

can run away.

In a stretched sense, some of us did all three. The quotas of missions were not increased arbitrarily in the 15th Air Force and I doubt they were in the 12th. I presume this was a dramatic device employed by Heller to good purpose. And you could get out of flying anytime you wanted to. All you had to do was ground yourself and lose your flight pay. Flying was voluntary in World War 11, and if you quit, the command had no recourse except idle threats. It was the Cathcart in you that made you go on, that part of you that wanted the approval of others, that couldn't risk social censure. I flew because others were flying and I couldn't have faced their scorn. And the missions increased too, not in real numbers, but in the size those numbers became when compounded by fear. The final mission may be only one, but that one was a million. The fictionalized facts in *Catch 22* were psychological realities, and that's the worst kind.

Yet my hero of those days was a man from Texas named Marshall who, after a series of crashes and dangerous missions, finally had his plane so badly shot up over Vienna one day that almost every system in the plane malfunctioned. He managed to fly the ship by holding the stick deep into the pit of his stomach which would normally put the nose straight up. Even then he lost altitude and managed to stagger over the Yugoslavia border where he and his crew bailed out.

Aided by the Partisans, he came back about a month later, white as tile, and announced that he would never fly again. For a while some superior officers threatened him but he held fast. When he said never, he meant it. They couldn't even fly him to Naples to take the boat back home. They had to haul him across Italy in a truck. I remember standing in the Puglia mud and watching him wave good-bye cheerful and resolute, the only man in the back of the truck. I was so young it never occurred to me that I admired a man for doing what I feared to do because if I did no one would admire me.

I accepted without question a world where events defied explanation. Planes that disappeared from formations without anyone remembering what had happened to them. The huge orange rectangular mass, like a geometric fish flopping or maybe a billowing bed sheet on the bank of the Danube at Wiener Neustadt. The train at Szeged exploding into a lovely fireworks display with rockets and flares oozing out over the buildings from the marshaling yard. Fear on the ground. From altitude sheer spectacle. We had fears of our own. I remember once a friend criticized a long bombing mission poem I'd written because he said I showed no awareness I was bombing people, and in a rare burst of intellectual superiority I said that's exactly the point. We were not bombing people. Towns looked as real as maps. Bomb impacts were minute puffs of silent smoke. The first time I saw "the enemy" was after I returned to America where German POWs were waiting on us in the mess hall at Camp Patrick Henry, Virginia. Somehow they didn't look like the enemy.

I ran away too. I drank heavily. I hitchhiked into Cerignola to find something to do though I knew nothing was there. I wanted to feel in town and out of war. I hitchhiked to Foggia and played Benny Goodman and Tommy Dorsey records in the USO club. Those records seemed terribly important. I had to hitchhike over thirty miles one way to hear them. In one way or another others were running away too. Bombardiers were denied the lead position on their last mission. They had a habit of dropping the bombs a few miles short of the flak area to insure a safe return.

I think the reason we accepted the madness was that we didn't know it was there, or if we did we didn't care. The more missions you flew, the narrower became your concerns until finally all you really cared about was your own survival. I remember our pilot, Lt. Howard (NMI) Steinberg, telling me a Jewish joke once about a young man who couldn't wait to get into combat. He volunteered eagerly for the infantry and all through the training he grumbled impatiently and expressed his dissatisfaction with a system that delayed him from confrontation with the enemy. Finally he got to North Africa and was facing the Germans. His first taste of combat was a prolonged devastating German artillery attack, and when it finally stopped he stood up and yelled in Yiddish, "My God. A man can get killed out here."

That's no joke. I had volunteered for the Army Air Corps for the cheapest kind of romantic personal reasons. I felt weak and inadequate, and foolishly thought facing and surviving danger would give me spiritual depth and a courageous dimension I lacked and desperately wanted. "I went hunting wild after the wildest beauty in the world." And when, like the Jewish soldier in Steinberg's joke, I woke up one day, around my fifteenth mission, and realized I could be killed, things were never the same. I was not mocked by "the steady running of the hour." I was terrorized by it.

It wasn't the reality of the war, but what your imagination did with it. You had nothing but time, mocking hours, in which to dwell, and you dwelled on being killed. Your imagination expanded your chances of dying hopelessly beyond statistical chance.

Another dreadful story I heard I would play back over and over to myself. Like the story about the flyers who bailed out over Munich to be marched naked into the center of the city before screaming mobs and then beaten to death. I could see it vividly, by day in my mind and at night in dreams. And the panic in my belly was physiologically real. Every morning explosive diarrhea and phlegmatic choking. When lucky I avoided the bizarre dreams by drinking myself into insensibility. One bombardier carried liquor in the plane and started drinking at 14,000 feet on the let down, as soon as he could safely remove his oxygen mask. And when we picked up an Axis Sally broadcast, either in the air or at the base, I could no longer laugh off her threats. She was out to kill me and I knew she could do it.

It would be unfair to infer I was typical. Most of the flyers, while tearful, handled their fears better than I could. They had gone to war with less illusions than I had, and they were simply more stable to begin with.

Yossarian was mature enough to have a kind of honor despite his fear, and the old Italian in the whorehouse was old enough to have none. He would have told the lies Cathcart wanted him to, and so would I but for far less sophisticated reasons. The Italian knew it made no difference. Worried as I was about myself I would never have seen the truth about Cathcart. Fear stopped me from seeing the most obvious madness, let alone distinguishing right from wrong.

I didn't question it when some idiot in Air Force Headquarters hatched the idea that when the entire Air Force was bombing the primary target, we could divert the German's attention by sending a lone bomber to another target on what was called a "nuisance raid." We never asked how one plane could divert the attention of a nation from 1500 hundred planes, especially when those 1500 planes were several hundred miles from the one plane. And no one asked just what the hell "German's attention" really meant