

Night Life IN THE SKY

BY MARTHA GELLHORN

RADIOED FROM FRANCE



"They all have a right to shoot at us. I wouldn't advise it."

Collier's girl correspondent sat on a wobbly crate and flew over Germany looking for enemy planes at night. Her nose ran, her oxygen mask slipped off, her stomach got mad, she was scared and she froze. They didn't down any Germans, but otherwise that's routine life for the Black Widow pilots

IN THE daytime the field was ugly as all forward airfields are, with the improvised buildings of the Ninth Air Force squadrons and a tent hospital outlining its edges. The air was thunderous with planes, and everyone looked small, eaten with cold and intently busy. But when darkness comes, all these fields are silent and nothing moves and they seem like plateaus on the moon. When darkness comes, the Black Widows take over.

The major commanding the 435th Night Fighter Squadron of the Ninth Air Force must have been all of twenty-six, blond and tough and with the hard, tired look one is used to seeing on the faces of all the young. He was making a speech. His squadron headquarters had been pieced together from the wood of a German barracks and it was very cold, with one iron stove to heat the room, and badly lighted by a few unshaded bulbs.

"Lady," he said earnestly, "everyone shoots at us. Friendly bombers and friendly flak and enemy flak and enemy fighters. Just anybody at all; they all have a right to shoot at us. I wouldn't advise it."

Last night one of their planes had been shot down, and the squadron doctor, who had driven over to the place where the plane crashed, returned to report that nothing remained of the pilot and the radio operator except four feet and two hands. There is never any time for pity or sorrow; at least, there is no time to show these feelings.

"Well," said the major, "if you're going, you better come with me. I'm on the first mission."

We ate supper at five, and it was already night. They had their mess in a large, untidy, dark, icy house. The pilots and radio operators ate in a big room wearing their flying clothes, and they passed heavy dishes of lukewarm unpalatable food around the long tables, and they laughed and shouted to one another, eating in haste.

A captain beside me began to list again the horrors of night flying until the major said, "She's coming with us now, so leave her alone. Tell her something good."

Flying Can Be Beautiful

The captain said at once, "It will be beautiful, anyhow; it's certainly beautiful up there and it's going to be a fine night."

I handed a bowl of congealed mashed potatoes to the major and thought that the myth of the glamorous lives of pilots is the silliest myth of all. Actually they live like hell at these forward fields. It is only one step better than the foxhole. Mostly they sleep in tents, and there is no escaping the cold, and there is nothing to do but fly, sleep, eat and wait to fly again. They do not apparently see anything remarkable in these living conditions. They always speak with pity of the infantry who have a truly "rugged" life.

After supper we went back to squadron headquarters. I was zipped into flying pants, flying boots and a flying jacket, feeling more and more breathless at each layer. The major appeared with an oxygen mask, and there was some difficulty in fitting the thing.

"They didn't make these for ladies," he said. "Can you breathe?"

Someone was stuffing gloves in my hand, and someone else was attempting to fasten a parachute on me. I found

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myself snoring inside the mask and shook my head, and the major said, "Okay, that'll do."

We now piled into a jeep again; the major, the radio operator, the driver and I. It was pretty difficult to hoist one's body around, and there was a marked tendency to sit down when one meant to stand up, due to the weight of the parachute on one's bottom. It was so cold that one shrank into one's clothes and felt oneself shriveling in the wind. Now we could see the sleek, sharp outlines of the black plane ahead. It was a beautiful plane with the two upcurling tails and the long narrow wings, and it looked in the night like a delicate, deadly dragonfly.

No one spoke in the jeep. The radio operator said thoughtfully, "This is the worst part of any mission." After that, we were too busy to think about better or worse.

The major climbed in the cockpit and began getting the plane ready. The radio operator was delegated to give me the necessary information. This was all so hopelessly mad that it could only be taken as a joke. He said in the dark, "If anything happens, you turn this handle."

How to Make a Quick Exit

"What handle? Where?" I said to myself nervously; I could not find the wretched thing.

"That will open the trap. Then turn this other handle on the right; it's wired but you won't have any trouble. That will drop the ladder out, and then all you have to do is fall out backward. You know where your ripcord is, don't you?"

"Yes," I said sadly.

"If anything goes wrong with those two, you turn this handle on the cowl, and that whole piece of glass will fall out, and you can climb out through that; it's a little narrow with all those clothes on, but it will be all right, I guess. Well, that's about all," said he. "Have you got a cushion for her?" he asked the crew chief, and from nowhere a rather flat little sofa cushion appeared and was put on top of the wooden crate which was to be my seat. No one was intended to ride back here in the glass bulb between the twin tails, and there was no seat or safety belt.

"Oh, and your oxygen mask," said the radio operator. "It plugs in here and this is your earphone plug-in."

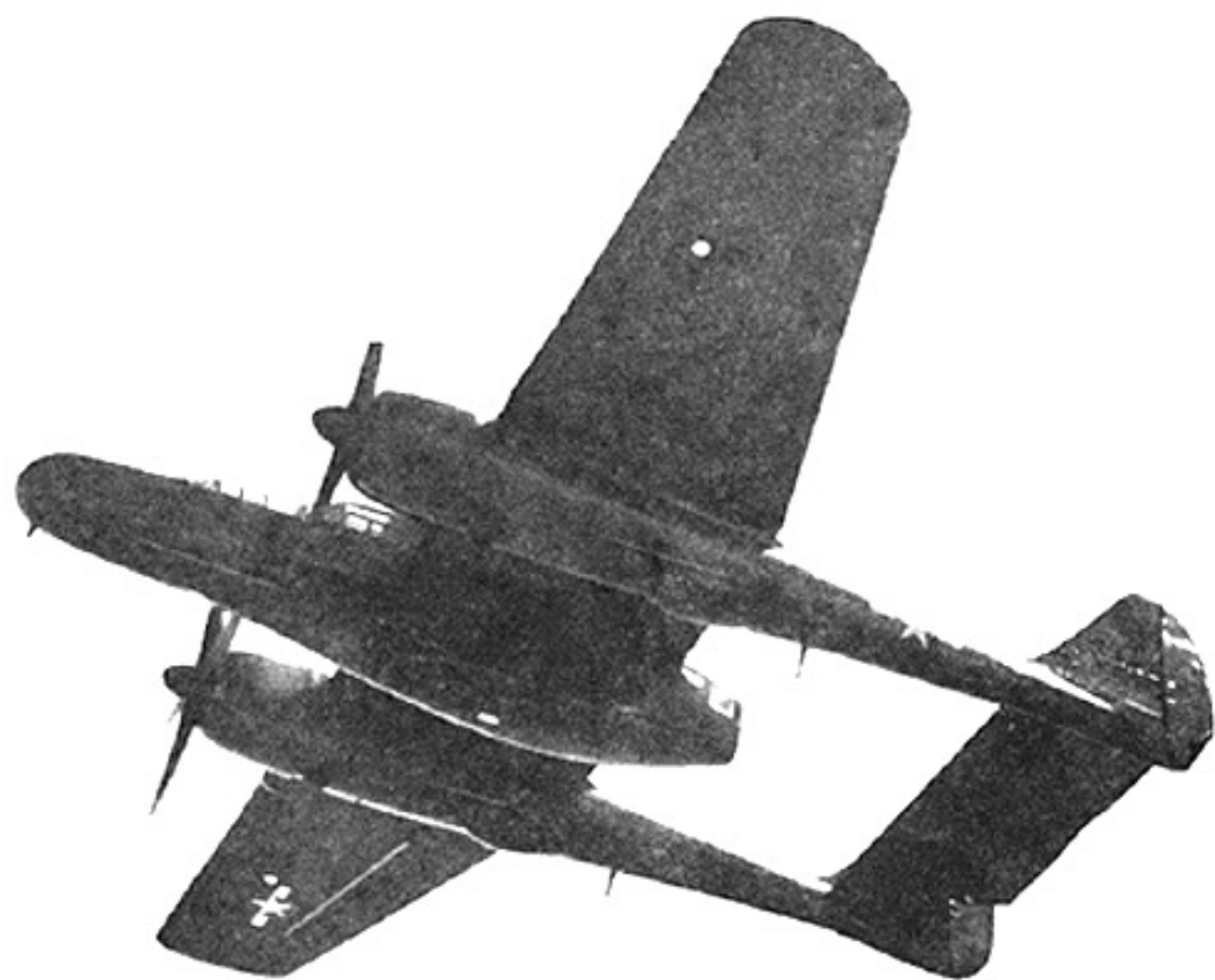
I had given up hope by now; it was all too complicated, and I thought gloomily that every one of these darned wires would come undone, I would fall out without meaning to or get hurled off my crate and mashed against the confused steel sides of my little glass case and I was already cold, and so I decided to try very hard to think of something else, like for instance a nice hot bath or next summer or going to the movies.

Meanwhile, a brisk, businesslike conversation went on in the cockpit; everyone's voice came through the earphones so deafeningly that I could scarcely distinguish words, but from the tone of it, it sounded as calm and sensible as if you were talking about whether there was enough gas and oil in the car to get to the country club.

We simply hurtled into the night and soared for the stars. I have never been part of such a take-off; and the actual feeling of flying became so intense that one felt free of the plane and as if one were moving nakedly and with no hindrance through a sky that was bigger (Continued on page 31)

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ILLUSTRATED BY WILLIAM VON RIEGEN



"The Black Widow is a beautiful plane that looks in the night like a delicate deadly dragonfly"

than any sky has ever been before. It was very beautiful, too, with a glowing moon and the stars close. I knew that I was an inferior soul, because the beauty was not going to soothe my spirit or hold my attention. The beauty was a vast emptiness in which we roared alone and the beauty was a good deal too scary for my taste.

Now the conversation began on the radio; or rather it had been going on all along, only it seemed clearer now. Somewhere on the distant, dark snow-covered earth, men would be sitting in a hidden caravan crouched over the black magic radio instruments, and a voice came from wherever they were speaking a very technical code, and this plane obeyed that voice.

At hundreds of miles an hour we fled blindly through the night. A night fighter pilot is directed by radio instruments to his quarry, which he cannot see, and he must not fire until he has a visual (that is, until he actually sees and identifies the other plane) and he can be as close as 200 yards from the enemy plane before he is certain of it. Until that time, one swerves and swoops, climbs and falls alone, like a strange mad bird obeying the voice of the ground control.

It was easy to realize how busy the two men in the cockpit were: the radio operator must interpret these directions and give the course to the pilot, who must instantly drive the plane according to these rapid, changing orders. They would be so completely and fiercely absorbed in their work that they would have little time to think, or so I imagined it. All standards in war seem insane; these men fly every night, often twice, and sometimes three times a night. This is their job, and they do it as if it were perfectly normal.

We were over Germany, and a blacker, less inviting piece of land I never saw. It was covered with snow. There were mountains; there was no light and no sign of human life, but the land itself looked actively hostile. Then the voice from the ground said something, the pilot said "Roger," and the plane simply vaulted up the sky.

This ranked easily as one of the nastiest sensations I have ever felt. We climbed in a matter of seconds from 11,000 to 22,000 feet. That does not sound like much written out but it felt like nothing human. One's body turned to iron and was crushed down, feeling as if an enormous weight were pressing on something that would not yield. My oxygen mask was too large and had to be held on. As I held it with my right hand and held onto some kind of steel shelf with my left hand (so as not to fall backward off my darling little crate), I thought that (a) my stomach was going to be flattened against my backbone, and (b) that I was going to strangle.

Guided to Our Destination

This loathsome set of feelings went on, and meantime the radio conversation sharpened and went faster and louder, and I knew, though the words were muddled, that we were being led to our quarry. I had now reached a stage of dull resignation and I only prayed that we would stop doing whatever we were doing, and do something else.

The plane stopped climbing and now it was just hard to breathe. An added charm is that one's nose, a reasonably earthy instrument, flows steadily in this cold and of course is unwipable; presently, since the temperature inside the plane was thirty below zero, one finds oneself with a small frozen river on one's face. This is mentioned only in passing because it is a minor matter but there it is.

The plane, driven on by the loud ground voice, was roaring high and straight through the sky. Then for no reason I could discover, we turned over on a wing and dropped sideways a few miles toward the ground. That, too, was an undesirable sensation; one's insides seemed to drain away, leaving one empty and weak and not at all certain which side was upright. The pilot said something to me in a nice cozy voice, but I did not

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"If anything goes wrong - you turn this handle"

understand. He repeated it. I gathered that we had just dropped through the sky that way in order to avoid flak at Cologne. It appeared that we had been following a friendly plane which must have been a bomber and was anyhow copping the flak above Cologne. It seemed very restful to be flying level at 11,000 feet again. The radio voices chatted to each other, apparently saying what a pity the whole thing had been, and better luck next time.

Everything seemed pretty calm now except for the fact that we were still over Germany, which was a no-good place to be. Then the pilot called to me over the intercom and, looking where he told me, I saw the trail of a V-2. It came from somewhere deeper inside Germany and was, at this distance, a red ball of fire and it rose perpendicularly from the ground and passed out of sight over the top of the sky in a few seconds.

Then there were gun flashes to the west where the front seemed to be waking up. There was one huge gun which opened like a blast furnace, only I could not tell whether it was theirs or ours. On the ground now we saw fixed flares, and again did not know what they were; then there would be the sudden quaking, soundless fire of the guns.

Closing in for the Kill

Then the ground voice spoke again, giving brisk orders, and the plane flicked neatly over on a wing and glided steeply downward. The pilot was asking questions, and more orders came from the ground. I could tell that we were hunting and getting close. It seemed to me by now that this had been going on forever; one had sat since the beginning of time on a wobbly crate in the middle of heaven, and there obviously was no end to it.

Then the plane slowed terrifyingly. It felt as if it were standing still in the air, and at the same time the pilot's voice cracked angrily on the radio. Nothing happened. There

was some reply from the ground, and the pilot said very angrily, "For God's sake." The snow-covered land was nearer now and so were the gun flashes.

The pilot spoke again on the intercom. We had been on the trail of an authentic enemy plane, but due to some miscalculation on a ground dial, we were guided wrongly. We were therefore briefly in the unfortunate position of getting shot at rather than doing the shooting, but luckily the Heinie did not wish to fight and had streaked off west and lost himself. The pilot was furious.

And now we were going home, as the time limit was nearly up. Suddenly the pilot said, "See the flak?" I had seen it to the left. I thought it was low and far away, and I was sad for the unlucky men who were getting it. This proves forever the "Ignorance is bliss" school of thought; the flak was shooting at us, the distance was too close for comfort, and I imagined that the shells went no higher than the tracers.

We did another quick aerial pirouette and roared for home.

We landed as we had taken off, which is to say like a bolt of lightning. We had been out a little over two and a half hours, and the major was almost blue with cold. He had not been heavily dressed, because he could not fly the plane if his body was hampered by all that clothing. So for two hours and a half now, and probably for two hours and a half later that night and every other night, he would sit in a plane in a temperature of thirty below zero and simply take it. He did say in passing, "Gosh, it's cold!"

The major was rather depressed about the evening. It had been a boring patrol; nothing had happened. There was one good chance of a fight and it had been mucked up and, all in all, he felt browned off. So we climbed stiffly into the jeep and went back to the squadron shack. The other planes of this mission were coming in, landing at that soul-shaking speed, and a new mission would be leaving within a few minutes.