



HERO FOUND

The Greatest POW Escape of the Vietnam War

BRUCE HENDERSON

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Bruce Henderson

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For Conrad "Connie" Liberty,
Ranger shipmate and friend for life

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I grew up believing in heroes. For me, they were always pilots.

It began with U.S. Army Air Corps pilot, 2nd Lt. Robert G. Silva, my maternal grandmother's youngest offspring. Bob went missing on March 4, 1944, when his P-51-B Mustang—named *Hi-Yo Silva*, mimicking the Lone Ranger's command to his steed Silver on the popular radio show—dropped out of formation at 22,000 feet in a heavy overcast above the North Sea. His squadron—the 353rd Fighter Squadron of the 354th Fighter Group, which finished the war as the highest-scoring fighter squadron in the European theater, with 295 air victories—was returning to Boxted airfield in eastern England after escorting B-17 Flying Fortresses on the first daylight bombing raid over Berlin. The daring mission, involving hundreds of Allied bombers and fighters, marked a “turning point of the war,” according to the mission's bomber wing commander, Col. H. Griffin Mumford. Thereafter, bombing runs flew day and night over the heartland of Germany until that country's unconditional surrender seventeen months later. The March 4 mission, the subject of a six-column front-page headline in the *New York Times* (“800 U.S. Bombers Smash at Berlin by Day”), proved historic for another reason: with the loss of twenty-three fighters, “most due to the [bad] weather rather than the enemy,” it was to be the costliest day of the war for U.S. fighter squadrons in the skies over Europe.

Born the year after the war ended, I spent the fondest days of my youth at my grandmother Daisy's rambling and always welcoming Victorian home at 1522 Lincoln Avenue in tree-lined Alameda, California, a small island community in the San Francisco Bay next to Oakland. I was no more than eight or nine years old when I first opened a brown-striped suitcase kept in a closet in the middle bedroom, formerly my grandfather's room but after his death a place to keep trunks, boxes, and a treadle sewing machine at which my grandmother mended, shortened, and cuffed. The suitcase had been Bob's—used in his travels from home while he attended the College of the Pacific in Stockton, California, where he finished a civilian pilot training course before joining the Army Air Corps as an aviation cadet in the summer of 1942 at age twenty-two.

The old suitcase was a boy's treasure trove. Initially, what interested me the most was the pilot paraphernalia: leather-rimmed goggles, a helmet of soft leather with padded chamois lining, leather gloves, a silk scarf, silver aviator wings, and two padded boxes each containing a tiny, folded U.S. flag atop a shiny military decoration. One was the Purple Heart, given to any member of the military wounded or killed in action. The other was an Air Medal, awarded “for heroic or meritorious achievement while participating in aerial flight.” I was particularly taken with the design of the latter: the bronze medallion had a swooping eagle clutching a lightning bolt in each talon. Also in the suitcase was my uncle's pocket-size address book. Tucked inside the back flap was a stick of Dentyne gum, hard and no doubt unchewable. My grandmother always had a new pack of gum waiting for me whenever I arrived, and despite the many brands of gum in the world it was always Dentyne. I never knew why until that moment.

Throughout the years I would regularly slip into the middle bedroom and open the suitcase. In time, I read all the letters my grandmother kept inside—more than 100 of Bob's letters home from his earliest days in army flight training until his last letter written three days before his final mission. On the front of that envelope my grandmother wrote that she had received it on March 13, 1944, and added, “My last letter from my darling.”

March 1, 1944

Dear Mom—

Received two letters from you today—I'm happy again! I'm glad you're all so proud—but like I told you once before Mom—everything I am, or hope to be, I owe to you and Pop. Think Abe Lincoln said that once, regardless—I mean it too!

Another medal today to my credit—I now can wear the “Oak Leaf Cluster.” It's a little bronzed leaf you wear on your Air Medal, signifying you've earned the Air Medal a second time. Two more Oak Leaf Clusters to go, and then the D.F.C. (Distinguished Flying Cross), the highest aviation award there is. But that's wishful thinking—better not cross my bridges 'till I get to them.

Well, angel—late again—and expect another date in the clouds with Jerry tomorrow—so I'd better get some sleep.

All my love,
Bob

Three days after opening Bob's last letter my grandmother received the dreaded Western Union wire from Washington, D.C., expressing the secretary of war's “deep regret that your son has been reported missing in action.” That telegram, yellowed and wrinkled, was also in the suitcase. So was a typed letter from Bob's commanding officer, Col. Jack T. Bradley, dated April 12, 1944, in answer to a letter my grandmother wrote seeking further information about her missing son. “Bob was missing after a Berlin raid and was last seen as the squadron was climbing through the clouds near the French coast,” wrote Bradley, who would finish the war as one of the top P-51 aces, with fifteen confirmed aerial kills. “We ran into some terrible weather that day and feel sure that Bob lost control of his ship in the clouds, as did several others. We broke into the clear to find that he was no longer with us. We were at a very high altitude and Bob had a good chance of getting out safely, even under the worst circumstances. Therefore we are all hoping to hear that he is a prisoner of war. Several men who did not seem to have as good a chance of surviving as Bob did have been reported captured by the enemy. Bob's loss is greatly felt by the squadron. He has completed many successful missions against the enemy and has been awarded the Air Medal and Oak Leaf Cluster. His promotion to First Lieutenant came through only a few days after his last flight. The loss of a pilot with Bob's experience and ability is in itself telling, but more than that we miss Bob himself, as he was everyone's friend and never seemed to lose his cheerfulness. If we receive any information at all about Bob, we will forward it to you without delay.”

The hope given to the family by the commanding officer's letter dissipated when Bob was declared killed in action, although neither his body nor the wreckage of his aircraft was ever found. When the war ended, Bob's wingman, David B. O'Hara, visited my grandparents in Alameda and filled in some details about Bob's last flight. Bob had problems with his plane's oxygen system, which had sent him back to the airfield shortly after takeoff for a quick repair. Taking off a second time, he rejoined the aerial armada bound for Berlin. O'Hara thought Bob's oxygen problem might have recurred on the flight back to England as they crossed the North Sea at high altitude, causing him to lose consciousness. O'Hara saw Bob's plane “oscillating more-or-less in a pendulum motion from one side of the formation to the other,” then shoot upward “at least 100 feet and stall out.” Trying to stay with his wingman, O'Hara hit full throttle and yanked on the stick, resulting in a snap roll and spin.

When O'Hara regained control of his plane, Bob was gone.

~~My spirited and indomitable grandmother, who chased fire engines in her bright red 1952 Chevy coupe and at Christmas gave the best gifts under the tree, lived another forty years, to the venerable age of 101, but not once did I see her speak about her lost son without her eyes brimming with tears. In truth, it was not something I fully comprehended until I had my own children. Although my grandmother had three other children, including my mother, it was no secret that her youngest, Bob, whom she gave birth in the front bedroom twenty-four years before his death, was special. Relatives and family friends shared similar feelings about Bob, who in a short span went from winning swimming and boxing medals in high school to flying combat missions over Europe. His was, of course, a generation of young men who died before their time in faraway places. My grandmother belonged to the Gold Star Mothers Club, a support group begun in the waning days of World War I by the mother of an airman killed in France. She hung in the front window a rectangular banner with a single gold star signifying her loss. I remember us visiting the nearby home of her friend Violet Newhouse, who in her window had a banner with three gold stars. For my family, whose other menfolk returned from war unscathed, it began and ended with Bob. By all accounts he was our best, most likable, and most promising. Everyone could only speculate: what *would* Bob have done with his life? He was irreplaceable, and his loss unfathomable.~~

One day when I was in the fifth grade I created a fantasy about the uncle I never knew. It was one that I would secretly hold for years, and only reluctantly outgrow. The teacher, introducing the topic of world geography, passed out several books containing colorful maps. When one reached me, I found the page that showed the North Sea. With my fingertip I traced a line from Germany to England and saw where the North Sea narrowed between landmasses. On the map, it looked as if Bob could not have gone down very far from a coastline. If he had parachuted from his plane, could he have made it ashore? Had he managed to float or swim to England he would probably have been identified, but what if he had washed up on the coast of occupied Europe? I looked out the bank of windows lining one side of the classroom. Gazing at the sky dotted with white cotton-candy clouds, I daydreamed. What if Uncle Bob had parachuted safely and made it ashore? Suppose he was injured and unable to talk? What if he had amnesia and didn't remember his name? Suppose he had been picked up by friendly locals? Had he, without any memory of his past, settled in a small village after the war? I looked again at the map, studying the possibilities. It soon became clear what I must do. When I grew up, I would search for my lost uncle in France and elsewhere, showing people his picture. Somewhere, somehow, they would find him, and bring him home to my grandmother. Of course, I also very much wanted to find him for myself, so I could have the uncle I had never known.

One day not long afterward, I was on the playground of Dayton Elementary School during recess when a roar in the sky caused everyone to look up. A huge plane appeared overhead, lower than I had ever seen one fly. The pilot was visible in the cockpit. It seemed as if the plane would plunge into our schoolyard. As the deafening noise intensified, the nose suddenly came up and the aircraft passed above our heads. In no time there was a tremendous explosion, and a fireball rose from a nearby empty marsh.

The crash site was cordoned off by the police and then by the military for two days, as investigators and cleanup crews did their work. The local newspaper carried details of the incident. The plane was a two-engine air force C-119 Flying Boxcar with a pilot, a copilot, and three crewmen. The pilot was credited with guiding the cargo plane, which had lost an engine and was on fire, away from the school before crashing into a wide field near the eastern edge of San Francisco Bay. The heroic pilot and his crew died instantly.

At the first opportunity, I wandered through the field where the plane had crashed. Although no large pieces of wreckage remained, I was amazed at how many small metal, rubber, and nylon

fragments were strewn on the ground. I picked up several, finding some scorched and bent but others as smooth and perfect as the day they were made. A fear gnawed at me: what if I found part of a human body? I decided they must have taken all that away. I came back to the field many times after that, always taking a small piece of the crash home with me. Airmen had died, suddenly and violently here in a field where my friends and I played army with gas masks, helmets, and backpacks from a war surplus store. I thought about the pilot who had saved lives—my own included. Did his family miss him as much as mine missed Bob? Had he survived the war only to die in a field next to a school in peacetime? Still, I held on to my fervent hope that Bob had not come to a such a tragic end, but had somehow survived.

By the seventh grade, I had found my very own pilot living right next door. In the habitual absence of my father—a salesman who worked weekends and spent most nights drinking at a neighborhood bar until past my bedtime—and any other adult male relatives in my sphere, I followed around like a lost puppy one Richard “Dick” Templeton, a husky former U.S. Navy fighter pilot. After serving in World War II, he had stayed in the reserves; he flew one weekend a month at Alameda Naval Air Station. Like many reserve pilots, Dick got his monthly flight time in a twin-engine Beechcraft utility plane. One Saturday morning as he was leaving in uniform, Dick, a gregarious, full-of-the-devil type—one Halloween he came trick-or-treating to our door holding an empty martini glass—told me to be outside at high noon. Waiting expectantly, I heard the airplane before I saw it. Then, it buzzed over low, banking sharply. Round and round it circled overhead. Kids and adults alike on the block joined me in waving at the plane being flown by *my* pilot. I was overjoyed, and very proud. Dick had a great way of topping himself, and before long I was with him in that navy utility plane taking my first airplane ride, buzzing my house.

When I was thirteen Dick invited me to my first air show, to see a performance of the navy’s Blue Angels. A few days before the event, I purchased a model kit of a Blue Angels’ Grumman F-11 Tiger. After I had glued together all the pieces, it was time to affix the decals, which included “U.S. Navy” and white pinstripes. Because there were six Blue Angels, the kit contained decal numbers 1 through 6 to put on the tail. I chose 3.

When we arrived at the Oakland Airport on Doolittle Drive, named after another heroic pilot—General Jimmy Doolittle, born in Alameda, who won the Medal of Honor for leading the first U.S. bombing attack of Japan only four months after Pearl Harbor—Dick took me to the front of the crowd. We stopped at a rope that cordoned off an area for the parked aircraft. The six Blue Angels were lined up in a row, the sun glinting off their polished navy-blue fuselages. Behind the rope stood their pilots in matching blue flight suits.

“Hey, Herb!” Dick yelled.

One of the pilots turned, and said, “Dick! Come on over!”

Someone lifted the rope for us. The Blue Angels pilot named Herb, it turned out, was a navy buddy of Dick’s. The two men shook hands, and Dick introduced me. I looked up, wondering how Herb could fit inside a cockpit. He looked eight feet tall. A lieutenant’s gold double bars were pinned on a foldable khaki cap that sat smartly on his head, and he wore aviator dark glasses.

“You want to sit in the cockpit?” Herb asked me.

I answered quickly before he could change his mind, and he led us down the row of planes. We stopped at the one that had his name painted under the open canopy: “Herb Hunter LT. USN.” On the tail was number 3.

A new pilot was now in my life, and I read stories, wherever I found them, about the Blue Angels always looking for a picture of number 3—which of course became my lucky number—and any reference to Herb Hunter, who flew with the navy’s elite demonstration team for three seasons (1957-1959).²

I joined the navy reserve while still in high school so I could go out to Alameda Naval Air Station for monthly drills and be around airplanes. After a restless year in college, I volunteered for two years of active duty. That is what brought me in June 1965 to the aircraft carrier *Ranger* (CVA-61). And while I was serving aboard ship as a weatherman (aerographer's mate)—taking observation plotting maps, and launching weather balloons—another pilot came into my life.

Things started off badly for *Ranger* pilot Lieutenant (j.g.) Dieter Dengler, however. He was shot down over Laos; there was a violent crash in the jungle; the wreckage of his plane was found deep in enemy territory but there was no sign of his whereabouts. For long months we heard nothing of him. We well knew that aviators could be lost just that way: falling to the ground or sea, never to be seen or found; no corpse; gone forever; only distant memories for those who knew them. Emotionally, those unfulfilled hopes of finding my lost uncle had followed me to the fleet. And in 1966 off the steamy coast of North Vietnam, there were many pilots who went missing. Most, like Uncle Bob, did not return.

The fate of Dieter Dengler, however, was to be different. Already a legend in the navy for his escape and evasion skills—amply demonstrated during training in the California desert—he would initiate, plan, and lead an organized escape from a POW camp, becoming the longest-held American to escape captivity during the Vietnam War. Caught in a desperate situation, imprisoned not only by the enemy but by the jungle itself, Dengler was impelled not only to get himself out but to help free the other POWs—American, Thai, and Chinese—some of whom had been held for years.

In a surreal scene of brotherhood and celebration, Dengler returned to *Ranger* six months after being shot down—emaciated, ravaged with several tropical illnesses but very much alive and joyous to be so—only two weeks before we were due to leave the Gulf of Tonkin and return home.



The author aboard *Ranger* off the coast of North Vietnam in the Gulf of Tonkin, 1966. *Family photograph.*

True, Dieter Dengler was but one lost pilot and hero found. Yet for his fellow fliers and shipmates, and for me personally, his story of unending optimism, innate courage, loyalty, and survival against overwhelming odds remains our best and brightest memory of our generation's war.

“BORN A GYPSY”

WARTIME GERMANY

On February 22, 1944, in the Black Forest village of Wildberg, a small peaceful town nestled between rolling green farmlands and wooded mountains, an SS officer in a dove-gray uniform arrived at the home of the widow Maria Dengler and her three young sons. When she came to the door, the officer told her that the fatherland was confiscating her late husband’s bookbinding machinery. Metal was so scarce in Germany that residents had been ordered, “under penalty of death,” to remove and turn in all brass door hinges, which were to be melted down into shell casings for ammunition.

“You must not take the machines,” Maria protested. “One of the children might become a bookbinder.”

“I have my orders. A truck will be here in the morning.”

Maria said she would be speaking to Wildberg’s mayor about the matter. A local *Bürgermeister* or mayor, held such authority over his township and its residents that the SS officer seemed unsure what to do or say next.

At that moment, the town’s air raid siren went off.

“We have to get out!” Maria yelled to her sons.

“Don’t worry,” said the SS man. “They don’t bomb small villages.”



Wildberg, Germany, in the 1930s. *Family photograph.*

“We’re leaving,” said Maria, gathering her boys to her side.

The oldest, Klaus, eight, serious-minded and a loner, showed a bent for academics and music.

Dieter, six, a tousled-haired rebel, was always into so much mischief that Maria worried her middle son was “born a Gypsy.” The youngest, Martin, four, was a good-natured boy who idolized Dieter and tagged after him.

Maria and her sons ran from the house. She prayed she was doing the right thing to keep them safe, as she had promised Reinhold on his last leave home before he returned to the Russian front. As the drone overhead grew deafening, they ran past the butcher shop and across a narrow bridge, then disappeared into the long shadows of pines and firs. For some time now she had been taking the boys into the dark forest to show them how to survive in case they were ever homeless and on their own. She taught them which wild berries to pick and which mushrooms were safe to eat, how to pick stinging nettles that could be boiled, and how to burrow into the ground at night and cover themselves with branches and leaves for protection from the elements.

The formation of planes appeared as countless black dots stretching from one horizon to the other. Such massive overflights were on the increase as Allied air power hammered Stuttgart, an important German industrial center thirty miles away. Although up to now Wildberg had been spared, sometimes at night distant fires burned so intensely that it was bright enough on the village’s unlighted streets to read a newspaper. Today, for the first time, a flight of heavy bombers dropped out of formation and circled overhead.

As the siren wailed, bombs began dropping on the small village which had on its outskirts a glider school where new Luftwaffe pilots were trained.

Maria Schnuerle and Reinhold Dengler, ages twenty-eight and thirty-one respectively, were married in 1936. Shy and religious, Maria, the daughter of a baker in Calw—ten miles north of Wildberg—had never been courted. Reinhold, however, had “an eye on her for a long time,” as Maria was a member of her church choir, which occasionally visited Wildberg, where he sang in the local choir.

For years, Reinhold had been unable to look for a wife. His father had died when Reinhold, the oldest of four children, was sixteen. On his deathbed, the father asked Reinhold to support his two sisters and brother until they were on their own. That time had arrived—with one sister married, another a schoolteacher, and his brother having completed training as a notary.

One spring day after the church choir from Calw sang in Wildberg, local families were asked to take a visiting choir member home for lunch. To Reinhold’s delight, the Denglers hosted the rosy-cheeked blonde he had eyed: Maria, the baker’s daughter. After lunch, Reinhold and Maria went for a walk. Along a meandering trail through woods carpeted with wildflowers, he showed off his impressive skills as a gymnast with handstands and backflips.

“Maria Schnuerle, I have something for you,” he announced. “This is the first present I can give you.”

He pressed into her hand several bright blue forget-me-nots.

An embarrassed Maria smiled, although she wondered if the dashing Reinhold Dengler “talked to all the girls” in such a pleasing manner.

Reinhold was a man of many talents. He had taught himself the bookbinding business and photography, and he was also a skilled artist who created detailed landscapes in pencil and water colors. He was admired by those who knew him for his kindness, creativity, and devotion to family.

The couple made a plan to meet midway between Calw and Wildberg the following Sunday. They both bicycled to the rendezvous, and after pedaling for a couple of miles they left their bikes inside a small factory and walked along a well-worn path. That afternoon they encountered numerous passersby, most of whom greeted Reinhold warmly. Maria was struck by how many people knew her

suitor and how well liked he seemed to be.

After a while, Reinhold said, "Maria, I have to say something to you."

"What is it, Reinhold?"

"I want you to be my wife."

Surprised and overwhelmed, Maria did not immediately respond.

Reinhold was undeterred. "When you get home, I want you to tell your mother and father about our walk today. Tell them that I would like to meet them next Friday. I will come to your house."

When Maria delivered the message, her father was outraged. "Who the hell does he think he is, coming into the family like that?" He sat down and wrote a stern letter to Reinhold, rejecting the idea of a family visit.

Hermann Schnuerle the baker was a famously stubborn and principled man. Although he was a member of Calw's town council, he had refused to vote in the 1934 plebiscite that served as a referendum for Adolf Hitler. Nationwide, 95 percent of all registered voters had gone to the polls, and 90 percent of them had approved of Hitler becoming the *Führer*. The baker's wife and others beseeched Hermann to go to the town hall and at least give the appearance of voting. He refused, explaining that he believed Germany was headed in the wrong direction and that Hitler was not the man to lead it. Later that day a group of men came for Hermann, telling him to accompany them to the town hall. After they rounded the first corner they tied his hands and hung around his neck a placard declaring him to be a traitor. Marched through town in a solemn parade, Hermann was cursed and spat upon by some of the same people who came to his shop every morning for his fresh bread. Many thought the baker would simply disappear. Instead, he was sent for more than a year to a "rock refinery where they cut rocks." When he returned home to his family and baking business, he was steeled rather than broken by the ordeal.

When Hermann read his letter to Maria and her mother, Maria said, "Now I have something to tell you. Reinhold was sixteen when his father died and he had to support his family. He is thirty-one now. Many people know him. He is liked and admired. He is a good man and a hard worker. He is a bookbinder and photographer, and people from as far away as Hamburg hire him."

Her father tore up the letter and wrote a new one, telling Reinhold Dengler, "Since I only hear wonderful things about you we are looking forward to meeting you next Friday." Reinhold made his visit, and won over Maria's family: not only her father, but also her mother and siblings, including her brothers, Harold and Theo. Maria and Reinhold's wedding soon followed.

Three years later, in 1939, Reinhold was drafted into the German army and went away for a year. When he came home on leave, he told Maria he was in charge of a library in Poland, and for her not to worry, as he was out of danger. "I'm not fighting," he explained, "and nobody bothers me." But as the war continued and the situation grew more desperate, Reinhold did become involved in the fighting. When he returned home in the summer of 1943 on his last leave, Reinhold told Maria that Germany was losing the war. She was shocked, since the only news the civilian population received told of great victories for Germany and crushing defeats for the Allies. "I may not be back," he said frankly. Reinhold made out his will. Expecting difficult times ahead—including food shortages—he implored Maria not to "tie the boys to her apron" but rather to teach them self-sufficiency. Near the end of his leave, he told Maria, "Let's take a picture. It will probably be the last one we have of us." That winter Reinhold's prophecy came true when the Soviet Union recaptured Kiev in the Ukraine and pushed the Germans into retreat. Reinhold was killed when his bunker was hit by an exploding grenade. He was thirty-eight years old.



Reinhold Dengler. *Family photograph*

After receiving notification of Reinhold's death, Maria proclaimed her life "now in God's hands." She kept her pledge to Reinhold to show their sons how to survive on their own, but she believed that whatever happened to her and the boys was preordained by God. In an opposite reaction, Maria's brother Theo, who had come to love Reinhold like his own brother, threw away his Bible because "there cannot be a God if a man like Reinhold is killed."

The war came to Wildberg not long afterward. At the precise moment it arrived, Dieter and Martin were at home, peering out a third-story window. A single-engine fighter with a big white star on its fuselage swept so low and so close to the house that the boys could see the pilot in the cockpit. The canopy was open, and they clearly saw the pilot's goggles atop his head and the white scarf around his neck. The plane roared past, aiming for the train station down the hill, its loud guns spitting out yellow flashes. The aircraft then pulled up abruptly in a steep climbing turn, and was gone as quickly as it had appeared.

For Dieter, the close encounter would be unforgettable and life altering. He had never seen anything so exciting. Not at all fearful, he had been mesmerized by the flying machine that soared above the earth with the freedom of a bird. Years later he would describe it as "like an Almighty Being that came out of the sky." He decided then and there that he would grow up to fly a plane just like that one. From then on, he later explained, "little Dieter needed to fly."

Attacking Allied planes would return on other days, making quick low passes over the town's train station. Railroad workers learned to keep only the older locomotives on the tracks, while parking the newer rolling stock inside a nearby tunnel. The children came to regard the flyovers more as amusement than as danger, for they lasted such a short time and inflicted no casualties or damage on homes and shops. Before the smoke and dust cleared, older boys would be eagerly running along the railroad tracks picking up spent bullets, and, if they were really lucky, "an entire cartridge belt to wear proudly."

For the youth of Wildberg, their enjoyment would be short-lived.

Maria and her sons neared the top of a steep hill when the "ground erupted." Never before had they heard the high-pitched whistling sound of bombs dropping or the "deafening booms from their explosions." They scrambled under the cover of old, fallen timber, and hugged the ground. Covering

their ears, they prayed as the earth shook beneath them.

~~They did not emerge until after the bombers were gone. When they did they looked anxiously in the direction of Wildberg but could not make out anything through the dense foliage. All around them was silence, not even the chirping of a sparrow. On their way back they met a group of armed men with leashed German shepherds. They said they were looking for an enemy pilot who had landed nearby in a parachute, and asked Maria if she had seen anyone. Maria said no, and hurried on with her boys.~~

As Maria and her sons left the woods, they entered a sunlit meadow where they came upon a stunned villager standing with two tethered cows.

“Everything is gone,” said the woman. “Everything.”

At the outskirts of Wildberg, the first dead bodies they saw were those of horses and cows lying stiffly on their sides or backs. The heat and smoke grew intense as they entered town. Many structures were flattened and in cinders; others were ablaze, including the shoe repair shop, which filled the air with the pungent smell of burning leather. Wildberg’s seventeenth-century castle had burned to the ground, and the village church and school were also destroyed, as were rows of houses and shops.

Maria and her sons realized with horror that the debris on the ground included arms, legs, heads and other human body parts. They dared not look closely for fear of recognizing the remains of friends and neighbors.

Turning a corner, they were surprised to see in the distance that their home was still standing, although the houses on either side were gone.

Their next-door neighbor Mrs. Bohler had been visiting a friend in the hospital when the bombs fell. She had hurried home to find her husband and nine children dead. Her husband—still with binoculars around his neck—and the children had been outside watching the planes fly over.

As they came closer, Maria saw that the wooden frame of their house was intact but most of the plaster walls were gone. Pieces of their tile roof lay across the street. Although the house was uninhabitable, Maria declared it “God’s gift” that there was no fire. Unlike many residents, who had lost their worldly goods, the Denglers were able to recover most of their belongings, although everything had “a million pieces of glass in it.” White-hot shrapnel had ripped through the house, singeing fist-size holes in furnishings and clothing. Digging through the rubble, the three boys dropped down into the pitch-black cellar and retrieved most of the remaining canned goods their mother had put up.

Looting had begun, with townsfolk who had lost their homes and belongings scavenging through wrecked and deserted structures whose owners were gone, taking food, clothing, blankets, tools, and utensils.

Finding a working phone, Maria called her parents. Upon hearing that their home and most of Wildberg had been destroyed, her mother said, “You and the boys are welcome here.” A plan was made for Maria’s brother Theo, who was home from the army on medical leave, to come to Wildberg to help with the move to Calw. The next day, Theo showed up in a horse-drawn wagon.

The Schnuerles were already feeding and housing more than a dozen relatives and friends, including several Jews, such as Mrs. Hess, who was fearful of being “resettled” after her Swiss husband was drafted into the army. Although Hermann and his family did not suspect the ghastliness of Hitler’s Jewish plan, they knew that Jews in Calw—such as the butcher, who had owned his own shop that was now boarded up—had disappeared. Having once been forcibly taken from his own home, Hermann did not hesitate to help others.



Maria Dengler with her three sons, 1942. Right to left: Dieter, Martin, and Klaus. *Family photograph*

A year passed, and before all the wildflowers of the Black Forest bloomed that final spring of the Third Reich, the war in Europe was over. The German economy went into free fall. With store shelves empty, hungry people canvassed the countryside, going from farm to farm trading their silver, Persian carpets, and other heirlooms for eggs, milk, and potatoes.

For many German civilians—mostly women, children, and the elderly, as men between eighteen and fifty years old were scarce—the Allies’ occupation of their homeland meant a fight for survival far worse than any they had endured during the war years. The next two winters were bitterly cold. With so many houses damaged or destroyed, there was inadequate shelter, and there were shortages of coal and food. Many people starved or froze to death.

Under the Allies’ division of occupied Germany, the southwest corner of the defeated country—where Calw was located—was in the French zone. It was not long before the residents of Calw met their occupiers: the rugged Moroccan Goumiers, who carried long daggers in their belts and were frightening in appearance and by reputation. In the final weeks of the war, the Moroccans had breached the fortified Siegfried Line and fought their way through the Black Forest all the way to the Austrian border. They specialized in night raids and were also used to man the front lines in mountainous and other rough terrain. With the spoils of war in mind, these wild and fearless combat veterans arrived in Calw “like a conquering army.”

Young Dieter would never forget the first time he saw the Moroccans. He was standing at his mother’s side in his grandfather’s bakery, “wide-eyed and scared,” when three of the hardened fighters, wearing turbans and striped cloaks, entered with axes and commenced to smash open storage bins, cabinets, and closets, taking anything they fancied. When they left, his grandfather hurried everyone into the cellar where he stored potatoes and made cider. They sat silently on crates and barrels stacked against earthen walls, the only light coming from a single candle. Suddenly, the door flew open and several Moroccans rushed inside. Looking over the huddled group, they chose Maria’s younger sister and another woman hiding with the family, and hauled them away, leaving Maria with her three boys clinging to her. In a while the two women returned to the cellar, weeping but saying nothing about their ordeal.

A postwar routine soon descended over Calw and its 20,000 residents. A contingent of Moroccans moved into an empty schoolhouse next to Hermann’s bakery. The soldiers required the local women

do their laundry, and Hermann was forced to bake for the occupiers, who supplied him with the necessary ingredients that for a time were difficult to obtain. Hermann, whose ancestors had been bakers since 1620, managed to skim some yeast, flour, and butter for his own baking.

Once a week, Maria bicycled into the countryside to trade small packets of yeast to farmers for food and produce. This type of private bartering with farmers was forbidden by new statutes put in place by the occupational forces. Maria, however, felt she had no choice; the family had to eat. Occasionally, she returned with an old, bony hen killed because it had stopped laying eggs. From the scrawny carcass she made a thin gruel that lasted for days.

Maria's two younger sons joined in the hunt for food, while the oldest, studious Klaus, was content to stay home with his books or practice the violin, which he would play for so many hours that his chafed neck would bleed. When it was apple season, Dieter and Martin rose before dawn. Although the new laws made it a serious offense to pick fruit from someone else's trees, it was permissible to take anything on the ground that rolled onto public property. By sleight of hand, the boys made sure some fruit went "rolling down the street." They also went into the woods to pick wild berries and mushrooms. Whenever they returned with food, they would be followed next time by "a herd of people" they would try to lose in the forest. "Martin, you go left and I'll go right," Dieter would order. "We'll meet where we found the berries."

Dieter curried favor with the Moroccans by delivering their laundry and running other errands. When the soldiers lined up for noontime chow, Dieter would squeeze through the smelly, jabbering foreigners and hold out an empty container toward the man with the ladle, who filled whatever was placed in front of him. Dieter took the soup home; his mother thinned it in order to feed more people. Once in a while she had a fresh egg to add—one egg stirred in the pot for a dozen people, and a treat for all.

Dieter watched whenever the Moroccans brought in sheep from the fields for slaughter. They first struck a bayonet in the sheep's throat, and after it slowly bled to death they beat the carcass with sticks prior to skinning it. They then cut up the carcass, throwing the heart, liver, and entrails into the bushes. Instantly, there would be kids coming out from all directions scrambling for the scraps. Whether the prizes were won by speed or fisticuffs, Dieter usually ended up with something, which he took home to his mother to cook. She also cooked wallpaper Dieter tore from bombed buildings, for the "nutrients in the glue."

As Dieter became an inventive scrounger, he found himself in trouble much of the time—for stealing, trespassing, truancy, fighting, and missing curfew. Growing into the Gypsy that his mother had feared, Dieter was "the most difficult" of her three boys. To punish him, she struck his backside with a rubber hose. Dieter took the blows stoically from the mother he loved, but he could not always find it in him to behave.

Gradually, conditions improved as the Marshall Plan went into effect. Each morning the children were lined up and given a cup of watery hot chocolate and a slice of bread, and once a week they were given a Hershey bar. The first time links of sausage reappeared in a butcher shop display window, Dieter stopped and stared. So did other passersby, although few could afford to buy any. For two years, until surplus clothing was distributed, Dieter wore the same pair of shorts his mother made from an old flag, and—when not barefoot—shoes with holes in the sole. "Cold and hungry" is how he would recall those years, his "first lesson in survival."

If those years in postwar Germany were about surviving, Dieter also flourished. He was the first boy in the neighborhood to have his own bicycle, which he built himself. He found the frame at the dump, bartered for one tire here and another there, and fashioned a seat out of a small pillow. During those years Dieter became a leader, too. It was a role that came naturally from his being capable and enterprising, as well as tough and never backing down. His brother Martin recognized that although

Dieter was not always the most skilled fighter, he would “never give up or be defeated.” By his early teens, Dieter was “always the leader,” and had his own gang—one of two in Calw, each with more than 100 members. The gangs fought to defend their turf, divided by the Nagold River that ran through town. To his followers, including Martin, Dieter, fiercely loyal to friends, was “the hero of Calw” with “nothing getting past him.” To Martin, Dieter “ran the town” and was “a hero to a lot of kids.”

Martin wanted to grow up to “drive railroad trains,” but he was selected at age five to become a baker and take over his grandfather’s shop one day. As for Dieter, Maria signed him up at age fourteen, following four years of middle school and after he flunked the entrance test for high school for an apprenticeship to a blacksmith and tool and die maker known as a stern taskmaster. She felt her middle son would benefit from a strong male figure in his life.

The blacksmith, Mr. Perrot, was not only strong but cruel as well. With “calloused hands that were accustomed to forging metal on an anvil” all day, he beat Dieter and the dozen other boys under his tutelage—sometimes bare-fisted, at other times with a metal rod across the back. Six days a week from morning till dark they labored, building gigantic clocks and faceplates for cathedrals across Germany. The boys did so mostly for the experience, as they received only the equivalent of \$2 a month. Dieter worked some nights in a butcher shop, his only remuneration being the quantities of smoked bratwurst he could stuff down while working, and a bag of sausage ends to take home to his mother.

When Dieter was sixteen, an American bookmobile came to town. Browsing through a flying magazine, Dieter spotted an advertisement with a young man wearing wings on his chest standing next to a new airplane. Dieter’s dream of flying had not diminished over the years, and the picture struck a chord. The ad read: “We Need Men to Fly These Planes.” There was a coupon to tear out and send in, which Dieter did. It came back with information about how the U.S. military was training young men to fly. With both military and civilian aviation all but nonexistent in postwar Germany, Dieter decided the only way he could become a pilot was to go to America.

Not long afterward, when an in-law from New Jersey arrived for a visit, Dieter found a way to sit next to her at a banquet in her honor. In spite of being “interrupted a hundred times by everyone wanting to impress her or looking for a handout,” he managed to tell her, in his fractured English (English was taught in German schools after the war), of his hope to come to America to fly planes. Taken with the charming youth with big ideas, Aunt Clara, a fortyish widow who had been married to the brother of Dieter’s grandmother, volunteered to be his official sponsor. She suggested he work on improving his English. Also, he would have to pay for his steamship ticket. At the time, the lowest-class one-way fare to New York was \$520—a fortune to Dieter.

It wasn’t long before Dieter had a plan. Scrap metal was in short supply and brought a good price. He became a round-the-clock scavenger, collecting brass, lead, and other valuable metals wherever he found them. The blacksmith had a collection of old brass wheels in the attic of his shop and didn’t seem to miss an occasional one. When Mr. Perrot wasn’t looking, Dieter would toss a wheel into the river that ran next to the shop, then retrieve it late at night by wading in knee-deep water and feeling around for the treasure. He found the roofline of churches a good source of ornamental brass, which he snipped away under the cover of darkness. The phone company was laying lead-coated underground cable throughout the area; he’d sneak into a supply yard at night and unroll a portion that wouldn’t be missed. Most of the pilfered materials he sold to an unscrupulous dealer in another village. For the first time in his life, Dieter made real money, and saved it for his steamship fare. Taking Aunt Clara’s advice, he found an old soldier, a retired *Wehrmacht* general, willing to tutor him in English.

When he turned eighteen, Dieter received in the mail information about gaining entry to the United States, and was given a date to appear for an interview at the American consulate in Munich, 150 miles away. Wearing an old double-breasted suit of his grandfather’s, Dieter set out hitchhiking

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