THE Heroes

S/SGT. HENRY E. ERWIN

YOU have been reading George Creel's great series of portraits of heroes each week in these pages. We have asked Mr. Creel to let us guest-edit his column this one week, because we have our own personal candidate for hero, and we'd like to tell his story again. We say "again," because we helped write something about him once before, on a memorable night at a B-29 base in the Marianas. What we were privileged to help write that night was his recommendation for the Congressional Medal of Honor. His name is Staff Sergeant Henry E. Erwin of Bessemer, Alabama. He was radio operator on a B-29, and what he did, we think, was the bravest thing we've ever heard of.

We were with Colonel Carl Storrie, the B-29 group's noted leader, when Erwin's plane returned to the base that night, and we heard the story in faltering sentences from the stunned, incredulous members of his crew.

It had happened about an hour off the coast of Japan, Captain Tony Simeral, the pilot, said. Simeral's hands were dotted with burns, and there were deep holes burned in the hands of Lieutenant Colonel Gene Strouse, the squadron leader, who was flying copilot. But they paid no attention to their burns; what Sergeant Erwin had done put everything else out of their minds.

They were lead ship in the formation, Simeral said. An hour off the coast, they were supposed to drop a phosphorus smoke bomb to assemble the other B-29s into position. Dropping the bomb was the radio operator's job: at a signal from the pilot he was to release it through a narrow tube with a flap valve at the bottom. Simeral gave Erwin the signal; but there was malfunction in the tube. The sputtering bomb hit the jammed valve, bounced back into the ship, and exploded in Erwin's face, searing off an ear and blinding both eyes.

You know how phosphorus burns, with a furious intensity that makes fuselage metal blaze like tinder. The bomb at Erwin's feet was eating its way through the deck, and there was a full load of incendiaries below. He was alone; the navigator had left his table just before and gone up to the astrodome to get a star shot. There was no time to think. He stooped, picked up the white-hot mass of flames in his bare hands, and started forward toward the cockpit, feeling his way with elbows and feet.

The navigator's folding table was down and latched, blocking his way. Erwin's sleeves were rolled up. He placed the blazing bomb under his bared right arm, hugging it against his side while the fire ate into his flesh (you thought of the Spartan boy and the fox), and with the remains of his left hand fumbled with the spring latch until it opened. The loose skin came off his hand onto the table as he lifted it. We looked over the plane next day; you could see the imprint of his whole hand seared on the table. He took the bomb back in his hands, and he held it out in front of him, and stumbled forward again. He passed the engineer's compartment, a walking torch. The engineer turned a fire extinguisher on him and smothered the flames in his clothing, but the phosphorus was burning into his flesh as intensely as ever. He reached the copilot, and gasped, "Is the window open, sir?" and leaned over and tossed out the bomb. Then he collapsed on the flight deck.

The smoke had blotted out the instrument panel, the plane was out of control; Simeral's wing plane, following him down, reported that he was less than 300 feet off the water when he righted it. Simeral radioed the formation that he was turning back, jettisoned his bombs, raced for the emergency field at Iwo Jima. The crew applied first aid to Erwin, gave him plasma, smeared grease on his smoldering flesh. He never lost consciousness; halfway back to Iwo, he asked another question, the only other time he spoke: "Is everybody else all right, sir?" When they removed the unguent pads at Iwo a couple of hours later, and exposed his flesh to the air, it began to smolder again. He was still exhaling smoke, they said, and his body and limbs had become so rigid that he had to be eased through the engineer's window. He could not see or feel, but he could know—he could always know—that he had saved the lives of the ten men of his crew. . . .

As we passed through Pearl Harbor a few days later, we heard about an urgent request for a Congressional Medal of Honor. They wanted to make the presentation to a critically injured sergeant in Guam. There was just one Congressional Medal in the whole Pacific, as it happened, in a display case at General Richardson's headquarters. They broke open the case, and flew the medal by special plane. We knew it was for Sergeant Erwin; and we knew that no American had ever deserved the Congressional Medal more.

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