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Stephen Frater, *Hell above Earth: The Incredible True Story of an American WWII Bomber Commander and the Copilot Ordered to Kill Him*. New York: St. Martin's, 2012. Pp. xiv, 302. ISBN 978-0-312-61792-9.

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Werner Goering (b. 1924) grew up in Salt Lake City during the Great Depression. He was a tough kid and fond of aircraft, but was graduated at the bottom of his high school class. His penurious father, a landscaping laborer, had immigrated to the United States from Germany in 1923. He told young Werner that he corresponded with his “younger brother” Hermann Göring (13). The famous, dashing World War I flying ace (winner of the Blue Max with twenty-two combat victories) had joined the National Socialist Party before the 1923 Beer Hall Putsch and accompanied Hitler in his rise to dictatorial power. The arthritic Bavarian became der Führer’s *Reichsmarschall* during the 1930s and built and commanded the German Air Force. “His” Luftwaffe devastated enemy air forces (if the ill-prepared enemies had one) from September 1939 and blitzed and bombed civilian targets on the continent and in Britain.

Young Werner Goering (hereafter WG), beyond the periphery of American politics, enlisted when the United States entered the war in late 1941 and studied hard to become a US Army Air Force (AAF) pilot (20). His poverty, lack of any college education, and famous last name complicated matters. His family’s alleged connection to the German commander seen in admiring newsreels of the 1930s iced a rancid torte.

The Nazi Göring, originally Hitler’s chosen successor, built a powerful air force, but after the war, he claimed that Hitler had prevented him from creating an essential heavy bomber wing. His effective aircraft planning and design emphasized offense over defense. His vanity and ostentatious wealth did not damage his popularity in the Third Reich until Allied bombs came to roost in German cities. Always an optimist, Göring became less and less effective as he became more addicted to morphine, fattening foods, and his spectacular (stolen) art collections. His influence waned as the Luftwaffe’s planes failed to win superiority in the Battle of Britain, and his repeated claim that Germany would never be bombed was disproved by the RAF and AAF from 1941 to 1945. The Luftwaffe never ran out of planes (3,000 a month were produced in 1944, 4,103 in September alone), but the shortage of trained pilots, fuel, and bombers crippled the Reich, as Allied armies forced its slow retreats on all fronts.

The reclusive, laconic WG had earned his captain’s wings by 1943. Neither he nor Jack Rencher, his copilot-to-be, had the two years of college the US Army typically looked for in men offered pilot training. Flying war planes was strictly voluntary; there was an abundance of teenaged volunteers, but a dearth of suitable candidates. Fail rates in the examination were high—in Rencher’s group, only 2 of 140 passed (49). WG was trained specifically to fly the B-17 Flying Fortress, not the B-24 Liberator, nor the as yet unbuilt super-heavy B-29 “Super Fortress.” Training was hasty: in 1942, the Army decided it needed one million air cadets. “In August 1943, 590 airmen would die stateside, 19 per day” (21), from pilot and navigator error, mechanical failure, etc. (21).¹

After a hundred hours of training, WG was not assigned a crew, as was the usual case. There were some pro-Nazi German-Americans of questionable loyalty, though far fewer after Hitler declared war on the United States. J. Edgar Hoover had chased gangsters and early Communists (Emma Goldman) before the war and after the war encouraged and managed Communist witch-hunts. During the war, to vary his diet, he was rooting out right-wing subversives, leaving no suspect German unturned. Hoover’s unrelenting hostility to Americans who fought fascists in the Abraham Lincoln Battalion of the Spanish International Bri-

1. Quotation from Laura Hillenbrand, *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption* (NY: Random House, 2010) 61. Hillenbrand reports 52,651 stateside aircraft accidents killing 14,903 personnel during the war.

gade is notorious.² He made sure that those trained and dedicated war veterans could not become officers fighting the fascist forces for the American military. The military invited the FBI to investigate the American boy with a hapless name, Werner Goering. The government remains unwilling to release his entire file—even under Freedom of Information Act requests (246). Frater reasonably conjectures that the full file would cast a poor light on the US military and the FBI's wartime investigations (36).

The US Government worried about the nineteen-year-old WG falling into enemy hands or, worse, deserting to the enemy rather than bombing his grandmother's city. He was too valuable for propaganda purposes to be allowed to become a prisoner—dead or alive. Inexplicably, the authorities did not send him to the Pacific theater, the obvious solution to his unique problem (62).

The Army and the FBI, however, addressed the issue in their own odd way. They assigned WG a special alter-ego as his copilot—Jack Rencher, former bootlegger's bodyguard, ace mechanic in the Dodge copper mines, and wild-west loner. Half-Jewish by birth but non-observant, Rencher, as a young student had slugged his school's vice-principal. The high school dropout became a homeless roustabout and had no cavities when inducted.³ Rencher had already become a daredevil pilot, training with the legendary barnstormer Tex Rankin. Though he had logged more flying hours, Rencher flew by the Mormon⁴ WG's side on almost every mission with secret orders to shoot his captain dead, should he try to desert or even to land a damaged plane in enemy territory (38). WG sensed his friend's unhappiness, but put it down to the more experienced copilot's dissatisfaction with his secondary role (63). After crew certification in Texas for service in a "claustrophobic, smelly, long narrow aluminum tube [reeking] of grease, sweat, cordite, dried blood, urine and vomit" (129), WG's crew sailed to Europe on the *Aquitania* in July 1944. They would have preferred to fly.

Rencher and WG had formed a special bond while training stateside that grew stronger in the flak-filled skies over Western Europe. Both were non-smoking teetotalers, a rarity among the young fighter- and bomber-pilots who saved western civilization by destroying the enemy's rail yards, oil refineries, and munitions plants (64).

Journalist and military historian Stephen Frater⁵ focuses on the friendship of two western loners piloting the "Flying Fortress." He acknowledges that "dialogue has been reconstructed" (ix, 257) from various written, oral, and documentary sources. But forewarned is not forearmed, since one does not know where verbatim slides into creative.

The good news is the designated assassin never pulled the trigger of any of the three sidearms he carried on his person in the cockpit.⁶ The better news is that WG proved to be a careful and successful pilot who lost only one plane from the 303rd Bombardment Group (during a fogged-in takeoff from England, which the crew survived [203-6]). He kept his crews aloft and alive through forty-nine missions in an army group that lost hundreds of aircraft and thousands of fliers, including sixty planes—17 percent—in a single day over Regensburg and Schweinfurt (176).⁷ Randall Jarrell's 1945 poem "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" memorializes one of thousands of B-17 and B-24 casualties.

2. E.g., In Studs Terkel's *The Good War: An Oral History of World War II* (NY: Pantheon, 1984) 479-86, Milton Wolff, a top Commander in the International Brigade, explains how Washington made sure no PAFs ("Premature Anti-Fascists") like himself became US military officers. "PAF" was FBI code for Communists, men who fought in the Lincoln Battalion or elsewhere for the Spanish Republic against Spanish, Italian, and German fascist aggression before World War II. Bernard Knox, a prewar British-American anti-fascist and later an eminent classicist, reports an unsettling experience with the term at Yale in a 1998 lecture, "Premature Anti-Fascist" - www.miwsr.com/rd/1509.htm. He wondered how one could be a "premature anti-Fascist." Oddly enough, the term has Marxist antecedents.

3. Forty percent of American draftees after the Great Depression failed to meet the military's minimum criteria: five feet tall, 105 pounds or more, twelve or more teeth, and no flat feet, venereal disease, or hernia (50).

4. He later left the Mormon Church to become a devout Christian fundamentalist and evangelical.

5. He has written for the Sarasota *Herald Tribune* and taught at the University of Rhode Island's School of Communication and Media.

6. The marksman Rencher's love of guns persisted to his death, after which his son found eighty-eight fully loaded firearms in his house (249).

7. The 303rd compiled 364 combat missions and flew 10,721 individual sorties from their base at Molesworth in Britain (83).

Thirty-one Fortresses and 310 men were lost in one 1943 mission of “precision strategic bombing” that dispatched 338 B-17s to Stuttgart, before long-range P-51 Mustang bomber-escorts began accompanying them.⁸ Sixty planes and six hundred men never returned from another mission on 14 October 1943. Flak jackets saved lives, but German flak⁹ knocked out more bombers than did their fighters, even the new Messerschmitt 262 jets—as many as a hundred at a time (190). Fortress crews sustained more casualties than any other kind of unit in the US armed forces (5).¹⁰ In fact, more Eighth Air Force men, about twenty-six thousand, died than all US Marines in all World War II theaters. Bombing the synthetic fuel works in a chemical park named Leuna at Merseburg in Prussia, known as “Murdersburg” (123), was one of the costliest missions of WG’s bomber group. On 21 November 1944, sixty B-17s went down. On a clear day, only 29 percent of bombs dropped actually struck their target, which was protected by up to a thousand anti-aircraft batteries; on a cloudy day, the number fell to just 5 percent. Twenty US Air Force raids cost the lives of 1,412 young men. In just three of the attacks, 119 aircraft were lost and not one bomb hit the gas works (117–18). In six minutes over Göttingen, all but four of twenty-nine B-24s fell from the skies (181).

“From December 1941 to August 1945, U.S. aircraft losses totaled 65,164 with 43,581 lost overseas and 21,583 in the United States, 18,481 in the European theater and 4,530 in the Pacific. Estimates of aircraft-related expenditures range from a quarter to a third of the war’s \$350 billion cost” (212).¹¹ There were hundreds of mid-air collisions in non-combat accidents (91) during the 1,042-day European air war. A tail-gunner reports one plane hitting another in dense fog and a gunner falling out and down, probably without parachute, towards the frigid North Sea; another time, a parachute-wearing crewman floated into the propeller of the next plane, getting sliced to death and pulling the B-17 into a lethal dive (105). Crews often wore no parachutes for greater mobility aloft. They suffered from freezing temperatures (as low as minus sixty Fahrenheit) and insufficient oxygen in unpressurized planes at altitudes higher than ten thousand feet (10). Anoxia afflicted men who ignored or had no time for oxygen-mask checks. Once every two days on average, a heavy bomber ditched in the English Channel during the Eighth’s European service (142). Thirty feet separated the cockpit from the hatch. Frater records stories of some of the nine thousand survivors, members of the “the Goldfish Club” (160), and of many who died. WG and Jack Rencher participated in one of the raids by 1,291 heavy bombers against I.G. Farben’s Leuna refineries.

WG was also a squadron leader for the fire-bombing of Dresden, site of 110 known armament and war-critical chemical plants (198). Air Chief Marshal Arthur “Bomber” Harris had no qualms about terror-bombing the seventh largest urban center of the Reich. WG also bombed Cologne, where his grandmother still lived, and too many other cities to list. By May 1945, 80 percent of Germany’s urban centers were wiped out. WG’s German had become so fluent that he communicated in the air with another American officer comfortable in the language, the colorful Maj. William “Iron Ass” Heller,¹² “to the consternation of intelligence officers” (99).

The unexpected news [spoiler alert; stop here!] is that WG was not in fact related to Hermann Göring; the surname is common among Bavarian Germans.¹³ His supposed kinship with the enemy’s most flamboyant politician began as a point of honor for the young WG when Hitler was resurrecting German industry and currency; it became a point of shame (253) when his ancestral nation declared war on his birth nation.

8. The Luftwaffe captured some forty B-17s that they repaired to fly. Some flew with German markings, others with US insignia to infiltrate formations. Still others were employed in training and to detect their vulnerabilities (36).

9. The word is a German acronym for *Fliegerabwehrkanone*.

10. Frater cites Roger A. Freeman, *The Mighty Eighth: A History of the U.S. Eighth Army Air Force: Units, Men and Machines* (London: Doubleday, 1970).

11. Frater cites Robert F. Futrell, *USAF Historical Study 69: Development of AAF Base Facilities in the United States, 1939–1945* (Washington: US Air Force Historical Research, 1951), but the numbers do not seem to add up.

12. Not to be confused with Joseph Heller, author of *Catch-22*, who flew sixty missions over Italy as a B-25 bombardier. After the war, William Heller became a senior pilot for Lufthansa airlines and had long conversations with German pilots about battles they had fought against each other. These pilots included Adolf Galland (185n), ace of aces, whose autographed photo my son has misplaced. Frater spoke with Heller himself.

13. The Nazi’s father and WG’s grandfather were both named Heinrich Ernst Göring with the umlaut.

Even fellow American officers mocked and originally distrusted the standoffish man they called the “Kraut.” Until 2010, deep into his eighties, when Frater’s researchers reported that they could discover no relationship to “Uncle Hermann,” the American had believed his father’s self-aggrandizing, originally harmless story. There is even a noteworthy physical resemblance between the SA Commander and the American AAF Captain.¹⁴

On 20 April 1945, Hermann Göring said his goodbye in person to Hitler, deep in his Berlin bomb-shelter HQ, but he was soon stripped of his rank and arrested by the SS before the Führer’s death. He surrendered in uniform to American forces, who imprisoned him without benefit of his usual doses of opioid drugs. At the Nuremberg trials, he defended himself well and the other prisoners treated him as their leader. Once convicted and sentenced to death by hanging, he stole a march on his captors and took cyanide.

Frater includes information on Göring’s polyprogenitive father, Heinrich, who had served as Otto von Bismarck’s *Reichskommissar* in German colonial East Africa. This earlier Göring took part in “legally institutionalized Racism and ethnic cleansing” (226) and the extermination of the Herero tribe, during which the terms *Lebensraum* and *Endlösung* emerged. Germans also performed medical experiments on African tribesmen—one element of early Teutonic pseudo-scientific eugenics. Heinrich’s son became the first head of the Gestapo and ordered the building of the first *Konzentrationslager*. The Nazi prided himself on following his father’s example.

When Jack Rencher completed his required thirty-five missions, he gratefully accepted his release from further combat duty and ferried planes back to the United States. He was mustered out with \$32,000 cash (poker winnings) taped to his torso. His intestines were in poor shape. Jack enjoyed talking about his “secret” assignment to Frater. For his part, WG resisted reporters as he did later writers (242). After completing his thirty-five missions, he volunteered for another thirty-five (194). The day after one lethal combat run, he volunteered himself, his plane (*Mercy’s Madhouse*), and his crew for a training run rather than the rest they needed. The crew got no credit for a mission, and the plane was damaged on the runway (195).

WG was posted to Potsdam as a military liaison and spied for what became the CIA, taking photographs on infiltrated aviation bases in East Germany. He flew hydrogen-bomb-laden Stratojet B-47s into the Arctic Circle for the Air Force Strategic Air Command. He worked for the State Department as an attaché in East Africa and socialized with Emperor Haile Selassie in Ethiopia (233). He retired after hitting a career ceiling in 1960, perhaps because of unresolved disputes with the Ambassador. After a brief stint at the Pentagon, he quit the Air Force in 1964 as a lieutenant colonel after twenty-two years of active service; he threw out his medals and burned his uniforms (236). Frater does not explore this unexpected expression of extreme anger. WG retired to Tucson, Arizona, and lived to become his dedicated crew’s last survivor.

The sad news is that Rencher never told his best friend WG about his assignment to kill him if stipulated circumstances required it. WG, the cool and skilled commander, had probably saved Rencher’s life forty times over. In 2010, Frater arranged an Eighth Air Force reunion in Tucson as a venue where the secret unshared between two death-defying, bonded friends might be disclosed. But Rencher died of intestinal complications just before the get-together. Frater himself then revealed the secret to an incredulous WG, a man of glacial remoteness. He also informed him of his “unrelationship” to the Nazi Göring.

The book’s fifty short chapters careen through sharp scene changes alternating between (frankly) repetitive accounts of frequent bombing runs and stories of the disasters and close calls that all Eighth Army bombers endured. Frater interviewed other colorful characters like William Heller, and provides canned histories of famous tough guys like Hermann Göring and the “Old Iron Ass” Col. Curtis LeMay.¹⁵

Frater supplies citations of his sources (oral and printed) for most of his anecdotes and facts, as well as a bibliography and index. Sixteen pages of photos improve the tale. The text is blemished by frequent repetitions that any breathing editor could have pruned.

14. See Frater’s webpage for a photograph of WG holding a large framed picture of Hermann Göring, resurrected from its place of dishonor behind the sofa – www.miwsr.com/rd/1510.htm.

15. LeMay was the inspiration for *Dr. Strangelove’s* (1964) Brig. Gen. Jack D. Ripper, played by Sterling Hayden (218). In 1968, he was George Wallace’s vice-presidential running mate.

Hell above Earth resembles Stephen Ambrose's *The Wild Blue*,¹⁶ but with a difference. Ambrose promises a history of the Fifteenth Air Force's B-24 Liberators based in Italy, but in fact follows the youth and pilot career of George McGovern; Frater promises a history of the youth and unique pilot career of Werner Goering, but actually follows the Eighth Air Force B-17 Flying Fortresses' campaigns from England. Both pilots preferred their own airships to all others, but the B-17 could survive more damage.¹⁷ Within a year after the war, virtually all the B-24s were scrapped ("salvaged") in the southwest deserts, heaped up by bulldozers. Both authors, to their credit, conducted many personal interviews and both indulge in forgivable hero worship.

16. Subtitle: *The Men and Boys Who Flew the B-24s over Germany* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 2001).

17. See "Battle Stations B-17 Flying Fortress," *YouTube* (19 Feb 2013) for footage and analysis of B-17s attacking and being attacked - www.miwsr.com/rd/1511.htm.