

THE
GREEN
MURPHY
SUCCESSION

BOOK 1—WAR, POWER, & BLOODLINES

A NOVEL

BY

GLENN W. STURM



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DEDICATION

To the warriors who make our way of life possible

DISCLAIMER

The Green Murphy Succession is a work of historical fiction. It places fictional characters, families, conversations, relationships, and events within the framework of actual twentieth-century history.

Historical figures, military organizations, government agencies, locations, operations, and events appear throughout the novel. Where possible, their historical context has been preserved; however, certain dates, circumstances, roles, procedures, and sequences of events have been adapted, compressed, or reimagined for narrative purposes. Real historical figures may participate in fictional conversations or events, and no such dialogue or private interaction should be understood as a literal historical record.

The Murphy and Green families and many of the individuals associated with them are fictional. Any resemblance between fictional characters and living or deceased persons, beyond clearly identified historical figures, is coincidental.

This novel is intended to explore history through fiction, not to serve as a documentary, biography, military history, or authoritative account of the events depicted.

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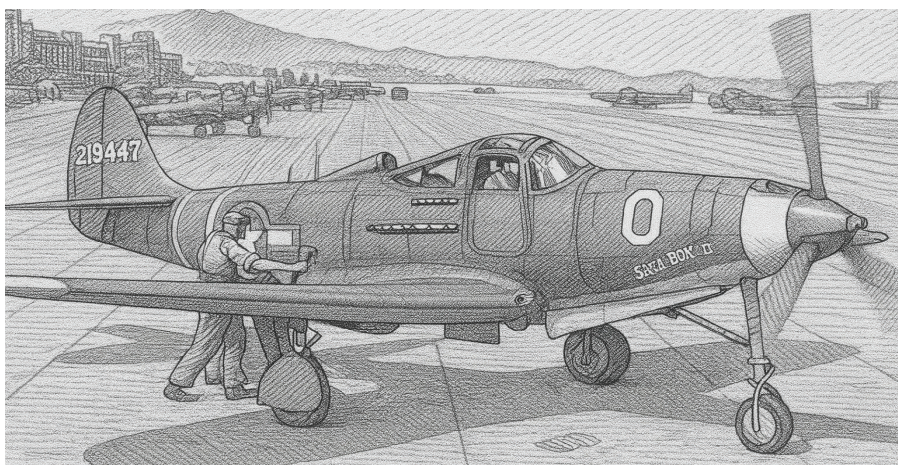
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PROLOGUE

During World War II, the U.S. Army Air Forces activated 114 fighter groups. Of these, a few units stood out as elite. The 357th Fighter Group had one of the most impressive combat records. In just over a year of combat, 42 pilots earned ‘ace’ status. Nicknamed “The Oxford Boys” after a village near their base in Leiston, UK, the 357th achieved the highest number of air-to-air combat victories of any P-51 group in the Eighth Air Force and ranked third among all groups fighting in Europe. As the first P-51 Fighter Group of the Eighth Air Force, the group flew 313 combat missions between February 11, 1944, and April 25, 1945.

On December 16th, 1942, the group was activated at Hamilton Field, California. Besides a few veterans, all pilots and personnel were new graduates from Air Forces schools, after moving through multiple bases across the country, including Tonopah Army Airfield, Nevada, on March 4, 1943; Santa Rosa Army Airfield, California, on June 3, 1943; Oroville Army Airfield, California, on August 18, 1943; and Casper Army Airfield, Wyoming, from October 7 to November 9, 1943, for various phases of training in the P-39 Airacobra. On October 24th, 1943, ten months after being formed, the 357th



357th Fighter Group training at Hamilton Army Airfield in their Bell P-39 Airacobra

Fighter Group was approved for combat. During training, 14 men lost their lives in accidents.

On November 3, 1943, the 357th began its journey to Europe, and by November 30, 1943, they had moved into RAF Raydon airfield in Suffolk under the Ninth Air Force. While the group was busy training with their limited number of North American P-51B Mustangs, the U.S. Army Air Forces recognized the need for a long-range escort fighter, and the Mustang was identified as a suitable option. On February 1, 1944, the decision was made to assign the Mustang as the primary aircraft for the Eighth Air Force.

The 357th was not only reassigned to the Mighty Eighth but also relocated to Station F-373 (RAF Leiston airfield), situated between the Suffolk towns of Leiston, Saxmundham, and Theberton, where they would remain for the rest of the war. From this base, on February 11, the 357th Fighter Group carried out its first official mission—a sweep to the Rouen area—led by ace and recent Medal of Honor recipient Major James Howard of the 354th Fighter Group. The group's main role in the air war was to escort heavy bombers, mainly B-17s and B-24s. These escort missions helped establish some new records for the Eighth Air Force.

After the group scored its first aerial victory on February 20, 1944, when 1st Lieutenant Calvert L. Williams of the 362nd Fighter Squadron, flying the P-51B Wee Willie (G4-U, serial number 43-6448), downed an Me-109, the floodgates opened for the 357th.

These 313 missions resulted in the destruction of 595.5 German aircraft in the air and 106.5 on the ground, totaling 702 victories. The 357th produced 42 pilots who became aces—the highest number of any fighter group in the European Theater of Operations.

Senior Year

A group of high schoolers was standing together, waiting for trucks to arrive and take them out to the pea fields. These teens were not headed to a game or dance but to a long, hard day of work under the open sky.

This was a time when school vacations usually involved farm work rather than relaxation.

PROLOGUE

Mrs. Paul Murphy (Betty) was preparing for Monday's classes at Teton High School. The school was in Driggs, Idaho, but she lived with her son in the northern part of Victor, Idaho.

Mrs. Murphy, who held a bachelor's and a master's degree in applied mathematics from NYU, taught the most advanced math classes available at any high school in Idaho. She also taught calculus and other subjects like chemistry at Teton High School. Betty, at 43, was one of the most beautiful and accomplished women in Teton County. It wasn't always easy being both one of the most intelligent individuals, a widow, and a very beautiful woman while raising a son.

Her husband of almost twenty years was a highly successful rancher a wonderful dad and an even better husband. He courted her for two years while she was finishing her master's degree. He had met her on his graduation trip after finishing first in his class at BYU, where he graduated in 1919. They were engaged in 1920 and married during her Christmas vacation. Their ceremony took place at the ranch because Betty had not joined the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which made marrying—or having the marriage sealed at the temple—untenable.

The couple's son was born in 1922 after a very traumatic pregnancy. The entire pregnancy was complicated, and the absence of specialists made it even harder. Another challenge the couple faced was that while her husband, Paul Murphy Sr., was a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Betty was Catholic.

Both Paul, Sr., and Betty were devout Christians who understood well the issues the other faced. Teton County's Mormon population made up about 70% of the total population, while the Catholic population was much smaller. Still, that didn't stop Betty from actively pursuing the growth of her faith.

Mission priests traveled a vast territory by train, then by horse, buggy, or early automobile to reach scattered Catholic families. When the priest visited, Mass was not held in a church. Instead, a designated Catholic family hosted the service in their home.

These services were significant social and spiritual events. They offered a chance to receive the sacraments, listen to a sermon, and connect with other Catholics. Betty always wanted to host these services. Without a local church or priest, the family home became the center of religious life. In most

Catholic households, parents, especially mothers, were the primary teachers of their children's faith. They led daily prayers, such as the Rosary, taught catechism from a book, and read from the Bible.

At Betty's house, both Paul and Betty offered grace before meals. Both parents took turns saying prayers at bedtime. Paul and Betty were unique in the county because they were practicing members of different religions who respected each other's beliefs and values. That didn't mean that Paul didn't get a lot of counseling from other members of his ward. He did.

Everything had been going well in the family for over a decade. Thanks to Betty's education, she was recruited to teach at the high school, and she thoroughly enjoyed it.

Paul was very successful as a rancher. He developed a line of Black Angus bulls that received awards and were in high demand. He quickly became the most successful rancher in Eastern Idaho and established himself as the buyer of choice when a bank had a problem borrower. Banks would expeditiously loan Paul, Sr. all the money he needed to buy a troubled ranch. His bank required him to purchase substantial life insurance policies because of the debt he incurred to acquire additional ranches. The policies were always enough to cover all the debt, provide working capital if needed after his death, and cover the family's expenses for the rest of Betty's life. The policies totaled over three million dollars, which in 1938 was generational wealth.

It was on a late October day when it happened. Paul Sr. was riding alone in the early evening. He was supposed to be home no later than 7.00 p.m., but on that fateful day, he didn't arrive. He was always punctual so that he could read to Junior, but this time the minutes ticked by with no sign of him. At 9 PM, Betty called Wes, the ranch foreman, to express her concerns. By 11:00 p.m., Wes arrived at the house with Paul's bishop, bearing the news that Paul Sr. would not be coming home again.

The funeral attracted nearly 1,000 attendees. Not only was his entire ward there, but an additional 35% of the county was also present. You see, Paul was the Eastern Idaho Stake President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Betty and Junior were in shock—no more rides with Dad, no more plans to expand the ranch, nothing.

A week after the funeral, Betty met with Pop's lawyer and the estate lawyer. He made the following statement: "Pop's death was a significant financial win for the family." She was polite but resolved never to let that

lawyer work for the family again. She couldn't wait to hear from the bishop of Pop's wards about his request for a tithing. Paul was supposed to give one-tenth of his income to his church annually. That wasn't going to happen.

The ranch manager, Wes Bowen, was responsible for all of the ranches that Mrs. Murphy owned. Many capital improvements were needed, and thanks to Pop, Betty had the cash to make those upgrades. She was known as the most generous person in the valley. After all, her ranch was now second only to the Bar B Bar Ranch in size. She owned nearly a hundred sections and ran about 4,000 head of Angus cattle. Her ranches were also completely debt-free.

Betty decided, for Junior's sake, not to change their lives in any way. It was up to him which religion to follow and which college to attend. He would work for Wes on the ranch and develop the skills Pops had. She knew he'd face the usual teenage struggles. While teaching at the county's only high school, she had seen every kind of young man. She knew her son would be defined by his character—not by becoming wealthy or highly educated. Her job was to make sure he didn't find out about or expect to inherit wealth. As much as possible, he needed to live the life of a typical, red-blooded American teen.

Paul's High School years

The Teton Valley was a place where nature set the rhythm, and the seasons shaped the spirit. In winter, snowbanks covered fenceposts. In spring, runoff thundered down the Teton River, watering fields that had been passed down like heirlooms. For Paul Murphy Jr., high school was less about growing up and more about preparing for manhood and loss.

He attended Teton High School in Driggs, where his mother taught. The building had drafty hallways, chalk-stained blackboards, and windows that opened onto the valley's long stretch of fields, where the Grand Tetons were felt more than seen—like a distant cathedral.

The county had only about 3,800 residents, and high school enrollment was just over 100 students—two-thirds girls, one-third boys. Most of the boys who weren't in class were in the fields or on the ranch. Paul did both.

Paul was handsome, tall, and broad-shouldered from baling hay and branding cattle. His thick, unruly dark hair complemented his blue eyes, and

his skin was clear from fresh mountain air and hard work. He was the type of young man who drew the attention of every girl and the envy of half the boys.

Paul didn't rely on charm. He pushed himself in the classroom, motivated—perhaps even intimidated—by the presence of his mother, Betty, who—as every student and teacher was aware—taught advanced mathematics (calculus) and chemistry at the school. A two-degree graduate of NYU, Betty expected excellence and delivered it. In her classroom, Paul was never “her son,” but he was expected to be the best.

Paul had heavy chores on the ranch and at home. As a talented athlete, he played basketball and ran track. Paul was also on his school's rodeo team, which played a key part in rural Idaho's cowboy culture. He was a fierce competitor in the paint and a sprinter who rarely lost the 100-yard dash. He was also a standout in steer wrestling and calf roping. Paul was the definition of a well-mannered young man.

He was also a standout in debate, where his quick wit and calm logic—perhaps sharpened by theological discussions at home—made him an unexpected intellectual force. He worked the pea harvest in the summers, baled hay in late July and early August, picked potatoes in the fall, and split wood for the winter. While other boys were sowing wild oats, Paul was earning varsity letters and applying to Ivy League schools.

What no one knew—not even his closest friends—was that Paul had been accepted to three of the top universities in the country: Harvard, Dartmouth, and Penn. His mother knew. She kept the letters in her desk drawer and never mentioned them publicly. She believed, just like Paul, that humility was the most accurate measure of character.

But what shaped Paul most during those years wasn't the classroom or the field—it was the absence of his father.

Everyone knew that Paul Sr. was one of the county's most successful ranchers, who died when Paul was just a freshman. They knew his death had come suddenly, during a riding accident in the high pastures. The man who had once read bedtime stories and said grace at dinner was gone in an instant. Paul Jr. never fully recovered, but he also never broke. Instead, he stepped into his father's boots—figuratively and literally—and took on the role of man of the house before most boys had found their voice.

Betty never remarried. Paul never complained. They built a quiet pact between them: work hard, live right, and don't let grief make you small.

In the spring of his junior year, as war clouds gathered over Europe, Paul asked his mother whether he should postpone college. He wanted to serve. She didn't argue and told him he still had another year to finish high school so that he could make his decision then. Paul knew that we must all give up hope for a better yesterday. Things didn't go as planned. On December 7th, during his senior year, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. The next day, in a nationwide speech, President Roosevelt announced that a state of war existed between Japan and the United States. The war changed Paul's missionary plans and the promise he had made to his father to serve the church. He felt horrible about his decision, but it was his family's honor as well as his duty to serve the country. Hopefully, he could finish a mission after the war.

That night, Betty held him a little longer than usual. In the morning, she made him pancakes, kissed his forehead, and gave him a rosary she had hidden in her top drawer since the day his father died.

It was during his remaining months in high school that Paul first decided that he wanted to serve as a fighter pilot during the war. As he quickly found out, it wasn't an easy process to get into flight school. There were a lot of steps you had to go through, a lot of tests you had to pass.

Flight Training

The war did not hand out wings easily. Paul applied for flight school with great haste, but then... he waited, waited, and waited. Eventually, in the early spring, he received a letter ordering him to report for the Aviation Cadet Examination. The courthouse hallway packed with boys who looked like men and men who looked like boys. Some were farmhands. Some were college sophomores. All of them believed they were different. All of them believed they would fly.

The written tests came first—hours of numbers, patterns, mechanical diagrams, logic puzzles designed to separate dreamers from pilots. Paul moved through them methodically, pencil steady. When the Army General Classification Test ended, he leaned back, confident but careful not to show it.

The physical exam was worse. Doctors measured everything—lungs, eyes, reflexes, heart rhythm. One minor defect could send a man to infantry instead of cockpit. Paul passed. Barely anyone celebrated. Too many still failed.

Then came waiting.

Six weeks of uncertainty. Six weeks of imagining the letter that might not come. When an envelope with “Orders to Report” for training arrived in early May 1942, it was thin, official, and life-altering.

He would report June 1. He did not tell the valley. He simply finished high school and went.

College Training Detachment

The Army sent him to a college campus where cadets wore uniforms but slept in dormitories built for debate teams and fraternity boys. Days began before dawn—marching, push-ups, mathematics, navigation theory, aerodynamics. Professors taught them how wings generated lift; sergeants taught them how to obey.

Half the class washed out before Christmas.

Paul learned two things quickly:
Intelligence mattered.
Endurance mattered more.

Classification

A week of testing determined futures. Pilot, bombardier, navigator—or back to the Army.

When the results were posted, Paul searched the board without breathing—Pilot.

Beside his name was another:
Green, Benjamin—Pilot

When the classification results were posted, Benjamin Green did not look immediately. He stood back, allowing the louder cadets to crowd the board. He had learned early that drawing attention was rarely an advantage.

When the cluster thinned, he stepped forward.

Green, Benjamin — Pilot. He exhaled softly. Not relief. Confirmation.

Behind him, one of the cadets muttered,

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“Green... that’s a New York name.” Benjamin turned, polite smile in place.

“It is.”

“You Jewish?”

The question wasn’t hostile. Not exactly. Just probing.

“Yes.”

The cadet nodded, unsure what to say next. Benjamin folded the paper in his pocket and walked away. He did not argue. He did not boast. He did not invite more.

As he turned, he noticed Paul Murphy. They nodded to each other, strangers only weeks before, now bound by selection.

That night, alone in his dormitory bunk, Ben whispered the Shema before sleep. Not because he doubted. Because he understood that the sky would not care who he was.

Preflight

Preflight lasted 10 weeks. It was not flying—it was running until lungs burned. It was memorizing aircraft silhouettes. It was Morse code tapped into forearms at midnight. It was pistols, rifles, formation drills, and leadership exercises meant to break arrogance. Instructors shouted. Cadets were tested, only the strong and smart survived. Failure was silent. Men disappeared weekly—Paul did not.

Primary Flight Training

The first time he sat in a PT-17 Stearman, he felt the war change shape. PFT took three months at the beginning, but as the need accelerated, it shortened to ten weeks. At some point they just had to get bodies in the sky.

The biplane was fabric and wire—fragile, honest. The instructor in the rear cockpit barked corrections over engine noise. Paul overcontrolled. Every cadet overcontrolled. The sky was not forgiving.

After twelve hours of instruction, his instructor climbed out, slapped the fuselage, and said:

“Don’t kill yourself.”

The aircraft felt suddenly enormous and impossibly small at the same time—Paul taxied out alone.

When the wheels lifted from the runway without another human aboard, something fundamental shifted. The world shrank beneath him. The controls steadied in his hands. For three minutes, he was not a cadet. He was a pilot.

He landed hard. Bounced once. Corrected. Rolled to a stop. The other cadets grabbed him and dunked him into a rain barrel. He came up sputtering and grinning.

Benjamin’s first solo felt different. His instructor climbed out of the cockpit and leaned in.

“Green, you’re steady. Don’t overthink it.”

Benjamin nodded. As he taxied onto the runway, he felt the familiar tightening in his chest—not fear, but responsibility.

Ariel’s face appeared unbidden in his mind. Then Yosef’s, though his child was still only a promise. The engine roared. The Stearman surged forward.

“Baruch atah Adonai...” he whispered, barely audible over the propeller wash.

The wheels lifted. For a brief moment, suspended between earth and sky, Benjamin did not feel triumph. What moved through him was something older, quieter—a covenant. When he landed—smooth, controlled—there was no shouting, no dunking ritual. He stepped from the aircraft quietly, removed his helmet, and looked once at the horizon—the sky had accepted him. He would honor that.

Basic and Advanced

The trainers became heavier. Faster. Formation flying demanded trust. Instrument training demanded faith in dials over instinct. Night flying demanded nerve.

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Aerial gunnery was different. Shooting at sleeves towed behind other aircraft made the war feel real. Missing meant embarrassment. Hitting meant something darker—proof you could destroy another machine. Washouts increased. Some cadets froze. Some lacked coordination. Some simply cracked under pressure—Paul and Benjamin did not. They gravitated toward each other—two high scorers, two men with quiet discipline. Competitive, but never reckless. By advanced training, they both knew their track.

It was during advanced training that Benjamin made his decision. He had been married for months—no one knew. Ben said nothing to the Army. Not yet. He understood how quickly a detail like that could be used to redirect a career—to move a man out of the cockpit and into something safer, something smaller. That was not why he was here. So he kept it to himself. Ariel understood. Timing, like everything else now, was a matter of survival.

Fighter Training

The AT-6 Texan was faster, louder, unforgiving. It rolled harder and punished hesitation. This was where boys became fighter pilots over a grueling 7-10 months.

Wings

Graduation came without ceremony worthy of the transformation. A small stage. A senior officer. Wings pinned to tunics. When the silver insignia touched Paul's chest, he felt the weight of expectation more than pride. He had survived—Many had not.

He and Benjamin stood side by side, newly minted lieutenants.

The war was waiting.

On April 3, 1942, Benjamin Green enlisted in the Army Air Forces. He was a young, married man dedicated to his religious faith. He attended Shabbat services every week and was very concerned about how he would observe Shabbat regularly. Green had met a beautiful Jewish woman named Ariel before enlisting in the USAAF to become a fighter pilot, and he married Ariel before joining the military. He kept his marriage quiet, not because it

was forbidden, but because he feared it might mark him as distracted—or worse, cautious. As a cadet, he believed the less the brass knew about his private life, the better. In wartime, a man was expected to belong wholly to the mission. A wife, and now a child, made him something else. Something with more to lose. Although it was not ideal for his career, he knew he had to come clean and live with the consequences. That decision had freed a weight from his shoulders that he hadn't even been aware of.

Having come from a wealthy family, Benjamin was well versed in the practice of discretion to the point of secrecy. It was just better for people not to know certain things, as it gave you more room to maneuver under the watchful gaze of perception.

Benjamin's parents, Yosel and Esther, met in the early days of the West 47th Street Diamond District, where they both worked as merchants. Esther Finkelstein came from a long line of diamond traders, which is reflected in her surname—etymologically, it relates to the words sparkle and rock.

Esther was devout in her faith and knew she had found her life partner in Yosel within days of their first encounter on 47th Street. Esther was representing the seller, and Yosel was the buyer. Yosel got much more than he bargained for in that deal, and his life changed forever. Yosel and Esther fell deeply in love, and their strong faith ensured that their children would be raised with honesty, integrity, and passion.

When Benjamin was conceived, he was conceived in love, and that love would shine through him into the world all the days of his life. As he grew, even in the school yard, he would bring peace and balance. It was like he had lived life before and had learned many of its mysteries. "An old soul," they would call him, even his teachers.

His responsible nature would enrage the children with a penchant for bullying. Benjamin knew they were weak and insecure and would talk them through their shortcomings. He would either embarrass them to the point they would let it go and walk away, or they would break down and admit their shortcomings. Benjamin knew the military was for him from a very early age. It called to him and offered him authority and strength to couch his inherent nature. He also saw that he wanted to fly. He wanted to learn and lead.

Leadership and purpose coursed through his veins. His parents wondered how they could have been so fortunate, because even their robust parenting,

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faith, and love could not have produced all his glorious traits. He was one in a million, and they knew it.

Benjamin effortlessly passed all the tests. His score on the Aviation Cadet Test was the highest ever recorded in the eastern region. Just like Paul, it was off to aviation training immediately after graduating from high school.

Ben made many friends easily, and one was Paul Murphy, whom he met at the initial classification center and who would later become a lifelong friend. He saw many of his own virtues in Paul Murphy as their relationship strengthened in those formative weeks. Both men were selected for pilot training, but after completing pre-flight and primary school, they were sent to the same basic schools and classified for pursuits.

They both qualified to fly fighters. They had no issues flying the AT. They were the only two members of their preflight school to finish all their training together as fighter pilots. For this reason, in part, they were both then sent to advanced fighter transition training, preparing them for assignment to an operational fighter group.

During training, Paul and Ben were inseparable; they were peers. They were both leaders, well-educated, and highly competent aviators.

One evening, while cleaning up after another day in the pattern, Ben looked over.

“When’s your birthday?”

“January first.”

Ben smiled.

“Mine too.”

Paul laughed.

“Well, that’s convenient.”

“At least one of us should remember it.”

From that day forward, they joked that they were twins separated by an ocean.

Before they went on their post-graduation leave, Ben had a question for Paul.

“Have you given any thoughts about your potential call sign?”

“No, Ben, I haven’t, I thought it was given to you by your initial squadron mates.”

“I don’t like that approach, so I have decided—aided by Ariel’s suggestion—that I want my call sign to be Mensch. Are you okay with that?”

“Sure, Mensch”

“Have you given any thought to yours?”

“Yeah, I believe that Rodeo would be a good one for me since that’s what I enjoyed the most in high school.”

Mensch and Rodeo completed their transition training in June 1943 and were assigned to the 357th Fighter Group as it continued its training cycle through California and Nevada before moving on to Casper Army Airfield, Wyoming.

After training, the new Army Air Forces aviators were granted a 21 to 30-day leave en route to their new assignment. Lt. Green was excited because he finally had some leave and could reunite with his wife, Ariel.

He was also able to attend Shabbat services. Due to a shortage of rabbis in the USAAF, participating in Shabbat services during flight training was very difficult; however, Benjamin continued studying the Torah. When he returned from leave, he knew it was time to inform the Army that he was married. He couldn’t keep it a secret forever, and opening those doors was now a necessary step.

Paul, on the other hand, had been frolicking around in San Francisco. Each day, it was another woman. He was developing a well-deserved reputation for having the highest quantity of “completed relationships” of anyone in the group.

It was another day—Paul believed it was going to be another day of hunting and bagging young ladies who were impressed with his flight jacket and being a fighter pilot. He had all his lines down pat, and the young ladies fell for them in record time each day.

Not suspecting today would differ from any other while “on the hunt” and completely oblivious to the possibility that his life was about to be offered an entirely new trajectory, he sprang through the squeaky wooden door of

a small French coffee shop, the sun was streaming through a window and shining angelically on a young woman. The light created what seemed, for a split second, like a halo over her head. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. A stunning blonde debutante named Katie, and all 5'9" of her was pure lust-inducing perfection.

At first, she was ice-cold toward him. She sliced right through the 21-year-old's lines and banter. To her, he seemed like just another jerk—an over-the-top flyboy. At first, she clipped his wings at every turn. To her, it seemed like the same thing it was to Paul. A game where superficial young men hunted for equally superficial young women in a mating ritual. She saw it for what it was and enjoyed clipping the wings of the superficial pilots. Eventually, Paul realized he was outmatched and softly surrendered.

"So, ah, have you?"

Katie looked into space rolling her eyes.

"Do you mind if I ask where you're from—are you in college?"

Fully expecting a crass pickup line, Katie was completely taken aback by the polite and straightforward question from the infamous hunter.

"One, two, three," she thought to herself before composing her reply. "Well, since you asked so kindly, I'll answer both questions. I'm from New York, and I'm attending Stanford University in the Honors Science program."

"Wow, that's impressive. If you don't mind me asking, what specifically are you studying?"

"I'm majoring in Organic Chemistry in case I decide to attend medical school after finishing my undergraduate degree. If I choose not to pursue a career in medicine, I might attend graduate business school."

Lieutenant Paul Murphy couldn't believe what he was hearing. Here he was, standing with the most beautiful, and clearly the most intelligent woman—besides his calculus-obsessed mother—that he had ever met.

"Well," he exclaimed after a long silence while trying to conceal his amazement. "I am both deeply impressed and

deeply jealous. I had to delay college because of the war, but I plan to major in applied math once the war is over. I'll be pursuing my Ph.D. and applying it to the business skills I've been gaining. I'm thinking about entering the securities industry."

"So, Paul, have you decided where you would like to attend university?"

"No, I am not sure. I haven't told anyone where I have been accepted. I didn't want to sound like a showoff. My mother warned me not to tell folks about my acceptances. That said, I believe you can keep my secret. I was accepted to the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard University, and Dartmouth College. My mom went to NYU, where she received her BS and Master's degrees in Applied Math."

"Wow, impressive."

"I agree, it was very unusual for a woman to achieve those honors back then."

Paul had often wondered why more women were not like his mother. But this one was obviously brilliant, highly educated, and stunningly beautiful. He felt like he had hit the jackpot. His fast-won conquests were becoming tiresome and lacked the thrill of the hunt. Katie presented something different entirely. She inspired in him a longing for her respect which meant he respected her. Katie was another level of lady.

Paul had quickly become enamored to the point of jaw-dropping, puppy-like bewilderment. He had found his dream woman. Mensa-like intelligence, and unimaginable beauty.

They engaged in deep conversation like they were frozen in time and isolated from the rest of the world. Like they were floating inside a bubble through clouds, miles above the Earth. Eventually, there was a few seconds of silence where they had satisfied all their thoughts and questions for a moment when Katie suggested they get some dinner. That was the last time anyone saw either of them during Paul's leave.

They both enjoyed a deeply dazed whirl of profound new love where time didn't matter, and the world went on around them all by itself. While on

PROLOGUE

leave, Lieutenant Green and his wife Ariel met Miss McFarland once. The rest of their leave, no one saw either of the new couple.

“Murf, where have you and Miss McFarland been? Ariel and I have left you 50 messages.”

“Ms. McFarland and I have been conducting a secretive military reconnaissance. After a while, we carried out in-depth formal military maneuvers called a reconnaissance in force. That was fun. By the way... Miss McFarland and I got hitched.”

Ben shot a sharp, shocked expression and blurted without thinking,

“Isn’t that against regulations?”

“Isn’t that the pot calling the kettle black?” Murph replied with a slight smirk.”

Ben sat down with an agreeing smirk.

A week or so after they returned from leave, the two lieutenants were assigned to the 363rd Fighter Squadron. Soon after they arrived at Hamilton Army Airfield, the Group was transferred to Tonopah Army Airfield, Nevada. Then the 357th moved to Santa Rosa Army Airfield, California, and then to Oroville Army Airfield, California, on August 18, 1943.

While the 363rd was in California, both Ariel and Katie found a way to spend a few days with their new husbands. Katie and Ariel became fast friends and decided to live together while Ben and Paul were deployed. This would ease the burden of loneliness and they thoroughly enjoyed each other’s company.

The two young aviators completed their training at Casper Army Airfield, Wyoming, from October 7 to November 9, 1943. During their months of group training, they completed their 2v2, squadron versus squadron, and escort training.

On October 24, 1943, the 357th was cleared for combat and initially assigned the P-38. The pilots had only just begun studying its “Dash One”

manuals and logging time in the cockpit when orders changed. The Eighth Air Force decided to standardize on the longer-range P-51 Mustang. The group had barely grown comfortable in the P-38 before orders came down—switch aircraft. Again.

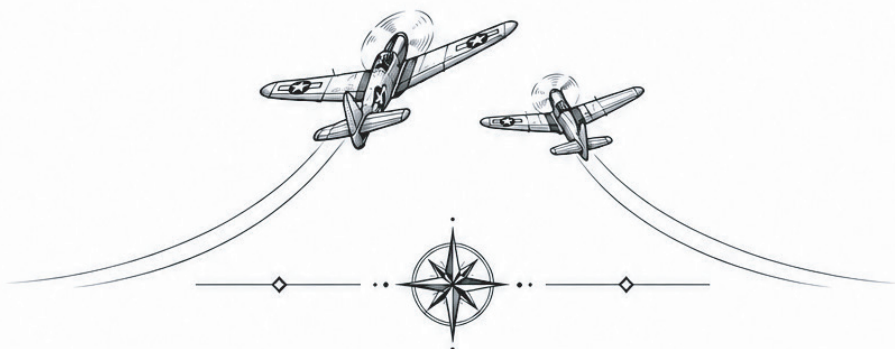
By mid-November 1943, the 357th was deploying to RAF Raydon in England, where they would assemble their new Mustangs and prepare for combat. Their first mission would come on February 11, 1944.



PART I

THE FIRST MISSION

(1943–1945)



CHAPTER ONE—TORN FROM EDEN

RAF Raydon, England, December 1, 1943—the day after the whole 357th Fighter Group arrives

Paul and Ben sat in a pub with a fire smoldering in the corner, they cradled a tin mug of lukewarm coffee in one hand and a Lucky Strike in the other.

“Ben, have you ever thought about what happens if we don’t come back?”

“Only when I look at my son.”

Murphy exhaled, the smoke curling like vapor trails in a dogfight.

“You still keeping him secret from the brass?”

“You think they’d let me become a squadron commander with a newborn son and fly combat missions?”

“They let me fly, and I can’t even keep a damn cactus alive.”

It took several weeks to assemble the P-51s. It was a reflective time for Paul. Away from his new wife and desperate to find himself in this new setting of active battle.

“What’s it like, Ben?”

“What?”

“Being... you know, righteous. Believing in something. God, family, nation. I mean, really believing.”

“It’s not about belief. It’s about obligation. If I don’t fight, Ariel and Yosef don’t get to live free.”

“And if you die?”

“Then at least I died giving them a future.”

Murphy nodded, quieter than usual. Somewhere behind them, the mechanics turned over a Merlin engine. It coughed, spluttered, then roared to life.

“Katie’s pregnant,” he announced abruptly.

Green turned to him, eyes widening with honest joy.

“Mazal tov. When?”

“June, maybe July. We haven’t told anyone. Hell, I wasn’t sure it was real until yesterday.”

“Then what are you doing here, man?”

“Same as you. Making sure there’s still a world for our kids.”

The silence hung like a prayer, unspoken but understood.

“We’ll be flying soon,” Ben finally breaking the silence.

“And then we kill Nazis. God help us.”

“He does,” Ben whispered distantly as he closed the prayer book and tucked it into his jacket. “And I thank him for it every time we fly and come back breathing.”

The two men moved outside and sat on crates outside their quarters, jackets zipped high against the Suffolk chill. Their P-51s rested on the tarmac behind them, still gleaming with fresh paint and the vexing promise of victory or defeat.

A sudden gust carried the scent of fuel and frost. Murphy stood up and stubbed his cigarette on the crate.

“Have you ever named your P-51?”

“Ariel’s Faith,” Ben continued without hesitation. “That way she’s always with me.”

“I love it. I was thinking ‘Katie’s Fury’ or maybe ‘God’s Irish Problem.’”

“Always dramatic.”

“Always the steady one, Ben. So, there we have it. Faith and Fury it is.”

They shared a laugh that turned into a coughing fit—cold air, stale coffee, and the nerves of impending combat.

Flashback: October 1943—Novato, California—Hamilton Army Airfield

The screen door creaked as Ariel stepped out onto the porch. Yosef nestled tightly against her chest, a soft lullaby in Hebrew drifting from her lips. The baby cooed, blinking up at her as if memorizing her face.

Katie sat on the steps below; her lab uniform unbuttoned at the collar. She glanced up and grinned.

“Still singing?”

“Always. He sleeps best when I sing the Shema.”

“I tried singing to Paul once. He told me I sounded like a goat with a hangover.”

“That sounds like Paul.”

They both laughed—two women from different worlds, brought together by war and the men rushing toward it.

“You think they’ll make it back, Ariel?”

“I don’t let myself wonder.”

“You’re always that strong?”

“No. I just pretend better than most.”

Ariel adjusted Yosef’s blanket as the wind off the Pacific swept over the hills. Inside the house, Benjamin and Paul were packing their duffels, laughing too loudly—forced laughter, loud enough to drown out the ticking clock.

Katie examined her new friend’s eyes, unsure of what to say. She tried to gently redirect the attention away from the departure of their husbands.

Katie noticed the sadness flicker in Ariel’s gaze and offered a small, reassuring smile, hoping to ease the tension of the situation.

“He’s got your eyes, Ariel.”

“And his father’s stubborn jaw. He fights sleep like it’s the Luftwaffe.”

“Guess he’s already a fighter.”

They sat in silence for a moment. Then Kathleen flicked away her cigarette and stood.

"You ever get mad, Ariel?"

"Every day. But then I remind myself why he's going."

"To fight Hitler?"

"To protect Yosef."

"Yes, the same reason Paul's going, now."

"Then they go together. And they come back together."

Back inside the house, Benjamin's fingers brushed the velvet cover of his siddur before slipping it into the side pocket of his duffel. Paul held up a black-and-white photo of Katie with her hands on her hips and a smirk on her face.

"This one'll keep me alive," he muttered.

"You should frame it for your Mustang."

"It's always with me."

"I'm thinking about finally painting her name on the nose of mine"

"Katie's Fury?"

"Of course."

Benjamin picked up Yosef's knitted cap—navy blue with a tiny white star. Ariel had made it during his final week of training.

"You sure about this?" Paul asked quietly.

"No. But I'm going anyway."

"What if we don't come back?"

"Then Ariel will raise a son who remembers why I left."

The door opened. The men stepped outside. Uniforms sharp and crisp, their bags and hearts weighing heavy, and their flight jackets draped over their shoulders. Ariel handed Yosef to Benjamin. He held the child as if cradling the Torah—reverently, protectively.

"You're my legacy," he whispered to Yosef. "My covenant."

"Amen," Ariel whispered.

Paul and Katie embraced fiercely.

"No tears, my love."

Benjamin kissed Ariel's forehead. She reached into her coat and pressed a folded piece of parchment into his hand.

"Psalm 91 in Hebrew and English. Read it every time before you fly."

"I will."

"Promise me."

"I swear on our son."

And with that, the two wingmen turned and walked toward the car that would take them to the airfield.

As the engine started, Ariel and Katie stood together on the porch, watching their husbands disappear down the gravel road, into war, and history.

"They'll be alright, Ariel"

"They have to be, Katie. It's not just us depending on them."

On the way to operations, Green handed Murphy a folded form.

"Sign this."

"What is it?"

"An allotment. Monthly pay to Katie. Rental allowance. Family allowance. If something happens, she won't have to fight the Army for it."

Murphy hesitated.

"Don't talk like that."

"Sign it."

Murphy scrawled his name without reading the fine print.

"Anything else I should know?"

Green met his eyes.

"If you get careless, she gets ten thousand dollars."

Murphy didn't answer. He folded the paper and handed it back.

CHAPTER TWO – THE SKY TURNS RED

RAF Leiston, England — March 3, 1944

The morning fog hung low and sour, like damp wool thrown across the airfield. Engines grumbled beneath tarpaulins, restless and impatient. Lt. Benjamin Green wiped a thin smear of oil from the edge of his prayer book, closed it carefully, and slid it into the inner pocket of his flight jacket. Across the tarmac, Lt. Paul Murphy tugged on his gloves and shook his head. “Another milk run,” he muttered. “Easy escort to Leipzig. In and out. Back by tea.” Green approached, fastening his sidearm. “You don’t believe them?” Murphy snorted. “The last man who called it easy came back with a wing full of holes and someone else’s blood in his cockpit.” They held each other’s gaze a moment. No bravado. No smiles. “Not today,” Murphy declared. “Not today,” Green agreed. They climbed into their aircraft.

Over Central Germany — 20,000 Feet

The sky was clear. Too clear. The B-17s droned ahead in rigid formation, silver bellies glinting in the cold light. Green flew tail-end Charlie on the right flank of Red Flight. Murphy sat steady off his wing. For a brief moment, it almost felt routine. Then the radio snapped alive. “Bandits. Nine o’clock high. Coming in hot.” The Messerschmitts dropped out of the sun.

The sky shattered. Green rolled left as tracer fire cut through the formation. A P-51 ahead of them—Red-Four—erupted in flame before anyone finished calling his number. The canopy tore away. The aircraft disintegrated midair. “Was that Carson?” Murphy shouted. “Stay with me!” Green barked. A 109 flashed across Murphy’s nose. He broke hard, pulled into the climb, then rolled over the top.

The German filled his windscreen—close enough to see the shape of the pilot’s helmet. Murphy squeezed the trigger. The Mustang shuddered. .50-caliber rounds stitched across the enemy’s fuselage. Smoke. Then fire. The Messerschmitt snapped downward, spiraling. Murphy followed for a

second too long—then saw it. A parachute blooming white against the earth below. He eased off. Green engaged seconds later. An Fw-190 broke toward the bombers.

Green climbed into position, steady hands, short burst. The 190 rolled inverted and vanished into cloud. No chute. The fight dissolved as quickly as it had begun. The remaining Mustangs regrouped around the bombers. Five American fighters failed to answer roll call. Two B-17s burned in the distance. Nobody said the words “milk run” again.

Back at Leiston, the intelligence officer asked for distances, angles, and ammunition expended. Murphy answered automatically. Green wrote his report in careful block letters: one destroyed. No one celebrated. That night, Murphy sat on his bunk staring at his hands, flexing his fingers as if they still held the stick. He could still see the parachute. Green wrote to Ariel in silence. Neither man mentioned the kills. War had stopped being theory. It had become arithmetic.

CHAPTER THREE – IT’S JUST ANOTHER DAY

That night in the Officers’ Mess at RAF Leiston, the whiskey was thin and the silence heavy. Benjamin stared at the glass in front of him without lifting it. Murphy sat beside him, collar open, sweat dried white against his undershirt.

“Carson had a girl back home,” Murphy muttered quietly.

“He was gonna marry her after Easter.”

Ben nodded. “He didn’t make it through Friday.”

They sat with that. Around them, men talked too loudly or not at all.

“You still believe in it?” Murphy asked after a while.

“In what?”

“God. This. Any of it.”

Ben folded his hands on the table. “I believe in the reason.
Not the outcome.”

Murphy let out a short breath. “Feels like the outcome’s
doing all the talking.”

Ben glanced toward the door. “I miss hearing Hebrew out
loud. I miss Shabbat.”

Murphy studied him. “What if we’re just feeding the machine?”

Ben didn’t answer immediately. The engines outside coughed to life in the darkness.

“Then we make sure it’s not for nothing.”

Murphy finally took a drink.

“That sky turned red today. I won’t forget that.”

“No,” Ben replied. “Neither will I.”

Outside, another aircraft rolled toward the runway.

Morning would come whether they were ready for it or not.

CHAPTER FOUR – FAITH IN THE FOXHOLE

RAF Leiston, Suffolk — Thursday Morning—March 1944

Thursday brought another fighter sweep southeast of Kassel. Major William “Mickey” Lochstern delivered the briefing without flourish. Ammunition was standard. Altitude twenty-six thousand feet. Rendezvous over Bruges. Expected contact with 109Gs. Debrief mandatory. The routine no longer felt instructional. It felt inevitable. The sky over Germany was crowded before noon. Green led the second element of White Flight, Murphy steady off his wing. The 109s came in from above and behind, fast and disciplined.

Green broke right into a shallow dive, closing the distance before the German pilot realized he had been seen. His first burst struck the fuselage. The second stitched the wing roots. The Messerschmitt faltered, then rolled into a steep descent, smoke trailing. The canopy separated. A parachute opened at nine thousand feet and drifted into cloud. Green did not watch him land. Back at Leiston, his report was clinical. One Me-109 destroyed. Four hundred sixty-one rounds expended. Enemy pilot bailed. No significant evasive action after first burst. He signed it without comment. Later, in his diary, he wrote only: To be a Jew is to ask questions. To be a soldier is to follow orders. To be both is to live inside a contradiction.

RAF Leiston, Suffolk — Thursday Afternoon

The toolshed behind the hangars smelled faintly of oil and old timber. Green had swept it clean himself. Two candles flickered on a pair of dented brass holders, their light catching the rough grain of the boards. He whispered the blessings softly, Hebrew moving across his tongue with practiced restraint. The door creaked open.

“You hiding from the Luftwaffe?” Murphy asked quietly.

“Only from the noise.” Murphy stepped inside, still in his flight jacket, streaked with grease.

He looked at the candles, then at Green. “You still do this? Even here?”

“Especially here.”

Murphy leaned against the wall. “I haven’t been to Mass in years.”

“Faith isn’t about attendance,” Green replied.

Murphy studied the small flame. “You think God sees this?”

Green considered the question. “I think we need Him to.”

Outside, engines coughed to life for the afternoon mission.

Captain Steven Jones—call sign “Balls”—handled the second briefing with easy confidence. The mission was nearly identical to the morning sweep. Same route. Same altitude. Same warnings. He spoke as if repetition guaranteed safety. It did not. They encountered ten 109s north of Kassel. Jones turned toward the Channel at the first sign of contact. The German formation pivoted as one and fell on him. His Mustang erupted in flame before a single American gun fired. There was no time to react. The sky dissolved into a furball.

Murphy broke right and climbed into the nearest pair of Messerschmitts. He fired once—too far. Corrected. Fired again. The first enemy aircraft exploded mid-dive. The second rolled hard left, but Murphy stayed with him, closing inside two hundred yards. His burst shattered the canopy. The German pilot bailed into the overcast below five thousand feet. Murphy felt the recoil and nothing else. By the time the remaining Mustangs reassembled, their mission commander was gone. The bombers pressed forward without them. Back at Leiston, Murphy signed his report in silence.

Two Me-109s destroyed. Six hundred five rounds expended. He did not comment on Jones. There was nothing to say. That night the wind rattled the tin roofs. Green sat on his bunk with his siddur open across his knees. Murphy lay above him, staring at the ceiling.

“Hey, Ben?”

“Yeah?”

“If I don’t make it back next time... will you say something for me?”

“Of course.”

“Even if I’m a lapsed Catholic bastard?”

“Even more so.”

Murphy laughed softly.

“Just don’t come back dead, Paul.”

“That’ll be best for us all.” Outside, another aircraft rolled toward the runway. Morning would come again, indifferent to who answered it.

That night, Paul wrote his daily letter to Katie to tell her about the allotment, signing off with, “If you need more, just let me know and I’ll find a way to send more. Sorry, my love, I should have attended to this earlier.”

Katie and Paul married so fast that they never even had time to discuss finances. Before they had a chance, the war called and Paul was whisked away. Paul was suddenly concerned but knew Katie was so responsible and self-sufficient she’d probably never even ask about money. It would be beneath her.

CHAPTER FIVE – FIRST FLIGHT OVER BERLIN

RAF Leiston–March 6, 1944

It would not be their last flight over Berlin, nor even the worst. But on that cold `s the first time they would follow the bombers all the way to the heart of the Reich.

The briefing room was dark except for a single bulb over the map. Major Sloan tapped Berlin with a piece of chalk.

“Direct run. Minimal diversion. Marshalling yards and heavy industry. First time the Mustangs go all the way in.”

No one whistled this time. They had already learned better.

Frost silvered the wingtips. Ariel’s Faith sat quiet and lethal in the gray light. Green ran his hand along the fuselage, feeling the cold through his glove.

“How are you feeling?” Murphy asked.

“Like history doesn’t care whether we make it back.”

Murphy nodded once. They climbed in.

The North Sea was deceptively calm. Forty bombers droned ahead, two dozen fighters guarding them like a tightening fist. Berlin appeared first as haze on the horizon. Then the flak began.

Black bursts climbed toward them in thick, deliberate walls. The formation shuddered. A Fortress lost two engines and slipped out of line, smoke pouring from its wing.

“Stay tight,” Green ordered quietly.

The Luftwaffe hit moments later—190s and 109s diving in coordinated pairs. The sky became vertical.

Green rolled under a climbing bomber as tracers sliced past his canopy. A 190 overshot and tried to recover. Green closed and fired. The German aircraft bucked, wing shearing loose before it fell through the flak curtain below.

He did not look for a chute.

Murphy disappeared into cloud after a 109. For several seconds there was nothing but static. Then—

“I’m here.”

A Fortress ahead of them exploded without warning. The wing separated cleanly, the fuselage tumbling end over end. Ten men vanished into smoke and fire. Neither pilot spoke.

The bombers held formation.

Bomb bay doors opened. Hundreds of bombs fell in disciplined silence, disappearing into the gray sprawl below. Smoke began to climb from the city in slow columns.

Flak intensified on the turn outbound. Ariel’s Faith jolted as fragments tore through the left wing. Murphy’s canopy cracked but held. Behind them, the sky burned.

Leiston—Debriefing Tent

They lost six fighters. More bombers than anyone wanted to count. The intelligence officer read names from a clipboard without looking up. Green removed his gloves slowly.

“They’ll call it a success,” Murphy spat defiantly.

Green stared at the mud on his boots.

“They always do.”

Murphy leaned back in his chair.

“You think we made a difference?”

Green considered the question.

“We’re still here,” Green finally released his imprisoned thoughts. “That will have to be enough.”

CHAPTER SIX – THE LONGEST DAY

June 6, 1944

The briefing room was already full when Murphy and Green walked in. No one was talking. That alone told them everything.

Maps covered the walls—layered, overlapping, marked in grease pencil and urgency. The Channel. The French coast. Grid coordinates stacked on top of each other like a problem no one wanted to solve out loud. Red arrows pushed inland from the sea. Blue lines stretched across the water in rigid formation.

Murphy stopped just inside the door.

“Jesus,” he muttered.

Green didn’t answer.

At the front of the room, the operations officer stood rigid, hands behind his back. He waited until the last chair scraped into place before speaking.

“Gentlemen,” he began, “this is it.”

No buildup. No theatrics.

“This morning, Allied forces are landing in Normandy.”

A pause.

“You will be flying top cover for the largest amphibious invasion in the history of warfare.”

No one moved.

The officer stepped aside and gestured to the map.

“Multiple waves. Bombers, transports, gliders, naval bombardment. Your job is simple—nothing gets through. No German aircraft reaches those beaches. Not one.”

Murphy leaned back slightly, eyes still on the map.

“Simple,” he said quietly.

Green allowed himself the smallest glance in his direction.

The airfield was already alive when they stepped outside. Engines turned over in staggered rhythm, coughing smoke into the pale morning. Ground crews moved quickly but without panic—every motion deliberate, practiced.

The sky above was still gray, low clouds hanging over the Channel like a lid. Murphy climbed into his Mustang and settled into the seat, hands moving automatically across switches and gauges. Fuel. Oil. Pressure. Everything where it should be. Everything except the scale of what they were about to do.

Green’s voice crackled over the radio.

“You ready for this?”

Murphy paused, looking out across the runway. Aircraft lined up in sequence—more than he had ever seen in one place.

“No,” he said. Then, after a beat: “You?”

“No.”

A moment of silence.

“Good,” Murphy replied. “Means we understand it.”

They lifted off in waves. Climbing through the clouds, breaking into a sky already brimming with aircraft. Bombers in tight formations stretched out ahead of them—endless, mechanical, relentless. Transports moved slower, lower, vulnerable.

The Channel below was hidden at first, swallowed by haze. Then the clouds broke.

Murphy felt it before he processed it. The sea was gone. In its place—ships. Thousands of them. Gray hulls cut across the water in every direction. Wake lines tangled into a single moving mass. Landing craft pushed toward the beaches in staggered rows. Smoke drifted upward in thin columns where bombardment had already begun.

Murphy exhaled slowly.

“My God.”

Green came in over the radio, quieter than usual.

“This isn’t a mission.”

Murphy watched the coastline grow sharper in the distance—sand, cliffs, fire.

“No. This is the war.”

Flak reached them first. Black bursts erupted ahead of the bomber formations, precise and methodical. The Germans had found their range. The sky shifted from crowded to chaotic in seconds.

“Keep formation,” Murphy snapped. “Stay high.”

A B-17 ahead of them took a direct hit to the wing. Fire blossomed outward, bright against the gray sky. The aircraft held for a moment—then broke apart, pieces trailing downward toward the water.

No parachutes.

Murphy forced his eyes forward.

“Stay focused,” Green said. “We’re not here for them.”

“Copy.”

The call came sharp over the radio.

“Bandits! Eleven o’clock high—multiple contacts!”

Murphy rolled left, scanning the sky.

“There.”

Dark shapes diving out of the sun—Messerschmitts, fast and aggressive, cutting straight toward the bomber stream.

“Red Flight, with me!” Murphy called. “Break and engage!”

The world collapsed into movement. Throttle forward. Nose down. The Mustang responded instantly, alive beneath him. He lined up the lead

German aircraft and fired. Tracers stitched across the sky, closing the distance.

The Messerschmitt broke hard right. Murphy stayed with him.

Another burst. Closer this time. The German pilot rolled inverted, diving toward the deck. Murphy followed for a second—then pulled off.

“Leave him!” Green barked. “Stay on the formation!”

Murphy climbed back up, scanning. More contacts. More movement. The sky was full now—not just of aircraft, but of intent. Every pilot knew exactly what was at stake.

Below them, the beaches were no longer abstract. Explosions walked across the sand in steady lines. Landing craft burned at the water’s edge. Figures—tiny, indistinct—moved forward under fire.

Murphy swallowed.

“Christ...”

Green’s voice cut through again, steady.

“Do your job.”

Murphy tightened his grip on the stick.

“Yeah. That’s what we’re here for.”

Minutes stretched into something unmeasurable. Engage. Climb. Reform. Scan. Repeat. The German attacks came in waves, but they never broke through. Every time a formation pushed toward the bombers or transports, Allied fighters were there—intercepting, turning, driving them back.

Murphy lost count of how many times he fired. Lost count of how many aircraft he saw fall. At one point, he glanced to his right and saw Green—tight in formation, calm, precise, exactly where he needed to be.

For a brief moment, the chaos narrowed to something familiar. Just two pilots. Wingmen doing their job.

By the time they turned back toward England, the sky had changed. Still crowded. Still dangerous. But something had shifted. The German presence was thinner now. More scattered. Less certain.

Murphy climbed through the cloud layer again, the Channel disappearing beneath him. For the first time that day, he allowed himself to breathe.

Back at Leiston, no one celebrated. They climbed out of their aircraft in silence. Ground crews moved in immediately, checking damage, refueling, preparing for the next sortie. Because there would be a next one.

Murphy pulled off his gloves and looked out across the field. Green walked up beside him.

“Well?” Murphy asked.

Green didn’t answer right away. He looked out toward the horizon, where the clouds still hung low over the Channel.

Finally, he spoke:

“It’s begun.”

Murphy nodded. They stood there for a moment longer. Then Murphy spoke again, quieter this time.

“No. It’s ending.”

They would fly again that afternoon. And the next day. And the day after that. But nothing would ever feel like this again. Because for a few hours over the coast of France, the war had revealed itself completely—its scale, its cost, its purpose. And they had been there. Not as observers. But as part of what would become D-Day.

CHAPTER SEVEN – THE BULGE

December 1944

The cold came first. Not gradually. Not politely. It arrived overnight and stayed. Murphy felt it before he even opened his eyes.

The barracks were silent except for the wind pushing against the walls in long, steady breaths. The stove had gone out sometime before dawn. Frost traced the inside of the windows in thin white veins. He sat up slowly, pulling on his boots without speaking.

Across the room, Green was already awake.

“You hear it?” Murphy asked.

Green nodded.

“The wind. And something else.”

By the time they reached the operations building, the field was still. Too still. No engines. No movement. Just aircraft lined up under a pale, frozen sky, wings dusted with ice.

Murphy stopped short.

“What the hell is this?”

A mechanic passed by, shaking his head.

“Grounded. All of it.”

Inside, the briefing room was tense in a different way than it had been in June. No maps covered the walls this time. Only one. The Ardennes. The operations officer didn’t waste time.

“German forces have launched a major offensive through the Ardennes,” he said. “Armor, infantry, everything they’ve got left. They’re pushing hard. Fast.”

Murphy frowned.

“In this weather?”

“That’s exactly why, Murphy. They knew we’d be grounded.”

A pause.

“For now, we wait.”

Waiting was worse than flying. The days blurred together. Cold. Wind. Snow. Reports came in fragments—units overrun, lines collapsing, roads cut off. American forces falling back under pressure that no one had expected this late in the war.

Murphy paced. Green read every report twice. Neither of them said what they were thinking.

“They’re desperate,” Murphy finally breaking the silence.

Green shook his head.

“No. They’re committed.”

On the seventh day, the sky began to change. It wasn’t obvious at first. Just a thinning of the clouds. A break in the gray. Then sunlight—weak, distant, but there. Murphy saw it from across the field and didn’t wait for orders.

“They’re going to send us up,” he said.

Green was already standing. The briefing was short.

“Weather window is open,” the operations officer said.

“We hit everything that moves. Armor, supply lines, troop concentrations. If it’s German, you destroy it.”

Murphy nodded once.

“About time.”

Takeoff was rough. The runway was still slick with ice, engines straining against the weight of the payload. Murphy felt the aircraft resist him for a moment before finally lifting into the air. The sky was clear. For the first time in days. And full.

They crossed into the Ardennes and saw it immediately. The forest was broken. Lines of vehicles cut through the snow—columns of armor, trucks, artillery. Smoke rose in thin spirals from burning fuel depots. The front wasn't a line anymore. It was a wound.

Murphy leaned forward, eyes scanning.

"There," he said. "Road column. Northwest."

Green saw it too.

"Let's go."

They dropped fast. The Mustangs came in low, engines screaming against the massive weight. Murphy lined up the lead tank and fired. Rockets streaked forward, slamming into the column with a flash that lit the snow. Vehicles scattered. Too late.

Green followed, guns walking across the trucks behind the armor. Fuel ignited. Fire spread. Murphy pulled up hard, banking left.

"Again."

There was no elegance to it. No maneuvering for advantage. Just destruction. They hit road after road. Columns caught in the open. Supply lines stretched too thin. Vehicles frozen in place, engines still running, crews exposed.

The Germans had pushed forward fast. Now they had nowhere to go. Over the radio, voices overlapped.

"Multiple targets—grid—"

"Taking fire—light AA—"

"Stay low—stay fast—"

Murphy ignored most of it. He didn't need direction. Everywhere he looked, there was something to hit. At one point, he saw a group of infantry moving through the trees, dark figures against the snow. He hesitated. But only for a second.

Green's voice came through, sharp.

"Keep moving."

Murphy pulled away. By the second pass, the sky belonged to them. There were no German fighters. No resistance above. Only the ground. And what was left of it. Murphy climbed briefly, scanning the horizon.

Smoke marked the battlefield in every direction. The offensive was still moving. But slower now. Breaking apart.

“They’re not going to make it,” Murphy said.

Green didn’t answer. He was watching something below. Murphy followed his gaze. A long column—vehicles packed tight along a narrow road, nowhere to maneuver. Trapped. They didn’t speak. They didn’t need to.

Murphy rolled in first. The attack was methodical. Pass after pass. The P-51s each carried 6 rockets, 2 x 500-pound bombs, and 1850 rounds total for the inner, middle, and outer guns. It was a firestorm. The column disintegrated under them. Explosions echoed through the forest, muffled by snow and distance. By the time they pulled off, there was nothing left moving. On the return flight, the silence was different.

Not tension. Not anticipation. Something else. Murphy broke it first.

“That’s it, isn’t it?”

Green took a moment before answering.

“Yes.”

Murphy nodded slowly.

“They’re done.”

Green looked out over the snow-covered terrain below. The smoke still rose, marking where the fighting had been. Where it still was.

“Not yet,” he said. “But they will be.”

Back at Leiston, the field was alive again. Aircraft landing, refueling, turning for another sortie. The war had resumed its rhythm. But something had changed. Murphy climbed out of the cockpit and stood for a moment, looking at his hands. They were steady. Too steady.

Green walked up beside him.

“You all right?” he asked.

Murphy nodded.

“Yeah.”

A pause.

“Just thinking.”

“About what?”

Murphy looked out toward the horizon.

“How it ends.”

Green followed his gaze. The sky was clear now. Cold. Empty. Certain.

“It doesn’t end all at once,” Green said. “It just... runs out.”

Murphy considered that. Then nodded. They turned back toward the aircraft. There was more to do. There was always more to do. But for the first time, it felt like the war was no longer something they were surviving. It was something they were finishing.

The battle started on December 16th and lasted until January 25. It would be Germany’s last major offensive.

CHAPTER EIGHT – TWO ACES— TWO COMMANDERS

March 1945

RAF Leiston

The largest daylight raid on Berlin to date assembled over England in cold, ordered silence. Squadrons that once flew under seasoned commanders were now increasingly led by men who had survived long enough to be trusted with more.

The map on the wall showed the route in red chalk: Groningen to Hamburg to Berlin.

Chuck Yeager moved past them near the front of the room—quiet, focused, already something of a legend among fighter pilots. He didn't look different. That was somewhat unsettling.

Bombers would strike factories in the capital. Intelligence expected heavy resistance.

“Same altitude,” Green commanded evenly. “Twenty-six thousand feet. Stay tight on the bombers until engagement. Do not chase alone.”

No one asked questions. The men in the room had learned what happened to those who did.

The sky over northern Germany was already hostile before they reached Hamburg. Flak rose in thick black blossoms, deliberate and methodical. At twenty miles out, it began finding them.

The first squadron commander vanished in a burst of orange flame. One moment his P-51 was holding formation; the next it simply came apart, struck through the fuselage. There was no spiral, no attempt at recovery. Just smoke and absence.

“No chute,” someone whispered over the radio.

Moments later the second commander was lost. A pair of Focke-Wulfs dropped from high sun, cutting through the formation before anyone could react. The Mustang disintegrated under the burst.

Green saw it happen. There are sounds you never forget. The short metallic cough of .50-caliber guns. The hollow thud of flak. And the sickening silence after an aircraft disappears. Command transferred itself in the air.

Green broke right, climbing toward a formation of Me-109s hanging a thousand feet above. They turned down into a forty-degree dive. He followed, closing fast. At two hundred meters he fired. The first German aircraft erupted immediately, fragments peeling away like torn metal leaves.

He shifted to the second. Murphy was already there.

Murphy fired from closer range—one hundred seventy-five meters. Green watched strikes tear through fuselage and wing roots. Pieces flew off both enemy aircraft. Both German pilots bailed out, their parachutes snapping open against the gray sky. Murphy did not stop.

Another pair of Focke-Wulfs cut across their path, converging fast. Murphy rolled right and took a deflection shot at roughly four hundred meters. He held the trigger longer than Green liked, walking the rounds into the fighter aircraft. Smoke bloomed. Fire followed. The canopy blew free, and the German pilot jumped.

“Break left,” Green ordered, but Murphy was already turning.

By the time the squadron reassembled, Berlin was burning beneath cloud cover.

Green had secured his twelfth confirmed kill that day. Murphy added three more. The numbers meant something to headquarters—they meant nothing to the sky.

Back at Leiston, the debrief was mechanical.

Altitude. Distance. Ammunition expended. Enemy types encountered: Me-109s, Me 262s, Fw 190s. Weather: broken cumulus at eighteen thousand feet over target. Green signed his report in clean block letters. Murphy’s hands were still trembling when he set down his pen.

That night, in the officers' quarters, neither man spoke for a long time.

"We lost both squadron commanders."

Green nodded once. "We did."

"They were good men."

"They were."

Experience was no longer something earned slowly—it was inherited in the instant another man failed to return.

That was how Green and Murphy found themselves standing at the front of the briefing rooms. Promotion had come without ceremony. A handshake. A nod. A quiet understanding that leadership now meant watching younger pilots take the same risks they once had.

Murphy leaned back against the wall, staring at the ceiling.

"You realize what this means."

"Yes."

"We're it."

Green did not answer immediately. Command was not triumph. It was inheritance of risk. After a moment, Murphy gave a dry half-smile.

"Three in one day," he muttered. "I should feel something."

Green looked at him carefully.

"You do," he muttered with a measured smile. "You just don't know what to call it."

Outside, the wind rattled the hangar doors. The war was far from over. No one said otherwise—the sky agreed.

CHAPTER NINE – LAST FLIGHT OVER BERLIN

“Tell her I’ll be home before the spring breaks the snow. If not... tell her I saw the sky once, and it was beautiful.”

—Final letter from Lt. Carter Evans, March 1945

April 18, 1945

RAF Leiston

There was no ceremony. The group assembled outside operations in a loose line, flight jackets zipped against the cold. No speeches. No flags. Just the group commander standing with a small box in his hand, moving from one man to the next.

“Major,” he said to Green, pressing the gold leaves into his palm.

Murphy stepped forward next. The same gesture. The same word. No one congratulated them. No one smiled. Promotions came the same way everything else did now—quietly, as a consequence of who was left. Two new triple aces and squadron commanders.

Green turned the insignia over once before slipping it into his pocket. He would pin it on later. Murphy glanced at his.

“Doesn’t feel like anything,” he muttered.

Green nodded. “It isn’t.”

Behind them, Carter Evans watched with something like admiration. Or expectation. Green had seen that look before. It made him calm, but then uneasy.

April 18, 1945

Over Berlin — 26,000 Feet

Green and Murphy remained on the ground that morning. Squadron commanders didn't always fly—not when the balance of experience had already shifted too far. They stood outside operations, watching the formations lift one by one into the gray.

Berlin no longer looked like a capital. It looked like a wound. Smoke rose in slow columns through broken cloud. The bombers pushed forward in disciplined formation, silver and deliberate, as if repetition alone could end the war.

Brad Jenkins flew lead element now. Tad Healy held steady off his wing. Carter Evans held position on the right, close enough that Jenkins could see the tension in how he flew—tight, precise, just a fraction too rigid.

He was new to the squadron, but not green enough to show it outright. Twenty-two, maybe twenty-three. Confident in the way men were when they had survived just long enough to believe they understood the rules.

Evans had arrived with a photograph tucked into his flight jacket and a story about what he would do when this was over.

Green had heard it before. They all had. Ben and Paul knew better than to get too close. It was just protection of their own souls. But Evans had gotten under Ben's skin almost immediately. Something about him was so engaging, so positive. Energy that could fool you into forgetting for a minute. But for now, he was going to have to do it without them watching his back.

Evans was tucked in tight on the right, young and bold enough that his confidence still came easily.

“Red Leader, confirm visual on Eagles One through Six,”
a voice called.

Jenkins leaned forward against the straps, scanning through
glare and haze. “Affirmative. Formation holding.”

Flak arrived without warning. Black bursts climbed in staggered rhythm, walking toward the bombers with methodical patience. Ariel's Faith jolted

hard enough to rattle Jenkins's teeth. A Fortress ahead of them lost its tail assembly in a single violent flash. The fuselage tipped, hesitated, then began to fall.

"Chutes?" Healy asked.

Jenkins searched the space beneath the tumbling aircraft.

"One... I see one."

There should have been ten. The radio snapped again.

"Bandits. Three o'clock high. Multiple contacts."

They came in fast and coordinated—109s diving out of sun, 190s angling from below. The sky compressed into motion and noise. Jenkins broke right and climbed to intercept. Healy rolled inverted, then dove through the first pair as they cut toward the bombers. Evans accelerated straight ahead, chasing one that had slipped inside the screen.

"Evans, hold your altitude," Jenkins ordered.

No reply.

Tracer fire stitched across Carter's left wing. His Mustang jerked violently. A second burst struck the fuselage. The canopy tore away in a spray of fragments and the aircraft yawed, engine coughing flame.

"Evans is hit!" Healy shouted. "Evans is hit!"

Jenkins saw the fire bloom along the cowling. The Mustang rolled onto its back and began to fall.

"Bail out, Jim! Get clear!" Healy yelled, But the Mustang was already rolling.

Two words cut across the radio, strained but clear. "Tell her—"

The transmission broke into static. The Mustang disappeared into smoke and cloud. No white blossom of silk followed. No chute.

Jenkins turned back into the fight because there was nothing else to do. A 190 flashed across his nose. He fired one short, controlled burst and saw the wing root split. The German aircraft broke apart and dropped away.

Healy drove a 109 off a bomber's tail, forcing it into a steep dive. The ME 262s broke off—as if satisfied with the damage already done.

The bombers held formation. Bomb bay doors opened in unison. The city absorbed the payload without flinching.

On the return leg, the radios stayed quiet. Men spoke only when they had to, as if words could make the losses more real.

RAF Leiston — Debriefing Tent

The A-11 leather flying helmets thudded onto tables along with the B-8 and AN-6530 goggles. Gloves dropped. The intelligence officer waited with a clipboard and a face that had learned not to react.

“Losses?” he asked.

“Three fighters,” someone answered. “Multiple bombers.”

“Names?”

Jenkins removed his gloves slowly. His fingers felt stiff, as if cold had gotten inside the bones.

“Evans.”

The officer wrote it down without looking up.

Later, in the barracks, the bunk assigned to Carter Evans was already stripped. Regulations required it. Personal effects were searched for anything inappropriate then packed into a cardboard box for shipment home—letters, a photograph, a small shaving kit, a book he'd never finished.

Murphy stood staring at the empty mattress.

“He had a ring,” Murphy's voice solemn. “Carried it in his flight jacket with a picture of his future. Said he'd propose in June.”

Green sat on the lower bunk opposite him.

“He won't.”

Murphy's jaw tightened. “We kept telling him he was ready for this.”

Green nodded once. “We did.”

Murphy looked up. “Why did we do that?”

Green took a moment before answering.

“Readiness assumes risk,” he declared finally. “Invincibility denies it. Nobody is ever ready for this. Not really.”

“No, I guess not. I know Jenkins and Healy did everything possible.”

The wind rattled the tin roof overhead. Somewhere outside, laughter broke briefly from another room—too loud, too forced—then disappeared.

After a while, Murphy spoke again. “You said your blessing today?”

Green stared at the floorboards between his boots.

“No.”

Murphy waited.

“I forgot.”

The words landed between them and did not move.

Murphy shifted on the edge of the bunk. “That’s not why he died.”

Green did not answer. He knew that. He also knew the mind did not obey logic when it wanted a culprit. Leadership had begun to feel less like authority and more like accounting. Not for victories. For bodies.

Murphy picked up Evans’s photograph from the box—a young woman in a summer dress, smiling awkwardly at the camera. He set it back down carefully, as if it might break.

“Someone should tell her the truth,” Murphy sighed.

Green rose and moved to the window, looking out across the darkened field. The air smelled of fuel and wet grass.

“No one gets the truth,” he murmured quietly. “They get something survivable.”

Murphy turned toward him. “And what do we get?”

Green rested a hand against the cold glass. The runway lights sat in a straight line beyond the hangars, pale and patient.

“Tomorrow,” he replied.

He reached into his jacket and removed his siddur. This time he did not whisper. He spoke the words aloud, voice steady, almost flat with exhaustion.

“Blessed are You, Lord our God, who gives strength to the weary.”

He paused. The room was silent except for the wind. His voice did not break. But something inside him had. Murphy bowed his head beside him.

Outside, engines turned over in the dark. The war was almost finished. No one felt victorious.

TWO SQUADRON COMMANDERS—LAST FLIGHT

Sometimes they began the morning with a song.

It wasn't official. It wasn't even particularly good. But it steadied the nerves.

Tuck away those flutes
Into their chutes
It's another day to fly today
It's another day to fly away
Put away your fear
Pack it in your gear
It's the perfect day to hit the sky
It's the perfect day—not to die

April 25, 1945

RAF Leiston

The engines started the same way they always had. There was no announcement that this might be the last time. No speech. No ceremony. Just ground

crews moving quietly beneath gray English sky, hands blackened with oil, breath fogging in the cold.

Green stood with his helmet tucked beneath his arm. Murphy adjusted his gloves beside him.

“No one wants to be the last man killed.”

Green nodded. “Which makes today dangerous.”

They had both felt it building for weeks. The Reich was collapsing. Reports said Berlin was encircled. Some targets were already rubble before bombers reached them. But the missions continued. War did not stop simply because one side was losing.

They did not always fly now. Command had changed that. A younger lieutenant stepped forward from the line, steady but untested in the way Green had come to recognize.

“I’ll take lead,” he said.

Green studied him. There was no arrogance there. Only readiness.

“Keep them together,” Green replied.

“Yes, Sir.”

The Mustangs lifted in sequence, climbing through broken cloud. Five to ten tenths at three thousand feet. Clear above. At altitude, the air felt strangely empty.

Green’s squadron took high cover. Murphy’s element held position off the right, separate but parallel. They crossed into Germany without the immediate violence they had grown used to. Flak rose eventually, but thinner now, sporadic. The sky no longer felt defended so much as stubborn.

Over Steinhuder Lake, contrails formed ahead—Me-109s crossing from eleven o’clock. Twenty or more, but scattered, not disciplined. Not what they once had been. The lieutenant climbed gradually, patient. He waited for separation within the German formation, then dropped his tanks.

Green watched from above as he slid into position. One German pilot broke early, bailing before a shot was fired. Another followed.

Murphy exhaled softly over the radio.

“They see the end.”

The lieutenant pressed forward. Short bursts. Controlled. One aircraft rolled inverted and fell. Another trailed smoke and spiraled away. A third tried to disengage but stalled in a tight turn. It was not chaos. It was unraveling.

Within minutes, the engagement was finished. The remaining German fighters dove east, toward territory that no longer promised safety. No one followed.

The bombers continued to target, releasing their payload over rail yards that had already been hit twice that week. Smoke rose again, though it was difficult to tell what was newly burning and what had simply never stopped.

On the return leg, the formation held quiet. No one joked. No one celebrated. Back at Leiston, mechanics moved toward the aircraft automatically. Pilots climbed down slower than usual. The lieutenant removed his helmet and goggles and walked toward Green and Murphy. There was no swagger in him.

“That should do it,” he said.

Green looked at him carefully.

“Yes,” he replied. “It should.”

Murphy gave a faint, tired smile.

“Still breathing.”

The lieutenant nodded once. That seemed to be the only measure left. The O-Club that night was subdued. No piano. No shouting. Just men sitting with drinks they did not finish. Someone mentioned Berlin might fall within days. Someone else said it already had. Green raised his glass but did not stand.

“To the ones who didn’t see this.”

The room echoed it quietly.

Murphy stared into his drink.

“Feels strange,” he muttered. “All that noise... and now this.”

Green considered the silence around them. The way men kept glancing at the door as if waiting for another mission call that might not come.

“We trained for years to survive it, but no one trained us to stop.”

Murphy looked up.

“You ready to?”

Green did not answer immediately.

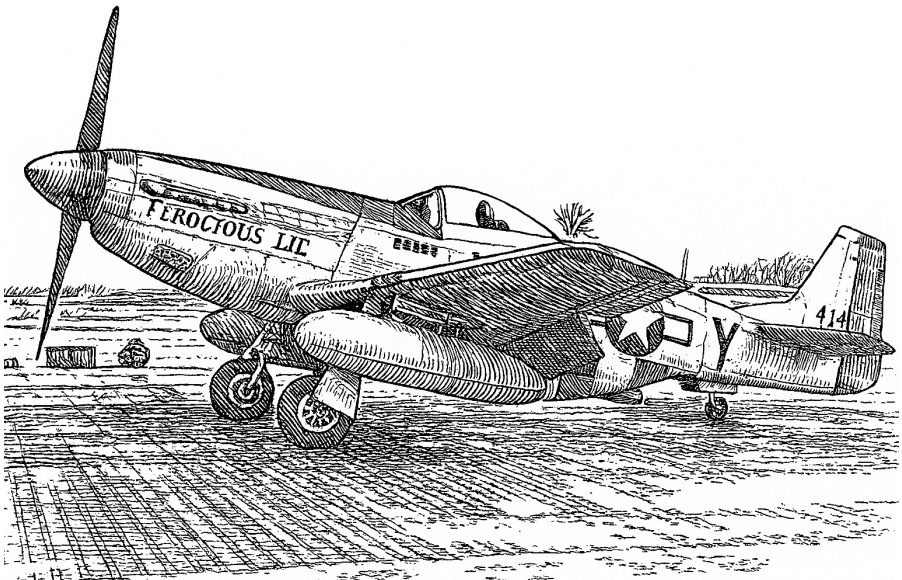
Outside, the airfield lights glowed across the dark grass. The Mustangs rested in rows, engines ticking as they cooled, as if reluctant to surrender their heat.

The words finally escaped Green’s throat.

“I don’t know who I am without it.”

Murphy nodded once.

“That’s the trouble.”



The war was not officially over. But something had already ended. And in the quiet that followed, survival felt less like victory and more like an unanswered question.

The End and the Beginning—May 1945—May 1946

May 1945

RAF Leiston

The war did not end with a trumpet. It ended with paperwork.

Word reached the base in fragments. Berlin had fallen. Hitler was dead. Germany had surrendered. The mess hall erupted once—briefly—then settled into something closer to exhaustion than celebration.

Men shook hands without smiling. They had expected to feel something larger. Instead, there was only relief—and an odd, unsettled quiet. The points system was posted on the board outside operations in the days that followed the war's end. Months in service. Combat missions. Air medals. Distinguished Flying Cross. Confirmed victories. Every category converted into arithmetic. Every life reduced to a number.

Murphy stood with his hands locked behind his head, staring at the numbers.

“Seventy-six,” he muttered. “Not enough.”

Green studied his own total. High enough. High enough to go home. The war had required them. Peace did not.

“You’ll rotate soon, Ben?”

Green nodded. “Looks that way.”

Murphy kept staring at the board. “Funny.”

“What?”

“We fought like hell to survive it. Now I’m disappointed.”

Green understood.

Survival had been the objective for so long that it had become identity. Without missions, without briefing rooms, without flak bursts and tracer fire, there was an empty space where urgency had lived.

The airfield grew quieter by degrees. Fewer sorties. Fewer engines. Aircraft were inspected, logged, and prepared for shipment or reassignment. Some pilots were already gone, leaving behind bare bunks and folded blankets.

The younger men talked about home constantly now. About girls who had waited. About farms, storefronts, college plans. Green listened but did not join.

One afternoon he walked alone along the perimeter fence. Beyond it, Suffolk farmland stretched in orderly green rows, untouched by bombardment. Sheep grazed in silence. The world looked intact. He felt foreign in it. Murphy joined him eventually, hands in pockets.

“You thinking about Brooklyn?” Murphy asked.

“Yes.”

“And?”

Green watched a farmer in the distance guiding a plow.

“I don’t know how to arrive there as the same man.”

Murphy nodded once. “We aren’t.”

They stood in silence.

After a while Murphy said, “Evans should be here.”

Green swallowed. “He should.”

“Lochstern. Sloan. All of them.”

“Yes.”

Murphy kicked at the dirt near his boot. “Feels wrong.”

Green considered that before speaking.

“Maybe it’s supposed to.”

The official announcement of Victory in Europe came days later. Flags appeared. Someone found a bottle of champagne. A band tried to assemble in the mess hall, but the music faltered halfway through. There was cheering. There was also weeping. That night, Green returned to his quarters and opened his siddur. He did not read from it immediately. He simply held it.

He thought of Ariel. Of Yosef. Of candles burning in a Brooklyn apartment. Of letters folded into a wooden box. He thought of Carter’s last words.

“Tell her—”

The phrase lingered unfinished in his mind.

Murphy knocked once before entering.

Murphy leaned against the doorframe. “You scared?”

Green did not answer immediately.

Finally, he came clean. “Yes.”

Murphy gave a small, tired smile. “Good. Means you still feel.”

Outside, no engines started. The sky above Leiston was empty.

Green stepped to the window and looked out over the quiet field where Mustangs had once launched in disciplined sequence. Now they sat in neat rows, paint dulled, waiting for destinations no one had trained them for.

Murphy’s voice softened. “We trained for years to fly into fire. No one trained us to land.”

Green closed the siddur and set it carefully on the table.

“We’ll learn,” he replied.

Murphy studied him for a moment. “You believe that?”

Green looked back out at the runway.

“I have to.”

Somewhere in the dark, a distant church bell rang. The war was over. Morning would come.

And this time, they would not fly.

The years that followed did not arrive all at once. They came in fragments—train rides home, unfamiliar streets, work that felt smaller than the sky they had known.

Benjamin and Ariel settled briefly in Brooklyn with their infant son, Yosef, while Ben struggled to exchange combat for ordinary life.

END OF PART I

Paul and Katie returned to New York as well, settling into postwar life with their young son, Tommy.

For a time, both young families depended on parents, borrowed rooms, and one another as they learned how to live without daily missions.

There were moves. London for a time. Then elsewhere.

The war receded, but never completely. It lingered in quiet moments, in the space between conversations, and in the things they chose not to explain.

The fighting in Europe had ended. The obligation had not. Green had not learned how to stop. He had only learned how to fight.

END OF PART I