

Flack

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SIMMONS CRAWLED under the top turret and came forward to stand between us. He unplugged his mask from the walk-around bottle and made his connection with an extra outlet on the flight deck. Then he plugged in his headset and his microphone.

"We're right on schedule. Should be at the IP in ten minutes. Good deal not being lead navigator. It gives me more time to look around." His voice was muffled and distorted by the throat mike. His eyes above the oxygen mask smiled at me.

"Why don't you try and spot those flack guns on this run? S-2 has been trying to get their position for weeks. You might even get a shiny new medal." I turned back to the controls.

George looked over from the right seat. His eyes looked pained. "I'm going to get a new mask. This damned thing has my nose feeling like Bob Hope's looks."

"Top turret to co-pilot. Lieutenant, you've said that on the last four trips. When are you going to do it?"

"This time for sure. I can't stand this thing any longer. It was all right for the short flights we've been having but these long grinds are too much." He turned and gazed out of the window. Then he pressed his mike button and checked the crew for oxygen.

"Right and left waist, O. K."

"Tail gunner, O. K."

"Nose gunner and bombardier, O. K."

"Belly turret, O. K. Fill me up again before the run, will you, Frank?"

"Roger."

George turned and checked the men on the flight deck. They nodded to him in turn, and he turned back to the front and watched the diaphragm on his oxygen regulator pulsing in and out, in and out.

"Flack at three o'clock!"

The formation started a slow sweeping turn to the left. On the lead ship, the bomb-bay doors started to roll open and the cat-walk was visible, looking like a fantastic X-ray picture.

"Bomb-bay doors open. Give me a long level, level, level." I struggled with the controls, trying to keep the plane level and still keep my place in formation. Black blossoms of smoke came between us and the lead plane. Farther ahead more puffs of smoke came up and we all ducked instinctively as the spent fragments rattled off the fuselage.

"Heard that one. It's getting close," George muttered as he grabbed the wheel to help me. We edged in closer to the lead plane. Now the sky was full of oily black bursts. We could even identify those from individual batteries. They would burst successively higher with a stair-step effect. To us they looked like a ladder to hell. We could not even turn to avoid them now. We were on the bomb run.

Simmons disappeared under the turret to lie down on the floor, his head stuck out over the open bomb-bay. "I'm set, Sonny. How much longer?"

"Thirty seconds and shut up. Level, level." An eternity passed. "Bombs away." I could hear the clatter of the bomb releases and trimmed the ship for the shift of loading. Then I throttled back to keep from overtaking the lead ship. Again we turned—this time toward home. The flack remained very heavy for we were still within range of all the guns on the tiny island beneath us, but now we could loosen the formation and take evasive action. Here and there in the formation a ship was hit and lurched drunkenly. Engines stopped, props were feathered, and the ships climbed back into place with one or two propellers still. One had an engine smoking.

"Can anyone see if we're hit," I asked on interphone as another turn took us out of the flack and away from the island.

"Our left rudder got it. The control surface has peeled bare from the elevator up."

"Is the right rudder O. K.?"

"Seems to be, Sir," came another voice.

Gingerly, I pressed first the left and then the right pedal. "Doesn't seem to be binding. Guess we're O. K." With a sign to George, I let go of the controls. "S-2 must have been right for a change. I didn't see any fighters at all." I unstrapped my flack armor, unhooked my safety belt, changed my oxygen hose to a walk-around bottle and slipped out of my parachute harness. Before I unfastened my mike, I turned again to George. "Back in a second. Then you can go." He nodded, and I crawled out of the cockpit and back to the flight deck.