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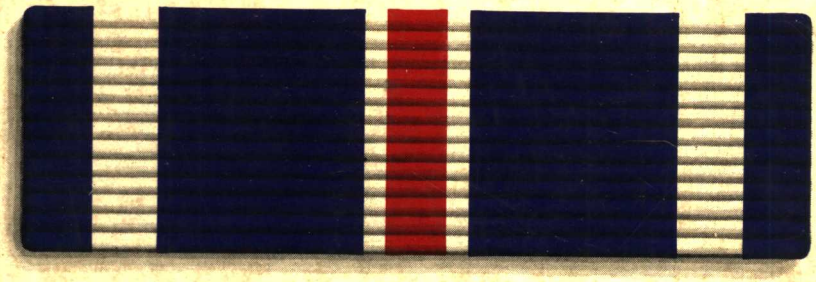
Guard of Honor



James Gould Cozzens

$3.95 A Harvest/HBJ Book

JAMES GOULD COZZENS

Guard of Honor

I and my fellows
Are ministers of Fate: the elements,
Of whom your swords are temper'd, may as well
Wound the loud winds, or with bemock'd-at stabs
Kill the still closing waters, as diminish
One dowle that's in my plume: my fellow-ministers
Are like invulnerable.

The Tempest

A HARVEST/HBJ BOOK
HARCOURT BRACE JOVANOVICH, NEW YORK AND LONDON

Printed in the United States of America

EFGH

ONE

THURSDAY

THROUGH THE late afternoon they flew southeast, going home to Ocanara at about two hundred miles an hour. Inside the spic and span fuselage—the plane was a new twin-engine advanced trainer of the type designated AT-7—this speed was not noticeable. Though the engines steadily and powerfully vibrated and time was passing, the shining plane seemed stationary, swaying gently and slightly oscillating, a little higher than the stationary, dull-crimson sphere of the low sun. It hung at perpetual dead center in an immense shallow bowl of summer haze, delicately lavender. The bottom of the bowl, six thousand feet below, was colored a soft olive brown; a blending, hardly distinguishable, of the wide, swampy river courses, the overgrown hammocks, the rolling, heat-shaken savannas, the dry, trackless, palmetto flatlands that make up so much of the rank but poor champaign of lower Alabama and northwestern Florida. Within the last few minutes, far off on the right and too gradually to break the illusion of standing still, the dim, irregular edge of an enormous, flat, metallic-gray splotch had begun to appear. It was the Gulf of Mexico.

The original AT-7's, of which this was one, were delivered to the Army Air Forces in the second summer of the war. Meant for use in navigator training, their cabins were equipped with three navigator's positions—a seat; a plotting table; a drift meter and an aperiodic compass; a radio headset and a hand microphone. On the bulkhead wall behind the pilots' compartment, placed where all three students would be able to see them, were a radio compass azimuth indicator and a simple supplementary instrument panel. In the cabin top was the miniature plexiglas dome of a navigation turret with a bracket for the pelorus. On the left wall, under, above, and around three small rectangular fuselage windows were racks for signal flares, oxygen bottles, so-called quick attachable parachutes, a

long map case, and a pull-down seat on which the instructor could sit when he was not forward with the pilot. At the back, a little compartment afforded, when the door was closed, the refinement of privacy to a chemical toilet.

Though an AT-7 was designed to carry five people, this one was carrying seven. All of them were military personnel attached to the Army Air Forces Operations and Requirements Analysis Division, known as AFORAD, which the Air Forces Board had set up at Ocanara, Florida; or to the Ocanara Army Air Base. In the third fuselage window, next to the entrance door, an oblong metal plaque was temporarily attached to the glass by strips of adhesive tape. The plaque was scarlet and bore two white stars, for the plane was piloted by Major General Ira N. Beal, commanding at Ocanara.

General Beal had that morning flown up from Ocanara to Sellers Field, Mississippi, accompanied by three of his present passengers. They were Colonel Norman Ross, the Air Inspector on General Beal's Staff; Lieutenant Colonel Benny Carricker, a young fighter pilot who had served with the general overseas; and Master Sergeant Dominic Pellerino, the general's crew chief. The other three were pick-ups—Ocanara personnel who happened to be at Sellers Field for one reason or another and were now being given a ride back to their station.

Captain Nathaniel Hicks, of the AFORAD Special Projects Directorate, had been sent to Sellers Field on a project of that Directorate's Reports Section. Second Lieutenant Amanda Turck, of the Women's Army Corps, had no actual business at Sellers Field. She had come in to Sellers that morning on a plane that had given her a lift from Des Moines, Iowa. She had been at Des Moines on seven days temporary duty, taking a course in disciplinary regulations which, now that the Corps was part of the Army, must apply to the five hundred-odd officers and enlisted women of the WAC detachment at Ocanara. A young, slender, and shy Negro Technician Fifth Grade belonging to an Ocanara Base Services Unit had been on furlough at his home near Sellers Field. His name, stenciled across the side of a little kit bag he carried, was Mortimer McIntyre, Junior.

These passengers had disposed themselves as well as they could for the three hour trip. Lieutenant Colonel Carricker was in the co-pilot's seat, up front with the general. Colonel Ross sat in the forward student-navigator's position. He had covered the plotting table immediately with piles of papers from his brief case; and he applied himself to them except when General Beal, turning his head, addressed some remark to him. Captain Hicks sat in the middle navigator's position. He, too, had laid out work from a brief case; but he spent much of the time faced around, talking against the noise of engines to Lieutenant Turck, in the rear navigator's position. He and she knew each other, in the sense and to the extent that Nathaniel Hicks's work often required classified material from the library files which were in Lieutenant Turck's charge at Ocanara.

On the pull-down seat by the door Sergeant Pellerino's stout, short body was relaxed with remarkable completeness. His thick-featured, amiable face was vacant. Regardless of his cramped situation, he was sound asleep. In the rear compartment, visible through the open door, T/5 McIntyre sat on the cover of the chemical toilet, the only place left to sit. He did not mind. Anything satisfied him. He had been prepared to stand, or sit on the floor if that was all right; but when they were airborne, Sergeant Pellerino opened up the compartment door and told him considerately that he might as well sit on the toilet. T/5 McIntyre's uniform, which fitted him neatly and closely, was very clean; and, like his carefully creased overseas cap with the scarlet-and-white Engineer Corps piping, seemed still cleaner because of the intense satiny blackness of his face and hands. He had never flown before. Though he held a worn, paper-bound comics magazine open in his lap, he spent most of his time glancing shyly and guardedly around him, absorbing an experience that he would be able to make a good deal of, once he was back to his barracks tonight.

General Beal, his tense thin snubnosed young face—for he was at that time the youngest two-star general in the Air Force—severe and thoughtful, moved his shoulder against the padded

back of the pilot's seat and turned his head to speak over it to Colonel Ross. General Beal had said nothing for almost ten minutes; but they were talking last about Colonel Woodman at Sellers Field; and it was plain that the general had gone on thinking about him. He said, his voice raised to be heard: "I wish to God I could do something about Woody, Judge. Think of anything?"

Colonel Ross, who was, in fact, a judge in civilian life, had been looking at a draft of a proposed Post Regulation 200-2. The tenth paragraph was entitled *Restricted Areas:* and proceeded: *Dogs and cats are prohibited in the following buildings: Headquarters, Operations, Officers Clubs, Barracks, Mess Halls, Kitchens, Swimming pools, or immediate vicinity.* He penciled a caret between *Officers Clubs* and *Barracks* and wrote above it firmly: *Post Exchanges.* He then initialed the sheet "NR," and put it on the right hand pile.

Plenty of men have married at eighteen and had children at nineteen, so Colonel Ross was old enough to be the general's father. He now took off his glasses, turned his large clear blue eyes on General Beal, and gave him a drily paternal look. While not stout, Colonel Ross was a big man, and he showed the heaviness of increasing age. His thick gray hair, parted in the middle, stood up enough to lengthen his lined face. Locked in his mouth was a bulldog pipe. He gave the pipe two hard puffs, removed it, and said: "You might take that bottle out of his bottom desk drawer."

General Beal said: "I know that."

General Beal wore a not-very-clean khaki shirt, open at the neck, with his stars on the wilted collar. His sleeves were rolled above his elbows. On his left wrist was a beautiful Swedish navigator's chronograph the size of a half dollar. The case was made of platinum and it had a platinum band. On his right wrist a gold crash bracelet hung loosely. The ends of the plate were joined by the heaviest possible hammered gold links. These elegant appointments contrasted with the shirt, and with his garrison cap, "raunchy" as it was then called, to a degree hardly exceeded by any new air cadet's carefully soiled and broken headgear.

General Beal removed this object and hung it on the microphone. He began to rub his brown hair, cropped in order to conceal the unmilitary curl natural to it. He said, "I doubt if they let him keep even Sellers Field. That won't be so good. He thinks he got a raw deal already. I didn't like to take the plane."

Colonel Ross puffed twice more on his pipe. "How could you help it?" he said. "It was an Air Staff directive. Woody better learn to comply with directives. He had no business shooting that TWX to Washington."

"He just doesn't get off the ground," General Beal said. "And it isn't just liquor. He always drank. He just isn't the man he used to be."

Colonel Ross grunted. "In my part of the country," he said, "they have another line to that. It goes: 'No, and he never was.'"

"I can tell you Woody was a pilot, Judge. He was my first squadron commander at Rockwell Field. He could fly and he was a right guy. Ask anyone who knew him then."

"Well, I saw a little of him at Issoudon in 1918, which is more than you did. He may be a good pilot. But he hadn't much sense. I mean, even less than most pilots. I doubt if he has any more now, in view of some remarks he made to me while you were out taking that telephone call."

"What did he say?"

The tone made Colonel Ross smile. "Not about you," he said. "It was about why he thinks they have it in for him at Fort Worth. But you're quite right; he probably would have said plenty about you if Sellers Field were in your command."

"By God," said the general, "do you know who was in command at Rockwell—I mean, the Air Depot? Major H. H. Arnold. Woody never gave a damn for anyone. He didn't like something, so he went around making cracks about the Distinguished Information Service Medal; and how we won't be over till it's over over there. I know they actually wrote up specifications for charges. Then it got fixed, somehow. Maybe he apologized. Nobody could stay sore at Woody very long. He was really a comical bastard."

Lieutenant Colonel Carricker said casually, "Getting way off our heading, Chief."

They both looked at the compass.

"By God, we are," said the general. He leaned and looked out. Presently he said: "That ought to be the Apalachicola River, ahead there. Let's see your sectional chart a minute, Benny." He took down his radio phones and held one against his ear. "Getting *A*," he said. "We're on Marianna still, aren't we? Well, if that's the river, we're not too far off—"

Colonel Ross returned to the pile of papers from his brief case. Among them he had information copies of the exchange of messages between Washington and Colonel Woodman, that quondam comical bastard; and it looked to Colonel Ross as though, sooner or later, people could and would manage to stay sore at Woody quite a while.

Colonel Woodman's trouble was, professedly, about letting General Beal have this AT-7, which General Beal now had, and was now flying home. However, Colonel Woodman had been twice ordered to let General Beal have it; so that was that. If Woody still went on, it was safe to guess that the real trouble was something else, of which the loss of one of his AT-7's was only a symbol.

Colonel Woodman, if he had any sense, must have recognized General Beal's conciliatory gesture in coming himself to get the plane. You would expect Colonel Woodman to meet it halfway. Maybe when he got the TWX message that General Beal was coming he meant to meet it halfway. He had, apparently, put the heat on his mess to get the general as good a lunch as they could on such short notice. He was duly down on the ramp in front of Sellers Field Operations with his Executive and his Airdrome Officer to welcome General Beal. However, while waiting for the tower to report the general's plane, Woody doubtless took a couple of quick ones from that bottle Colonel Ross later observed in his not-quite-closed lower desk drawer.

General Beal's plane was a B-25B, called *My Gal Sal*. It was beautifully kept. The general landed it hot, with plenty of dash.

He gunned it around, swept back to the ramp, and roared up his fine engines while Colonel Woodman had a good look at it. The only plane available for Colonel Woodman's personal use was a worn out AT-6, the advanced single-engine trainer.

The general gave Colonel Woodman a cordial wave. Then there was some delay as he got out of his parachute, and Lieutenant Michaels, his pilot, took his place, and Lieutenant Noble, another pilot, took Lieutenant Michaels' place. This made it plain that the B-25 was going right back. Finally the hatch under the radio position opened, the ladder dropped, and General Beal scrambled down and ducked out from beneath the plane.

Colonel Ross, coming out less actively, was in time to see what followed. Woody, his red face very red, his red-veined eyes glowering, his half-comic, half-ferocious cavalryman's mustache twitching, sauntered forward. The Executive and the Airdrome Officer, unprepared for this informal move, had automatically snapped up their hands to salute the general as soon as he was clear of the plane. Woody, it seemed, had sulkily decided he was not going to salute anyone, and he didn't, not even when the general answered the other officers' salute. His greeting (whose offensive force was perhaps weakened a little by the fact that the general was now face to face with him and had held out his hand, and Woody had limply taken it) was: "Well, how the hell many personal planes do you need down there, anyway?"

You could see Colonal Woodman choking on resentments and disappointments. He was sick with the long deferment—now he must know it was really more than that, it was the final demise—of hope. He was not going to get any stars. He was never going to get that overseas assignment without which there could be no kind of postwar career in the Air Force. Instead, they ordered him to Sellers Field, a poorly located tarpaper post which they were hastily transforming into an extra school to meet the increasing demand for navigators.

Probably because General Beal understood at least part of this, he answered Colonel Woodman by laughing. "Yeah," he said. "We're really putting it on." He turned and watched

Sergeant Pellerino, who was easing a wooden box out of the rear gunner's hatch in the plane. "Got some branch water?" he said. "I brought you something to go in it. Honest-to-God case of Scotch, right from London. RAF fellow gave it to me. Come on, Woody. Let's see your place. I hear it stinks."

They went up and had some of the Scotch in Colonel Woodman's office; but, probably for the first time, even whisky seemed to choke Woody. He kept mumbling parts of his argument. More than once he said, irrelevantly, to everyone else at least, "I don't get it. I don't see what they're trying to do. I don't think anyone knows what the hell is going on!" Sometimes he seemed to mean Ocanara and AFORAD; sometimes, the training program in general; sometimes, the conduct of the war. It was clear to Colonel Ross that Woody, in a practiced, unhappy way, was tight.

Someone spoke in then on the box and said that Ocanara was calling, a personal message for General Beal; so the general went to take it. Colonel Woodman immediately made an effort to sober himself. Carricker had gone to check out on the AT-7, so that they could fly it down; Colonel Woodman's Executive had been previously excused. He and Colonel Ross remained there alone.

Colonel Woodman said at once, with an air of fortitude, that he didn't want Colonel Ross to get him wrong. "Hell, Norm," he said, perhaps a little belatedly playing up their acquaintanceship of twenty-five years ago, "I'm not kicking about this assignment just because it's lousy. I can take it. I'm a soldier. I'll serve where they send me."

Colonel Ross was surprised. Though he might well kick about his assignment, Colonel Woodman had been so busy kicking about the Air Staff decision on the plane that he hadn't mentioned it before. Colonel Ross realized then that Colonel Woodman was staring, with mixed craft and tipsy ingenuousness, at the Inspector General's insignia on Colonel Ross's collar. Woody might not have understood that his old friend was at Ocanara, not from Headquarters in Washington, and so couldn't do anything for him.

Rapidly and passionately, Colonel Woodman now developed

what he was kicking about. They were the difficulties which were being deliberately put in his way at Sellers Field. "I just want to tell you a few things confidentially—just informally, in case you think some action—"

Since this confirmed Colonel Ross's guess about the stare at his insignia, and since Colonel Ross did not particularly want to hear the maudlin story of Colonel Woodman's troubles, he interrupted to say, very carefully and clearly, that he was not from the Inspector General's office in Washington, nor even AAF Headquarters' Air Inspector's office. He was just SWAAF; detached on Service with the Air Forces. He was assigned to Ocanara as General Beal's Air Inspector. Nothing outside AFORAD was in his province or power. . . .

Colonel Woodman would not listen. He went on to describe his "few things," directing whisky fumes in short explosive puffs toward Colonel Ross, clenching and unclenching his swollen hands on the sweaty leather of a riding crop which he carried around the post with him. Sometimes he rapped the desk with the crop. There was this deliberate withholding of essential equipment; unanswered requisitions; delays in meeting approved and authorized schedules. When they did let him have some of what he needed, on one pretext or another (he gave Colonel Ross a significant look) they took it away from him. They refused him qualified officers and they deliberately undermined post morale by sending in detachments of trainees for whom, as they damn well knew, he couldn't yet have provided quarters or even proper mess facilities.

Of course, Colonel Woodman did not deny that some of these things *looked* perfectly natural when a new installation was being set up in a hurry. That was part of it; they were pretty smart. By "they," he meant a certain "clique" at Fort Worth who had it in for him. The members of it were so placed in the organization of Training Command Headquarters that, dropping a word here or delaying a paper there, they could hamstring any installation and wreck any program. He knew exactly who these people were, and he could positively prove what he was saying.

Well, Colonel Ross might ask—in fact, Colonel Ross asked

nothing, simply sucking at his pipe—why didn't he go to General Yount personally with his proof? All right; Colonel Woodman would tell him why. He got up abruptly, opened the door, and closed it again. Then, with a kind of fuddled caution, he examined the box on his desk to see that it was off. The plot, it seemed, was not confined to the Headquarters of the Training Command. It would be useless to go to General Yount. The general was in no position to do anything. To Colonel Woodman's positive knowledge, General Yount had told his Chief of Staff that Sellers Field would have to sink or swim. Colonel Ross would know what that meant. In Washington, certain parties had resolved to thwart, humiliate, discredit, and ruin Colonel Woodman.

Colonel Ross, in his turn, stared. For a Regular Army man like Woody to believe that the Commanding General of the Training Command would say any such thing to his Chief of Staff, or to anyone else, was preposterous to the point of being psychopathic. If Sellers Field "sank," General Yount would be held personally responsible.

Colonel Ross did not have the facts on whatever other troubles Colonel Woodman had or thought he had; but he knew all about this episode of the AT-7—perhaps more than Woody thought. It was really all you needed to know. A routine order had gone from Washington to Fort Worth and from Fort Worth to Sellers Field; give an AT-7 to General Beal. Understandably, Colonel Woodman didn't like giving away planes; but anyone not obsessed with a persecution complex need only look at a map to figure it out. The finger was put on Sellers Field because it was the point nearest Ocanara to which AT-7's were then being delivered. Moreover, Sellers Field, as Woody so loudly protested, was not scheduled to be, and was not, ready to use all its planes. Still, standard operating procedure would be to query the order. Fort Worth grasped, at least as well as Colonel Woodman did, that basic principle of military management: always have on hand more of everything than you can ever conceivably need. If Colonel Woodman in the normal way queried Fort Worth, Fort Worth could be counted on to query Washington.

What Woody did was compose and immediately fire off a TWX message to the Chief of Air Staff. Naturally, he had known and flown with this officer back in his comical bastard days. Woody now said that every AT-7 he had or could lay his hands on was absolutely indispensable to the Sellers Field program. Giving one to General Beal was quite out of the question. He made an oblique but unmistakable reference to those fancies of his about his superiors at Fort Worth. He made another, incoherent but no doubt intelligible enough, to the duplication of effort, waste, and working at cross-purposes bound to result when exempt organizations under the Chief of Air Staff, like AFORAD, supposed to do God Knew What, were given the inside track on everything.

At the Headquarters of the Army Air Forces the second summer of the war was a nervous time. They still put up those signs about doing the difficult at once and requiring only a little longer to do the impossible. Nearly every day they were forced to make momentous decisions. On their minds they had thousands of planes and hundreds of thousands of men and billions of dollars. Their gigantic machine, which, as they kept saying, had to run while it was being built, gave them frightening moments and bad thoughts to lie awake at night with.

Now, then, toward the end of the usual exhausting day, came a long and stupid message which, if it were going anywhere, should have gone to Fort Worth. It fretted them about one training plane. It lectured them on what was indispensable to Sellers Field (the AAF had so many fields that you could not find one man who knew all the names). It informed them that the Training Command was not run properly and that the project at Ocanara was a poor idea.

Enemies of Woody's, a "hostile clique" trying to do-him-in, would have asked nothing better than a chance to make these attitudes and opinions of Colonel Woodman's known at AAF Headquarters. Woody made them known himself, in black and white, over his signature. Colonel Ross could not help thinking that the evidence showed, if anything, that there were "certain parties" at Headquarters who were still ready, for old times' sake, to cover for Woody, to try and keep him out of trouble.

An angry man (so Colonel Woodman thought a little wire-pulling could determine Air Staff decisions, did he?) might have walked across the hall, laid the message before the CG/AAF and watched the roof blow off. Even a mildly annoyed man might have supplied Fort Worth with an information copy and left Woody to explain. Instead Woody got a personal reply at Sellers Field. He was peremptorily ordered to make available at once repeat at once one of first ten subject articles delivered to him. He was curtly reminded that direct communication between Headquarters Sellers Field and Headquarters Army Air Forces was under no repeat no circumstances authorized.

Of course, Colonel Woodman had done irreparable damage to any remaining chances he might have had for advancement, or an important command. Still, there was such a thing as the good of the service; and Woody, making it certain that he had no future, might be promoting that.

General Beal, speaking again to Colonel Ross, said: "Well, the hell with it! I'm sorry he doesn't like it; but I really need this plane. I need a plane for short trips. That's what it will mostly be. There's no percentage in hopping *Sal* to, say, Orlando, or Tampa. Uses too much gas. Besides, unless I modified it, it's too uncomfortable for anyone but the pilots. I don't think I'll do anything to this. It's all right the way it is." He faced about and looked back into the fuselage. He began to laugh. "Get a load of Danny," he said, indicating Sergeant Pellerino. "When that boy sleeps, he sleeps. I wish I could do it. Just the same, I don't like rubbing it into Woody; throwing my weight around with him—hell! You hungry? I am." To Lieutenant Colonel Carricker, who had been sitting idle, staring out the side window, he said: "Let's get this on the automatic pilot, Benny. Want to see what's in that bag."

"Roger," said Carricker. He put out a powerful square hand whose whole back was a graft of glazed skin transplanted from his thigh to cover second degree burns. The fingernails, small deformed fragments of horn-like substance, were in the much