



## *Under a War-Torn Sky* by L. M. Elliott

**Subjects:** World War, 1939–1945—Underground movements—France—Juvenile fiction; Air pilots—Juvenile fiction; France—History—German occupation, 1940–1945—Juvenile fiction

**Award:** Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People

**Book Lists:** Europe, Gifted

**Props:** Pilot hat



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*(Wear pilot hat)* Dan and I shuffled through the snow to Group Ops for a briefing of our next mission. It was early morning in March of 1944 and we were stationed in England, fighting the Germans. I was a copilot on the B-24 named Out of the Blue. Dan was my pilot and captain.

Two weeks after I graduated from high school I signed up to fly. I am proud to say I, Henry, am the youngest copilot on the base—just being barely 19-years-old. But I'm not proud to say that right now I'm scared. Let me explain—my next mission will be my 15<sup>th</sup>. To finish my tour I have to survive 25 missions. But the average life span of an Eighth Air Force bomber crew is only 15 missions. This is a make-or-break flight.

In the briefing room, I learned that our mission would be a long one. We would travel across France, through Switzerland and into Germany. Our target was a ball-bearing plant. The CO barked, "Without ball bearings, Messerschmitts can't fly, Rommel's tanks can't roll." The debriefing over, we went for chow, a big breakfast of eggs and bacon, real eggs today, not the powdered green stuff. Then, we left for Germany. We flew in a diamond shape today. That meant a lead squadron in front with 24 bombers total.

For 45 precious minutes we flew in peace. Nothing but water below and sky above—a mirrored world of soft blues. The ocean's white caps looked like small clouds. This is what I had thought flying would be like. For a few wondrous minutes, I was filled with an awed happiness. But my peace didn't last. Out of the glaring sun zoomed a swarm of single-engine fighters. They fanned out into pairs and swooshed in, closing at a rate of two hundred yards a second. It all happened faster than I expected. Four messerschmitts whirled around, looped up over our bomber and came back, straight on, rolling. Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat. Hurling lead at us.

Most of the bullets bounced off, but one broke through the cockpit's Plexiglas armor. Zing, zing, zing. It rattled around and around until it found its mark: Dan's leg. He screamed and slumped over grabbing his calf. I reached for him. "Keep your hands on the wheel, Lieutenant. I'm all right." More Messerschmitts. Rat-tat-tat-tat. CRRRRACK. Glass shattered. A scream of pain came from the bombardier's compartment below. A Messerschmitt streaked by the cockpit. BANG, BANG, BANG. I heard the sound of bullets puncturing metal, of engine gears grinding and cracking. Our plane quaked and dipped. Its number two engine was on fire. The edge of its left wing was sheered off. BANG! I looked to my right. Our number three engine sputtered and shook. Its propeller grated to a stop.

Dan called to the crew, "Bail out. Everybody out NOW!" The bomber began to whine and drift away from the formation, falling like a leaf on a strong wind. Soon her nose would go down, she'd start spinning and in a matter of minutes she'd explode. But Dan and I clung to the controls for a few more moments to give the crew—whoever was still alive—a chance to get out. Then it was time for us to go. We got to the bomb bay. We already had our parachutes strapped on and I helped Dan into the opening—he dropped into the sky. Then it was my turn to fall into the blue. *(Take hat off)*

Henry will land in Nazi occupied Europe, enemy territory. Will he be captured? Will he escape? Henry's adventure is just beginning. *(Hold up book)* *Under a War-Torn Sky* by L. M. Elliott.