

## Axel

Stuttgart, *Hotel Silber* – *SS Kommandantur*

“Death.”

The word had such finality – *Hitlerjunge* Axel Printz heard its dull thud in his head, like the fall of a condemned arrested at the end of the rope; he’d just seen the newsreel footage of the *Gestapo* hanging thirteen German youths for treason in Köln two weeks before, the youngest only nine years of age.

Axel’s ears had heard the words spoken by *SS-Standartenführer* Engemann, “*Das Hauptamt SS-Gericht hat dich/ihren/sie zum Tode verurteilt.*” Though fluent in German, Axel’s brain translated the pronouncement to English, his first language - he had been sentenced to death, *Tode*, by the SS court.

Axel remained at attention, shock, . A somber quiet filled the room, punctuated only by the ticking of the wall clock. Properly, he was not making eye contact with the SS officer. In his peripheral vision, the only movement registering with Axel was the gentle snow falling outside, barely visible through the windows ringed with condensation frost on this late November afternoon. The floor felt hard through his boots, his feet cold and painful. Axel felt momentarily dizzy, afraid he would faint.

For a brief moment, Axel thought he perceived the tiniest spark of compassion in Engemann’s tone, though Axel wondered what the *Standartenführer* would say if he knew what his very own son had done - is still doing no doubt - was the catalyst for the circumstances in which Axel now found himself. He doubted the man could ever conceive that Hans – just eighteen, could be the cause of Axel’s misery.

Axel was pulled back into the moment when Engemann continued officiously as the circumstances required:

“During your time in both the regular Hitler Youth and in this school, named for *Der Führer*, where we were training you to be a member of the elite SS, you were made fully aware of the consequences for such actions, they having been outlawed since 1936. *Der Führer* and *Reichsführer* Himmler have made it clear that such activities are contrary to the good of the State and its people; they are specifically proscribed in Paragraphs 175 and 175a of the penal code, and the *Führer* has ordered that such offenses committed by SS members, prospective members, and police personnel, warrant a sentence of death.”

In a sudden rage, knowing he had done only what he'd been coerced to do by his *Scharführer* - his squad leader, Axel now glared directly at Engelmann, withering the officer with its remarkable fury. Today was Axel's sixteenth birthday.

## Will

### Over Pforzheim Germany

*“Aviate, navigate, communicate!!”*

Although Will Cameron knew exactly what had just happened, his mind was immediately focused on the mantra he’d learned from day one of flight training, “”

*Aviate* - getting his P-47 *Thunderbolt* back under control. He would have to worry later about the chatter he could hear in his headphones from his wingman asking if he was alright - for now, Will had to ignore him. His engine was over-speeding, it appeared he’d lost half of each propeller blade, smoke was seeping from the engine cowlings, and the entire aircraft shuddered from vibrations. They hadn’t covered *this* in his training.

Losing altitude and speed due to the damaged propeller, his airplane began banking to the left. Using his right hand Will manipulated the control stick along with his feet on the rudder pedals to bring the plane straight and level; simultaneously he adjusted various controls for the engine with his left hand - throttle, turbocharger, propeller, mixture - but discovered that regardless of the settings attempted, the engine continued over-speeding and the thrust it was managing was barely keeping the aircraft above stall speed. Each change of settings had only worsened the vibrations. With his craft now straight and level Will scanned the instrument panel to determine what was still working.

While he’d fought to regain level flight, the aircraft descended back into the cloud cover he had just climbed through.

Having regained reasonable control of the damaged plane, Will next *navigated*. He managed to keep enough airspeed allowing him to begin a slow right turn to the west, the direction that would bring him on a heading toward the Allied lines. As the

P-47 inched through the turn, which he decided he had to limit to a five-degree bank, Will coaxed his ship, “C’mon, baby, hold together long enough to get me home.”

Just then the entire propeller - still rotating far too fast for its current settings - detached itself and spun away from the Thunderbolt like a discus: *communicate* was not going to happen.

Without the propeller providing some resistance, the damaged 2,000 horsepower engine began shaking itself apart.

Will realized had no further options.

Still in the cloud bank, no view of the ground, he quickly shut down the engine, and trimmed the airplane for best glide speed and stability. Noting his altitude, he realized bailing out at this moment would expose him to a long parachute descent and the danger of being spotted by anti-aircraft gunners or other troops on the ground.

Will decided that descending in his crippled aircraft for as long as possible was a better choice – bailing out as close to the ground as he thought safe. He would have to closely monitor the performance of the aircraft in the event it began to disintegrate.

Continuing the cautious turn to a westerly heading, Will slid back the canopy and unplugged his flight helmet’s headphone and microphone jacks followed by unbuckling his harness – if he lost control or the airplane came apart, he’d have a better chance of escape.

Nosing the huge airplane down to pick up additional airspeed and to increase its descent rate, Will kept a close eye on the needle of his altimeter which indicated a loss of 1,000 feet of altitude with each complete revolution.

As the altimeter indicator passed through 6,000 feet on its way to 5,000, the P-47 cleared the clouds and Will took a moment to look outside and study the terrain

around him. He discovered he was over mostly snow-covered open farmland, punctuated only by a few tree and hedge lines here and there and the occasional fence; good for a safer landing, bad for evading capture since there would be little or no cover once he touched down. Off in the distance to the south of his position, he could see the dark border which signaled the edge of the Black Forest.

When his altimeter indicated 2,000 feet, Will began a slow roll to invert the fatally injured fighter. As soon as he neared complete inversion, Will tucked his knees up, grasped the edge of the cockpit and pushed as hard as he could to free himself from the aircraft. Gravity took command and Will managed to clear the massive plane. The tail of the P-47 whizzed past as he fell.

*Aviate* complete Will sighed to himself as he watched his favorite airplane recede on its way to inevitable impact with the ground.

Realizing that he was plummeting headfirst toward the ground, Will flailed and twisted his arms and legs until he finally brought his head higher than his feet.

As he'd been trained, Will had been silently counting "one-thou-sand, two-thou-sand, three-thou-sand,..." - when he reached "five-thou-sand", anxiety took over and he pulled the parachute ripcord.

Will had wanted to wait as long as he could before opening his chute - making it visible for the least amount of time before landing in the hope he might be missed by the Germans. In spite of his mild panic, he hoped he'd waited long enough.

The parachute unfurled rapidly above him, and he grunted loudly at the jerk in his thighs and shoulders as the chute harness took his weight. In a stable descent, Will looked below him to see he would land in an open field.

He grabbed a handful of risers - the nylon cords running from his harness to the billowing chute above - on his left front side attempting to bring him face forward in

the direction of travel. “Crap,” he muttered “wrong corner.” He grimly acknowledged that a two-hour lecture and a pamphlet had not made him a parachutist. Will quickly switched risers and made a visual sweep around him for any tell-tale signs of human activity; none were immediately visible.

Shortly, with the ground rising toward him at an alarming rate Will recalled the [mantra from?] classroom training - *don't lock your knees, don't lock your knees!* Anticipating a hard jolt when he landed, he wasn't disappointed as his chin bounced off his chest and his knees buckled, collapsing him into a rumpled heap splayed out in the snow.

He lay still for a moment to make sure nothing was broken, although he now realized it wasn't much different than dropping off the barn roof at home. He quickly gathered up his chute and dragged it toward the only cover nearby, a large ancient tree which stood almost in the center of the pasture in which he'd landed.

Reaching the old tree, he quickly looked around to see if anyone was racing toward him, German military or otherwise. Will hoped it would be German soldiers if he was to be discovered. Military Intelligence had communicated repeatedly that enraged German civilians were lynching Allied pilots if they could get to them first - allegedly on Hitler's orders - and the tree Will was standing under would be perfect for a hanging.

After scanning the area and surprised to still see no one, Will took take a minute to sit down, gather his thoughts, and formulate his plan to try to make it back to the Allied lines – at least 120 miles away. Tall order.

As he sat against the least conspicuous side of the tree, he was suddenly surprised to feel cold metal touching his left ear. He froze, then, without moving his head, Will cautiously reached up with his lefthand, expecting to be the barrel of a German gun...



## Mort

West of Brandscheid, Germany, in the Schnee Eifel, near the *Westwall*

“Shhhhhhhh...”, Mort had whispered.

Just a few minutes before, US Army Lieutenant Kenneth Morton, ‘Mort’ to his military friends, had happened upon the young German soldier in a snow-dusted stand of trees. The boy was half-frozen and half-starved, exhausted; his uniform filthy and disheveled, his hair the same. He had little facial hair, but what he had was unshaven.

Mort inwardly winced seeing the raging acne that made the German soldier’s face and neck appear to be a pockmarked battlefield of open sores and scabs. The American was also amused to see he’d found the lad with one hand inside the unbuttoned fly of his trousers.

Apprehensive, but seemingly happy to surrender - perhaps ending some ordeal, upon seeing Morton the young soldier had immediately kicked his rifle away and threw his hands above his head shouting “*Kamerad!*”

Mort calmly smiled. In perfect German told the boy to sit down against a tree, also indicating the young soldier could drop his hands. Mort lowered his .30 caliber M1 Carbine and offered the boy a standard GI issue Hershey chocolate bar. At this the boy relaxed a little and nervously accepted then ravenously devoured the sweet. Mort asked the boy, “*Name*”? The boy answered as he had been trained, “*Engelmann, Hans; Oberschütze; Regiment Nummer Eins Null Neun Vier, Herr Leutnant!*”

Mort chuckled nicely at the boy’s formality. “*Sehr gut, Hans, danke.*” Sizing up the emaciated soldier, Mort could see the field blouse bore the parallel lightning bolt



insignia of the SS. The boy's age suggested he was likely a member of the 12<sup>th</sup> SS-*Hitlerjugend* Division - comprised of former Hitler Youth members.

Mort estimated the soldier couldn't be more than 17 or 18 years old; he'd noticed a prevalence of German soldiers recently who were either very young, some even younger than this boy, or very old. At the age of 25, Mort was the "old man" in his unit, but some of the Krauts he'd seen recently were also easily in their 50's, possibly some in their 60's.

A drink of water from Mort's canteen was next, and Mort's offer of a cigarette was also gratefully accepted. By now the boy was more calm, more relaxed – appearing relieved at his good fortune to have been captured by this tall, friendly American officer wearing a helmet bearing the letters "MP".

As he dropped the finished cigarette into the snow, the boy smilingly looked up at the big American standing over him, awaiting the instruction to stand so they could begin his march to captivity.

In one swift and smooth move, 6'5" Mort, still smiling, drew his bayonet, used a knee to pin the skinny boy against the tree and covered the soldier's mouth with his free hand. Mort's bayonet smoothly and deftly penetrated the young German soldier's field coat just to the right of the button second from the top - where the his heart would be. The boy moaned loudly. "Shhhhhhhh...", Mort whispered.

Mort, ever smiling, looked deep into the astounded and panicked eyes of the boy, keeping his hand firmly over the boy's mouth. Blood began to seep out around the bayonet, soaking the uniform coat. A wet stain, steaming in the cold, appeared in the region of the boy's groin as his bladder emptied. In a few moments, the boy's eyes glazed over, he was dead. In death, the boy's face was frozen in a puzzled expression, as though he couldn't understand what had just happened.

Mort still smiled down at the dead soldier. He could not care less about the boy or even what he'd heard about the *Hitlerjugend* Division's atrocities. Mort liked killing. Killing gave Mort a hard-on – a lot of things did, none of them good.