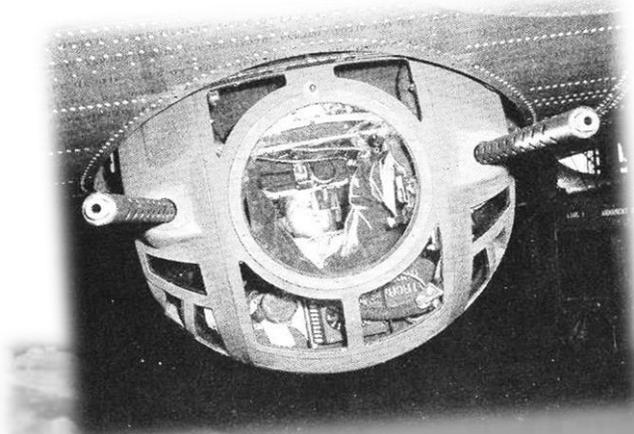


HEAVEN'S HEROES



A Short Story

BY JERROD S. SMELKER

Heaven's Heroes
By Jerrod S. Smelker

Jerrod S. Smelker grew up in Ionia Michigan, a quaint small town smack dab in the middle between Grand Rapids and the state capitol of Lansing. He has always loved history, creating and writing. He enjoys fine cigars and pipes, craft beers, Michigan road trips, travel, good food, get-togethers with friends and family, writing and creating in his woodshop. He currently lives in Grand Blanc with his wife Shana, kids Kylan, Sadrie and step-son Jake along with three cats.

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The Story:

In the skies above occupied France in June of 1944, an Army Air Corp Speery gun turret operator, Sgt. James A. Malcolm, is forced to abandon his burning B17 Flying Fortress and parachute to the incensed ground below.

Unbeknownst to Jim, he is floating towards the same scarred battleground his father is fighting on. Captain Wendell Malcolm of the 101st Airborne division and his Fox company is in a full-fledged ground battle against the Nazi's trying to gain a foothold before the major invasion of Normandy.

After finding each other through the chaos, the father and son must help each other get through the thick hedgerows of Normandy to reach the Allied held territory of the D-Day beaches, but to do so, they must stay ahead of the pursuing Nazi's and keep out of Nazi gun sights.

This story is fictional, but based on real people depicted as the characters.

To...

Wanda (Tinker) Malcolm

Marv, Steve, Cindy, Sherry and the Malcolm family

This story is dedicated with love to my step-grandfather James A. Malcolm and his cousin Wendell Malcolm whom the main characters in the story were based on and named after. God bless them for their service to this country and for the freedoms we enjoy each day.

We miss them and remember them every day.

...And to all of the men and women who fought, served and died during World War II.

Truly, the Greatest Generation.



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It is March of 1942. James A. Malcolm is still a skinny stunted kid at only 18 years old. He enlisted in the Army as the war raged on in Europe and in the Pacific. Jim's father Wendell, a 39 year old Captain with the revered 101st Airborne Division has been fighting the Nazis in the air and ground war since January of 1942. Jim grew up on the family farm in Hastings Michigan and spent his summers with the family on Middle Lake. An avid hunter and down home farm boy, Jim knew his way around guns, and knew the value of family along with duty and honor.

March 8th, 1942

Dear Mom,

Well, this sure ain't the farm and this sure ain't Michigan! I knew enlisting in this war was the right thing to do, but I guess I never realized how tough training would be. Seems like all we do all day is run and then run some more. When we are not running we are cleaning or learning how to fight. Pop would be proud of me as I got the marksman badge yesterday at the range. Some guys here have trouble hitting the targets, but it seems to come natural to me. I guess years of shooting squirrels and rabbits on the farm helped teach me to shoot.

I miss the farm. How's Dusty doing? I miss not having my dog with me all the time. Is he following Cindy around like he did me? I bet he is.

Have you heard from Pop? I sure hope he is doing good over there. I'm sure it won't be long before I get my orders to ship out after graduation. The scuttlebutt around here is that we will be going somewhere over in Europe maybe, but we don't know exactly where. I'm told we'll most likely go by boat. That will be quite a long ride and quite an adventure.

Sure hope you and Sis can take the train to North Carolina to see me graduate next month.

Give my love to the family. I miss you all.

Love,
Jim

In May 1942 Jim graduated Army boot camp and was able to celebrate for one short day with his mother Wanda and younger sister Cindy. They had taken the train down to North Carolina from Michigan. A long trip for them, but worth it to see Jim proudly walk the graduation field and see him in his neatly pressed uniform. They were certainly proud of him, like they were their husband and father for serving their country.

Jim would be assigned to serve with the 8th Army Air Corps 486th Bomber Group and fly bombing missions on a B-17 Flying Fortress. It wouldn't be long before he was on a ship heading to Europe to get fully involved in the war effort.

July 23rd, 1942

Dear Mom,

Well, it's July. I made it to Europe and am doing well. The boat ride here was something. Many of my buddies got sick a number of times because of the rough seas. It was very lonely at times, but I kept thinking of home. I know a lot of the guys tried to keep busy so to keep themselves from going crazy. We played a lot of cards betting with cigarettes and we shared photos of family and girls back home.

Have you heard from Pops lately? I wrote him letters, but I'm not sure if they ever reach him. I try to get information about his company and where they are over here, but sometimes the news is sketchy at best. If you hear from him, tell him not to worry about me.

I'm going to be flying with the 8th Air Corps 486th bomber group on a B-17. Ever heard of those? They are something. Massive planes with a lot of firepower and bombs. Oh and get this; our Captain and pilot is a guy named Marvin McLoud and guess what, he is from Michigan like me. And he and his wife Sherry even camped with his family at Middle Lake. Isn't that a hoot? I bet Pops would really like him.

Anyway, I miss you. Please give Cindy a kiss from her big brother. Hope to be home soon.

Love always, Jim

Soon after their arrival in Europe, the 486th Bomber Group is sent to North Africa to help push the Germans and Italians out of the country. The Nazi's stronghold has completely flooded through many countries with no sign of stopping. Their army grows stronger and in the deserts of Africa, they are quickly taking over every town and village in their path.

The United States continues to send troops to North Africa in the hopes of stopping the quick advancements of the Nazi's. The assignment is to push the Nazi's out of Africa, then move on to take control of Italy.

August 15th, 1942

Dear Mom,

As I write this letter, I am in North Africa. Soon I'm told I may be going to Italy. We have been conducting a lot of bombing runs mostly at night, but a few during the day. Don't worry, I'm fine and haven't been on too many dangerous missions. That's all I can tell you for now.

I'd read about Africa in school history books, but it's amazing seeing the places in person. Africa is nothing like the books talk about. It's very hot here and there is sand and dust everywhere and in everything. We have to constantly clean our guns, equipment and sand even gets in our food. A lot of the boys here are sick from heat stroke or some kind of illness.

How is Cindy doing? Has she had a good summer? I bet she's been swimming at the lake with her friends. I miss doing that.

I will write again as soon as I can,

Love Jim

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It's been a tough and bloody war over the last few years. Thousands of allied soldiers and airmen have lost their lives battling for control of the land and air over Europe. With the Nazis now pushed out of Africa and Italy, the Allies set their sights on France and the rest of Europe. Success all culminates on one major mission, one that will determine the outcome of the war, one that will live on for centuries. Jim and his B-17 will be right in the middle of one of the biggest invasion forces ever imagined; D-Day!

May 18th, 1944

Dear Mom,

Sorry it's been a while since I last wrote. We have been busy and constantly on the move until now. I'm in England now and boy is this country pretty. Lots of green grass and believe it or not, there are lots of cows. The milk and beef has never been so fresh. Thank goodness for that.

I won't lie; we've been beat up and battered over here. It's been rough and I've seen a lot of things I hope to forget one day. There's no way to describe it and I don't think I'd want to even if I could. I've seen a lot of boys my age die in an instant. You get to know someone one day and the next they are gone. I don't want you to worry about me though; our B17 has saved us more times than I can count.

We've been here a few months with only a few sparse runs here and there. We are appreciating the relaxation and quiet. We haven't been told what we're doing here in England, but I suppose we will be told eventually. Not sure when I'll be able to write again, so give my love to Cindy.

Love Jim

June 6th, 1944, in the skies over the English Channel.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen the sun set so quickly, so beautifully.” Jim said gazing out the window of his B-17 Flying Fortress “The Swamp Lily”. That June day was the first time Jim had been in his B-17 in about a month. He and his crew had been on a British base for months waiting for orders. He could smell the smoke from the B-17 engines. “The smell of the engines reminds me of the tractors growing up on the farm, but those never left the ground.” Jim said out loud, but none of the other crew was really listening. Everyone else was either asleep or deep in their own thoughts and prayers.

Jim’s plane was 30,000 feet off the ground and was part of the biggest aerial armada the war had seen to date. His plane, along with hundreds of others, was part of the D-Day invasion of Normandy France. This mission, as Jim was told, was one of the most important of the war. He knew that he would be a part of something historical. He knew that if the mission failed, the war may go on for years. He also knew the Nazi’s would be throwing everything they had at them.

The plane was shaking back and forth, up and down, and everything was rattling. It was bitter cold in the plane and the metal walls and floor offered no comfort. Jim’s heated jacket kept going in and out of heat and every time he moved his oxygen mask, it hurt his face. They were three hours into the mission and it seemed like an eternity. Jim just wanted to get it over with and back to base in England. The rest of the crew at this point seemed to be sleeping. Jim wondered how they could sleep. He wanted to, but he just couldn’t. He looked out the window and could see at least a dozen other B-17’s and fighter planes flying in front, in back and to each side of them. This was their first mission in France and he had never been so scared in his life. Jim tried to sleep the night before, but his nerves would have none of it.

His mission position or duty aboard the B-17 was the Sperry gunner, ball turret gunner or as most refer to it as; the belly gunner. Jim got the job for one reason only; he was small. The rest of the crew were over 5 foot 10 inches tall, Jim was a mere 5 foot 4 inches. There were no straws drawn, the smallest guy always got the ball turret. The Sperry ball was an extremely small sphere located under the B-17. It was made of metal, thick plastic glass and equipped with two 50 caliber machine guns. Many crew members wanted nothing to do with sitting in the "ball of death" as some refer to it. They felt it was too vulnerable for enemy fighter planes and most of all; shrapnel flying from enemy flak.

Captain McLeod briefed everyone before taking off; they were flying over Omaha beach to drop bombs on a German radar installation and gun emplacements. He said if they could destroy the radar and take out a few big German guns, then perhaps it would save some of our guys on the ground. That's how they came to grips with causing so much destruction. They told themselves that everything they do is for a purpose; to help in the war effort and to bring the war to an end. Most just wanted to do their jobs and get back home safely. They believed in what they were doing, but many times while looking into the face of death, many just wanted it to be over. The bombs would help the invasion force take the beaches and eventually take France.

Jim was not in the Sperry yet. They were still over water and not yet close to the shores of France. He looked out the window at the darkness of the night, the gray clouds and black water below. He wasn't quite sure if that was the ocean or land below him, but it was everywhere. Jim had heard stories about plane crews being shot down and landing in the water never to be heard from again. He wondered what was worse; dying in the air or dying in the water. Jim joined the Army instead of the Navy because he didn't want to die in the water.

Of course, he never wanted to die in the air either. The water below looked calm. There was nothing around; no waves, no nothing. It actually looked like a black desert. If it weren't for the sound of the plane engines it was quite peaceful.

"FLAK!!!" yelled Captain McLeod over the intercom system. Jim had dozed off and woke up hearing the most dreaded word bomber crews could hear. The German's were pasting the night sky with it anti-aircraft artillery. The plane shuddered back and forth, and danced up and down. Jim quickly ditched his parachute (it wouldn't fit with him in the Sperry) and headed for the ball turret. The crew was frantically trying to get to their assigned positions. Steve was running for the side gunner position and Jerry ran past Jim to get to the rear. Everyone had a tough time walking through the plane because of the turbulence. Everyone's body kept getting tossed from one side to the other. Jim's heart was racing and he could feel sweat dripping down his face and freezing to his cheeks. He scrambled to open the turret hatch. It was just a matter of time before the flak stopped and the German fighters would start coming. Jim was ready for this, but for him and the crew, it was truly terrifying.

Jim opened the Sperry hatch and climbed inside. Jerry was already screaming that he was hit. Jim saw him hit the floor before he ducked down into the turret. He closed the hatch and locked it tight. There was nothing Jim could do for him. Jim was now hanging off the bottom of the airplane. There was nothing protecting him except a bit of thin metal and two inches of Plexiglas. He had no parachute. If the plane went down, he would likely go down with it. He spun the turret from side to side looking for any signs of enemy fighters. The radio was going crazy with men screaming. He could see bombers on fire and men on fire jumping from their planes. There was thick black smoke everywhere. He was never so scared.

“Fighters 6 o’clock, fighters 3 o’clock, 12 o’clock” the radio was non-stop. He swung the turret from one side to the other looking for a target. His blood was pumping so fast through his body and his adrenaline was overwhelming, he felt like he was going to burst. Coming up from below was a German fighter. It was heading right towards him. Its wings burst with fire as its guns poured out round after round. Jim pulled the triggers on his two 50 caliber machine guns and unleashed a hail of bullets and tracers right down the German’s throat. He was still coming straight at him. Jim just closed his eyes and kept firing.

Jim opened his eyes to see the Nazi fighter was gone. He didn’t know where, it was just gone. Just then his plane started to dive down and dive hard. Just then over the radio “Bail out! Bail out!” the captain yelled. “We’ve been hit hard boys” he continued in a frantic voice. Jim’s eyes grew big and adrenaline made his body shake. He could see dark smoke pouring from both left side engines. He released his constricted grip on the guns and reached for the turret door in a panic. He knew he had only a minute to get out of the ball turret and find a parachute if he was going to make it out alive. He knew most turret gunners never make it out.

The plane was in a nose dive racing towards the ground. It mercilessly shook and bounced through the sky. Men scrambled to find a door or opening to get out. The g-force pinned some to the walls and some to the floor. It was a struggle to move, and a struggle to breath. As the plane continues to drop; one chute opens, then another, then another. Jim was still inside trying to get out of the turret. The acceleration and turbulence was throwing him from side to side making it difficult for him to get out of his hole and get his parachute on. With the grace of God he was finally able to make it out. Jim struggled to buckle his chute while trying to find a way out. For a split second he stopped moving and just stared at nothing. “JIM!!!” yelled Steve. “Let’s go!” said Steve as

he reached out his hand for Jim's. Both men pushed their way out the side door which was now a horizontal opening.

Jim's chute opened with a hard jolt to his entire body. He looked over to see Steve about 20 feet from him, chute opened. He looked down to see his smoking B-17, now engulfed in flames, plummeting towards earth. He fixated on the plane as it hit the ground and exploded. He had no idea who got out and who didn't. Flak was still exploding all across the sky and he could see tracer rounds climbing up from the ground all around him. He prayed that he would make it safely to the ground unharmed. He placed his hands over his ears to block out the mid-air explosions, and then blacked out.

Jim's unconscious body hit the ground; hard. Luckily for him he didn't break anything. As soon as he hit, he awoke. It took him a few seconds to realize what had happened and where he was. He laid on the ground for a minute or two looking at his surroundings. He could hear gun fire coming from all directions. He could see tracer rounds shooting through the sky and he could hear large artillery firing every second or two. Hundreds of planes were flying overhead and flak was popping in the air like deadly ear piercing popcorn.

Jim raised his head up to see where he was or if anyone else was around. He knew he was behind enemy lines and at least hoped he was near friendly forces. He knew that the 82nd and 101st Airborne units had dropped into the area earlier that night in order to help take out German artillery. The fields were thick with grasses and weeds. Large thick hedgerows separated each field making it difficult to see from one area to another. It was pitch black except for the flash of light coming from the explosions. It was difficult to see and he had no idea what direction to go. He had no map, no compass and worst of all; no weapons.

He ditched his parachute and began to crawl through the grass. As he made his way towards a hedgerow he noticed someone lying in the grass about ten feet in front of him. He stopped and stared at the figure. It didn't move. Jim slowly made his way towards the shape being as quiet as possible. As he reached the body he could see that it was a man, dead. The face was covered with a parachute riddled with bullet holes, as was the body. Jim pulled the chute off of the face. His heart skipped a beat and he winced with shock. It was Steve.

Jim pulled the parachute back over Steve's face, said a short silent prayer and continued his crawl. As he reached the hedgerow he curled up and covered himself with weeds and leaves. The planes were moving farther and farther away and the artillery began to quell. He could hear voices from afar but couldn't tell if they were friend or foe. Jim was scared, frozen and unable to move from his hiding spot. His body was shaking and he searched for inner strength. He thought about his plane, his friends in the plane, his family and home.

An hour or so passed. There were no longer planes above, no artillery being fired and only the faint shots of rifles going off here and there in the distance. The sky was still dark, but the sun was slowly making its way above the horizon shedding light across the terrain. Dew covered the fields and the air was chilly. Jim raised his head a bit, lifted his helmet off his eyes to look around, only to see virtually nothing; nothing except open fields with bomb and artillery shell craters and miles of hedgerows. He slowly stood up keeping his eyes wide open. He brushed the leaves and weeds off of his body and checked his pockets for anything he could use. He found nothing.

Jim walked along the hedgerow, slowly, looking in every direction. As he came to the corner of two adjoining fields, in the distant tree line he spotted a

downed glider with United States markings. He watched the area for a few minutes, but no one was around. He made his way to the glider. It was severely damaged with much of the wings and tail tattered. The cockpit was smashed into a large tree and the frame was bent and broke everywhere. As he moved closer he could see bodies on the ground and in the glider. Everyone in and around the glider was dead.

Jim stuck around long enough to gather a pistol, an M14 rifle, ammunition, a knife and a few chocolate bars most GIs kept in their pockets. He knew if the German's were in the area they would be doing the same; stripping the dead of their property...to utilize and for trophies. With the sun rising higher in the sky and the area becoming well-lit, he gathered his things and headed towards a wooded area where he would be more concealed and hopefully out of enemy sight.

Once in the woods, Jim tried to gather his thoughts. He took a position far enough within the trees to be hidden, but close to the open fields to see if anyone passed by. He laid on the ground and covered himself with foliage. His thoughts wandered to where he was, who was around, did anyone else make it out of the plane, were they out here in the area and so on. He took a chocolate bar from his pocket, unwrapped it and ate it slowly, leisurely. The taste brought him peace if only for a few moments. His thoughts wandered and he drifted off to sleep.

"Keep searching" said a German voice from the edge of the woods. Jim awoke to footsteps and voices directly in front of him at the woods perimeter. He opened his eyes to see four German soldiers about ten feet in front of him. He held his breath. The Germans were looking around the field and into the wooded area. They were certainly searching for something...or someone. Jim's rifle was next to him, but if he moved to grasp it, he would undoubtedly make

too much noise alerting the German soldiers to his presence and proximity. His heart was beating so loud he was sure they would hear it. He laid there motionless and hoped they would pass. The soldiers walked back and forth in the area carefully surveying for any movement, but eventually walked away to another location. Jim breathed a sigh of relief, but still didn't move.

As Jim lay in the woods he could hear off in the far distance gun fire and explosions. It was miles away, but he could hear it. The beach invasion of France had begun. He knew that where the sounds were coming from was the beach. He knew that was the direction he had to go. He slowly rose from the brush, gathered his rifle and began to walk along the wooded border. He kept looking over his shoulder and all around the fields for any German soldiers.

After hours of slowly creeping through the countryside with no friend or foe in sight, Jim found a small abandoned bombed out shack to spend the night. He settled in with his back against a corner, rifle resting across his knees. His stomach was grumbling and his mouth was dry. His thoughts blurred between being home and what lay ahead. He eventually dozed off.

Jim's peaceful sleep was abruptly interrupted by the sound of footsteps just outside of the stone and brick wall. He couldn't hear voices, but the footsteps got closer and closer to the doorway. He slowly raised his rifle and trained it on the door opening. Jim held his breath and did not make a move or a sound. His rifle iron sights were fixed on the opening. The moon light was shining through the entryway and suddenly a person's shadow appeared. He was scared and started to shake. His hands gripped the wood of the M14 stock so tightly you could almost hear the wood splinter. The human figure stepped into view.

"Flash" he heard a voice whisper. "Flash" said the voice again. It clicked with Jim that the word flash is the Allies code word for friendly subject. Excitedly,

but quietly he gave the Allied response; “Thunder”. The shadowy subject moved inside the shack and into the slight moonlight shining in. Jim’s eyes opened wide. “Pops!?!” Jim whispered loudly. “What the...how did you get here?” Jim said eagerly with a puzzled look on his face. It was Jim’s father Wendell. Jim stood up and hugged his father...tighter than he ever had in his life. “What are you doing here?” Jim asked his father quietly. The two sat down and Jim lit two cigarettes and gave one to his father. Jim had a huge smile on his face and was never so happy to see a familiar face. His stress, pain, and fear vanished, at least for the time being.

Wendell explained that he and the rest of his 101st Airborne company had parachuted into the area the night before. They ran into heavy German resistance. Many of his men were killed before they even hit the ground. The one’s that did make it to the ground, well, some of them drowned in the flooded fields. Some were taken underwater by their equipment and others were killed by Germans waiting for them in the hedgerows. “Men were dropped all over the place and it was complete chaos.” Wendell explained. “I don’t know where any of my men are.” He said shaking his head and taking a long drag from his cigarette. “None of them.”

Jim and Wendell sit in the dark, enjoying their smokes and talking quietly about the last few years. They also talk about how much they miss home and family. Jim tells his father about some of his missions and the one that got him where he was. With their cigarettes put out, they both close their eyes, huddled together, to get some much needed rest.

After days of walking through flooded fields, hedgerows, and dodging German patrols, Jim and Wendell finally make it to an allied held base at Omaha beach mid-afternoon. They are over-joyed with happiness and contentment. A smile covered Jim’s face as big as it ever had. His harrowing ordeal was finally over

and now he could get some food, water and perhaps a shower. His first stop however was to the medical tent for attention to his cuts and bruises.

“I’ll be right behind you son.” Wendell said as Jim made his way into the medical tent. “Ok Pops.” Jim said. Jim talked to a nurse about his cuts and bruises as he laid on a cot in exhaustion. She removed his shirt and began to assess him. As the nurse was tending to his wounds, Jim noticed a copy of the newest edition of the Stars and Stripes magazine sitting on a stool next to him. It was opened to page four. Jim stared at it for what seemed like ten minutes. His facial expressions went from jovial to despondent to baffled. He picked up the magazine and read the headline again and again, and stared at the photo.

It read, “Captain Wendell Malcolm of the fighting 101st Airborne posthumously receives the Medal of Honor for heroic acts in Europe” Jim read it over and over. He was confused. “Posthumously?” Jim said out loud. The nurse looked at him. “What does that mean?” He asked the nurse. Though fairly sure of knowing exactly what it meant. He asked as if to get some clarification on what he thought he had just read. The nurse looked at him and looked at the magazine page. She read the headline. “It means he was awarded the medal after he was killed.” She said assuredly.

Jim jumped up from the cot brushing the nurse aside spilling her supplies. He threw open the tent flaps and looked around. “Pops!” he yelled. “Pops!” he yelled again. No one answered and no one came. The nurse rushed to Jim’s side. “Are you okay?” she asked. Jim, looking confused, could only mutter. “But....” He said softly.

Heaven's Heroes
By Jerrod S. Smelker

May 26th, 1945

Dear Mom,

By now you have no doubt received word about Pops. My hope is that this letter will ease your mind that I am alive and doing well. I have stories to tell you about the last few months, but I am not quite certain how to tell them.

The war is over. It has been a non-stop celebration here in Europe due to the war finally being done, yet I have had little desire to celebrate. I'm tired. I just want to be home.

Give my best to everyone. Hope to be home soon.

Love, Jim