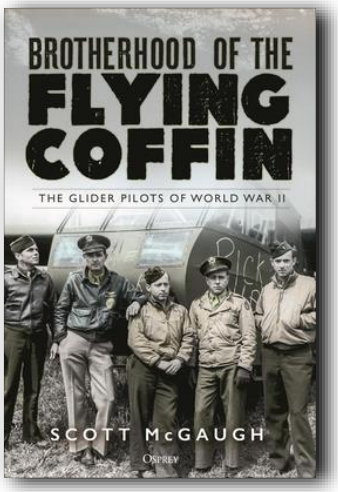
Brotherhood of the Flying Coffin (Excerpt)



Richard Libbey was as helpless as a duck flying in hunting season.

His combat glider was locked in formation only a few hundred yards off the ground as the shadows below lengthened on D-Day in Normandy. The enemy's coal-red tracer fire seemed to walk down his tow rope from the plane towing him toward his cockpit. Antiaircraft bursts rocked the glider as shrapnel sliced through its fabric skin. By the final glider mission on D-Day, German gunners had been honing their accuracy since sunrise.

They had opened fire shortly after Libbey and other glider pilots had crossed Normandy's beach. In only minutes, they would reach the landing zones where they would release, turn, drop, and crash land. But not before chunks of sheet metal peeled off wounded aircraft engines coughing fire and swatches of glider fuselage fabric fluttered away in the armada's prop wash.

The fields below didn't look like the photos Libbey had been shown in the pre-flight briefings. *Are we off course?* He watched gliders ahead of him cut loose and turn toward the ground. *Is this our landing zone? Wait too long and I'll be way into German territory. To the hell with it.* Libbey released from his tow plane, pushed his glider's nose down and to the left, and looked for any place to land. *There, looks big enough.* His copilot started calling out the glider's elevation as Libbey leaned into the glider's dive.

"100, 120, 100, 100, 100, 90, 85…"

"Full flaps, Ray!" Libbey ordered.

"We'll hit the trees at the edge of the field!"

"Damn, full flaps."

"God, this is it!"

Libbey and his copilot heard the trees scraping the bottom of their glider. Slowed, they somehow cleared the hedgerow and dropped down onto the field, hard, crushing a landing gear and spinning to a stop.

Then the terror began.

Machine gun tracers swept across the furrow where Libbey and his copilot laid after scrambling out of the wrecked glider. Libbey froze. "I could not think. For the first time I was so scared that I could not think. In a few seconds, I started to breathe again. And we started moving…the first [glider pilot] I saw was Ben Winks's copilot.

"Where's Ben?"

"Ben's dead."

Two words, yelled over war's cacophony, would haunt Richard Libbey for the rest of his life. *Ben?* His buddy had been so full of confidence and was sure he'd be coming back. Instead, he had slammed into a row of trees, crushed between them and the howitzer and quarter-ton truck he had carried a few feet behind his seat. It was his first combat mission.

In the coming nine months, Libbey would fly in two of the largest and deadliest glider missions of World War II. Alongside thousands of other young glider pilot volunteers, most only a few years removed from high school dances, summer jobs, and family dinners.

Maybe burgers with Helen at the diner. She's swell. It's getting cold, hope my car starts in the morning. What's mom gonna cook for Sunday dinner? Maybe go see The Great Dictator *this weekend with Helen. We better beat Peoria Friday night. I hate those guys.*

The older sons of farmers, seamstresses, migrant farmhands, teachers, the jobless, policemen, shopkeepers, loggers, and plant workers stood on the threshold of manhood in 1940. Many were teenagers nearing high school graduation, working odd jobs, helping bring in the harvest, and eager to see their girlfriends. Some were in college, and a few had enlisted in the U.S. Army or their state's national guard. More than a handful had married and started families.

But as the Great Depression's dust finally began to settle, war loomed. The only life they knew on ranches, in towns the size of a single café, and in cities could soon evaporate as America mobilized for war.

Final exams would be replaced by soloing in an aircraft with no guns, no motors, and no parachutes. Friday night larks and girlfriends might be recalled in letters sent home. Friends would be killed instead of ragging on each other while hanging out with a milk shake. Bruising tackles would be replaced by antiaircraft artillery shrapnel shredding the fuselage or machine gun fire ripping into the man sitting in the next seat. Marriage would have to wait "until this thing is over." The rest of life would stall as well.

Joseph Andrews wanted to become a doctor. A good doctor. The son of a federal government lawyer in Washington, D.C., Andrews was about to graduate the pre-med program at The Citadel and was bound for George Washington Medical School. He was a studious young man who enjoyed singing and tended to come straight to the point in conversations. His sincere demeanor merited a host of friends who admired his one ambition of someday being recognized as one of the best doctors in his profession.

James Larkin had wanted to fly almost from the day in 1927 when accounts of Charles Lindbergh's transatlantic flight captivated America. His immigrant father had served in the Spanish-American War and raised his children on a fire department captain's salary in Minnesota. Larkin was about to graduate high school. The military and a war might be his ticket to becoming a pilot.

Stephen Painter was a Texas prairie farm boy outside of Joshua, the kind of farming town that relied on rain, each year's summer harvest, a bank, general store, and its train station. His family had weathered the

Depression well, growing crops on flat farmland country blanketed with corn, cotton, potatoes, vegetables, and orchards between stands of post and blackjack oaks.

As he was finishing high school in Joshua in 1940, Painter's future was as blurred as a Texas dust storm. His brother's Texas National Guard unit had been mobilized in 1939 and Stephen wanted to follow, but his father refused to sign the parental permission document for the seventeen-year-old. That left odd jobs on neighbors' farms, perhaps a part-time job in town between harvests, and mowing lawns until winter arrived.

Guy Gunter sometimes went to bed hungry as a boy, growing up in east Atlanta in the 1930s. The son of a policeman and housekeeper, he rarely carried a lunch to school. In the winter, dinner after school might be vegetable soup and a sweet potato topped with margarine, his first real meal since a small breakfast each morning. He was a good student bound for Georgia Tech where he would attend school at night, while working days as a salesman for an electrical parts company. Perhaps he could begin building a career in 1940, with a college degree in hand one day.

J. Curtis "Goldie" Goldman had been a blustery boy growing up in Tyler, Texas, who enjoyed fighting, pranks, spitballs when adults were not around, and acting bigger than his size. One teacher became so fed up with Goldman that she insisted he spend the rest of her semester in the school principal's office. At five feet, nine inches tall, he was too small for the basketball team so he had begged to be its manager and tote team equipment so he could go on the team's road trips.

He had grown up in a small country house with water from a nearby well and an outhouse at the end of a crooked path. His boyhood had been marked by learning how to hunt jackrabbits in stands of mesquite on an uncle's farm, volunteering to be a batboy at a softball park near his grandmother's house so he could watch games for free, and a penchant for getting into trouble.

By 1940, he had started classes at Tyler Junior College along with another Tyler boy, Harry Loftis. A country lad, Loftis "had never been anywhere in my life" and had hoped for a college scholarship but when that did not come through, a local banker loaned him $50 for his school fees. Meanwhile, Goldman was a good student but failed to make the Honor Society after he and Loftis were caught cutting a college chemistry class so they could drink sodas and play checkers at Woody's Soda Fountain across the street from school. If war and the draft came, Goldman stoked the same passion as thousands of other young men. He wanted to be a fighter pilot.[i]

Jack Merrick also wanted to fly. The nineteen-year-old had built a glider in high school that was towed by a car. He had no instructions but had learned the requisite principles by "reading the funny papers, building model airplanes, you know, that sort of thing." In 1940, he held a private pilot's license, had graduated junior college, and was headed for the University of Texas.

The Depression had been especially hard on Jack, his mother, and four brothers and sisters after his parents had divorced. He had lived with relatives for two years before their separation. Money and food were scarce for the five Merrick children. At times, relatives sent money to support them.

Sam Baker also was a handful in school. The California native was eager to please his teachers and had been elected president of his senior class. But he had to resign his post due to poor class attendance. A series of empty jobs awaited after high school. Clearing stands of manzanita at a logging camp made him think there had

to be a better route in life. So, too, did a job as a "flunky" in a box-manufacturing plant where his father worked.

In 1939, he and a couple of buddies thought about enlisting in the military. A fast-talking Army recruiter offered Baker $252 per year, room and board, and a promise of getting out of Sacramento, maybe even to Oahu as his first duty station. Baker had enlisted with little hesitation. He was eighteen.

None could have possibly imagined that within a few years Henry Arnold, a man who had been the second choice of both his father and the United States Army, would send them into battle in what some later called a "flying coffin."

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[i] Harry Loftis personal account.