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Redd Boggs' SORCERER

A MARTIAN ODDITY

> "As Phobos's rotation slows, it drops closer to Mars. Every year, it moves 1.5 inches closer to Mars and its time of rotation decreases by a few hundredths of a second.... Eventually, as it moves closer to Mars, Mars's intensifying gravitational field will tear Phobos into fragments that will rain down on the planet. Phobos has been circling Mars for billions of years, perhaps, and we now have the exciting chance to see it in the very last stages of its life.... It will still take about 38 million years before Phobos breaks up and falls...."
>
> -- Isaac Asimov, *Frontiers*

It will be wonderful to see · this once-in-a-billion-years event · the immense explosions churned-up dustclouds geysers of fire and ice · silent shrills of garbled colors · as all that thin oxygenless atmosphere makes an enraged exhalation · imagine to behold it · lots of melting lots of scintillations lots of breakage · storms of rearrangement · soundless humps and bumps · rumples and upheavals · burning beads of white and scarlet · planetary cataclysm · a momentary staggering in orbit · a poking up for a dying blaze · the famous mummy brought to twitching and a brief reanimation · showers of sand and fractured mountains flying up in chunks to make new mountains · We'll see it sure enough if we're still around · a wink of light so bright that it will scratch the lenses of the TV cameras from a million miles away · and on the network news the great collision rivaling for a day or two the everlasting reruns of "Three's Company" and "Mary Tyler Moore."

WILD BLUE YONDER

Like other celebrities such as Isaac Asimov and John Madden, I don't fly, either by flapping my arms or traveling by jet liner. I refuse to believe the fibbing statistics that supposedly indicate that you are safer in the air than on the highway. On television once I saw a racecar driver who affirmed that he was safer on the racetrack than on the freeway. This is absurd. The freeways are dangerous, but more dangerous than the Indianapolis Speedway? At least you have some control over your destiny when driving a car, and have some chance of surviving a car wreck. You have no control over the airliner, no chance at all of living through a midair plane collision. I have never been in one of those huge commercial airline monsters.

I have been up in planes, however. The first time was at Alamogordo (New Mexico) air base in March 1944, when I was in the Air Force in World War 2. Since I wasn't a flyboy, or even on flying status, I went aloft voluntarily. I must have been crazy. Maybe it was because I had heard "The Army Air Corps Song" too many times. I have among my old war relics a little leaflet that prints the words to that song -- the verse and three choruses. I remember receiving this leaflet one hot afternoon in July 1942 at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, when I was a raw recruit in basic training in the Air Force. A couple of hundreds of us had been herded into a big circus-like tent for the session, and I still remember how the blazing sun, evidently fueled with an unusually copious supply of hydrogen that summer, drilled through the canvas top and hit the back of my head like a soft bludgeon. We were required to sing the song with spirit and gusto. Rereading it now, I find that I had almost forgotten how romantic the words are: "Souls of men dreaming of skies to conquer, / Gave us wings ever to soar..." But the line that we sang with particular emphasis was the one about going "Off with one helluva roar!" (My sister Claire once had the sheet music of the song, which noted in a footnote that for radio broadcast the line should be altered to "One *terrible* roar," but by god, we sang the uncensored, hairy manly version!) The song must have been responsible for numberless men volunteering for flying jobs, carrying on in

echelon, somewhere out in the wild blue yonder, and some of them, unfortunately, going down in flame, and it even affected me, in small measure.

To get into the air that morning my old army buddy, Larry Green, and I went out to "the line" at Alamogordo air base and pestered a pilot to take us along when he went up. Larry had flown before, but it was the first time for me. I think we went out to Base Operations two or three times in hopes of getting a flight, but we had no luck till this particular morning. Nothing was going up except regular training flights of B-24 bombers, with a full crew aboard and no room for passengers. This time we were in luck. As we entered the office we found a pilot who was getting ready to fly. We could tell that because he was just buckling on a parachute. He was puffing a cigaret -- everybody smoked in those days except me -- and moseying around in a relaxed fashion, looking very amiable. Except for the fact that he was tall and angular, he resembled Hotshot Charley, a regular character in Milton Caniff's comic-strip "Terry and the Pirates." Like most Air Force officers on flying status he was only marginally in uniform. He had a misshapen cap on his head, a carelessly buttoned flight jacket over fatigues, and sketchily polished shoes. A white silk scarf, very nonregulation indeed, was wound around his neck, making him a very dashing figure. We had never seen him before, and never saw him afterward. The assistant operations officer called him Sandy. We could see the gleam of captain's bars under the ripple of his scarf.

Yes, he said in answer to our breathless inquiry, he was going up on a short flight, leaving in a few minutes after the paperwork was completed. We could go along if we made it snappy and checked out a couple of parachutes. We dashed off to do this. It took longer than I expected. First of all, we had to be instructed how to buckle on the chute. I wondered if I could fathom the occultism of the device if it came to using it to save my life. I tugged at a handle nervously till somebody snarled, "Jesus Christ! You dumb bastard, you'll dump the silk if you do that!" Well, it didn't look like the release ring I had expected, but more like a handle for toting the chute around.

When we returned to the operations office we found the pilot sitting in the corner, cushioned on his own parachute, calmly engrossed in a comic book. The incongruity of this amazed me. I wondered if we could trust a reader of comic books to be a competent pilot. And the business of being a pilot struck me as far more remarkable than being Superman or Batman. Better those two minor "freedom fighters" should be reading about real-life freedom fighters.

He stuck the comic book in his jacket pocket and led the way out to the plane which was warming up on the line, its three-bladed prop ticking over in an easy well-timed fashion. I looked at the aircraft dubiously, much as Sydney Carton must have looked at the guillotine. I was beginning to have misgivings about this little lark. I had never seen such a plane before, and unlike an automobile it had no identifying emblem on it to tell us what it was. The pilot said it was a Navy combat plane, an SB2C, called the Helldiver, and it appeared that he was as curious about it as we were. Why it was at an Air Force base I have no idea. He had never flown one of these birds before, he explained, but he expected it to be "a piece of cake." I devoutly hoped that he was right.

Afterward, I looked up the specs of the SB2C, and learned that it was made by Curtiss-Wright in both an Army and a Navy version -- the latter had folding wings that were not in the Army version, but I saw no indication of those in the present craft. It was known as the A-25

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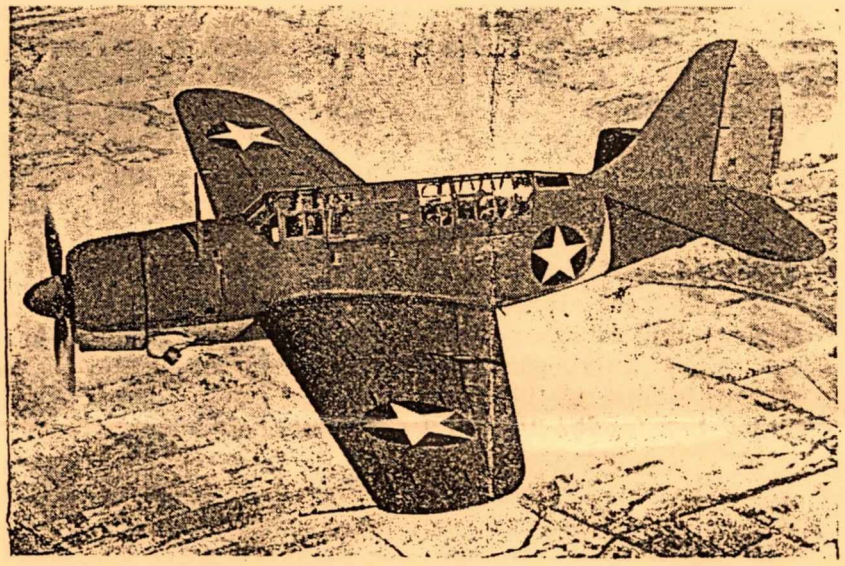
In the Army Air Forces, but most such planes were assigned to the Marines as the SB2C–1A. Its top speed was said to be 275 to 300 mph, and it was built to be a dive bomber. It could carry torpedoes, depth charges, or large bombs. It looked big and burly compared with the P–38s and other fighter planes I had seen around the air base, which looked almost fragile compared with this plane. Despite the propaganda for the aircraft which I read later ("From all indications, the SB2C will become one of the world's deadliest dive bombers") the plane played but little part in air operations during World War 2, and may even have been obsolete by 1944. But as we soon found out, it was fast and agile enough, at least as compared with the big lumbering B–24 Liberators that belonged to our air base.



SB2C : HELLDIVER

Sandy waved us casually into the rear cockpit and nimbly climbed into the forward one. He didn't bother to instruct us how to slide shut the canopy over the rear compartment or how to fasten our seatbelts –– we figured this out just in time. The seat was plenty wide for two people and was fitted with two belts. On the panel in front of us was a full array of dials, partially exposed wires, and controls, but –– although this must have been the tail–gunner's cockpit –– no machine gun was in place. I hoped we wouldn't encounter any Zeroes on our flight.

Without ceremony the pilot headed down the runway and we were airborne in only a few half–skipped heartbeats. Off the starboard side I saw the ground angling away from us in a dizzy blur. The racketing roar of the engine restored my confidence a little as we climbed for altitude about as steeply as a squirrel goes up a tree. There must have been an intercom between the forward cockpit and ours, but the pilot didn't use it. There weren't any bulletins from "the Captain" such as the passengers receive on a 747 about our height or direction of flight or the delightful panorama spread out below us. On a commercial flight, in addition to the peril, you are made to suffer the same lack of privacy that you face on a crowded bus, but here we were isolated in our own thoughts and apprehensions. I could have used some reassurances.

It was a bright blue and gold morning. There aren't many skies as deeply crystalline as the sky of New Mexico, but the heavens didn't seem quite so blue up here. Even in its delicately blanched state the sky stretched comfortably far enough just to overlap the edges of the immense land that reeled below us, realizing (as Robert Frost said) into mist, north and south, but hemmed in by majestic tinted mountains in the other directions. Our height seemed somehow to make the mountains even more impressive than from the ground, contradictory as it seemed, for they towered above us even yet, and we could see them from base to peak, lavender and ageless against the sky. There must be something primal in the desire to see the world laid out below you from the aspect of a treetop or a mountain summit. You have the monarch–of–all–you–survey feeling, and you orient yourself in relation to the visible world. That's why humans climb mountains, not because they are *there.*

Below us, careering grandly, was the endless jumble of desert rocks and sand, wash and gully and coulee; above us was the pure uncomplicated sky. But the tranquillity of the flight didn't last long. The horizon dipped and yawed as we flew, and we were soon over Biggs field at El Paso. I had seen field and city before, but had some trouble recognizing them from the air. The trip to El Paso/Ciudad Juarez, I seem to remember, took an hour and a half or two hours by bus, and traveling by air was a matter of 15 minutes or so. At Biggs field Sandy landed the plane, but as soon as he touched down, he gunned the motor and took off again. I have no

idea whether it was a practice landing or only a bit of skylarking, landing without permission and insouciantly taking off before they could tell him to get the hell out of there.

We seemed to slant straight up into the sun, as in the song, and then I saw rather than felt the wing on my side begin to assume a vertical position in relation to the horizon, which itself tilted alarmingly, and then I was clinging to my seat frantically (despite the seat belt) as we rolled all the way over, not once but again and again, as if we were on the wildest roller coaster ride in the world. The horizons seemed completely out of place as I reached up and jammed my cap tighter on my head. Gravity, we know, is the weakest of nature's forces; as Edward R. Harrison remarks in his book *Cosmology,* it takes the whole earth to make a feather fall, but it seemed to do well enough in taking our plane and its passengers in giant hands and dragging us down inexorably. I remembered stories that it's difficult in the air after an acrobatic maneuver to tell which way is up -- a disorientation given its definitive comic representation in Chaplin's "The Great Dictator" -- and I stared out fearfully. All I could see was sky, and I wondered if Sandy was properly adjusted to the world and knew which way was up and, more important, which way was down. There wasn't much time to think, however, as we ricocheted off the four imagined corners of the sky like a manufacture of Brunswick-Balke-Callender. My stomach suffered the worst. Just the wide prospect of the blue morning made the eye a bit bleary after a while.

Once we straightened out from these bone-wrenching twists and rolls, Sandy had another surprise for us. He spotted the same thing we did when we regained our equilibrium: a long way down below a freight train was chugging along the west-pointing rails of the Southern Pacific. We saw the glints of railroad track in the morning sunshine as we banked sharply to the left and descended, jostled about in our seats by the acceleration. The cold air of the heights we had climbed screeched around the glass canopy now as we slanted almost straight down and buzzed the train. I could have dropped a shoe into the smokestack of the locomotive as we leveled off and felt gravity grab us by the seat of the pants. I hope the railroad engineer in the train cab down below appreciated our sudden advent. He probably didn't see us coming, but as we soared away he must have seen the glitter of our wings and our shadow streaking down the track ahead of him. The snarl of the SB2C peeling away must have been loud over the rumble of the train. Afterward Larry and I agreed that the vertical dive on the freight train had been the most exciting moment of the whole flight, which ended about half an hour later. When we landed at last back at Alamogordo and I clumsily climbed down from the rear cockpit I didn't quite kiss the ground, but I felt like doing so.

Standing by the plane Sandy was lighting another cigaret. He slapped the fuselage of the SB2C affectionately. "What did I tell you?" he said. "Nice little ship. Did you guys enjoy your ride?" I must have looked a little woebegone, as I checked over my vulnerabilia after all that pummeling, for he looked at me with some concern, and asked, "Are you all right, kid?" I said I was OK, and looked at him in much the same way. I wondered if *he* was OK. Was he a flight instructor in the States, or was he headed overseas, to duel with Messerschmitts over Germany or Zeroes over the Pacific? ("Some have it lightly; some will die.") Would this likable fuzzy-faced young man survive the war? What would happen when enemy planes came zooming to meet his thunder? Would he live in fame or go down in flame? Our brief visit to the high rafters of New Mexico had given me some inkling of the magnitude of the "wild blue yonder" of the sky, and of the perilous maneuvers of aerial combat. So I regarded him softly, wondering if he was only a blithe puff of dust in a flight jacket, with a silk scarf wrapped jauntily around his neck. It was hard to picture him living "to be a greyhaired wonder." He didn't look too worried about his fate at the moment. He shucked his parachute and slung it over his shoulder. As an afterthought he took the comic book out of his pocket. I suppose he was eager to get back to the adventures of Superman. As I already knew, the world of the imagination competes powerfully with real life. Tossing a casual salute at us, he sauntered away, and my last glimpse of him centered on the comic book in his hand.

Only a woman can be so forgiving, and unforgiving.
