



2009.04.01

In Memoriam: John T. Hassett, Jr., KIA, 4 April 1945.

Documents and introduction provided by John A. (“Jack”) Sherzer, Ann Arbor, MI (ksherzer@aol.com)

Three of the documents that follow relate to my cousin John T. Hassett, Jr., a Flight Officer in the Army Air Force during the Second World War. The first is a letter that John wrote to my brother, Bill. The second is an announcement that appeared in the *Sault Ste. Marie Evening News*. The third is a letter to John's mother (my aunt) from his commanding officer. The fourth item is the well-known sonnet, “High Flight,” written during the war by John G. Magee, who, like my cousin, died too young, having “slipped the surly bonds of Earth.”

Apart from (italicized) emendations of a couple typos, I have retained the orthography and punctuation of the originals. —Ed.

* * *

Jan. 18th, 44

Dear Bill:

We're snowbound—ships, barracks, all covered snow white. The Yankees have gone mad with delight. Ah! Atonement at long last for having to live in this heathen land. Once more we will show the Rebels. And so once more we will fight the Civil War. This time with snowballs.

The ships I am flying now Bill, are almost the real thing. A few more months, if luck holds, and they will be. Night flying, echelon or formation flying we pick up here. The latter is done by contact, night flying all instruments, *of course*. The gadgets are ingenious beyond belief. One, the artificial horizon, is a miniture ship suspended in a case which gives you the attitude of the ship—whether climbing, diving, banked or otherwise. Remarkable little thing when you see it operate.

Germanity ingunity. This, our new oxygen regulator—all taken from downed Nazi planes. At least *they're* frank about it and tell us where they get such things.

I was up, in and above the clouds again today. If ever you are given the opertunity *of* doing this, don't pass it up Bill. For to me it is the most thrilling experience I have ever had, and no matter how many times I do it, it still seems so. Going through is like walking in a fog—ghostly. Bursting into the quiet sunshine above and seeing below tumbling snow white formations assuming shapes of whatever your imagination will conjecture—waterfalls, water cascading from tremendous heights without a sound, halls of marble, a million things I couldn't attempt to describe is really unforgettable. Sometimes one of those soft, summer afternoon, cumulus clouds will split and diving between is like threading your way through a sea of icebergs.

I have a final in Radio Communications and aircraft instruments tomorrow so excuse me if I cut this short with:

Write Soon
John Jr.

* * *

Sault Ste. Marie Evening News (18 April 1945)

Flight Officer Hassett Is Killed Over Germany



Flight Officer John Thomas Hassett, 22, son of Mr. and Mrs. John T. Hassett, of 812 Swinton street, was killed in action over Germany on April 4, 1945, his parents learned yesterday in a telegram from the War Department.

F/O Hassett enlisted in the Air Corps in 1941, while attending the University of Michigan, and following his basic training at Curtis Field, Brady, Texas, won his wings at Altus Army Air Field, Altus, Okla., on May 23, 1944.

When his parents last heard from him, he was in France. He was a twin-engine bomber pilot.

He leaves, besides his parents, a brother, Gerald, at home, and two sisters, Mrs. Harold (Lillian) Wieneke and Mrs. Ralph (Eileen) Potter.

HASSETT

* * *

HEADQUARTERS
1ST PATHFINDER SQUADRON (M), PROVISIONAL. AAF.
APO 140, % PM, N.Y.C.

1 May 1945

Mrs. Phoebe M. Hassett
812 Swinton St.,
Sault Ste. Marie, Mich.

Dear Mrs. Hassett:

By this time, you have no doubt received notification that your son, Flight Officer John T. Hassett, Jr., T-127178, has been killed in action on an operational mission over Germany.

May I take this opportunity to convey my profound sympathies and those of the men in the squadron at this time of great sorrow.

Your son, who joined us on 4 March 1945, was highly respected as a Pilot whose ability always produced superior results. In the short time that we had him with us, he made many friends who, as I do, feel not only the loss of a comrade and friend, but a Pilot whose capabilities and valuable suggestions contributed to this great effort in which we are all engaged. I assure you that our loss was not in vain.

On the 4th of April, the aircraft and crew, of which your son was Co-Pilot was dispatched to lead a group of aircraft to the target, which was an effective enemy installation in Central Germany. On the way back, the aircraft developed engine trouble and the Pilot, 1st Lt. William [...], prepared for an emergency landing. The aircraft lost altitude steadily and finally came out of a cloud bank at 750 feet. They were over a sparsely wooded area. Under the circumstances a crash was unavoidable. Three crew members survived the crash. Two of them sustained serious injuries, and one, Sgt. William [...] (Radio Operator Gunner) [...] escaped injury. The Navigator, F/O Robert [...], is recovering and will soon return to duty. The Engineer, Sgt. Bernard [...], is now in England. Lt. [...] (Pilot) and M/Sgt. Herbert [...], (Armorer-Gunner) died instantly. 2nd Lt. Jerome [...], (Bombardier) died shortly after the crash before help arrived, without regaining consciousness.

After the crash, Sgt. [...] did what he could to make his injured crew members comfortable and started off to get help. Although suffering greatly from shock, he carried on until he met some German civilians, who directed him to the Autobahn (Super-Highway). He took one of the civilians with him and when they reached the highway, they stopped a convoy, which, luckily, had an ambulance and some nurses. They returned to the scene of the crash and removed the crew to a hospital not very far away.

At the present time, I regret that I am unable to state where the place of burial is, but I will notify you as soon as possible.

Your son had completed nine (9) missions against the enemy. The results of his ability were always excellent. You have every reason to be proud of him. He was always ready to cooperate and give assistance whenever needed. His gentlemanly manner and pleasant nature endeared his comrades to him.

I remember hearing him say while being interviewed one day, "No, I'm not married my mother is my girl." A short time ago we received recommendations for his appointment to 2nd Lt. in the Army of the United States. He had been recommended for the Air Medal.

F/O Hassett's personal effects will be forwarded to you through the Effects Quartermaster at Kansas City, Missouri.

I feel that you may be able to find some solace in corresponding with some of the families of the other crew members, and I am listing the addresses of the next of kin, as follows:

2nd Lt. Jerome [...]
 Leonia, New Jersey
 1st Lt. William [...]
 San Diego, Cal.
 [...], Herbert [...] (Armorer-Gunner) [...]
 DeSoto, Kansas

I'm sure you will be glad to hear that your son was a consistent churchgoer. He attended Mass and Communion with Lt. [...] and Lt. [...] regularly in the little Catholic Church *in* the village here. Chaplain Chatham, said Mass for each deceased member of the crew on the following day.

If there is any information which you desire, that I have not set forth in this letter, please do not hesitate to write me.

Very sincerely yours,

Bill E. [...]
 Lt. Col. A.C.
 Commanding.

* * *

"High Flight"

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth
 And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
 Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
 of sun-split clouds,—and done a hundred things
 You have not dreamed of—wheeled and soared and swung
 High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,
 I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
 My eager craft through footless halls of air....

Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue
 I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace
 Where never lark nor even eagle flew—
 And, while with silent lifting mind I've trod
 The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
 Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

—J.G. Magee, 1941