
Opening Extract from...

Resistance

Written by Anita Shreve

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RESISTANCE

Anita Shreve

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All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental

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For our fathers who flew in the war

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This novel is entirely a work of fiction, yet it would not have been possible without the help of the following individuals: Maralyse Martin Haward, Andre Lepin, and Rosa Guyaux, who shared with me details and anecdotes about Belgium during World War II; John Rising, Chief Pilot of the Collings Foundation, who checked over the flying sequences for me; George Cole, who took me up in his plane; and, in particular, Mable Osborn, who gave the seeds of a story. I would also like to thank my editor, Michael Pietsch, and my agent, Virginia Barber.

Finally, a necessary word about the Belgian surnames. I have used, for the most part, surnames that were or are prevalent in southern Belgium. Just as the novel is fictional, however, so are the names that are attached to the various characters. I mention this because the period about which I have written is a sensitive one, and my use of certain names is not meant in any way to confer honor upon, or castigate, any Belgian families.

10 November 1993

Gentlemen,

INAUGURATION OF A MONUMENT
TO YOUR FLYING FORTERESSE B 17

On Thursday next December 30, our association will inaugurate a monument in rememberance to your aeroplane fallen down on 1943 december 30th at the Heights nearly our village.

It consists in a marble block extracted out of our village quarry on which a stele with the following inscription will be fixed.

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Homage à nos alliés

Le 30 décembre 1943 vers midi s'écrasa à 500 m d'ici la forteresse volante américaine Woman's Home Companion

Equipage

Pilote: Lt. T. Brice
Co-pilote: Lt. W. Case
Navigateur: Lt. E. Baker
Bombardier: Lt. N. Shulman
Ingénieur: J. McNulty
Ass. Ingénieur: E. Rees
Radio: G. Callahan
Ass. Radio: V. Tripp
Mitrailleur: L. Ekberg
Mitrailleur: P. Warren

Delahaut, le 30 XII 1993

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With this letter, we would like to invite you and your wife to be present at the inauguration. It will be a pleasure for us to offer you a lodge in Delahaut.

If you are still in contact with the other members of the crew, please will you make them known they are also welcome. Send us their address so we can invite them officially.

Meanwhile, Gentlemen, please agree our best rememberance.
Jean Benoît

December 30, 1943

The pilot paused at the edge of the wood, where already it was dark, oak-dark at midday. He propped himself against a tree, believing that in the shadows he was hidden, at least for the moment. The others had fled. He was the last out of the pasture, watching until they had all disappeared, one by one, indistinct brown shapes quickly enveloped by the forest.

All, that is, except for the two on the ground, one dead, one dying. He could no longer hear the gunner's panicky questions. The cold and the wound had silenced him, or perhaps the morphine, administered by Ted's frozen fingers, had dulled the worst of it. Dragging his own wounded leg through the battered bomber, Ted had reached the gunner, drawn to him by the pitch of the man's voice. He had separated the gunner from the metal that seemed to clutch at him and pulled the man out onto the hard ground, still white with frost even at noon. The wound was to the lower abdomen, too low, Ted could see that at once. The gunner had screamed then, asked him, demanded, but Ted looked away, businesslike with the needle, and whispered something that was meant to be reassuring but was taken by the wind. The gunner felt

frantically with oily fingers for the missing pieces. The pilot and the navigator had held his arms, pinned him.

Possibly the gunner was dead already, he thought at the edge of the forest. There was too much blood around the body, a hot spring that quickly pooled, froze, on the ground. The other man, the rear gunner, the man who was undeniably dead, dragged also to lie beside the wounded, had not a scratch on him.

Ted slowly tilted his head back, took the air deep into his body. As a boy he had shot squirrels in the wood at home, and there were sometimes days like this, days without color, when the sky was oily and gray and his fingers froze on the .22.

The plane lay silent on the frosty field, a charred scar behind it, the forest not forty feet from its nose. A living thing shot down, crippled now forever. A screaming, vibrating giant come obscenely to rest in a pasture.

He ought to have set fire to the plane. Those were his instructions. But he could not set a fire that might consume a living man, and so they had gathered all the provisions in the plane and made a kind of catafalque near the gunner, whom they had wrapped in parachute silk, winding sheets, the white silk stained immediately with red.

Soon people would come to the pasture. The fall of the big plane from the sky could not have been missed. Ted didn't know if the ground he sat on was German or French or Belgian. It could be German, might well be German.

He had to move deeper into the wood. He hesitated, did not want to leave the plane. He felt, leaving it, that he was abandoning a living thing, an injured dog, to be dismembered by strangers. They would take the guns first, then the engines, then every serviceable piece of metal, leaving a carcass, a dog's bones.

Gunmental bones. A plane picked clean by buzzards.

One's duty was to the living.

Ted might have aborted. He was allowed to abort. He knew the mission was not a milk run, that they were going into German territory, to Ludwigshafen, to the chemical plant. And he had felt unlucky without Mason, his navigator, whom he had found drunk in a hotel room in Cambridge with his English girlfriend. When Ted had entered, the room had been heavy with the smell of gin. A bottle was nearly empty on a side table. Mason had looked at Ted and had laughed at him. Ted had thought then, abort. A missing navigator was a bad omen. They had flown eleven missions together, had sometimes come under heavy fire, but there had been no serious injuries, no deaths. Abort, he tried to tell himself; but at dawn, when the thin, wintry light had come up over the landing field, and he'd looked at his plane, he could not make the decision to abort. Mason was replaced. A capable man but a stranger. Together they had pinned the arms of the gunner, looked into each other's eyes.

But had the missing piece of the crew fatally altered the mix, in the same way that an error in the mix of the fuel, too rich or too thin, could also be fatal? Had

unease over the missing navigator made Ted hesitate even a second when he should not have hesitated, or made him act too quickly when he *should* have hesitated? Had his belief in bad omens clouded in some indefinable way his judgment? Case, his copilot, was right. They should have ditched. But he couldn't, and it was no use pretending he could.

Twigs crackled. Ted tried to stand, leaned against the rough bark. He had dragged himself out of the clearing, his right leg wounded inside his flight suit. When he stood, the pain traveled up his thigh. He embraced the tree, his forehead against the bark. A sudden sweat broke out on his face from the pain. He bent over quickly, heaved onto the frozen leaves. He might have saved a needle for himself, but he was afraid that he would crawl into the forest and freeze to death while he slept. He knew he had to move deeper into the wood.

Today was his birthday. He was twenty-two.

Where did the gunner's dick go? he wondered.

He turned to look at the plane once again, and from his full height he saw what he had not seen before: In dragging himself to the edge of the forest, he had made a path in the frost, a path as clear and distinct as a walkway shoveled in snow. He heard the first of the muffled shouts then. A foreign voice. He dropped to the ground and pulled himself away from the pasture.

The boy reached the Heights before Marcel. Jean dropped his bicycle, his chest burning. He gulped in the icy air and stared at the plane on the dead grass. He had never seen such a big plane, never. It was somehow terrifying, that enormous plane, unnatural here. How did a machine, all that metal, ever get up into the sky? He approached the plane cautiously, wondering if it might still explode. He heard Marcel behind him, breathing hard like a dog.

Jean walked toward the bomber and saw the bodies, the two men in leather helmets, one man wrapped in a parachute. The white silk was bloody, drenched in blood.

Jean spun and yelled at Marcel: 'La Croix-Rouge, Marcel! Madame Dinant! La Croix-Rouge!'

Marcel hesitated just a moment, then did as Jean had asked, unwilling yet to see exactly what his friend had seen.

When Marcel had gone, Jean walked slowly toward the plane. For the first time since he'd seen the giant, smoking surprise drop suddenly from the cloud cover, he could breathe evenly. He was chilled, the sweat beginning to freeze inside his pullover. He hadn't thought to fetch his coat before racing out of the school to head for the Heights.

When he reached the plane, he looked down at the bodies. Both of the flyers had their eyes closed, but the man wrapped in blood was still breathing. Beside the two men was a pile of canteens and brown canvas sacks.

Jean moved away from the men and began to circle the plane.

The plane was American, he was sure of that.

The bomber rested deeply on its belly, as if partially embedded in the ground, the propellers jammed and bent under the wings. The wings were extraordinarily long. The tail seemed to have been ripped apart, to have stripped itself in the air, and there were dozens of holes in the fuselage, some of them as large as windows. There were markings on the plane and a white, five-pointed star.

Jean walked to the front of the plane. Perhaps, he thought, there were men still trapped inside the cockpit, and for a moment he entertained the fantasy of rescuing them, saving their lives. The windshield had been shot away. Jean climbed onto the wing and peered into the cockpit. He looked at the debris and glass and smashed instrument casings. He tried to imagine himself behind the controls. He hopped off the wing then, and walked around the nose to the other side of the plane. Below the cockpit was a drawing he couldn't quite believe and beneath the drawing were English words he couldn't read. If Marcel had been with him, Jean would have pointed to the drawing, and the two boys would have laughed. But alone, Jean did not feel like laughing.

Slowly he circled the rest of the plane and returned to the two men lying on the ground. The man in the parachute began to moan, opened his eyes. Instinctively, Jean backed away. He didn't know whether he should speak or remain silent. For a moment, his own eyes welled with tears, and he wished Madame Dinant would hurry

up and get here. What could a ten-year-old boy do for the man in the pasture?

He walked backwards from the plane, his hands frozen in his pockets. And as he did so, he saw what ought to have been obvious to him, but was lost in his eagerness to inspect the plane. Fanning out from the front of the plane to the forest were footprints in the frost – large footprints, not his own. He could see distinctly where the footprints had gone: this trail, and that trail, and that trail – all into the wood, spokes from the plane.

And then there was the one path.

In the distance, Jean heard voices, the murmur of excited, breathless voices scurrying up the hill toward the pasture. Quickly Jean marked in his memory the entry points of the various trails into the forest. Without knowing quite why he was doing this, he began to scuffle over the field, erasing footprints with his shoes. The voices grew louder. His own feet would not be sufficient. He ran to the edge of the clearing, ripped down a fir branch. He whirled around the pasture, sweeping the frost from the grass.

Anthoine was ahead of him, limping with remarkable speed up the cow path. How could such a fat, ungainly man move so fast? Henri wondered. His own chest stung with the effort. He didn't want to find this plane, didn't want to see it.

Just minutes ago, in the village, he and Anthoine had been drinking at Jauquet's. Thinking to make something of a noon break, not quite a meeting, talking about the leaflets, drinking Jauquet's beer, not as good as his own. And then the plane dropping out of the sky as they sat there in the Burghermaster's small, frozen garden. Dipping and wobbling as they watched, three of its engines trailing dark plumes, creating an eerie charcoal drawing. He wanted to cover his head; he thought the plane would fall onto the village. The bomber barely missed the steeple of St Catherine's, and Henri could see it had no landing gear. Excitement and fear rose in him as he watched the plane lift slightly and then fall, and then lift again to disappear over the Heights. Waiting for the explosion then, watching for billows of smoke from the field. In silence they had waited seconds. Nothing had happened.

American, Anthoine had said.

How long since the plane had crashed? Nine minutes? Eleven?

The others approached the clearing just ahead of him. Thérèse Dinant was first, walking so fast she was bent forward in her wool coat, retying her kerchief under her chin against the cold. Behind her, Jauquet was puffing hard to beat her into the pasture. Léon, a thin man with steel glasses and a worker's cap, couldn't take the hill, was falling back. And schoolboys, running, as if this were an outing.

He heard exclamations of surprise, some fear. He

turned the corner and took it all in at once: the broken plane, the bodies, the scarred ground. From habit, he crossed himself.

Not a crash, but a belly landing. The smell of petrol, the thought of fire. Thérèse kneeling in the frost. Taking the pulse of a man wrapped in a parachute, speaking constantly to him in a low voice. She raised the wrist of another man beside the first, but Henri could see, even from where he stood, that the man was dead. It was the color of his face.

Dinant looked up and ordered stretchers and a truck. Girard, who worked with Bastien, the undertaker, ran suddenly from the pasture.

More people arrived in the clearing. Twenty, twenty-five, thirty. The villagers surrounded the plane, climbed onto the wings. Schoolboys rubbed the metal of the engine cowling with knitted gloves as if it were burnished gold. They peered down under the wings to marvel at how the propellers had bent in the landing. A distance was kept from the wounded and the dead, with Thérèse watching over them, except that some of the men gave their coats to be piled over the wounded man to warm him.

Henri meant to give his coat. He couldn't move.

Women – farmers' wives, shopkeepers – inspected canvas sacks, exclaiming over the provisions. The chocolate, he saw, was taken immediately. Later, he thought, after the bodies had been removed, the sacks would be picked clean.

There was activity inside the plane. Paper and instruments were spilling from the cockpit. He saw Anthoine beckoning for him to come closer. Henri stood with uplifted hands to receive the salvaged goods. He didn't want to see what the instruments were, what the papers said. It was always true: The less you knew the better.

How long until the Germans came to the clearing? Minutes? An hour? If they came around the corner now, he would be shot.

Turning, he saw Jauquet with schoolbags he'd commandeered from the children. How did the Burghermaster know which children could be trusted? Anthoine climbed out of the plane and over the wing. He slid to the ground, helped to pack the sacks.

I'll wait two hours, then go to St. Laurent. Jauquet speaking, puffed up with the mission. To tell the Germans was what he meant. Standard procedure in the Resistance, Jauquet said knowingly, though privately Henri wondered how the man could be so sure, since this was the first plane ever to fall precisely in the village. Jauquet expansive now, explaining the risk: If the Germans found the plane before they were officially told, Jauquet's head would be in a noose. But more than likely, Henri thought, the Germans were eating and drinking at L'Hôtel de Ville in St. Laurent, as they did at every noon hour, and had probably had so much beer to drink already they hadn't seen or heard the plane. It was meant to be a joke: The Belgian beer was the country's best defensive weapon.

He saw a boy by the front of the plane now, gesturing

to another, looking up at something on the nose. The boys' eyes widened. They whispered excitedly and pointed. 'La chute obscène,' Henri heard them say.

Stretchers were arriving on a truck. Thérèse would take the flyers home, tend to the wounded. Bastien would come for the dead man. If the wounded man lived, he'd be put into the network before the Germans could find him.

The village women maneuvered in toward the sacks. More people at the pasture, gathering closer to the plane, as if it were alive, a curiosity at the circus. Fifty now, maybe sixty. Schoolgirls in thick woolen socks and brown shoes stood on the wing and crawled forward to peer into the cockpit. There was nervous giggling. Their laughter seemed disrespectful to Henri, and he was irritated by the girls.

Beside him, Anthoine's voice: We'll hide the sacks with Claire, convene a meeting in the church.

Henri turned with a protest, the words dying on his tongue. Not with Claire, he wanted to say. Anthoine's face a wall.

We've got to find the pilots, Anthoine insisted quietly. Before the Germans do.

Henri, with the heavy sacks, nodded as he knew he must. It was beginning now, he thought, and who could say where it would end?