

The flat pasture land passed outside the train window in a monotony of green and brown. Joe's empty gaze followed the random, isolated trees drifting by, until it was drawn to a goshawk negotiating the invisible currents floating up from the warming ground. Even from this remove he could see its wings flexing, trimming, negotiating a climb with the morning air till it stood still in the sky. There it hung for a long second before tipping a wing and falling away. Then they were past it. He unconsciously craned his neck to follow it and gave up. He felt the press of frustration inside again. *At least one of us gets to fly.*

The lull of the jostling train pulled at his eyelids, but a harsh jounce snapped him awake and he looked around. The cramped relic, elbow-full of boisterous, uniformed airmen happy for a day's break in Melbourne, hailed from the era of gold and cattle drovers, raucously and roughly out of place in a modern world of streamlined bombers and sleek aircraft carriers. His exasperation came out as a sharp sigh.

His seat mate, a thinly mustachioed staff sergeant named Louis Barone, heard it and saw his mood.

"You got it backwards, Joe," he said. "You're supposed to act like that on the way back, not on the way there." Joe threw him a smirk.

"Put some wings on this thing and let me drop some bombs from it, then ask me how I feel."

Barone guffawed. "Stick a turret on top of the coal car and I'll join ya. I think that'd make the Japs surrender all by itself."

Joe chuckled in spite of himself at the image of jolly "Baron" Barone in his coal car top turret. He'd been one of the many Joe had personally trained in gunnery at Langley, and now again in the gunnery classes being given to the combat crews that had been formed. He was a good student, but like Joe had yet to be able to show how well his training paid off in the air.

It was the same story with the bombardier's school. Joe taught the ad hoc program based on his own instruction at Lowry and Langley, which in itself had been a work in progress based on peacetime assumptions, with elements of his specialized aircraft observer training. Ballistics, bomb trajectories, trail and cross trail, basic meteorology, aerial photograph and map reading

—give him a classroom and he could teach all of it, better now than some of his own instructors. Even the more practical work with bombs and racks, fuses and releases, the instruments and bombsights themselves, was easily achieved at a base like Laverton, with such a variety of aircraft at its disposal. On the plus side, he had had the entire summer with them rather than his own two months. But now there was the uncertainty of moving. There were rumors of a move again now, but there had been many, enough for him not to plan by them.

And what then? Would they go straight to combat? As much as he wanted, all of them wanted, to get into the fight after months of being the pit crew to the racer, how could they with only half of their training? And what if, as was more likely, they stayed right where they were? His own class at Lowry had flown an average of sixty practice drops. Later classes he knew got at least 150-200. What was he to do in the meantime with heads full of theory and functional knowledge, but no bombs to drop, no sights to adjust to a real target on the ground? How much would they forget before they got the chance? How much would *he* forget? It was maddening. He had tried to keep his training alive, but now it was months since he had dropped anything more than a baseball in a squadron game.

Sure, they were all expert mechanics now. Leeman had seen to that when they first arrived and began working with the Australian service depot. Every man in the 403rd could now work sheet metal, splice a cable, trace a short, weld, replace a propellor, overhaul an engine—they'd become a squadron of engineers, in addition to whatever else they might be officially. Not that he regretted or resented it; such knowledge would be invaluable to them once they did get into combat. But Leeman had been able to put his knowledge to use. Not only that, but add to it. This was heaven to him, though even he was beginning to experience some of Joe's frustration now that the wounded warbirds were staying north rather than migrating south to Laverton.

Joe looked hard at the faces of minds going soft with distraction. *A bombardment squadron needs its bombers. To finish its training and to keep its training. Or what's the point?*

The massive Newport railway workshops appeared out his window. They were entering the suburbs of Melbourne. He braced himself against the hard turn north, paralleling the deep-blue Yarra River, as picturesque as any back home, though he could only see it at intervals beyond the industrial sections and working-class neighborhoods of packed, small homes, their roofs sticking out among the plentiful trees. He tried to remember the last time he'd been fishing.

After a brief pause at the small Newport rail station, they resumed their way north. He watched an Australian Wirraway climb into the cloudless sky from the aerodrome across the river and head east. He looked away, at anything and nothing.

Not long after it was their turn to head east, over a tributary of the Yarra and back south into Melbourne proper. The city reminded him of a larger version of Harrisburg, its skyline of low high-rises punctuated by a host of smokestacks and church spires and the occasional taller building or dome. At the moment he could barely see it, though, as a forest of khaki heads and shoulders above his line of sight obscured his view out the left window. He straightened up, craned his neck forward and back, even furtively pushed himself up on his fists, to no avail. His gaze shifted to the nondescript pasture and swampland on his side. *Twenty-seven-years old and I still need a dictionary to sit on.*

The train eased to a stop at a station not far out of Melbourne's downtown district, but still a country station with open platforms and fields on his side. The men and women were dressed much the same as they would be in Harrisburg. They certainly didn't sound the same, though. Often it seemed as if they were speaking a foreign language.

He enjoyed the differences, though, intrigued by the otherness of a culture otherwise so similar to his own. There were movies with Vivien Leigh and Charles Boyer and Olivia de Havilland, clubs with men in slacks and girls in flying skirts jitterbugging to Glenn Miller and the Andrews Sisters, Fords and Chryslers, Coca-Cola, restaurants with beef and mashed potatoes. At the same time, there were the milkshakes without ice cream, the horse tracks that ran backwards, bars only open a

couple of hours a day, shillings and half-pennies and guineas, dinner for lunch, supper as a snack, and tea for supper. Home, but not home.

It had lent a veil of the fantastic to the entire stay, making trips into Melbourne both a return to and break from normalcy. The Aussies themselves, though, were so genuinely welcoming and gregarious that the myriad differences faded into the background. A beer to relax among friends was still that, wherever the table was, however big the glass or warm the beer.

The train began slowing down. They were pulling into the Spencer Street station, literally the end of the line. Joe had daydreamed through another station and across the winding Yarra again.

The airmen piled out of the train onto the platform, forming into knots and disappearing into the dimly lit interior of the covered stairs leading down a hill into the station itself. As soon as Sarnoski, Barone, and the rest of their small group began the long descent, they could hear the echoing of excited voices down below them. Two soldiers below them on the steps addressed a gentleman in a suit and white hat coming up. After a brief, animated exchange, the soldiers hurried down the stairs.

“Something’s up,” said Joe. They all picked up their pace. The man in the suit didn’t wait for the question as they caught up to him.

“There’s been an invasion, lads,” he said calmly. “Up in the islands.” Brief looks were exchanged as the group raced down the remaining steps into the station.

Unlike the cathedral grandeur of Flinders Street station just five blocks away, Spencer Street was little more than a long, airy market barn, with picket fences and gates around rather than walls, under a high monitor-style roof of corrugated iron supported by long timber trusses. Sarnoski squinted as they entered, the sunshine from the large windows above one side blinding after the dark corridors. He looked for a newspaper stand. He saw none. Barone smacked his arm.

“The grocery store.” The entire group was off again, jogging for the gates, the civilians inside watching and smiling, intrigued at the activity.

The men dashed out onto the sidewalk. Barone's intuition was right. Along with a growing number of locals, all the men from the train huddled in clumps around newspapers outside the small grocery store down the sidewalk, and beyond that by the parcels station. Almost immediately they spotted a young boy in a jacket and shorts, a stack of *The Age* newspapers he could barely hold under his arm, doing brisk business with a small line of locals and soldiers. Joe started to move toward him when a man passing by slapped a folded newspaper in his gut.

"Here, mate. I'm done with it."

"Say, thanks," Joe called after him. Barone snatched it from Joe and opened it up. Joe punched his arm but didn't fight him for it.

The headline was big enough for all to see: "ALLIED OFFENSIVE LAUNCHED AGAINST SOLOMONS."

Barone read out loud. "Allied forces have launched against bases in the Solomon Islands an offensive which, by reason of its nature and proportions, is considered to be a major operation . . ." He skimmed. ". . . launched offensive operations against the Tulagi area, in the Solomons, on Friday."

Joe was incredulous. "That was three days ago."

"Operations were progressing favorably," Barone continued, "despite opposition from enemy land-based aircraft and the garrisons. . . ." The men waited, looked to Barone. Joe sidled up to him, craning to see for himself. "Is there anything with more details?" Barone scanned the page.

"There's not much detail. I guess that's to be expected. 'This is our first actual offensive in South Pacific waters, Allied action in the Coral Sea battle have been counter to a movement by the Japanese fleet.'"

"It's about time we took the offensive," one of them said.

"We have to have something to take the offensive with," Joe replied, still trying to read for himself.

"Here you go, Joe," said Barone. "Says here, 'Our medium bombers carried out three heavy attacks against enemy installations on the isthmus and the aerodrome.' That's in Sala—mau-a? Moh-a? I don't know how you pronounce that. It's up in New Guinea. So are these other two, Lae and Buna.

Medium and heavy bombers, night and day bombing missions. Rabaul. We all know that one. And one called Buka. Night attack on the airfield. Lots of ack-ack.” He was silent for a moment, reading. The men were in their own heads. “Son of a— They dropped fifteen tons on Rabaul just on Saturday. Biggest raid on it yet.” A sergeant whistled. Joe straightened up, the flush of excitement over.

“They were running interference for the invasion,” he said, “keeping them tied up. They’re not taking any chances with this one.” Heads nodded. Goosebumps swarmed over his body as Joe turned towards the street.

A dizzying stream of Technicolor sedans and coupes—shiny black, navy blue, mustard yellow—passed by in front of them going both ways. A trolley, yellow and red, clanged by, turning down the ruler-straight street which led away from them. The street sloped gently down and then up again, cutting a deep canyon through the unbroken facade of cream and red brick high-rise hotels, commercial buildings, and churches with their spires, facing each other down from both sides of the street. People were everywhere in their hats and suits and dresses, with their briefcases and bags, up and down the sidewalks, crossing streets, getting into cars and out of cars and into stores and out of stores. The whole world was motion and sound.

Joe took it all in. “Soak it up, gents. We’re not going to be here much longer.”