

SONS AT WAR

Written by

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Based on the book "Sons at War: The True Story of Two Young Men
Destined from Birth to Collide in Death" ©2017 by Jane Sweetland

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FADE IN:

INT. OFFICE - DAY

We see JANE's hands (female, 70, the author) open the first two photo albums that are falling apart. There is a picture of a mother holding a baby in her arms.

SUPER: "TED SWEETLAND, BORN JUNE 27, 1919, HAZLETON, PA."

JANE (V.O.)

Ted Sweetland was my uncle. I never met him because he died in World War II before I was born. He was a presence, though— a sadness my father never reconciled. After my dad died, I went to Germany to meet the family of the man who killed his brother.

Jane opens a second album. We see another child in his mother's arms.

SUPER: "JOACHIM MÜNCHBERG, BORN DECEMBER 31, 1918, FRIEDRICHSHOFF, GERMANY."

JANE

In Germany, I met Joachim Müncheberg's uncles. Joachim, too, died in the war and over coffee and cake, we talked about these men, whom we had never met. Ted and Joachim were both privileged and nearly the same age when they died. They even looked a little alike, like cousins in a way. But they were taught to see the world and the people in it in different ways.

(beat)

In Roosevelt's America, cocooned by wealth, Ted's options were unlimited. He could grow up to be an inventor, like his father, or a journalist, like Ernest Hemingway. He could decide for himself what he believed about the war that was brewing. Was his father right? Was isolation the answer? Wasn't Hitler fighting Communism, which his Irish Catholic mother believed was the right thing to do?

(beat)

(MORE)

JANE (CONT'D)

In Hitler's Germany, Joachim learned that his genetics made him a superior man. He learned how much it cost German citizens to educate a handicapped child and how Jews profited from the treaty that punished Germany. When he grew up, he knew his path was clear: he would follow in the footsteps of his grandfather and his father. He would go to war. He would fight for the man who promised to make Germany great again.

(beat)

This story is based on the lives of two young men destined to cross paths in a war that consumed the world.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. NORTH AFRICA - DAY - STOCK

A Luftwaffe fighter pilot taking off in North Africa in WWII.

A U.S. fighter pilot taking off in North Africa in WWII.

A dogfight.

FADE TO BLACK.

TITLE: "SONS AT WAR"

FADE IN.

SUPER: "1924 -- TWO BOYS BORN INTO PRIVILEGE"

INT. TED'S CHILDHOOD HOME - DAY

TED (Now 5) sits with his mom NELLE (mid-30s) in a grand room of their palatial estate in Piedmont, California. The home is decorated for Christmas. Nelle has the "Catholic Liturgy of the Hours" on her lap. Ted nestles in to sit closer to her.

TED

Mum?

Nelle puts her arm around Ted.

NELLE

Yes, Teddy?

TED
I think Santa is God.

NELLE
You do? Hmmm. Why do you think
Santa is God?

TED
'Cause he can go all around the
world in one day.

Nelle puts her prayer book on the side table.

NELLE
God doesn't have to travel, Teddy.

TED
He doesn't?

NELLE
No. Because he's already
everywhere.

TED
So he's right here? In this room
with us?

NELLE
Yes, Teddy, He is.

Ted escapes her hug and runs to the glass doors facing an expansive garden.

TED
How did God get in here?

Nelle joins Ted at the glass doors.

NELLE
Through your heart, Teddy. God is
in your heart.

TED
Is Santa in my heart, too?

NELLE
(smiles)
Kind of.

Ted looks down at his shirt.

TED

Is that how Santa knows if I've been bad or good? Because he's in my heart?

NELLE

I suppose, Teddy.

TED

So I was right! Santa is kind of like God!

NELLE

Santa is like love.

Ted hugs his mom.

TED

So you must be Santa, Mama, because I know you love me more than anything!

Nelle hugs him back.

NELLE

I do love you, my dearest boy. You are the lamb of my heart.

TED

(like a lamb)

Bah! Bah!

(beat)

I am not a lamb, Mama. I am a bear! And I am going to give you a big bear hug to show you how much I love you!

Ted crushes his mother in a hug.

NELLE

I will always love you, Teddy Bear.

TED

And I will always love you, Mama, even when I grow up to be a very big bear!

They look out at the lush green garden.

INT. JOACHIM'S CHILDHOOD HOME - NIGHT

We SEE a German estate decorated for Christmas.

JOACHIM (Now 5) watches his mother, ERIKA (now 30s), slicing an orange into thin pieces.

Joachim turns to watch the candlelight from the Christmas tree flicker on the walls. He's sleepy.

JOACHIM

Mama, does Christkind fly?

Erika rests her knife and smiles at her son.

ERIKA

Why do you ask, mein Schatz?

Joachim rubs his eyes.

JOACHIM

Opa says that Christkind will come on Christmas Eve, but I have been watching carefully, and there is no one coming on the road.

Erika wipes her hands on a linen cloth.

ERIKA

Christkind does fly, but not with wings.

JOACHIM

How can he fly without wings?

Erika pauses, then picks up a candlestick.

ERIKA

Christkind moves like light. See how the light from the candle flies to the wall? Christkind can travel like that. He brings joy and warm feelings to our hearts on a cold winter day!

Joachim presses his chest.

JOACHIM

My heart feels warm, Mama. I am happy to be with you while everyone is asleep.

Joachim looks down his shirt.

JOACHIM (CONT'D)

Christkind made me warm and happy, but I don't see any presents!

Erika hugs her son.

ERIKA

You have to go to sleep before
Christkind brings presents. But
don't worry! If you have love in
your heart, there will be presents
under the tree in the morning.

JOACHIM

I will always have love in my heart
for you, Mama.

(gazes up)

Even when I can't see you, I love
you. I will always love you.

ERIKA

And I you, my little love.

JANE (V.O.)

How innocent are our children. How
precious, and open, absorbing what
they see and hear. I thought of
this as I read my uncle's letters
to Santa and walked the land where
Joachim's childhood home had been -
homes full of love, and the stories
that would teach them about the
world: what is right and wrong and
who is good and bad.

EXT. JOACHIM'S CHILDHOOD HOME - DAY

SUPER: "SUMMER, 1928"

We HEAR three 10-year-old boys shooting cap guns and laughing
on a field that will be a racetrack when Joachim is older.

JOACHIM (10) runs fast and has a cap gun in each hand. Two
boys laugh as they follow him. HEINRICH (10) struggles to
keep up, and KLAUS (12) has a noticeable limp and lags
behind.

KLAUS

I shot you, Heinrich! You have to
be dead!

HEINRICH

I'm wounded, Klaus! Not dead. A
good soldier keeps going!

JOACHIM

A good soldier doesn't get shot!
Gotcha! Gotcha! Gotcha!

The boys collapse on the lawn.

We see PAUL MÜNCHBERG (48) in the distance approaching; he wears a Stahlhelm uniform and helmet.

HEINRICH

Joachim, why does your dad always wear that old uniform when he goes on patrol?

JOACHIM

He's proud of it. He says that it shows that Germany - the real Germany, Kaiser Wilhelm's Germany - is still strong.

HEINRICH

Well, I am stronger than you, Joachim!

JOACHIM

You are not!

HEINRICH

Am too! I'll prove it!

They are tussling on the lawn as Paul approaches.

PAUL

That's the way, boys! A man doesn't learn to stand tall without falling a few times first. Keep your balance, and remember -- use your strength, not just your fists. A clever mind wins as many battles as strong arms!

Boys separate. Shake hands. Paul heads to the barn.

JOACHIM

Hey, let's race around the climbing tree and back!

KLAUS

I'll be the starter and the judge of who wins!

HEINRICH

I'm faster now, Joachim. My legs have gotten longer. See?

KLAUS

Your legs have always been longer than Joachim's, Heinrich, but no matter how long your legs get, I don't think you'll ever beat Joachim.

HEINRICH

Why not?

KLAUS

Because, Joachim has more muscles than you do.

HEINRICH

Muscles, schmuscles. I've got those, too. And my legs are still longer.

KLAUS

Right, Heinrich. You're like a lynx, but Joachim is more like a cheetah. The lynx's legs are longer, but the cheetah's muscles and build make him much faster than a lynx.

JOACHIM

Wow, Klaus. You're a genius.

KLAUS

I'm not a genius. I just read a lot, and since Dad can't work in the fields with only one arm, he teaches me a lot, too.

HEINRICH

So you're saying Joachim always wins because he's a cheetah and I'll always lose because I'm a lynx?

Klaus shrugs at Heinrich.

KLAUS

Maybe I'm right and maybe I'm wrong. All I'm saying is that whoever moves most efficiently will win. But there's only one way to find out, right? Are you ready?

(beat)

On your mark!

Joachim and Heinrich crouch.

KLAUS (CONT'D)

Get set!

Joachim and Heinrich set their stance. Klaus holds the cap gun in the air and shoots.

Joachim and Heinrich race around the tree; Heinrich has the early lead, but Joachim catches him and passes him easily.

Klaus, with his club foot, hobbles to his friends and holds up Joachim's arm.

KLAUS (CONT'D)

Joachim Müncheberg, I declare you the winner!

HEINRICH

One of these days, I'll win, Joachim. Just you wait.

Heinrich looks at the afternoon sun.

HEINRICH (CONT'D)

I better go home. I promised Father I would stack the wood before dark.

Heinrich heads off across the field. A plane glides close overhead.

JOACHIM

I'm going to fly one of those one day!

Heinrich shouts from a few yards away.

HEINRICH

Me, too!

Klaus focuses on the plane.

KLAUS

That plane is a new design! Look at the wings!

JOACHIM

Do you want to walk down to the airfield? Take a closer look?

KLAUS

I hoped you would want to go. I brought my sketchbook because Hauptmann Bauer always wants to see my drawings. Now I will be able to sketch this new plane!

JOACHIM

You are never without your sketchbook, Klaus. I think it's welded to your arm.

KLAUS

That would surely be another unwelcome handicap, Joachim.

JOACHIM

Mother says God gave you a club foot so he could give you a big brain.

KLAUS

I wish he hadn't.

Klaus picks up his satchel, and the two boys walk down the road.

EXT. AIRFIELD IN GERMANY - SAME DAY

Joachim and Klaus approach a glider parked on the side of the runway. HERR BAUER (40), a seasoned pilot (leather jacket and goggles), joins them.

JOACHIM

It looks different from the ones in the magazines.

KLAUS

The wings are new; they bend like gulls, and the middle lifts, but the end slopes down.

Herr Bauer crosses his arms.

HERR BAUER

Very sharp, as usual, Klaus. They are called gull wings. The bend helps with stability in the air.

KLAUS

Like storks. When they glide, their wings curve like this.

HERR SCHREIBER (50), a war veteran with a scarred face and missing digits, approaches. Two pilots nod to each other. Bauer is guarded.

JOACHIM

Have you ever seen a plane like this before, Herr Schreiber?

HERR SCHREIBER

No. Not quite like this. But I've seen men push the limits of flight before, always trying to make a machine fly like a bird. Trying to shape the air to their will.

Herr Schreiber glances at Klaus's sketchbook.

HERR SCHREIBER (CONT'D)

Some get closer than others.

Klaus, excited, flips to a sketch of a gull in mid-dive.

KLAUS

The wings of this plane curve just like this -- high lift, less drag. It's meant to soar. But why?

JOACHIM

What do you think this plane will be used for?

HERR SCHREIBER

(glances at Bauer, shrugs)
Machines like this, their purpose is never what they claim at first. They say "sport," they say "agriculture," but soon they find reasons to test how fast, how strong...

(beat)

How deadly they can be.

HERR BAUER

(arms crossed, measured)
It's just a glider, boys. No engine. No guns.

HERR SCHREIBER

No guns yet. That's how they start. I dusted crops with a Taube. Then the war came and they outfitted them for scouting and bombing. Early ones barely climbed. No one feared them. But the engineers learned. They always learn.

(looks at Bauer)

Someone will take this quiet little glider and teach it to scream.

KLAUS

But it doesn't have to be for war.
A design like this, if it's that
efficient, could change how we fly.

HERR SCHREIBER

Hmmph. We shall see.

EXT. TED'S CHILDHOOD HOME - SAME TIME

SUPER: "SUMMER, 1928"

We see a big lawn with mature trees surrounded by a manicured garden. TED (now 10) plays with cap guns with LIAM (10) and JOHNNY (10).

JOHNNY

Gotcha, Liam!

LIAM

Did not! You missed, Johnny.

Liam turns and fires at Johnny.

LIAM (CONT'D)

But I got you!

Johnny runs away.

TED

Guys! We're not the enemies! The
enemies are coming over the hill!
This way! Fast!

The boys run to the trees as they fire at invisible enemies, whooping and yelling.

One by one, the boys need to reload their ammunition.

They collapse on the lawn. A small plane flies overhead doing acrobatics against a blue sky.

JOHNNY

Man, I'd love to fly one of those.

LIAM

You know how much flight school costs? Like, a million dollars.

JOHNNY

So? I'll figure it out.

TED

It's not just flying that's fascinating—it's how a plane works. The shape, the wings. Why doesn't it just fall out of the sky?

LIAM

Yeah, okay, Professor. You're gonna grow up to be an inventor, just like your dad.

TED

Nah. Too much sitting.

He flips a rock over with the toe of his sneaker, thinking. Below them, the San Francisco Bay glimmers, speckled with sailboats. The wind shifts, carrying the scent of salt.

JOHNNY

So what, then? What's big enough for you?

TED

Dunno. But something where I don't have to sit around all day thinking.

LIAM

I thought your mom wants you to be a priest, Ted.

TED

She likes that I'm an altar boy. But she says that I am lucky because I can be whatever I want when I grow up. She wants me to pray every day.

LIAM

Do you?

TED

Do I what?

LIAM

Pray every day.

TED

Mostly. Sometimes I forget. Except Grace. I never forget to say Grace because we can't eat until we thank God for our food.

LIAM

When I grow up, I'm going to be an artist.

JOHNNY

You're a pretty good artist, Liam. Not great, though. Some of the stuff you paint doesn't look like what it's supposed to be.

LIAM

Sometimes, a painting is not supposed to look like something. It's supposed to make you feel something.

JOHNNY

Oh. What I feel is confused when I look at a painting that doesn't look like anything.

Liam shrugs in exasperation.

TED

Artists don't make much money, Liam.

LIAM

I know that, too.

TED

My dad says you have to learn to do something that will make money.

Liam looks dejected. Ted redirects his friends.

TED (CONT'D)

Look! Enemies coming over the hill!

With a whoop, they take off running down the hill away from the house, cap guns popping in the late afternoon light.

A GONG sounds. Ted stops short and looks up at the house.

TED (CONT'D)

I guess it's lunch time.

NANNY (a black woman, 40) is walking in from another part of the yard with Ted's siblings, EUGENE (2) and HELEN (4).

JOHNNY

I better scram, my mom will blow her top if I'm late for chow.

LIAM

I better go, too. I have to help Mom with the babies.

TED

You can come, too, Liam. There will be plenty.

LIAM

No. But thanks. Maybe Dad got work today.

Ted nods, understanding, but conflicted.

TED

OK then. If there are cookies, I'll bring you both cookies.

Ted races up to the house. Goes inside.

EXT. THE GREAT DEPRESSION - DAY - STOCK

A 1929 Hooverville in the U.S. in 1929.

Reichsmarks as wallpaper in Germany, and lines of people in breadlines, and men seeking work.

INT. TED'S CHILDHOOD HOME, WORKSHOP - SAME DAY

We see a wall calendar open to "November 1929". Ted's dad, ERNEST (55), is working on a lawn sprinkler mechanism.

TED

What're you working on, Dad?

ERNEST

An invention that I believe will be useful to people. Can you guess what it is?

TED

(picking up metal casing)
Hmm. Yep, well, hmmm. It looks like a rocket booster, only you have it upside down!

ERNEST

(chuckling)
It could be a rocket booster - but it's not. It's a sprinkler that will pop up when we turn the water on to water the lawn.

TED
It pops up? Like a ground squirrel?

ERNEST
A welcome ground squirrel!

TED
Can you make the head go around?

ERNEST
You're thinking like an inventor,
Ted. It will, but it doesn't yet.
I'm working on that now.

Ted smiles and fidgets.

Ernest sees that Ted has something on his mind.

ERNEST (CONT'D)
Did you have something you wanted
to talk to me about?

TED
(suddenly shy)
Mom said I should talk to you.

ERNEST
Yes?

TED
(speaking in a rush)
At school, we're learning about the
economy, and my teacher said that
it's bad right now. A lot of people
lost their jobs, and some families
don't have money to buy food, and a
lot of people can't buy meat
anymore because it's so expensive,
but...

Ted speeds up to say what he wants to say quickly.

TED (CONT'D)
but we're still eating meat, and
you didn't lose your job, so I was
wondering if maybe you could hire
Liam's dad!

ERNEST
(taken aback)
Liam's Dad?

TED

Yeah. He lost his job. But you still have a job, and you have lots of work that maybe Mr. Gallagher could help you with!

ERNEST

Since I work for myself, I will always have work to do.

TED

(dejected)

Mr. Gallagher would like to work, too. He's a mechanic, but the garage owner had to let him go.

Ted picks up the sprinkler part.

TED (CONT'D)

I bet he could help you figure out how to make this sprinkler head turn like you want it to.

ERNEST

Maybe.

TED

Liam is my best friend and he's hungry, even though he says he's not. They aren't telling anyone that his dad lost his job. Even Liam's little brothers and sisters don't know because Mr. Gallagher goes out every morning just like always, only he's not going to a job, he's just looking for one.

ERNEST

I will talk to your mother. Maybe we can help Liam's family in some way.

TED

Don't tell anyone though, Dad. They don't want anyone to know. I just worry sometimes.

ERNEST

I know you do, son. It's because you care about people.

An old dog gets up from a bed in the corner and comes wagging to Ted. Ted crouches to the dog.

TED

And dogs. I care about dogs, too.

ERNEST

Yes. And dogs, but you don't have to worry about Rex; he's the king of the castle!

TED

I know. That's how he got his name.

INT. JOACHIM'S CHILDHOOD HOME, BEDROOM - SAME TIME

Joachim is using an old carving knife with a PRUSSIAN EAGLE ETCHED INTO THE HANDLE to carve a miniature model airplane. The table is in front of the window with the airfield in view. ERIKA is leaning over him. A calendar is on the wall, November 1929. A long-haired dachshund is next to them.

ERIKA

(softly, watching him)

Do you feel how the wood pulls when you press too hard? Let the knife do the work. Don't fight it.

JOACHIM

Like this?

ERIKA

Better. It's not just about shaping the wood. It's about feeling it.

Joachim nods, focuses, shaves a piece off the wood.

ERIKA (CONT'D)

There it is! Work with the wood. That's the way you get a clean cut, no splinters, no gouges.

Joachim continues to shape the plane, then puts the knife down and holds the plane in the air.

JOACHIM

Pretty good?

ERIKA

Very good. You know this knife belonged to your grandfather.

JOACHIM

Did he etch the eagle in it?

ERIKA

Yes. He did that in the war, in the trenches. He also carved beautiful things with it.

She goes to a nook and takes a little wooden dog.

ERIKA (CONT'D)

He made this for me when I was a little girl. I would like to give his knife to you. I can see that you have the delicate touch my father did.

JOACHIM

You are trusting me with grandfather's knife?

ERIKA

I trust you to keep it safe, Joachim. And yourself, too. Don't cut yourself!

JOACHIM

I will keep it safe, Mutti. I will keep myself safe, too. This knife will always remind me of being here with you.

Joachim strokes the eagle handle. Erika kisses his forehead.

INT. MIDDLE SCHOOL CLASSROOM, CALIFORNIA - DAY

We see a calendar from 1930. There are pictures of the Founding Fathers; maps; presidents including the current one, Herbert Hoover. We SEE a teacher, MISS HARPER (40s), showing the class a worn history book with photographs of a Civil War battlefield covered with bodies from both sides. The classmates (12-14) include TED (one year older), MARY, SUSAN, FRANK, and DOROTHY, LIAM (one year older), all dressed in casual clothes.

MISS HARPER

Yesterday we talked about the Declaration of Independence. What are some of the important ideas of that document?

MARY

All men are created equal!

MISS HARPER

Can anyone think of anything else
the Declaration of Independence
says?

DOROTHY

Life, liberty, and the pursuit of
happiness -- all Americans have
those. They're called alien rights.

FRANK

Like Martians!

MISS HARPER

Not quite, Frank. The word isn't
alien, it's in-alien-able. Does
anyone know what that word means?

TED

Something that can't be taken away.

MISS HARPER

Exactly, Ted. "Inalienable rights"
are rights that belong to everyone.
No government or person can take
these freedoms from you.

SUSAN

It means that in America, we have
the right to vote, live the way we
choose, and pursue happiness.

FRANK

I would like to pursue happiness
with Dorothy.

Class laughs. Miss Harper sternly faces Frank.

MISS HARPER

Today we read Abraham Lincoln's
very short speech,

FRANK

(interrupts)
That's the way I like 'em!

MISS HARPER

Frank?...

FRANK

OK, Miss Harper! I'm calm now.

Frank pretends to zip his mouth shut.

MISS HARPER

Lincoln gave this speech on a battlefield at Gettysburg during the Civil War. What was that war about?

SUSAN

The North fought the South to end slavery.

TED

But the Civil War was also about keeping the country together.

LIAM

(Playing devil's advocate)
Southerners believed that they had the right to hold slaves and they just wanted to rule themselves. Isn't that how democracy is supposed to work?

TED

In a democracy, people can't own people! That's not freedom.

LIAM

But in a democracy, people get to vote for how they want to live. They choose leaders who'll do what they want. That's the whole point.

TED

That's how it's supposed to work. But what if people vote for leaders who slowly change the rules? What if, little by little, their choices disappear?

LIAM

Wouldn't people notice? Wouldn't they just vote them out?

TED

Maybe. But what if, by the time they realize what's happening, it doesn't work that way anymore?

Long beat.

SUSAN

But we are still one nation under God!

(MORE)

SUSAN (CONT'D)

And these freedoms, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness can't be taken away!

LIAM

Can't they? Look around. When the stock market crashed, thousands lost their jobs, their homes and their farms. People are lining up for bread just to get through the day, but President Hoover doesn't give a darn. The rich are still rich, and the poor are begging for help. I guess all I'm saying is that we're not one nation under anything we can all agree on, and there's nothing that can't be taken away no matter what the documents say. I think we're just a lot of different people trying to figure out how to be one nation at all. Sometimes we get it wrong.

Ted gazes out the window, deep in thought.

INT. GYMNASIUM CLASSROOM, GERMANY - DAY

Rows of wooden desks. A German (Weimar) flag hangs at the front. A group of students (12-14) sit with books open. HERR STEIN, a WWI veteran and strict but fair teacher, stands at the blackboard where "Reichstag Election Results" are written. A calendar reads, "1930."

HERR STEIN

The Nazis have won many seats in the Reichstag. A historic victory, but not a majority. What does this mean for Germany?

JOACHIM

It means people are angry and desperate. My father says the Nazis are too extreme.

AUGUST

Your father is wrong, Joachim. The people have spoken! The Nazis will bring Germany back to greatness.

OTTO

Yes! Hitler will end all the chaos. No more weak leaders.

HERMANN

But the Nazis didn't win a majority. They still have to work with other parties, right?

HERR STEIN

(measured, cautious)

For now, yes. But they have gained momentum. What do you think this says about our democracy?

JOACHIM

That people can vote for leaders who can take their freedoms away.

A pause. A flicker of unease in Herr Stein's expression.

HERR STEIN

Why do you say that, Joachim?

JOACHIM

My father says the Nazis are too extreme. He says they don't care about democracy or the people; they only care about themselves. They will profit, but many will... many will not.

AUGUST

Nonsense. Hitler is the only one who actually cares about Germany! He promises to put our people back to work and end this misery. No more starving families, no more men begging on the streets while the government does nothing! He says he'll get rid of the Treaty of Versailles and make Germany strong again. And he won't let the communists take over like they did in Russia. My father says we need a leader who doesn't just talk—someone who will actually do something!

OTTO

Anyway, people were free to vote, and the Nazis were chosen fairly! That is democracy! They will make Germany strong again. That is what matters.

SILENCE

Herr Stein walks using a cane from around the desk, and we SEE he has lost a leg.

HERR STEIN

History will decide. It always does. But remember—once power is given, it is not always easily taken back.

Bell RINGS. Herr Stein dismisses the boys and watches them as they leave the classroom. He looks despondent.

JANE (V.O.)

Joachim's middle school classroom had wooden desks in straight rows, very much like Ted's in California. But teachers in Germany were state agents, tasked with indoctrinating as much as educating and students would not dare to disagree or wonder if what they were being taught was true. So unlike Ted's experience where learning was discovery and discussion, including dissent.

(beat)

Standing in those two classrooms—one steeped in obedience and ideology, the other in curiosity and individualism—I couldn't help but think about the world my grandchildren will inherit. Will they learn that repetition is not the same as truth or that obedience is not always virtue? What are our leaders teaching them?

EXT. JOACHIM'S CHILDHOOD HOME - DAY

SUPER: "MÜNCHENBERG ESTATE, GERMANY, JANUARY 30, 1933"

JOACHIM (now 14), in gym shorts and a T-shirt, races HERMANN (also in gym shorts & t-shirt) (now 14) on a track in front of their home. Hitler Youth uniforms are neatly folded.

OTTO and AUGUST (now 14), dressed in Hitler Youth uniforms, cheer Joachim on. Klaus with his club foot is standing apart.

Joachim is ahead, but Hermann begins to catch him.

Joachim appears relaxed, then with a burst of speed, he easily wins. The other boys cheer.

AUGUST

Joachim, you are a champion!

OTTO

You are bound for the Olympics!

JOACHIM

Not in Berlin! But in 1940 Father says I will be at my prime! I am training for Helsinki!

AUGUST

Maybe you could be in the pageant in Berlin in 1936? My father tells me that some students will be chosen to march in the parade. You could be one of the chosen!

Hermann puts on his uniform shirt over his t-shirt.

HERMANN

Maybe we will all be chosen!

KLAUS

I will never be chosen to march.

Otto and August ignore Klaus, but Joachim stands next to him.

JOACHIM

You will be chosen for your brain, Klaus!

HERMANN

No, he won't. There is no room in the Reich for--

OTTO

Uh-oh, talking about being chosen! I'll be chosen for a good belt on the seat of my pants if I'm late for supper!

The boys chuckle.

JOACHIM

You don't have much seat to start with, Otto! You better get a move on, or you'll be walking on your hands around here!

HERMANN

Not the only one! I better hoof it, too! I'll race you, Otto!

OTTO

No, you won't, but if you want, I will throw rocks at you from behind to make you move faster.

The boys laugh and move away. Klaus lingers for a minute, nods to Joaquin, then walks across the field to his home.

Joachim puts on his Hitler Youth shirt over his t-shirt. Buttons it neatly. He waves to his father, Paul, on horseback, who wears the uniform of the Stahlhelm. The Boys are walking away up the road.

PAUL

Hi, son. I saw you race. Did you win? I hope so. I don't raise losers in this family.

JOACHIM

Yes, father, I won.

PAUL

Good.

Paul dismounts. The two walk towards the house.

JOACHIM

Any action at the border?

PAUL

No, but I got something for the pot!

Paul pats his saddlebag.

PAUL (CONT'D)

(CONT'D)

We shall feast on hasenbraten soon!

JOACHIM

(laughs)

Not soon enough! It takes a long time to soften up a wild hare!

Paul chuckles and puts his arm around his son's shoulders.

PAUL

Your youth makes you impatient, as I was, but you will learn to wait. That's what war taught me: How to wait until the moment is right to attack without mercy!

(MORE)

PAUL (CONT'D)

I've told you about that priest who was picking off my troops from the bell tower...

JOACHIM

You've told me, Father. You threw him out of the tower to the ground far below.

Paul and Joachim walk towards the house.

PAUL

He got what he deserved. He had shot dozens of our men, my friends.
(beat)
Maybe Hitler will avenge them.

He puts his hand on Joachim's shoulder.

PAUL (CONT'D)

Maybe out of these ashes, Germany will rise again.

The dialogue fades out as the father and son return home.

EXT. HITLER RALLY, GERMANY - DAY - STOCK

Hitler speaking. Crowds mesmerized.

INT. TED'S CHILDHOOD HOME, LIVING ROOM - DAY

SUPER: "PIEDMONT, CALIFORNIA, SATURDAY, MARCH 4, 1933"

We see TED (now 14), Nelle, and Ernest listening to FDR's inaugural address on the radio. All are nicely but casually dressed.

We see that the door to the kitchen is ajar, and TWO female uniformed servants (one black, one white, 30s) are listening.

FDR (V.O.)

...The People of the United States have not failed; in their need, they have registered a mandate that they want direct, vigorous action. They have asked for discipline and direction under leadership. They have made me the present instrument of their wishes. In the spirit of the gift, I take it.

Ernest is agitated. He stands and takes his pipe.

ERNEST

We must hope Mr. Roosevelt does not take too much power! The United States must remain a free-market economy!

TED

People can't buy things if they don't have any money, Dad. And right now, people need help getting jobs. Maybe the government can do something about that. That's what Hitler is doing in Germany.

ERNEST

Roosevelt is not Hitler! Hitler is a tyrant. Hitler is imprisoning those who disagree with him. God willing, we will not come to that in this country!

Nelle clicks her fingers on her rosary beads. Ted puts his hand on his mother's shoulder.

TED

I know, Father. It's just that people in America. People right here in California, need help now. Isn't it right that the government helps where it can?

Ernest glances at the servants.

The door to the kitchen closes quietly.

Ernest crosses to the leaded glass window that overlooks a sweeping backyard. Ted's two younger siblings, HELEN (now 8) and EUGENE (now 7) are launching and chasing rubber-band-powered model airplanes across the lawn.

ERNEST

I have not always been wealthy, you know, Ted.

TED

I know, Dad. Your father was a shoemaker. And you lived on a shoestring.

ERNEST

I worked! That's what I did! I worked!

(MORE)

ERNEST (CONT'D)

I went from city to city and from mine to mine to strike it rich. Not with a shovel, but with my inventions!

TED

I know, Dad. I'm proud of you.

ERNEST

(softly)

It's just that you can't give people pride. They have to give it to themselves. I hope our new president remembers that.

INT. GERMAN HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOM - DAY

We SEE Joachim (now 15) sitting up straight (wearing a white shirt, wool vest, and school blazer). A calendar on the wall reads, "1934." The teacher, HERR LEHRER (50), points to a problem on the chalkboard that shows the relative cost of educating a healthy student (.5 RM) versus a disabled student (5 RM) in school. The teacher's back is turned to the chalkboard.

HERR LEHRER

Let us end our class with an elementary decimal problem: How many healthy students can be educated for the same cost as a single disabled student?

Heinrich and Hermann raise their hands.

Herr Lehrer points to Heinrich, who stands immediately at attention.

HEINRICH

Ten healthy students for the cost of one disabled student, Herr Lehrer.

HERR LEHRER

Yes. So, what conclusion may we draw from this simple fact?

Again, several students raise their hands.

Herr Lehrer points to Hermann.

HERMANN

Herr Lehrer, the obvious conclusion is that unhealthy students should not be allowed to go to school. They are a drain on the German economy and will never amount to anything. Heil Hitler!

Rudolph shakes his head quietly. The teacher turns to him.

HERR LEHRER

You do not agree with this conclusion, Rudolph?

RUDOLPH

No, sir. I mean, yes, Herr Lehrer. I do agree.

HERR LEHRER

You look as if you do not agree.

Rudolph clears his throat uncomfortably.

RUDOLPH

I do agree.
(looks away)
It is obvious, Herr Lehrer.

HERMANN

(interrupting)
Rudolph Müller's brother, Klaus, is a krüppel, Herr Lehrer!

RUDOLPH

(irate to Hermann)
And compared to him, you are an imbecile!
(to Herr Lehrer)
I apologize for this outburst, Herr Lehrer.

HERR LEHRER

What is wrong with your brother?

RUDOLPH

One foot is not right, sir. He walks with a limp. That's all. Like some who fought in the war.

JOACHIM

Rudolph's brother is like Kaiser Wilhelm.

(MORE)

JOACHIM (CONT'D)

The Kaiser's arm was withered since he was a boy, but his arm did not affect his ability to be a great leader.

A bell rings. The teacher dismisses the class. Some students stand, salute, and say, "Heil Hitler!" But not all.

Joachim approaches the teacher.

HERR LEHRER

Yes, Herr Müncheberg?

JOACHIM

Klaus is very smart, Herr Lehrer.

HERR LEHRER

(questioning)

Who is Klaus?

JOACHIM

Rudolph's brother.

HERR LEHRER

Ah, the kruppel.

JOACHIM

Yes, sir. But it is only his foot that is wounded. Like Kaiser Wilhelm's arm, Klaus's foot has nothing to do with his brain.

Herr Lehrer speaks in a low voice to Joachim.

HERR LEHRER

Ahh. Yes. You are right, Joachim. But such thoughts are not welcome in today's Germany. Such thoughts we must keep to ourselves. We must all be careful.

Herr Lehrer looks around.

HERR LEHRER (CONT'D)

We should not be having this conversation. I fear that I will not be long employed at the gymnasium.

JOACHIM

I understand, Herr Lehrer.

Joachim starts to leave but turns back.

JOACHIM (CONT'D)
Herr Lehrer?

HERR LEHRER
Yes, Joachim?

JOACHIM
Klaus has been my friend since we
were children.

Herr Lehrer looks away, slightly guarded but compassionate.

JOACHIM (CONT'D)
I do not know if we can still be
friends.

Herr Lehrer nods but says nothing. There is the sound of marching in the hallway as a phalanx of Hitlerjugend students follow their leader. Herr Lehrer nods at Joachim but says nothing.

EXT. COBBLESTONE STREET, AUSTRIA - DAY

SUPER: "1936, A TOWN IN AUSTRIA"

JOACHIM (now 17) marches with five other Hitler Youth down an Austrian Main Street. Six to Ten ONLOOKERS (various ages and types) from windows and doorways CHEER, but a few sneer. Several look away. One young mother's face is tense; she turns her child into her skirts.

One onlooker, an elderly man, crosses his arms and watches without clapping. He mutters something under his breath.

One onlooker (boy, 10) hesitates before raising his arm in a weak salute. The boy's father (30) grips his shoulder, a clear warning.

Two men (20s) whisper to each other, step away, and vanish.

The parade ends and the Hitler Youth including Joachim stop marching in front of an intimidating DISTRICT LEADER (20s). The Leader addresses the group.

DISTRICT LEADER
Today, you brought honor to the
Führer. Look at the streets! The
people cheered for you because they
see in you the strength of Germany.
They see the future marching before
them, bold and unstoppable! The
Führer trusts you.

(MORE)

DISTRICT LEADER (CONT'D)
The Fatherland trusts you. Will you
prove yourself worthy?

HITLER YOUTH
Sieg Heil! Seig Heil!

The boys salute.

The silence stretches.

DISTRICT LEADER
You are dismissed.

The Hitler Youth lower their arms in perfect synch.

The Leader strides away. Tension eases.

Joachim exhales slightly. HERMANN (now 17) grins and nudges
HEINRICH (now 17).

HERMANN
Did you feel that? Like lightning
in your chest!

HEINRICH
The District Leader is right. This
is history. We are part of history!

Joachim nods slightly but gazes back at the onlookers
watching them.

HEINRICH (CONT'D)
What is it, Joachim? Do you not
feel the energy?

HERMANN
What is wrong? Do you not support
the Reich?

Joachim looks as if he has been jarred from a deep thought.

JOACHIM
Of course, I do. I was just
thinking about the parade. The
people we saw, not all were
cheering.

HEINRICH
They should have been! We are
liberating them!

HERMANN
The Reich is growing. One people,
one empire, one future.

JOACHIM

We're liberating them, yes, I know.
Giving them their place in
something greater. They should know
that, I think.

Joachim glances towards the onlookers still watching them.

JOACHIM (CONT'D)

It is the future. This land will be
living space for them and all
Germans.

HEINRICH

Yes! The Führer has already seen
it. The land to the East is ours by
right. We will take back what has
been stolen and give Germany the
space it needs.

HERMANN

Imagine, Joachim. A true empire
stretching beyond the borders they
corralled us into. Our generation
will spring open the trap made by
the Treaty of Versailles!

Joachim nods, silent.

JOACHIM

Yes. It is time.

INT. HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOM - DAY

Ted sits in a classroom with an American Flag; the calendar on the wall is November 1936. Maps of Europe and the world are on the wall. MR. GRIZZARDI (40s) is circulating in the classroom as students write at their desks. Students (all 17) include TED, ANNA, SARAH, RACHEL, EDDIE, and GEORGE.

Question on the chalkboard: Should the United States have boycotted the Olympics in Berlin? Why or why not?

Students are writing essays quietly for a moment. Clock ticks. Mr. Grizzard goes to the front of the classroom.

MR. GRIZZARDI

All right, class. Pencils down.
Let's take the last few minutes to
hear some of your thoughts on this
question.

Mr. Grizzard points to the question on the blackboard.

MR. GRIZZARDI (CONT'D)

Our U.S. teams will be in Berlin this summer. The question I put to you today is: In your opinion, was the Olympic committee correct in sending our teams to Nazi Germany? Remember, these are opinions, so there is not necessarily a right and a wrong -- only a better defense. Anyone care to start?

JACOB

We should have boycotted the games since Hitler has barred Jewish athletes from competing in them. By participating, the United States has tacitly expressed support of Hitler's antisemitism.

ANNA

I disagree. I am glad that we will be going to the games because the United States isn't all one religion or all one color. We are many and we will show the world that there is not one single "superior race," but there are many superior individuals of all races and creeds.

MR. GRIZZARDI

The Olympic Games are designed to showcase peace and diplomatic relations among nations. They are also a way for the hosting country to showcase the country's beauty and talent. This year, what do you think Hitler wants to show the rest of the world?

TED

He wants to prove that Nazi Germany is strong, disciplined, and better than everyone else. He'll put on a perfect show--clean streets, proud athletes, and big crowds cheering. He'll make sure the world sees exactly what he wants them to see.

JACOB

But it won't be the truth. The truth is what he's hiding: attacks on Jews, people arrested for disagreeing with the Nazis and speaking out, and then there are the books they've been burning because they ask the wrong questions. The Olympics will be his disguise, but if people look closely, they'll see what's happening!

The bell rings. Students exit noisily.

MR. GRIZZARDI

I will collect your essays tomorrow.

CUT TO:

EXT. OLYMPIC GAMES IN BERLIN - DAY - STOCK

SUPER: "1936 OLYMPIC GAMES IN BERLIN"

EXT. STANDS AT OLYMPIC GAMES - DAY

Paul and Erika are in the stands with Joachim's childhood friends, Otto, and August. They all cheer for Joachim and his Hitler Youth friends dressed in white and in the parade.

PAUL

Did you notice it? The streets as we walked here are spotless. Not a thing out of place.

ERIKA

Yes. Hitler is putting on a fine show for the world.

Paul and Erika whisper to each other.

PAUL

Not just the streets. No beggars, no workers with their tools looking for jobs. It's as if they've hidden the city itself, scrubbed it down, and painted over anything ... unsightly.

ERIKA

No unsightly people, you mean. No one is poor or dirty, no one is different. No misfits.

PAUL

You mean, no one who isn't like us.

ERIKA

We are a Christian nation, are we not?

INT. MOVIE THEATER, LOBBY - NIGHT

A sign reads, "NEWSREEL SPECIALS-1936 OLYMPIC GOLD IN BERLIN!"

Ted, Liam, and Johnny jostle into the lobby. Posters of upcoming films line the walls including "San Francisco," "The Great Ziegfeld," and "The Plainsman."

The boys huddle in the corner of the lobby to talk.

JOHNNY

So there are two newsreels today, right?

TED

Right: runners and rowers.

LIAM

Jesse Owens is tearing up Berlin. Four gold medals in the bag! 100 and 200 meters and the long jump. When I heard the American team won the 400-meter relay, I thought Hitler might explode! I listened to the whole thing, but I can hardly wait to see it on the screen!

TED

Jesse Owens is amazing. And how about those country boys from U-Dub?

JOHNNY

Did you hear the radio broadcast? The Huskies almost didn't make the final round. Boy, that was a nail-biter.

LIAM

The coxswain, Bobby Mach, is a genius. He timed it perfectly.

JOHNNY

I was wondering about that. I mean, they call it an 8-man boat, but there are nine guys in it, right? What's the coxswain do anyway?

TED

The coxswain calls the shots; he doesn't row, but he paces the rowers. He steers, watches the other teams, and decides when to push harder. Remember, all the rowers are facing backward. Only the coxswain sees what's happening on the water in front of them.

JOHNNY

From the pictures in the paper, he looks like a runt next to the guy in front of him.

LIAM

Coxswains are not there for power, they're there for strategy.

TED

The guy in front of him is Don Hume and he's a real hero in my book.

JOHNNY

Why a hero? It's a team, right?

TED

Yeah. A team, but Hume was the boat's "stroke." That's the guy who sets the pace that the coxswain calls. He didn't let up for a second, and neither did the other guys. Just goes to show, don't give up. Never give up. Not even when you're going down and you're up against a team that's had a whole helluva lot more experience.

LIAM

Especially then.

The boys enter the doors to the main theater.

INT. MOVIE THEATER, MAIN THEATER - CONTINUOUS

The theater is self-segregated. Black people on the sides, whites in the center. The three teens move to the center.

The lights dim in the packed theater, and the crowd hushes.

EXT. 1936 OLYMPIC ROWING NEWSREEL - DAY - STOCK

NEWSREEL ANNOUNCER (V.O.)

From Berlin, we bring you exclusive motion pictures of the 1936 Olympic Rowing competition. It is August 9, and America's Rowing Team, having faced an uphill battle to get to Berlin, faced the most formidable competition in the world! Rowing in Lane 6, the lane most exposed to the wind and currents at the Grünau Regatta Course, the US Team has a tough go. Six boats all rowing for their countries. Eight men rowing for the gold! And they're off!

(beat)

It looks like the Americans had a slow start from the outside lane. They're in last position, trailing Switzerland, Hungary, and Great Britain, with Germany in the lead, trailed closely by Italy...

(beat)

The crowd is cheering wildly, but with 1000 meters to go, the Americans are not easing up! They're passing Great Britain and Hungary and have moved into fourth place! With 500 meters to go, it looks like Bobby Moch is pushing his team to the max. Can they do it? They're sprinting to pass Switzerland. The Americans are in third! Now surging to move past Italy and ... can it be? Can it be? They are neck and neck with Germany! And - oh my! Oh my! It's a photo finish! The United States has won gold! Italy is second with silver, and the German team, favored to win, has to settle for the bronze.

(MORE)

NEWSREEL ANNOUNCER (V.O.) (CONT'D)

The crowd was on their feet
chanting for Germany and Italy
throughout the race, but the finish
was so stunning that many of the
75,000 spectators looked to be in
shock! They can't believe what they
just saw. America has beaten
Germany!

Lights in the theater rise slightly as the reel is changed.

JOHNNY

Wow! What a race. An unknown team
from the American West showed those
Nazis!

TED

Those racist bastards. I can hardly
wait to see Jesse Owens show them
what's what!

A BLACK TEEN (18) listening to their conversation, crosses
the aisle.

BLACK TEEN

Oh yeah. I hear ya. Those Nazis are
racist bastards for sure. But
America? Oh no, not America! Look
around, buddy. White America has
its own way of keeping us down. If
you're black and can run like the
wind, you can run for America! But
when Jesse Owens comes home, he'll
still be black and that makes him a
second-class citizen. Those racist
Nazi bastards? They don't have a
lock on racism, that's for damn
sure.

Lights dim as the newsreel begins playing ...

EXT. 1936 OLYMPIC RACING NEWSREEL - DAY - STOCK

NEWSREEL ANNOUNCER (V.O.)

Hello, America. It's the 400-meter
relay and it is Jesse Owens' fourth
shot at Olympic gold! What we may
be looking at here is history!

(beat)

And they're off! A blazing start
for the Americans as Jesse Owens
explodes out of the blocks!

(MORE)

NEWSREEL ANNOUNCER (V.O.) (CONT'D)

He's sprinting hard, eating up the track, smooth and fast as he reaches the first exchange, and there's the baton!

(beat)

Now it's in the hands of two-time Olympic silver medalist Ralph Metcalfe, flying down the backstretch! He's keeping the Americans in front, pushing hard as the Germans and Italians try to close the gap! The handoff is coming, and it's clean to Foy Draper. Look at that speed! Draper is pure power, driving through the turn, stretching the Americans' lead. He's charging towards the handoff-- a perfect pass! Now it's Frank Wykoff, the team anchor is a blur! The crowd is on its feet. No one can catch him! He's flying towards the finish line--and Wykoff crosses first. The United States wins the gold in world record time! And Jesse Owens clinches his fourth gold medal in Berlin!

The three teens and the white audience around them cheer, but the black audience on the sides leap to their feet. The black teen crosses the aisle to Ted and his friends.

BLACK TEEN

(to Ted and friends)

White America should stand, too.

LIAM

You're right about that, and you're right about racist America, too.

Liam stands, and the others follow. The whole middle "white" section follows their lead.

TED

(looks around)

Hell of a thing, isn't it?
Americans, black and white,
Christian and not, are winning for
all of us, but not all of us get to
sit at the same table.

INT. AIR WAR SCHOOL CLASSROOM, GERMANY - DAY

SUPER: "AIR WAR SCHOOL DRESDEN, GERMANY 1937"

A stark lecture hall with rows of wooden desks. Maps and charts hang on the walls, along with propaganda posters extolling the might of the Luftwaffe. On a side wall, we SEE a diagram on one board with bullet trajectories, speed, and wind direction. At the front of the room is a blackboard, where a diagram of a bomber formation is sketched in chalk.

An instructor, HAUPTMANN MÜLLER (40s), stands by a lectern, a pointer in hand. JOACHIM (19), HERMANN (19), and FIVE fellow Cadets (18-19) sit in crisp uniforms, notebooks open. The Hauptmann (captain) strikes the blackboard with the pointer.

HAUPTMANN KRÜGER

Gentlemen, the events at Guernica provided invaluable insights into the coordination of bomber and fighter units. The lesson is clear: air superiority is the cornerstone of modern warfare. Without it, the ground forces are vulnerable, and the mission is jeopardized.

He pauses, scanning the room to ensure he has their attention.

HAUPTMANN KRÜGER (CONT'D)

Your role as fighter pilots is to ensure that such missions succeed. A bomber squadron is only as effective as the fighters that protect it. Consider Guernica. Our Condor Legion's success was not just in the bombing itself but in the precision of its escort.

He gestures to a map of Guernica pinned to the wall, showing flight paths and bombing targets.

HAUPTMANN KRÜGER (CONT'D)

Now, examine this. The bombers flew in three waves, targeting strategic points: the bridge, roads, and railway station. But without the Messerschmitt Bf 109s patrolling the skies, enemy aircraft could have disrupted the mission.

Hermann raises his hand and waits to be called upon.

HERMANN

Hauptmann Krüger, were the civilian casualties part of the strategy?

HAUPTMANN KRÜGER

The objective was to destroy infrastructure and cripple enemy morale. The civilian casualties, while regrettable, are an unavoidable consequence of total war. Do not forget, gentlemen, we must ensure victory for the Fatherland, no matter the cost.

He turns to Joachim.

HAUPTMANN KRÜGER (CONT'D)

Cadet Müncheberg, as a fighter pilot, how would you position your squadron to defend a bomber formation from interception?

JOACHIM

Herr Hauptmann, I would assign two planes to fly ahead as a vanguard, scouting for threats. The rest of the squadron would maintain close formation around the bombers, prioritizing any incoming fighters.

HAUPTMANN KRÜGER

What about fuel conservation? Over-aggressive maneuvers can leave you unable to return to base.

JOACHIM

Maintain altitude advantage, use short bursts of fire, and avoid unnecessary engagements unless the bombers are directly threatened.

HAUPTMANN KRÜGER

Yes. Fighter pilots must balance aggression with discipline. The skies are no place for reckless heroics.

He turns back to the map.

HAUPTMANN KRÜGER (CONT'D)

One final point, gentlemen. Psychological impact. Aerial bombardment is not just about destroying targets. It is about breaking the enemy's will to fight. As fighter pilots, you will play a crucial role in demonstrating the Luftwaffe's dominance.

(MORE)

HAUPTMANN KRÜGER (CONT'D)

When the enemy sees our planes
overhead, they must feel powerless.
That is true air superiority.

The cadets nod, some jotting down notes, others staring intently at the map.

Joachim glances at his notebook, where he's sketched a rough diagram of a fighter formation, the shadow of a bomber outlined in the center.

EXT. SANTA CLARA UNIVERSITY - LATE AFTERNOON

SUPER: SANTA CLARA UNIVERSITY, 1937

FATHER O'CONNELL (60S), a Jesuit priest, and TED (now 18) are walking on campus.

FATHER O'CONNELL

So, Ted, I'm glad you wanted to talk. You seem to be having some trouble understanding the evils of Communism.

TED

I understand that you're saying that Communism masks itself as a government that stands for equality and fairness for all. I understand that it replaces churches with the state, freedom with control, and morality with ideology. Blah-blah-blah. And I know there is no freedom of speech or religion in Russia.

(beat)

I understand all that. You made it abundantly clear that the Church believes that Communism is an ideology against which we should fight.

As they walk, they pass by the Mission Church.

FATHER O'CONNELL

Communism denies the soul, Ted. It seeks to erase God and replace Him with the State. Stalin has priests shot and churches burned.

TED

So, carrying that statement to its logical conclusion, does that mean by fighting Communism, Hitler is doing the Lord's work?

(beat)

But he can't be! Look at Guernica! Senseless killing of innocent Christian women and children. So who is stopping Hitler? Not the West, the Communists!

Father O'Connell shakes his head at the paper.

FATHER O'CONNELL

One evil does not justify another.

TED

But if the Communists are so evil and the Nazis are the only ones fighting them...You know, the enemy of my enemy...

FATHER O'CONNELL

Is not necessarily your friend. What the Germans have done to Guernica is abominable, but Hitler and Stalin are two sides of the same coin, Ted. The Nazis preach racial purity, and the Communists teach class purity. Both are building their empires on the bones of the innocent.

TED

But, Father, plenty of Catholics see Hitler as the better devil. The man's got priests at his rallies and crosses in his speeches. At least he doesn't call himself an atheist.

FATHER O'CONNELL

Wolves can dress as shepherds. Don't be fooled by his crosses, Ted. The Nazis twist the Church to serve their ends, just as the Bolsheviks erase it. Different lies, same damnation.

TED

The church's position is somewhat muddy, Father O'Connell, you have to admit since Pope Pius XI basically defanged his clergy in Germany telling them they couldn't oppose the Nazi government.

Father O'Connell stops. They are in front of the church.

FATHER O'CONNELL

As you are aware from class, Pope Pius XI subsequently issued an encyclical condemning Nazi racial ideology and calling on Catholics to resist Nazi influence.

TED

Seems a little late to me and if both sides are a lie, where does a man stand?

Long beat.

Father O'Connell walks slowly, hands clasped behind his back.

FATHER O'CONNELL

You know, Ted, when I was younger, I thought the world was moving, however slowly, toward righteousness. Toward justice. But now? Now, I see two great storms gathering—one in the East, the other in the heart of Europe—and I wonder if we are drifting toward ruin instead.

TED

You mean Communism and Fascism?

FATHER O'CONNELL

Yes. Communism preaches equality but builds its kingdom on the ashes of the faithful. It strips man of his soul, of his God, and calls it progress.

TED

And Fascism?

FATHER O'CONNELL

Wraps itself in flags and prayers,
but beneath all that pageantry, I
see something darker—a hunger for
power that knows no morality.

TED

What about Father Coughlin? He says
we should fight Communism. He says
Fascism is the answer.

Father O'Connell stops and turns to Ted.

FATHER O'CONNELL

Coughlin sees an enemy in
Communism, but he does not see the
devil at his own doorstep. He
preaches against tyranny yet flirts
with another form of it. No, Ted, I
cannot follow a man who uses the
language of faith to sow hatred.
Christ does not stand with the
hammer and sickle, but neither does
He march beneath the swastika.

EXT. SHIP DECK - DAY

Ted and his father are on the deck of a luxury ship.

SUPER: "1938 PASSENGER LINER TO EUROPE"

TED

Wow, Dad: The Rock of Gibraltar.
Europe on one side, Africa on the
other. You can tell why it's been
fought over for all these years.

ERNEST

Yes you can.

TED

There are sure a lot of warships
surrounding it! Destroyers,
battleships, even aircraft
carriers. The British aren't taking
this little island for granted!

Ted takes a photograph.

ERNEST

This rock is the Gateway to the
Mediterranean.

(MORE)

ERNEST (CONT'D)

Whoever holds Gibraltar controls
the straits and the sea beyond.

TED

I'm sure Hitler wants it.

ERNEST

I'm sure he does. He'd like to
sweep all of Europe under his Nazi
flag.

TED

I don't think that will happen. Do
you, Dad? I mean the democracies of
Europe will stop him, won't they?

ERNEST

We don't know yet. But I'm glad you
get to see this part of the world
now. There's a lot of history here.

TED

You said you wanted to take us to
Europe while there's still a Europe
to see.

ERNEST

I did say that. I know you're
keeping a diary and the camera we
got for you will take some dandy
photographs! It will be good to
document what is here.

TED

You trying to make me into Ernest
Hemingway?

ERNEST

I know you enjoy writing your
column for the college newspaper.
I'm just encouraging you to see
Europe with your eyes wide open.

Ted takes a close-up of the British flag on the Rock. They
pause for a long while.

TED

At least he's Christian.

ERNEST

Who's Christian?

TED

Hitler. I mean he's not Communist.

ERNEST

You're right. Hitler is not a Communist, but I wouldn't call him Christian either. He's a wolf in sheep's clothing.

TED

That's what Father O'Connell said. I think that's why the Christian nations ignore him.

ERNEST

It's worked so far.

A destroyer crosses their bow as they pass the Rock.

TED

Do you think there will be war, Dad?

ERNEST

I hope not, Ted. I sincerely hope not.

Ernest puts his arm around Ted.

INSERT PHOTOS of the Sweetland's visit to Europe in 1938.

EXT. AUSTRIA, 1938 - DAY - STOCK

SUPER: GERMANY'S OCCUPATION OF AUSTRIA, MARCH 12, 1938

INT. PRIVATE ART GALLERY - NIGHT

SUPER: "ART GALLERY, FALL 1938"

Ted (now 19) is with his friend, Liam, in an art collector's salon (or private living room) where Ten European émigrés (various ages and types) smoke cigarettes and drink wine. Surrealist paintings (Ernst, Dali, Miró) are featured. They pause in front of an Ernst painting tacked to the wall.

TED

I didn't see any paintings like this in the Louvre last summer. These paintings are like nightmares of a world that shouldn't exist.

LIAM

It is shocking, Ted. That's the point.

(MORE)

LIAM (CONT'D)

These surrealists aren't just painting nightmares, they're shaking us, trying to wake us up.

TED

Wake us up to what?

LIAM

To the disaster we're sleepwalking into!

One female EMIGRÉ FRENCH ARTIST (30s) tries to cling to Ted.

EMIGRÉ FRENCH ARTIST

Ernst saw it first. Before all of you. Before all of us.

She inhales her cigarette seductively, annoying Ted.

TED

Saw what?

EMIGRÉ FRENCH ARTIST

The future. Soon, you won't need a gallery to see this.

She taps ash onto the floor, further annoying Ted.

EMIGRÉ FRENCH ARTIST (CONT'D)

You'll just have to look at a newspaper.

Liam nods at the woman. Ted continues studying the painting and extricates the woman from his arm.

TED

I could use some air.

Ted exits to the courtyard. Liam follows.

EXT. PRIVATE ART GALLERY, COURTYARD - CONTINUOUS

In a quiet courtyard behind the salon, vines creep along walls. Single candles flicker on the few wrought iron tables. Conversation in the gallery is distant.

TED

When I was in Europe last summer, I sure didn't see what those artists saw. Maybe I'm being a coward. Maybe it's easier not to see it. What that woman said was the future, I mean.

Liam shakes his head and swirls his wine.

LIAM

You sound like every goddamn politician in London and Washington D.C while Hitler strips people of their rights, their dignity. First, he takes their citizenship, then their jobs, their homes, their place in the world.

TED

I didn't see that, Liam.

LIAM

Of course you didn't. You saw what they wanted you to see, Ted. The cafés were open, the trains ran on time, and the newspapers printed what kept people calm. But behind all that? In France, they're too divided to act and half of them think the Maginot Line from the last war will save them. And England? They're selling peace like it's something you can buy at the market, signing treaties and making speeches while Hitler builds his war machine. You didn't see unrest because they've dressed it up as hope.

TED

Italy looked normal, too. All the Italians seem to like Mussolini. It felt like a very satisfied nation.

LIAM

(Inhales deeply)

Satisfied, huh? Of course it looked normal—when a man's got a boot on his neck long enough, he forgets what standing up feels like. Mussolini's got them marching in step, singing his praises, and keeping their mouths shut. Is that satisfaction or fear?

Ted sips his wine. Liam takes out a cigarette.

TED

I don't know about fear. I didn't see it, but I can tell you Mussolini's been busy with public works projects.

LIAM

Oh yeah? Like what?

TED

Like the Autostrada—smooth as glass, stretching for miles. We drove from Milan to Florence without a single bump. Efficient, modern... it felt like progress.

LIAM

Progress, is it? You think Mussolini paved those roads for rich tourists in Packards? Those highways weren't built for Sunday drives—they were built to move tanks and troops.

TED

Here we go again. If there is war, it won't be ours. The European nations are making alliances and Britain and France will step up if Hitler ever does anything against the Treaty of Versailles.

LIAM

You think so? Those cowards will stand up to what, Ted? What will convince them, convince you, that Hitler is not just adjusting state boundaries, he's attempting to change the world order?

Ted shakes his head. Liam inhales deeply on his cigarette.

TED

It just seems, I dunno, like the war mongers are trying to fatten us up for the slaughter.

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. HOTEL BALLROOM - NIGHT

SUPER: "FAIRMONT HOTEL, SAN FRANCISCO, SPRING 1939"

The Grand Ballroom is filled with the brassy sound of a LIVE BIG BAND. Ted is swinging with CARLA (20), a beautiful young woman and a great dancer. The dance floor is packed with twenty college students in their best evening wear, moving to a lively swing number. Ted and Carla laugh as they dance. Carla is quicker on her feet than Ted.

CARLA

Hey, Ted. For a man who spends most of his time dancing with a typewriter, you're not too bad on the dance floor.

TED

I can write a scathing editorial and do a passable swing-out. After all, the modern man is versatile.

The band slows to a smooth foxtrot. Ted and Carla catch their breath as they glide across the floor to the bar. A voice calls out, and JACK (21) slaps Ted on his back.

JACK

Hey, Ted! That misguided editorial of yours, gotta say, sure stirred up the campus.

Four college students, still holding their drinks, cluster around. Bill (20) is amused, and HENRY (21) and JACK (21) are dead serious.

BILL

Yeah, you think this war talk is just fattening us up for the slaughter on "Mars' altar" wasn't it? Quite the poetic touch.

TED

Am I wrong? I've been thinking about this for a long time. A year ago, I was in Europe -- the old country, as they say. But they've all been at each other's throats for centuries. What makes their squabbles our business now? Anyway, Prime Minister Chamberlain assured the Brits that there will be peace in our time.

HENRY

Really, Ted? You believe that? You believe that now that he has all the riches of the Rhineland, Hitler is just going to take his winnings and go home?

TED

I'm just saying the warmongers are trying to lure us into a conflict that isn't ours.

BILL

(raising his glass)

My dad left a leg in France. Can't say he's happy about it. Here's to staying out of it! No men, no munitions, no meddling!

JACK

Open your damn eyes! This isn't about a few diplomats haggling over treaties! This is about Hitler and his goose-stepping Nazis taking over Europe. All of it, that's what he's going for.

TED

What do you suggest? That the U.S. sends our generation to get maimed or die in another European war? Do you think if we jump in, the world will suddenly be safe for democracy? That's what they told our parents and grandparents in '17. Twenty years later, here we are again.

HENRY

What if we wait too long? What if while we're dancing, the world burns?

Carla takes Ted's hand and returns to the dance floor, but we see that Ted is subdued and the two leave the dance floor. Henry and a few others linger at the bar.

EXT. ENGLISH CHANNEL - NIGHT

SUPER: "SEPTEMBER 1939 - GERMANY INVADES POLAND"

NIGHT: We SEE Joachim seated in a fighter jet (Messerschmitt Bf 109) over the Channel.

White cliffs of Dover in the near distance. He sees a convoy of merchant ships, escorted by smaller warships. Radio chatter from high command tells them what is happening 600 miles away over Poland.

RADIO CHATTER

Luftwaffe units over Warsaw...heavy resistance....

Radio static.

BAUMANN (O.S.)

(Grunting)

Those Poles are tough bastards. They're doing this alone. Sure as heck, the Frogs aren't helping 'em!

BRANDT (O.S.)

Someone should tell the French government that the ally they pledged to help is at war.

BAUMANN (O.S.)

Goes to show what their alliance meant. They're probably too busy drinking wine and spreading pâté on bread to notice.

Laughter over the radio. Joachim, silent, watching.

FLIGHT LEADER (O.S.)

Stay sharp, men. Remember, the Brits pledged their support for Poland, too. Just because we haven't seen movement yet doesn't mean they aren't mobilizing. Our job is to stop them.

BAUMANN (O.S.)

The Brits are probably still debating whether war is bad for business.

BRANDT (O.S.)

Strange, isn't it? Our guys are fighting tooth and nail over Poland, and we're over here babysitting the Channel.

FLIGHT LEADER (O.S)

(suddenly focused)

Hunter One, unidentified aircraft near Düsseldorf. Move to intercept.

JOACHIM

Roger that.

Joachim banks hard.

INT. SANTA CLARA UNIVERSITY, DORM ROOM - DAY

Ted sits alone at his desk, writing. He speaks softly to himself. A calendar reads, "September 3, 1939.

TED (V.O.)

It was 11:15 in the morning in London when Neville Chamberlain sat in his cabinet room at Number 10 Downing Street. Through his mind, a thousand images seethed--the group of children playing in the park. The smile of employees leaving work. Sparrows chirping in the trees. The door opened and the broadcast engineer whispered, "Prime Minister, you are on the air, sir." He roused himself, cleared his throat, and his tired voice carried the black message into the night: Britain is at war with Germany.

Ted gazes out a peaceful window as he imagines the war.

EXT. POLAND, 1939 - DAY - STOCK

Germany's invasion of Poland.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. FRANCE, 1940 - DAY - STOCK

War in France.

SUPER: "ONE YEAR LATER: SPRING 1940, FRANCE"

CHURCHILL (V.O.)

We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender, and if, which I do not for a moment believe, this Island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, would carry on the struggle, until, in God's good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old.

INT. SANTA CLARA UNIVERSITY, CLASSROOM - DAY

Father O'Connell holds up the front page of the Oakland Tribune dated June 4, 1940.

The same Jack, Henry, Bill, and Ted are quiet in their seats. Father O'Connell switches the radio off.

FATHER O'CONNELL

By this time next week, maybe the week after, Paris may no longer belong to the French.

JACK

So that's it? After all their talk about defending democracy, they abandoned Poland and now France just folds?

HENRY

They fought, Jack. But they haven't been building a war machine like Hitler has. The Germans have been planning this for years.

BILL

Still, even if France falls, there's an ocean between us and Europe!

(MORE)

BILL (CONT'D)

Like Father Coughlin writes in Social Justice, we're being pushed into this war by the same people who got us into the last one-- the bankers who profit while Americans die. Why should we fight for London or Paris? What do we owe them?

Father O'Connell points to a map of Europe blackened where Germany has taken territory.

FATHER O'CONNELL

If France falls, as I expect it will, the British may very well have to fight the Germans alone. And tell me, Bill, how long do you think they can hold out?

BILL

I dunno. It's just that... well, my mother used to listen to Father Coughlin every week and now she reads his newspaper.

HENRY

(under his breath)
He's as racist as the Nazis.

FATHER O'CONNELL

What did you say, Henry?

Henry sits up and speaks loudly.

HENRY

I said that Father Coughlin is a racist. That's why his so-called Hour of Power was taken off the area.

Father O'Connell nods.

FATHER O'CONNELL

You are right, Henry. It doesn't make me happy to say that, but wearing a collar doesn't make a man right. Many in the church now stand against him.

HENRY

His Social Justice rag is filled with Nazi propaganda.

JACK

It just goes to show, the U.S.
needs to step in, Father. We
should've stepped in months ago.

HENRY

As Churchill said, the Brits will
fight to the end, but they need us.
They need the New World with all
its power and might...

FATHER O'CONNELL

Inspiring words, no?

JACK

But we're not powerful and mighty!
We're cowards, hovering in the
shadow of isolationists and
Coughlin, that snake in a Roman
collar!

FATHER O'CONNELL

Watch your tongue, Jack. We do not
fight lies with slander.

(to Ted)

And you, Ted? A while ago, you were
so certain that this war wasn't our
concern. That Hitler was just
another European tyrant fighting a
war we had no part in. Except, I
believe you argued that since
Hitler was fighting against
Communism, we should support him.
What do you say now?

Ted shrugs and looks despondent.

TED

I don't know.

Jack scoffs, but Father O'Connell silences him with a look.

FATHER O'CONNELL

That's an honest answer, Ted. And
it's more than most are willing to
admit. France is on the brink of
falling, and Britain may stand
alone, as Churchill said. We may be
able to stay out of this war... for
now. But I'll tell you this,
gentlemen, there are moments in
history when neutrality becomes a
moral betrayal.

(MORE)

FATHER O'CONNELL (CONT'D)

If that moment comes, you must
decide which side you stand on.

Bells outside toll the hour and go on tolling for a bit as classrooms empty for the last day of the semester. Students can be heard outside cheering that summer is here.

Father O'Connell looks out the window; the boys in his classroom, subdued, stay seated.

FATHER O'CONNELL (CONT'D)

Summer is here, gentlemen. Some of you will return home to San Francisco, to Los Angeles, or to the valley farms. Some will work in your fathers' businesses or spend your days in the sun. And when fall comes, you will return to these halls, to your books, to your discussions—"

He pauses, his fingers tapping once against the desk, his voice quiet but firm.

FATHER O'CONNELL (CONT'D)

Next semester, you will embark on the last year of your college education, but the world may not be the same.... This summer I want you to think about the war. And I want you to think about what you believe is worth fighting for. What is worth sacrificing for? Because by the time you come back, France will likely have fallen as Churchill expects it will soon. By the time you come back, the war may look very different. And though we sit here, blessed with peace, this is not just a war of men and machines. It is a war of ideas, of principles. It is a war that will define the world you will inherit.

JANE (V.O.)

My dad idolized his brother. He couldn't talk about him without tearing up, so I never pressed, but Dad kept all his letters and Ted wrote a regular column for his college newspapers so it's through his own words that I came to know my uncle.

(MORE)

JANE (V.O.) (CONT'D)

In Germany, I was nervous to meet Joachim's uncles, but the conversation turned out to be easy. Christian opened his home and put on the coffee table hundreds of pictures, postcards, and newspaper articles about his famous nephew. We, Christian, Konrad, and I weren't so different as we talked about the past—each of us a little uneasy, sensing the world tilting once again toward nationalism.

INT. MESS HALL - DAY

SUPER: "MIRA LOMA FLIGHT ACADEMY, OXNARD, CA, 1941"

Ted is with Three other cadets eating lunch, still in uniform. They include FRANK (22), RALPH (21), and JIMMY (22). Ted has a text and notebook next to him.

FRANK

Nothin' beats flying over open fields. Back home in Nebraska, I had my first solo in my dad's crop duster when I was sixteen.

RALPH

Same here. Flew my uncle's Piper Cub around the California Valley.

JIMMY

Dusted cotton in Texas. Not the whole state, mind you, but a big chunk of it. What about you, Ted? Where'd you fly before this?

Jimmy nudges Ted's arm. Ted hesitates. Gives a small shrug.

TED

My own two feet. They took me to the summit of Mount Tallac. That's about 10,000 above sea level and as high as I've ever been.

A few chuckles. Not mocking. Surprised.

FRANK

Are you serious? Never even a joyride?

TED

I stuck my head out the car window
on Highway 50.

RALPH

Well, hell. That means when you
finally get up there, you'll
appreciate it more than the rest of
us who've already been there. It
never gets old, though.

FRANK

You'll see, Ted. When you leave the
dirt behind, you step into the
Lord's back forty. Nothin' like it.

Jimmy points a fork at Ted's notebook.

JIMMY

You a college boy?

TED

Was. Dropped out.

JIMMY

Well, study this then. And no
taking shortcuts 'cause there are
no second chances in the air.

RALPH

You got that right. If your engine
freezes and your brain freezes at
the same time...you fall.

Jimmy jabs at the notebook again.

JIMMY

You gotta know this stuff so well,
your hands and feet know what to do
without your brain.

Ted nods quietly and touches his notebook.

TED

I'll keep up.

The men begin clearing their plates.

FRANK

We got a Sunday pass. You're
welcome to join if you want.

TED

Thanks guys. I'll be going to mass,
but that's about all the break I
can give myself.

FRANK

(smirking)

The only kind of kneeling we'll be
doing tomorrow is down on one knee
begging some pretty girl for a
dance.

JIMMY

But if you're going to church
anyway, you may as well put in a
good word for us farm boys.

TED

I'll do that. I'll tell Him that
you guys worship every time you
visit His back forty.

The men smile and leave. Ted sits in the mess hall, opens his notebook, and studies the diagram of airflow over wings, letting his fingers trace the wind over wings.

EXT. AIRFIELD IN GERMANY - DAY

Joachim wags the wings of his white Messerschmitt and lands.

When his plane stops, he is surrounded by a PILOT (20s), a MECHANIC (30), and the COMMANDING OFFICER (40) congratulating him, dragging him off the wing of the plane, and putting him on their shoulders. A PHOTOGRAPHER (25) is on the runway.

MECHANIC

Lieutenant Joachim! We heard you
had lots of action, but it looks
like you brought her home without a
mark on her!

PILOT

And another two victories for your
count? Is it true?

Joachim nods, "Yes."

PILOT (CONT'D)

Long live our First Lieutenant!

The men cheer.

Out of the crowd steps Joachim's Commanding Officer. Silence falls, and the group gives respectful distance.

COMMANDING OFFICER
 First Lieutenant Joachim. I
 congratulate you on your 43
 victories.
 (shakes his hand warmly)
 It's always good to see you,
 Joachim.

A photographer takes a picture and then positions Joachim and the Commanding Officer in front of the plane.

Joachim pulls his Knight's Cross from under his collar.

The Commanding Officer takes a medal from his pocket.

COMMANDING OFFICER (CONT'D)
 Captain Müncheberg, in the name of
 the Führer and the German people,
 today I award you the Oak Leaves to
 your Knight's Cross.

Commanding Officer places ribbon around Joachim's neck.

The men surge in and cheer, crowding around Joachim.

EXT. AIRFIELD IN CALIFORNIA - DAY

SUPER: "CAMP WASCO, CALIFORNIA CENTRAL VALLEY, 1941"

Ted and a FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR (50) watch a novice (TIM) land. Ted waits impatiently and mutters to the novice. Four Cadets are behind them.

TED
 Easy on those brakes, Tim. Feather
 'em, feather 'em like you're
 stepping on eggs.

The Flight Instructor grits his teeth, and whispers to Ted.

FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR
 If only he could hear you, Ted. The
 worst mistake in those tail
 draggers is stomping on the brakes.

The novice pilot hits the ground and then stomps on the brakes. The front wheels dig into the dirt.

FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR (CONT'D)
And there it is... the dreaded
wheelbarrow landing.

The Stearman flips forward, and rests for a minute awkwardly
on its nose.

A second later, the tail drops down.

The canopy pops open, the novice climbs out, clearly shaken.

From across the strip, a MECHANIC (50) throws his wrench into
the tool bin, making it clank. He stomps towards the wreck.

TED
That's tough...

FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR
Is he a buddy of yours?

TED
Yeah. He's really book-smart.

The Flight Instructor shakes his head as the Mechanic races
to the plane.

MECHANIC
That's \$2000 of government money
you just tore up, ya Rookie!

FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR
(to Ted)
Sorry about your friend.

TED
He'll get another chance, won't he?
I mean, he won't wash out because
of one bad landing, will he?

FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR
Don't know. Depends. It's better to
let a guy wash out when he can
still walk away. Doesn't matter how
smart you are, Cadet. Some of being
a pilot is instinct, and that's
hard to teach.

He puts his hand on Ted's shoulder.

FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR (CONT'D)
(CONT'D)
You're book smart, Ted, but you've
also got some good instincts, and
you're becoming a pilot.
(MORE)

FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR (CONT'D)

One step at a time. Today you'll learn to fly blind. Instruments only. Take nothing for granted up there. And take no shortcuts.

TED

That's what my buddies told me.

FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR

Do you have your hood?

TED

Yep.

FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR

Thought so. I heard you wore it last night to play poker.

TED

The guys told you that? Liars. I didn't wear it while playing, but I did put it on. I figured it'd be better to get used to having no eyes on terra firma, before getting 3,000 feet up.

FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR

Terra firma, huh? Are you planning on writing poetry after you wash out?

Ted turns to the instructor as he climbs into the plane.

TED

Just figured I'd get all philosophical before we punch a hole in the sky.

The instructor chuckles as he sits in the backseat.

FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR

Punch a hole in the sky, is it? Well then, once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more.

TED

(laughs)

Whoa! Who woulda guessed I'd get a Shakespeare-quotin' flight instructor?

Ted throws the hood on the passenger seat, buckles his seat belt, and grips the stick as the engine roars to life.

FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR
Alright, Cadet. Take us up.

Ted pushes the throttle forward. They take off.

INT. TED'S COCKPIT - CONTINUOUS

Ted's plane gains altitude. The altimeter reads 3,000 feet.

FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR
Hood on.

Ted clenches his jaw, takes the canvas hood from the seat, and pulls it over his head. Only the instrument panel glows in his downward vision.

TED
(muttering)
Airspeed. Attitude. Altitude.
Airspeed, Attitude, Altitude.

The plane wobbles.

FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR
(calmly)
Trust the instruments, Cadet. Your
gut lies. The needles don't.

The plane levels.

TED
It feels like we're banking left.

FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR
What do your instruments say?

TED
That we're level.

FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR
So, who do you trust?

TED
The instruments, sir.

FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR
Right. Your stomach is a liar.

TED
Got it.

The instructor uses his controls to cause the plane to bank one way and then the other. The plane wobbles and steadies.

FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR
Good job. Keep it steady.

The instructor forces a steep dip.

FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR (CONT'D)
What do your instruments say,
Cadet?

Ted inhales sharply. He watches the needle and whispers.

TED
Banking steep left, sir. Adjusting
ailerons.

The plane steadies out of the dive.

FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR
Good job, Cadet. Keep your eye on
those instruments.

The Flight Instructor gives the plane a series of unexpected rolls. Ted grips the stick. His stomach and the instruments are not in sync.

Ted levels the plane with his controls. This exercise is repeated several times.

FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR (CONT'D)
Nice work, Cadet. Now, let's see
what happens when I really mess
with your head.

Ted grits his teeth as the plane takes a sharp, unexpected right turn. Ted mumbles.

TED
Thought you already were.
(louder)
My stomach says I'm spinning;
instruments say we took a lazy
left, then a steep dive.

Ted levels the plane.

FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR
Not bad, Cadet. I hate to overuse a
metaphor but remember, your gut is
bluffing with a pair of deuces.
Your instruments are holding a
Royal Flush.

TED
Yes, sir.

EXT. AIRFIELD IN CALIFORNIA - SAME TIME

The other cadets are watching Ted's plane twist and turn above them. Among them are Ralph and Frank (experienced crop dusters), Mac, and Tim (who just nosed-in).

RALPH

God, Ted's a natural. Can you believe it? Never been up before he enlisted. Now look at him!

TIM

Yeah. Well, I guess I'm history. Those mechanics weren't any too pleased with my little nosebleed.

MAC

Ah, don't pay 'em any mind. Shake it off, Ivy League. The sky doesn't hold any grudges.

FRANK

Besides, you ain't a real pilot 'til you've bent some metal.

TIM

Yeah? How much metal are you boys planning to bend?

MAC

Me? None. I plan to be so smooth they'll name a maneuver after me.

Frank rolls his eyes, then pats Tim's shoulder.

FRANK

Look, planes can be fixed, and pilots get better. I mean it. It ain't how you fall, it's how you get back in the cockpit.

He gestures to Ted in the plane above them.

MAC

You know Ted crashed in training?

TIM

He didn't tell me that.

MAC

Pilots don't like to talk about the times they lose, just about the wins. But I'll tell you what.

TIM

I'm all ears.

MAC

After that, Ted practiced the hell out of every drill. Sat in the cockpit, studied like his life depended on it because it does, and after that belly land, he knew it.

Ralph looks at the plane in the air.

RALPH

Gotta hand it to the guy. I don't think he left base once in Basic. Now look at him. When we transferred to the desert, he flew every chance he got.

Frank looks up at the plane.

FRANK

I don't know if I'll do that well when they hood me!

TIM

You, Frank? With all your experience dusting crops and flying hither and yon?

FRANK

Don't know about any hither and yawning, but I had my two eyes wide open, didn't I? Flying blind is a whole new game.

TIM

Cripes. I'm getting queasy just watching him.

RALPH

Auguring your prop into the ground probably unsettled your stomach a bit, so don't sell yourself short, Ivy. You ain't washed out yet. Nobody remembers your first bad landing--unless you let it be your last.

INT. TED'S COCKPIT - CONTINUOUS

FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR

You can remove your hood, Cadet.

TED

Yes, sir!

Ted pulls the hood off and blinks in the blinding light.

FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR

Now that you survived your first instruments-only flight, do you think you can land this tin can without kissing the ground with the prop like your friend?

TED

Definitely can do that, Lieutenant. I specialize in soft landings.

The two return to base.

EXT. LONDON, 1940 - NIGHT - STOCK

A German bombing mission over London.

INT. JOACHIM'S COCKPIT - NIGHT

The planes are returning.

Joachim is in the cockpit over London after a bombing raid. We HEAR the radio exchange between Joachim and a WINGMAN (20s). There is a light crackle over the radio. Joachim is guarded and says little.

WINGMAN (V.O.)

God, look at that. London is a ruin. We've hit them hard, but still, they send their Spitfires up. Can't even imagine what it's like down there.

JOACHIM

Hmmm.

WINGMAN (V.O.)

Lucky for us, their boys barely nicked Berlin. Didn't do a damn thing worth talking about. Can you believe they even tried?

Joachim still says nothing. Hands and eyes steady. His voice is emotionless.

JOACHIM

It won't happen again.

INT. BARRACKS IN ARIZONA - NIGHT

A radio is playing Big Band music softly. Tim, Bill, and Frank are polishing their boots, sorting and packing through their footlockers. Ted is ironing his khaki dress shirt.

FRANK

Do you plan to frame that thing or wear it to graduation on Friday?

TED

Just making sure my shiny wings have the perfect landing spot.

TIM

Frank?

FRANK

Yeah, Ivy League?

TIM

You know I'm not Ivy League.

FRANK

Yeah, I know. We all know. So what's up?

TIM

I just wanted to thank you.
(to all the men)
I wanted to thank all of you. If it hadn't been for you guys telling me about the mistakes you made, I woulda walked away after that nosedive in Wasco.

JIMMY

Like I said before, planes can be fixed, and pilots get better...

The music is interrupted. All the men stare at the radio.

RADIO ANNOUNCER (V.O.)

We interrupt this broadcast to bring you a special bulletin: The Japanese have attacked Pearl Harbor. Hawaii is under assault. I repeat, the Japanese have attacked Pearl Harbor. This is not a drill.

The men's expressions vary; some freeze, some look shocked, and some go to the window. The room falls into silence.

FRANK

That's gotta be a mistake. They wouldn't...

RADIO ANNOUNCER (V.O.)

(jagged, crackly)

Battleships are burning in the harbor. We know that the Arizona got torpedoed; the West Virginia was bombed. Planes from Hickham Field are under attack.

Ted hangs his shirt in the window, and what sounds like a choked laugh escapes.

TED

Christ...Pearl Harbor. They actually did it.

FRANK

Damn it all to hell, Ted, what's up with you? You think this is funny?

TED

I don't think it's funny, Frank. It's not one bit funny. But I think it was inevitable.

FRANK

Jesus, Ted. People are dying. God knows how many guys like us just got blown to hell in Hawaii.

TED

I know. It's terrible. But the Japanese have just invited us into this war. Finally, the United States is going to do what we should have done a long time ago.

The men are quiet. Ted turns away from the window.

FRANK

What the hell, Ted. You sound like you're glad this happened.

TED

Not for the men who died. But yeah, I am glad that the Japanese sent us a personal invitation to get involved in this war. It took me a long time to get here, but Japan's been begging for a fight.

JIMMY

Japan? I thought all eyes were on Hitler and Europe. How did you know anything about Japan? You sound like you saw this coming.

TED

I did. Well, not really, but kind of. I dropped out of college the summer of '40 after France fell and got a job working for Eastman Kodak in Hawaii. Over there you couldn't sit in a bar, talk to a sailor, or listen to a radio without hearing what Japan was doing in China. The papers called it war, but it wasn't war. It was conquest. They weren't just fighting soldiers—they were taking entire cities and crushing them --- women and children among the rubble.

The room is silent. Some of the men exchange uneasy glances.

TED (CONT'D)

That summer the Japanese expanded into French Indochina, making their imperialist ideas clear. That's when I sailed home and enlisted.

Ted exhales, rubs a hand over his face.

TED (CONT'D)

Japan got us in this thing. This is what we trained for, guys. The sleeping giant, with all its power and might, has finally woken up and I, for one, am glad.

Frank looks away, jaw tight. The room stays quiet. Outside, a training engine coughs to life.

INT. BARRACKS IN ARIZONA - PRE-DAWN

SUPER: "LUKE AIRFIELD, ARIZONA, DECEMBER 1941"

Ted, Frank, Jimmy, and Tim are fully dressed in uniforms with silver wings over their hearts. We HEAR the rumble of transport plane engines idling outside. Each man holds his orders in one hand and a duffle bag slung over their shoulder.

FRANK

Well, looks like this is it.

TED

Funny, isn't it? Japan lit the match, but Europe's the first to get the fire.

FRANK

Yeah. My first stop is Churchill's backyard.

TED

I'm jealous. I got North Carolina.

TIM

Hell, I'd pick Carolina over Alaska any day. They're calling it "defensive duty," but let's be real. Freezing my ass off in the dark for six months isn't what I signed up for.

RALPH

You'll be fine, Ivy League. Maybe you'll even see some action if the Japs get cute near the Aleutians.

TED

What about you, Jimmy?

JIMMY

Florida. Flight instructor duty. Guess somebody's gotta teach the next batch of knuckleheads how not to wheelbarrow on their first solo.

Jimmy ribs Tim, reminding him of his "wheelbarrow."

TIM

I only did it once!

FRANK

You keep those boys alive, Jimmy. We're gonna need 'em.

A loud WHISTLE from a SERGEANT (30s) cuts through the noise. The pilots HUSTLE out of the barracks.

SERGEANT (O.C.)

Alright, let's move out! If you're headed east, transport's waiting on the far strip. Westbound, report to hangar!

Ted turns to Frank.

TED
Keep your wings level, Frank.

Frank grips Ted's hand firmly, holding his gaze.

FRANK
Yeah, yeah. One more thing, hot
shot, don't fly under any more
bridges just for the kicks.

They lock eyes.

TED
Give 'em hell, Frank.

They shake hands all around, clasping shoulders, and nods of encouragement before walking in separate directions. No one looks back.

INT. MESS HALL - DAY

Ted (22) and MAC (24) are at a table, drinking coffee, talking. There is a look of resigned despondence.

SUPER: "MYRTLE BEACH, N.C., SEPTEMBER 1942"

MAC
Frank was a damn fine man.

TED
I'll always think of him when I
leave the ground.

MAC
He teach you to take off?

TED
Nah. He taught me to see. First
time I met him he said "when you
leave the dirt behind, you step
into the Lord's Back 40."

MAC
At least he went down fighting.

TED
His family will get a purple heart
to remember him by. (beat) Some
consolation prize.

SILENCE

TED (CONT'D)

When in hell are they gonna let us at the Jerries, Mac? I've been teaching recruits for months and I feel like a goddam malingerer.

MAC

I'm guessing soon.

TED

Really? You think so?

MAC

Yeah. They need good pilots over there. If we can just get them through training.

TED

How many did we lose here at Myrtle Beach?

MAC

I try not to count, but the crowds coming to see crashes Sunday afternoons are seldom disappointed.

TED

One of my boys cut down three trees, broke the fuselage in half, clipped off both wings, and sent the engine ten feet ahead of the ship. They chopped him out with axes, and he only had a minor scalp injury.

MAC

Did he lose his nerve for pursuit?

TED

Nah. He was tougher than boot leather. Don't know where he is now though.

MAC

Let's perfect that right, counter-torque turn this afternoon. I'd like to have that one in the bag before we deploy.

TED

Do you know something I don't?

MAC

I know that if a pilot can turn a plane against the torque of the props, he can maneuver his ship in a way the Jerries won't expect.

TED

Let's do it. I'm getting better every time we practice. At first, she pulled against me, all wild and stubborn. But now? A little coaxing on the stick, a whisper on the throttle, and she just melts into the turn, no fight, no fuss.

MAC

She? I thought you called that old crate of a P-40, The Beast.

TED

She is a beast. She's just learning when to lead and when to follow.

They stand, collect their gear and head towards the door. An OFFICER (30s) intercepts them.

OFFICER

Lieutenant Sweetland. Lieutenant McDonald. You're ordered to report to the Colonel's office immediately.

They exchange glances and follow.

INT. COLONEL'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

COLONEL

Lieutenant McDonald, Sweetland, your time as instructors is up. Mac, you're heading to Britain. Ted, you'll make another stateside stop.

Ted's shoulders slump.

COLONEL (CONT'D)

(CONT'D)

Stand up straight and wipe that look off your face, Sweetland. A good soldier goes where he's told and does the job he's given. You don't get to pick your war.

(MORE)

COLONEL (CONT'D)

The only thing you get to decide is how damn well you do your part. So square yourself away and act like an officer.

TED

Yes, sir.

Ted salutes. The Colonel hands them each a set of orders. They skim the top page.

COLONEL

You leave in 48 hours. Get your affairs in order... Before wheels up, stop by the base legal office. Make sure your paperwork's squared away, last will and testament included. That's an order, gentlemen, not a suggestion.

INT. BARRACKS - NIGHT

Ted is writing a letter home.

TED (V.O.)

Dear Mother and Dad. I find it necessary to wax philosophical about how you have given me so many advantages, your sacrifices in doing what was right for all of us children, with small thanks for all your troubles. This to me is what makes a nation great: countless sacrifices through a lifetime--selfless striving to make our world a little easier for the other man. It is not flash-in-the-pan heroism, but a strongly burning courage that lightens the shadows of doubt and despair. After all, that is fundamentally what we are fighting for, the right to help ourselves and those we love to live a God-like life; and it will only be with His help that we will succeed. Do not expect to hear from me for a while but know that you are always in my thoughts.

(beat)

P.S. Mother, if you happen to knit a few extra dark red socks about Dad's size, I know two feet that would be glad to wear them.

Mac enters the room. Sits across from him. Light is dim. Ted puts the letter in an envelope, takes out whiskey. Pours two shots. They raise their glasses.

TED

To happy landings.

MAC

To getting home.

(beat)

Don't worry about making a stop in Jersey. They're staggering us is all. You'll get action.

TED

You have a gut feel about that?

MAC

I mostly try to ignore my gut.

TED

Sometimes your gut is all you got.

MAC

Yeah. Say, I wanted to ask you, did you do the legal office thing?

TED

Yeah. You?

MAC

Not yet. I will tomorrow. I have to think about it. It's a pretty big deal, writing a will. I mean, I just never thought about it before.

TED

I didn't think about it before either.

MAC

Then how did you do it so quick?

TED

I guess I just did what my gut said. I mean, my folks don't need anything from me. My dad's done real well. And you know I'm not married.

MAC

I do know that, but you sure got a girl in every port.

TED
Not every port.

MAC
So who'd you leave all you have and
all you ever will have to?

TED
A friend.

MAC
Girl or guy?

TED
A guy. Liam. Known him practically
my whole life. His family doesn't
have much and he's always wanted to
be an artist. My dad wouldn't
approve of that since a guy can't
make much of a living with art.
But, hell with that. Maybe Liam's
art will make people think.

MAC
He serving?

TED
Nah.

MAC
Why not?

TED
Unfit for military service.

They exchange looks. The designation is broad. Mac doesn't
press.

MAC
Maybe he'll turn out to be the
lucky bastard.

TED
Maybe.

INT. MILITARY OFFICE, GERMANY - LATE AFTERNOON

SUPER: "REICH CHANCELLERY, SEPTEMBER 1942"

Hitler sits in a high-backed chair behind his desk, a
magazine in which Joachim is featured is on his desk. There
are various photos of Joachim in athletic competition;

in his Ms 109; on the ground with his men. A knock at the door. An OFFICER (30s) steps in and clicks his heels, salutes.

OFFICER

Herr Major Müncheberg, Mein Führer.

Joachim enters in his dress uniform, stopping precisely three paces from Hitler's desk. His posture is rigid, disciplined. He raises his right arm in a crisp Nazi salute.

JOACHIM

Heil Hitler!

Hitler glances up from the magazine, eyes flicking between the photograph of Müncheberg's athletic victory and the Luftwaffe officer standing before him. After a pause, he gives a small nod, his own half-hearted return salute barely lifting from the arm of his chair.

HITLER

Major Müncheberg.

Joachim lowers his arm and waits. He does not move forward until Hitler gestures slightly toward the desk, signaling him to step closer as he taps the double spread of photos.

HITLER (CONT'D)

(CONT'D)

The warrior and the athlete. This is how the Reich should see you, Müncheberg, strength in the air, strength on the ground. You are proof that the German man is the finest in the world.

(beat)

Tell me, Major, do you find more pleasure in conquering an opponent in the sky or on the track?

Joachim hesitates briefly. When he speaks, his voice is measured, steady.

JOACHIM

Mein Führer, both require discipline, strength, and an unbreakable will. On the track, the challenge is measured in meters and seconds. In the air, it is measured in lives. The stadium demands perfection, but in the sky, there is no second chance. That is why I will always be a soldier first.

Hitler nods, his lips curling into the ghost of a smile, but Joachim is not finished. He knows flattery alone does not satisfy men like Hitler; there must be conviction.

JOACHIM (CONT'D)

And yet, I would be lying if I said there is no joy in competition. To run, to push the body to its limits, to feel the strength of the Reich in one's veins. It is a privilege. But the true contest, the only one that matters, is the one we fight now. Victory in the West, in the East, and over the Mediterranean will determine everything.

Hitler leans back in his chair, drumming his fingers lightly against the armrest. He studies Joachim, as if searching for any hint of hesitation. Finally, he rises.

HITLER

Spoken like a true officer of the Reich. You have had many victories over the Channel and many on the Eastern Front. Now you will prove yourself again over the Mediterranean. There is no glory without struggle, no future without victory. That is why I have awarded you the swords to your Knight's Cross. You are a knight of the air, Müncheberg, and now you are the Commander of the 77th in North Africa. The Reich does not need men who are merely strong, we need men who are relentless.

He extends his hand. Joachim clasps it, firm but controlled. The Führer's gaze sharpens. Hitler's personal photographer HEINRICH HOFFMAN (66) snaps a portrait.

HITLER (CONT'D)

(CONT'D)

North Africa will be your proving ground, Major Müncheberg. Make sure the world remembers your name for the right reasons.

Joachim clicks his heels and salutes.

EXT. NORTH AFRICA - DAY - STOCK

SUPER: "NORTH AFRICA, NOVEMBER 1942"

Allies landing as Axis and French fire on them in North Africa: Operation Torch.

Show freighter sinking, heavy artillery.

EXT. DESERT - DAY

Ted walks alongside fellow pilots in the desert. All are weary but alert, with their eyes on the horizon. Ted falls in step with an RAF pilot, SQUADRON LEADER JOHNNY HARRIS, a lanky Brit (26); and RUSTY, a red-headed Aussie (21).

TED

Lovely bit of scenery, isn't it?
All sand and more sand, but it sure
beats staring at the ocean.

RUSTY

Nah, mate, I'll take the ocean any
day. At least you can bloody well
swim in it. No swimming in this
sandbox!

They chuckle. TED gestures toward their uniforms, curious.

TED

Where'd you guys train?

RUSTY

Tiger Moths back home in Australia.
Then Harvards in Canada, and
finally some Kittyhawks before they
packed me off here.

TED

Hell, you got the grand tour.

RUSTY

You didn't?

TED

P-39 Aircobras and P-40 Warhawks
stateside. Didn't get in a Spitfire
until I crossed the pond and got to
Wattisham. In Beasley Herts, had a
taste of the P-38 Lightning, but
mostly flew Spits.

They walk in silence for a moment, the heat pressing down.

TED (CONT'D)
How 'bout you, Johnny?

JOHNNY
Training? Seems like a lifetime ago. Started in Cranwell, then Hurricanes up north. Been flying Spits over the Channel since the Krauts took France.

Rusty's eyes flick to Johnny's forearm, where burn scars catch the light as Johnny adjusts his rolled-up sleeves.

RUSTY
That a souvenir from the Channel?

Johnny keeps walking. Dust swirls around their boots.

JOHNNY
Something like that.

RUSTY
Looks like a bad burn.

Johnny exhales through his nose, flexing his fingers slightly.

JOHNNY
(mumbles)
Goddam rookies.
(louder)
Cockpit fire. Fuel line got hit.
Had to jump before I roasted.

Rusty lets out a low whistle, pushes his slouch hat back.

RUSTY
Bloody hell.

Men walk in silence.

TED
So Johnny, did they tell you where the hell we're headed?

JOHNNY
We'll know when we get there. But I imagine the Germans have a pretty good idea.

TED
I heard we gave Rommel a thrashing at El Alamein.

RUSTY

Well, if it's true that the wily old Fox is on the run, maybe this war'll be wrapped up by Christmas. We win, go home heroes.

TED

Heroes? You're kidding. Not if we don't get a crack at it. Be a shame to ship out here just in time for the war to end.

JOHNNY

Don't count on that battle making much of a difference. This bloody desert's changed hands more times than a bookie's purse. We push them back, they regroup, push us back, we regroup and do it all over again and every time, a whole lot of men die.

They walk in silence.

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

Ted, how'd you get to be a captain?

TED

Desk jockey.

JOHNNY

Thought so. College?

TED

Some. Didn't finish.

JOHNNY

The men you join up with won't like it. They've been doing the dirty work, but you're the one with the bars.

TED

Wasn't my first choice.

JOHNNY

You shouldn't be ashamed of it. Just gotta show the men you earned 'em.

They fall into silence. Ahead, the road stretches on, endless and uncertain.

EXT. DESERT AIRFIELD - DAY

SUPER: "ALLIED AIR BASE, BISKRA, ALGERIA"

Ted is reunited with some of his friends from the States.

Ted trained with MAC the squad leader (now 26) and FRANK (now 23). A young pilot, KYLE (21), joins them.

MAC
Captain Sweetland. Your call, pick
your spot.

TED
Tail-end Charlie, sir.

The pilots exchange glances—surprise, uncertainty.

KYLE
Does he even know what he's getting
into?

FRANK
He knows.

Ted overhears but remains silent, calmly checking his gear—focused, confident.

MAC
Alright then. Stay sharp back
there. Kyle, move up to second.

The men disperse to their respective planes.

EXT. BUNKER - NIGHT

SUPER: "LUFTWAFFE BUNKER, LIBYA, NOVEMBER 1942"

A makeshift bunker, partially dug into the desert sand, reinforced with wooden beams and sandbags. Wide shot of the desert landscape, eerily silent, with scattered aircraft carefully concealed under netting and sand. The camouflage blends seamlessly, reinforcing Joachim's strategic foresight.

INT. BUNKER - CONTINUOUS

In the bunker, Joachim stands before LIEUTENANT WEBER (25), a wiry, sharp-eyed pilot, WEBER, a veteran with sun-scarred skin (30), and a RADIO OPERATOR (18), with 6 Extras in German uniforms behind them. The men are exhausted, their uniforms stained with sweat and sand. Some sit on crates, others lean against walls, silent but simmering with frustration.

Joachim reads a telegram, his voice steady, controlled. Each time he is interrupted, he waits like a hunter for silence.

JOACHIM

From the Office of Reichsmarschall
Göring: It has become abundantly
clear that the recent setbacks
experienced by Field Marshal Rommel
and our ground forces in North
Africa rest squarely upon the
inadequate performance and lack of
decisive support from the
Luftwaffe.

The men grumble. Some yell out loud. Joachim waits.

JOACHIM (CONT'D)

Your failure to secure air
superiority and effectively disrupt
enemy operations has severely
compromised our ground troops'
tactical and strategic position. I
expect immediate corrective action.

Men interrupt again.

JOACHIM (CONT'D)

You are to restore the offensive
spirit, reestablish air dominance,
and provide unfaltering support to
our comrades on the ground. The
current situation is unacceptable
and demands your full commitment
and immediate improvement. Hold
your position at all costs.

A ripple of anger moves through the men. Fists clench; jaws
tighten. Weber mutters under his breath.

WEBER

So, he's suggesting we hold onto
this place at all costs? That's
ludicrous. We're sitting ducks!

JOACHIM

The Führer does not tolerate
excuses. Nor does he countenance
retreat.

A heavy silence. Some shift uncomfortably. Weber exhales
sharply, shaking his head.

WEBER

They give us nothing. No fuel, no spare parts, not much in the way of food either. Just orders issued by fat old men in Berlin, guzzling beer and gorging on sausages, while we starve in the sand!

JOACHIM

Orders cannot be eaten, it is true, nor will they fuel our planes. But they will be obeyed. That is our duty.

The men fall silent again, though their resentment lingers. Joachim exhales, then speaks more quietly, almost to himself.

JOACHIM (CONT'D)

We may never leave this place.

His dog, a long-haired dachshund, whines. Joachim picks him up.

JOACHIM (CONT'D)

I didn't mean you, Seppl. You are our mascot. You will live on forever!

The men smile wanly.

SILENCE

Distant but growing rumble of multiple engines in the air. The men freeze, listening. Joachim signals for silence.

WEBER

Those aren't ours.

Extended silence as the planes fly directly overhead, then pass over them.

WEBER (CONT'D)

Our planes are scattered and well camouflaged in the Wadi. Hopefully they'll think it's abandoned.

RADIO OPERATOR

I've got something.

Men listen tensely as the Radio Operator decodes the message.

RADIO OPERATOR (CONT'D)

Recon Alpha to Command, suspicious activity observed.

(MORE)

RADIO OPERATOR (CONT'D)

Request immediate secondary sweep.
Enemy aircraft possibly
concealed—repeat, target may still
be active in the Wadi.

Joachim stands rigid, eyes narrowed, face lined with concentration. He lifts binoculars, stepping slightly into a shaft of sunlight cutting through the bunker entrance.

He SEES Allied planes receding into the hazy distance, but one recon plane breaks formation, banking into a wide, slow turn—circling back over them.

Joachim lowers the binoculars sharply.

JOACHIM

The Recon is returning.

An anxious murmur passes among the men.

RADIO OPERATOR

Major, Allied pilot is requesting
reinforcements.

The murmurs rise, men shifting uneasily, Joachim watches, turns, speaks decisively as the Allied planes circle back.

JOACHIM

Get your planes airborne. Now.

Pilots scramble urgently towards the bunker exit. Joachim's second-in-command, MARTINS (23), approaches swiftly.

MARTINS

Sir, they'll spot us immediately.

Joachim meets Martins' concerned gaze calmly, confidence unwavering.

JOACHIM

They're coming back. We have a
better fighting chance in the sky
than pinned here on the ground.

Martins nods grimly and rushes out.

Joachim steps back into the doorway, silhouetted against the setting sun, watching his pilots rush to their concealed aircraft and take off like scatter shot.

JOACHIM (CONT'D)

We've played Göring's hand long
enough.

(MORE)

JOACHIM (CONT'D)

We'll give some territory and save
the unit. We're not done. Not yet.

EXT. OFFICE BUILDING, BERLIN - DAY

A Nazi Flag tells us the location.

Joachim (24) and his Commander, ADOLF GALLAND (30), converse quietly as they approach the building. They are in full uniform, and the building shows extensive propaganda.

GALLAND

How many did you lose?

JOACHIM

Two planes. Couldn't get 'em up.

GALLAND

Any men down?

JOACHIM

Two ground crew injured.

GALLAND

Good outcome.

JOACHIM

I don't expect Herr Reichsmarschall
Göring will agree.

As they approach the inner office, two Airmen (20s) stiffen and come to attention, whisper to one another, then crisply salute as the officers walk by. Civilians are respectful.

AIRMAN 1

Herr General Galland.

AIRMAN 2

Herr Major Müncheberg.

ADOLF GALLAND

At ease, men.

JOACHIM

Carry on.

Two WOMEN (30s) whisper to themselves as Joachim and Galland pass them.

WOMAN #1

That was General Galland himself.

WOMAN #2

If they are able to come home,
things must be going better than
some fear?

WOMAN #1

Shh, to question is dangerous.

Nearby, Woman #2's young BOY (8) reaches into a tangled bush and pulls a crumpled Allied leaflet, which boldly reads "Germany's defeat is inevitable. Stop the madness now!"

Woman #1 quickly snatches the leaflet away from the Boy, and looks wildly at Woman #2, who glances anxiously around. Woman #1 shoves the leaflet in her pocket.

WOMAN #2

Quiet, child. It is trash. Nothing
but enemy lies.

She nervously scans the street. Galland and Joachim continue into the Reich Air Ministry building.

INT. GÖRING'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Seven Ace Luftwaffe pilots are in a meeting with Göring who is clearly angry. He is over-dressed, as usual. A calendar reads January 27, 1943.

GÖRING

Gentlemen, it is the end of
January! While some of you enjoyed
pleasant Christmases at home, our
forces in the field have suffered
humiliation after humiliation. El
Alamein—lost! Stalingrad—on the
brink of disaster! And this very
morning, American bombers struck
Wilhelmshaven in broad daylight!
Where were your fighters, Galland?
The Luftwaffe has failed again! How
much more failure can we tolerate?

He sweeps his hand to include all in the room.

GÖRING (CONT'D)

You pilots, you are presumed to be
Knights of the air, but you are
failing! And all the men who report
to you are failing! The Luftwaffe
is failing Germany. Your outfits
are filled with cowards.

(MORE)

GÖRING (CONT'D)

Your men do not represent the National Socialist ideal of the perfect Aryan race! Some of them are shirking their duties and you know who they are! I demand to know their names! They are bringing shame to Germany as they cower, seeking safety, giving up territory instead of flying head on into danger for the glory of the Reich!

There is a prolonged, shocked silence. The seven pilots exchange uneasy glances. GUNTHER LÜTZOW (29) is the first to speak. He holds the second highest rank of the pilots (after Galland) and is frank, even to his superiors.

GUNTHER LÜTZOW

Herr Reichsmarschall, the Luftwaffe hasn't failed Germany. Germany's leadership has failed the Luftwaffe.

The men suck in their breath. But Lützow is steady, in complete control as he gathers steam.

GUNTHER LÜTZOW (CONT'D)

Your incompetence and living in the old days will not change the facts, Herr Reichsmarschall! Wise men know their limit, but you obviously have not received that education. The only cowards I can see are the old men in Berlin giving orders, but not taking the risks, and you are the greatest example! If you wish to change our circumstances, I suggest that you allow those of us who are leaders to lead and stay out of our way!

The men know that Lützow has just committed treason, and for that he will die. Göring does not engage with Lützow, but turns to Galland, raises eyebrows in silent question.

ADOLF GALLAND

The pilots are doing everything they can, but they need more support. Supply lines are stretched, and they aren't getting the fuel, parts, planes, or pilots they need.

SILENCE

GÖRING

So, you have lied about your victories? You are admitting that you are unworthy of wearing the medals that dangle from your necks!

Göring senses the men's disbelief.

GÖRING (CONT'D)

These accusations are from Hitler, himself!

Now Galland's anger matches Lützow's.

Galland stands and one by one unhooks and unpins his medals and throws them on the table in front of Göring.

ADOLF GALLAND

Reichsmarschall, I spoke directly with der Führer two days ago. These words you speak are not his, but yours. You, Herr Reichsmarschall, are the one implying that neither we nor our men have earned these medals. Well, here they are.

Galland removes his medals, placing them firmly on the table.

ADOLF GALLAND (CONT'D)

Perhaps you'd prefer to adorn yourself with them.

Trautloft, Joachim, and Lützow glance at each other and then remove their medals and place them on the table. The four pilots push their chairs back and turn to leave the room.

GÖRING

You have not been dismissed!

The four men continue towards the door, leaving three pilots sitting uncomfortably. Lützow turns back.

GUNTHER LÜTZOW

Then, I would suggest you tell the Führer that his cowards walked out. You can't shoot us all!

CUT TO BLACK.

EXT. NORTH AFRICA - DAY - STOCK

The first US major defeat at Kasserine Pass.

Ted's unit is doing sweeps over the retreating troops.

SUPER: "NORTH AFRICA, FEBRUARY 1943"

EXT. BISKRA AIRFIELD - EVENING

Ten Pilots and crew (20s-30s), worn and dusty from relentless combat missions, gather.

In the near distance, you can see a flatbed truck with a sign, "Four Jills Performing Today 1600 Hours"

Mac approaches Ted, surprised to find him heading away from the show.

MAC

Hey, Ted. You're gonna miss the show? Never seen you pass up a chance to get close to beautiful women.

Ted smiles faintly, quietly reserved.

TED

Maybe later. I promised myself I'd get a few scribbles on paper tonight.

Mac studies him, sensing Ted's exhaustion. He nods knowingly.

MAC

You've been doing a lot of flying, Ted. You've earned a break. Why not take it with the squad?

TED

Thanks, Mac.

MAC

Tough to watch a buddy go down.

TED

Yeah. Roddy was quiet. Not a loudmouth like me. I liked him. I think the most noise I ever heard him make was "whoopee" when he hit that Grand Slam!

MAC

(chuckles)

You and I lost some guys in training, but it's different in combat. I don't know. It just makes me want to...

TED

Take revenge? Kill someone?

MAC

Hmmm. Something like that.

Silence as the two men face away.

TED

We hit a pot full of flak. I was lucky.

MAC

You were. But you also did some smart flying. I saw you pull up sharp.

TED

Yeah. Too sharp. My bird stalled and when the wing dropped, I thought I was goner.

MAC

Been there. Scared the daylights out of me.

TED

The weird thing is I didn't feel fear. Just kind of excitement all messed in with anger. I was thinking, dammit, you killed yourself.

MAC

But you didn't.

TED

I didn't.

Commanding officer STEVE (35) approaches.

TED (CONT'D)

Anyway, Mac. Thought I'd do some writing.

MAC

Good for you, Hemingway. I'll say I knew you before you were famous.

TED

Hmmmmph. Not much chance of that.

MAC

You never know.

TED

Maybe I'll catch up with you guys and the Four Jills later.

Mac walks away.

STEVE

You know, Ted, when you first arrived, I wasn't sure about you. I wanted you reassigned. I knew you earned those captain bars sitting at a desk.

Ted looks at him, uncertain.

STEVE (CONT'D)

But Windy and Mac vouched for you—said you'd prove yourself. They were right.

Ted meets Steve's eyes, moved by this unexpected honesty.

STEVE (CONT'D)

Just wanted you to know—you're where you belong. You've earned every bit of that rank.

Ted nods slowly.

TED

Thanks, Steve. Means a lot to me.

Steve claps Ted on the shoulder, walks toward the performance. Ted watches him go, thoughtful, before heading toward the quiet solitude of his tent.

EXT. DESERT - DAY - STOCK

SUPER: "THÉLEPTE, TUNISIA, MARCH 23, 1943"

12 Spitfires flying in British Box formation. Ted is tail-end Charlie.

Two Messerschmitt 109's flying above the box.

INT. JOACHIM'S COCKPIT - DAY

Joachim hand signals to his wingman that he is going to dive to attack. Radio silence.

Joachim fires. Ted's plane is on fire, and begins to crash.

INT. TED'S COCKPIT - SAME TIME

TED

Break!

The Spits disperse, but Ted sees the Messerschmitt following him, close to his right.

TED (CONT'D)

Damn good flying, I'll give you that.

MAC (V.O.)

If you can perfect that right turn against torque, the Jerries won't see it coming.

TED

This is it.

A sharp inhale.

We SEE red socks inside his boots press against the rudder pedals, and for the briefest moment, his mind wanders.

BEGIN MONTAGE (Ted's POV)

-- Ted sees his mother at the sitting-room window, needles clicking, the firelight making her glasses shine. The red wool in her lap, looping around, row after row, until it became the socks on his feet now-warm, made with love.

-- His father, proud of him, in the workshop with young TED.

-- Liam and Ted playing on the lawn. Liam showing him a drawing.

TED (V.O.)

Dear Mother, I love you. I expect you know that without me writing it. Dad, I hope I made you proud. I gave it a shot.

-- Liam at the artists studio.

TED (V.O.)

Liam. I guess all I owned will soon
be yours. I hope you can make art
that makes people think. I think
you can. You did that for me.

END MONTAGE

The Messerschmitt holds steady. Ted exhales. Then he yanks
the stick.

The Spitfire rolls hard, twisting against torque, hard right.

Ted sees the shock in Joachim's eyes just before impact.

INT. JOACHIM'S COCKPIT - DAY

Joachim's eyes open wide as he sees the Spit bank right.

BEGIN MONTAGE (Joachim's POV)

-- Joachim (age 5) with his mother and playing with his
friends.

-- The rise of Nazi Germany; propaganda everywhere.

-- Kristallnacht; visual showing relative cost of educating a
handicapped child;

-- Joachim with his father,

-- Joachim wearing Hitler Youth uniform in Austria.

-- Joachim shaking hands with Hitler.

-- Joachim's mom teaches him to use the knife.

END MONTAGE

INT. JOACHIM'S COCKPIT - DAY

Joachim glances at the knife with its imperial eagle shining
in its sheath mounted beside his seat.

JOACHIM (V.O.)

(whispers)

I love you mother. Father, I am
sorry I failed.

INT. TED'S COCKPIT - SAME TIME

TED

Got you.

INT. OFFICE - NIGHT

We see JANE's hands slowly closing the two photo albums from the opening scene.

JANE (V.O.)

It is hard to write of someone's death and, of course, exactly what happened in the air that day we can never know, but in his journal, Ted described a day he nearly crashed. "There was a feeling of suspension and extreme excitement mingled with mild anger. No heroics, no fear, no prayer, no time." I imagine, though, that in that suspended instant, their thoughts flickered to the ones who loved them—especially their mothers, who somehow never fully let go.

FADE OUT.

THE END