"When Grandpa Flew In World War Two"

By: Robert E. Doherty
Illustrated by: Carolyn Councell
To Greg Natter in honor of your Dad, Hyman, who was a war cane casualty during the "Evacuation of Heydtking," with my appreciation and respect.

Bob Doherty

WHEN GRANDPA FLEW IN WORLD WAR II
Poems of
Training, Combat, Captivity and Liberation

By Robert E. Doherty
Illustrated by Carolyn Councell
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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My thanks to Carolyn Councell, distinguished Maryland artist, for taking time from her own career to provide "Grandpa" with such appropriate illustrations.

Collectively these poems have been extracted from an unpublished manuscript, THE MEMORABLE MEANS OF KEVIN DUNNE. However, many have appeared individually in The Creative Review, Midwest, The Legionnaire and The American Ex-POW Bulletin and in fellow Kriegie-historian Joe O'Donnell's treasured triology, The Shoe Leather Express.
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Luftwaffe General Adolf Galland and the author.
I PROLOGUE

WHEN GRANDPA FLEW IN WORLD WAR II

1

WHEN GRANDPA FLEW IN WORLD WAR II?
Well, times were simple then:
The enemies were Japanese
Or Nazi Supermen.

I'd say that things were cut and dried;
We knew our cause was right.
THE ARIZONA fashioned all
Our values overnight.

We had no moral quandaries;
The farthest left we went
Was learning Roosevelt's alphabets
And guessing what they meant.

2

This country wasn't split at all.
In fact, it fought as one.
We had a man behind the man
Who really fired the gun.

We had a "kid in upper four"
In all our magazines
And knew for sure the girl next door
Was queen of all his dreams.

By War Bond Drives and ration stamps
We knew what "home front" meant.
Why, U.S.O.'s with star-cast shows
Were sent right where we'd tent.
I PROLOGUE (Continued)

WHEN GRANDPA FLEW IN WORLD WAR II . . . 2

3
We had no stupid parallel
We couldn't cross to fight;
No doubtful qualm like Viet Nam
To dissipate our might.
America was so unified
Before the atom's blast -
We never had the slightest clue
How brief it had to last.
If Grandpa's view of World War II
Seems corny as can be,
You ain't heard nothing 'till you've heard
His view on World War III.

4
Grandpa's mad at World War II.
He thinks of you and yours;
Because, you see, his legacy
Was supposed to be - NO WARS:
Kids, Grandpa's sad and mad as hell,
He's troubled to the soul
By silos, subs and satellites
That bring remote control.
When Grandpa dwells on World War III
What makes him so bereft
Is it could have no history -
There might be no one left!

5
Well, let's go back to World War II
And the initial training spot:
I started doing "monkey drills"
In a hotel parking lot.
"Most everything that I have said happened: But it's memory now, the shadow of things. The truth lives in its own time; recall is not the reality of the past. When friends depart one remembers them, but they are changed ... we hold only the fragment of them that touched us and our idea of them is now a part of us. Their reality is gone, intact but irretrievable; in another place through which we passed and can never enter again. I cannot go back nor can I bring them to me. So I must pursue the shadows to some middle ground for I am strangely bound to all that happened then. We broke hard bread together and I cannot forget Kiel, Schweinfurt, Regensburg, Rostock, Poznan, Zwickau, Berlin and all the others . . . not cities but battlegrounds five miles above where we made our brotherhood. It's gone and long ago; swept clean by the wind. Only some stayed. Part of me lives there still tracing a course through all the names. I don't know why. What is it that memory wants that it goes through it all over again? Was there something I should have recognized? Some terrible wisdom? The kind of awful knowledge that stares out of the eyes of a dying man? I was at the edge then and almost grasped the meaning. But I lived and failed the final lesson and came home. I linger now, looking back for them - the best ones who stayed and learned it all."

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The wonderfully lyrical sentiment expressed above can only be attributed to an anonymous airmen. He had listed 15th Air Force targets; I changed them to reflect those of the 8th. Other than that, the words are all his. No one could say it better. My thanks to the first lady of the 466th Bomb Group, Mrs. Barkev Housepian, who heard this passage read at a memorial in England and passed it on to me.
OVER KIEL

Crinkle, crinkle, flaming Fort!
Jesus, please don't flop to port!
It seems that screams fill up the sky
When ten men spiral down to die!

Ten who shared our tents and huts:
Ten who shared their booze and butts.
Ten who now in burst of smoke
Spill from where their coffin broke.

Twinkle, twinkle, they were hit
By flak and not a Messerschmitt.

When flak explodes in a full bomb-bay
You come apart - then blow away.

Jan. '44
That that head-banded, desert marauding,
Reservation-jumper's name
Should flood the mind
And try to drain to mouth
As I consider leaping into Eternity
Is a God-damned, military training,
Son-of-a-bitch non sequitur!

Hail Mary, full of grace . . .

I am swathed in cloud;
Standing bloody-legged
On the wind-whipped threshold
To the Land Of Unknowing.
I have no horizons, no visibility.
I am the fright-filled owner of NOW!

Above this storm-cloud cover,
Messerschmitt buzzards
Wheel and dive to seek and destroy.
And below? God, not the seal

For certain only
Is that this turbulent coffin
Descends fast and inevitably.

Our Father, who art in heaven . . .

Jesus Christ! What have images
Of burning stockades, cactus,
Pinto ponies, mesas, arroyos
And a cantering U.S. Calvary
In common with this crisis?

Dear God,
Let not the horizontal stabilizer
Become my guillotine
And let Errol Flynn or David Niven
See to that incongruous Apache
Whose name is
GERONIMO!

March '44
INTERROGATIONS

Jackboots!

Bootfalls snap-sounding
As though Gothic ghosts,
Ball-and-chain legged,
Were waltzing and whirling
Glass-slippered skeletons
Down the corridor
To my womb cell.

It is time again.

Key rattles in lock.
Metal door grates on constipated hinges.
Luger beckons.
Trolls observe amenities:
"Raus: " "Schnell:"

It is time again.

The cervix to my cubicle
Closes with ringing clangor.
My umbilical cord is cut.
I am delivered
And jostled to ordeal
By gruff midwives
Who disdain my survival.
I am Don Sturdy in the Temples of Fear.
I am Jack on the way to the ogre's kitchen.

It is time again.

Who is this dapper Hauptman,
This suelte martinet
That he dazzles me with excerpts
From my own biography?
It is his grey hair,
His pleated trousers,
His manicure,
His sibilant English
Oozing from snake-jaws
And his proximity to omniscience
Which tempts me to overact
My sterile role
Or ad-lib beyond the restrictions
Of my sworn-to bit-line script.

I surely perceive
The oscillations of his head.
There is treachery here.
There is a slitheriness
To the poised master
Of this windowless room,
This shadowy pit,
I see scales on his brow
And his nostrils are pinholes,

Again he uncoils and upspirals
Between glossy boots,
With lidless eyes
He frustrates, angers,
Neck-puffs, arcs,
Strikes and spits.

It is time again.

With feet far behind me,
Body-weight on index fingers only,
I lean against the pit-wall
And shiver to the staccato questions.

This head, this thought-sieve,
Becomes a mental tumbler
And sifts three thoughts,
Routine retorts:

My name.
My rank.
My number.

The last time it was a gorilla.
This time it is a cobra.
When will the next time be?
And who will hold court then...a tiger?

March '44
ROLL CALL IN PRUSSIA

Far through the squares of this fanged-fenced restriction,
   Far to the west over ice-crackling pines,
Nestles the source of our lonesome affliction -
   Our country and memories of far better times.

   Here in a clearing not far from the Baltic,
Unshaven, in tatters, we stand for appel; (1)
   Too proud for this moment to falter or fall sick -
Showing how well we can soldier in hell.

Snow caps our shoulders while wind flaps our dressings.
   And, though we are grieving our lost liberty
We challenge the Nazi by counting our blessings
   Each grumbling, "The bastards can still count on me."

April '44

(1) roll-call
THE WEAPONS OF PEENEMUNDE

East

of where Heydekrug's stove-pipe-like chimneys
Are smoking in forests of fir and blue spruce,
This guarded enclosure of a Luftwaffe prison
Deters allied airmen from trying to break loose.

West

of where Heydekrug's ginger-bread houses
Are snuggled in forests of blue spruce and pine,
The heavens are marred by the scars of the rockets
The Germans are frantically trying to design.

West

(like the forest where Hansel and Gretel
Were saved at the end of a cute fairy tale),
The freighters are loading cigar-shapes in Danzig
Which came in tarpaulins by Konigsberg rail.

Slow

down the Baltic they steam past Gydnia
with the Navy beside them, behind and before;
And head for a launch-site nearby The Atlantic
To add the dimension of pilotless war.

East

of where Heydekrug's thatched roofs are slanting,
We prisoners hear Luftwaffe Jets whistle-call;
And, having not heard them nor seen them in coming,
We wonder who's winning the war after all.

May '44
THE EVACUATION HEYDEKRUG
(From Stalag VI, East Prussia to Stalag IV, Pommerania July 14-18, '44)

I

Die Russki kommen! Die Russki kommen! *
Shhh! Hear that thunder resound in the East?
The Germans are blowing up bridges or else
It's a Russian artillery piece.

Die Russki kommen! Die Russki kommen!
Hey! Look at the sneaky SS:
They're dressing in Luftwaffe uniforms:
In case they get captured, I guess,

Die Russki kommen! Die Russki kommen!
The guards are betraying the signs:
they've fired the warehouse and all of our food;
They've severed the teletype lines.

Die Russki kommen! Die Russki kommen!
Evacuate old Heydekrug,
A spear-head is driving on Königsberg:
It's rumored they've ferried The Bug: **

Die Russki kommen! Die Russki kommen!
Pack up your ditty bags, men,
In order to get us to Memel's port,
They'll jam us in boxcars again.

* The Russians are coming!
** The Bug River
II

In the hold of a Nazi cargo ship
With nothing to drink or eat;
Where the temperature reaches one hundred degrees
And you feel like you're shriveled-up meat.
Where the sun slants down through a hole in the deck
When the tarp is drawn back overhead;
Where you whisper and move only to prove
To yourself that you're really not dead.
In the hold of a filthy cargo ship
On the Memel-to-Stettin run,
Retreating in front of a Russian advance
But hostages still to the Hun.
In the hope that a Russian sub won't see
This swastika-ship pass by,
We focus our eyes through the aperture
And rumble our prayers to the sky.
In the hope of a Biblical miracle,
Counting the nights and days,
Praying that God will give us a chance
To behold His wondrous ways.

But:

The Hitler Youth and the Kriegsmarine
Await on the Stettin dock;
Shepherds with dogs and bayonets
Who delight at the sight of their flock.

Oh God, dear God, why are men so cruel
When their countries cannot get along?
Whatever the reason, no matter which side,
By Jesus, it's horribly wrong.
III

OK, God, don't make me bawl
I know war's war, but this takes all.

Who could ever be so vile
To make a cripple trot a mile
Handcuffed to a man who's blind
So he won't be left behind?

Who could ever be so vile
To prod with bayonets the while
And threaten any rebel sound
With fury of Alsatian hounds?
Who could ever be so cruel?
Kids who ought to be in school.
Brats who take their sport of us
As we make our exodus.
From one plateau of Dante's Hell
To this new Silesian cell.

These blue-eyed blonds, so clean and neat
Lunge with sticks and trip our feet.

IV

Die Russki kamen: Durch Polen Sie kamften.
Aber Sie kamen nicht weit genug ***
And while they were stopping for re-supply
We were herded from Heydekrug.

So much for the Russians who started us dreaming.
It didn't end up any good:
We're lousier, leaner, the Kommandant's meaner
And it's worse than the old neighborhood.

*** The Russians came. They fought through Poland,
But they didn't come far enough.
THE MOLE

With his nose to the face of the tunnel,
Breathing dirt when he has to inhale,
He claws like a mole with fingers and tin
In his drive to escape from his jail.

Where the air is supplied by a bellows
And the dirt is hauled back on a rope,
He sees by the light of an oleo'd wick
While he digs on the dregs of a hope,

Where the shoring is old it will weaken.
He can hear the slow trickle of stones.
And his hips are always infected
From the chafe on the sides to his bones.

Then he swaps with his Caliban brothers
And backs to the mouth of the shaft
Where he rows like a slave in a galley
In order to maintain the draught.

When the dirt's hoisted up to the barracks
Its emptied in pockets that wait
To be sprinkled as draw-strings are loosened
In a walk that's away from the gate.

Like the love of his life, he is buried
Like the death of his love, he is sad.
If the tunnel weren't there for an outlet
His thoughts would be driving him mad.

Let Job, he says keep all the Patience.
Let me, he prays, try to break free.
And down in the hole like a mole without soul
He burns with conspiracy.

October '44
BAH HUMBUG

Froliche Weihnachten! Froliche Weihnachten!  
In spite of the hunger and chill.  
Admire the choir inside the barbed-wire  
That sings about men of good will.

Froliche Weihnachten! Froliche Weihnachten!  
The guards in those towers must freeze.  
Even the spruce could do with a truce,  
Hear the ice rapid-fire in the trees.

Froliche Weihnachten! Froliche Weihnachten!  
It's not easy spreading good cheer,  
Santa Claus put a frost-bitten foot  
In our stockings for Christmas this year.

Froliche Weihnachten! Froliche Weihnachten!  
Like Jesus we sleep in the straw.  
With lice in our seams to tickle our dreams  
And fleas that we cannot ignore.

Froliche Weihnachten! Froliche Weihnachten!  
Though our world this season's a mess.  
Donner and Blitz now champ at their bits  
To haul for the Waffen S.S.

Froliche Weihnachten! Froliche Weihnachten!  
Both inside and outside the fence.  
May God hear our plea that we will be free  
This evening another year hence.

(1) Merry Christmas!

December '44
PEACE ON EARTH
LULLABY IN A BOXCAR

Yo ho, yo ho, we are embryos
In the womb of a forty and eight.
We are seventy-five and hardly alive
But lively enough to hate
The ceiling, the floor, the walls, the door
The memory of hygiene and pride;
The strafing, the corps, the goddam war
And even the world outside.

We can't abide this mystery ride
In freezing unknown lands.
We thirst and hunger, incessantly wonder
What God has done with His hands.
When comes an end to this train-cortege?
When can we breathe the fresh air?
When will our trainers open our cage
Delivering us up from despair?

Yo ho, yo ho, we are *hommes et cheveaux*.
We are pawns in the foes' game of chess.
For more than a week we've travelled to seek
Another barbed-wire address.
Where is the end of this enemy track:
This freezing, this vomit, these feces,
Will Humanity want to take us all back
When we try to return to our species?

Yo ho, yo ho, it's twenty below
And each G.I. Joe is a cramp
Clutching his knees, praying his pleas
For the length of a new prison camp.
Embryos of Eskimos
In the womb of a forty and eight,
Playing the game the Army knows
Called, "Hurry up and wait."

March '45
"Yo ho, yo ho, it's twenty below
And each G.I. Joe is a cramp
Clutching his knees and praying his pleas
For the length of a new prison camp."
To My Grandchildren:

Andy Warhol's fifteen-minute ration of fame came to me late in my eighteenth year when I was a buck private at the Air Corps radio school in Sioux Falls. For the most part, we were all in our late teens or early twenties. Wide eyed and tousled-haired we were eager beavers steeped in innocence and looking forward to adventure. But the military, in all its wisdom, had specified tarpaper barracks in spite of the fact that South Dakota winters always featured magnificent blizzards and sub-zero temperatures. (Ink and milk turned to ice when left on our windowsills.) This prompted some griping i.e. "What the hell did we enlist for?" or "I'd like to grenade that draft board." If only to formulate answers for myself, I wrote AN AMERICAN SOLDIER'S LITANY and mailed it home to your great-grandmother. "This", I wrote her, "is why my generation is willing to fight." I was her only child. At least it would make her feel good. Unknown to me, my uncle who was an officer in the local Legion, copied it and sent it on to headquarters. It was immediately published in The National Legionnaire and I became poet laureate of my training squad. The Litany was reprinted in my hometown paper and several others including The Providence Journal, my former employer. And I was besieged with requests from announcers from all over America for permission to read it over their radio stations. WOW!

Viewed through America's "house-divided" phenomenon - the Korea-Vietnam syndrome - or through the distorted prisms of today's political correctness, multi-culturism and outright historical revisionism, my once patriotic Litany has the false ring of jingoism. These lines can sound corny.

They didn't back then.

They shouldn't now.

AN AMERICAN SOLDIER'S LITANY

A soldier has no definite knowledge of his future; it is the memory of a thousand and one little incidents of his past which generates that unequaled energy - American energy - which helps him to cope with the hardships and uncertainty of the present. I cannot describe such memories on behalf of my service brethren for theirs is a difference of race, color and creed. Therefore, it is my purpose to speak for myself in the fervent hope that this bit of writing might offer consolation and give pride to parents, relatives, sweethearts and friends back home.

Because my eyes have seen the purple splendor of sunset at the departure of an autumn day;

Because at cider time in New England I have seen God's forests in variegated beauty;

Because on a crisp winter's eve I have heard the crack of distant ice and the crunch of snow undertread;

Because I have silently worshipped the glory of the evening star;
Because I have watched the oceans of earth ripple in liquid melody while silvered by moonglow;
Because I have listened in the hush of night to the tormenting protests of surf;
Because on a summer’s day I have marvelled at a lethargic parade of fleece-woven clouds;
Because I have seen the spirit of Christmas from without the window of a Dakota farm;
Because I have not forgotten the many adventures and friends of my childhood;
Because I have heard the lulling rhythm of rain;
Because I have breathed the fragrance of spring;
Because the beauty of the moon, trees, stars and all God’s gifts, though common to man, are conceived as mine alone;
Because someone waits for me; *
Because I have a firm faith in her and in the God of my religion;
Because I have been blest with the best parents and family in God’s universe;
Because I believe that they and myself will rejoice in the promised eternity of God’s kingdom;
Because of Faith, I fear not Death;
Because in this world totalitarianisms are destined to defeat;
Because of these knowledges, remembrances and beliefs I shall be a true soldier, bringing neither sin nor shame to my God and country.

Sioux Falls, December ’42

* Yes, gang, she was and is Nana.