

DOWN IN GREECE

by

Bill Drake

TO LARRY,
A FELLOW MANCH U.
— DRAKE

Prologue

The story you are about to read is true. At the time of the precipitating incident, I was a bombardier-navigator in the 68th Tactical Reconnaissance Group, a National Guard Unit out of New Orleans, Louisiana which had been called to active duty some years before. I was a "transfer" from the 310th Bombardment Group to fill a "need".

The 68th TRG was a small part of the overall effort of the Office of Strategic Services to effectively promote behind-the-lines resistance to the German war machine by local populations and guerrillas of any persuasion. I went down in Greece April 6, 1944, on my forty-first combat mission and spent the next six months as an "evadee" in Thrace and Eastern Macedonia, Greece.

I have tried to put on paper a realistic and factual account of my experience. Memory dims after the passage of many years, but the stark reality of this escapade remains very vivid in my mind. Considering my inability to recall the high emotional peaks, as well as the depressing lows of the experience, I truly believe I have understated many of the incidents related.

That the writing was undertaken at all, can be credited to Annie Ray Poth, a friendly persuasive neighbor of mine, both of us residing at the USAA Towers in San Antonio, Texas, who kept saying, "You should write all of that down".

Any errors of commission or omission in the story itself are mine alone. I also take full responsibility for any grammatical, spelling, and punctuation errors yet to be uncovered.



Bill Drake
San Antonio, Texas
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Chapter 1

As I dropped the rip cord, I saw my hat blow away. The parachute blossomed above me and at same time the landscape below suddenly lighted up. The B-25 I had just bailed out of plowed into the ground and burst into flame. With eyes glued on the burning aircraft below me, I wondered how I was going to avoid falling into the flames. It looked like I was headed straight for the fire below!

Thirty seconds ago I had been sitting in the nose compartment of the "Mitchell" patiently waiting to clear the heavy cloud cover we had entered while climbing for altitude---after successfully dropping a load of guns, ammo, clothing and the like to unknown Englishmen and Greek guerrillas on the ground---get a fix on a star, and plot a course home.

Twenty-five seconds ago the plane had started flopping about as if it were being over-controlled. At first, I gave it little thought, concentrating instead on my task as the Navigator. Clay was the pilot. We had flown some ten intruder missions together. He was a Senior Pilot. A star above the shield on his pilot's wing attested to that. But then?

Twenty seconds ago I had called Clay on the intercom to ask, "What the hell are you doing back there? I'm trying to get a fix for a course home and you can't even fly this bird straight and level!" No response.

Fifteen seconds ago I had crawled back to the navigator's compartment to see what was going on. As I emerged from the crawl way on my hands and knees and stood erect, I shook my head in disgust at Peacock, the other navigator just along for the ride, who was sitting on the navigator's table with the leg straps of his parachute unbuckled. I turned around and started to climb up to the pilot's seat to ask Clay what was going on when the co-pilot, a chap I had never flown with before, turned toward me, trying to get out of the right-hand seat while shouting, "Get out, get out, the plane is out of control!"

You cannot get out of either pilot seat in a B-25 without one seat "full forward"

and the other "all the way back" because the space between the armor plate of the seats is too narrow to permit the passage of a body.

Ten seconds ago, heeding the co-pilot's frantic cries and remembering what had happened before take-off---trouble with the "black light" which illuminates the panel instruments---I turned, stepped back down into the navigator's compartment, faced aft, snapped on my chest chute which had been stowed in its rack to my right, raised the floor cover of the escape hatch, squatted on the rungs of the ladder, and reached for the emergency hatch release underneath the navigator's table. No release!

Five seconds ago, realizing that I was in a modified B-25-C, I reached to my right and grasped the release. I pushed away the safety clip with my thumb and pulled. The hatch entrance and I fell out and away from the aircraft. The plane receded from sight in what appeared to be a slow glide, its popcorn exhaust stacks forming a ring of light around each engine.

Four seconds ago, as I dropped away from the aircraft and counted three, I pulled the rip cord of my chute. It blossomed above me. Below, the B-25 hit the ground and burst into flames.

Three seconds ago, as I swung crazily in the harness, the ground loomed up in the eerie light of the fire. It looked like I was going to land in some very large trees.

Two seconds ago, I'd hit the ground, totally unprepared for the landing. What appeared to be very large trees proved to be very small bushes.

One second ago, as I lay on the ground, I thought I was going to be shot by exploding ammunition from the burning plane.

Now, sitting on a hillside still harnessed to the collapsed parachute, above the burning

aircraft, I thought about this forty-first mission and what had just happened..

The weather had been as predicted, a line of thunderstorms and some overcast between takeoff and drop. On the way to the target zone we had encountered no bad weather. At the drop zone we had given and received the letter of the day, "M". Small fires also formed the letter "M" on the ground. Not more than ten minutes ago, we had descended to a very low altitude, had made two dropping runs at the target area, released the canisters from the bomb bay, and were climbing for altitude and an uneventful trip back to our home base in Manduria, Italy, when the plane started to "flop" about.

Clay and I had discussed aircraft emergency and evacuation procedures if we ever had to bail out. In the quiet atmosphere of a bar it was easy to agree that we would "ride her down" and take our chances with a controlled crash landing. While serving as a bombardier with the 310th Bomb Group, I had already "bellied in" at Palermo on a return flight from a bombing run on the Capua River bridges in Southern Italy. The landing had been uneventful; a smooth impact, a cloud of dust, bent props, and a very short landing run. Very satisfactory.

The most unsatisfactory incident of that landing had come later. Having successfully landed, and with the prospect of a few days off waiting for a gooney-bird to pick us up and return us to Souk el Arbra on Cape Bon in Tunisia, we decided to go into Palermo and "see the town". They wouldn't let us off the airdrome! We weren't dressed properly. We didn't have ties! General George Patton, who had liberated the place, had put out an order that all military personnel had to wear ties in town. No one that I knew had ever flown a combat mission wearing a tie.

I unbuckled my parachute harness, removed my Mae West, gathered up the parachute

canopy and continued to sit on that hillside for about half an hour waiting for the fire to die down and the ammunition to quit popping off. Meanwhile, I called out the names of the other six crew members---Clay and Peacock, the co-pilot, and the three gunners who had been in the rear of the aircraft---in the forlorn hope that someone else had gotten out of the plane alive. I knew in my mind and heart that I was the sole survivor of that crash.

What to do? Here I sat on a lonely hillside, in the dead of night, somewhere in the middle of Thrace with my escape kit and my high tops sitting on a desk in the Tech Supply Officer's Office in Manduria, Italy. And where was my watch?

Events of the past ten days came flooding back. Clay and I had not gone to Cairo for R & R, rest and recreation, having only ten more missions to go before reaching that magic number of fifty and a ticket home! Although it was now the dark phase of the moon and missions were harder to come by, we decided to stay home and fly out as many missions as possible. About a month earlier I had flown a mission with a Canadian crew in a British Halifax to observe how it was possible to fly night intruder missions with only starlight to illuminate the ground. That night intruder mission had been in support of Yugoslav guerrillas around Belgrade. "Night flight by starlight" was satisfactory and the American Office of Strategic Services, OSS for short, had started scheduling "moon-ess" flights by American night intruder crews.

During the ten days we would have been in Cairo, we thought we had a good chance to rack up at least one or two missions and it would be "home to the States" just that much sooner. Besides we would be "one up" on the rest of the crews who had decided to visit the pyramids. Cairo couldn't be that much different from Marrakech or Tunis and we'd been there and done that. And Algiers! What a mission that had been. Manduria to Algiers; Algiers to Bastia, Corsica; Bastia to the Po River valley; a "drop" to waiting Italian partisans; back to Algiers. And the Germans had even turned on the runway

lights for us at Milan! They probably thought we were friendly night fighters of the Reich Mach.

We didn't fly a single mission while the rest of the crews were in Cairo. In fact, this very night, they had returned, whooping and hollering it up as we had sat on the apron trying to fix the fluorescent lights of the plane we were scheduled to fly on the only mission we had been assigned while they were away.

And this mission had only been a "probable"! What with aircraft maintenance problems and an "on-again, off-again" weather forecast, this mission had been scrubbed and rescheduled two or three times since word had first come down from OSS early in the afternoon. As the Group Technical Supply Officer, I had issued and collected the escape kits a couple of times. I had changed my high top boots for oxfords a couple of times. I had made a couple of runs between our living quarters in an old country estate house and the airfield. When we finally took off, I didn't have my escape kit with me and I was wearing oxfords instead of high tops in my fleece-lined flying boots!

As the flames of the burning aircraft subsided, I began to think about what to do next. Briefings on escape methods sprang to mind.

If downed, and I was "down", one cardinal principle to follow was to destroy any evidence of your presence and leave the area of a crash site as soon as possible.

I unstrapped the parachute harness, took off my Mae West, gathered up the canopy of the parachute, and headed down the hill to the still burning plane. The ammunition had ceased exploding and the fire was growing smaller by the minute. I approached close enough to the burning wreck to throw the harness, the Mae West, and the parachute into the

flickering flames. That done, I walked off into the darkness surrounding me.

Chapter 2

And it got darker and darker as I walked away. The fire receded behind me. As I left the scene of the crash, I noticed bobbing lights off in the distance. There was no way of knowing how close or how far away these lights were, but those bobbing lights hastened my departure. Could they be headlights of vehicles making their way toward me? It was hard to tell.

And it is difficult to tell time without a watch. Where was my watch? We had “dropped” to the Greek guerrillas about ten thirty. How long had I sat on the ground waiting for the flames to die down? There was no way of knowing. Guessing it must be about midnight, and dead certain that was the North Star in the heavens above me, I headed out in a northerly direction, believing that I was south of the dropping ground we had visited about an hour or so earlier.

I stumbled along in the dark falling over rocks and small bushes which were hard to distinguish from the general terrain. Some “moonlight” would have helped immeasurably. After a little while I found myself following what I thought to be a trail. Walking along a lot more confidently than before, I suddenly found myself flat on my face! Close examination of my immediate surroundings made me realize that what I had thought to be a trail was a dry stream bed. Looking up and back I realized that I had unknowingly stepped off a three or four foot vertical drop. Luckily the fall had been well cushioned by soft sand. I got up, brushed myself off, then realized one reason I was stumbling and bumbling along was I was walking in my flying boots. Flying boots are not designed for cross-country hiking. I sat down, took them off, tied the laces together, swung them over my shoulder, got up and continued on my way down the stream bed being very, very careful about any black areas which appeared beneath my feet.

Concentrating on where I was placing my feet, I was unaware of the very large circle looming out of the darkness in front of me until I was almost in it. That circle was the mouth of