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INTRODUCTION

It is every pilot's nightmare: getting hit by a missile or enemy bullets.

The attack usually comes from behind. An enemy fighter follows the plane, comes in close, and then shoots.

Sometimes the attack is a missile shot from the ground. Sometimes it is anti-aircraft fire.

Maybe the plane explodes. Maybe it just loses an engine. Maybe the pilot cannot control the plane. The plane is no longer a flying machine. It is a huge piece of metal falling to Earth. Just a little damage can cause any plane to crash.

But the pilot and crew can bail out of a war-plane if it starts to go down. If the crew is lucky and quick, they will float to the earth by parachute.

Nobody can bail out of a passenger plane. If a missile hits a plane, it usually crashes, killing everyone on board.

Fighter pilots around the world have an agreement. They do not shoot down passenger planes. They only attack other warplanes.

But these rules are not always followed. Sometimes accidents do happen. In this book, you will read about planes that got shot down. Some were warplanes in times of war. Some were passenger planes in times of peace. Sometimes the people on board survived.

Sometimes they did not survive.

CHAPTER 1

Ace Pilot Shot Down

DATAFILE

Timeline

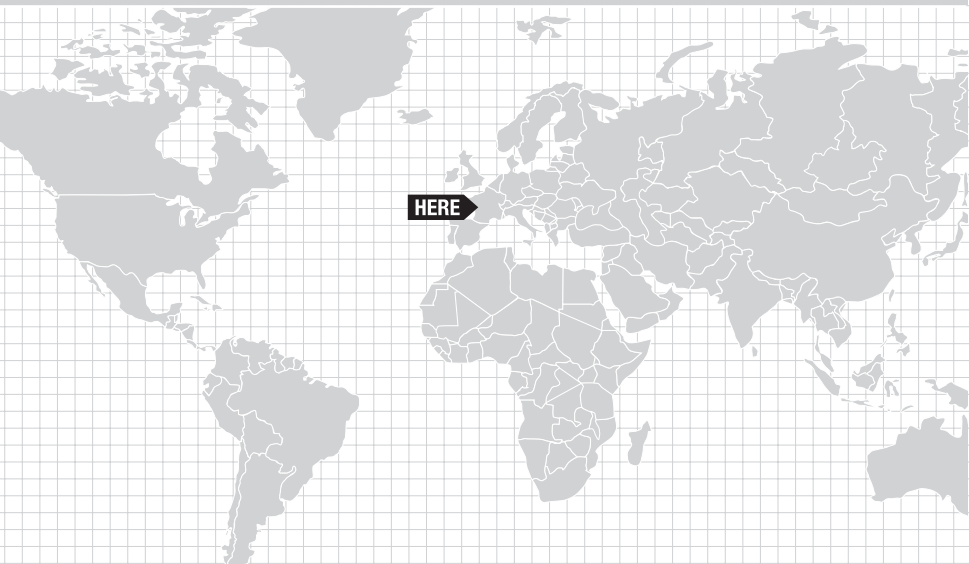
December 1941

The United States declares war on Germany.

March 1944

Chuck Yeager's fighter plane is shot down over Bordeaux, France.

Where is Bordeaux, France?



Key Terms

altitude—the vertical position of an object above the sea or land

cockpit—the front of the plane where the pilot sits and controls the plane

elevator—part of the small wing at the back of a plane used to make the plane go up or down

rudder—the part of a plane or boat used to steer it



Did You Know?

Germany attacked several countries in 1939 and 1940. In 1941, the United States joined England and France, and fought against Germany. At the same time, the United States also fought against Japan.

CHAPTER 1

Ace Pilot Shot Down

On March 5, 1944, Chuck Yeager took off from England. His and three other P-51 fighter planes headed for Bordeaux, France.

Below them, World War II raged on. The German army had taken over France. Yeager's mission: To find German bombers at secret airfields in France and destroy them.

A Dangerous Mission

German fighter planes protected the airfields. They patrolled the skies, looking for American and English planes.

Yeager and the others flew in a diamond-shaped formation. Yeager flew in the rear—the most dangerous position. The German pilots usually attacked the plane in back first.

Yeager had a lot to watch out for. He had to stay with the other American planes. He had to look for bombers on the ground and for enemy fighter planes in the air. And he had to watch his plane's instruments and controls.

Hunting Planes

Yeager was a good pilot—quick, alert, brave, and smart. He had grown up in the mountains of West Virginia. He knew how to hunt. But now he was not hunting rabbits and squirrels. He was hunting enemy planes.

He was good at it. Yeager had already shot down two planes, and he had always flown home safely. But Yeager's luck was about to run out.

German Fighter Planes

Three German FW-190 fighters came swooping in from behind. Yeager saw the tracer bullet trails zip past his plane. He tried to dodge them, but it was too late.

As the bullets hit his plane, they cut its elevator cables. Yeager could not control the elevator wing at the back of the plane. He could not change his altitude.

To get away, Yeager used his rudder to do a snap roll. As the plane rolled to the side and spun upside down, the blood rushed to his head. Yeager escaped the attack, but he knew he would crash.

“I just got hit.”

Pilots do not like to bail out of their planes. It is never easy and always dangerous. On a P-51, the pilot has to open the cockpit and climb out. It is not easy because the plane falls faster and faster, spinning as it goes. Yeager’s heart pounded. He was scared, but he kept his cool. He radioed the other pilots and told them he was in trouble.

“I just got hit and have to bail out.”

— *Chuck Yeager*

Yeager was three miles above the ground and falling fast!

Falling, Falling, Falling . . .

Yeager pulled open the cockpit. A powerful wind hit him in the face as the plane lurched

downward. Yeager rolled into the air, and felt the sickening feeling of falling.

He was afraid to open his parachute too soon. It would slow him down, making him an easy target for the German pilots.

As he fell, Yeager ripped off his oxygen mask and helmet, and let them fly away. The rushing air ripped the breath from his lungs. It tore at his eyes and face. His flight suit flapped furiously. He fell fast, spinning as he went. When Yeager began to feel dizzy, he pulled his ripcord.

Yeager was very glad to see the chute open. It snapped him to an almost a dead stop in midair. The biggest danger had passed. Below him, his plane fell until it crashed to the ground. Yeager was glad he was not in it.

It felt good to drift gently below his parachute. But he was still 8,000 feet off the ground. Yeager was not safe yet.