

"They had us bracketed, and I knew that when the next blast came they'd get us. They did."

THE FLIGHT OF THE BOMBER PHYLLIS

An epic of endurance
by men and machines

BY DONALD WILHELM

ILLUSTRATED BY A. LEYDENFROST

ON October 2, 1942, occurred one of the most dramatic incidents of the war. Riddled, with more than 200 bullet holes in its fuselage, one wing all but wrecked, two motors out of commission, six shell holes in rudder and stabilizers, half the controls shot away, oxygen and radio equipment knocked out, and landing gear smashed, the Phyllis, American Flying Fortress, returned to England after an attack by forty Focke-Wulf 190s. Its return is a tribute to the daring and the airmanship of its crew and to the sturdiness of the Flying Fortresses.

Of the crew's ten members, five were wounded, one seriously. All were fresh from civilian life. Their average age was just twenty-three. Two were only twenty. Here they themselves tell Donald Wilhelm what happened during that truly epic flight.

A WEEK after the bomber Phyllis got back from her raid over occupied France I met with her crew in the handsome lounge of London's Dorchester Hotel.

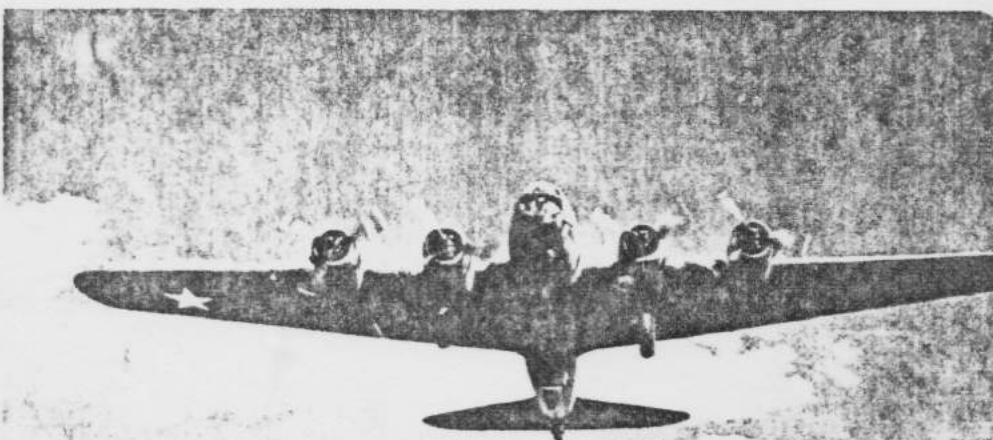
All but two of the ten men in that crew were there. Only Sergeant Thomas J. Coburn, Jr., the upper-

turret gunner, flat on his back in a hospital, and Sergeant Bert Peterson, also hospitalized for the time being, were absent as First Lieutenant Charles J. Paine, Jr., twenty-seven-

year-old commander of the Phyllis, began telling me her story.

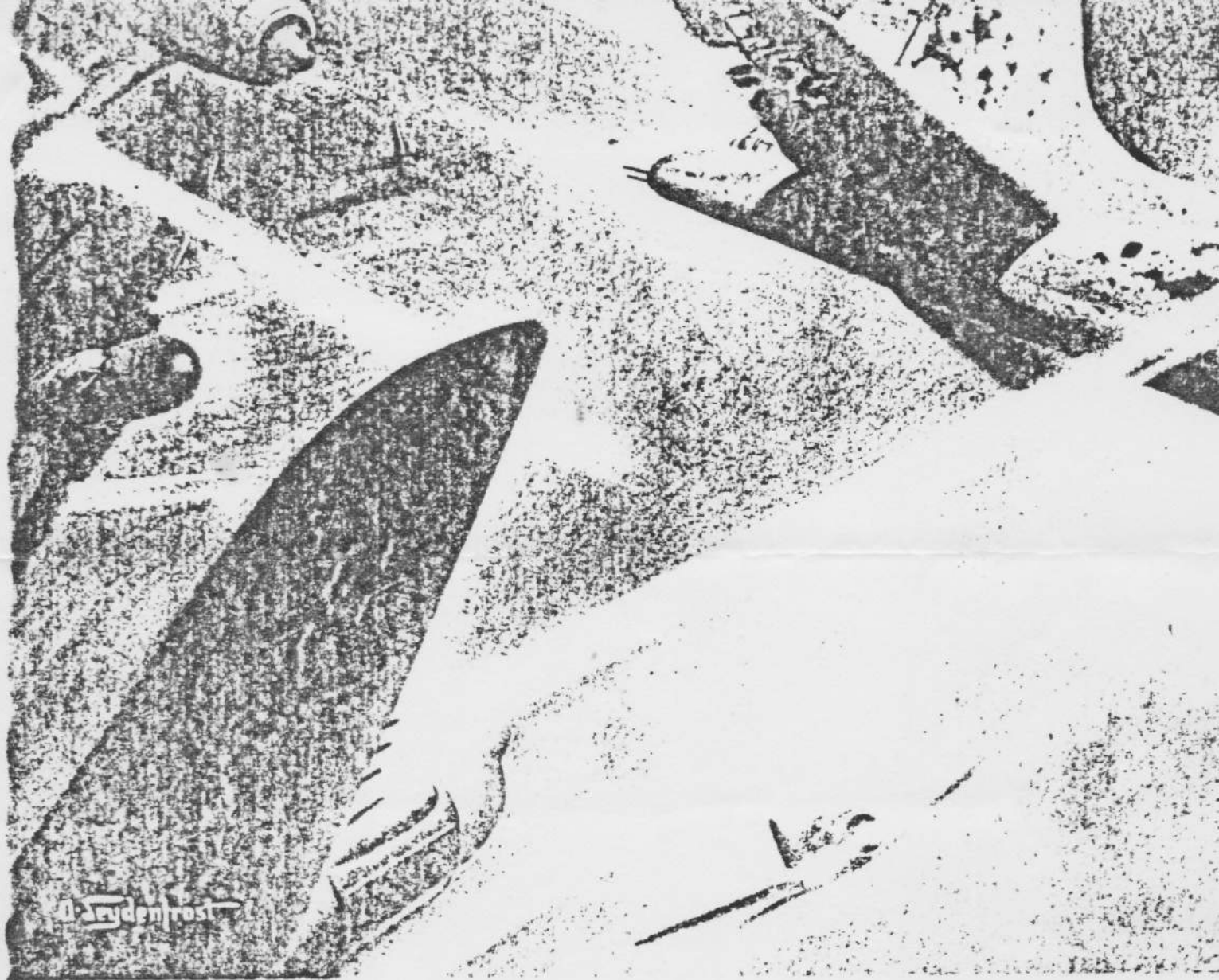
"I was having a real good sleep on a cot in a Nissen tin hut on the field," Paine began. "The hut was so small I

If this isn't Phyllis herself, it is a sister plane just like her—a Boeing B-17E Flying Fortress.



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"It hurt to have Phyllis pasted like that. I could feel her taking it, getting harder to handle . . .

could reach out on both sides and touch other sleeping officers. It was dark—about five in the morning. I'd heard some one asking for me. Then Captain Rehmet, the operations officer on duty, came over and said, 'Paine, you're it! You're going over with the biggest lot of Fortresses we've sent yet, to bomb hell out of a German aircraft plant in France!' I said, 'Swell! That'll get my mind off being a new-born father any day now.'

"The captain said he was an expectant father too and wished to heaven he could go, to get his mind off his troubles. He said I'd take Dempsey's ship and Kelso's crew because Kelso was on the sick list.

"Teamwork is everything in operating a big bomber. I'd be commanding a crew of nine men I had never seen. I had arrived at that field late the evening before."

Paine, slender and brown-eyed, with black hair thinning at the temples, laughed and talked volubly, wise-cracking now and then. He told me where he went to school and things like that, but he didn't mention that

he had flown one Fortress in the States more than 200,000 miles, had taken others on bombing missions over the Continent, and had just been promoted to first lieutenant. He did say, over and over, "Lieutenant Long ought to have been put in command of a Fortress before now. He's good, that boy!"

The boy referred to was sitting alongside us, quietly pulling on his long straight brier. He is a second looney, a handsome lad from Sweetwater, Texas. He now admitted that he had served as co-pilot on "several" missions over Europe. He added, "Two of the other boys had also been over—the radio operator and his gunner."

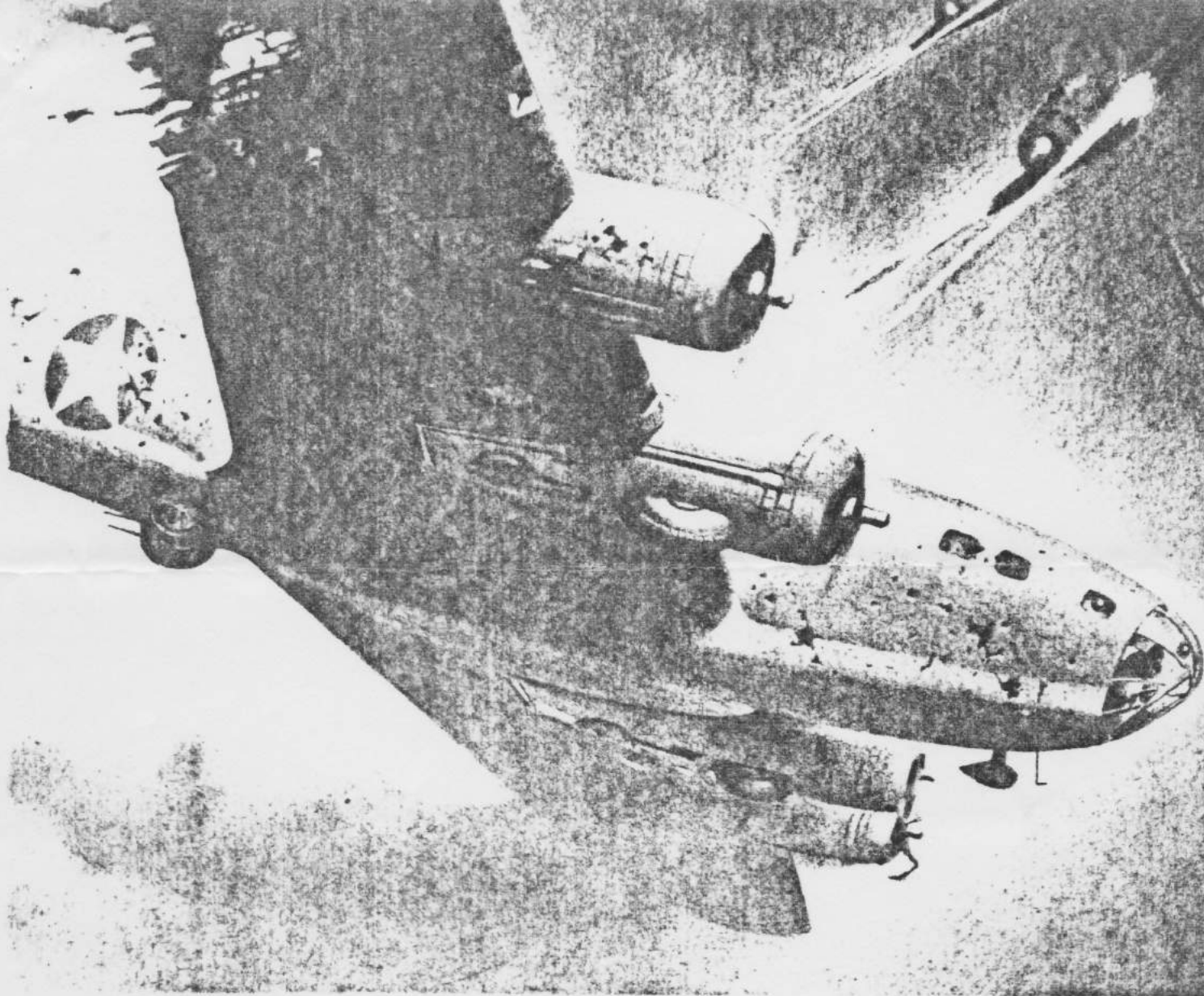
"After breakfast," Paine went on, "I asked Dempsey if the ship was O. K., because some ships, like cars and girls, have little peculiarities. Dempsey said Phyllis was as sweet as sweet, and she sure was. They called her Phyllis because a couple of her regular crew had girls named Phyllis (or maybe it was the same girl) and

they had a picture of a swell-looker on the nose of the plane.

"Later on, after briefing—that's a session we hold before we take off on an assignment, when everybody asks questions about the mission—I went over the plane and the report of Engineering to Operations on her. When Engineering certifies to Operations that a ship is O. K., and Operations tells you so, you can darn well bet she is O. K. They go over everything—motors, body, wings, electrical equipment, oxygen lines, ammunition, and so on.

"The gunners just live with their guns. I reckon some take 'em to bed. And the ground crews—Lord, what devotion they've got for a ship! We boys that get shot at get the publicity. But the ground men are always begging to go with us, and they'll wait up all hours till their ship gets back. That's teamwork for you! I bet they darn near wept when Phyllis didn't come back to her own base at all."

All were "nervous as hell" before



I looked out at our right wing and saw a couple of shell holes big enough to drive a sheep through."

the take-off. It is always like that, they agreed. Paine added, "I was so scared I could hardly walk. I always am before the take-off."

But everything went fine at and after the take-off, and, in V-of-V formation, on the way over. Then, ignoring the flak, they went in over the target, sixty miles from the Channel.

"We were Tail-end Charlie in getting over the target," Paine explained. "Then I heard Lieutenant S. A. Komarek—he's from Muskegon, Michigan—yell through the intraphone, 'Bomb doors open! . . . Left! . . . Right a bit! . . . Hard right! More right!'"

"It was taking a lot of rudder to swing Phyllis to the right because we were in the slipstream of the other ships, and the flak wasn't helping any."

Stocky Lieutenant Komarek—"Kamerad" by nickname—smiled with a special joy in his ruddy face at having assumed command for a few seconds.

"My people came from one of the countries the Huns smashed," he said. "I like to drop bombs on the Huns. As I let 'em go I said, 'This one is for grandpa. . . . This one is for grandma. . . .' When I think about 'em like that, with the new bombsight I can hit the target right on the nose every time. I wish I could do it every day."

Paine added, "He sure did a job. I heard him call, 'O. K.! Bombs away! Button her up!' Meaning 'Close the bomb doors.' Then he added the good news: 'Hit! Hit! Right on the nose!' Fact is, our raid wiped that German aircraft plant off the map."

"Of course," Commanding Officer Paine went on, "opening the bomb doors slows a plane a bit. We were still in the wash of the other ships. As Tail-end Charlie, Phyllis now got a pasting from the AA guns. I saw flak bursting below us, in front, then above us. They had us bracketed, and I knew that when the next blast came they'd get us. They did. I could feel the ship buck and shudder each time they hit. Incidentally, they also de-

stroyed one of their own pursuit ships, we learned later.

"The flak was bad enough. But after that came something worse. When the flak stopped cold, I knew we were in for it, especially with a crippled ship. That's the toughest part of a bombing raid—the few seconds between the time the flak stops and the moment when the enemy pursuits pounce on you. I had just time enough to go cold all over."

"Then all the gunners started calling in, 'Enemy aircraft at three o'clock, captain . . . at five o'clock . . . at nine o'clock!' and so on—meaning, in our lingo, that they were all around us. I remember what Taucher, the tail gunner, called in. He reported, 'They're coming, all right, captain. There's a jillion of them! They look like pigeons, only they're yellow!'"—a color meaning that they were Göring's own crack squadron of Focke-Wulf 190s.

Sergeant Ben T. Taucher, twenty-nine, the oldest man aboard, a coal miner from Rock Springs, Wyoming, and best known as "Bosco," tossed

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back his mop of black hair and leaned back in his chair. With a tumbler of what he loves best in England well in hand, he grinned infectiously at me and said:

"They came fast, out of the sun. They looked like a lot of yellow pigeons, or butterflies, except that they came on in a straight line—a new trick, they say. The first one took a pot shot at us, so near I could see the pilot. The second opened up, and the others kept coming right on.

"I cut loose, too.

"You're sitting back there alone, with practically no protection. You get them or they get you. Sure, I was scared, at first. But you get mad as hell, having a lot of guys shooting at you like that. To make it worse, I'd fired only about three bursts when both my guns jammed. Maybe that was because it was way below zero up there where we were, four or five miles up. I reported this to the captain. He said, 'Keep your guns swinging so they'll think you're firing anyway. No use shaking your fist at 'em, boy.'

"I pulled back the charging handle and got the right gun going, but the left gun stayed dead. So I went on working with the right gun, pot-shotting those yellow babies as fast as they came on. A bullet or a piece of flak nicked my arm, but I didn't know it. I pulled off my oxygen mask too, without knowing it. By rights I should have passed out, but I didn't. I wouldn't know whether working in a coal mine a mile down helps you to get along without oxygen four or five miles up. And when I tried to use the phone to find out how things were up ahead, it was dead.

"I FIRED all but a little of the ammunition for my right gun. Don't ask me how many of those yellow devils we killed off. We're told we got four. I wouldn't know. I wouldn't claim an enemy plane even if I knew I'd winged it, because you haven't got time to watch them go down and you haven't got time to concentrate your fire on any one ship more than a split second, things are moving so fast.

"Coburn, in the top turret, gave the Jerries hell until a shell blinded him. So did the gunner in the waist of the ship, Sergeant Bert Peterson, a Swedish boy from Des Moines, Iowa—when he could get a bead on them. And I could hear the guns of that hot little Pennsylvania Dutchman, Ralph Sheeder of Six Mile Run, Pennsylvania, going all the time. He and Coburn used up nearly all their ammunition—a lot! Sheeder is about to be a pa. That will be one for him to tell his kid about. He was manning the bottom turret, with nothing under him but space."

Cherubic, boyish Sheeder said, with simple Dutch matter-of-factness,

"Some of those babies were so near I could almost have spit on 'em. They weren't blowing kisses at us. I tried to help out Ben all I could, back there in the tail. It was a good thing for me that I did. If I'd had my guns pointed upward, I'd have got it in the belly. A piece of flak came through my turret, tearing a big hole in it in front of me, and hit my seat. That made me sore."

Sergeant Peterson could not speak for himself, being in the hospital. As waist gunner, he manned two guns, one on each side of the radio room. Darting from one to the other, he worked so hard and fast, his companions said, that he forgot a bad bullet wound in his leg. The flooring where he stood was later found to be a sieve.

"One dodge the Jerries used," Paine explained, "was to start for one of the ships ahead, then do a twenty-degree turn and pepper us. Mostly they came from the rear, but at least one came up under us from the front, stalled, and raked the whole length of Phyllis' belly. I could feel his hits banging into her. As a matter of fact, I could feel a lot of their hits and the machine-gun fire sounded like hail. It hurt to have Phyllis patted like that.

"I heard a twenty-mm. cannon shell explode just behind the upper turret. I thought, Gosh, if one hits the flares—good-by!

"I could feel Phyllis taking it, getting harder to handle all the while. After what seemed a thousand years of that, I began to realize that this wasn't going to be any Sunday-school picnic. I didn't have time to pray, though my pa and ma raised me to be a minister. Once or twice, though, I thought about my wife and Charley Paine III.

"I looked out at our right wing and

saw it was all shot to hell. There were holes everywhere. A couple were shell holes big enough to drive a sheep through. The other wing was all shot up too.

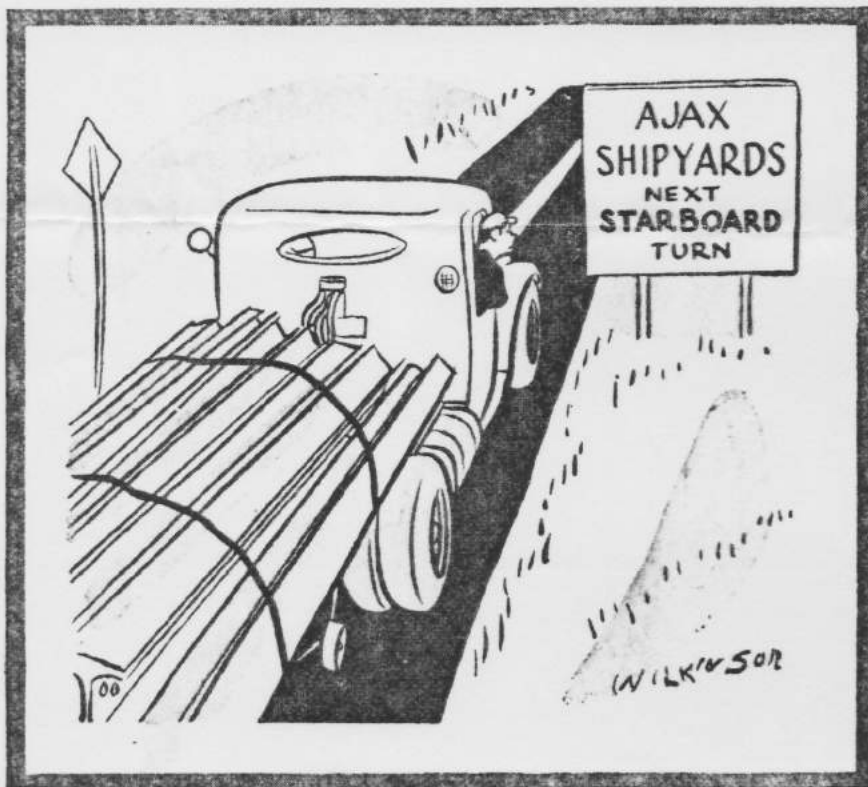
"I looked at Long. That was a treat. There he was with his control wheel shoved clear over to the right, whereas mine was centered. I started to laugh, then realized that his aileron control cables had been damaged. That wasn't funny at all, because without ailerons you can't turn a ship. Waist Gunner Peterson phoned that a bunch of control wires were slapping him in the face, meaning that some of the tail surface controls were shot away.

"Meanwhile the left-hand outboard engine, No. 1, was running wild with smoke, and the controls were so messed up we couldn't shut it off. No. 3 engine was soon running away too. Later it went dead.

"ALL of a sudden Phyllis lunged upward in a steep climb—so steep that Bosco Taucher said afterward it made him, back there in the tail, feel like the ship had dropped 10,000 feet, tail-first. This meant that the tail controls had been shot up. I had to brace my knees against the wheel. The control column kept trying to push me through the back of my seat. I motioned to Long to help me, and between us we managed to push the control column forward and assume level flight.

"Meanwhile a nice bit of drama was going on that I couldn't see.

"My radio gunner and assistant radio operator, Arthur Bouthellier—a commercial artist from Westcott, Rhode Island—suddenly passed out. The radio operator, Walter Parcells, a redheaded printer's apprentice from Kingston, Washington, saw that gun-



fire had damaged the oxygen system. He tore off his own oxygen mask and, using the emergency 'mercy flask,' went to work on Bouthellier, who revived just in time to see Parcells go out.

"He took the emergency bottle from his own face and revived Parcells. After that, on the verge of going out himself, he called me to report the left oxygen supply line gone.

"Now, to keep half my crew from passing out, it was up to Long and me to get the ship down to 20,000 feet, where we could get by without oxygen.

"We had a tough time doing it. Phyllis wanted to go up, not down. But we got her into a steep dive, down to 20,000 feet, with the Huns following us down, giving us hell all the way."

STILL over enemy territory with the big 13-ton ship wobbling uncertainly, moving so slowly she was "like a sitting target" for the hornets swarming after her, Paine now decided it was time to do "some plain and fancy thinking."

As commanding officer, he was responsible for the lives of nine men. He called the roll, all answering including Peterson, who, with a bullet in his leg, said, "Sure I'm O. K. How's the ship? How are you?"

This bunch were, Paine now knew, as fine a crew as ever took off. "With thought of a German prison camp in mind," he said, "it seemed a tough thing to do, ordering them to bail out, even though the ship was doomed." But he gave the order, "Prepare to bail out!"

Each man knew what to do. Anyhow, they and their fellow raiders had downed thirteen Focke-Wulfs.

But fate intervened.

From the top turret and the belt and stirrups supporting him in firing position, Coburn suddenly slumped to the floor behind the pilots. He was helpless, barely conscious, and coughing up blood. His body was quivering with pain. Long asked permission to leave his wheel to help.

At once, despite all of Paine's efforts, the ship trembled and lunged upward.

Now Paine spoke into his mouthpiece, asking Lieutenant Komarek, the bombardier, to come up to help. Forward, in the very nose of the ship, Komarek and his navigator, Lieutenant John A. Thomson, twenty-three-year-old Washington University graduate and former market analyst for Time magazine, both moved back to the hatch leading "upstairs."

"Coming through the cracks," Komarek said, "were trickles of blood." When he tried to lift the hatch door, he reported back to Paine, he could not do it.

Again Long left the wheel, to ease Coburn off the hatch. Then, when Komarek relieved him at the wheel, he ran back along the bomb-bay catwalk to get first-aid equipment and help. Parcells now came forward and applied digital pressure to keep Coburn from bleeding to death. In this

way, the doctors said later, he saved his life.

Obviously Coburn could not bail out. "So," Paine explained, "it had to be England—or the wash!" meaning the Channel, now under them.

He used every trick he knew to nurse Phyllis on, careful all the while not to let her battered wing down. He knew that if it ever got down, he could never get it up again, and he was afraid to use his remaining two engines unnecessarily, lest they quit altogether.

Nudging him, Long pointed to an enemy plane ahead and above which was swinging as if to blast them out of their seats. In a moment Long nudged him again, then smiled and pointed. Racing to the rescue was a flock of Spitfires. "Nothing could have been more welcome," said Paine.

"So now," he continued, "we put Phyllis into a long dive for the nearest point on the English coast. We passed over one, then another, then a third British crash boat, racing out to give us a hand. We'd sure have needed one if we'd had to land in the wash. For our rubber boat had been shot to pieces."

Soon they were nearing England, where they knew every landing field was ready for them.

"What about it?" Long asked.

"I guess it will have to be a crash landing," Paine said.

"Not use your wheels—?"

"One of the tires is shot out," Paine replied. "Even if we could use our wheels, we'd run through half of England and over the edge."

"Crash landing it is, then," agreed Long. The crew was advised to stand by.

ON the field selected, as on others they had passed, an ambulance and fire truck could be seen waiting. While circling to the right—the only way the ship would turn—the two men planned their approach to the field. Together they fought her down for a belly landing, not at a Fortress' normal landing speed of around 110 miles an hour but, despite their most frantic efforts, nearer 170. Ahead of them suddenly loomed a hangar. With the plane

streaking straight at it like a flash, Paine gunned his last two motors. Suddenly the big battered ship lifted. An agonizing second later it cleared the hangar by less than a hair's breadth, knocking off one corner. But it held to the air.

Beyond was a wooded slope. Climbing slowly, the big ship brushed the trees all the way up, finally got into the clear.

Paine sighed his relief.

"All right so far!" smiled Long.

Making another wide right-hand swing, again these two young lawyers from the South quietly talked things over, decided what to do. Ignoring the cross wind and selecting the longest stretch on the fighter-plane field, they aimed to go in lower this time.

Fighting her down, they switched Phyllis' motors off, and she touched with little more than a jar. Said Sheeder, aft, "Gosh, look at my bottom turret tearing up that grass!" Finally she skidded the length of a football field, then stopped.

IN that instant she was surrounded by men with fire extinguishers and an excited, cheering R. A. F. crowd. From this mob a doctor emerged, asked to be shown the wounded.

"So," laughed Paine, "we piled out through the emergency door to take a look at Phyllis. The last man out ahead of me was big Komarek, carrying his bombsight. He must have loved Phyllis, battered up as she was, because, though terribly planesick, he was using his helmet to keep her clean. We got a laugh out of that."

"She looked like a big bird that had plumped out of the sky on her tummy," laughed Lieutenant Thomson.

Her left wing had been nearly wrecked by three high-explosive shells, and her aft section ripped wide open by flak. Her No. 1 motor was afire. Her four propellers were bent under her; even some of the blades were punctured by bullets. The upper turret was smashed. Aft of it a four-foot section of the fuselage had been torn away, leaving a big gaping hole.

Three shells had exploded against her right stabilizer, two against the vertical, one in the left horizontal, making R. A. F. pilots wonder how she had been steered at all. Altogether, sixteen vicious twenty-millimeter shells had exploded in or against her. At least 300 bullets had punctured her skin, turned areas of it into sieves, cut the oxygen tubes, cut or damaged nearly all the controls.

"She looked like a duck that about thirty guys with guns and cannon had taken pot shots at," said Bosco Taucher. "They tell me four other bombers on this mission went down. Phyllis took it and got back. So I said to the captain, 'What I'd like most, Charley, is a big hooker of Scotch, neat.'"

"And so," said their captain, "here we are in the Dorchester drinking whisky. Here's to Phyllis! God bless her!"

THE END

QUERY

MAYBE in a month or two

I shall have gotten over you;

And probably within a year

Somebody else will call me "dear."

I know in time I shall recover

And find myself another lover.

But facts like these don't ease my
plight—

What am I going to do tonight?

EVELYNE LOVE COOPER.