

