

PRISONER  
*of*  
WAR

KINSEY M. ROCKETT



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*Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.*

—Philippians 4:8

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*For the Lord Jesus Christ, who is my Creator,  
my Redeemer, and my King*

*That the prisoners might be set free.*

# Acknowledgments

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Sergeant Robert Kain, “Grandpa Bob,” who served in both gunner and pilot positions on an SBD Dauntless in the Marine Air Corps.

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## Historical Note

As morning dawned over the Hawaiian Islands on December 7, 1941, the skies above the American naval base at Pearl Harbor were clear and peaceful. For more than two years, a war had been raging throughout Europe and Eastern Asia, but the United States had established a position first of neutrality, then of background support to Great Britain. Though she did offer assistance to her ally overseas, so far the United States was not engaged in warfare. That was about to change.

At 7:55 AM on a quiet Sunday morning, the first of two waves of Japanese aircraft swept across the clear December skies. High-level bombers, dive bombers, torpedo bombers, and fighters swarmed upon the Pearl Harbor naval base, their targets including the numerous airfields and the double row of battleships at anchor in the harbor. For nearly two hours the Japanese attacked, sinking and damaging eighteen ships, destroying nearly a hundred aircraft, and causing over 3,500 casualties at the cost of a mere handful of their own airplanes. The following day, December 8, 1941, the United States declared war on Japan, officially entering World War II.

World War I, known in its day as the “Great War,” had ended in 1918, but the resulting peace was shaky. During the two decades that followed, dictatorships began to rise in Russia, Italy, and Germany under the power of Joseph Stalin, Benito Mussolini, and Adolf Hitler, respectively. Meanwhile, Japan was experiencing social and economic challenges, and her leaders started looking for a military solution to their country’s problems. They began their aggression by invading Manchuria and seizing it from the Chinese in 1931.

Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935, and Germany began her own conquests the following year. By early 1939, Hitler’s Third Reich

had overtaken Spain, Austria, and most of Czechoslovakia, enslaving the people of the nations it conquered. In addition, Italy had seized Albania. Hitler claimed that he would take no more territory in Europe, but in August of that same year, he signed a nonaggression pact with Stalin and on September 1 invaded Poland with the secret intention of dividing the Polish land between Germany and Russia. Realizing that Hitler's conquests had to be stopped, the French and British governments ordered Hitler to immediately withdraw his forces from Poland. He refused, and on September 3, 1939, France and Great Britain declared war on Germany. A mere twenty-one years after the conclusion of "the war to end all wars," the European continent plunged into World War II.

Within seven months of the onset of war, France fell to the Nazi forces, leaving Great Britain to battle Germany and Italy alone. Japan, meanwhile, continued her aggression in the Far East by advancing into northeastern China and various island groups in the East Indies. Japan had joined with Germany and Italy in 1936, and in 1940 the three nations formed the Rome-Berlin-Tokyo Axis, the axis about which the world was supposed to turn. Hitler expected the little island nation of Great Britain, who stood alone against the Axis powers, to soon surrender to the far greater numbers of the Third Reich which opposed her. That assumption was disproven as Britain bravely fought on through 1940-'41.

For the first eighteen months of the war, the United States remained entirely neutral, but in early 1941, she became a nonbelligerent ally of the British Empire. This new position increased the hostility between the United States and the Axis nations, and while the U.S. stopped just short of active, armed participation, her leaders were readying her armed forces in preparation for future conflict. By December of 1941, the U.S. had strong reason to believe that war with Japan was coming soon and that it might well begin with a surprise attack somewhere on the Pacific front. However, that attack was expected to be in the South China Sea, the probable target being Malaysia, the Dutch East Indies, or the Philippines—not Hawaii.

On December 8, 1941, the day after the unexpected assault on Pearl Harbor, the United States declared war on Japan. Germany and

Italy promptly demonstrated their loyalty with Japan by declaring war on the United States, who in turn declared war on them. This brought America into the conflict on three fronts: in the Pacific, in the Mediterranean, and in Europe.

The year 1942 was grimly fought, but by mid 1943, the tide was beginning to turn in favor of the Allied nations. Within eighteen months of the United States' entrance to the war, the Allied soldiers had cleared the Axis forces from North Africa, and Italy surrendered in September of 1943. The famous Normandy Invasion took place in June of 1944, with tens of thousands of American, British, Canadian, and Free French troops wading ashore on Normandy Beach in northern France.

The invasion of the European mainland marked the beginning of the end of the war in Europe, and Germany surrendered eleven months later on May 8, 1945. Japan held out several months longer, but the dropping of two atomic bombs on the Japanese mainland finally induced her to surrender as well. September 2, 1945, marked the end of World War II.

During the early months of 1943, the time frame in which this story takes place, the outcome of the war was yet doubtful. German U-boats still infested the Atlantic, sinking countless tons of Allied shipping intended to supply Europe with vital war materials. The Allies were making headway in North Africa, but fighting was still hot in the Mediterranean Theater. Conflict was equally active in the Pacific, where the American forces were making their counteroffensive, one hard-earned island at a time. No one could yet say when, or by whom, the war would be won.

A key player in the European Theater was the Allied bomber offensive. From 1942 to 1945, the United States Army Air Force and the Royal Air Force of Great Britain worked in tandem to cripple Germany through the systematic destruction of her factories and other facilities vital to the war effort. Under the cover of darkness, the slower but larger RAF "heavies" bombed factory cities in the heart of the Fatherland. During the daytime, the USAAF's smaller but speedier strategic bombers went after factories, railroads, chemical works, marshaling yards, and other such targets throughout occupied territory.



The air offensive ultimately proved to be successful, but it came at a price. Anti-aircraft fire and *Luftwaffe* fighters claimed many Allied planes. Quite a few of the airmen went down with their aircraft, but others succeeded in bailing out. Although they had survived the mission, these men faced a new challenge as they landed in enemy-held territory.

Most of these survivors were speedily captured and turned over to the *Luftwaffe* as prisoners of war, but a few managed to evade capture. Assisted by the resistance group of the country in which they landed, the airmen were sheltered from the eyes of the Nazis. Whenever possible, the refugees were smuggled back to England. When that could not be done, the men continued to hide with the Resistance—sometimes for the remainder of the war—both the airmen and the folks who sheltered them living in constant risk of discovery.

Some of those who became prisoners of war also risked discovery, but for rather a different reason: they were attempting to escape. Secured in fenced and guarded prisoner of war camp compounds, the prisoners were faced with two choices: either wait out the war or try to escape to friendly territory from which they could keep fighting. Some chose the former option, but other prisoners felt it their duty to escape. If they succeeded in returning to friendly soil, then they could continue to serve in the war. Even if they were recaptured before reaching friendly or neutral territory, they would at least have tied up the German forces by forcing them to spend time, effort, and manpower in the search. Besides, what man among them did not desire to again have his freedom?

Throughout the war, countless breakouts were attempted. Tunneling under the compound's fence was by far the preferred method of operation, and while most tunnels were discovered prior to completion, some were not. In spite of the guards' best efforts to secure the premises, men did succeed in escaping, and while most were captured and returned to the camps a short time thereafter, a handful of them did succeed in making their way back into friendly hands.

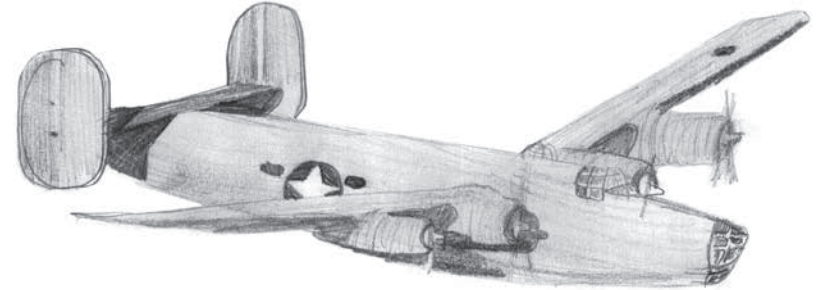
Ultimately, World War II was a battle between two beliefs: those who followed the dictatorial views of the Axis leaders versus

those who upheld the basic, God-given rights of mankind. Some of the German soldiers blindly followed Hitler; others did not fully agree with the dictator's views and plans but were willing to fight for their country. The Axis proved themselves to be a formidable foe, but the Allies, both those on the home front and those on the battlefield, wielded a powerful weapon which the Axis powers lacked: an unquenchable desire to be free.

## PART ONE

# The Pilot

*February 1943*



*And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up:*

*That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.*

*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*

*For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.*

—John 3:14–17

## CHAPTER I



# Flak over France

*12 February 1943*

The young sergeant watched the damp, misty grayness streaming backward past the open window. His eyes strained for a glimpse of something beyond; his gloved hands, sweaty in spite of the high-altitude cold, held his .50-caliber machine gun in a tense grip. How could he protect his fellow airmen and their Liberator when he couldn't even see if *Luftwaffe* fighters lurked nearby?

Sergeant Brentley shivered, partly from the subzero temperature and partly from nervousness, and peered over his shoulder at one of his fellow gunners. Half leaning on the edge of the open waist window, the picture of calmness, Sergeant Myle watched the swirling, iron-colored mist, the impossible clouds that hid the American bomber from friend and foe alike. Or hid the foe from it.

*Stop it!* the young sergeant reprimanded himself. *Stop worrying and focus on your job. We'll be out of the clouds soon.*

*His job.* Helping preserve America's liberty—that was his job, and hopefully the conquered people of Europe and Asia would regain their stolen freedom in the process.

*Freedom.* What a precious word, more precious than ever now that it was in danger—the word in the hearts of all who fought for the Allies.

*The Allies.* Brentley's mind flashed back to that December day just over a year ago when the radio had informed all of America of the unprovoked Japanese air raid on the naval base at Pearl Harbor. Brentley's older brother had been stationed there, had perished in the vicious attack. Now Staff Sergeant Charles Brentley, nineteen years young, was standing at the waist window of an American strategic bomber, eighteen thousand feet in the air, fighting to defend the freedom for which his brother had given his life.

A voice over the interphone system interrupted his thoughts. "Bombardier to crew. Oxygen check."

Subconsciously feeling his mask to make sure that it was still reasonably snug, Brentley cast a sideways glance at his regulator dial and noted the level of oxygen flow. When he lightly pinched his regulator hose several times, a faint hiss indicated air flow. "Right waist gunner to bombardier. Oxygen normal."

As one by one the other eight crew members affirmed that they were receiving the life-giving air, a vital supplement at such an altitude, the young airman turned his eyes back to the window. Deep inside the obscuring grayness, something flickered. Was it an enemy fighter? Again came the flicker, an elusive smudge of brown hidden behind the clouds. No, under the clouds. As Brentley leaned forward, the wind from the huge propellers drummed on his oxygen mask, goggles, and flak helmet. The heavy cloud cover was clearing at last.

Brentley squinted at the ground. What were those little flashes? They looked rather like little sparklers lighting up in groups of five or six. Surely that wasn't—

"Be ready!" The bombardier's voice was tight. "It's coming!"

Brentley edged back, shrinking deeper into his heavy flak jacket but still maintaining his grip on his gun. An ever-present threat to Allied airmen and their planes, anti-aircraft fire was one foe that no gunner could drive away. During the twenty-odd seconds that it took for the shells to reach their altitude, Brentley held his breath, for the first few flak bursts usually indicated how intense the next twenty or thirty minutes would be. After an interminable half minute, a black puff appeared less than a hundred feet from the fuselage, followed

by another, then a third. The steady drone of four sound engines drowned out the explosions, but the youthful gunner knew that each of those harmless-looking puffs of smoke was a powerful anti-aircraft shell shooting out thousands of steel splinters.

The fifteen minutes that followed were some of the longest the young sergeant had known. Dangerously close, those dreadful black puffs set every crewman on edge, made each wonder when one would strike home.

Then one did.

It came at the end of the bombing run, mere moments after the announcement, "Bomb's away!" assured the crew that they had once again done their part to preserve and restore freedom, not for the first time and hopefully not for the last.

Three tons lighter with its payload gone, the Liberator lurched upward, sending a surge of relief through the young gunner at the right waist window. Brentley was holding his gun ready, studying a distant fighter and trying to identify it. Several of the little enemy aircraft were skirting the formation, seeking a weak point at which to strike. One of these had entered Brentley's line of sight. Having already informed the pilot of its location, he had just determined its identity as a *Messerschmidt* 109 and brought it into his sights when he heard a muffled explosion, and his airplane shuddered beneath his feet. Seconds later a trail of orange flame streamed past the open window, and he started back in alarm. A flak shell must have struck one of the engines and set it alight.

The pilot was on the interphone now, giving instructions, as he, the copilot, and the flight engineer worked together to extinguish the blaze before it spread. Meanwhile Brentley, holding his post, tried to keep a sharp lookout for enemy aircraft that would relish the opportunity of attacking the crippled bomber. Glowing flames and shimmering heat waves from the damaged engine somewhat hindered his vision.

*Bring! Bring! Bring!*

The alarm bell rang through the waist, startling the gunners. "Pilot to crew," came a tense voice over the interphone. "Be prepared to bail out. It may be necessary."

*Bail out? Doubts and questions darted through Brentley's brain. Jump from an airplane into the sky while we're moving at something like a hundred and sixty-five miles an hour, trust my life to a piece of silk and hope it opens, come down somewhere in occupied France and maybe break an ankle in the landing, and then most likely get picked up and handed over to the Germans to spend months or even years in dreary inactivity in a prisoner of war camp?* But the young sergeant obeyed.

"Right waist gunner preparing to bail out." Securing his gun, Brentley removed his flak jacket and oxygen mask and retrieved one of the canvas parachute packs stowed nearby. In a few swift movements he snapped the twin hooks and rings together to secure the chute in place across his chest. He left his earphones on so that he could hear any further orders from his pilot, which he figured would soon take the form of either a cancellation of the warning or an order to jump. Then he gave a hand to Jerry, a fellow gunner, who was scrambling from the ball turret.

"Thanks, Brentley."

As the short gunner deftly attached his own pack, Sergeant Myle opened the escape hatch on the bomber's belly. The floor seemed to be sinking from beneath Brentley's feet. Darting a glance out the window at engine number 3, he saw that the fire was spreading from it onto the wing, dangerously close to the fuel cells behind the engine.

*We can't stay here; this plane is burning up! Of course we have to bail out. Even a POW camp is better than going down with the ship! Good, everyone's ready. When can we get out of here?*

Now the navigator was giving a position report. Now the radio operator was sending a distress message. Through all this, Brentley and his three fellow gunners had nothing to do but wait, hoping that another flak shell wouldn't hit the plane.

As the right wing began to drop, the alarm bell rang through the fuselage, followed by the anticipated order. *Briiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiing!* "Pilot to crew. Abandon ship!"

To avoid a lineup, Myle and Jerry climbed down into the bomb bays to exit, leaving the rear hatch for Brentley and the tail gunner. Anxious as he was to escape, Brentley motioned for his companion

to go first. Nodding his thanks, the tail gunner disappeared into the sky below. Brentley's turn.

Taking two quick steps to the edge of the entrance hatch, the young airman crouched and steadied himself with a hand on either side of the oblong opening. Though still distant, the ground appeared closer than it had been a few minutes before, and Brentley knew that the airplane was losing altitude. He also knew as he readied himself for the jump that nothing but a bundle of silk and cording separated him from eternity. Drawing a deep breath, he tried not to think of all that could go wrong. Then he closed his eyes, pulled his arms against his chest, and rolled out headfirst.

After several seconds he opened his eyes, saw that he had fallen well clear of the burning airplane, and pulled his ripcord. Silk billowed from the pack; then the lines caught the harness with a hearty yank. A moment later the tacking broke. Brown canvas flashed past his face, and he felt a second tug as the risers caught his weight. His descent slowed. Glancing around him, the young sergeant spotted numerous other canopies dotting the sky, five below him and two near his level. Then two more blossomed above him as the pilots finally deserted their dying aircraft.

The minutes stretched long as the men descended. With their airplane and the rest of their bomber formation now far ahead, the sky around them was quiet. With silence filling his ears for the first time in hours, Brentley studied the ground below, wondering just where he would come down. The crew had bailed out over occupied France, but based on that last position report, Brentley was pretty sure that they weren't too far from the Belgian border. In which country would they land? On a breezy day they might drift quite some distance as they descended, but today was calm. France was most likely to be the destination, but Brentley knew that the country wouldn't make much difference. Since Hitler's army had overrun both France and Belgium, he and his fellow airmen would be surrounded by the enemy either way.

Now Brentley could make out buildings on the ground, and he knew that he might be savoring his last few minutes of freedom. Once he and his fellow crewmen landed, the enemy forces would

be sure to soon capture them... Or would they? Many airmen were found and taken prisoner, but not all. Brentley had heard that some downed airmen managed to evade capture, usually assisted by the resistance group in whatever country in which they happened to descend. Maybe he would evade too. He could always hope...

Brentley landed rather hard. Winded, he lay gasping for several moments before the breath returned to his lungs. A puff of wind caught his parachute, billowing the white silk and tugging on the harness. Not wanting to be dragged across the ground by a runaway chute, Brentley scrambled up and tackled his canopy before the breeze played with it further. So engrossed was he in his task that he failed to see the two men in Nazi uniform approaching.

*"Halt!"*

Spinning around, the young sergeant was startled and momentarily frightened to see a rifle pointing right at him, wielded by a burly Nazi *Soldat*. A second soldier was nearby, and judging from their insignias, Brentley concluded that they belonged to the *Wehrmacht*, or German army. For a split second Brentley thought of making a dash for freedom, but he knew that it was too late for that. A wave of dismay washed through the young sergeant's heart as he lifted his hands in a gesture of surrender.

## CHAPTER II



# Prisoners

*12 February 1943*

While one soldier kept his rifle trained on Brentley, presumably to discourage him from attempting to escape, the other used hand motions to make the young airman understand that he was to remove the laces from his boots. Puzzled and nervous, Brentley obeyed. With the laces the soldier bound his prisoner's wrists tightly behind his back. Feeling helpless, Brentley made no effort to resist.

When this was done, the second soldier, the one with the rifle, stepped forward to face the young captive. In a low, meaningful voice he uttered something in the German tongue. The words sounded like an important statement of some kind, but for all the American prisoner knew, it could be anything from the weather report to his death sentence. Since none of the three or four words of the German language that Brentley did know seemed to be the right thing to say, he just looked at the soldier with a blank expression and a pounding heart and hoped that they weren't about to execute him.

They weren't. The soldier behind him gave him a shove in the back, and Brentley stumbled forward, regaining his balance just in time to keep from falling on his face. With one soldier behind him and one before, Brentley was made to march across the field to a narrow dirt road that looked like it came from the middle of nowhere

and was headed in a similar direction. As the young sergeant walked, a myriad of questions and emotions tumbled in his heart.

Where was he being taken? A prisoner of war camp, most likely. How far would he have to walk? Would they interrogate him when he got there, wherever “there” was? He obviously wasn’t a spy, so he probably needn’t worry too much about that. Unless they wanted information about the mission? But it hadn’t been much; it had mainly been a diversionary raid, distracting attention from a large formation of B-17s heading for a more important target. What about his fellow crewmen? Were they safe? He had counted nine other parachutes, so he knew that the rest had at least made it out of the airplane. Had they, too, been captured, or had they somehow managed to escape? For many of these questions, Brentley had no answers. All he could do was wait and see what happened.

Three-quarters of an hour of brisk walking brought Brentley and his captors to a small town, where the young prisoner found himself ushered into a low brick building which he was pretty sure was some sort of jail. His suspicion proved to be correct, and the two *Wehrmacht* soldiers led their prisoner to a desk where there sat a stern-faced German officer who spoke enough English to ask Brentley for his name, rank, and serial number. The young gunner gave these at once. The officer evidently needed no more information, and Brentley found himself pushed into a dinky, dank jail cell harshly lit by a single unshaded bulb suspended from a wire in the middle of the low ceiling.

Three other men occupied the cell. Two were sitting together near the back, and as the door clanged shut behind Brentley, they exchanged a few words between themselves in a foreign tongue. The third was none other than Jerry, the ball turret gunner from Brentley’s crew. Jerry greeted him, and with a mixture of disappointment and relief—disappointment that Jerry had been captured and relief at seeing a familiar face—Brentley sat down on the cold, damp concrete floor opposite his fellow gunner.

Jerry’s story was much the same as Brentley’s. After bailing out, the gunner had descended to an open field and landed almost on top of a loyal civilian, who had immediately taken the American airman

into custody and sent for the local police. He, too, had been marched to the town jail and had been tossed into the cell less than fifteen minutes before Brentley had arrived. Of the other crewmen Jerry had no certain news, but he had seen several other parachutes come down not far away.

Brentley knew that Jerry likely didn’t have any more of an idea than he did of what was going to happen and when, but he couldn’t help asking, “How long do you suppose we’ll be here?”

Jerry shrugged. “No idea.”

“Do you know where we are?”

Jerry gave him a funny look. “We’re in a jail cell.”

“No, I mean the country. France? Belgium?”

“I think we’re still in France,” Jerry responded. “Leastways, those two in the back have been chatting in French ever since I got here. Don’t know much of the language myself—a smattering of German, but that’s about it. Guess I should have studied harder in my foreign language class in high school. Never thought I’d have a need for it. But anyway, France or Belgium, I don’t see how it makes much difference to us. We’re captured either way.”

“But why would they stick us in jail like this?” Brentley wondered. “Why not take us to a POW camp? We are prisoners of war, aren’t we?”

“Maybe they’re keeping us here until they can hand us over to the *Luftwaffe*,” Jerry suggested. “Or maybe they stuck us here to wait until it’s a more convenient time for them to put us someplace else. Or maybe they’re all out of room in the prison camps and are using the jails as a substitute. I don’t know.”

“So do you think we’ll be stuck here till the end of the war?” asked Brentley, looking around the tiny cell in dismay.

Jerry shrugged again. “Am I supposed to speak from experience? I’ve been an official POW lodged in a proper jail cell for all of about twenty minutes.”

Somewhere a door opened and slammed shut. Brentley heard voices and the tramping of boots, both sounds echoing through the jail. The heavy footsteps drew closer, and Brentley turned just in time to see a small group of men pass the cell. Through the small, barred

window in the door, he identified two German soldiers among the group, escorting three or four men who appeared to be Allied airmen. Were they members of his crew? Brentley stood up for a better look, but the group passed by the bars too quickly for him to tell who they were. Somewhere down the corridor a cell door slammed, and the soldiers tramped back past Brentley and his companions.

The hours that followed were not pleasant ones for the young airman imprisoned in the jail. The cell was not heated, and soon the damp February chill had both of its newcomers shivering. Brentley had had nothing to eat or drink since breakfast that morning, and while he was too nervous to have much of an appetite, thirst soon began to plague him. As the afternoon wore into evening and the evening crept toward night, the lone light bulb kept glaring into the cell, and Brentley began to suspect that the guards never bothered to turn it off. Worst, though, was the uncertainty of not knowing what would happen next. He didn't like uncertainty and had been glad that as gunner, he could at least see what was going on around him while he and his crew were flying their missions. Here in a prison cell in the custody of the Nazis, he felt trapped.

As the night wore on, the jail grew quieter, and soon the only sounds to echo in the stillness were the footsteps of an occasional guard in the corridor and snores from Brentley's three companions. The two Frenchmen seemed to be accustomed to the cell, having probably been there for a couple of days, and Jerry, never one to be much bothered by tight circumstances, had dozed off as well. Brentley could only dream of sleeping, and for him the night was one of the longest that he could remember.

It had all happened so quickly. Just that morning he had been safely at the air base preparing for the day's mission. Their target had been a rather small German-held factory in northern France, and as far as that was concerned, they had succeeded. Then their airplane had been hit, had begun to burn, and had gone down in a foreign field to meet a fiery fate.

*Shot down.*

Ever since joining the Army Air Force, Brentley had heard about the prospect of getting shot down. He had often wondered what it

would be like and if it would ever happen to him. Now here he was, a prisoner of the Nazis. In a matter of minutes, he had gone from a gunner in the United States Army Air Force to a prisoner of war.

*A prisoner of war.*

It would be some days, perhaps weeks, before his family heard of his condition and location. Until then, he would simply be "missing in action." Brentley didn't like to think about that. His parents and younger sister had already borne the loss of one son and brother; how long would they have to wait in suspense before learning the fate of the other?

And what about him? Well, he was a prisoner; there could be no doubt about that. But what next? The Geneva Convention protected prisoners of war as long as they did not break any laws or attack any citizens. Even though the Nazis didn't always play by the rules, he probably needn't worry about anything too bad happening to him. If he weren't left in the jail, a POW camp was likely the worst that the young sergeant could reasonably expect. Then what? Well, he would probably be destined to stay there until the end of the war... unless... Brentley sat up a little straighter as the thought occurred to him.

*Unless I somehow managed to escape.*

For the next hour Brentley scarcely noticed the cold, hard floor or the gnawing feeling that was growing in his middle. His thoughts were on a new channel: the possibility of freedom. Escape from the jail was out of the question, at least right now. The cell door was locked from the outside, and the narrow bars of the door's tiny window were too close together to admit Brentley's arm. Even if he could somehow get out of the cell, guards would be after him in a moment. No, he would have to wait on his attempt.

But then again, he didn't have a clear idea of what German POW camps were like, assuming that one of them was where he ended up being taken. Would it even be possible to escape? More of a follower than a leader, Brentley wanted some assurance that his idea wasn't too far-fetched. Maybe in the morning he would talk to Jerry about it.

The cell had a single small window near the top of the wall opposite the door. From his position on the floor, Brentley could see



nothing through this window except a square patch of sky darkened by unhappy clouds and crossed out by grim bars of steel. When this square at long last began to grow lighter, Brentley knew that morning was on its way. His mouth felt parched and had a unpleasant taste from thirst, and he hoped that the guards would at least bring their prisoners some water.

Outside the jail a large vehicle rumbled along the road then stopped. A door opened and banged shut, startling Jerry and the two Frenchmen awake. Brentley heard voices. German voices.

Boots tramped into the corridor. A key scraped in the lock, and the cell door swung open to reveal a tall guard, who motioned to the two Americans. Brentley and Jerry stood. Stepping back, the guard beckoned them out of the cell.

As the two prisoners allowed the guard to herd them down the corridor, Brentley asked Jerry in a low voice, "What do you think? Are they moving us to a new location, or are they taking us somewhere for questioning?"

"*Nicht sprechen,*" the guard snapped.

Brentley glanced at Jerry, who shrugged slightly without speaking. Evidently, the guard didn't want them to talk.

A few moments later, the airmen found themselves outside again. A heavy, gray overcast blotted out the sky, spitting a mixture of misty raindrops and tiny flakes of snow that melted into a dirty slush on the unpaved street. In the midst of this depressing landscape sat a large covered truck with its motor idling. The back was open, and another soldier stood guard beside the tailgate. He pointed inside, and the two prisoners obeyed the unspoken order to clamber in.

Already inside were half a dozen airmen, four of whom Brentley recognized as the other enlisted men from his own crew. One of these was Sergeant Myle, Brentley's fellow waist gunner. "Hey, Myle," Brentley began. "Were you—"

"*Nicht sprechen!*" the guard interrupted, glaring at Brentley. "*Sprechen verboten!*"

Brentley bit his tongue and fell silent.

Soon five more airmen were added to the truck, including the four officers from Brentley's crew. Brentley scooted over to make

room for Lieutenant Bright, his pilot. Looking exhausted, disheveled, and discouraged, Lieutenant Bright murmured his thanks as he settled down against the side of the truck bed next to Brentley. Then the German soldier shut the tailgate and tied the canvas cover down. The truck's motor sputtered to life, and soon the thirteen airmen crowded in the back were jostling along a rutted road on their way to somewhere else.

The truck was not moving particularly fast, but it seemed incapable of avoiding the bumps and potholes that marred the surface of the road. The heavy canvas tied down on each of the three sides pretty much blocked the view from the vehicle, but it didn't seem to be nearly as successful in keeping out the wind. Somehow the damp February gusts succeeded in whistling in through every gap between the lashings, making the ride an uncomfortable one indeed.

At first the airmen talked, swapping their stories. Several, like Brentley, had encountered *Wehrmacht* soldiers straight away. Like Jerry, a few of the others had been discovered and turned in by citizens who were either loyal to the Third Reich or too afraid of the consequences to dare assist. Soon Brentley struck up a conversation with one of the unfamiliar airmen and found out that he and his two companions had been shot down three days before. They also had been flying a diversionary raid, but they had not fared nearly as well on the bailout, and the three of them were the sole survivors from their Liberator crew. The airman didn't seem to want to talk about it, so Brentley soon dropped the subject. After that, there didn't seem to be much more to say. Brentley hunched deeper into his coat and waited for the journey to end, wondering all the while what the future held for his companions and himself.

Three bumpy hours later, the truck stopped, and another soldier unlashed the canvas in the back and opened the tailgate. One by one the men got out. When Brentley's feet hit the ground, he turned and looked around, a brief examination of his surroundings settling the question that had been pestering him for the last fifty miles. What he saw could be nothing other than a prisoner of war camp.

A few minutes later, the thirteen downed airmen found themselves hustled through the main and only gate of a small compound

whose perimeter was surrounded by a nine-foot barbed-wire fence and studded with a fifteen-foot guard tower at each corner. Not knowing much more German than he had the day before, Brentley could make neither head nor tail of the brief conversation between the camp *Kommandant*, or commander, and the guards. The *Kommandant* was gesturing toward a couple of the rectangular buildings within the compound.

“Do you know what they’re saying?” Brentley asked Myle in an undertone.

Myle, who understood a little of the language, replied, “They’re talking pretty fast, but I think the older officer is telling the guards which barracks to put us in.”

That made sense. What didn’t make sense was what happened next. While two of the guards took charge of the other airmen, one managing the officers and the other corralling the enlisted men, a third guard motioned for Brentley to follow him. Brentley hesitated for a brief moment, then obeyed. Why was he being singled out?

Brentley counted six barracks, or huts, of dubious quality in the compound, laid out in two rows of three. While the other guards took their twelve prisoners to the left and center huts in the back row, Brentley’s escort led him to the one on the near right. The guard entered without knocking.

The bunk room was square, containing four bunks, a few cupboards, a rough-cut table with two equally rough-cut benches, and a tiny coal stove that didn’t seem to be putting out a great deal of heat. Two men rose from the table as the guard entered with his prisoner. The guard barked a few words to the taller of the men, who nodded. The guard left.

Dazed, Brentley looked around the tiny bunk room, not sure what to say or do. Stepping forward, the taller prisoner held out his hand in a friendly manner. “Welcome to hut number 1. I’m Thomas Allen, and this is Henry Mitchell.”

Brentley shook Allen’s hand, but Mitchell just gave the newcomer a brief nod. “I’m Charles Brentley,” the young airman ventured. “Is this where I’m supposed to stay?”

“It is,” said Allen. “That’s your bunk on the upper left, mine is beneath it, and Mitchell’s is on the upper right.” Stepping to a pail in the corner, Allen filled a dipper with water and handed it to Brentley. “Here. Thirsty?”

Brentley gratefully guzzled the refreshing liquid. “Thanks,” he breathed, handing the empty dipper back to Allen. “I sure needed that.”

“Just remember, the stuff’s rationed,” Mitchell warned, “just like the food, the fuel, everything.” His voice was tart. “I’ll tell you up front, life here is no picnic.”

Allen returned the dipper to the water pail. “When did you get shot down?” he asked.

“Just yesterday. We spent last night in a jail cell, and I guess we weren’t there long enough to warrant a water ration.”

“Only one night?” Mitchell broke in. “That’s nothing. I was stuck there for thirteen days before they got around to relocating me. I half starved and more than froze.” He snorted. “Not that it’s much better here.”

“Don’t mind him,” Allen said to Brentley in an undertone. “He’s always grumbling.”

“So what’s it really like to be a prisoner here?”

Allen shrugged. “The barracks are always chilly, but you won’t freeze. There’s nowhere near enough to eat, but you won’t starve. The Red Cross helps some with that. They send us parcels now and then with food and such. The guards don’t waste any kindness on us, but they don’t bother us all that much either. There’s not a lot to do, but you won’t die of boredom. On the whole, I think you’ll find it to be bearable.”

Brentley glanced around the bunk room. “Is it just the three of us here?”

“For the time being. There’s a fourth prisoner assigned to this room, but he’s not here right now.”

Curious, Brentley wanted to ask where the other prisoner was, but he did not get a chance to do so right away and soon forgot about it. Allen showed Brentley around, talking cheerfully as he tried to make his new roommate feel at home in the hut—at least, as “at

## PART ONE: THE PILOT

home” as one could feel behind the barbed-wire fences of a POW camp. Mitchell, on the other hand, though not outright unfriendly, didn’t go out of his way to interact with the new prisoner. While Allen gave Brentley the grand tour of the bunk room, Mitchell half sat and half lay on his bunk, writing in a little blue notebook.

As Brentley looked around the bunk room’s restrictive enclosure, a feeling of helplessness washed over him. *Somehow*, the young prisoner thought, *we have got to get out of here.*