

Prologue

MONDAY, AUGUST 16, 1943

Washington, District of Columbia, United States

Maj. William Edwin Dyess, U.S. Army Air Forces, serial number 0-22526, was not officially here. Not in Washington. Not seated in one of the innumerable offices catacombed inside the vast reinforced-concrete bowels of the brand-new Pentagon building. For all intents and purposes Dyess's presence in the United States was classified. Yet the dark cloak of secrecy, wartime protocol though it was, was perhaps unnecessary. After all, the mere supposition that Dyess was alive was almost unbelievable.

An exhausted apparition in loose, ill-fitting khaki, Dyess did not look very much like the dashing hero the newspapers had described him to be, a decorated pilot who wore some of his nation's highest honors—including both the Distinguished Service Cross and the Distinguished Flying Cross—among the multicolored ribbons pinned to his lean chest. Right now he looked like a man who had been through hell and back, in his case a terrifying real place with a real name—the Japanese-occupied Philippine Islands.

The tall Texan's classically handsome face was sunken and weathered, a bronzed mask drained of its youthful vivacity. Withered muscles and wispy, thinning locks of amber hair bore witness to months of malnutrition, grueling slave labor, and the insidious form of torture that he and his comrades called “the sun treatment.”

A literal barefoot prophet, the erstwhile prisoner of war had carried with him throughout his odyssey few possessions: a Half and Half tobacco tin that was his billfold; a creased, Mobil Oil map of the Philip-

pinet; his rusty wings and captain's bars. The Presbyterian also wore a crucifix and a medal of Saint Christopher—the martyred soldier and patron saint of travelers who, in the mythos of the Catholic church, was the bearer of Christ and heavy burdens—with his dog tags. The holy objects had been given him by a dying pilot from his shattered squadron, the 21st Pursuit. Dyess had knelt by Lt. James May as he choked out his final words: "Ed, take these and wear them. Take them back to the United States when you go." It was as if May had somehow known that Dyess, unlike so many others on Bataan, would one day return home. Thus far, the items had proved a fitting bequest.

These items were not all that Dyess carried. Frozen in his crystalline, ice-blue eyes was a catalog of countless, soul-searing images, images that Dyess had purposefully and painfully carried through his waking hours and fitful dreams, images that could never be permanently laid to rest—images that no eyes should see.

Dyess had returned to the States exactly one week earlier, on Monday, August 9, his twenty-seventh birthday. But there were no throngs of relatives and well-wishers to welcome him, no popping flashbulbs and reporters waiting to chronicle the pilot's first triumphant steps on American soil in nearly two years. Instead, he arrived anonymously in Washington, the only news of his arrival a telegram he had somehow secretly conspired with Western Union to send to his wife in Champaign, Illinois, a few days before.

WILL ARRIVE CHICAGO VIA UNITED AIR LINE 2:30 PM AUG 13.
REMAIN 30 MINUTES. MY PRESENCE IN US SECRET TELL NO
ONE NOT EVEN FOLKS.

According to a newspaper account published months later, Marajen Stevick Dyess received "little more than a glimpse of her young husband" that day. And only later, "from a certain room in a certain hotel at a certain time [Dyess] was able to talk to his parents in Albany [Texas] by phone." It was perhaps the most bizarre, guarded homecoming ever afforded an American war hero.

But mystery had surrounded Dyess since the fall of the Philippines in early 1942. The last word anyone had received from him had been an Easter telegram sent from an overseas wireless station on the Philippine island of Cebu. In the succeeding months, as tales of Dyess's battlefield

bravery began to appear in publications small and large—from his hometown *Albany News* to the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* to *Esquire* magazine—Dyess's legend grew. A correspondent from the *New York Times*, in an article detailing Dyess's intrepid leadership and battlefield exploits on Bataan, referred to him as the "One-Man Scourge of the Japs."

But since 1942 no one knew whether Dyess was even alive, not until a few weeks earlier, when a brief, cryptic message sent from a U.S. Navy overseas station arrived unexpectedly at the Dyess home in Albany on the 23rd of July to let his parents know that their son was safe. The message, however, revealed nothing of his whereabouts, nor the manner in which he had been returned to U.S. military control. Only a handful of men, some of the most important in the American military, were privy to such details, among them Gen. Douglas MacArthur; Gen. Henry "Hap" Arnold, chief of the Army Air Forces; and Gen. George V. Strong, head of the ultrasecret Military Intelligence Service, who reported directly—and only—to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the White House.

MacArthur, the first to hear Dyess's story in detail in Brisbane, Australia, just weeks earlier, had been so moved that his chop was immediately affixed to the freshly typed transcripts of Dyess's debriefing, thereby assuring that the documents would be sent via special air dispatch to Washington. Strong, in turn, arranged for two stenographers and an officer from the adjutant general's office to take an official statement from the pilot for the eyes of his superiors. And that was why Dyess, though weary, now sat in the inner sanctum of the War Department. As the stenographers readied to record Dyess's words, the foundation of what the War Department would later call "the greatest story of the war in the Pacific," Dyess exhumed the images—as well as the names, dates, sounds, smells, places, and faces that had been buried with them—and prepared to revisit the nightmare.

It was finally time to tell the story, the whole story, of everything that he and his eleven extraordinary comrades who had escaped with him had been through.