Big Mac

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Abstract

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BIG MAC ducked his head from force of habit as he walked through the door of the officer’s quarters. His high cheek-bones were broad and his hair Indian-black, but his eyes were pure Irish. They were usually smiling eyes, with little crow-foot wrinkles at the outer corners, but not today. His big-knuckled hands hung at his sides, his fingers closing and opening slowly. They were good hands—hands that could rein in a bucking horse, or crumple a beer-can, or design an airplane on a drawing board. They needed something to do now.

“What did the captain say, Mac?” Mac shook his head slowly before answering.

“The captain said no one had to ride in a ‘flying-boxcar’ if he didn’t want to. He said we could take the train to Virginia for all he cared, but if we didn’t get there by the time the planes did, we’d get court-martialed. It doesn’t leave us much choice, does it?”

“No, not one heck of a lot. So what are you going to do, Mac?”

“I don’t know, probably follow orders, like all the other numbers in this outfit. But damn it, Carl, you know as well as I do that those planes have no business in the air. They’re about as aerodynamically sound as a falling rock. And the turbine rings have a habit of changing into shrapnel if you give the motors full power for more than a minute at a time.”

“Did you tell the captain that?” I asked.

“Yeah, I told him.”

“So what did he say?”

“He said his orders are to transfer the company to Virginia by the air-craft available. Our orders are to report for take-off at 1400 tomorrow. I don’t know, Carl, I guess I’m just one of those gut-less wonders that we hear about.”

Mac afraid? . . . Maybe. I remembered the summer before. We were on duty in the boiler-room of a destroyer when the packing blew out of a valve. Super-heated steam shrieked and roared as it rushed into the compartment—
steam so hot and under such pressure that a jet of it could pierce a man's body like a bullet. Men were fighting like animals, trying to be the first up the ladder and out of the hatch—while Mac closed the main valve. He wore bandages on his hands for three weeks.

I remembered the night in Lisbon when Olie Johnson came aboard drunk and fell over the rail. It was Mac who jumped in and held Olie's face out of the oily water till the O. D. threw him a line. Mac griped for a week because the doc gave Olie a rum-ration and didn't give him any.

Mac afraid... Maybe.

We took off from Corpus Christi the next afternoon. It was dark when we flew over New Orleans. From 5,000 feet, the lights were like glowing strands of lace as they crossed and curled around the river. It was a beautiful sight, but it made me feel a little detached and unreal. To think that there were people down there on the land, living and loving, never noticing me as I passed.

We landed at Pensacola for refueling about midnight. Mac was on the plane next to mine. We went into operations for a cup of coffee while we waited. The runway was low and moist, and on the way back we could hear a million frogs croaking in the darkness.

Mac said "so long" and got back aboard his plane. In a few moments the pilot cranked his motors, they back-fired, then caught with a roar. The plane taxied onto the runway and its motors whined as the pilot cut in the turbines for a full-power take-off. The lumbering plane reluctantly lifted off the concrete, gaining altitude in order to clear a patch of trees. I turned away and climbed the ladder to the door of our plane.

As I reached the top, the night turned yellow, then red behind me, and a roar shook the air. Ambulances screamed and a hideous rose of flame blossomed in the darkness, and a man on the radio said, "Forty men died tonight" and a man in a uniform said, "Report for take-off at 0800 tomorrow morning."

—Frank Meyers, Sci. Sr.