



fire struck with deadly accuracy. In a Fourth of July type spectacular, we saw three nearby planes shot down. Others, which were hit, eased away from the formation possibly to become victims for waiting German fighters unless they could find the protection of U.S. P-38s, P-47s, or P-51s fighters. Brave, talented black officers of the famous Tuskegee Airmen Group piloted many of these.

One of the planes was hit, enveloped in flames and spun lazily toward the ground. Terrified but fascinated, I rose in my turret straining to watch it and look for parachutes. I saw none. One plane that was hit I thought might be Herb's. Before we got back to base, our pilot confirmed that the plane with Herb's crew had gone down. I was torn between relief over my own survival and depression over the loss of those for whom this Friday the 13th was fatal. Photography confirmed that our bombs destroyed a large section of Vienna rail yards.

When I got back to my tent a remarkable thing happened. As I was about to collapse on my cot, I glanced across the way and saw the figure of a man sitting on the ground outside of Herb's tent holding his head in his hands. Could that be Herb? Thank you Lord it was Herb! Conversation with him revealed that he had been told to stand down from that day's mission because his plane was involved in an experimental program to install radar in the nose. A navigator replaced him. During the next three months, although crushed by the deaths of some of his crew members (three or four of them did successfully bail out after they had dropped their bombs), Herb plunged ahead seeking assignment to any mission where there was an opening. He got in 33 missions. He told me that some evenings he went out to one of the ships, donned his flight gear and practiced getting out of his turret to the nose wheel door through which he would escape in the event his ship was hit. He said he cut his time in half with practice and urged me to do the same. I never did. With two missions left to go, Herb could refuse a mission. He turned down Vienna.

One day when I was in a chow line with Herb and others, a conversation developed that was not uncommon among threatened young soldiers. It was suggested to a married gunner that he give his "lonely" wife's phone number to Herb who would be going back to the States in a few days. The man's hot retort was

that Herb was going to get shot down and killed before he ever got to his wife. The accuracy of that prediction was tested the very next day, January 20, 1945 when our Wing attacked Hitler's boyhood home, Linz, Austria.

Herb and I were both there. A ship just ahead of us got a direct hit, caught fire and exploded in our faces. Herb's plane did not seem to have trouble over the target, but ran into bad weather on the way home. It made it back to the Adriatic Sea then disappeared into a cloud bank and was presumed lost. I convinced myself that Herb was not on that plane. Somehow he had cheated death again.

He just wanted too much to live. I piled out of the truck that brought us back to our area and ran to his tent expecting to find him. He wasn't there. I never saw him again. Herb Brooks, whom we considered the luckiest guy in our outfit, apparently had his luck run out a few days before he was slated to go back to his home in New York City. My guess is, however, Herb did go home that day to heaven.

The Germans surrendered approximately three months later. Finishing with 28 missions, I went home and married a fine woman who has put up with me for nearly half a century. We have great children and grandchildren. It has been a good life, but there has been a drop of guilt mixed in with the joy. In trying to disentangle God's strange game plan as all veterans of wartime combat seem to do, we are thankful for the great blessing we have been given, but do ask,

"Why me, Lord?" About Herb Brooks and all the rest of our buddies who died we ask, "Why them, Lord?"

In a recent motion picture, which brought tears to my eyes, a dying army captain who had saved a private's life on the battlefield, embraced him and whispered, "Earn this! Earn it"

Vets continue to think about and pray for our departed comrades in arms particularly at national holidays. We try with varying degrees of success to lead decent lives in their memory. But we never deceive ourselves into believing that we can ever earn the sacrifice they made for us.

In January 1944, a month after my 18th birthday, I was called to World War II volunteer service with the U.S. Army Air Corps. Eight months later, after hasty training as an aerial gunner and