

The man in black fired shots to the right of the wall. Instantly, a volley of shots came back at him. Now that he knew where the enemy was, he fired to the left of the wall. Shots were fired back, hitting him in the arm. He was blown backwards by the impact of the bullets, and a hot, sticky substance oozed down his arm, into his fingers. He heard shouts of elation from a couple of yards away. Then, a gun fired and more pain instantly overtook his body. *Let it be over. Please, let it be over.* He struggled to the wall and leaned up against the now bloodstained brick. The world went black.

Steve Jennings walked to school with his friend Brian.

"I'm going to join the army!" Brian exclaimed and swung his arms around.

Steve laughed, his dark eyes shone with inner mirth and he swung his broad and muscular shoulders when he walked. "How long do you think you would last?" he asked his short and skinny counterpart.

"I don't know, maybe a few months. I'm really weak. You could join, though."

"Anything to serve the country. The country that fired my dad from his job. The country that closed down the local schools. I'd love to pay them back."

A couple of days later, however, there was a knock at the Jennings door. When Steve opened it, he found himself face-to-face with a draft officer.

"I'm 'fraid you'll have to come with us." The tall one said. He was skinny as a stick with long arms and legs as high as stilts.

"Why? Who are you? Why do you want me?"

"Boy, don't you recognize me? You're joining the army."

By this time, Steve's parents had come to the door.

"No," Steve's mother Martha whispered. Tears slowly trailed down her long, wrinkled nose and chin. "You can't take him. I've heard o what happens to those children. Jenny's boy joined the army. When he came back, he was in a coffin. Said both his legs were blown off and he bled to death. No. No! NO!" She screamed this last word.

"Quiet woman, we have permission." The officer procured an official document from his pocket and showed it to her. She began crying even harder.

Steve's father looked lost for words. He put a trembling arm around his wife. His face was pale. He managed to choke out the word, "Please."

Steve felt so many emotions that he couldn't tell exactly what he was feeling. There was just a bottomless pit in his stomach.

*Yes! Adventure! No! I'll die! I can get away from this boring town and be a traumatized hero!*

The man grabbed his hand and tugged. Steve struggled to remove his hand from the man's grip. The officer took him again, and this time his grip was much tighter. He pulled Steve with surprising strength. Once they were out the front door, he let go of Steve and shoved the subdued boy to the car. They drove to the draft center. The man behind the counter jammed a pen into his hand and thrust a piece of paper at him.

"Name, age, date of birth, and occupation," he said.

*Great, now I'm part of the team of death.*

One week later, he was transported to the Yorkshire Air Force base to take flying lessons.

Steve experienced not one iota of relief that night. His thoughts remained solely with his parents, and he had a hard rock in his stomach. He decided to take a short walk around the center. When he thought about or saw anything that even vaguely reminded him of the life he could be living, tears came to his eyes. As the sun rose over the horizon, Steve lay back down and shut his eyes for some well deserved rest.

The next few days were torture. Steve was assigned to the air force and soon after began his training. He was last in his class and could not keep up with his more talented classmates. In addition, it did not help that he was being plagued with thoughts about home.

A few weeks later, Steve was taking his flying final, and his teacher, a pudgy little man by the name of Mr. Ferguson was screaming instructions at him.

"Boy, you need to work hard. Pull that lever when you want to land. No, not yet! God save us both. No, not that button! We're taking off again!"

When Steve finally landed, he felt elated and a little queasy at the result.

He had passed. He was officially a fighter pilot.

Five days before the battle, he was strolling down the boardwalk. He saw a commander sitting on a bench. After properly saluting him, he asked him about their first time in action.

"Not for a couple of weeks. Be patient, it'll come, and before you know it, it'll be over," he said.

"Oh, I can't wait!" Steve replied enthusiastically.

"You seem excited," the commander peered over the top of his glasses. "I like you. You know what? I'm going to get you in early."

Steve saluted and walked off with a squeamish sensation. The next morning, he was immediately summoned to the base.

"Steve, I have good news..." a young, ginger commander told him.

When Steve exited the base, he had a brand new badge pinned to his chest.

That afternoon, a legion of planes flew by and the ground erupted. The sirens sounded as absolute pandemonium broke loose. Steve followed a group of men with a badge similar to his pinned on their chest.

Inside, he saw the commander. He had a frown on his face, a frown that was not there that morning. He then spoke three words. Three words that would change his life. Three words that he would never forget. Three words that every soldier wants to hear. Three words that every soldier dreads.

"Prepare for battle!"

He began assembling them into planes. Steve was placed with a tall, lanky brown-haired man named John and a short, plump man named James.

"All righty-o?" John greeted him jovially. James merely tousled his hair with a humorous glint in his eye as the building shook.

"We'd better hurry up," James said as he and John hurried up the steps onto the plane with Steve in hot pursuit. As Steve attempted to climb to the plane, John pulled a lever that made the staircase fold upwards, sending Steve flying into the plane. Steve rubbed his head as John and James roared with mirth.

"Let's just go," Steve muttered. His face was flushed and he was rubbing a new bump which had recently erupted on his head.

Over the next hour, they flew to Germany and shot down many of their planes.. Suddenly, a huge explosion rocked them. Steve looked behind and saw a plane with a swastika on its tail flying directly behind them.

"Fire back!" he shouted at John. John glanced at him and fired a volley of shots. Yet another explosion soon rocked them. The plane lurched forward, and soon spiraled downwards.

"Evacuate the plane!" Steve yelled to Bill and Bob. Together, the three of them put on their parachutes and leapt off the plummeting, flaming plane. Below them, Steve could just about

make out the sounds of a battle. He caught sight of John landing on the ground and immediately getting caught in crossfire. James was stabbed in the back by a young man in green. When Steve landed, his thoughts immediately drifted to his mother.

“Oh mother,” he muttered. “If I die tonight, just know that I love you.” He thought of all the arguments they had had, and of all the hurtful things he had said to her. He wished he could take them back. Tears came to his eyes at the thought that he may not ever see her again.

*Oh mother, always taking care of me. Always sacrificing for me. Doing everything for me. Oh dear mother, I love you.*

A huge explosion brought Steve back to his senses. He looked wildly around, not sure exactly what to do. It had all seemed so easy in practice, but now that he was in the real thing, his brain was drawing a blank. A shot grazed the top of his head. He shot back in the general vicinity. When another shot came back, he realized that the shooter was a young German. He flipped his black hair and sprinted towards Steve. Steve ran away with the German hot in pursuit. They soon reached a more deserted area at the outskirts of the battle. They soon reached a more deserted area at the outskirts of the battle. The German leapt behind a wall and fired a volley of shots back at him. He leaned over the now bloodstained brick. The world went black.

As the sun set over the horizon, Steve Jennings fell forward and never rose. The expression on his face was one of a man who loved life to the extent of being scared of death.

Death had come prematurely to one who was too young to accept its inevitability. But that is the tragedy of war.