

# IN THE PRESENCE OF Heroes and *Angels*

A flight in *Aluminum Overcast* meaningful to pilot and passenger

DON GADDO WITH HAROLD WEEKLEY  
WB# 2651

PHOTOS BY PAUL BOWEN

## JULY 19, 1944

The men of the 398th Bomb Group approached the target in Lechfeld, Germany. Young American B-17 Flying Fortress crews anticipated that the German 88 battery, located in Scheuring, would fill the sky with hundreds of black, sooty, bursts of flak. Each burst would send razor-like shards of hot steel through the sky. Each shard searched for a fuselage of a defenseless Eighth Air Force bomber.

Flying in the low squadron, 1st Lt. Harold Weekley felt his Fortress shudder from the near miss of an ominous burst of flak. Perspiration soaked his forehead. His gloved hands tightly held the controls as the Fortress wavered, but kept its position. With steely determination, Harold whispered to himself, "Hold your position. Hold your position."

Meanwhile, in the lead squadron, pilot Dallas Hawkins maneuvered

his B-17 on the bomb run. He had named his Flying Fortress *Angel*, and the nose art of a beautiful angel, dressed in a flowing white robe, caressed the fuselage. The painted angel, however, was different than most, as a teardrop hung suspended under her right eye. The teardrop was not painted by a human hand, but mysteriously appeared after the crew's first mission

to Hamburg, Germany.

The young men of the *Angel* crew were a religious group, each member professing spiritual faith and a belief that someday God would

bring them home. A valued St. Christopher medal hung next to the position occupied by *Angel* navigator 2nd Lt. Joseph Doglio, who sat at his navigator table on that fateful day. The St. Christopher medal shook and rocked back and forth, clanging against the inner fuselage, as the threatening and menacing flak came closer and closer to his *Angel*.

Suddenly, in one terrifying second, *Angel* burst into flames, her right wing falling away. An apocalyptic explosion rocked the 398th Bomb Group and *Angel* plummeted to earth in a shuddering spiral of death.

Harold watched in horror, helpless, knowing he was powerless to change the inevitable outcome.

As a 6-year-old boy from Illinois, I would soon learn that my hero, cousin Joe, was missing in action.

Fifty-five years would pass before Harold's and my paths would cross. Little did we know that the events of July 19, 1944 would build a bond of friendship so strong, that together, on a quiet and emotional morning in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, each of us would relive the memory of that fateful day during World War II. I would find myself in the presence of heroes and angels, while 80-year-old Harold, a retired colonel, , retired U.S. Air Force colonel and senior pilot of EAA's *Aluminum Overcast* for 24 years, would fly his beloved B-17 for the second to last time (he would make his last *Aluminum Overcast* flight the next day during the EAA AirVenture Oshkosh air show), saluting fellow airman 2nd Lt. Joseph Doglio.

## JULY 26, 2001

There is something special about a Wisconsin sunrise. The mystical orange glow of an awakened sun sends its genteel morning welcome across the fertile green fields of the Wisconsin farmlands. Although this same heavenly greeting has blessed the earth for millions of years, on this quiet morning it appears as

though God's creation is being accessed for the very first time. We two men—one an aging warrior, the other a relative of a fallen hero—stand side by side on a grassy field where dark green blades of grass shimmer with the moisture of heavy morning dew. We are mesmerized by the beauty of the scene.

More than a hundred World War



Hal Weekley and Don Gaddo

II warbirds sit silently in the early morning sun. The poetic beauty seems to bless the dignified aircraft for what they were: the elegant reminders of a monumental crusade for freedom. P-51 Mustangs, F4U Corsairs, B-26 Marauders, and every World War II aircraft imaginable seems to call our name. Each warbird has a story to tell, and there is no doubt in our minds that during the darkness of the previous night, the fighting ladies whispered their experiences of dangerous missions, courageous pilots, and perilous encounters to the gentle breezes that embraced the field of patriotism. It's funny what this moment does to a man. The aging warrior stiffens, his body coming to attention, as it had done so many years before. His eye begins to glisten like the early morning dew. Memories surge though his mind, the sound of engines fill his senses, and for one brief shining moment he reaches out for his

World War II crew, his hand grasping their souls for what seems an eternity. I remain silent, in awe of what he is witnessing.

Our reverie is broken by the considerate voice of Dr. William Harrison, longtime EAA/WOA member and director of operations on the EAA's B-17 program. Our spiritual contemplation is not lost on him. He approaches slowly, head bowed, eyes filled with respectful understanding. Behind him, considerate of the moment, were Verne Jobst, air show operations director, and his daughter, Jennifer, who round out the crew for our memorable flight. Harold extends his hand to William. Smiles are exchanged, we mingle for several minutes, and then, by some unseen or unheard signal, the group begins to walk past the symbols of a mighty nation. I, the youngest of the men, lag behind and stare at the group in front of me. They walk with dignity and pride, and suddenly they are wearing the flight suits of an aircrew preparing for a mission to an unknown World War II target. Then, as quickly as the scene entered my mind, it dissolves into the vast regions of imagination. Anticipation consumes me, the excitement suddenly becomes a reality, as sitting before me is the most beautiful aircraft ever to fly the endless skies of God's blue heaven.

The B-17 Flying Fortress sparkles in the sun's early morning glow. Its aluminum skin beckons me to come closer. For a brief moment the Fortress seems to speak. The four Wright Cyclone engines remain silent in the morning mist, but the ghosts of time sit behind the controls, stand ready beside the .50 caliber machine guns, and man the Norden bomb sight. One lone, shadowy figure sits at the navigator table, beckoning a six-year-old boy to sit beside him and feel the pleasure of flight. For the navigator, time has no meaning. He is free of human con-

straints. We, in his eyes, have not grown old, but remain as we had been on July 19, 1944.

A shiver runs through my spine as at that very moment; I know Joseph is in my presence. He and I had waited so long for this moment and now our reunion is only a few short minutes away. The pleasure of it all consumes my emotions. Suddenly I see Joseph's mother and father. Their images fill my mind with memories. Were they here too? I can smell the sweet aroma of Aunt Kate's kitchen, I feel her love, and most importantly I see her radiant smile. Next to her is Uncle Albert, quiet as usual, just being himself. The kind gentleman who loved his family more than words could express. Maybe, I thought, that's why he didn't speak much. Maybe it was because his love was so strong that words would have no meaning. Only his actions mattered, and his actions were always those of a reverent father and an honorable uncle. This day could not be complete without their memory. This day is about family, both past and present. This day is about history, and it is a day to fulfill the promise of an aging warrior.

I turn my attention to Harold. He and the others examine the Fortress. I have watched pilots do this before. A quick look here, a meaningless touch there. They seem to inspect their aircraft as though it is a piece of metal, a machine that has no soul. This is not the case with the colonel. He turns the prop with his aged hands. His smile speaks volumes as if to say, "You may be aging, old propeller, but you feel as young as ever." He moves to the landing gear, kneels, and allows his fingers to flirt with the steel mountings that hold the gear together. Another smile forms on his face. Rising to his feet he strains to gain his balance. I turn away as not to embarrass him. He steadies himself and says, "The grass is still wet." I

nod and return his comment by saying, "Yeah. A little slippery." We return glances, he looks at me as if to say, "Thank you, friend. We understand each other."

I keep my eyes on him, my emotion claims the moment as my mind answers his silent and personal thought, "Don't worry Col. Weekley. Today you will fly the skies as if you are once again a young eagle. Today you will own them as you did in 1944. The grass will soon become



slippery for all us, my friend. Time is the old bald cheater. But today, Colonel, you will triumph over time and today you will take your Fortress skyward and slip the bonds of the present, and take us back to the past." I walk to the nose of the B-17 and I imagine an angel painted on her side. I see the teardrop, and I feel the wetness and emotion claiming my eyes.

Harold turns to a stranger standing next to him. They exchange a few casual words. Then he turns to find his friend. He realizes that his wish to have his younger friend fly in the B-17 is about to come true. He wants me to sit where Joseph sat, to get the feel for the aircraft, to hear the sounds, to feel the vibrations, and to understand the closeness of the crew. He wants me to hear the roar of the engines and to smell the aroma of beauty. An aroma of burning oil, the exhaust of powerful engines, and the sweet smell of all things past. An aroma more expensive than the price of an elegant perfume that was made and bottled in Paris, France. The aroma of America, the boys who wore the uniform, and the smell of freedom. A freedom paid for

with our nations most priceless commodity. The blood and sacrifice of sons and daughters who served their country with honor and pride. He knew that once his friend experienced the flight of a B-17, he would truly understand that this beautiful aircraft did indeed have something no other aircraft could offer. The B-17 Flying Fortress had a soul.

"Today," he thinks, "At the age of 80, I will fly my chariot for almost the last time. Today will be the best flight of my career." These honorable intentions are what you would expect from an American hero. Today this proud veteran will salute 2nd Lt. Joseph Doglio once again. Today Harold will be the instrument of dreams, promises, and miracles.

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We board the plane. I sit motionless as Harold signs the flight log. I watch in deep and humble admiration as he takes his position at the controls. By instinct, he and William go through the monotonous checklist. This switch on, the other off. Harold would point a finger at some meaningless instrument and the good doctor would nod, indicating that it, whatever it was, was checked and ready. I stand behind Harold and for some unknown reason I know that the moment has come. It was as though a voice whispered in my ear and said, "Listen!"

Suddenly an engine comes to life. An unnoticeable cough, a blanket of thick white smoke, and a sound that will forever remain in my mind...KKKEEEEE, CCCHHOOO. The Fortress trembles. Then another KKKEEEEE, CCCHHOOO. And now four engines are growling like some caged tiger ready to be set free and experience freedom. The cockpit shakes in anticipation of another flight into the heavens. The roar seems deafening and yet it seems to have the precision of a brilliant symphony orchestra being led by a master of the

baton. Today the conductors, the masters of the baton, are aging pilots who know the music of the skies.

The famous B-17 taxis to the concrete runway. I can't help but notice that people of all ages are running toward the proud aircraft. They run with great excitement and anticipation, carrying cameras, pointing in glee. One trips and falls, only to rise and shout, "There she is!" Fathers talk excitedly to their children, little boys stop in their tracks, and aging grandfathers stare silently at the pride of their generation. As Oshkosh comes to life, I wonder what is going through Harold's mind. Where is he—in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, or perhaps by some internal memory, in Nuthampsted, England, preparing for take off on a July 1944 morning?

The pilots exchange a few words, and the grumbling of the Wright Cyclones turns into a syncopation of brilliance. We speed down the runway as people cheer us on. They wave the red, white, and blue. The wheels leave the ground. The landing gear, held together by the steel mountings that the colonel only moments earlier had touched so lovingly with his fingers, locks into place. We're airborne. The heavens envelop us and welcome the Fortress into the sky.

Several minutes pass. I watch the pilots check instruments and look at the engines. I fidget with the back of William's pilot's chair. Harold turns and nods. A smile says everything there is to say between two friends. "Go find Joseph, my friend." And so I do.

I make my way to the nose section, passing through the narrow opening that takes me to the navigator table and the bombardier position. As I stand straight in the compartment, I see the table. Joseph's navigator table. For all my anticipation, for all my excitement, for all the dreams that had embraced me, now

that I am here, I can't move. I can only stand in silent tribute to him. My legs become weak, my eyes fill with tears. A million thoughts catapult through my mind. The desk is void of instruments—no protractors, no rulers, no pencils. No maps, no photographs of family and loved ones. Just a desk and a chair.

The .50 caliber cheek guns sit ominously to my side. I imagine Joseph manning one of these powerful weapons, protecting his *Angel*. Turn-



ing to the table I imagine him plotting a course to the target, shouting above the flak, and giving a thumbs up to his bombardier. I imagine the closeness of his crew and the bravery of young men. I move toward the table and sit in the chair. Unashamed, I allow my emotions to show my deep respect for my hero and my cousin.

I don't know what it is about a moment in your life that brings you close to the heavens. Maybe it's a wish, maybe a dream, or something deeper. Maybe it's the sudden realization that an angel is by your side. A presence envelops your senses and you know your loved one is there. Nobody can dispute what I feel. It's between me and Joseph. It's our reunion, and it's my personal miracle. I hear the tinkling and clanking of metal against the fuselage. The gentle sound tugs not only at my ears, but at my eyes as well. I search for the source of the sound; I listen intently for a clue of where it is, and what it is. PING, TINK, TING. A gentle sound. It comes from just above the navigator table, but there is noth-

ing there. I place my hand on the spot where it seems to be coming from. I hold my fingers on the brown skin of the B-17. The noise stops. My fingers seem to tremble. The coolness of a small metal token seems to touch my hand. I smile and say, "God bless you, too, Joseph."

Our landing is perfect. More people have gathered to welcome us back. They, like the others, point, smile, and marvel at the Flying Fortress. Harold steps from the plane.

He did what he had to do. Sign a paper here, another there. People leave him alone. I start toward him, but Verne takes my arm. "Give him a few minutes with his Fortress," he says. People had gathered near the proud aircraft, but as in all great things in life, every single soul understands the significance of

the moment. The 80-year-old hero approaches his B-17. He places his hand on her skin. He seems to caress his Fortress with his heart and with his mind. He whispers a few words, too low for us to hear. Then he turns and walks away.

I had met an angel on my memorable flight. To me, as a six-year-old boy, Joseph was the greatest hero of all. Now, on this day, he had touched my life again. My friend Harold had made it happen. But on this very day I realize that we are blessed with many kinds of heroes and angels, some living and others who have passed to the ages. Where do we find such people? Why did Harold come into my life? Harold may ask the same question of me. Regardless of the answer, we are all better for it. People like the colonel will never be gone. They will always be in our memories. The slippery grass will never claim their youth. They will always be in our hearts, the way we knew them. As long as there is a uniform, they will walk among us.

Heroes and angels . . . God bless them all.

