

John Hollow

THAT LIFE, THAT DEATH:
A NOSTALGIA FOR NOSTALGIA

I HAPPENED TO BE in Galveston, Texas, with an afternoon to myself before I had to drive back to Houston to catch my evening flight home. I had already been to the train museum which has, along with several engines and railroad cars, a mockup of a train station waiting room, including life-size plaster-of-Paris figures buying tickets, tending to luggage, making telephone calls, and reading or sleeping on the benches. The figures seem dressed in the sort of nondescript clothes that could represent any time from 1930 to 1950, the period roughly ten years on either side of my 1939 birthday. The sight of them had already reawakened my nostalgia for the time of my childhood, the time I sometimes think I have most clearly experienced not in life but in the movies, those years the most exciting event of which was World War II.

I had seen billboards in Galveston advertising an air museum, including pictures of a B-17, and so I decided to have a look. The museum consists of a large hanger-like building, houses, a souvenir shop and several well-preserved planes. There are also several planes outside on a flight-line, including a P-38, the only real one I've ever seen. But I couldn't find the promised Flying Fortress anywhere, inside or out. I had about decided that it would turn out to be, as have several paintings in my life, temporarily removed for restoration. But just as I finished walking around an HU1B helicopter, I heard and then saw the "Fort." There it was, several hundred yards away, wheels down, coming in for a landing. It was painted a bright green, but other than that it was as if I were watching *Command Decision* or *Twelve O'Clock High* or *The War Lover* or either of the *Memphis Belles*, William Wyler's 1944 documentary or Michael Caton-Jones's 1990 feature film. I was, in some part of my mind, relieved that both wheels were down, no props feathered, and that there were no flares announcing the presence of wounded aboard.

It's a distinctive plane, the B-17, wide of wing and tall of tail. When it banks into and then levels off for its final approach, one sees mostly wing, up and down at first and then edge on. As it comes down, the

wheels look canted out, as if a rider is standing in his stirrups. The nose has something of the fish snout about it, and the whole plane looks too large to rest on a tail wheel, as if it was designed, as perhaps it was, by stretching a fighter plane in every possible direction.

That day at the Galveston museum there were visitors old enough to have flown such craft. I remember one man especially, leaning on a cane and looking up at a C-47, who seemed to my romanticizing eye to be reliving some moments from fifty years ago. I had no trouble imagining a cap on his head, its sides crushed with the wearing of earphones.

I've been told that, in 1985, when the Boeing Company celebrated the 50th anniversary of the B-17, hundreds of former crew members and their families attended. That evening, so the story goes, there was a dance in a hanger, and when the band began to play music from the World War II years, many of those present wept openly. That's what I would call the usual nostalgia, a longing for the past, in this case for what has been called "the last good war." "It was a time when the choices were clear," says the epigraph to Peter Hyams's very romantic *Hanover Street* (1979), a film set against the background of that air war. "A time when death was closer . . . so life was more precious."

I am more interested in my own nostalgia, a nostalgia occasioned by the relics of a war I was not old enough to fight or even to be very aware of. It's a nostalgia I seem to share with many—witness the continuing popularity not only of television programs and books about World War II, but, across even more generations, of khakis and leather flight jackets, the latter complete with the appropriate insignia. When a recent film, *Forever Young* (1992), tells a version of the Rip Van Winkle story, it casts the awakened sleeper, Mel Gibson, as a test pilot from 1939. The boy who befriends him in the present has a bedroom decorated with pictures of jet planes and planets, but when the recently-awakened man and the boy share a father-son sort of moment, the boy presents Gibson with a World War II flight jacket. The two of them then pretend, in a treehouse, to be in the cockpit of a World War II bomber, a scene that tells us more about the nostalgia of the filmmakers than it does about the knowledge and interests of a current pre-teen.

This nostalgia seems to me to need some explaining; its object needs to be clarified. As I stand in the aisle of the local toy and hobby shop, the model airplane kits available include all of the Gulf War's jets, but

they also include, in addition to several World War II fighters, the B-17, the B-24, and even, to jump to the Pacific theater, the B-29. Who builds these models? Curtis LeMay's generation? Well, maybe. But the rest of us must do it too, or the kits would not be so widely available. What past is this a longing for?

The B-17 I watched in Galveston did not touch down. Instead, it took off again, retracting its landing gear and rising to make another circle of the field. As it did so, I was reminded for a moment of the scene in the wartime documentary, *Memphis Belle*, when the "Belle," returning from its twenty-fifth mission, "cuts the grass" of the field as she flies by at a very low level before circling one more time. Doing so is against regulations, we are told, but this is a special occasion. The crewmen of the plane have survived their tour of duty; they are going home.

I was also reminded, by association, of the scene in the 1962 film, *The War Lover*, in which Steve McQueen buzzes the field in his returning B-17, protesting having been assigned to drop propaganda leaflets instead of bombs. He wants to destroy things, this ex-juvenile delinquent. He is a graduate of the school of hard knocks, he says, and his whole life has been preparing him for war. In fact, both of the pilots in the film are graduates of the 1950s, not the 1930s; both could be called men in grey flannel flight jackets. The one played by McQueen is too involved in his work, does not really care for anything or anyone else. The other, a college graduate played by Robert Wagner, has the decency to be concerned about his home life, even though the home life in this case is an affair he is having with a woman he got to know in the Blitz. Such is not nostalgia but some sort of opposite of nostalgia. It is reinterpretation.

My nostalgia, as I think about it, does not seem to be a longing for the years of the war itself so much as it is a longing for the years just after the war, the years when I made models, paper and wood, of most of the World War II planes, including of course the B-17. Years when I had, in movies such as *Command Decision* (1948), my own experience of daylight precision bombing, the 8th Army Air Force, and carrying the war deep into enemy territory.

I remember being there with Clark Gable just after he learned that a good friend had been killed on a mission that he, Gable, had had to order. I sat as he sat, looking up at a giant map of Europe, and heard

as he heard, in memory and imagination, the radio talk. “Bandits, three o’clock.” “Flak.” “B-17 hit and going down.” “Any chutes?”

I was there with Dean Jagger in *Twelve O’Clock High* (1949). I watched him watch Gregory Peck as the latter lived out the mission the group was flying. I knew, as Jagger knew, that Peck had seen the destruction of one too many planes, tried to fly one too many missions, suppressed his “over-identification with his men” one too many times. We couldn’t hear the voices in the planes, but we knew that Peck could. He sat there, hands gripping the arms of the chair, face lit from below so that his eyes seemed deep wells.

In fact, as I look back on all those cinematic missions, they blend together, as if I had actually flown my twenty-five. The orderly wakes us, flashlight in hand: “Breakfast at oh-five thirty; briefing at oh-six-hundred.” The CO addresses us: “We have a chance to make a real difference today, to hasten the end of this war.” And then it’s “Sergeant, will you get the lights?” and the dramatic revelation of map and target.

Outside, the ground crews load the bombs, riding to the planes on them in little wagons. The camera discovers the B-17s against the background of rural England—of fields, trees, the village, the church tower. William Wyler does it brilliantly in the original *Memphis Belle*, using a series of still shots, each one closer to the planes, each one shutting out more and more of the peaceful countryside.

The crews enter the planes through various doors, some swinging up through the hatch just in front of the wings. There is the cough of starting engines, a flare from the tower, and the aircraft begin to move, plane after plane after plane. The mode was set by the original *Memphis Belle*, but it has been copied by films with many fewer planes to work with. It’s a parade of nose-art, name after name: “Old Bill,” “Round-trip Ticket,” “Picadilly Lily,” “The Body,” “Can Do.” The shots, especially those that use actual footage, are sometimes clearly those of other films, stock footage that is on occasion reversed, on occasion not. The whole scene is a study in the Doppler Effect, the changes in a sound as it approaches, passes, and then leaves a single point. The planes roar down the runway, are loudest when they pass the stationary camera, and then diminish in sound as they climb into the sky.

The mission itself becomes a routine. At 10,000 feet we go on oxygen. The gunners test-fire their guns. We concentrate on the formation,

echelon left and echelon right. "Close it up, close it up." At 25,000 feet there are vapor trails, and it's forty degrees below zero inside the plane. We find ourselves, as Randall Jarrell's ball turret gunner puts it, "Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life." We wake "to black flak and nightmare fighters." The flak, we say, is so thick you could get out and walk on it. The fighters, in the breaks between the bouts of flak, come in from every direction. "Three o'clock high, coming in on a half-roll." "Got him, got a piece of him! He's bailing out!" "Damn it, don't shout on the intercom."

The bombardier takes over; he's flying the plane. He opens the bomb bay doors, looks through the bomb sight, and releases the bombs. The explosions walk their way along the ground. "We're flying for ourselves now." "Let's go, I've got a date in London tonight."

The scene shifts to the home field. We are waiting for the planes to return. Here too, as the original *Memphis Belle* tells us, the mission is being flown. The camera finds, in *Twelve O'Clock High*, an enlisted man who is hitting fly balls in a desultory fashion to other members of the ground crew. He hits one and then looks into the sky as the others throw the ball around. Each player, of course, also looks to the sky after he's had his turn.

The announcement comes from the tower. The planes have been sighted; they are coming in. The men start their trucks, don their fire-fighting gear, climb into the ambulances, and mount a surprising number of bicycles. The planes are spotted and the ritual of counting begins. "Eight, nine, ten." "Twelve, thirteen, fourteen." There is always one, it seems, that has to make a belly landing. We watch it appear to float in, impossibly light and balanced on its wide wings, and then scour its way across the ground, skidding and dragging to a final stop.

The war seems to have ended, at least as I have experienced it in the movies, with a similar sort of comedown, a similar sort of crashing return to earth. Very near the end of William Wyler's 1946 film, *The Best Years of Our Lives*, Dana Andrews, the ex-bombardier, sits in the nose of the B-17 and relives a mission. The plane is in an airplane graveyard, and Wyler, again with a series of something like still shots, suggests the starting of the engines, the flight to the target, and the bombing run itself. We cannot see what Andrews is seeing, hear what he is hearing, but we do see him lean forward over where the bombsight used to be.

This flashback that is not a flashback is interrupted by a voice outside the plane, by the boss of another kind of demolition firm, a company that is breaking up the old planes to make materials for “pre-fab houses.” “Reliving old memories?” he asks Andrews. “No,” the former bombardier replies, “getting rid of some.”

When Andrews asks the construction boss for a job, and gets it—when he heads over to help the other workers beat these swords into plowshares—he takes off his flight jacket. It is not a large, dramatic gesture; Wyler is too subtle for that. But it is a gesture that is intentionally not nostalgic. It is a denial of nostalgia.

Most of my experience of the 1942-45 air war over Europe, however, certainly was received through the filter of nostalgia. Sam Wood’s 1948 film version of *Command Decision* is even more about leadership and justification than I remember the original play being (we performed it at my high school in the early fifties). And those emphases, it seems to me, are a kind of nostalgia. They insist that, four years after the war, the whole effort seemed worthwhile. Those leaders knew what they were doing even if the people at home didn’t always appreciate it.

The film opens with Clark Gable having ordered two missions in a row that have suffered very heavy losses, more than a thousand men in two days. The target, it turns out, is nothing less than the German jet aircraft industry, the makers of a weapon that could, we are told, give back to the Third Reich air superiority over Europe. We first see Gable, standing alone as if on the deck of a ship, watching the return of his decimated forces. He is dressed in a trench coat, has binoculars around his neck, and surely represents some sort of archetype of the loneliness of command.

By the end, of course, he has been justified. He has hated the decisions he had to make. But he made them, and his successor, Brian Donlevy, a sort of Gable look-alike complete to the mustache, continues to make the same decisions. Even the cynical career sergeant, Van Johnson, who has done his twenty-five years and isn’t impressed by any officer, asks to accompany Gable to his next command. That’s nostalgia.

Twelve O’Clock High, less than a year later, repeats the same idea. Had Gregory Peck not tightened up the discipline of the 918th Bomb Group, had he not reawakened unit pride, so much so that non-combatants stowaway aboard the bombers, the whole endeavor might have failed; we might

have given up the attempt to hit German industry. The film is dedicated “to those Americans, both living and dead, whose gallant effort made possible daylight precision bombing.” Such is the same justification given in the original *Memphis Belle*. We are trying to bomb targets that will reduce the future capabilities of the war machine that, “twice in a generation, has flooded the world with suffering.” By 1949, however, the message has become nostalgic. The emphasis is less on the targets than on the attitude of those doing the bombing. They have to “grow up,” Peck says, “become men.” They have to give up feeling sorry for themselves and get on with fighting the war. “Forget the future,” he tells them in his first briefing. “Consider yourselves already dead.”

Such a message, in 1949, is certainly not addressed to the dead, in spite of the film’s dedication, but to the relatives of the dead. Their loved ones, it says, did not die in vain. The message is also addressed to the survivors, to those who must, however they feel about the experience, acknowledge that they did grow up during the war. And it is addressed to those of us, the vast majority, whose experience of the war is vicarious. We only knew, those of us who were pre-teenagers when we first saw this film, that here was a definition of manhood, of growing up, one seemingly shared by much of our culture and delivered with great authority and a sense of hard-won wisdom. And the film begins, moreover, with one of the finest evocations of time past in the history of American film.

Dean Jagger, returned to England in 1949, revisits the base from which the 918th operated. He crosses a field of tall grass, past trees and, in the distance, a few cows. Suddenly, and the music becomes more dramatic, he reaches the edge of the old runway. The camera watches him from the other end, and we see him, just a stick figure in the distance, walking back and forth across the width of the pavement. Then we are with him again and begin to discover, from his point of view, the tatters of the windsock on its pole, the remains of the control tower and operations building, some barracks and Quonset huts, all fallen into disrepair. Faintly in the background we hear, as he hears the voices from the time he is remembering, the singing in the officers’ club. “Don’t sit under the apple tree / With anyone else but me.” “Bless them all, bless them all, / The long and the short and the tall.” “We are poor little lambs / Who have lost our way.”

The camera closes in on Jagger, shooting him straight on, from the waist up. He takes off his glasses and starts to clean them. As he does so, we hear the cough of a starting engine. He replaces his glasses and pulls down his hat against the start of a wind. Engines roar to life, and the camera, mimicking a shot from the *Memphis Belles*, pans to a field of high grass churned by prop wash. The camera pans up into the sky, then left across the clouds. There is a sudden jump, and the sky is full of returning B-17s, low and headed into the camera. We are back in 1942.

Or we were. In 1949 or '50 we could imagine ourselves back in the fall of '42, joining that handful of young flyers who were, at that time, the only Americans fighting in Europe. But now we are on the other side of 1972, of another less popular war. We have also been with Martin Sheen in *Apocalypse Now* (1979). We have awakened from an alcohol-induced sleep to find ourselves back in Vietnam. Home was just a dream, a daze between tours of duty, and we have awakened to find the thump, thump, thump of the helicopter's rotor at one with the sounds of the ceiling fan in the hotel room. Saigon. We're still only in Saigon, waiting for a mission.

There is more than a little nostalgia, however, even to *Apocalypse Now*. John Milius's screenplay, his version of *Heart of Darkness*, includes a former ideal. Col. Kurtz (Marlon Brando) was another kind of soldier, a trooper from previous wars. Third-generation West Point, Green Beret, being groomed for Chief of Staff—before he went wrong, before the war went wrong, before something went wrong, and he now has to be “terminated” because of his “unsound methods.” Kurtz was corrupted, but that change assumes he was something else before he was corrupted, a something else that owes more to the life of Douglas MacArthur than to Michael Herr's *Dispatches*. *Apocalypse Now* does not deny the ideal; it longs for it and laments its passing.

Michael Caton-Jones's *Memphis Belle* (1990) also tries to retell a nostalgia-colored story, the one I have rehearsed here, the story of having to send men into combat, of flying and waiting out missions, of growing into manhood in the midst of the experience. The film highlights the parallel situations of two men, one an officer, the other an enlisted man, both of whom have found in war a self-defining experience that they are not sure, on the eve of their twenty-fifth mission, they know

how they are going to give up. The officer, who manufactured furniture in a family firm before the war, is not able to explain himself except to say that the experience has not been like making furniture. The enlisted man, an only son with four older sisters, is more articulate, wishes he could stay with these “brothers,” does not in any sense know what he is going to do after the war.

The moment in the film that presents this choice of war as a defining experience is the reading, by the enlisted man, of some lines from Yeats’s “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death.”

“I know that I shall meet my fate,” he begins, “Somewhere among the clouds above.” The other enlisted men snicker (“Oh, Lord,” says one of them), and the officers smile tolerantly. But when he continues, “Those that I fight I do not hate, / Those that I guard I do not love,” his audience is suddenly quiet. They have been reached; they know what he is talking about. And so, when he finishes,

I balanced all, brought all to mind,
The years to come seemed waste of breath,
A waste of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this death,

they pay him—and Yeats—the ultimate compliment of complete silence. They know, these men, all of whom are volunteers, that it was in fact the adventure they signed up for, not the cause. There isn’t anything to say about that; it is just so.

The film cannot remain at this high, romantic peak. Perhaps no film could, this side of and this close to Vietnam. Instead, it becomes a series of incidents, a collection of almost every story that has ever been told about a bombing mission. The bombs do not get hung up in the bomb bay, but the pilot’s thermos of tomato soup is hit, splashing both him and the co-pilot with what they think at first is blood. The planes have to go around twice to bomb the target, the crewman with only a week of medical school has to nurse a wounded buddy, and, at the end, the crew of the “Memphis Belle” has to lower the landing gear by hand.

The male bonding is, if anything, overdone. War becomes something of an athletic event, an exercise in learning teamwork. The film opens with a touch football game, has several important moments happen at

what is, for all the world, like a dance before the big game, and ends with a clear anachronism borrowed from current television, the airplane commander's spraying the crew with champagne. The film's dedication, not announced until the end, after we have cursed the German flyers and bombed their city, is "to all the brave young men, whatever their nationality, who flew and fought in history's greatest airborne confrontation." Or, to put it another way, "Nice game, guys."

But the makers of the film clearly wanted to stay in the nostalgic mode. They wanted to recapture what I've suggested here is not the war but the time after the war, the time when we, our culture, could believe that the war was a key to growth, adulthood, and significant endeavor. They wanted to recapture that time when kids climbed all over airplanes at air shows, when hospitalized veterans cut out paper airplanes from kits furnished by cereal manufacturers, when films such as *Command Decision* and *Twelve O'Clock High* told us how to interpret the war. Theirs is not a nostalgia for a time when life was more intense; theirs is a nostalgia for the time of nostalgia after that intense experience.

The tail gunner, in this version of the story of the "Memphis Belle," spends his idle moments carving out a model of a B-17. Not much is made of the activity except that at a significant point in the film, when a real B-17 is accidentally destroyed, the model too gets broken. In *Command Decision*, Clark Gable has a machinist make a model of the German jet aircraft that is the target of the costly bombing raids. The model, however, is never used; when it comes time to demonstrate the awesome capabilities of the jet, Gable uses film clips showing the German plane flying faster than either a P-38 or a P-51.

That the planes in the film clips are also obviously models, as is the B-17 Gable talks down in a major dramatic incident, is something we are not supposed to notice. We are supposed to suspend our disbelief, see those planes as real planes, see the film as a reproduction of the war. The models in *Memphis Belle*, on the other hand, although far more technically sophisticated, far more realistic-looking, seem to reproduce the act of playing with models, not the acts of war. When the nose is blown off one B-17 and the tail sheared from another, the action happens so slowly as to make it almost possible to see the hands of the player, to hear the exploding sounds I used to make with my mouth. *Memphis Belle* reminds me, not of the war I never knew, but of the play we used

to engage in that was based on films of that war; of spending hours putting together fine balsa and tissue paper models of P-38s, P-51s, B-17s, and even ME-109s; of, on occasion, bringing some of them to a fiery end with matches, firecrackers, and a final crash on the cement driveway.

In this sense, Steven Spielberg's 1985 TV drama, "The Mission," part of the *Amazing Stories* series, is more self-aware. It focuses, in spite of a surface realism, on the B-17 as those of us too young to be in the war knew it best, as a model, as a drawing. The plane is returning from an aborted mission, its landing gear out, two engines gone, and the ball turret gunner stuck in his turret, sure to be crushed when the plane has to make a belly landing. The gunner is saved when he manages to add to a drawing of the B-17 a set of obviously cartoon wheels, wheels which then magically appear on the real plane. The program reminds me that we didn't always crash those models, that sometimes we saved them, that we brought them in with heavy battle damage and then, with glue, paper, dope, and paint, got them ready for the next day's mission. Sometimes we even stopped them in mid-mission, holding up the game in order to fix what had to be fixed.

The program also reminds me that the past we long for is ours and not that of others. We have been told by the last of the generation that fought World War II that the video views from the Stealth Bomber should make up for the view not unfairly represented by the B-52 tail sticking out of the riverside mud in *Apocalypse Now*. But we know, those of us who grew up when adulthood was defined by a lanky figure in khakis, a flight jacket, sun glasses, and a cap with the sides crushed in, that certain words have passed from the country's vocabulary, words such as "enlist," "volunteer," and "join up," words that implied both a cause and an attitude that we were promised, never found, probably no longer believe in, and still miss.