



Blue 4 Escape

Tumbling, tumbling, tumbling. *“I guess this is what it means to be dead,”* thought Will. Water, sky, water, sky, then a sliver of land. He was spinning now. His goggles flew away and then both gloves. He could feel the centrifugal force pulling at his feet, but so far his boots stayed on. *“That’s because they’re laced well above the ankles. Wait a second! I can’t be dead! If I were dead I wouldn’t feel anything, and I wouldn’t be worried about my bloody boots. Damn, now I remember, those NAZI bastards shot me down. How did I get here? I should be burning to death in my Hurri. The last thing I remember was hiding behind the armored back plate. I could feel the impact of the machine gun fire and mostly the strikes from the 20mm cannon.”* He looked about and there was no Hurricane, only fragments of Blue 4, some of which were falling with him. *“It must have exploded, and I got thrown clear.”*

“Holy Hurricanes! I really will be dead if I don’t do something bloody quick like open my chute.”

Will reached for the D ring that would open his chute. He clawed with his hand and couldn’t find it. He tore at his chest in desperation until he lost two of the finger nails on his left hand. *“Wait I’m left handed! This isn’t going to work.”* He grabbed with his right hand and immediately found the D ring and pulled it. His chute didn’t blossom but jerked open. The restraining straps snugged up against his groin so hard he thought his nuts would pop out of his eye sockets. Now

that he was floating in his chute, he noticed some pieces of his Hurri whizzing past him too close for comfort. He even recognized part of an aileron as it fluttered by.

Hanging in his chute he had time to take stock, and his situation was desperate. He was over the middle of the English Channel closer to the *Isle of Wight*, but it didn't matter since the west wind was blowing him in the direction of France. He was going to land in the drink no matter what. In the distance he saw two dots. They were coming head on, and he could see the yellow noses and wingtips of the Abbeville Boys as the dots got bigger. He was sure they were going to gun him down. Churchill strongly suggested that enemy rescue craft and pilots in chutes over the Channel be attacked since they'd only come back to attack England again the next day. All the pilots he knew refused the suggestion for the simple reason that the German fliers would return the favor, and it looked like those two bastards in their Bf109s were about to do just that. As they bore in on him, Will felt embarrassed when he lost control of his bladder. He then laughed, "*What the hell does that matter? In a few seconds, I'm really going to be dead for certain this time, or swimming in the channel.*" He waited for the Bf109s to come into range, and hoped they were good shots making quick work of his trip to Valhalla. However, unexpectedly the pair of 109s went wings up, and did a tight banking turn around his chute and at the same time the leader gave him a salute. They then leveled their wings and headed for France.

A feeling of relief surged over Will until he looked down. What he saw was a gray ocean with breaking waves. He was going to drown, but first he was going to get a very cold dunking. The water was coming up fast, and for a second he envied the NAZI bastards because they had much better survival gear, like better life vests and inflatable rafts that kept them out of the water. All he had was swimming lessons he got as a child and his Mae West. He heard from his skipper that a pilot should lose the chute just prior to hitting the water, because if you didn't the chances were excellent that you'd get tangled in the shrouds supporting the chute and drown. He felt euphoric so near to death, and was giddy with laughter. "*Shroud? How appropriate.*

Burial shroud or parachute shroud one way of getting wrapped up was as good as the other.”

Will punched the quick release on his harness and fell free. He waited to hit the water, but misjudged his altitude and was too high. When he hit the water it was like hitting concrete, and he went under, getting a nose and a mouth full of water. He was too shocked to feel the cold. Desperately resisting the urge to breathe, he fumbled about looking for the surface, but he couldn't find it. He was lucky to find the release to discharge the CO2 cartridge to inflate his Mae West. Moments later Will could feel the Mae West pulling him to the surface. When he broke the surface and gasped for air, all he got for his effort was a slap in the face from a breaking wave. For several minutes, he alternated between vomiting and choking in between which he was able to catch a few breaths. Will was becoming delirious, and was only partly aware of the sensation of cold creeping through his body. He couldn't feel his legs, and he could hardly move his fingers. There was a numbing sensation starting at his groin that was creeping up into his chest. He was too far gone to hear the diesel or the voices when a boat hook caught his Mae West.

“Achtung Kapitan, Wir haben ein Englander Flieger.”

There was a knock on the door. Melissa Wells felt a thrill go through her, because she knew that Will would be on the other side. She quickly hid the slip of paper where she was practicing to see what her name would look like once they got married, *Mrs. Melissa Smythe and then Mrs. William Smythe*. Will hadn't asked her yet, but just the way they talked, she knew he would eventually pop the question. *“Maybe even tonight,”* she thought. Even so, she didn't think it was a good idea to appear too forward. It would be better to let Will come to that conclusion all by himself. Before answering the door, she glanced around the room, and everything looked in order. The stew was simmering on the stove, and there were two bottles of Will's favorite brown

ale on the counter. One of the other young women with whom she shared the flat allowed Melissa to use a bit of her expensive French perfume. "Just a little dab. Don't use too much. I may need some of that if I ever meet Mr. Right," she said. Melissa did a quick dab here and there and went to the door.

It wasn't what she expected. Instead of Will, it was the son of the shopkeeper on the ground floor. "There's a call for you miss. I'd hurry. It sounded official miss."

She hoped it was from Will, but she had a feeling of foreboding. Her heart was racing when she picked up the receiver. "This is Miss Wells," she said, and that is all she remembered clearly before her knees went weak. There was some recollection of a female voice saying she was sorry, but Will had gone missing and was probably killed in action. She was partly aware of being helped up the stairs by the shop owner and his wife, given a shot of whiskey and put to bed crying uncontrollably. After a half hour, Melissa gained some control, but when she saw the two bottles of ale and the crumpled paper with *Mrs. William Smythe* on it, her crying renewed. She heard the shopkeeper's wife say, "John, I'll stay with her until one of her mates comes back in the morning."

"The morning?" She knew she had something to do in the morning. *"That's right. I have to drive in the morning. The bloody war!"*

Will lay face down on the deck. Someone was pushing on his chest forcing water out of his lungs. He choked and heaved. Then two of the crew turned him over, sat him up and slapped him on the back. One of them handed him a tin cup. "*Schnapps, sehr gut,*" he said and motioned for Will to drink it. It was damn good too, and Will could feel it warm and burn all the way down.

He was still wet and shivering. One of the crew wrapped him in a blanket after which he and another crew member dragged Will forward under the lee of the deck house containing the bridge and machine gun emplacements. A young sailor gave him a cup of hot 'ersatz koffee' which tasted just as bad as the stuff he drank in England, but it was hot.

Will thought, *"This is crazy. I watch Green #2 get blown out of the sky and then Stuffy gets the same. I then finished off the bastard that got Stuffy. Then the NAZI bastards shoot me down and instead of filling me full of holes while I'm hanging in my chute, they salute me. I wonder if the reason I got rescued is because they radioed my position? One minute we are at each others throats and the next the NAZI bastards are trying to save my bloody ass."*

Will then took stock of where he was and figured out that he had been rescued by what Jerry called *ein S-Boot* for *schnell* or fast boat. The Brits called it an E-Boat for enemy boat. It was the NAZI answer to the British Motor Torpedo Boat and the American PT boat. There were some differences. The three most important were that the E-Boat was much bigger, faster and more heavily armed. It could cruise at well over forty knots. They were a true menace to shipping in the channel, and at times were willing to take on bigger opponents like destroyers. In fact, the skipper had warned the squadron not to engage them since if you did, it would be the last thing you'd ever do. "Leave it to Coastal Command. They have the surface fleet and aircraft to deal with Herr E-Boat," he said.

This E-Boat was posing as a rescue vessel close to the English coast and had a large red cross with a white background painted on a tarp covering most of the stern quarter. Under the tarp, however, she was bristling with radio antennas and extra gun tubs containing rapid fire high velocity 20mm cannons. She was doing more than rescuing downed flyers, since she was listening to Coastal Command and RAF radio traffic and maybe even jamming traffic.

Suddenly, he felt the vibration of the diesels increase, and the tarp covering the gun tubs was cut loose. The E-boat made a sharp turn to starboard and the 20mm cannons and every other weapon but the torpedoes opened up. The reason became clear. At wave top level he saw a pair of Coastal Command Beaufighters heading for the E-Boat. He knew they were tough customers. Not much for day time air to air combat since they were twin engine aircraft being heavy and slow. When used to attack shipping they were deadly and The Coastal Command Boys loved them. The Beaufighter configured for antishipping missions had massive forward fire power including four 20mm cannons and up to eight machine guns. In addition, they could carry a mix of bombs, rockets and torpedoes. They also had air cooled radial engines that could take hits and keep running, and front facing armor that made them almost impossible to shoot down. The problem was that they were not only out to sink Herr E-Boat, but they were going to kill him as well. This was one time when Will considered cheering for the NAZIs!

Both Beaufighters opened up with cannon and machine gun fire. He could see the rounds striking the water causing a frothy mix marching toward the E-Boat. It looked like the gunfire would cut the E-Boat in half, but the skipper was a wily old salt probably all of twenty five. He kept the E-Boat in a tight turn making it a hard target for the Beaufighters. Will cringed and made himself as small as possible as the two aircraft flew overhead. They were so low that he could see the pilot in the lead fighter clearly. His goggles were framed in black leather with white stitching. He could also see the bombs release from the bottom of the Beaufighter. They skimmed three feet over the deck and exploded in the water on the port side creating two great geysers dumping spray on the deck and shaking the E-Boat. What Will didn't see were the two other Beaufighters attacking from a ninety degree angle to the first attackers. The skipper was up to the task because the E-Boat he had anticipated the move and was ready. The E-boat put up a wall of lead and explosive cannon fire. Will could see strikes on the lead Beaufighter, and as the pair passed over they dropped their bombs resulting in near misses. He could see the

port engine on the lead aircraft start to smoke and belch flame. It broke off the attack and turned west for its home base, but it didn't make it pancaking into the water a mile away.

The crash of the Beaufighter was only of momentary interest, because as wily as the skipper was, the Coastal Command Boys had the E-boat cornered, and with one of their number shot down they were not going to let it escape. This time the pair of Beaufighters came in for their second pass. The E-boat continued to put up a wall of fire, but this time the Beaufighters opened up with machine guns and rockets. While three of the four rockets missed falling short, one bounced off of a wave, and struck the E-Boat midships and punched through the wooden hull missing anything solid and came out the starboard side and exploded in the water. At the same time the lone Beaufighter made a head on pass, stitched the deck with cannon and machine gun fire, and added a rocket that struck at the base of the bridge killing the skipper, helmsman, and nearby gun crew.

Will was curled up next to one of the gun tubs when more fire came from a direction he could not determine. The E-Boat was now in shambles and had slowed. The Beaufighters were now reaping vengeance for their downed companion. The young sailor that had given Will the coffee staggered out of the gun tub next to where Will was curled up. The young sailor reached down with his left hand to pick something up. It was his right arm. He was bleeding profusely and was in shock. Walking in a small circle he collapsed, probably dead thought Will. To finish the job, the Beaufighters each made a final pass laying down machine gun and cannon fire. Thanks to the fact that the E-Boat was made of wood she was sinking slowly. Will didn't see anybody else alive, but he spotted a life raft that was lashed to the side of the deck next to him. It was riddled with bullets and shrapnel, but it was made of cork or a similar material and would float.

Will summoned all of his strength and pulled on the release that freed the raft and scrambled into it as the remains of the E-Boat sank under him. He was now afloat and scanned around as

much as possible considering the choppy conditions of the Channel. The motion of the waves were making him sicker than he already was. He looked up and could see one of the Beaufighters circling keeping his port wingtip pointed at the exact same point. He couldn't see what it was circling, because he was so low in the water and the waves were high obscuring his view. He guessed it was the crew of the downed Beaufighter. His suspicions were confirmed when he saw a Walrus, a single engined flying boat used for air-sea rescue. It headed directly to the spot indicated by the circling Beaufighter that was now about a half mile from his location. The Walrus bounced once and then settled onto the rolling swells. Occasionally he could see the tail and wing as it circled on the water. Then he could see that it turned off its engine. He guessed this was the procedure for picking up survivors. Will hoped he was next and called out, but nothing came out but a croaking sound, not that the call would be heard over the din of the waves. He desperately looked in the raft for some sort of signal equipment, hoping for a flare gun. He might have been able to use a dye that was in a bag along with other survival gear that was useless because it had been shot up. He fingered the bag not knowing what was in it because he couldn't read German. Later he opened the bag hoping it was food. By the time he discovered it was a dye that would color the water around the raft for several meters, getting the attention of aircraft flying over, it was too late. He waved weakly, but nobody saw him, and he watched in frustration as the Walrus restarted its engine and took off heading away from him to the south west.

Will was resigned to taking a trip to Valhalla, or wherever dead people go. During the combat a number of things had changed that Will had not been attending to since survival was paramount. He was becoming delirious again and lost track of time. He would have succumbed to hypothermia and passed out, but the motion of the raft made him so sick the pain of dry heaves kept him awake. The wind had changed, and was now blowing out of the east pushing him closer to the English shore. In addition, the mission of the E-Boat had been to get close to

the Isle of Wight and points further west along the English coast. The quirky tides in the Channel and around the Isle were pushing the raft closer to the English coast.. Just before dusk he felt a bump and he was aground on a shingle beach just to the west of Key Haven and the entrance to the Solent which is the sound between the Isle of Wight and the main island.

A hundred yards up the beach were two men of the Home Guard. Only one carried an Enfield rifle. "Blimey! Would you look at that Ian. It's a bloody Kraut liferaft with someone in it."

"Do you think we should shoot the bastard?" said Ian.

"You're always wanting to shoot something. He's probably dead already and it would be a waste of a bullet, besides the blighter's in the middle of a minefield. If he moves he'll blow himself up," said John.

Will rolled out of the raft and tried to stand. He briefly staggered to a standing position, and then fell back landing on his butt in a sitting position waist deep in the water..

John was looking at Will through field glasses and said, "It's a good thing you didn't shoot the bastard," he said, "because he looks like he's one of ours."

Both John and Ian shouted, "Don't bloody move mate. You're in the middle of a minefield!"

An hour later help arrived and Will was transported out of the minefield and tucked up in the local roominghouse with hot water bottles stacked around his body. "We've made arrangements to have you transported to London tomorrow if you're feeling better," said the captain of the Home Guard, "First by ambulance and then train and ambulance again."

Will was too disoriented to respond coherently. He wanted to get word to his squadron and Melissa, but all that came out of his mouth was incoherent babbling.

In the morning, Melissa could hardly move. She wanted to pull the covers over her head and pretend that the awful news had never arrived, but there was a war on and she had to get to her ambulance unit and do her duty. Her unit was always busy because the blitz was an every night occurrence. There were always wounded that were dug out of the rubble that needed transportation to hospital. In the morning when she arrived for her shift, Nancy, one of her friends, asked, "Did your dinner go well?"

This was too much for Melissa and she broke down in tears and said, "Will is missing and presumed killed in action." As a result she was useless as a driver for most of the morning. Due to a shortage of drivers, her sergeant, Lillian Thompson, judged Melissa was ready to drive by the afternoon and sent her on a simple detail along with an assistant driver to pick up a pilot coming off the train from Limington and take him to St. James Hospital on the other side of London along with three other cases.

In the meantime Will was more lucid. He said to the nurse attending him on the train, "Please call Miss Melissa Wells at this number and leave a message to tell her I'm safe and will be at St. James Hospital."

The sun was setting by the time the ambulance arrived at the station. Melissa was still upset when she collected the four patients at the station, and could not bear looking at them lest she break down in tears. As a result the assistant driver supervised the loading of the patients.

Part of the way to the hospital the air raid sirens started to blare and searchlights started to sweep the sky. Melissa's ambulance was caught in the open. She had two choices. The first choice was to continue to drive to the hospital, but the streets were now pitch black which would

make it almost impossible to navigate them in safety. The second possibility would be to stop and seek shelter. Her assistant pointed out an entrance to the London tube. They stopped the Ambulance and started to take the patients out of the back, but being two petite women, it was an impossible task. They managed one stretcher but they dropped it causing the patient to let out a loud groan. They needed help and the assistant ran into the tube entrance to find some. In the meantime Melissa was dragging the stretcher toward the tube. She could hear bombs dropping and anti aircraft fire the sounds of which were getting closer. She was struggling and could not move the patient because the stretcher was hung up on the curb. Some help finally emerged from the tube and they were able to get the two other patients out of the ambulance Leaving Will.

A police officer shined a torch on Will, "We got no more help. Can you walk mate?"

Will, who was exhausted, rolled off the stretcher and said, "With a bit of help I can make it."

When he got out of the ambulance his head was spinning. He could see that all hands were needed for the stretcher case and staggered to the tube opening, and nearly fell down the stairs. At the bottom landing, Will still was dizzy and collapsed into the arms of the ambulance driver who tried to steady him and keep him from falling.

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