

FALL EAGLE ONE

By Warren Bell

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This is a work of historical fiction. All the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

The book cover was designed and produced by Thomas Clifford Bell. The photo of the Big Three at the Yalta Conference is a public domain image from the website of the U.S. National Archives.

Dedication

This book is for my wife

ANNETTE

who is the greatest of many blessings

which have graced my life.

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Cast of Characters
(In order of their appearance)

HARRY PACE — an American press photographer renowned for his images of the wars of the late Twentieth Century.

CAPTAIN WERNER BRANDT — a *Luftwaffe* maritime attack pilot and hero of the Battle of the Atlantic.

EVAN THOMPSON — a U.S. Navy code-breaking expert who became a prosecutor at the Nuremberg war crimes trials.

MAJOR SIEGFRIED VON RALL — a decorated combat officer and reconnaissance expert, considered by many the best pilot in the *Luftwaffe*.

REICH MARSHAL HERMANN GÖRING — Commander-in-Chief of the *Luftwaffe* and Adolf Hitler's designated successor.

BEATRICE VON RALL — Siegfried's mother, a wealthy German noblewoman.

EVA VON SEECHT — a beautiful young physician, once Siegfried's boyhood playmate.

SS MAJOR OTTO SKORZENY — commander of Germany's Special Troops and spy schools.

COLONEL THEO ROWEHL — Siegfried's boss of several years, the commander of strategic reconnaissance for the German armed forces.

MAJOR HAJO HERRMANN — founder and leader of the *Wilde Sau*, the *Luftwaffe*'s single-seat night fighters.

LIEUTENANT VIKTOR LUTZE — a skilled *Luftwaffe* bombardier and fanatical *Nazi*.

LIEUTENANT ERICH BOTZ — a former airline pilot now flying long-range bombers.

ELIZABETH WALKER — a lovely and efficient English code-breaking specialist of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force.

HEIDI THYSSSEN — a famed *Nazi* film director, formerly a movie star and Göring's mistress.

ROD "GUNNY" BARNES — head of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Secret Service White House Security Detail.

PROLOGUE

Ellesmere Island Canadian High Arctic The Immediate Future

The line of Arctic wolves danced across the lenses of Harry Pace's pocket binoculars, a white streak against the dark lunar landscape of Ellesmere Island's barren ground. Led by the Alpha female he called the Dragon Lady, the seven predators moved in single file over the bleak terrain with the determination of animals sure of their destination. Having waited for weeks to capture a major hunt on camera, Harry grinned broadly in anticipation of what lay ahead. The Dragon Lady was obviously after either musk oxen or caribou. Before returning to camp, he expected to witness the wolves make a significant kill.

Stowing his binoculars in the side pocket of his parka, Harry engaged the automatic transmission of his Honda ATV and moved off across the pebble-strewn plain in pursuit of the wolves. The FourTrax Rubicon was the latest in four-wheeler technology, sporting front and rear cargo racks that could carry well over 200 pounds. The bag containing Harry's photo equipment was on the back rack, his pack of survival equipment on the front. With the temperature a balmy 37°-Fahrenheit, he could stay away from base camp for several days.

For a man approaching fifty, Harry was in great shape, the result of years of working out at a health club. Like all men of his age, what body fat he had was beginning to concentrate near his waistline. His green eyes still had 20/20 vision, but his dark brown hair and two-month beard were flecked with gray, giving him a professorial air. Keeping his eyes fixed on the Dragon Lady's faint image, he relaxed and enjoyed the trek in the perpetual daylight of the Arctic summer. At forty-seven, Harry knew that this was his final chance to live out one of the dreams of his youth.

Harry had wanted to do wildlife photography all his life. While a student at the University of Minnesota, he and his best friend, Jim Downing, had even talked of making a trip to northern Canada to study wolves. But when graduation came, Harry took the

more lucrative path of photojournalism. Assigned as a junior reporter to Israel, he was caught up in the 1982 Peace for Galilee operation in Lebanon. His battle photos won prizes from the profession, cementing his reputation as a superb combat photo artist. The wars that bracketed the turn of the Millennium provided abundant subjects for his violent art. Life had given him a certain amount of fame, a reasonably comfortable stock portfolio for his retirement, a broken marriage, and a somewhat jaded view of the world. Recently separated from the news organization where he had spent the past decade, he readily responded when Jim Downing asked him to join his National Geographic Society team for the Ellesmere expedition. Jim's regular photographer had been diagnosed with cancer only a few days before. A scientist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Jim had been studying this particular pack of Arctic wolves for over twenty years. Ellesmere Island, the northernmost piece of land in the western hemisphere, was one of the few remaining places on earth where the white wolf—*Canis lupus arctos*—still roamed free, relatively undisturbed by the activities of man. Jim's supervisors in Washington viewed this year's expedition as especially important. Data tracks from Ellesmere's weather station painted a picture of rising temperatures and increasing carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. The glaciers which cloaked most of the island were melting faster than in the previous century, sending torrents of summer snowmelt to gouge deeper channels through the volcanic soil. Vegetation crept up the slopes of the mountainous spine of the island, providing a larger food supply for the grazers upon whom the wolves fed. The team's mission was to study the effects of these changes on the lives of the white wolves.

As the wolves moved farther inland, the land rose in gravelly ridges peppered with small meadows of cotton grass and purple saxifrage. Arctic poppies lent patches of yellow to the dreary landscape. Up ahead, where the mountains met the coastal plain, a small glacier shimmered in whites and blacks against the cobalt sky. The Dragon Lady kept up her relentless pace, climbing higher and higher away from the ice-choked sea. Harry guessed that she had her mind on other game than the small bands of musk oxen that roamed the barren ground. Up in the piedmont valleys, herds of miniature Perry caribou grazed in meadows that were buried in ice before global warming accelerated. These must be the prey she sought today.

Topping a slight ridge, Harry stopped his Honda and raised his binoculars for a closer look at the moving blob of white against the black gravel countryside. The wolves were almost to the edge of the glacier now, nearing a narrow pass that led to a grassy valley beyond. Harry's enthusiasm faded when he dropped his glasses to scan the slope between them. Pushed up by recurring cycles of frost heave, the ground was a sea of dome-shaped hummocks. The ATV could never negotiate such terrain. He would have to skirt the area until he could find a way across. The most likely course ran close against the glacier.

The air was much colder in the shadow of the creeping ice. His Honda bucked and groaned as Harry picked his way up a slippery field of loose gravel. Just ahead, a patch of sunlight beckoned beyond a jutting corner. Finally breaking out into the light, he paused for a moment to get his bearings. The wolves were long gone now, somewhere beyond the pass that led to the meadow. As he surveyed the terrain to choose his next course, something caught his eye, a faint patch of light blue against the stark white of the snow atop the glacier. He lifted his binoculars and focused on the mysterious object. When the picture became clear, his heart started to race. It was the wing of an airplane!

A shiver ran up his spine at the prospect of an exclusive discovery. He was on Ellesmere to study wolves, but he was first and foremost a journalist. He quickly surveyed the slope beside the glacier, carefully picking a route that would take him close to the downed aircraft. After almost an hour of coaxing the Honda up the steep slope, he rounded a large rock outcrop and braked hard to keep from colliding with the wrecked plane.

The stub end of a wing, which had been sheered off just outboard of an engine nacelle, was within inches of his ATV. About forty feet of fuselage were visible in the edge of the ice, and an intact tail structure—twin fins and rudders on the ends of a tailplane—juttred from the top of the glacier. Two nacelles on the visible wing indicated that the aircraft originally had four engines. The outboard power plant was missing, but the inboard engine was still in place. Two blades of its large propeller juttred up into the air, while the other two were bent back under the wing, indicating the engine was dead when the crash occurred. Except for the raw end of the torn wing, the entire wreck was painted a mottled pattern of soft haze blue. But it was the markings on the plane that

galvanized Harry's attention: a straight black cross edged in white was painted on the side of the fuselage, and the tail fins bore the raked black swastika of the World War II Nazi *Luftwaffe*. What was a Nazi bomber doing here in the High Arctic?

Consumed by rising excitement, Harry killed the Honda's engine and dismounted. Walking slowly under the fractured wing, he found weapons pylons on the underside. A teardrop-shaped observation window in the fuselage drew his attention; he went over and rubbed away some ice to peer inside. Nothing was visible in the darkness within, but he could see a small shaft of sunlight coming through an opening in the top of the aircraft. Was it possible that he could get inside? Was it really safe to do so alone?

Harry's curiosity quickly overcame any fear of the unknown. Returning to the ATV, he retrieved a digital camera from his packs and stuffed several spare memory sticks and a six-inch flashlight into his pockets. After taking a dozen shots of the wreck against the ice, he hung the camera around his neck, picked up his ice ax and a coil of nylon rope, and very carefully began to climb the face of the glacier.

The frigid wind on top of the ice took Harry's breath away. It tore at his face, sending tears streaming down his cheeks. Harry edged over to the top of the wreck, where he identified a flat weapons turret with two machine guns protruding above the round fuselage. A few feet forward of the barbette, a small transparent dome rested ajar on its mountings. Without hesitation, he pulled it open and directed the beam of his flashlight down into the interior. The high swivel chair of a gunner's control station perched just below the dome; behind the seat, an elaborate array of radios nestled in racks hung from the overhead. About six feet beneath, his light illuminated the cabin floorboards. Without hesitation, Harry secured his rope around the base of the hatch, dropped his feet through the opening, and lowered himself into the aircraft.

The air inside was completely still, a welcomed relief from the cutting wind at the top of the glacier. It took him a few moments to get his bearings. A jumble of control cables, electrical conduit, and what looked like a fuel pipe ran along the aircraft's curved walls. To the rear of the roof hatch, the cabin tapered gradually back to a point. An electric winch, a mechanical control panel, and bottles of gas filled the space near the tail. The forward part of the cabin contained a large rack of vacuum tube electronics

equipment. An elevated door in the forward bulkhead opened toward the front of the aircraft.

Moving forward, Harry found old motion picture cameras mounted behind the bubble windows in the sides of the fuselage. Several large film canisters rested in racks nearby; he examined one closely and found that it appeared to still be hermetically sealed. Was it exposed? Might it be possible to develop it and make prints?

Harry climbed up into the next compartment and swept his light beam over the cabinets and electric stove of an elaborate crew galley, then moved forward to discover stacked bunks along the sides of a narrow passageway. Wrinkled kapok sleeping bags topped two of the beds, as if their occupants had just gotten out of them. Aluminum mess kits and silverware littered the floor. He moved past the bunks, ducked under what appeared to be the ammunition canister of another gun turret, and stepped down into the forward fuselage cabin.

The flight deck beckoned directly ahead of him. His light played over a navigator's station to the right and a flight engineer's panel to the left, then illuminated the backs of the pilot and copilot seats. He moved first to the chart table, discovering a radio compass and small radar set mounted on the adjacent bulkhead. A chart that appeared to be of Canada was clipped to the table, and several rolled maps filled pigeonholes beside it. Leaning forward across the large control panel between the cockpit seats, he found a central control column with a single steering yoke sprung to the left. Then he looked into the pilot's seat, and icy fingers rippled up his spine. The cockpit was still occupied!

The corpse in the left seat slumped across the control yoke, a freeze-dried mummy of a man about Harry's size. The features of what must have been a handsome face were still discernible, despite the hollow cheeks and sunken eyes. The corpse wore a leather flying helmet with earphone sockets, a leather jacket with a fur collar, and baggy cargo pants. The occupant of the right seat was similarly outfitted, but long blond hair fell from under the flying helmet. The copilot was a woman! Harry played his light over her fine-boned features, wondering what she was doing aboard what was obviously a warplane.

Despite the macabre setting, Harry was suddenly filled with elation. This discovery could be Pulitzer Prize material if handled right. So many questions raced through his mind. What was this Nazi bomber doing here at the top of the world? Where had it

come from; what was its mission? And who were these poor devils that had died in the Arctic deep freeze?

A shadow down in the extensively glazed nose of the bomber caught Harry's eye. When he bathed in light, a wide leather briefcase came into focus. Wriggling forward between the seats, he leaned over and gently lifted the heavy satchel back onto the flight deck. Carefully prying it open, he found three flat, cloth-bound ledger books, a toilet kit, two chocolate bars, and a metal pill tube marked "Pervitin." He lifted out one of the books and saw the words, "*Flugbüch—Hauptmann* Werner Brandt," printed in block letters on the front. "*Hauptmann*," which Harry knew was German for "Captain," had been crossed through and the word, "*Major*" handwritten in ink above it. *My God*, he thought, *is this the pilot's logbook?* Afraid to further handle the fragile document in such inadequate light, he slipped it back into the old briefcase. Then he took out his camera and camcorder and began shooting pictures, keeping at it until every square foot of the inside of the plane had been photographed. By then, his body was demanding food. Reluctantly leaving the shelter of the aircraft, he climbed back down the ice and began setting up camp.

Within a few minutes, a pot of freeze-dried beef stew bubbled over a roaring butane stove. While the food heated, Harry attempted to contact Jim on his voice-activated Personal Digital Assistant (PDA). "Computer, phone Downing."

The PDA immediately dialed Jim's phone number. The system rolled directly to voice mail, which did not surprise Harry. When closely observing wolves, the naturalist would not want to have the animals startled by the beep of a cell phone.

Harry felt a compelling need to talk to someone about the crashed bomber. He had another alternative, but that would have to wait until after lunch. Removing the steaming pot of stew from the stove, he put on water for coffee.

Finishing his meal quickly, he cleaned his dishes while boiling water for a second cup of coffee. Then he downloaded the first few images of the bomber from his camera to the PDA and established a satellite link with the computer system at Explorer's Hall, the headquarters of the National Geographic Society in Washington, D.C. After transmitting the photos, the computer dialed the voice number of Terrence Middleton, the project manager of the Arctic wolf study.

“Middleton here,” came a gruff voice over the satellite circuit.

“This is Harry Pace, Terry, calling from Ellesmere Island.”

“What’s going on, pal,” said Middleton. “I thought you wolf men liked your solitude.”

“You’re not going to believe what I have to tell you, Terry. You’d better open the progress report file and look at what I just sent you.”

Quickly, with a journalist’s economy of words, Harry outlined what he had found in the glacier. Middleton listened most of the time, only occasionally interrupting with questions. When Harry was through, the project manager let out a soft whistle.

“This is big, Harry, really big. We’ll need the cooperation of two governments and the best aviation historians we can get our hands on. I’ll shoot to be on site with you no later than day after tomorrow. Stay with the wreck, and keep your phone turned on. And get Jim over there to join you.”

“Roger your last. I’ll sit tight and try to contact Jim.”

Harry rapidly finished setting up camp, then brought his cameras and computers into the small tent and sat down on his sleeping bag. The mention of government agencies had triggered an alarm in his brain. He was too much of a journalist to trust to the benevolence of bureaucrats, even those of two democratic nations such as Canada and the United States. After e-mailing the rest of his pictures of the German plane to his office computer at Explorer’s Hall, he duplicated the memory sticks from the camera and camcorder, labeled the duplicates, “Shots of wolf pups-2,” and stored them with his other wildlife files. Then, satisfied that he had done everything possible to safeguard his data, he opened the old briefcase and removed Major Brandt’s logbook.

The penmanship of the German words was crisp and precise. The earliest entry recorded a flight in 1937; the final notations, made in different handwriting, occurred on April 13, 1944. The signature on several late passages was *Oberleutnant* Erich Botz. Another *Oberleutnant* named Viktor Lutze signed the last paragraph. Fascinated, Harry pored over the other journals, identifying a volume that appeared to be in Viktor Lutze’s script as a navigation log. The identity of the third book remained a mystery. Up-linking his computer to the Internet, Harry accessed a language translation site and fed in

the first page heading. When the English text came back, he realized that the book was a record of the contents of the film canisters.

Son-of-a-bitch! I may have enough here to piece this thing together!

With rising excitement, Harry thumbed through Brandt's log looking for a convenient place to start translating. Then the word, Stalingrad, seemed to leap off a page to grab his attention. He carefully keyed the entry, dated 18 January 1943, into his computer.

CHAPTER 1

(One)

**Headquarters *Luftflotte* (Air Fleet) 4
Taganrog Railyard, Occupied U.S.S.R.
18 January 1943**

A blast of hurricane-force wind rattled the railcar, jerking Werner Brandt awake.

“Coffee, *Herr Hauptmann*?”

Werner looked up in surprise at a white-jacketed steward with a silver tray in his hands. “Yes, thank you,” Werner replied quickly. Despite his august surroundings, he had dozed off for several moments. Perhaps he should have expected it. This was the first time he had been warm since arriving in Russia; the temperature in the headquarters train anteroom was downright toasty. Tiny rivulets of sweat trickled from his silver-blond hair down the back of his collar.

Werner wore the blue-gray uniform of a front-line *Luftwaffe* officer: the short, fly-fronted jacket known as a *Fliegerbluse* (Flight Blouse) and straight-legged trousers stuffed into fleece-lined flight boots. Yellow and silver shoulder straps and collar flashes identified his rank in the flying forces, and the national emblem, a flying eagle carrying a ringed swastika, was embroidered in silver thread on the right breast of his blouse. An impressive array of hardware adorned his chest: on the right, below the national emblem, he wore the eight-pointed star of the German Cross in Gold; on the left, in descending order, were the Gold Bomber *Frunflugspang* (Front Flight Clasp), an Iron Cross, First Class, and his pilot’s badge—a gold garland enclosing an eagle atop a swastika. On an adjacent chair, his visored field cap was perched atop the two-piece, fleece-lined leather flying suit he had worn for the bone-chilling drive from Zaporozhe. His cap lacked a stiffening wire, giving it a “fifty mission crush.”

The steward poured coffee from a silver carafe into a china cup and saucer marked with the rank devices of a colonel general, then offered cream and sugar from silver containers. The china and silver service were in keeping with the décor of the railcar—thick carpets on the floors, elegant furniture, and dark hardwood paneling on the walls, which were decorated with oil paintings of aerial combat. In the German armed forces,

rank had its privileges, and high rank had even greater prerogatives. The train belonged to Colonel-General Wolfram Freiherr von Richthofen, commander of all German air forces on the southern half of the Eastern Front. Initially one of the *Luftwaffe*'s premier technical experts (he held a doctorate in aeronautical engineering), Richthofen had risen from second-in-command of the *Kondor* Legion in Spain to command ground-support air units in Poland, France, and Russia. He was widely recognized as the best tactical brain in the German air service.

God in heaven, this is real cream, Werner thought as he poured from the pitcher. Stirring the cream into the steaming coffee, he took his first sip. *I haven't had coffee this good since Christmas of '41 at Grandfather's house. Before Elsa was killed.* The sudden memory of his dead wife sent a surge of anguish through his brain. He closed his eyes again, listening to the shriek of Arctic winds buffeting the train.

"Cigarette, *Herr Hauptman*?" The steward, who had a Bavarian accent, offered a silver box filled to the brim with French *Gauloises*.

Werner had developed a fondness for *Gauloises* while stationed in France. When he put one in his mouth, the steward offered a flaring lighter. Inhaling deeply, he sat back in the leather-covered armchair and tried to come to terms with his situation. But then resentment boiled up within him, knitting the narrow features of his wind-chapped, fair-skinned face into a frown and igniting fire in his pale blue eyes.

Werner supposed he should feel honored. Richthofen had called Major Hans Jurgen Willers, commander of Special Duties Battle Wing 200, that morning with an unequivocal message: GET DOWN HERE AT ONCE AND BRING YOUR BEST KONDOR PILOT.

Werner was not flattered. He knew all too well what was probably about to happen, and he thought it utter madness. An expert at long-range maritime reconnaissance and attacks on shipping, he should not be in Russia at all. The four-engine Focke-Wulf 200C *Kondors* of his former unit were the eyes and ears of the Admiral Dönitz's U-boat forces in their life-and-death struggle against Allied shipping in the Battle of the Atlantic. Prowling out over 1,000 miles offshore, he had personally called in wolf packs to devastate more than a dozen large convoys; fifteen British freighters had gone down after mast-height attacks by his own aircraft. As more and more Allied escort forces became

available, the U-boat war was beginning to turn against Germany. And now, at this critical juncture, the Air Force High Command (*Oberkommando der Luftwaffe—OKL*) had withdrawn the *Kondor* units to play the role of flying trucks in southern Russia. It was the equivalent of destroying a razor-edged sword by chopping hardwood with it. Eighteen *Kondors* had arrived in Russia only ten days before. Only Werner's was still flying.

Conditions at the Zaporozhe airstrip were atrocious. Without hangars and assigned only one engine-heating vehicle, the technical officer and his mechanics serviced aircraft outside in temperatures that fell to thirty degrees below zero, braving driving sleet and snow to get as many planes into the air as possible. Their mission allowed no concessions to the elements. Three hundred miles to the east, Colonel-General Friedrich von Paulus's Sixth Army, completely ringed in by Red Army hordes, was bleeding and freezing to death in the snowy streets of Stalingrad. Paulus's only source of supply was by *Luftwaffe* airlift, an undertaking that had been doomed from its conception.

Since the German air service lacked the transports to provide Sixth Army's minimum requirements of 600 tons per day, bomber squadrons were diverted from attacking the besieging forces to freight hauling. Appalling weather further reduced the number of flights that could be made. Then almost a third of the available lift capacity was lost when the Red Army overran the forward air base at Tazinskaya. Obediently waiting for authorization from higher headquarters to evacuate, the Heinkel He 111 squadrons sat on the field with their engines idling until Russian T-34 tanks appeared among the planes. Hitler's personal intervention sent Field Marshall Erhard Milch, Deputy Commander-in-Chief and Inspector General of the *Luftwaffe*, to Richthofen's headquarters to unsnarl the supply situation, but he had been injured in an auto accident almost immediately after arriving. Milch had come far too late, at any rate. Average deliveries to the beleaguered army during peak operations had been barely eighty tons a day. Then, on January 14, the Red Army captured the main Stalingrad airfield at Pitomnik, leaving only the auxiliary strip at Gumrak available to receive flights. By the time the *Kondors* reached the scene, the situation was utterly hopeless. The OKL was sacrificing the maritime reconnaissance force to show Hitler they were doing everything possible to support Paulus. Werner did not relish losing his life in a vain political gesture.

The door to Richthofen's office opened, and Major Willers appeared, beckoning for Werner to join him. Werner rose to his full six-foot height, squared his shoulders, and marched briskly into the general's office. "*Heil* Hitler, *Herr Generaloberst*," he barked while snapping a military salute to the stocky, dark-haired man behind the large desk in the center of the room.

"*Heil* Hitler, *Herr Hauptmann*," responded Colonel-General von Richthofen as he returned the salute. "You may stand at ease." With a high forehead, broad face, and narrow, hooded eyes, the Air Fleet 4 commander bore only a superficial family resemblance to his famous uncle, Manfred—the Red Baron of the previous war.

Besides Willers, there were four other men in the room. Two staff officers whom Werner had already met flanked the general. To one side stood a major and a colonel of the black-uniformed *Waffen SS*. Introductions were made, but with anger still clouding his mind, none of the names registered in Werner's memory. His attention concentrated when the general began to describe his mission.

"I must have at least one more *Kondor* sortie into Stalingrad." Richthofen was leaning back in his chair, his fingertips touching to form a "tree" in front of his chest. "These gentlemen of the SS have brought a direct order from the *Führer*. He wants *Gruppenführer der SS* Sepp Kersten, the OKW observer in the fortress, flown out and delivered to his headquarters as soon as possible. I called you here to impress upon you the importance of this mission. Do you understand, *Herr Hauptmann*?"

"Of course, *Herr Generaloberst*," Werner gave the only reply possible. OKW stood for *Oberkommando des Wehrmacht*—the German Armed Forces High Command. Kersten's SS rank was equivalent to an Army major general.

"You will schedule your flight to arrive at Gumrak at dawn tomorrow morning. That should give you ample time to prepare your aircraft. I plan to use the opportunity to get another nine tons of ammunition and food into Paulus."

Werner choked back a protest. The maximum takeoff weight of a FW 200C was supposed to be 50,000 pounds. Major Willers should have objected, but the flights into Stalingrad had routinely overloaded the craft more than the general was now demanding.

“One more item. *Major* von Thoma here will fly as your copilot.” The general gestured toward a portly staff officer. “He’s a former *Lufthansa* pilot, well qualified to fly *Kondors*.”

Werner flashed a quick glance at Thoma. Short, bald, and fifty pounds overweight, the heavy-jowled, flawlessly uniformed major hardly looked capable of combat flying.

“*Generalfeldmarshall* Milch and I have been receiving conflicting reports on operating conditions at Gumrak. The *major* will make an evaluation and report directly to us. Now, I’m sure you gentlemen have much to do to prepare for your mission. You are dismissed.”

The two *Kondor* pilots saluted and left the room immediately.

“The *generaloberst* just signed my death warrant,” Werner said with resignation as they climbed back into their warm flight gear.

“Maybe not, my friend,” Willers tried to console him. “You’re the luckiest pilot I ever met. If anyone can make it through, you’re the one.”

“Save your pep talk for the new recruits,” Werner shot back. “I’ll put my affairs in order before I take off.”

The icy wind took Werner’s breath away when he stepped out onto the end platform of the railroad car. *Maybe it’s just my time to go*, he thought as he hurried to the waiting staff car. *At least I leave no one to worry about*.

Born in 1915, Werner was orphaned early in life. His father, a fighter pilot on the Western Front, fell victim to the American ace of aces, Eddie Rickenbacker, in 1918. A few months later, his mother perished in the worldwide influenza epidemic. His paternal grandfather, who owned coalmines in the Saarland and a shipyard in Hamburg, took on the job of raising Werner. Because of the old man’s wealth, the family survived the turbulent days of the Weimar Republic fairly unscathed. For while the French War Reparations Commission seized the Saarland mines and stripped the shipyard of machinery for shipment to France, his grandfather retained ownership of mines at Ibbenbüren, near Münster, the only source of coal still under German control. The old man could have made a killing by charging outrageous prices, but he was too great a patriot to cash in on the misfortunes of his countrymen. But as an industrial baron of the

old school, he welcomed the restoration of social order that came with the Nazi Party's assumption of power.

From his days as a schoolboy, Werner's ambition was to become a commercial airline pilot. Charles Lindbergh and Ernst Udet, the German stunt flier, became his earliest heroes. He spent his years in *Gymnasium* (high school) studying math and natural sciences during school terms and attended gliding camps during vacations. Receiving his Class "A" gliding badge at sixteen, he never looked back. After serving as a machinist in his grandfather's shipyard to satisfy the compulsory twelve-month apprenticeship required before attending a university, Werner entered the prestigious Technical University at Stuttgart to study aeronautical engineering. Two years later, he was admitted to the coveted, expensive German Commercial Pilots' School at Braunschweig. Precocious beyond his years and experience, he graduated at the top of his class, expecting to enter *Lufthansa* as a commercial copilot. But by then, the once-secret *Luftwaffe* was out in the open and expanding rapidly. Werner found himself drafted into the military air arm and sent to officer training. Since he already possessed a *C-Schein* (multi-engine certificate), he was ordered to Ludwigslust in Mecklenburg for multi-engine bomber training after being commissioned. Within a few weeks, he was piloting a Ju 86 bomber instead of the graceful Fw 200 *Kondor* airliner of which he had dreamed. The only thing that bothered him about the turn of events was he was required to swear an oath of personal allegiance to Adolf Hitler. Although he considered himself a patriot, Werner was never interested in politics and was not a member of the Nazi Party. He had no personal devotion to the *Führer*.

Werner met Elsa Dittmar while earning his blind flying certificate (*B-Schein*) at a special school at Tempelhof Aerodrome in Berlin. The daughter of a Foreign Ministry official, she was working as a secretary for the Air Ministry at the time. Werner was smitten when he first saw her at a party given for his students by the school commanding officer. Tall and slender with blue eyes set in a heart-shaped face framed by long auburn hair, she was the epitome of the girl of his dreams. A few dinner dates were enough to establish that the attraction was mutual. They became engaged within a few weeks and were married in the spring of 1938.

For the first year of their marriage, Elsa played the dutiful military wife, following her husband from posting to posting. But when war broke out in 1939, she agreed to move to the family mansion in Cologne for the duration. Werner flew numerous missions in Poland and France before being assigned to Bordeaux-Mérignac on the French coast to pilot the military version of the *Kondor*. During one of his brief periods of leave in early 1942, Elsa informed him she was pregnant.

Werner's private world disintegrated on the night of May 31-June 1, 1942. RAF Bomber Command struck Cologne with over 1,000 warplanes, dropping 3,000 metric tons of bombs on the city to create one of the first "fire storms" in history. Hurricane-force winds whipped the center of the conflagration to blast-furnace temperatures, reducing the center of the city to ashes. Everyone whom Werner loved—his grandfather, his wife and unborn child, even the servants who had helped to raise him—was roasted alive and then reduced to unidentifiable lumps of charred flesh by the inferno. Now utterly alone except for his comrades-in-arms, he was determined to see the war through to victory over the foes that had left his life devoid of all other meaning.

I will do my duty.

(Two)
Skies Over Stalingrad
19 January 1943

Werner slowly circled his *Kondor* at 5,000 feet, surveying the Gumrak airstrip in the faint light of early dawn. The place was a shambles, a parody of the "day and night operational facility" promised by Sixth Army radio messages. He counted thirteen wrecked aircraft around the perimeter, one a Messerschmitt Me 109 right off the southern end of the single narrow runway of packed snow. Empty bomber cargo canisters, which should have been salvaged for reuse, littered the surrounding terrain. Without them, the Heinkel 111 bombers being used as transports were virtually useless. Shell holes pockmarked the whole area, indicating Russian artillery already had the field zeroed in. Landing the heavy *Kondor* would be tricky, but he had made more difficult landings with damaged birds back in France.

The flight from Zaporozhe had proved surprisingly easy. For once, the weather was cooperating. The previous day's storm had blown out, leaving the skies clear beneath a

bowl of bright stars. And although the temperature inside the heated plane never rose above freezing, the aviators remained warm inside fleece-lined flight suits, flying helmets, and boots. Engine noise made normal conversation impossible, but the built-in earphones and throat mikes of their helmets allowed easy communication over the *Eigenverständigung* (EiV) interphone. Major von Thoma spent much of the trip regaling Werner with tales of his transcontinental flights to Buenos Aires, Argentina. A thoroughly competent copilot, Thoma held a current *Erweiterter Luftwaffenflugzeugführerschein-2* license—entitling him to fly any aircraft with a gross takeoff weight in excess of 11,000 pounds. He had flown the *Kondor* extensively during his years with *Lufthansa*.

There had been no cargo overload after all. When Thoma and the SS officers arrived, they brought with them a squad of tough *Waffen SS Panzer Grenadiers*, a bodyguard insisted on by *Reichführer* Himmler to assure General Kersten was safely brought out. The cabin space they took up would have held ten times their weight of food or ammunition. Only a fraction of Richthofen's planned supplies were actually aboard.

Werner could understand the *Reichführer's* concern. Sepp Kersten was the shining star of the *Waffen SS*, a *panzer* commander of remarkable skill. Rising from the ranks of the original Nazi street fighters, he had been first the commander of the *Leibstandarte*, Hitler's personal bodyguard, and then an officer in the *SS panzer* division of the same name. Like the American Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest, he quickly displayed a natural flair for mobile warfare. Commanding his own division in the invasion of Russia, he had driven within sight of the Kremlin when a Russian shell tore off his left arm. While most of his men perished in the snows of the first winter in Russia, Kersten recuperated in Berlin. Hitler had personally sent him into Fortress Stalingrad as his special observer.

Most of the trip from Zaporozhe was made in darkness at high altitude. As usual, the *Kondor* was a pleasure to fly. Originally a long-range civilian airliner, the elegantly streamlined Focke-Wulf had been modified by adding a long ventral gondola containing a bomb bay, a bomb-aimer's station, and two gun positions. One of the largest planes in the *Luftwaffe*, the *Kondor* had a wingspan approaching 110 feet and a length of almost 77 feet. Five huge tanks consumed the central part of the fuselage, providing fuel for a

range of over 2,200 miles but leaving only the rear cabin available to carry passengers and freight. With no radar and unable to hear the high-flying aircraft's 1,200-horsepower BMW radial engines, the thousands of Russian antiaircraft guns lining the flight corridors into Stalingrad remained silent during the flight. But now daylight was upon them. As soon as the *Kondor* landed, every Russian gun that could reach it would open fire.

Werner made one more pass along the field, then tapped Thoma's shoulder. "We'll have to put down at the runway threshold to miss those wrecks," he said to the staff officer. "I'll need two sets of hands on the controls."

Thoma nodded his agreement. Unlike most *Luftwaffe* bombers, the *Kondor* had double control yokes and rudder pedals.

Werner tried for the tenth time to contact ground control, then gave up and lined up for a landing. The strip of dirty snow seemed to rise to meet the descending plane. Werner guided the *Kondor* down until the landing wheels softly kissed the icy surface, then cut power and let the tailskid drop. Adjusting the propellers to slow their headlong run, he pushed hard on the brake pedals. Everything went smoothly until the right tire hit a crater in the snow. The right wing bounced up into the air, almost dragging the left wingtip. Both pilots fought the controls as the plane fishtailed on down the runway, barely missing the wrecks of Ju 52 transports strewn along the edges. Then, at last, they brought it to a halt a few yards from the end of the strip.

"Good work, *Herr Major*," Werner commended Thoma.

"We old *Lufthansa* guys know a little about flying," the fat major replied, smiling.

Werner did not even try to find the unloading area. He simply reversed course and taxied back to the southern end of the runway. Before killing the engines, he wanted to be ready for an immediate takeoff. As he spun the *Kondor* around, a staff car came racing across the field.

Feldwebel (technical sergeant) Conrad Schmidt, the flight engineer, appeared at the back of the cockpit. A stocky Berliner with dark hair, Schmidt had been with Werner for over a year. "What now, *Herr Hauptmann*?" he asked.

"Stay with the ship. Someone should be here in a few minutes to unload. Fire up the engines as often as you feel necessary to keep them warm. We have plenty of fuel, and I want to be ready to get out of here on very short notice."

“What about the SS bully boys?”

“Not our concern. Their officers will give them their orders.”

The SS men apparently knew what was expected of them. Before the cockpit occupants completed their shutdown checklist, the soldiers spilled out of the rear cabin to form a circle around the plane. Warmly dressed in the latest winter survival gear, each *Panzer Grenadier* held a MP-40 submachine gun at the ready.

Thoma dropped first through the floor hatch, and Werner went out a few seconds later. Despite his sheepskin flying suit, a shiver went through his body when the frigid wind tore at his face. The temperature was mind-numbing—more than 22°-F below zero. The staff car stopped a few feet from the plane, and a colonel swathed in a leather overcoat beckoned the pilots to come over. Major von Thoma saluted, then engaged in an animated argument with the senior officer. Werner caught only snatches of the conversation because of the howling wind.

Thoma turned to Werner. “They want me to go to *Generaloberst* von Paulus’s headquarters,” he yelled above the wind. “You are to come with me. I’ll need a witness.”

“Of course, *Herr Major*,” Werner replied, unhappy about leaving the aircraft. At that moment, a shrill whistling ripped through the air, followed by a resounding boom as a Russian medium artillery shell exploded at the other end of the runway.

“Let’s get cracking,” yelled the unidentified colonel.

The two pilots jammed into the back seat of the sedan along side of the staff officer, and the driver sped away from the incoming artillery barrage.

(Three)
Sixth Army Headquarters Bunker
Stalingrad
19 January 1943

“Unless your aircraft continue to land, my army is doomed,” railed Colonel-General von Paulus, a dark scowl knotting the gaunt features of his hawk-like, aristocratic face. “One machine can save a thousand lives. My men haven’t eaten for four days; they’re too weak to gather canisters, so airdrops are useless. They would collapse from exhaustion if I tried to shorten my lines.”

Werner inwardly flinched at the torrent of abuse being heaped on Major von Thoma. They were in a timbered bunker a mile west of Gumrak, the forward headquarters of Sixth Army. As soon as the two *Luftwaffe* officers entered the brightly lighted operations center, a circle of outraged generals and senior officers surrounded them, all mouthing insults at the air service. Thoma tried to protest at first, citing the appalling weather conditions along the front. But Sixth Army command refused to countenance any excuses.

“What should I, as commander-in-chief of an army, say when a simple soldier begs me for a piece of bread?” said Paulus.

“Have you ever seen starving soldiers crack the skull of a putrefied horse and swallow the brains raw?” a staff officer snapped angrily.

“Why on earth did the *Luftwaffe* ever promise to keep us supplied?” Paulus ranted on. It was clear to Werner the general was on the verge of a nervous collapse. “Who said it could be done? Had someone told me it was not possible, I would not have blamed the *Luftwaffe*. I could have broken out while I was strong enough to do so.” The general’s voice tailed off to a whisper. “Now it is too late.”

“*Herr Generaloberst*,” Thoma said softly, trying to defuse the situation, “there is another matter in my orders, one concerning *SS-Gruppenführer* Sepp Kersten.”

“The OKW spy,” Paulus said with a sneer. “The *Führer* wants to save his skin?”

“I have orders to transport him to Zaporozhe.”

“Take him, then, and good riddance. He did us no good at all.” Paulus’s voice rose to a fever pitch. “The *Führer* personally assured me he and the whole nation felt responsible for this army. Now the annals of German arms are disgraced because the *Luftwaffe* let us down.”

“*Herr Generaloberst*, that is unfair,” Thoma protested. “The weather...”

“Get out of here,” Paulus shrieked at him. “We already speak from a different world than yours. You are talking to dead men. From now on, we exist only in history books.”

The situation was nasty when they got back to Gumrak. The artillery barrage had let up, and thousands of walking wounded swarmed out of the fetid medical bunkers around the field to surround the *Kondor*. Only the guns of the tough *SS* troopers kept them from

rushing the hatches to scramble aboard the plane. Their protesting voices filled the air with a buzzing like millions of insects. The staff cars nosed through the crowd, coming to a stop beneath the *Kondor's* right wing. Sergeant Schmidt opened the back door, snapping a salute to the officers.

“This place is a madhouse, *Herr Hauptmann*,” Schmidt complained to Werner. “No one has showed up to unload the cargo. It’s been touch and go to keep this rabble at bay.”

Just then, General Kersten got out of the second staff car and stalked over to join the pilots. A sharp-featured man with a Hitler mustache, the one-armed *Waffen SS* officer had an air of confident command about him. His pristine black uniform was in stark contrast to the rags of the wounded soldiers.

“What is the meaning of this?” the *SS* officer demanded. “Why is the plane not ready to take off?”

Werner quickly explained the situation. The general listened, then turned and barked an order to the *SS* sergeant. The *Panzer Grenadier* saluted smartly then detailed four of his troopers to dragoon a working party at gunpoint to unload the plane. The *SS* men were fit and warm in their anoraks and felt boots; the Sixth Army soldiers were but walking scarecrows. Kersten ordered Werner to prepare to take off.

“But, what of the wounded, *Herr Gruppenführer*?” Werner protested. “It’s standard procedure to bring out a load of stretcher cases.”

“Forget this riffraff,” Kersten shot back. “A few more of them will make no difference. As *Generaloberst* von Paulus himself said, they are dead men already.”

By the time Werner finished his preflight checkup and fired all four engines, the cargo had been unloaded. Sergeant Schmidt came forward and tapped Werner on the shoulder.

“We’re about ready to close the hatch,” Schmidt informed him. “Isn’t there anything we can do for the wounded? We’re practically empty.”

“We’d best get out while we can,” Thoma answered. “The information we bring is more important to Germany than a few more lives.”

As soon as the last *SS* man boarded the plane and shut the hatch, the waiting soldiers swarmed around the *Kondor*, beating desperately at the door, clawing at the aluminum

skin. Quietly mouthing a prayer, Werner gradually increased power on the engines, holding the brakes fast as he did so. As the four powerful BMW radials reached their maximum revolutions, he eased off the brakes. Then the aircraft tossed and swayed as dozens of the frenzied soldiers tried to scramble onto the wings. A number of them made it up, and they sprawled out on the metal skin, trying to hold onto the leading edge with frozen fingers. With his jaw set, Werner released the brakes and shoved the throttles forward. The *Kondor* gradually picked up speed and shot down the runway. One by one, the frozen wretches on the wings lost their grip and fell away. Then the plane began to lift off the ground.

Werner realized at once something was wrong with the tail. The controls were sluggish, causing the aircraft to yaw. Then he realized one of the soldiers must be clinging to the horizontal stabilizer. Both he and Thoma fought the controls until they were 650 feet above the ground, when the unnatural pressure on the rudder pedals suddenly ceased. Their unwanted passenger had fallen off.

Werner breathed a sigh of relief and set a course to Zaporozhe, climbing as fast as the *Kondor* would rise. With the aircraft lightly loaded, he was soon up to 9,500 feet, as high as he dared go without oxygen for his passengers. Since he had fuel to spare in his fuselage tanks, he pushed the plane to its limits. When he reached 100 miles of his destination, he began to believe he might make it. Then a sudden barrage of cannon shells struck the *Kondor's* fuselage.

As Werner fought to retain control, four sleek fighter planes streaked by close overhead. He recognized Yak-9's, part of a new generation of Soviet fighters beginning to challenge the *Luftwaffe* fighter force for control of the skies over Russia. Werner bore ahead, hoping against hope he could keep the plane in the air. The enemy pilots swung around and came in from his blind stern. The *Kondor* shook and bucked as pieces of metal flew off the left wing. Fire erupted in the port outboard engine, sending a trail of flame and smoke out behind it; then shells began to impact on the right wing. The cockpit windshield disintegrated, spraying the pilots with fragments of frozen Plexiglas. Arctic wind tore at Werner's face as he clawed his goggles down to protect his eyes. He realized he was now flying on two engines and the *Kondor* was steadily losing altitude. An icy calm settled over his mind. Fear was no longer there, only a sharp perception of

everything that was happening. He was prepared to die if he had to. In the meantime, he was going to fly his plane as far as he could. Over in the right seat, Thoma coolly extinguished the fire in the left wing.

A rousing cheer from back in the cabin suddenly caught his attention. Then another streamlined fighter came streaking in from ahead, the cannon and machine guns in its nose flashing fire. It was a Gustav, a Me 109G! Three more German fighters appeared close behind.

Werner concentrated on flying and put every fiber of his being into keeping the *Kondor* aloft. He had totally lost track of his position, so he put the plane back on its previous heading and trusted to luck. He was down to 3,200 feet now, and losing altitude rapidly. Far below, he spotted a column of monstrous T-34 tanks heading westward and realized he was still behind enemy lines. Machine guns winked at him from the turrets of the tanks. Then, up ahead, he spotted a dark line snaking across the snow, the forward positions of the German forces. Nursing

every inch of altitude for forward progress, he skimmed in low over the trenches and looked for a place to put down. An open wheat field beckoned in the distance.

“Do you want the gear down?” Thoma shouted.

“Leave it up. We’re better off on our belly.”

The long ventral weapons gondola touched down first, and the *Kondor* skimmed over the snow for half a mile like a sled with one runner. Then the full weight of the plane settled, crushing the gondola against the fuselage structure. The craft slowed perceptibly, and Werner was just beginning to have hope of surviving when a low stone fence loomed up ahead. As the plane smashed into the barrier, his body whipped forward to slam his head against the control column, and the world went black.

Through a red haze of pain, Werner became aware of light filtering through his closed eyelids. Feeling crept back into his body, and he realized both of his legs were closely encased in casts of hard plaster and elevated above his torso by some sort of rigging. Moving tentatively, he found his arms intact, although his shoulders ached fearfully. Tubes ran from his left arm, which was strapped to the bed frame, to a bag hanging from a pole beside the bed. His free hand moved to his aching head, which he found swathed

in bandages. Then, summoning up all his courage, he opened his eyes. He was staring at the most beautiful blond nurse he had ever seen. Her eyes were closed, as if she were dozing.

“Water.” he croaked softly through parched lips. “Could I have water?”

The nurse’s eyes popped open, and then a smile creased her features. “Of course, *Herr Hauptmann*.” She lifted his head gently and placed a straw in his mouth to let him drink from a glass of cool water. “Don’t move, *Herr Hauptmann*,” she ordered softly after lowering his head back to the pillow. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

Werner let his eyes play about the small room, taking in log walls, field furniture, and a single bare bulb dangling from a wire. The light seemed to intensify his headache, so he closed his eyes for several moments. When he opened them again, Major Willers and the nurse were peering down into his face.

“You lucky bastard!” exclaimed Willers. “I knew you’d pull through, no matter what the doctors said.”

“How bad?” Werner asked, fearing the answer.

“You have a compound fracture of the left tibia, *Herr Hauptmann*” the nurse responded, “and torn ligaments in your right knee. The real problem’s your head, however. You had a skull fracture and a bad concussion. The surgeons installed a steel plate.”

Werner let the information sink in. “Did the others make it?” he finally said.

“All but a couple of the *Waffen SS*,” said Willers. “The Russian fighters got them.”
“*Feldwebel Schmidt*?”

“Not a scratch on him. He’s on his way back to Bordeaux. We’ll all be leaving as soon as transportation can be arranged. Our business here in Russia is finished. Stalingrad surrendered day before yesterday.”

Werner winced at the last news. Over a quarter of a million men were now lost to Germany, either dead or marched off to Siberian POW camps.

“How about *Major von Thoma*?”

“Safe at *Lufiflotte 4* headquarters.”

“Don’t overtax him, *Herr Major*,” the young nurse chided. “We have orders to give *Hauptmann* Brandt the best of treatment. He will be having an audience with the *Reichsmarschall*.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Werner, confused.

“*Generaloberst* von Richtigthofen was overjoyed you got Himmler’s star general out in one piece,” said Major Willers. “He’s nominated you for the *Ritterkreuz*. *Unser Hermann* himself will decorate you.”

For a moment, Werner was stunned. The Knight’s Cross of the Iron Cross was one of Germany’s highest decorations, equivalent to Britain’s Victoria Cross and the French Legion of Honor. *Unser Hermann*—Our Hermann—was the *Luftwaffe*’s affectionate nickname for Reich Marshal Hermann Göring, commander-in-chief of the air service. *Well, isn’t that a hell of a note*, Werner thought as he drifted back into unconsciousness.