Collier's

DECEMBER 11, 1943

THEY ALSO SERVE . . .

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This business of waiting for the big bombers to return from their missions is real war, a war of of tension and sleeplessness, in which no time exists. It's fought by the ground crews, namel-ess G.I.s in grimy dungarees

Few can appreciate the silent agony of the crew counting and identifying the home-ward-winging bombers, waiting, watching

IT WAS funny to see a morning newspaper from the States at this American bomber base in England. It was funny to see a morning newspaper at all, as a matter of fact, because here at the base you had almost forgotten such things as morning or night. There were no days in the week here, just an endless succession of hours, and some of them you slept, if you were lucky; or, if you were hungry, you knocked off what you were doing and got something to eat.

Time didn't go by the clock; it went by a mission taking off and getting back again. You said, "Twelve o'clock," but that could be either noon or midnight; if it was dark, was how you could tell. Day ran into night, and night ran into the next day, and it was funny to think of an orderly existence that began at eight o'clock with breakfast and the morning paper.

We didn't get to read the newspaper just then, as it happened; for a familiar, far-off drone was beginning to fill the sky, and we folded the paper and stuffed it absently in our pocket.

You forget everything else when you hear that sound the big Forts make. It is a deep, unhurried, somber sound, like a gathering wind, and once you hear it you never mistake it. Ahead of it, the escorting fighter planes hurtle the field, homeward bound; but above their roar and shrill, exuberant scream, above the jeeps scurrying past you and the ominous pant of crash trucks parked in readiness at the end of the runway, you can make out in the distance that unmistakable, solemn drone of engines turning, turning steadily, bringing the bombers back again from Germany.

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report to Intelligence officers the moment they land at home base

Even before you see them, you feel a strange hush over the base. The roof of the control tower fills with officers, peering through field glasses; mechanics crowd the doors of armament shops and hangars, and stare overhead in silence; outside the mess hall, a cook tilts his white cap expectantly. Enlisted men on bicycles begin to pedal down from the squadron areas, as the rising and falling drone fills the sky, irresistibly drawn to the line. On the cement-hard stands around the perimeter track, the waiting ground crews rise nervously from toolboxes and empty cartridge cases and shade their eyes with oil-smeared wrists.

The Big Bombers Return

"Here they come!" Slowly, almost casually, the formation drifts toward you out of the bright haze; and, in unison, everyone around you starts counting aloud: "Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen—seventeen out of twenty. Maybe it isn't our group. But they're beginning to circle; it must be ours!"

Someone swears softly; the lead ship has fired two red flares, sign of a wounded man aboard, and the ambulances—the meat wagons—race down the strip to meet it. You count the formation again as it comes around: sixteen, seventeen. A murmur; another Fort appears over the horizon, struggling low, the props of two engines starkly feathered. Beside you, the starter of the fire truck whirs rapidly. Eighteen now, eighteen out of twenty. Chain-smoking, scanning the sky and waiting, sweating the formation home. . . .

For this is war, too, this war of sweating them out and sweating them in again —a war you never hear of. You hear of the bombs falling on Hamburg or Kiel, and the Forts zigzagging through black, cottony flak fields, and FWs half-rolling toward them with wing guns flaming scarlet.

But here at this sunny wheat field in England—with a threshing machine put-putting lazily beside the concrete runway, and a herd of cows grazing incongruously in the shadow of a hangar—is a war that's just as real, a war of tension and waiting and not sleeping, a war that goes on twenty-four hours a day, an unknown

war, whose soldiers are nameless G.I.s in grimy dungarees. Their battlefield is a semicircle of oil-soaked cement down on the line; the rattle of a riveting gun is their artillery. They don't get citations—only the nod of a pilot as he guides the ship to a safe halt and grins from the cockpit window: "Okay, Joe. . . ."

Take it around the clock at a bomber base and see how a big raid is made. The day begins—if a day really has any beginning here—with the mission's return: the big bombers peeling off and landing one by one, waddling and grunting—so graceful in the air, so clumsy on the ground—along the runway to their assigned parking places, where each crew chief stands with arms upraised to guide his own ship in.

Chocks under wheels, engines cut, the weary fliers in Mae Wests and electrically heated suits drop from hatches onto the welcome cement, eyes still hard with excitement, shaky voices trying to sound elaborately offhand: "Not too bad! We only saw about seventy-five fighters today." "Flak was a little rough, knocked out our oxygen system and cut our control cables. . . ."

Inspecting the Damage

The ground crews swarm over the ships, inspecting the jagged rips in wings and fuselage, a sagging trim tab, a neat hole in the nose. A jeep is ready to take the fliers to interrogation. The pilot pauses a moment to run over his flight report with the crew chief: "Supercharger regulator on Number Two engine wasn't operating right. Number One was a little rough at altitude; acted like fouled plugs. Oh, and better check that hydraulic system again, Joe. Had trouble getting the wheels down."

You pile into the jeep with them and jolt along the runway, past a vacant parking space where a group of mechanics wait in huddled silence.

A tail gunner beside you mutters, "Smitty's ground crew. I saw their ship go down. It went into a tight spin. I didn't see any chutes. Maybe somebody ought to tell them. . . ."

You glance back over your shoulder at the silent group, seated on toolboxes that are now suddenly useless; still hoping against hope, still scanning the empty sky.

The corridor outside the interrogation room is like a locker room after a game, with a smell of close-packed warm bodies and leather and wool. One by one, the combat crews take their turns at the wooden tables inside; nondescript groups of ten, officers and men dressed alike, bulky as a football squad in coveralls and padded flying jackets, leather helmets shoved back and earphone plugs dangling, perspiration trickling down over the smudges of burnt cork under their eyes.

Another rests a leather elbow on a crewmate's shoulder and answers between bites of a double-decker sandwich: "Yeah, I got one fighter. Time was 11:14. He was coming in on our tail, and I give him a burst. . . ." The Intelligence officer makes pencil notes, straining to hear above the clamor of the room. "Dropped our bombs right on the button. Tomorrow Lord Haw Haw'll say we hit two baby carriages, an orphan asylum and a church."

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A waist gunner gulps hot chocolate from a thick white mug. "I bet I seen every kind of Jerry fighter today. I bet they even sent up a couple of Link trainers at us."

Other combat crews are standing in line behind them; they grind out cigarettes, shove back chairs in relief: "Let's go," and they stumble toward the door, suddenly drunk with fatigue, heavy boots dragging, get a shower, get some chow and hit the sack. Another mission tomorrow! Get a little sleep!

They get some sleep, if they can; but, while they sleep, the rest of the field works on. There's no sleeping when you fight a war against time. Already it is mid-afternoon: the planes must be checked, battle damage repaired, engines tuned, fuel tanks and oxygen systems refilled; ammunition and bombs loaded; maps and weather reports readied for tomorrow's briefing; the whole vast preparation for a raid completed before take-off at dawn.

Back on the line, the ground crews swarm over the ships like benevolent gremlins. A mechanic straddles an engine and tugs at an obstinate cowling; two others balance atop a crew chief's twelve-foot ladder; a broad, tanned back bends upside down from a wing, and a naked arm reaches deep into a motor's warm, dark vitals. They work swiftly, surely, with a native American love of motors and tools; the wrenches flip naturally into their calloused hands.

You look at a freckle-faced kid with black, broken fingernails and a smudge of grease across his nose. A few months ago, back in Kansas or New Hampshire or Texas, he might have changed your oil, mister, wiped your windshield, checked your tires at the corner garage. He swears happily as his experienced fingers (he could take a Model A apart when he was ten) perform a delicate bit of surgery on a motor's intricate heart. No, you don't have to worry about the efficiency of our planes in the air; not with kids like this on the ground.

All over the field, hour after hour, the war against time goes on. Where flak or explosive shells have made cruel can-opener tears in the Fort's aluminum skin, expert sheet-metal men cut out the jagged holes and fit on new patches; their riveting machines chatter where a short time ago a .50-caliber Browning was blasting at a Messerschmitt 109. Specialists replace the smashed windows, fasten pieces over holes in the transparent nose or tail, drill the ends of shatter cracks to keep them from spreading. Ignition men pull out the severed strands of multiwired electric cables, swiftly thread in new ones.

The Work of Craftsmen

In the armament shop, the armorers go to work on the Fort's machine guns, taking them down carefully and scrutinizing each part for signs of wear. They measure the play in a T-slot, scratching a mark on the side, so it can be adjusted in the dark; check the ejector and cocking lever and firing pins; rub in the special nonfreezing oil with their bare hands instead of a rag, liking the sensual, slippery-smooth feel of metal under their fingers. They assemble

the parts again and listen with satisfaction to the soft, precise click of mating mechanism; in a few hours, the lives of ten men may depend on the accuracy of that gun.

As the afternoon wanes, fluorescent lights are turned on in the secret A-2 room. Intelligence officers co-ordinate the morning's combat reports to determine the numbers and types of enemy fighters and the location of flak areas; freshly developed photographs of the target are studied and results of the raid estimated; the data is hurried to wing headquarters.

Meantime, in front of a large-scale map hanging on the wall, a couple of officers on stepladders are plotting tomorrow's mission, marking the route with colored yarn, setting bright-headed pins to indicate the rendezvous, the diversion procedure, the target.

It's inky midnight down on the line. Flashlights wink as the ground crews race to complete last-minute adjustments on motors and superchargers. Trucks rumble through the blackout, slits for eyes.

In the mess hall, half-naked cooks bend over red-hot stoves, preparing breakfast; it's close to time, now.

"Breakfast at two o'clock. Briefing at three . . ." The groans and rolling over for a last luxurious minute, the splashing of water, the stumbling into clothes; the prunes and powdered eggs and coffee at one end of an echoing mess hall, while enlisted men with mops swab the floor; the waiting trucks, the cigarettes glowing in the dark.

From the shadowy ships on the line, the whine and sudden roar of motors being preflighted, mounting to a crescendo, fading, roaring again, suddenly still. The briefing room, packed with leather-clad figures leaning forward intently, inking data on the backs of bare hands: time of take-off, rendezvous, homing course in degrees and minutes. "All right, everybody synchronize your watches." The trucks making a swing around the perimeter track, dropping off the crews one by one beside their ships. An hour to check guns, test equipment, get into flying clothes. Take off at five.

You are on the line, in the slow pink dawn, as the ships waddle past you to the north-south runway, and line up for take-off. There's a strange hush over the field. On the roof of the control tower, the officers, eyes heavy with lack of sleep, stand with field glasses in hand.

Mechanics lean wearily against the doors of armament shops and hangars. A cook stands outside the mess hall, white cap shoved back from a perspiring forehead. On the parking spaces the ground crews watch in silence as the great lumbering Forts roll down the strip with increasing speed and skim lightly into the brightening eastern sky.

The ships circle slowly around the rim of the horizon, gradually pulling up together into formation, and the deep, somber drone begins to fade. The field relaxes but it does not rest. There's no rest, there's no end of a day here. They'll be back in a few hours; meantime there are engine changes to be made, wrecked planes to be dismantled for parts, new shipments of material to be uncrated.

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There's no sense in trying to catch some sleep. How can you sleep while a raid is on, while they're over Hannover or Regensburg? Maybe one of them will develop engine trouble and head back home. You'll have to be on the line; you can't sleep. Twenty-four, forty-eight hours, it doesn't matter. There's no time to sleep . . .

News of the Home Front

The drone dies away like a subsiding wind at dawn; the crow of a rooster is surprisingly loud in the sudden silence. You sink down, exhausted, on an empty oil drum; and for the first time you remember the newspaper from the States, wadded in your pocket. You open it and glance at the headlines. Another strike in an aircraft plant. Steel mills shut while coal miners argue about wages. Absenteeism laid to factory owner's refusal to build adequate housing for his workers. Citizens protest ban on pleasure driving, demand more gas for own use. Meat rationing assailed. Congress denounces father draft. John L. Lewis . . . Forty-hour week . . .

A crew chief stumbles past you on his way to the hangar. He's been going seventy-two hours without taking his shoes off; his face is unshaven, and his eyes look like holes burned in a blanket. "What's the news back home?"

"Oh, nothing much," you reply. "Everything about the same!"

You fold the paper and put it back in your pocket. Somehow, you are ashamed to have him see it. After all, it's his country, too.