
Catch 22 Addendum

Story by Richard Hugo, 825th Sq



Once in a while a friend will ask me what I think of *Catch 22*. When I'm asked I feel faintly uncomfortable because, being a writer and having been a bombardier in the 15th Air Force in Italy, I suspect my answer is supposed to carry some extra weight and I don't like bearing the responsibility of the expert critic. My admiration for those who do is considerable.

I enjoyed the book, and I'm sure I would have enjoyed it without my background of experience, but given that, Heller brought memories pouring back, some painful, some delightful, and all of them welcome because bad or good they are mine.

The bombers in *Catch 22* are mediums in the 12th Air Force, and the airfield is located in Corsica. Rome, readily accessible in the novel, is subdued by war, slightly sinister, but a relief from the boredom of the airfield. Under the squalor, life still pulsates. Women and booze can be had.

Our bomber was the B-24 a heavy bomber, the flying pregnant water buffalo we called it. We flew fewer and longer missions, and we flew at high altitude. And we were located near Cerignola, which is not Rome, in drab, hostile Puglia.

If modern war is a "giant slapstick" as Karl Shapiro said somewhere, is really a spectacle of men and whole nations gone bananas—and I think it is even when a war is as close to being "justified" as was World War 11—then I suppose no one has captured that insanity better than Heller, at least not since Byron's hilarious description of battle in "Don Juan."

Funny as *Catch 22* is, it is more sad than funny. Accuracy wouldn't have it another way, and Heller is much more accurate than a stranger to the experiences that initiated the novel could imagine. After the misery, despair, boredom and fear are modified or erased by years, the sadness remains, a gnawing constant. My favorite book about the war remains *The Gallary* by John Horne Burns because, despite its dated style, it confined itself to the essentials of suffering and fear, most of all to a sad-

ness undiluted by sociological or political idealism. When someone is trying to kill you, you try to stay alive. The side you happen to be on makes little difference, and even if it did, you had little or no control over it to start with. Idealism is a luxury most poor people can't afford. I wish this weren't true.

Some critics have objected to Milo Minderbinder bombing his own airfield. Psychologically it's a rare weak point in the book. When men are as terrified as Yossarian is, they are dangerous. Milo would have shot on the spot because funny as war can be, the men involved are often deadly serious. One story that made the rounds in Italy was about a line sergeant (a sergeant who worked on the flight line on the field) who was finally caught after ten B-24's had exploded on takeoff over a period of several weeks. The sergeant, the story went, had been getting 1000 dollars a plane and 100 dollars a man from the Germans, a total of 2000 dollars an explosion. He was tried, convicted and executed within a half hour after he was caught. His immediate superior, a lieutenant, had put a .45 to the sergeant's head and pulled the trigger a minute or two after the sentence was read. I don't know if the story was true or not but I never met anyone who didn't believe it.

Aside from objections to the Minderbinder bombing, *Catch 22* seems most accurate when it is screwiest. I clowned my way through the war as best I could, and so did others. What else could a sane person do. If we were sane. The events were out of control. Yossarian is a sane man in a world gone ape. Even rational scientific laws are suspended. Planes disappear into clouds without a trace, and mystical as that may sound to someone who wasn't there, it is true.

Yossarian can accept this mad world and fly more and more missions as the quota increases until finally the odds run out and he is killed. He can escape it by telling lies, by saying the madness is really sanity, and giving glowing reports to high level Washington officials about perverted and degenerate men. Or he