



From left to right, Major Ed Dyess, Lt. Cmdr. Melvyn McCoy, General Douglas MacArthur, and Major Stephen Mellnik conversing in MacArthur's office in the A.M.P. Building in Brisbane, Australia, on July 30, 1943.

From "Escape From Davao" by John D. Lukacs

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 22, 1943

Burbank, California

No one could accuse Ed Dyess of not taking time to stop and smell the flowers. Not today, at least. It was late morning and though somewhat in a hurry, Dyess was all smiles walking down Crescent Heights Boulevard, his arms filled with the fresh-cut flowers he had personally selected for the dinner party he and his wife were hosting in their Hollywood apartment that evening. Marajen Dyess counted a number of Hollywood elite, including several movie stars, as close friends, so the event promised to be star-studded.

Nothing could ruin Dyess's mood, not even the preposterous stall tactics being employed in Washington. Exactly three weeks earlier, the *Gripsholm*, her cargo delivered, had docked safely in New York. The *Chicago Tribune* immediately petitioned for permission to release the Dyess story, but "the War Department said that the American people were not yet ready for such an appalling story of Japanese atrocities," recalled Charles Leavelle. The situation, it seemed, had morphed from a matter of supposed practical pretexts to one of transparent, official obstinacy. Just when did the government think that America would be ready?

Dyess went to Washington to consult with General Hap Arnold, but Arnold could offer Dyess little in the way of answers or assistance. The

War Department had classified the matter as one of national security, Arnold told Dyess; he had no power to intervene. The War Department had reiterated that any revelation of Japanese atrocities would possibly result in reprisals against American POWs. Dyess was incredulous. Those men still behind Japanese barbed wire, he argued, would want the people back home to know what was happening. It was a chance that needed to be taken.

The *Tribune* then began to wheel out its First Amendment field artillery. The paper first enlisted the help of Roy Roberts, editor of the *Kansas City Star*, president of the American Newspaper Editors Association, and chairman of the Newspaper Advisory Committee of the Domestic Division of OWI, to lobby Elmer Davis on the paper's behalf. Next, the *Tribune's* research staff assembled a massive file containing hundreds of atrocity and escape stories—organized by theater, enemy, publication, and date of publication—that had been printed with military censorship approval and submitted this package of precedents to OWI.

Dyess could only wait. In the meantime, he had plenty to do, including finding his crucifix and Saint Christopher medal, the treasured talismans that had accompanied him on his journey through combat and captivity to freedom. He had been wearing them during his stay at Ashford and had allowed the *Tribune* to photograph the objects, remembered Leavelle. But on December 20, the items mysteriously disappeared. A full-scale search was initiated, but nothing turned up. "On the night of December 21st [Dyess] still was hopeful of finding his talisman," wrote Leavelle. "He spoke of it to Mrs. Dyess as they addressed Christmas cards."

One of those cards was addressed to Sam Grashio. Dyess had been planning to visit Spokane, but poor weather had grounded him. No matter. He would get there after the holidays.

Dear Sam—

I was to leave here this morning, but O-O kept me on the ground so now I'll have to put it off until after Xmas as the weather is supposed to be bad all day tomorrow. Listen "knucklehead" if it isn't too much of a secret just where in the hell do I find you after I get there, or have you moved into the jail to feel at home.

There were some additional matters that Dyess needed to attend to before the holidays. Depositing the flowers at his apartment, he then headed

to Grand Central Air Terminal in Glendale to sneak in some flight time on the P-38 Lightning, the Army Air Force's new ultrafast twin-engined fighter. Armed with four .50 caliber machine guns and one 20 millimeter cannon, the P-38 was capable of reaching speeds in excess of 400 miles per hour. It was the kind of warplane that aggressive, talented pilots salivated over—Dyess's kind of plane. He needed to log some hours in order to assume command of the outfit that he was preparing to take into combat in Europe, the 479th Fighter Group, a component of the Eighth Air Force.

Just before Dyess's arrival at the field, Lt. Robin Olds, a twenty-one-year-old West Pointer, was given his orders. "The operations officer said, 'I want you to check out this colonel in a P-38,' " Olds would say. "Nobody told me who he was or anything else about him."

As Dyess settled into the cockpit of P-38H-5-LO, Olds crouched on the wing and explained the controls. Dyess was not curt or overbearing, but, recalled Olds, "I realized that he wanted to hurry up." Though Dyess had logged only ten total hours of flight time in the P-38 and Olds had extensive training on the model, Olds deferred to Dyess's rank and distilled his preflight check into a handful of necessary items. Olds told Dyess that warplanes in the United States were provided with lower-grade gasoline in order to conserve high-octane, high-performance fuel for combat aircraft. As a result, the engines of stateside birds frequently became congested and tended to detonate, or backfire. Sometimes, they even locked up mid-flight. These problems were particularly prevalent with the P-38.

"As you line up," Olds told Dyess, "if you hear bang, bang, bang, shut 'em [the engines] down and stop. Hit the brakes. Go off the end of the runway if you have to."

Dyess signaled that he understood, but Olds would later say that it seemed as though Dyess was dismissive of the briefing. Of course, Dyess had logged thousands more hours of cumulative flight time in his career than Olds, a recent flight school graduate. And, as a pilot who had actually tangled with the Japanese in aerial combat, Dyess was unlikely to be frightened by something as seemingly harmless as bad gasoline.

After Olds hopped down from the wing, Dyess gunned the plane's engines. At approximately 1206, he called the tower for taxi instructions. Dyess was notified that he was cleared to runway 30, but when he rolled onto the flight line, he found himself waiting for several minutes as a B-25

prepared to take off. This likely tried Dyess's patience; it was now past noon and he had plenty of other errands to attend to. At 1209, Dyess radioed the tower again—permission to take off was finally granted.

Tech Sergeant Roy E. Davidson, flight chief of the 337th Fighter Squadron, watched as Dyess zipped down the runway, gaining velocity for takeoff. He had noticed that Dyess did not check the mags—the plane's wheels, or landing gear—a normal preflight precaution.

What happened next, as Olds remembered it, took place in a matter of a few seconds, but it seemed to occur in slow motion. As the P-38 streaked along, the left engine began cutting out. Olds heard the telltale popping sounds from the operations shack and remembered that several officers and men had rushed out to investigate the source. The plane, instead of braking, feathered ever so slowly into the air, reaching an altitude of approximately twenty feet according to one eyewitness, Capt. Gerald R. Rounds of the 329th Fighter Group. The left engine, recalled Rounds, began "backfiring violently," causing the plane to bank to the left. While Olds estimated that Dyess was able to loft the P-38 up to about 200 feet, he and several other eyewitnesses noticed that the plane's landing gear was still fully deployed, creating an excessive drag, which prevented the plane from gaining more altitude. "[There was] no way to control it in those circumstances," said Olds.

Dyess must have arrived at the same frightening realization. He called the tower to request that the field be cleared for an emergency landing. The tower acknowledged Dyess's message and advised him to pull up his wheels, as the plane was rapidly losing altitude. At this point, approximately thirty seconds had elapsed and Dyess's plane disappeared out of sight of the tower, "below tree top level, with wheels still down." Neither Olds nor anyone else at the field could see what happened next.

The airfield was adjacent to Burbank and tightly bounded by a crowded residential area that began almost at the end of runway 30, so there were plenty of civilian eyewitnesses. Mrs. Oscar Schuetz was in the kitchen of her home, which was located directly behind Saint Finbar's Catholic Church on the corner of Sparks and South Myers Streets, at 12:10 P.M. when she saw an airplane roaring out of the sky that "appeared to be on fire while still in the air." Seconds later, service station owner Howard C. Gowman was at his place of business on 1250 West Olive Avenue when he saw Dyess's smoke-belching plane cough overhead at no more than

100 feet. According to Gowman, the plane was somehow operating "with one motor out" and despite the fact that "the other motor did not seem to work right." It was plummeting fast.

Gowman saw the plane swing in line with Olive Avenue, a four-lane highway, about two blocks west of his station; evidently, the pilot was going to attempt a landing on what looked to be an empty city street. Dyess had no other option. He could not guide the crippled plane back to the airfield, nor could he bail out and let his plane careen into a heavily populated area. Even if his conscience would have let him, his parachute would likely not have had time to deploy. The attempt to land would be his best chance of saving his own life and those of the civilians living in the neighborhood. Dyess was just about to attempt the daring maneuver when fate—as it had so many other times in his young life—intervened one last time.

The smoking, fire-licked P-38 was only a few feet from skidding to a miraculous emergency landing when a car unexpectedly appeared out of a side street and proceeded east on Olive Avenue, directly in the line of Dyess's landing path. Dyess jerked the stick and the ship responded by lofting into the air just high enough for the car to pass underneath. In the ensuing split second, while Dyess had floated up to perhaps forty or fifty feet, he noticed that there was a small vacant lot at the southeast corner of Myers and Olive. Instinctively, he banked his plane for it. But there was not enough altitude or time for any more evasive action.

Roland Ellis of North Hollywood was sitting in his car, which was parked about one and a half blocks northeast of the intersection of Myers and Olive, when he saw the left wing and left wheel of the P-38 strike the steeple of Saint Finbar's, just east of the vacant lot. In an earth-shattering crash, the plane struck, left wing first, metal upon asphalt, and cartwheeled into the vacant lot. Ellis testified that he was the first adult on the scene, some children having arrived before him. The plane, Ellis would claim in his deposition, had fragmented upon impact, with portions coming to rest in both the vacant lot and in front of a residence.

By the time an ambulance, crash truck, and military escort arrived, a large crowd of onlookers was already on the scene, pressing forward to gawk at the fiery wreckage. The officer in charge, an Army major, noticing the fuel leaking from the plane's mangled fuselage, ordered everyone to put out their cigarettes. When the request went unheeded, he ordered the cordon of soldiers to load their rifles. Hurriedly, people stamped out

their smokes, speculating in nervous chatter the circumstances behind the crash and the identity of the pilot. By the looks of the crash site, Ed Dyess had died instantly.

Official inquiries into Dyess's death began shortly after the wreckage was cleared. Whether Dyess had been prevented from raising the landing gear of his plane by some mechanical malfunction or "temporary mental deficiency," the underlying cause of the accident as stated in the official report, will never be known. There were many ridiculous and far-fetched explanations for the accident proposed, but the "underlying nature" of the accident was perhaps appropriately listed as "91 octane gasoline." Dyess's crucifix and Saint Christopher medal were never found.

"Almost every pilot we knew carried a talisman of some sort," Marajen Dyess would later say. "They guarded these objects more closely than any other possession. Edwin's accident, following closely on the loss of his crucifix, may have been coincidence. It may have been something more."

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 22—MONDAY, DECEMBER 27, 1943

Albany, Texas

Sam Grashio recognized the troubled voice on the phone as that of the *Chicago Tribune's* Don Maxwell. Ed Dyess, Maxwell told Grashio, had been killed in a plane crash. Stunned, Grashio immediately placed a long-distance call of his own, to Albany, Texas. Someone—it was Judge Dyess—answered, remembered Grashio, but evidently he was even more shocked than Grashio because he had been rendered speechless, unable to utter a single word beyond hello. The news was true.

It made no sense. Dyess had dodged bombs and bullets. He had survived starvation, brutality, disease, and humiliation. He had traversed swamps, jungles, and oceans, only to have his life snuffed out in a routine practice flight? To Grashio, who loved Dyess like a brother, the flier's death was an amazing anticlimax to an extraordinary existence. "Every circumstance of his death seemed to mock reason and justice, even more proportion," Grashio would write.

Yet there was in fact symmetry to this horrific tragedy. Dyess had died as he had lived—heroically and unselfishly. The Ed Dyess who flew a crippled P-38 to his death in order to avoid hitting an unknown motorist was the Ed Dyess who was concerned with evacuating everyone but himself from Bataan; it was the same Dyess who had selflessly exposed himself

on the Death March to lead others; the Dyess who had given up a can of sardines to a sick enlisted man in Camp O'Donnell; the Dyess who had volunteered to take the escape party's gear out of Dapecol on his bull cart; the Dyess who had sung off-key at a jungle fiesta so as not to offend their hosts. At the moment, however, it was little consolation to a grief-stricken Grashio. "Ed would never know if the story he wanted so badly to tell would ever be released," Grashio lamented.

In the succeeding days, Dyess's hometown mourned his loss. While the family waited for his body to arrive by train from California—it was the desire of his parents that he was buried in Albany, rather than Arlington National Cemetery—the huge American flag flying on the lawn of the town's limestone courthouse was lowered to half-mast.

In the immediate aftermath of Dyess's death and for several weeks afterward, a deluge of letters, cards, telegrams, and telephone calls, outpourings of support and sympathy, flooded the Dyess residence. There were missives from politicians and the general public. The lieutenant governor of Texas, John Lee Smith, sent his condolences, as did college friends, flight school chums, and other acquaintances with return addresses spanning all corners of the country. Some were from strangers, people who had heard or read of the tragic crash and, despite the secrecy surrounding Dyess, somehow felt that he was significant, as was his yet untold story.

News of the tragedy even circled the globe. One of the most poignant letters was written by Lt. Cmdr. Al Clark, skipper of the *Trout*. "I want to say that Ed was the grandest, toughest, good natured hombre that I have ever had the pleasure of knowing or ever hope to know," wrote Clark. "If any of my three boys grow up to be the man that Ed was I would feel that I had done one hell of a fine job."

Several hundred men, women, and children who shared those sentiments waited in line on the cold, rainy, wind-whipped day of December 27 to fill Matthew's Presbyterian Church for Dyess's memorial service. There were so many that the overflow crowd was directed to a nearby building where a public address system had been rigged.

One of the many military dignitaries present was Brig. Gen. Russell Randall, commanding officer of the 4th Fighter Command. Randall, who had flown to Abilene under zero-zero conditions to attend the service, informed the crowd that he was personally recommending Dyess for the nation's highest military honor, the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Those present inside the church and at the graveside ceremonies that

somber day witnessed many moving gestures and tributes to Albany's favorite son—an appropriate solo, "Ah! Sweet Mystery of Life," was sung by a woman named Helen Gordon during the funeral service—but none was as touching or appropriate as the eulogy delivered by Rev. J. A. Owen.

According to Owen, amid all the sacks of mail and stacks of telegrams received by the Dyess family one piece of correspondence in particular had stood out. It was a telegram addressed to Dyess's parents. Only thirty-four heartfelt words, it was a fitting epitaph, one that perhaps not even the still suppressed *Chicago Tribune* story, comprising tens of thousands of words, could surpass. It was the real story of William Edwin Dyess, and, perhaps most significantly, helped solve at least one of the many mysteries swirling around the hero pilot at the time of his death. Owen read it in its entirety:

PLEASE ACCEPT EXPRESSED PROFOUND SYMPATHY OF THE
MAN SPARED FROM DISASTER BY THE FINAL BRAVE DEED OF
YOUR SON. GREATER LOVE HATH NO MAN THAN TO GIVE HIS
LIFE TO SAVE ANOTHER.