

14

Tom Dougherty

(Stories 31,32,33,34)

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#32

The Fall Guy

In reference to that heading, it goes back to a period of time in May of 1944. I was a Staff Sergeant in the United States Army Air Corp. My assigned duties placed me in a little village in England, called Nuthampstead. The army called it station 131. It was a bomber base, more specifically, the 398th Bomb Group which was part of the First Air Division of the 8th Air Force. Our planes were the famous and legendary B-17s, known as the Flying Fortress.

There were four squadrons in this group, the 600th, 601st, 602nd and the 603rd. I was in the 602nd, being part of a lead crew as the right hand waist gunner. The crew consisted of ten men, four officers and six enlisted. The officer positions included pilot, copilot, navigator and the bombardier. By name in that order they were Harold "Woody" Woodson, Richard "Dick" Morauer, Peter "Pete" Mullin and R. Malvern "Mal" Turner.

In the enlisted ranks we had two Tech Sergeants, they were Gerald "Dick" Dixon, engineer and top turret gunner and Sol Waslow, radio man gunner. The other four enlisted personnel were Staff Sergeants. The other waist gunner was George Shoptaw, Russell "Russ" Spear Jr. was the ball turret gunner and Cecil "Tex" Moore was in the tail gun position.

As a crew we came together in a quaint little berg no more than a wide spot in the road called Pyote in Texas. This was in September of 1943. We took first phase training there which would be the first segment of getting ready to be a part of a bomber group.

Basically, our only superior to reckon with was Lt. Woodson. Naturally, we were inferior to anyone with a rank higher than ours, but as far as taking orders, our pilot pretty much directed us from the time we got up in the morning until we hit the sack at night. We became a closely knit group of people and to some extent could almost be called a family. We worked together, exercised together, played together and often even ate together when we went off base.

Woody, as he asked us to call him, tried to be like a father to us. Maybe "Big Brother" would be a better description because Woody was more like a big kid than most of us. He had a ready boyish smile and did not fit the mold of the West Point graduate that he was. The truth of the matter was, we had all just come from our respective tech schools and gunnery training when we were assigned to the training unit in Pyote.

During those first few months together, I felt that Woody often confided in me or would ask questions of me as to the status quo of how things were developing in our training or even impersonal things concerning the enlisted men. It was often in a friendly nonchalant manner so I didn't think much about it.

On one occasion after we had been assigned to another air base in Dalhart, Texas, Woody had decided he wanted to buy a used car for his wife to have when the time came for us to go overseas. He asked if I would go to Amarillo with him to help him make his selection. Actually, I assumed it was as much an order as it was a request, but willingly told him I would be glad to go along.

By this time I actually felt more akin to Mal Turner than any of the other officers. Mal was a regular guy that enjoyed a good drink and being single, he had a ready eye for those of the opposite sex. Especially the shapely and good looking ones. He and I saw eye to eye on these two subjects so we just kind of hit it off together.

By the time we were leaving Dalhart to join the 398th Bomb Group in Rapid City, South Dakota, Mal and I both were married. He to a nice little gal from Lubbock, Texas and me to the girl back in my home town in Illinois. The four of us drove from Dalhart to Rapid City in Laurie Turner's 1939 Ford coupe.

We hadn't been in Rapid City long until my new wife was spending more time in Illinois than she was with me. It was becoming obvious the marriage was a mistake and a separation was in the making. An annulment or divorce was out of the question at the time because as the JAG officer put it, "You're too close to shipping out for an overseas assignment now, you will have to settle your marital affairs when you get back."

Turner made a good buddy to join me in drinking my sorrows away, but it was sad in a way too because he would not include Laurie on these occasions and I felt like this was partly my fault.

By this time Woody seemed more distant than ever before. Possibly it was because an overseas assignment was fairly imminent and what the destination would be was anybody's guess. Without a doubt, our close knit crew of a few months ago had changed to quite an extent almost over night. Not so much the enlisted men but still, things were different. We all seemed to have our own thoughts and worries.

By mid March of 1944 we finally were assigned to an overseas location, it was not generally known where but we would be moving out. It was determined at headquarters that one man off each crew would go to the new destination by boat. I'm not sure how it was determined but on our crew I was the unlucky guy. I had to join the contingent of ground crew people and headed out by train for Grand Island, Nebraska. The plane crews would be taking off from the base, a few at a time.

After a week in Grand Island, Nebraska we left by train for the east coast. Although the powers to be would not disclose our eventual destination, most of us felt sure we were heading for England. To most of us that was a God Send.

The ground echelon reached station 131 before most of the planes arrived. Actually I was there a week before my crew arrived. There were all kinds of reasons they claimed but mostly bad weather which delayed them at almost every stop along the way.

Their interest seemed to be centered around whether I had I been off base visiting any of the local pubs in the numerous small villages. I had not of course because no one was allowed off base. It was a pity by my reckoning because being an air crew member, there was no assigned duty except to wait until the rest of the crew arrived. I spent the days going back and forth between the consolidated mess hall and my quonset hut.

There was a small straw stack about half way between the mess hall and my hut which on occasion I would climb to the top of the stack and stare up into the blue sky day dreaming about some of the fun and experiences I'd had during my first year and a half in the service and wondering what life was going to be like over here in England.

In reality, getting leave to go into town in the evenings with the liberty runs became one of the first big problems facing our crew. While the other enlisted men in our hut were getting passes, Woody had not allowed us leave in the more than two weeks since the crew arrived. His excuse was, he didn't want a bunch of guys with hangovers when we may be going on a mission the following day. This of course did not make sense because we never knew when we would be called to go on a mission. That being the case, we could spend our whole tour of duty cooped up on base.

Morale among our crew members was about as low as it could get. It was obvious to Woody also. He cornered me alone one day and asked me, "What the hell is the matter with the men, they act like the world has come to an end?" I said, "Do you know that you are the only plane commander who hasn't allowed your men to take the liberty runs into town during the evenings?" He said, "No, but is that what's eating them?" I questioned Woody, "Can I speak to you as one man to another, not as enlisted man and officer?" He said, "You know you can, Tom."

I said, "Woody, they think you're chicken shit about this pass thing and a couple of them are talking about going to the squadron commander with their gripe. There is a possibility one or two may ask for assignment to replacement crews." He took a deep breath and said, "It's that bad?" I said, "It's that bad."

Belligerently, Woody lifted the restriction and after a few nights in the nearby town of Baldock the problem kind of healed over. None of us were ever so bad off after a night in town that we couldn't perform our duties whenever we were called upon to get up for a mission the next day.

It's a bit difficult for me to put my finger on the change in Woody's mood after we began flying combat missions. It was a known fact that his wife Jean was pregnant when we left the states and he outwardly admitted he was going to try and be home before the baby arrived. Being a lead pilot, it was easy for him to fly extra missions, and he evidently took advantage of the opportunity whenever it arose.

The situation between he and I was different than it was back in the states. I could feel this change and wasn't sure how to explain it to my own satisfaction. It was possible, I was too frank when I explained how we all felt about being restricted to base in the beginning.

On our first mission's de briefing we were surprised to find that they served 10 shots of 100 Proof Kentucky bourbon as we all gathered around the table. Russ Spear and Woody were the only ones who didn't drink their whiskey. After a few moments, Mal Turner pushed one of them toward me and took the other and said, "Here's to you Tom." I reciprocated in kind and downed the second jigger. I recall at the time, Woody gave me what I thought was a rather impatient look, or maybe it would be better to call it a look of disdain.

In a matter of just minutes, I could care less what he thought, in fact, had there been another extra bourbon I would have drunk that one too. It was usually twelve to fourteen hours between the time we had breakfast and de briefing so the whiskey would make its' way into the bloodstream in a hurry. After a seven to ten hour flight over enemy territory, the fear and the tension was great enough that the booze produced a good feeling. As time went on, more of the crew were leaving their shots untouched and Turner and I would make sure the tray was empty before being removed.

As for Woody, I knew from past experience that he would have a drink on occasion but after we arrived in England, it was obvious he was abstaining from its' use. In my humble opinion, I think this was a mistake. I believe it could have been a form of therapy had he imbibed at least to a limited extent. To me, his mind and body was all pent up with apprehension about getting back to the states in time for the birth of his first child. How far he could stretch what seemed like a rubber band between what he believed was right and what he perceived to be wrong was anyone's guess.

One night two other enlisted men and myself were invited to play poker in Woody's hut. One of the other officers brought out a bottle of Vodka, offering each of us a swig. It was my first experience with Vodka. Truthfully, I had never even heard of it. Woody had dropped out of the game, suggesting it was time to hit the sack. No one took him literally and after about ten minutes, he jumped out of his bunk and hollered, "I said it was time to hit the sack, and that is

what I meant.” Naturally the other two enlisted men and I immediately left the hut. To our surprise Mal Turner, left with us. He said, “We can continue the game at your hut can’t we. Joe Totter and Joe Kiska said, “By all means.” Only a few minutes passed when Woody came busting through our double black out doors and grabbed Turner by the shirt collar and the seat of his pants tossing him toward the doors. Then he said, “I don’t give a damn what you other enlisted men do, but as for my men, when I said it’s time to hit the sack, that is exactly what I meant.” This was the first and most outrageous reaction I had ever seen by Woody. How Turner could put up with this indiscretion was beyond me.

Not long after that Turner and I went to London on a forty eight hour pass. We had a real good time and decided forty eight hours wasn’t enough so we added one more day to it without getting any kind of permission. We both knew it was wrong but decided to pay the piper when the time came; and it came as soon as we arrived back on base.

Woody had Turner’s paycheck docked ninety dollars for one month and busted me to a Buck Sergeant for one month. He explained to me that he didn’t think I thought the infraction deserved the bust. I said, “Sir, when Dixon took a week without leave in Denver while we were stationed at Dalhart, on his return you gave him a good reprimand and that was the end of it.” Surprisingly, he didn’t tell me there was a war on and that I could have been called to go on a mission. No, he said, “What is Dixon’s serial number?” I told him, I had no idea. He told me it began with a three which meant he had been drafted into the service, he was not a volunteer. I had enlisted all right but it was only because I had been promised a slot in the Air Force and I was within three months of being drafted myself. I found no fault with his action but was surprised by his explanation.

The night the officer’s club brought a group of local young women to the base for a dance was the night the rubber band stretched to the breaking point. I was on my way back to the hut and as I passed near the straw stack I mentioned earlier, I saw Woody trying to hoist this woman up to the top. She was standing on his shoulders and after a great deal of effort was able to get to the top. After that, Woody would get back about fifteen feet and make a running jump trying to get to the top. The lady was being helpful, even trying to grab his hand at each lunge. Woody was so plastered I don’t know how well he would have been able to perform if he did make it to the top. Frankly, I was laughing so hard and at the same time so happy for him, I did not stick around to see if he even made it to the top.

We were called for a mission the next day and I can assure you, Woody was not just hung over, he was still inebriated. When we all met out at the plane, Sgt.

Dixon advised the rest of the enlisted men that we didn't have to fly with Woody because of the shape he was in. Dixon advised Woody that he should ask for a substitute pilot to take his place. Woody would not hear of this, explaining he would be O.K. once they were in the air and he could get on oxygen. When it was over, Woody talked the rest of us into flying with him that day, but Dixon remained on the ground.

The mission turned out well, but the copilot was in charge during the whole time while Woody was trying to sleep it off. This was a perfect example of what Woody was hoping to keep from happening with his original pass restriction, yet it happened to him and he hadn't even left base.

Not long after that incident, Woody came to me again, using me as a sounding board to find out what the other enlisted men were saying about the most recent incident.

On August the 12th I flew my last mission with the Woodson crew. Once again, a decision had to be made because 8th Air Force Headquarters ruled the ten man crew was being reduced to nine men. I can't remember much of how it came about, but I was the one that was ultimately let go. At first the decision was based on who would be called for plane guard duty. The use of a gig against one of us would be the determination. I guess the gigs were all against me. The result, my crew was finishing their missions without me. I guess Woody had finally finished his missions before any of my old crew finished theirs and he was on his way home. I believe, in time for the arrival of his first child.

The number of missions flown by me did not change after that August 13th raid until January 17, 1945 when I was placed with a new pilot. I will admit, I was a little bitter about the way things happened at first, but I never did blame any of my crew mates. If it was anyone's fault, it would have to be between Woody and me. As I mentioned earlier, with the war raging on, life was much too short, I thought, to have to hold back on things you wanted to do or say. Had I known I would live to the ripe old age I have thus far attained, I may have looked at things differently. When I look back to those times however, life had a much shorter expectation.

On the brighter side, during that extra time I spent in England, it allowed me to find and fall in love with a beautiful woman who gave me a wonderful daughter who in turn has given me much happiness in the twilight years of my life. But that is another story so I will hang my close on this line.

The End

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START 10/13/1
Written about 50 years later in 1993