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Opening Extract from...

Alphabet House

Written by Jussi Adler-Olsen

Translated from the Danish by Steve Schein

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Alphabet House

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Chapter 1

It wasn't the best weather in the world.

Cold and windy, with poor visibility.

An exceptionally bleak January day, even for England.

The American crews had already been sitting on the landing strips for some time when the tall Englishman approached. He was still not quite awake.

Behind the group a shape rose halfway to its feet and waved to him. The Englishman waved back, yawning loudly. Functioning in daytime was difficult after such a long period of nothing but night raids.

It was going to be a long day.

At the far end of the airfield the planes were taxiing slowly towards the southern end of the landing strips. Soon the air would be full of them.

The feeling was both exhilarating and oppressive.

The orders regarding the mission came from Major General Lewis H. Brereton's office in Sunninghill Park. He was requesting British assistance from Sir Arthur Harris, marshal in the Royal Air Force. The Americans were still impressed by the British Mosquitoes' discovery, during their November night-time bombing of Berlin, of the Germans' most closely guarded secret, the V-1 missile sites at Zemplin.

The choice of British personnel had been left to Group Captain Hadley-Jones, who entrusted the practical work to his next-in-command, Wing Commander John Wood.

The latter's task was to select twelve British flight crews. Eight of them were to function as instructors and four as supporting crews with special photo-reconnaissance duties under the 8th and 9th American Air Forces.

Two-seater P-51D Mustang fighters had been equipped for this task with radar and sensitive optical instruments.

Only two weeks had passed since James Teasdale and Bryan

Young had been chosen as the first crew to try out this equipment under so-called ‘normal conditions’.

In short, they could expect to go into action again.

The raid was planned for the 11th January 1944. The target was the aeroplane factories at Oschersleben, Braunschweig, Magdeburg and Halberstadt.

Both men had protested at having their Christmas leave curtailed. They were still suffering from combat fatigue.

‘Two weeks to figure out this bloody machine!’ Bryan shook his head. ‘I don’t know a thing about all those gadgets. Why doesn’t Uncle Sam do his own dirty work?’

John Wood was standing with his back to them both, bowed over the document files. ‘Because Uncle Sam wants *you*!’

‘That’s no argument, is it?’

‘You’ll live up to the Americans’ expectations and come out alive.’

‘Is that a guarantee?’

‘Yes!’

‘Say something, James!’ Bryan turned towards his friend.

James fingered his silk scarf and shrugged his shoulders. Bryan sat down heavily.

It was hopeless. They had to go.

The entire operation was calculated to take a good six hours. A total of about 650 four-engine bombers from the 8th American Air Force were to bomb aeroplane factories, escorted by the P-51 long-distance fighters.

Bryan and James were to break away from the formation during the attack.

During the past couple of months there had been persistent rumors of an increased influx of builders, engineers and highly specialized technicians – as well as hordes of Polish and Soviet slave labourers – into the region of Lauenstein, south of Dresden.

Intelligence had learned that some kind of construction was

going on in the area, but not what kind. They had a hunch it might be factories for producing synthetic fuel. If this were the case, it would be a dangerous development that could lend impetus to new German V-bomb projects.

Bryan and James' job, therefore, was to photograph and map out the area thoroughly, including the railway network around Dresden, so that the intelligence service could update its information. After completing their mission they were to rejoin the formation on its way back to England.

Many of the Americans who were to take part in the raid were already seasoned air warriors. Despite the cold and the impending take-off, they were lying half stretched out on the uneven, frostbitten earth some people might call a runway. Most of them were chatting away as though they were on their way to a dance, or relaxing at home on the family sofa. Here and there a few sat hugging their knees, staring dully into space. These were the new and inexperienced pilots who had not yet learned how to forget dreams and control anxiety.

The Englishman strode between the seated figures towards his partner, who lay stretched out on the ground with his arms behind his head.

Bryan gave a start when he felt the gentle kick in his side.

Snowflakes drifted above them, settling on nose and brow as the sky above became more and more overcast. This expedition would differ very little from one of their night raids.

Bryan's seat vibrated gently under him.

The radar screen showed the surrounding airspace to be thick with signals from the planes in the formation. Each echo signalling a plane's position was clearly distinguishable.

Several times during training they'd joked about painting over the windows and flying on instruments alone. The equipment was that precise. It was a joke they could just as well have taken seriously on this flight. According to James, the visibility was

‘as clear as a symphony by Béla Bartók’. The windscreen wipers and nose of the plane penetrating the snow clouds – that was all they could see.

They’d been arguing. Not about the crazy idea of changing duties and equipment at such short notice, but about John Wood’s motives. According to Wood they had been chosen because they were the best, which James was willing to accept.

But Bryan blamed his friend. There was scarcely any doubt in his mind that John Wood had picked them because James never protested while on active duty. And on this operation there had certainly been no time for questioning orders.

Bryan’s reproaches irritated James. There were worries enough already. It was a long trip and they were handling new equipment. The weather was terrible and there was no one to support them once they left the rest of the formation. If the intelligence services were correct in assuming that important factories were under construction, the target area would be very heavily guarded. Finally, it was going to be an extremely difficult task getting the photos back to England.

But James was right. Someone had to do it. Besides, it couldn’t be very different from the bombing raids on Berlin.

They’d made it this far.

Bryan sat silently in his seat behind James, doing his job irreproachably, as always. The vibrations gradually shook loose his combed-back hair. Bryan’s hairstyle was his most distinguishing feature. Freshly combed, he looked almost as tall as James.

Between Bryan’s map and measuring instruments hung the photo of a WAC by the name of Madge Donat. In her eyes, Bryan was an Adonis.

He’d stuck with her for a long time.

As if responding to the authoritative cue of a conductor’s baton, the Germans began greeting the arriving planes with an anti-aircraft overture. James had foreseen the barrage a few seconds previously and given Bryan the signal, so they managed to change course. From that moment on until some undefined

time in the future, their fate was out of their hands.

Unprotected and on their own.

‘We’ll be scraping the bottom off this machine if you want us to fly any lower,’ Bryan grunted, twenty minutes later.

‘If we stay up at 200 feet your pictures won’t come out,’ came the reply.

James was right. It was snowing over the target area, but the wind was constantly forcing the flakes to whirl upwards, creating holes through which it was possible to photograph. Assuming they were close enough.

No one had been interested in their presence since they’d turned away from the barrage over Magdeburg. Apparently they hadn’t been observed. Bryan would do his utmost to ensure that they weren’t.

Many planes had crashed behind them. Far too many. In the midst of all the noise James shouted back to Bryan that he’d seen German fighters firing rocket-like things. A short flash followed by a totally devastating explosion.

‘The *Luftwaffe* isn’t worth shit,’ an American pilot had bellowed out the previous evening, a broad Kentucky grin on his face. Perhaps experience had taught him something different now.

‘And then 138 degrees to the south!’ Bryan was following the sea of snow beneath him. ‘You should be able to get a glimpse of the main road out of Heidenau. Can you see the crossroads now? Good. Then follow the turning towards the ridge.’

Their speed was down to scarcely 200 kilometres per hour, which in that weather made the entire fuselage complain audibly.

‘You’ve got to zigzag over the road here, James, but watch out! Some of the southern slopes could be steep. Can you see anything? You should have a good chance between here and Geising.’

‘All I can see is that the road seems quite wide. Why would that be, in such a deserted place?’

‘That’s what I was wondering. Can’t you swing southwards now? Look at those trees! Can you see how dense they are?’

‘Camouflage netting, you mean?’

‘Possibly.’ If there were any factories here, they must have been dug into the hillside. Bryan was in doubt. Once such a building was discovered, the earthworks wouldn’t provide sufficient protection against intense precision bombing. ‘This is a wild-goose chase, James! There’s nothing in the vicinity to suggest recent building.’

If possible, they were to follow the railway line northwards towards Heidenau, turn west towards Freital and follow the railway line to Chemnitz, then turn north and afterwards north-east along the railway line to Waldheim. The entire network was to be photographed in detail. By Russian request. Soviet troops were exerting heavy pressure near Leningrad and were threatening to roll up the entire German front. According to the Russians, the railway junction at Dresden was the Germans’ umbilical cord. Once severed, the German divisions on the Eastern Front would soon be lacking supplies. It was merely a question of how many cuts were necessary in order to be effective.

Bryan looked down at the railway line beneath him. There would be nothing to see in his photos but snow-covered rails.

The first explosion came without warning and with incredible force, only a half metre behind Bryan’s seat. Before he could turn around, James was already forcing the plane into a fast perpendicular climb. Bryan fastened the snap hook in his seat and felt the cockpit’s tepid air being sucked out from under him.

The jagged hole in the fuselage was about the size of a fist, the exit hole in the roof like a dinner plate. A single round from a small-calibre anti-aircraft gun had hit them.

So there was something they’d overlooked, after all.

The engine screeched so loudly during the steep ascent that they couldn’t tell if they were still being shot at.

‘Is it serious back there?’ James screamed. He appeared satis-

fied with the answer. 'Then here we go!' Almost instantly James had looped the loop, tipped the plane on one side and put it into a vertical dive. After a few seconds the Mustang's machine guns began ticking away. Several anti-aircraft muzzle flames pointed directly up at them, showing them the way.

In the midst of that deadly blaze there had to be something the Germans were extremely reluctant to have outsiders know about.

James swung the plane from side to side in order to confuse the enemy while the German gunners on the ground tried to get them in their sights. They never saw the guns, but there was no mistaking the sound. The Flakzwillig 40 made a bloodcurdling noise all of its own.

When they were close to the ground, James levelled the plane with a jerk. They would only have this one chance. The entire area was two to three kilometres wide. The camera needed a steady hand.

The landscape whipped along beneath them. Grey patches and white swirls alternated with treetops and buildings. Tall fences encircled the area they were flying over. Several watch-towers fired machine-gun salvos at them. Slave labourers were kept in camps like these. Tracer-bullet salvos from a forest thicket in front of them made James instinctively dive still lower, straight towards the trees. Several rounds from his machine gun made it past the tree trunks, silencing all resistance from that quarter. Then, grazing the tops of the fir trees, James flew the plane right over a gigantic greyish mass of camouflage netting, walls, railway carriages and scattered heaps of materials. Bryan had plenty to photograph. A few seconds later they again banked upwards, and away.

'OK?'

Bryan nodded, patted James' shoulder and prayed that the guns below them were their only opponents.

They weren't.

'Something funny's going on here, Bryan! You can just see it if

you sit up straight. It's the engine cowling! Can you see it?'

It wasn't difficult. A triangular bit of cowling was sticking straight up in the air. Whether it was caused by the dive, a hit, or blast waves, was immaterial. It wasn't good under any circumstances.

'We're going to have to really reduce our speed, Bryan. There's not much hope of getting back to the bomber formation now.'

'Do what you think is best!'

'We'll follow the railway line. If they send fighters after us, they're probably thinking we'll make off due west. You keep an eye on the air around us, OK?'

The trip back was going to be interminable.

The countryside beneath them gradually became flatter. On a clear day they would have been able to see the horizon to all sides. Had it not been for the snowstorm they would have been audible kilometres away.

'How the hell are we going to get home, James?' asked Bryan quietly. Looking at the map was useless. Their chances were slim.

'Just keep your eye on that little screen,' came the reply. 'You can't do much else. I think the cowling will stay put as long as we stick to this marching pace.'

'Then we'll take the shortest way back.'

'North of Chemnitz. Yes, please, Bryan!'

'We must be crazy!'

'Not us! The situation!'

The railway line below them was no minor branch line. Sooner or later an ammunition train or troop transport would turn up. Small, easily aimed twin cannons or Flak 38 20-millimetre anti-aircraft guns would be able to finish them off quickly. And then there were the Messerschmitts. For them, the Mustang was easy prey. Close combat. Shot down. That's how brief the report would be.

Bryan thought of suggesting they land the plane before the enemy did it for them. His philosophy was simple and practical.

Captivity was preferable to death.

He took hold of James' upper arm and shook it slightly. 'They've spotted us,' he said quietly.

Without further comment James let the plane lose altitude.

'Naundorf ahead. Here you go north of...' Bryan saw the enemy only as a shadow above them. 'There he is, James, straight above us!' James tore the plane away from low altitude with a violent wrench of the controls.

The whole plane was vibrating with protest as he accelerated. During the sudden ascent the hole behind Bryan practically sucked the cabin empty of air. James' machine guns started rattling even before Bryan had seen their target. A merciless salvo into its belly paralyzed the Messerschmitt instantly. The explosion that followed proved fatal. The pilot never knew what had hit him.

There were several bangs that Bryan couldn't quite place, and suddenly they were lying level in the air. Bryan glanced at the back of James' neck as if he expected to see it react in some special way. The draft blasting through the shattered front windscreen signalled that the triangular bit of cowling had been torn off during their brutal ascent.

James shook his head without making a sound.

Then he slumped forward with his face turned to one side.

The roar of the engine increased. All the aeroplane's joints rattled in time with the fuselage's descent through the air strata. Loosening his harness, Bryan threw himself over James, got hold of the control stick and forced it towards the lifeless body.

A delta of small bloodstreams trickled down James' cheek, emanating from two long superficial gashes above and in front of his ear. The piece of metal had hit him in the temple, taking most of his earlobe with it.

Without warning, another piece of cowling came loose with a bang and tumbled over the left wing. Creaking sounds told Bryan there were more to come. Then he made a decision for

them both and pulled James free.

The cockpit canopy almost exploded off, sucking Bryan out of his seat. In spite of the howling, icy wind, he grabbed James under the armpits and pulled him out onto the wing in the lacerating air. At the same moment the plane disappeared from under them. Jerked out into space, Bryan lost his grip on James, who plunged downward like dead weight, but he still felt the life-redeeming tug of James' ripcord. For a second James lay poised in midair with arms hanging limp as a rag doll's. Then his chute opened with a sudden jerk. His flapping arms made him look like a fledgling just out of the nest, tumbling through the air for the first time.

Bryan's fingers were like ice as he tugged at his own parachute ripcord. He heard the crack of the chute opening above him as shots began rattling towards him from the ground, sending faint, treacherous flashes of light up through the snowy haze.

The plane banked and plunged slowly earthward behind them. Anyone searching for them would have to do a thorough job. Until then, Bryan had to make sure that James, the small fluttering grey ball, did not disappear from sight.

The ground rose to meet Bryan with unexpected brutality. Hard plough furrows were like concrete gutters in the severe frost. As he lay moaning, the wind filled his chute again and dragged him over the earthen ridges, ripping his flying suit to pieces. The powdery snow froze any bloody scrapes to ice before he could register the pain.

Bryan saw James hit the ground. It seemed violent, as if his body had been crushed from the waist down.

Contrary to all regulations Bryan let his chute blow away from him as he hobbled over the furrows. Isolated fenceposts marked an old corral. The horses were gone, slaughtered long ago. James' parachute had wedged itself between the bark and wood of one of the posts. Bryan glanced around. There wasn't a sound. Amid cascades of whirling newly fallen snow, he

took hold of the dancing parachute with both hands and with even tugs guided himself along the seams and straps towards James.

It took three shoves before James slid onto his side. The zip of his flight jacket gave way reluctantly. Bryan's icy fingertips dug down under the rough clothing. The warmth he found there was almost painful to the touch.

Bryan held his breath until he felt a faint pulse.

The wind finally subsided and the snow stopped drifting. All was quiet for the moment.

James began panting feebly as Bryan dragged him towards a thicket. Sky could be seen through the treetops. Alongside the trunks lay debris from generations of storms, offering shelter and cover.

'With so much uncollected fuel around, there's not much chance of anyone living here,' Bryan said to himself.

'What'd you say?' came a voice from the limp body, as it was being dragged through the carpet of snow.

Bryan dropped to his knees and carefully pulled James' head onto his lap.

'James! What happened?'

'Did something happen?' His eyes were still not focusing. He stared up at Bryan, his gaze wandering the air above him. Then he turned his head and surveyed the black and white landscape. 'Where are we?'

'We crashed, James. Are you badly hurt?'

'I don't know.'

'Can you feel your legs?'

'They're cold as hell!'

'But can you feel them, James?'

'You bloody well bet I can. They're cold as hell, I told you! What's this godforsaken place you've dropped me?'