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FEBRUARY 8, 1944

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The bursting of the Focke-Wulf's 20 mm cannons around our ship was the first indication that we had been singled out. Then the celestial dome blew up in front of me. After that I could hear 20 mm striking and exploding as they hit the ship. Pieces of equipment and parts of the ship were flying about, striking my feet and legs.

When the oxygen cylinders exploded, I didn't realize what had happened. The noise of the explosion was muffled by my helmet and headset, but the concussion stunned me for a few moments. Someone lighting a match in a gas-filled room would cause much the same effect as the explosion. Only, instead of flames decreasing immediately after the explosion, they seemed to continue all around us with the same intensity.

In a half-dazed state, I became slowly conscious that the entire cockpit was filled with smoke and flames. I must have been knocked unconscious for a period of time. It was difficult to see through the smoke and flames, but I could see the terrified face of Eike, his eyes almost out of his head, looking crazily around him as he tore frantically at his flaksuit and safety belt. I think Holbert had already jumped as I couldn't see him at all.

As I looked back at Eike, after trying to see Holbert, he seemed absolutely mad and out of his head. Then, as my mind seemed to clear a little more, I too became absolutely terrified. I had been frightened before but never completely lost my wits from terror. It was horrible. I tried to yell or scream, but the sound died in my throat and my open mouth emitted no sound. I tried to jump out of my seat, but my safety belt held me there.

My only thought was to get out of that terrible fire. I couldn't think as I clawed wildly for my safety belt. The fact that I had buckled my safety belt under my flak suit on this raid, instead of over it in my usual way, was the only reason I was able to regain a semblance of sanity. For, as I endeavored to unfasten my safety belt, I could not realize in my terrorized and stupefied mind why I could not find it. It was only with great mental effort that I figured out why and thus started my thought process again. As I looked down and realized what the trouble was, a little of the terror left me. But it wasn't until I had thrown off my flak suit and unfastened my safety belt that I regained control of myself.

As I left my seat, Eike had just taken his chute pack from beneath his seat and made his way to the nose hatch to jump. I hesitated momentarily, not knowing what to do and switched on the auto pilot. Although not terrified as before, I was still greatly shaken and afraid. I acted more from instinct; I don't recall any thoughts. I grabbed a fire extinguisher, but it had no more effect on the blaze than an eyedropper. Deciding it would be impossible to save the ship, I threw the extinguisher down, climbed back from between the seats where I had been standing, held the emergency switch on and began calling through the interphone for the crew to jump. I don't know how long I continued to call, but not getting any response, I felt they had jumped.

The fire was getting so hot I could hardly stand it. My neck was burning and I pulled my scarf over the exposed skin. My nose, cheeks, eyebrows, eyelids and lower forehead must have been burned when I was using the extinguisher. I don't recall any pain from my face until I was on the ground. It was impossible to go back through the fire to see if they had jumped from the rear of the ship, and as I couldn't get any response from anyone, I left the cockpit. As I crawled down to the escape hatch, I was surprised to see Benny and Dan still in the nose. As I made my way toward them, Benny looked down and saw me. I motioned for him to come. He hit Dan on the arm and they both dived toward their chutes. We went out through the nose hatch.

When I jumped, our bomb bay doors were still open. As I crawled through the escape hatch, I recalled the discussion we had about clearing them when jumping and I wondered if I would. I did! I had been a good while without oxygen and was feeling the effects as I fell. We were at 20,000 feet. I was determined to make a delayed jump and as I extended my arms to stop somersaulting, I caught a glimpse of what I thought were eight billowing chutes.

Someone had told me that we would fall about 10,000 feet a minute so I started counting to sixty as I fell through the clouds, vapor and then clear air. But after reaching sixty, I still couldn't see the ground. I started counting again but gave it up and watched the ground. As I came out of a cloud, the earth appeared for a second and then disappeared again as I reached another cloud. I was falling into the country. There were little clusters of white farm buildings, green squares of pasture and dark brown, irregular and leafless woods. Then as the earth appeared again, I waited until I could distinguish objects very clearly and pulled the rip cord.

It seemed natural to wonder if the chute would open. I knew soon enough as the air caught, filled the chute, and the jerk nearly snapped off my head. The rushing air roaring in my ears stopped suddenly and a most wonderful and peaceful quiet settled over me. It seemed as if I had come out of that hell above into a heaven of peace and rest.

Up above, I could now hear the heavy deep sound of the "Forts" mingled with angry rasps of the fighters. But with the peaceful country coming up to meet me, baked in sunshine, the war and all that had happened only a few seconds before seemed like a bad dream long ago. A light breeze seemed to carry me toward a wood, and I reached up to grab the shrouds in order to guide myself into a pasture. I found I was so weak I could hardly lift myself up in my harness. I was too close to the ground to pilot my course. I placed my feet together and resignedly watched the trees rush up at me.

The above is an excerpt from a diary, hand written by Howard Snyder, pilot of the B-17 Flying Fortress *Susan Ruth* several weeks after he was shot down over German occupied Europe.

As he stated,

This story is being attempted primarily to occupy my time, which hangs heavily over my head, and secondly, it may prove of greater interest than a verbal account later.

I have refrained from writing this account before, for fear that it might fall into improper hands and cause serious results to those who have so kindly befriended me. However, Maurice has assured me that he has a great many hidden secret papers in connection with his work and one—more or less—would make little difference. Of course, persons, dates and places shall

remain anonymous and I shall attempt to write in a somewhat vague manner in hopes of further safety.

It is impossible to know whether I shall be able to finish writing my adventure up to the point of departure or whether I will even leave this country. At least, it will give me something to do while I wait—wait—wait—in hope of returning to England through the underground.

After the war, Howard's diary was given to Lt. Jack Creek, U.S. Army 385th Anti-Aircraft Artillery by Maurice (whom Howard mentioned in his diary) and Ghislaine Bailleux in Charleroi, Belgium. Lt. Creek mailed it to Howard's wife, Ruth Snyder, on July 4, 1945, from Cuxhaven, Germany.



The envelope (containing Howard's diary)
that Lt. Creek sent to Ruth Snyder