



THE WHITE TOWER



JAMES RAMSEY ULLMAN



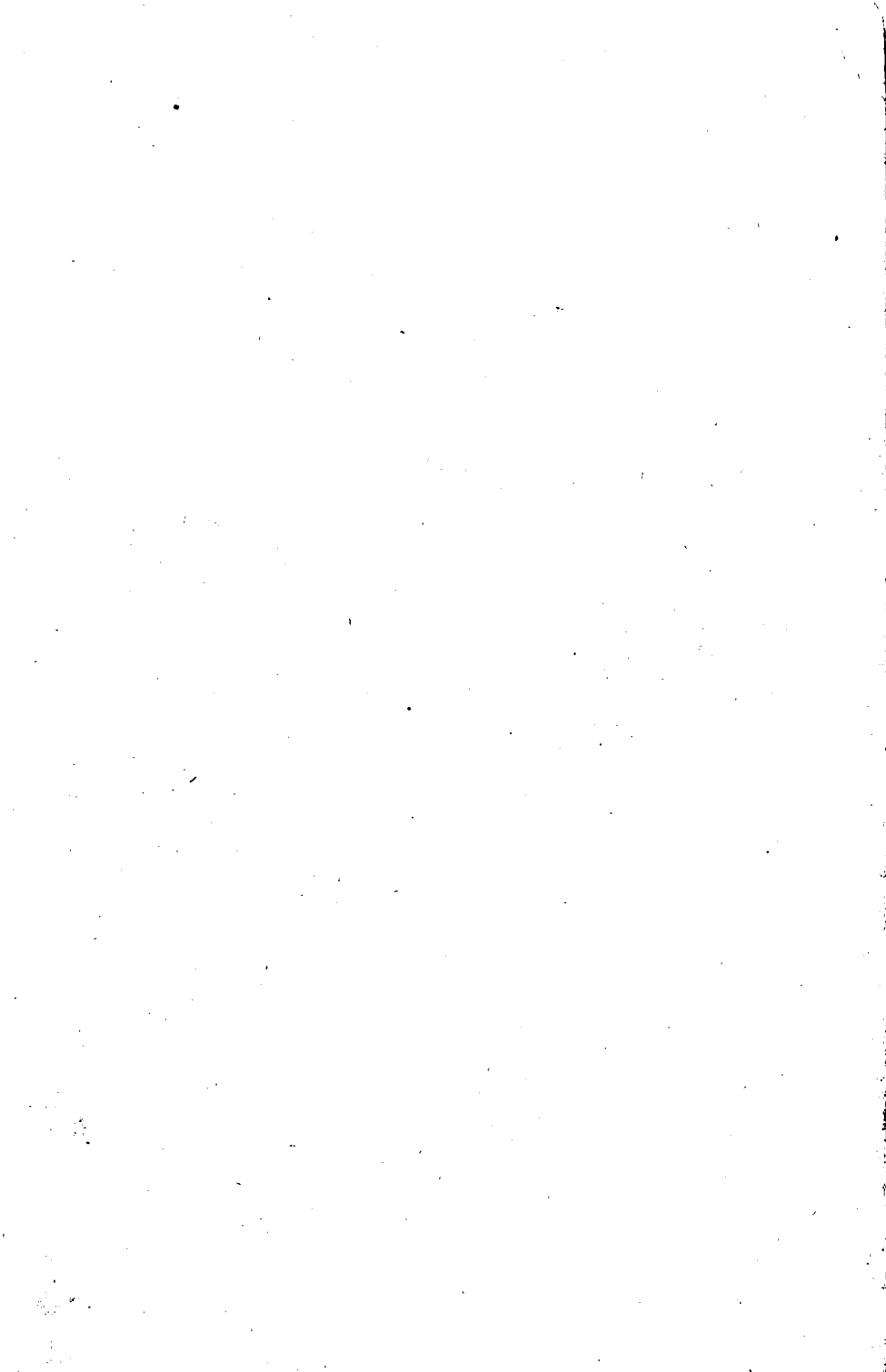
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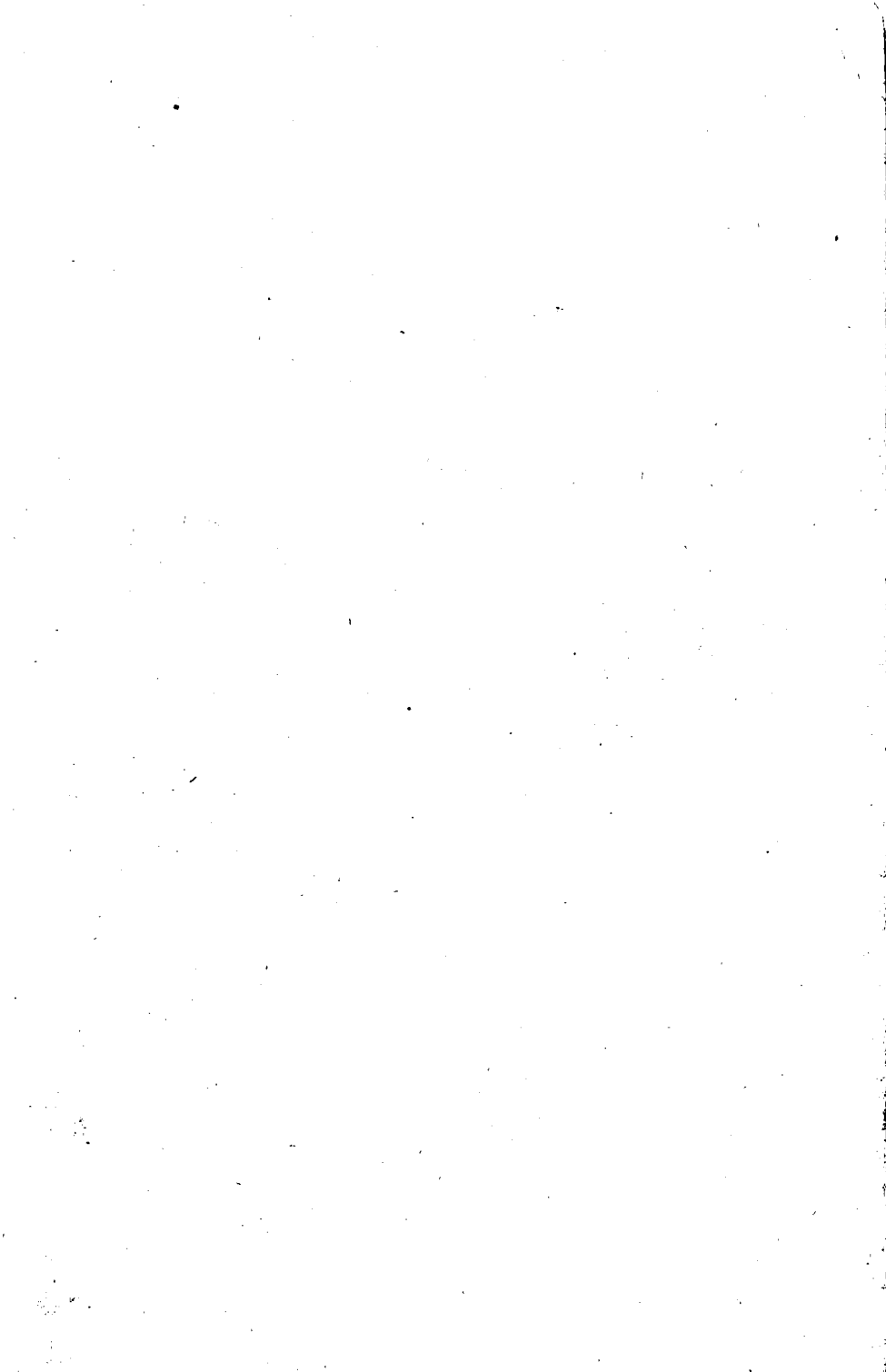


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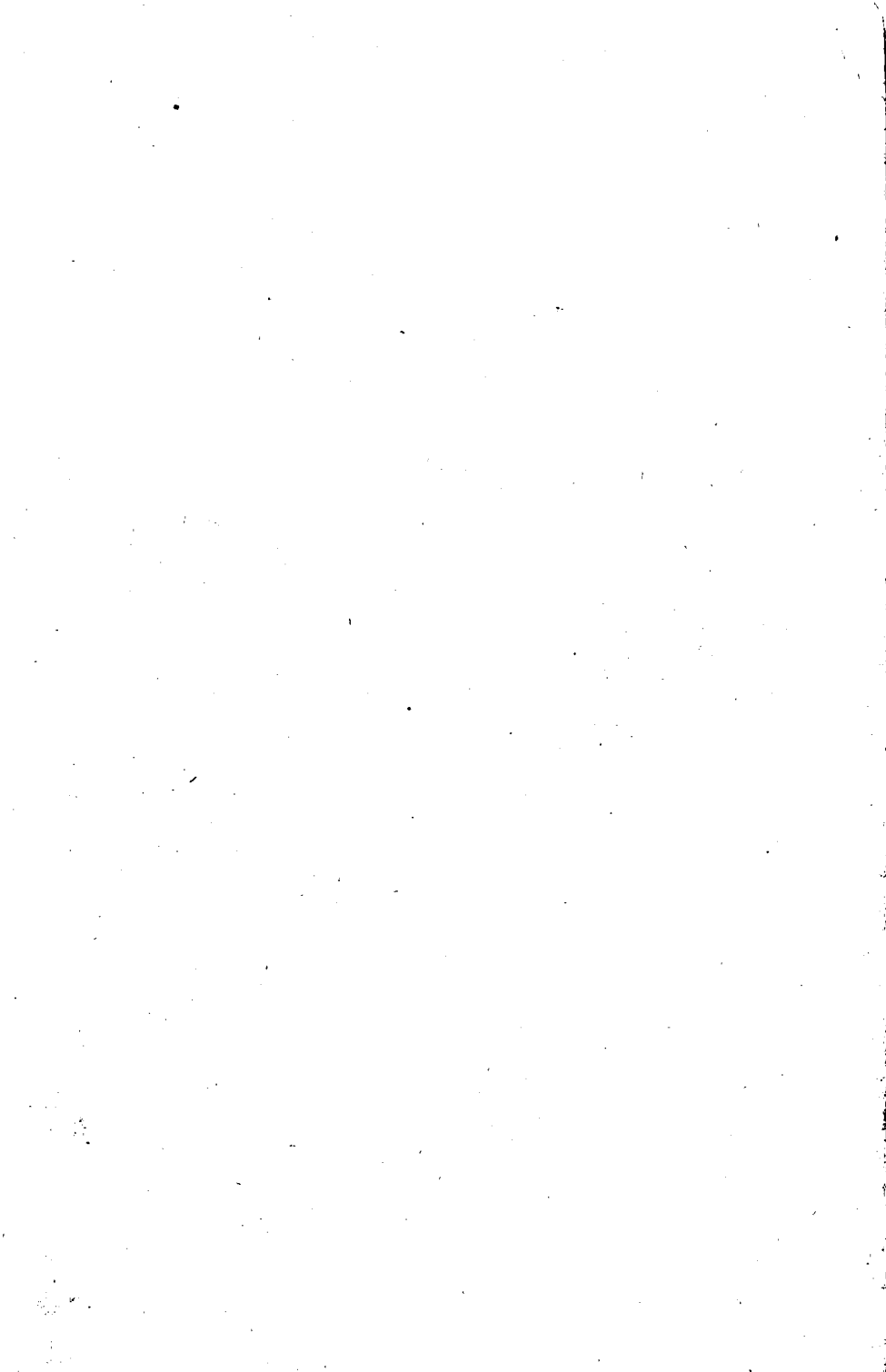


To the memory of

A. F. U.

and

W. I. F.



Chapter 1

Now they were there again. . . .

They were in the seventh and last flight, and the city, as they came over it, was no longer a city but a lake of orange fire. There were the bright beams of the searchlights and the tracers rising in a flowing dome against the darkness. There were the swift, scudding shapes of the other planes. In the sudden glare that filled the cockpit Martin Ordway could see the face of his co-pilot, Riggs, bent tensely over the instrument panel. He saw the yellow down on the cheekbones, the blue boy's eyes, the tiny pulse throbbing in the tight line of the jaw.

The orange lake rushed up at them, reached out for them. Then it tilted suddenly away and streamed past below. The chimneys of a factory appeared ahead, rising through the flame like the fingers of a charred hand.

The next moment came Bixler's voice:

"Bombs away!"

. . . and now it was over again.

Ordway pulled toward him. His body thrust hard against the back of his seat as the plane climbed and banked. The ravaged city wheeled away beneath them, throwing up flames and beams and tracers in a fountain of bright fire. Around them the flak exploded, hung suspended for an instant in dark, wreathing puffs against the white shafts of the searchlights, and disappeared. In

another few moments they would be above them. Beyond the propellers now there were the stars.

A sword of light cut through the sky. There was a white flash behind Ordway's head, followed by a shattering roar, and he was hurled forward against the bindings of his seat. The plane bucked and lurched. Its two engines coughed and slackened. It seemed to hang motionless in the darkness—disemboweled, trembling, poised to plunge. Ordway braced himself back into his seat. His gloved hands moved from wheel to throttle to controls and his feet worked swiftly among the pedals. The engines caught for an instant, stuttered again, and the nose of the plane went down. Then the engines took hold again. The propellers bit the air.

They levelled off. Ordway pulled the wheel back gently and they began to climb. The flak was beneath them now, and the bright thin scrawl of the tracers; the fires of the burning city were only a faint red glow beneath the pall of smoke that filled the night below. The phosphorescent glow of the instrument dials had gone out, and it was black in the plane. There was no sound except the deep humming of the engines. They sped westward above the dark earth, under the stars.

Martin Ordway removed a glove and passed his hand slowly over his eyes. Then he flicked the key of the interphone jackbox. "Everyone all right?" he asked.

The interphone was dead.

"Ted?" he said, turning.

Riggs, the co-pilot, stirred and mumbled a few words. Ordway could scarcely see him in the darkness, but it seemed to him there was something wrong about the outlines of the boy's neck and shoulders.

"Ted—you've been hit."

"I guess I have." Riggs' voice was low and hoarse.

"Where, do you know?"

"In the back, I think. Sort of high up on the side."

"Does it seem bad?"

Riggs did not answer at once. Ordway tried the interphone again, then removed his throat-mike. "Bix!" he called. "Harry!"

There was no reply. Ordway unfastened his safety belt and leaned over toward Riggs. "Ted," he said.

"Yes?"

"Think you can hold your wheel a minute?"

"Sure." The voice was a little stronger. "Sure I can, Marty."

"I'll be right back. Then I'll fix you up."

"I'm okay. It's nothing, really."

Riggs shifted his shoulders slowly, seeming to square himself. His hands moved out and took the wheel before him.

"Just hold her steady," Ordway said.

"Sure, Marty."

Ordway got up and half clambered, half crept between the wheels and down through the entrance to the bombardier's compartment.

"Bix," he said.

There was a faint gleam of shattered glass, the scudding night beyond, and, on the floorplates of the nose before him, a dark, sprawling shape. Taking his flashlight from his overalls, he let its beam fall on the face of Lieutenant Bixler, the bombardier-navigator. For a moment he crouched motionless, peering down at the face. Then he snapped off the beam.

Crawling back between the wheels and the pilots' seats, he stood up and groped his way back into the body of the plane. He was unsteady on his feet after the long hours of sitting and had to brace himself with his hands as he came down the two steps from the cockpit to the radio compartment. Ahead of him he could see dimly two jagged rents in the left wall of the fuselage, through which the wind poured with a low moaning sound.

"Harry," he said.

Sergeant Wasniewicz, the radio-gunner, was seated at his control panel, his head resting on the bench among the coils and dials. Ordway raised it and looked into his face.

"Harry," he said. "Harry."

He jerked down the zipper of the man's overalls and fumbled at the sweatshirt beneath. He had just removed his hand when the nose of the plane lurched violently downward and he, Wasniewicz and the radio apparatus went crashing forward along the floor. He brought up against the steps to the cockpit and lay there a moment, half-stunned and sick with the sensation of falling. Then he pulled himself to a kneeling position, partly climbed and partly slid up the steps and over the back of the pilot's seat, and got a hand on the wheel. He pulled back on it, but it did not

budge. He got both hands on it, hooked his knees around the edge of the seat and pulled with all his strength. The wheel moved slowly backward. He felt the angle of their fall lessen, and kept pulling. In a few moments the plane was flying level. Then slowly it began to climb.

He got himself set in his seat and tested the throttles, wheel and pedals. They were all working. But the instrument panel was a dark expanse of shattered glass and plastic and the right-hand engine was misfiring. He worked the gun and fuel-mixture controls, but it still missed. The plane, he suddenly noticed, had developed a slight tilt to the right, and the steel floorboard was trembling violently. Nevertheless, they continued to climb. Their speed seemed only a little below normal.

"Jesus, Marty, I'm sorry."

The sound of Riggs' voice startled him. In the darkness he could see that the boy was sitting motionless in his seat, looking straight ahead. His back was erect, but his head seemed to be awkwardly pulled down between his shoulders.

"Don't worry about it," Ordway said.

"I must have blacked out for a minute."

"How do you feel now?"

"Okay."

"I'm going to fix you up." Ordway took his first-aid kit from the pouch in his parachute harness. "Do you think you can hold the wheel while I put on a dressing?"

Riggs did not answer.

"Ted—"

It was a long moment before the boy spoke, and when he did it was not in answer to Ordway's question.

"How're Harry and Bix?" he asked suddenly.

"They're all right, Ted."

"No they're not. They're washed up."

Ordway took his own wheel between his knees, pulled off his gloves and began opening the dressing-pocket.

"I'm washed up too, Marty," Riggs said.

"The hell you are."

The boy was silent. Still holding the wheel with his legs, Ordway leaned over toward him, the dressing in one hand, his flashlight in the other. He turned on the beam.

Riggs' helmeted head was sunk down deeply between his shoulders. From under the helmet a few strands of tow-colored hair straggled down over the paper-white skin of his forehead. His eyes were open and very blue. His mouth was open too, and from it a gleaming crimson stain spread downward, over his chin, across the front of his overalls, into his lap. A cluster of minute pinkish bubbles rose and fell between his lips as the breath sucked in and out.

Ordway snapped off the beam and shifted back into his seat. "We'll be home soon, Ted," he said.

He levelled off the plane and advanced the throttles a little. The left engine responded, but the right one sputtered and stalled. After a few moments he got it going again, but it was missing badly now. The plane's list to the right was more pronounced.

He snapped on the flashlight again and moved the beam slowly over the instrument panel. Some of the fuel and electrical gages were still working, but the navigational instruments had been knocked out. The altimeter was locked immobilely at eleven thousand feet, and the needle of the compass swung in long idle arcs from its pivot pin. Leaning forward over the wheel, Ordway peered into the night ahead. There was no other plane in sight. He swung the bomber's nose to right and left, so that he could see to the sides and the rear; but there were no planes. There was not even a vapor trail streaking the darkness.

He judged that they were at about nine thousand feet and heading in a southwesterly direction. The earth slipped past below—black, still and lightless. The last orange glow of the burning city had faded from the sky behind them, and the night towered vast and unblemished from the horizons. Ahead of them was darkness, above them the stars.

Perhaps five minutes had passed when Riggs spoke again.

"Marty—" he murmured.

"Yes, Ted?"

"You'll write Frances, won't you?"

"You'll write her yourself."

The boy was silent awhile.

"She's some girl, Frances," he said at last. "You know some-

thing, Marty: I never slept with her." There was another pause. "I never slept with any real girl. Only a few whores."

His voice was very low but clear. Presently he shifted his shoulders a little, so that his head seemed to sink even more deeply between them. The two men sat silently as the plane droned on.

"Marty—"

"Better not talk," Ordway said.

"You know, this isn't too lousy a way to go, Marty. Up in a crate. Stars and bombs and all that crap. Guys like us aren't good for anything else anyhow."

"Try to go to sleep, Ted," Ordway said.

"Guys like us after the war—what the hell are we good for? Just so many more jerks looking for jobs. Flying, that's all we know. Flying and dropping eggs and killing a few Krauts. That's us, Marty. That's all there is, there isn't any more. Just us and Old Man Percentage, sitting up there on a cirro-stratus, working on his double entry." Riggs coughed gently and shifted again in his seat. "My pop had it all figured out: when I got home I was going to go to business school and learn to be a certified public accountant. A C.P.A. Sure . . ."

He coughed again and was quiet. Another five minutes passed; perhaps ten. At intervals Ordway looked across at him through the darkness, but the boy sat hunched and still.

Suddenly he spoke again:

"First thing I'm going to do when I get home, though, is marry that girl, Marty. . . . Know what I always call her? Biscuit. Her name's Frances, of course, but I call her Biscuit. . . . Isn't that the goddamndest name for a girl? . . . Biscuit. . . ."

Riggs, Theodore L., 1 Lt., C-P, 21, Burbank, Calif.

Bixler, John R., 2 Lt., B-N, 23, Murfreesboro, Tenn.

Wasniewicz, Harry, T/Sgt., ROMG, 24, Waban, Mass.

The staff sergeant in S-1 would make the prescribed notations and turn the page.

Ordway, Martin F., Capt., P, 31, Larchmont, N.Y. . . .

Ordway peered into the blackness off to the left. He had seen a whitish, faintly luminous streak that might be the vapor trail of another plane. He banked toward it, passed through it, and swung back on his course. It was mist. Other shreds and wisps of mist

were drifting past him now, undulating like slender gray scarves in the darkness.

The plane droned on. The left engine maintained a steady hum; the right one rose, stuttered, fell and rose again. Behind him Ordway could hear the air pouring through the rents in the fuselage and the gentle creaking of the bomb-bay doors that Riggs had not had time to close. The long scarves of mist came up out of black nothingness, streaked past the plane in sudden wild gray tumult and disappeared in black nothingness behind. Peering down between them, he searched for a familiar landmark: the Black Forest, the Lake of Constance, the lights to the south that would mean the Swiss frontier. But he could distinguish nothing. The distant earth flowed by, dark and featureless, under the lean, trembling oblongs of the wings.

Riggs, Theodore L. KIA.

Bixler, John R. KIA.

Wasniewicz, Harry. KIA.

And the prescribed notations.

He was not thinking of the dead men. He was not thinking at all. He sat staring, unseeing, at his shapeless gloved hands on the wheel, and the roar of wind and engines seemed to be flowing through him in an immense dark tide. He felt tired and very old.

He was old. He was old and spent and thirty-one. There were places in the world on that October night—well, a few places anyhow—where men of thirty-one were still young men; where they were laughing and drinking, dancing to swing bands, falling in love for the first time, hopefully beginning the practice of their professions; but those places were not the cockpit of a shattered bomber over ravaged Europe, and there were no ME-109's prowling the dark skies and no dead friends dripping their lifeblood out upon the steel floorplates around them. Years are not the only auditors of a life. If age is a brown, creased face, hard eyes and a nerveless hand, this man was old. If it is a torpor of the body and a slow strangulation of the mind, he was old. And if it is tiredness, he was old. For he was utterly tired. He had been tired for so long that he could scarcely remember the days when he had not been tired; when he had still possessed the will to do, to act, to achieve; when a bombing plane had been more to him than a trembling, roaring prison of steel and sound, and war more than an endlessly and

meaninglessly repeated pattern of engine-drone, bomb-burst, death.

Martin Ordway was tired in his bones. And he was tired in his soul.

Until a few minutes ago the night had been the same as any other night. You walked out to the airstrip in the cool darkness. You wisecracked with the ground crew, waited for the signal, stepped up the R.P.M.'s until the roaring filled the wide sky and the crannies of your brain. You took off. You flew, hour after hour, through a roaring emptiness. And then at last, suddenly, it was no longer emptiness but roaring, shattering brightness, and you banked and dove and went over. You dropped your eggs. You dropped them, thinking about wind velocity and flak and directional equations and the delicate shifting hairlines of Bix's bomb-sight. You dropped them, not thinking of the toppling stone, the scream, the legless man, the breastless woman, the faceless child; not thinking of the one that went astray through the roof of the maternity hospital. You dropped them, and tried to believe you were without blackness and horror in your heart, because you lived in a certain kind of a world in which dropping them was necessary, and therefore right. You dropped them for the Four Freedoms and the United Nations and the Dignity of Man and the column of check-marks under your name in the H.Q. log-book. You dropped them in the bright orange lake and raced for the emptiness and the darkness.

In the darkness it was safe again. It was almost safe, almost quiet again. Planes around you were hit, buckled, exploded, went down in quick thin streaks of fire; but you were not hit. It was not yet your turn. It would never be your turn. . . . And then it was your turn. The turn of Riggs, Theodore L., Lt., C-P, 21, Burbank, Calif.; of Bixler, John R., 2 Lt., B-N, 23, Murfreesboro, Tenn.; of Wasniewicz, Harry, T/Sgt., RO-MG, 24, Waban, Mass. They had met the Great Imponderable of war, committed the one ineradicable and irremediable error of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. . . . Or was it the right place at the wrong time? Or the wrong place at the right time? . . . In any case, a certain number of smallish, jagged fragments of metal, moving at high velocity, had passed through their pelvises, their small intestines, the membranes of their throats and the sockets of their eyes. They lay in a variety of strange positions that their mothers would not

have liked to see them in. Their blood dribbled away across the steel and aluminum floorplates of the plane and out into the dark roar of the slipstream. And they died.

Ordway, Martin F., Capt., P, 31, Larchmont, N.Y., on the other hand, had not died. The young men were gone, but the old man, the old tired young man of thirty-one, was still there. The Great Imponderable had come and gone; it had passed, swiftly and invisibly, in smallish, jagged fragments of metal; it had whispered, "No, not here. No, not yet." He was spared (perhaps) to return once more. He was spared to feel the smooth hard earth of the airstrip under the wheels and hear the roar of the engines die at last and clamber stiffly out and walk slowly away in the cool darkness; to smoke a cigarette and taste hot coffee and empty his bladder; to listen to Bob Hope and Gracie Allen on the radio and inspect the latest Grable and Hayworth pinups on the board walls of the mechanics' hut; to stand against a long, dim, man-swarming bar and drink and drink; to fall, clothes and all, shoes and all, nausea and D.F.C. ribbon and all, across a cot and sleep and sleep. And dream . . .

A sudden sharp tremor passed through the plane and entered his body. He opened his eyes. The shattered dials of the instrument panel were gleaming faintly in the darkness. Above them, the glass of the windscreen was opaque with moisture.

The automatic wipers were jammed. He fumbled at the mechanism with a clumsy gloved hand, and presently they began to move slowly and jerkily across the glass. The stars were gone. The earth was gone. The plane was boring through a weaving ocean of gray mist.

He pulled back on the wheel and felt the nose go up. The engines held for a moment; then the right one missed and sputtered, and the plane jerked around and began to tilt. He forced it back sharply, opening and closing the throttles and manipulating the ailerons. The plane swung back level, dipped again, swung back again. Its righthand motor thumping and faltering, it plunged on into the clouds.

Ordway sat perfectly still. It was his hands, his feet, the blind pilot's instinct, that had caught and righted the plane. There had been no mind or will in it; no fear, no hope, no resolve. He was lost. He was lost, and he was sitting quietly, almost peacefully,