

For I Have Sinned

A Novel



Michael Deeze

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Foreword

From the time that the United States entered the war in 1944 until the final armistice, over 100,000 airmen lost their lives in the air war over Europe. That is more than the entire loss of life of the U.S. Marine Corps in the war of the Pacific.

Introduction

My name is Emmett Michael Casey. Depending upon the station of the family member I'm with, I'm Michael, or Mick. People who work with me call me Mick or Casey. I stand five-feet-seven-inches tall and weigh on both sides of one-hundred-thirty pounds, depending upon the time of day. My friends and close relatives call me Little Mick. I don't mind. People that don't know me very well think I'm an asshole. I don't give a shit what people think anymore. I mind my own business.

Chapter 1



January 15, 1945, Trento, Italy

Diary of Mick Casey, Army Air Corps Tail-Gunner, The Flying Ass

We hung for dear life while the Captain throttled up the four big engines. We were seriously overloaded with fuel, with ammunition, with eight tons of one-hundred-pound bombs - and us. We would need every inch of the runway we could get. The old girl shook like she was going to explode. I could feel myself leaning against my harness, just like we all were, just like she was, pushing hard against the brakes. She wants to go. Just when I thought it wouldn't take anymore, the brakes released and we were off, hanging on tight, deaf from the roar of the four engines going full tilt into hell, down the metal track that is the runway; thirty seconds behind the last bomber and thirty seconds ahead of the next one.

We faced each other belted to the bulkhead, in our 'crash positions' three on one side, three on the other side of the bomb bay between us, the racks of hundred pounders within an arm's reach as we were thrown into our harnesses with the force of the release and the rumble of the runway. We felt every bump and rough spot as we pounded along, too fast to abort, daredevils to the end. I didn't think she could lift her ass. I was praying, thinking come on baby, get up, get up, come on baby. I couldn't hold on any tighter. I didn't think we could possibly have enough runway and still we kept pounding along. Then we were up, and then we bounced back down and raced on. Then we're up. The landing gear ground its way up into the belly, and the engine noise changed pitch. The Captain pulled it into a hard bank, and we began the long spiral up to the other planes. We're off, all of us, we brothers - not knowing what is ahead - all of us ready, all of us sudden converts to Jesus, if we weren't already.

I had to leave my parachute behind me in the bomb bay and crawled down the tight passageway into the turret at the back of the plane, where I cranked up the tail wheel. Once I got my flight suit plugged in and my oxygen hooked up, I started to warm up a little. An hour out we got the 'OK' from the Captain and I cleared my two fifty-caliber Brownings, firing a long burst from each one, and

settled down to watch my piece of the sky. This was our second mission and I prayed to God that it would be like the first one. I'm not a kid anymore, I'm nineteen, and I want to live long enough to see twenty. The first mission was a piece of cake the Captain had said. We dropped down, unloaded and got out of there. The flak was light and all the birds flew home. Today we're heading into Austria, the city of Vienna. At the briefing at three a.m., they said we'd see stronger defenses and concentrated flak. It was a beautiful sunny day, and I watched the Alps as we crossed them and out of Italy. Looking down I thought about how my brother-in-law Charlie is down there somewhere. He's walking behind Patten; I'm flying. Which is worse I wondered?

As soon as the mountains got a little behind us, the intercom blasted in my ears. Janssen yelled, "Bogies, eleven o'clock high, they're comin' around!"

Janssen mans the upper turret so I can't see the eleven. In the tail-gun turret, I ride backward, facing where we just came from. I pulled my helmet back off of my eyebrows a little and got a good dose of sun in my eyes. I didn't see the bogies. They used the sun as cover to get behind us. Then I did; three little dots right dead in our six-o'clock and getting bigger real fast.

Then Janssen yelled, "Three at six o'clock, three more coming in on the starboard, four o'clock low! MEs, (Messerschmidt 109s).

The dots got bigger; we were in the starboard group today flying tight, getting close to our I.P (initial point). At the I.P., the formation will turn to the target, drop altitude, arm the bombs in the bay, and line up for our run. The group is vulnerable at both ends of the run, the tighter the group, the more firepower we can bring. During the run, we string out. They don't call these babies Flying Fortresses for nothing though.

The wings and tails of the oncoming fighters defined themselves in my vision. They weren't just dots anymore, they were trouble and they were bringing it with them. I swung the guns up. Six-hundred yards is the effective range for the Browning .50 caliber and they would be there soon. I know what six-hundred yards looks like and I wasn't going to wait until they got there. I was ready, I pulled the triggers and the twins roared into life, a spray of tracer rounds racing off toward them, five-hundred rounds a minute.

The trio behind didn't reach the gun range barrier. Instead, they peeled off, two to my right and one to my left. I couldn't swing my turret toward the other three ME's, I only have ninety degrees of rotation in the turret. I had to watch as they made their run. I could see the muzzle flashes of their guns as they swung into attack mode, concentrating on the waist and tail of the right-most B-17, 'Moaning Lisa'. They attacked from a lower angle to avoid as many of our gun positions as they could and almost immediately fragments of the her started to peel off the fuselage along with sparkling plexiglass from the gun mounts. They're tearing her apart. The first fighter split away, up to where I could lay strafing fire out for him to fly into, and I opened up on him. Then the second ME made its run, targeting the same position. This time her number four engine belched black oily smoke and the right wing dropped. The bomber heeled over to

her right and away from the squadron. Moaning Lisa turned nose down and spun down into the cloud cover, out of my sight. They had cut one of us out of the herd.

“Stay tight, close up the formation, steady ahead. Any parachutes on that bird?”

“Negative.” Shouted Taylor from the Sperry-Ball turret. “No chutes. Three o’clock, three o’clock level, he’s gonna take us end to end.”

I couldn’t watch for chutes; I picked up the ME as he passed.

“Two more, ten o’clock high, one at six o’clock level, you pick him up Casey?”

“Yep, I see ‘em.”

Then, just like that they’re gone. None of them in the sky. Captain Brinker came over the intercom, “Damage check?” He’s a lot older than the rest of us, he’s almost twenty-five but he’s still a pretty neat guy. I couldn’t run any damage check because I’m on my knees strapped into the turret and the plane is behind me. But there didn’t seem to be any when the rest of the crew checked in. He told us we were approaching our I.P, which meant I had to get out of the turret and crawl back into the bomb bay. The fighters don’t chase us into the I.P. In here there is flak to do their job for them. They’ll wait for us when we come back out after the bomb run, if we come out from it.

Once in the bay, the Sperry-Ball (belly turret) gunner, Taylor, and I pull all the pins on the bombs so that they are armed and will explode on contact. We have to put on our chutes and hook up portable oxygen tanks first. We hurry our way through the process. You don’t want to be in the bomb bay when the doors open, and our oxygen bottles don’t have very much air in them anyway. Although we’ve practiced it a hundred times, it’s hard to do in our parachute gear and oxygen tank. The catwalk between the bombs is narrow, ten inches wide, and the footing is icy this high up in the air. The wind blows through there, matching our air speed.

Once I got back in the tail-gun turret, we turned hard to port and started our bomb run in earnest. The fighters will wait until we come back out on the other side. Now it would be anti-aircraft defenses, and flak - it started immediately, and it started heavy. The poor ship rocked up and down and back and forth. There is no defense; we’re big dark silhouettes in the sky just asking for them to shoot us in the ass. We had to take the pounding. There are no atheists during the bomb run. Even with my harness cinched tight, my head was snapping around on my neck like a punch-drunk prizefighter. Behind us, I watched as the sky turned black with the smoke of the explosions and the flash of the flame when they detonated. We were in the lead group, and I couldn’t imagine what the last group through was going to get as the blackness got thicker and thicker. I imagine this must be what hell looks and feels like. Suddenly a piece of my turret shattered and hit me on the side of my head, knocking me silly for a minute. I was ok, but my head hurt a lot. There was so much noise in the plane I could barely hear “Bombs away” coming through the headset. But the light on the floor below my feet flashed so that I would know, just in case.

We were ready for the ME’s as soon as we cleared the flak. But there weren’t

any. They had vanished. We made it home safe. At the debriefing we were told we lost three planes. They lost five. Just for laughs the chief from the grounds crew told us we won the award for most holes punched in the fuselage today. He asked if we wanted to know how many. We all told him, 'NO'. We were in the air seven hours and fifty-five minutes. It felt a lot longer than that. It took twelve stitches to close the gash in my head. That night I crawled into the tent and got in my sleeping bag. It gets cold in January in Italy. I couldn't sleep. I looked up at the canvas and thought we go again - tomorrow.

Chapter 2



1956

Chicago, Illinois - Emmett

I wake up with a start, they're in the room again. Those others, I can feel them crowding in. The room is dark and I can hear my sister's open mouth breathing in the bunk bed above me. Near the window my brother sleeps with his feet sticking out of the bars of his crib. He's too tall for the bed now. I really have to pee. When I roll over and open my eyes, the room is empty, filled with shadows.

I know there will be something under the bed waiting for me to step out, some nameless terror that will snatch at me if I put a foot on the floor. I'm conflicted between chancing the run for the toilet in the bathroom, or just peeing the bed and taking my punishment and humiliation in the morning. It might be worth it, but if I don't make up my mind pretty soon the decision will be made for me. I decide to make the run for it - but quietly. As soundlessly as I can I peel off my blankets and head out of the bedroom on my tiptoes. The bathroom is at the other end of the apartment and I've memorized where the floor squeaks are.

As soon as I enter the dining room the aroma of cigarette smoke hits me, strong and familiar - he is awake. I bypass the bathroom door and peek around the doorway into the living room. His silhouette is defined sharply by the streetlight that glares in through the front window. Silently he sits in his chair facing toward me, then his cigarette tip glows bright and even in the low light I see the cloud of smoke he exhales.

"Bad dream?" comes the voice, so quietly yet unexpectedly loud in the silence of midnight.

"The people are in my room again Da," I added, "I gotta pee."

"They won't hurt you Emmett; they're not here for you. Go on, go pee, it's behind you."

I shuffle into the bathroom and pee with the door open aiming at the side of the bowl so it doesn't make too much noise. I wouldn't think of flushing the toilet in the middle of the night for fear of disturbing any other nearby demons, so once

I finish, I turn back toward the living room and peak once more. My night vision is good enough to see the bottle and ashtray perched on their stand next to him.

“Bedroom’s the other way.”

I hesitate.

“Go on now, morning will be here soon. Gotta go again - tomorrow.”

About the Author

Michael Deeze is a natural-born storyteller - in life and in print. A child of the sixties, he draws extensively from his own diverse life experiences and subsequent education to introduce the hapless Emmet Casey. A Vietnam vet and Doctor of Chiropractic, Deeze weaves the history of an ill-fated child's transition from a lonely, inner-city rebel, decorated war veteran and into a man who looks all too familiar to him, a man like his father - all earned the hard way. After spending decades living near the forests of rural Wisconsin, Deeze now lives and maintains a small, private practice in Illinois. He's a devoted father to his three children, a magical daughter, two grown sons and his dog.