

## Dogfight!

By Michael Danese

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“Focker at three-o’clock!” said a young voice over the radio as the sound of machine guns rang out.

“I see’em!” said Jack into his mic. Jack was about 20 years old with a head of blond curls under his leather helmet. He looked more like a high school football player than a fighter pilot. But don’t let that fool you. He’s an ace, and his squadron has flown several successful missions over Central Europe, at least up until now.

He looked off to his right to see one of his six brothers-in-arms going down in flames. He pushed his stick down hard and the plane dove. He pushed the stick to the right to come under the attacker. All around him he heard the rat-a-tats of the battle, punctuated by loud explosions. Jack knew that each boom was the sound of one of his team meeting their maker. He took careful aim at the Focke-Wulf D9 then pulled on his triggers. He snarled as he scored a direct hit and watched the German plane tumble from the sky.

“Take that you bastard! That’s for Johnny!” he said.

He pulled back on the stick and his P-51 D Mustang propelled towards the heavens. He pulled to the right and pushed forward to assess the situation from above. He saw that there were only two Mustangs left and the two Fockers had them on the run. In the blink of an eye, the Mustangs crossed paths just as a Focker began to fire, and he watched another Mustang fall. The remaining Mustang was able to get behind the enemy plane and fire. He knocked the Focker out of the sky. But unfortunately the last Focker was able to pull up and shoot him down.

Jack aimed his plane at the last German fighter just as the plane turned directly towards him. They raced head on at each other at over 400 miles per hour with their guns blazing. Jack heard bullets hitting his plane, then all of a sudden he felt a deep burning pain. His plane started a nosedive as Jack passed out.

A man gasps as his eyes spring open and he is startled by his dream. Physically shaken, he sits up in his single bed, rubs his eyes and looks around the small, dingy room. He glances at a small clock on a nightstand. 6:45 is blinking. “Ugh...” he says to himself.

The room is sparse. There’s a small dresser, a chair piled with clothes, and an old wooden shelf on the wall with a few knick-knack souvenirs from long-ago travels, a little figurine of a Dutch boy and girl, a miniature Big Ben, a small wooden plane, and a little Golden Gate Bridge. There are also some framed snapshots of by-gone days. A beach scene with the man and a woman and two small children, his family we presume. Another photo of the man and the woman, and a third photo of the two children as teenagers.

His cat then jumps up next to him and licks his face. “Morning Rosie,” he says in a low voice.

He climbs out of bed, walks the few feet to the bathroom and stands over the toilet. In what seems like forever he is able to pee. He goes to the sink and washes his hands, then he splashes some water on his face. Looking back at him in the mirror is a gaunt face with sunken eyes. He grabs a towel and dries his face and hands, then he wipes off his bald head. He quickly brushes his teeth.

He pulls on a tee shirt and a pair of shorts and heads to the kitchen. There's a wooden table with two chairs, a sink piled with dirty dishes, a vase with some plastic flowers, and a small refrigerator.

He pets his cat and turns on his little transistor radio. He pours some cornflakes into a small bowl, then some milk. He pours some milk into the cat's bowl. He pours some juice, then reaches for a box containing several medicine bottles. He takes a pill from each bottle, then swallows the handful. He stands and goes to the counter as the cat jumps onto it.

He pets the cat as he looks at a large-print calendar. He runs his finger down the box for today. He says, "Ok, Rosie, looks like another trip to the center for chemo, then the GP doc. Still don't know why I need to see both. So they can both bill, I suppose..." Rosie doesn't look up as she keeps licking at the milk.

Here is a man in the fight of his life. He's been battling lung cancer for four years. Two operations, several rounds of chemo and radiation, and as he looks ahead it seems like another patch of rough road. He plops down into his easy chair and begins to read a magazine. Rosie jumps into his lap. Within minutes both are sound asleep.

The pilot awakens from his blackout just in time to pull back on the stick to level out his plane. He feels a sharp pain in his upper chest, almost to his shoulder. He puts his hand there and feels blood dripping.

"May day! May day! This is Lion One! Lion One, I'm hit!" he says into his radio. Just then he begins to take on enemy fire. Off to his left he sees the Nazi Fockler bearing down on him. He pulls back hard on the stick and flies straight up, then he twists it to the left as he flies in a big arc over and around the Fockler. As soon as he can he unloads all six of his .50 cal machine guns towards his enemy. Within seconds he sees smoke coming from the fuselage as the plane noses down. Seconds later he sees a small puff as it slams into the face of a mountain.

"Come in Lion One! Come in Lion One! Do you copy? Over," said a voice on the radio.

"This is Lion One. I'm hit in the shoulder," he said as he jammed a small towel under his blood-soaked flak jacket as he tries to put some pressure on the wound. "I don't see any other aircraft, I brought down the last Jerry that I saw. I'm heading back. Over."

"What happened? Over," said the voice.

“We were flying north after hitting the target. *That* part of the mission was a success. Then six Fockers came outta the sun and ambushed us. They picked us off like a shooting gallery. I got two of them, then this last one. I...I guess I’m the only survivor. Over,” he said in a whisper.

“Sorry, buddy. The medics have been alerted and are waiting for you. They have a little reception planned. Over,” said the voice.

“Wouldn’t miss it! Over,” said the pilot, as his voice began to strain.

As he landed the medics converged on the small plane. They lifted the weary pilot out. Blood pooled in the bottom of the plane and covered his clothes. “You ok?” asked a medic.

“Never better!” said the pilot as he passed out.

“Meow, meow!” screeched Rosie startling the sleeping man.

“Oh, it’s okay girl. We’re gonna be just fine,” he said as he stood up.

Half an hour later he arrived at the bus stop just as the bus pulled up. “There’s a stroke of luck!” he thought to himself. He climbed aboard and took a seat near the front. As he looked out the window at all of the people rushing in all directions he began to wonder who they were and where they were going. He started to come up with little scenarios for some of them. “That guy in the suit is going for a job interview. It’s his third interview for this important job. He ain’t gonna get it... That guy in the tee shirt with the sleeves cut off is gonna buy some crack from that guy on the corner. He’ll be dead in two weeks.... That woman with the two little girls is going to meet her divorce lawyer. Life’ll never be the same for those kids...”

A few minutes later he arrived at St. Paul’s Hospital. He slowly walks past the main desk and heads directly for the elevator. He enters and pushes the button for the third floor. When he gets there he checks in at the desk. “Good morning Mr. West. How are you feeling today?” said the ward clerk.

“I’m fine dear, just fine,” he replied. He thought to himself how sad it is when the people in the cancer ward know you by name.

“You can go right back. They are ready for you,” she said.

He nodded and smiled at her and walked back to the line of chairs and IV bags on stands.

“Here’s my guy!” said Nurse Johnson. She was a large African-American women dressed all in white. “Your seat is all ready for you!”

“Thanks, Flora,” he said as he plopped into the chair. Within minutes he was punctured and the drugs were flowing into his body. He leaned back and closed his eyes.

Jack threw his head back as he awoke in the makeshift Air Force hospital. “Hey, where am I?” he shouted.

A young nurse came over. Nancy was about his age, with red hair and soft blue eyes, “You’re in the hospital. Lay back down there; you need your rest!”

“Well doll, looking at you I thought maybe I was in heaven!” he said as he tried to grin.

“Doctor he’s awake!” she yelled as she grabbed his arm to take his pulse.

The doctor quickly came over. Dr. O’Connor was a chuffy guy with gray hair, probably about 50 years old. “You lost a lot of blood son. Another few minutes and you woulda been a goner!”

“Am I gonna be okay doc? You gotta get me back in this fight!” said Jack.

“You ain’t going anywhere, at least for a while. Now that you’re stable we’ll need to operate to get that slug outta your shoulder. Couldn’t chance any more trauma to your body until you got some strength back,” he explained.

“Oh, yeah, it’s killing me! How soon can ya yank it?” he asked.

“I wanted to give you enough time to get that blood circulating.” turning to Nancy he said, “Let’s schedule it for later this afternoon.”

“Okay, Dr. O’Connor,” she said. Just then a patient in another bed cried out and Nancy went over to him.

Jack read some magazines to pass the time, in between trying to flirt with Nancy. He tried to sweet talk some food or water from her, as he was starving, but she knew he couldn’t have any before his surgery. He knew too, but it was an excuse to talk to her.

The Red Cross stopped by for a visit and then he received a packet of his mail. There were a few letters from his parents, some snacks, and a small wooden plane from his little sister. The letters tried to paint a cheerful picture of life during wartime in his home town. They also gave him encouragement to keep fighting the good fight for God and country and to please be safe. He asked Nancy for a pad and pencil and wrote back that he was safe and how much he appreciated the food and gifts and hearing from everyone. He didn’t mention that he was in the hospital. He thought he would tell them after he was out so they didn’t worry.

In a few hours Nancy came to take him for surgery. “I have a request,” he said.

“I already said *no!*” she replied.

No, no, it’s not that...after they get the slug outta me, can I have it?” he asked. “I wanna wear it around my neck to remind me of the good men that died around me.”

Nancy was touched, "I can't see why not, I'll be sure to ask the doctor."  
She helped to prep him and soon the anesthetics did their work and he was out.

The bright lights in the cancer ward pried into the slits that were closed for the past hour or so.  
"You okay there, Mr. West?" asked Flora in her cheerful way.

"Yes, fine...I guess I dozed off there..." he said.

"Happens every day!" Flora said.

"How much longer?" he asked.

Flora looked at his bag and said, "Just about done! I heard this is your last visit with us, I'm gonna miss that smile!"

"Hope so!" he said. "And thanks for making this as pleasant as it could be. Believe me, it really helps"

"It's what I live for!" she said.

Soon he was back on the bus. This time he didn't pay much attention to the people in the street. He just wanted to get home. The drugs always make him feel awful. When he got there he poured himself a large glass of water and also some for Rosie too. He collapsed into his chair. The cat curled into his lap and they both drifted off.

The pilot opened his eyes. He was still groggy as he called out for Nancy. She came over, "How are you feeling, fly-boy?" she asked as he slipped a large lead slug into his hand then closed it for him.

"Never better!" he slurred. He brought his hand to his face and opened his fingers. "And thank you! By the way, I just decided that when this is all over I'm gonna marry you!"

"Oh, is that so!" she exclaimed. "You just close your eyes and go back to sleep for now. You need your rest!"

"Marry you, I tell ya..." he said before he drifted off.

Rosie licked the man's face and woke him up. "Hey, wattayadoin?" he said as he glanced at the clock, "It ain't time yet, leave me alone now, Rosie!" he said gently pushing her to the floor. He reached to his neck without thinking about it, like he always does, and stroked the lead slug and wedding ring that he wears together on a gold chain. His heavy eyes closed.

"Mama! Mama!" yelled the young girl as she awoke in her hospital bed.

"Doctor! Doctor! She woke up! She's awake!" said the young mother as she hugged her daughter.

“Finally!” said the nervous father standing next to the bed.

The little girl’s big blue eyes search the room. “Where am I Mama?” she asked.

“Thank you God, thank you! You are in a hospital, Jillian darling. There was an accident, but you are okay now!” said the mother.

Jillian is seven years old. She is in the bed with an IV in her arm and blankets covering her. Red tufts of hair are sticking out of the towel around her head. She is a mini version of her mother, Coleen. Coleen is 29, tall and thin. Her red hair is pulled back in a ponytail. Peter is Jillian’s dad, and he is now *very* happy. He is 32, and about the same height as his wife. He has dark hair and brown eyes. He is wearing a green tee-shirt and swimming trunks.

“I can’t wait to tell you about my dream!” exclaimed Jillian.

“Hiya little lady! It’s great to see you, let’s take a look!” said the doctor as he entered. Dr. O’Brien was about 50, a bit chuffy, with gray hair. He was wearing a white lab coat and had a stethoscope around his neck. He quickly listened to her heart and a nurse took her blood pressure. He looked in her ears and throat.

“Doctor?” asked Peter.

“Everything looks fine to me, but I want to keep her here overnight to be sure,” he said to the beaming parents.

“My dream!” said Jillian.

“Thank God! Oh, thank you Dr. O’Brien!” said Coleen.

The doctor motioned for them to come out into the hall. The three stood close as the doctor spoke. “Listen, I’m not one for miracles, but when she first came in, I feared the worst. She was under the water for a long time, too long I thought, and her lungs were filled with water. Peter, I know you got her out as soon as you could, but, well, let’s just be thankful that she’s awake!”

She’s a fighter, doc, comes from a long line of ‘em!” said Coleen hugging her husband.

“Can we stay with her?” asked Peter.

“Of course! Go be with her, it seems she has a lot to say!” said the doctor.

Peter and Coleen both went in and hugged their daughter and sat on the bed.

“I had the most amazing dream! This man named Jack was in a war flying an old-time plane and shooting other planes, like in those movies, then he got hurt, and then there was an old man named Mr. West who was sick, and he had a cat, and he went on the bus, then the war guy was in

hospital with a pretty nurse that looked like you, Mama! Then the old man had a necklace with a piece of metal on it that he rubbed, and...”

“Hold on there, young lady! What kind of dream was this? said Coleen.

I don’t know but it was zonkers!” said Jillian.

“Jack....West? Was the man’s name Jack West?” asked the dad.

“No, I told you, Mr. West was the sick man and Jack was in the plane!” said Jillian.

“Honey, could it be?” Peter asked his wife.

“My grandfather? How? You know, he did wear a necklace like that, I never saw him without it.” said Coleen.

“And a ring! There was a ring too!” said Jillian.

“Ah, yes...after my grandmother died, he wore her ring on the necklace...” added Coleen.

Peter held his wife close, “I can’t explain it, but that guy was sure a fighter! He shot down all of those planes in the war, he even beat cancer! Somehow, some way, he knew that it wasn’t her time. He musta pushed her back to us!”

“I can’t argue with that, he was certainly a fighter, and so is our little girl!” said Coleen as they all hugged together.

“And there was a little toy plane too!” added Jillian through the hugs.

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