

COLE VON COLE THE AVIATOR: FATAL VEIL

"Twelve o'clock! Straight ahead! Germans approaching! Evasive maneuvers!" Cole Von Cole's voice echoed through the cockpit of his F-5B Lightning. He shouted urgently, the imminent threat of the approaching Messerschmitt Bf 109G-10 pushing him to the limits. As his plane tossed and turned, death seemed to be knocking at his door, and he instinctively began a nosedive to escape the pursuing Luftwaffe pilot. The Luftwaffe pilot, skilled and relentless, posed a formidable challenge. Despite the marvel of the Bf 109G-10, it spelled imminent danger for the Army Air Corps pilots. Cole, mesmerized by the enemy pilot's agile maneuvers, knew he had to maintain focus to survive the encounter. However, the German pilot executed a flawless barrel roll, throttled down, and expertly positioned himself behind Cole's F-5B. The roar of machine guns erupted as the enemy opened fire. The F-5B endured critical damage, and flames engulfed the cockpit. In that perilous moment, Cole, realizing the severity of the situation, accepted his fate. With the aircraft crippled and no chance of bailing out, he braced himself for the inevitable.

Cole Von Cole's eyes snapped open, his heart racing, sweat forming on his forehead, as if his dream synchronized with his body, unable to tell reality from fantasy. "Thank God, it was only a dream," he whispered quietly as he lay still in his cot, his heart rate slowly returning to normal as the fear of falling began to leave his mind. It was October 13th, 1943, 0700, and Cole was preparing to face a dangerous reconnaissance mission for the upcoming Schweinfurt Raid on October 14th. His mission was to provide precise details and the location of a ball-bearing factory, hoping it would crush the German war machine that had been encroaching on Europe. Although when he began flying, he dreamed of joining the "bomber mafia," as they were affectionately named, he instead decided to fly the F-5B Lightning, the recon variant of the P-38 Lightning. As an F-5B pilot, Cole Von Cole provides the allies with a critical recon of potential targets, flying deep behind enemy lines solo to accomplish this role.

While Cole's mission departure time was 0900, he still wanted breakfast and had to attend the pre-mission briefing. Moments like this, he was grateful for the quick and easy breakfast provided in the barracks. However, the food was far from being momma's home cooking. Nonetheless, he was always thankful for the meal that, at some point, may have been his last, especially when he knew all the effort the kitchen staff made to bring a piece of home back to the guys. Cole readied himself in his uniform, a fresh Captain with a brown

combover, thick mustache, six feet tall, and young, just like the rest of the Air Corps. However, with ten missions under his belt, you could see the toll of war on his body, aging it past his years. He adjusted the slightly crooked ranks on his lapels and began the walk down the hall to the Officer's Chow Hall. During his walk, he reminisced on his life, where he came from, and how he found himself in this hell of a war.

Cole Von Cole was born September 10th, 1919, to loving parents in Florida, where he grew up. His parents were never wealthy, but they provided the necessities that a child would come to appreciate. They were loving and taught him life lessons and values, some of which he reflects on during especially worrisome times. As time passed and Cole looked towards his future, the law called his name. At twenty-two, he began his educational journey until the day war called him away. Despite common belief, it was not the act of war that drew Cole and every other man his age to serve. Instead, it was the desire to fight and win for their country. Cole was no different than others and decided if he was fighting the war, he was doing it from the air, not the ground. The idea of flying mesmerized him as a child; as he aged, he would seek more adventure, which would develop him into flying an F-5B. The F-5B was a beautiful aircraft with twin engines, fast, sleek, and streamlined for the most dangerous missions. Cole's thoughts stopped in their tracks. A scent of jasmine, sweet and rich, a hint of honey, was ahead of him in the hall.

Looking ahead, Cole noticed a beautiful shape, the silhouette of a nurse; he would consider her hypnotizing. He could make out raven black hair set in pin curls with a bandana as a bowtie to hold her hair in place. Cole walked faster, filled with desire; he had to see her face and know who she was and if she was available. "I need to stop this fantasy and focus on the mission ahead. Thoughts like these are dangerous and a distraction," he thought as she rounded the corner and disappeared. Luckily, he had made it to his destination, and the idea of breakfast was a more realistic fantasy to believe in. As he entered the Chow Hall, he glanced around. He noticed a couple of pilots, mostly bomber pilots, with whom he had limited association. The boys running recon for the Air Corps were shrouded in secret. Cole was part of an experimental unit that few knew of, the 67th Reconnaissance Group, 8th Air Force. His home in Europe was RAF Membury, Berkshire, England, and it was beautiful countryside. Cole sat down to speak with no one. However, this was nothing new as everyone knew he was a sort of introvert, so they allowed him his peace while he ate his breakfast and possibly his last meal.

It was now 0800, and Cole still had to attend his mission briefing before reuniting with his beautiful F-5B patiently waiting for him on the parking ramp. Cole Von Cole entered the briefing room and secured the door behind him; as with all his briefs, this was top secret, and even the bombers did not know their target yet. This was not to keep them in the dark; it was precautionary, as recon was required before they could be greenlit to bomb the target. Standing in front of the large map on the wall, Lieutenant Smith, or Schmitty as he was called, stood 5 feet and 10 inches tall with short blonde hair and blue eyes. He looked up from a document he was examining, locked eyes with Cole, and snickered, "I was not sure you were going to make it in time. Usually, you are here early!" With a grin, Cole looked at him and said, "Apologies, there was a slight distraction, but I am ready for my briefing. What is the target?" Schmitty's face suddenly shifted as his usually cheerful disposition was overruled with a pale and grim appearance. He quietly told Cole, "Schweinfurt.... ball bearing factory, we need solid intelligence as the weather has stalled our attempts to accomplish this raid." Cole looked at him and calmly said, "Oh...what is the threat level?" Still looking pale, Schmitty told him, "We anticipate multiple Luftwaffe squadrons starting at the German border until your return to base. Additionally, we speculate heavy flak resistance, and this will not be a milk run." Quietly and calmly, Cole exited the room and headed to his plane.

Approaching his aircraft, bathed in the affectionate hue of PRU Blue and bearing the name "Sam's Vision," Cole Von Cole admired the exquisite nose art. A striking brunette pinup girl clad in a vibrant red dress skillfully straddled a camera, embodying the harmonious blend of beauty and reconnaissance prowess. He climbed into the cockpit of his F-5B, trying to limit his fear and display confidence for his maintenance crew. He could not help but wonder if this would be the last time, they would see each other; he knows maintenance takes pride in their aircraft. He is hopeful he can bring it back in one piece to them; the cold October air cooled him down as he ran his preflight before the engines roared to life on either side of him. He donned his headset and throat mic, checked the oxygen pressure for 400 to 450psi, ensured the fuel selector was correct, and all the other switches in the cockpit. Cole signaled to the ground crew for engine start, and they cleared the area with a fire extinguisher ready. Aloud, Cole stated, "Batt and ignition switches to on, generator switch to on, boost pump to on, engines primed, energize!" Both engines roared sequentially, the aircraft gently shook, the cockpit rumbled, and the engines stabilized at 1,000 revolutions per minute. The maintenance crew saluted him and moved away as Cole increased the throttle and taxied to the runway. Just like that, by 0900, Cole was

airborne. As the wind briskly brushed against his face, Cole closed the canopy, shutting out the elements and the symphony of engines. He made his ascent to his cruising altitude of 25,000 feet (about the height of Mount Everest), donning his oxygen mask to prevent hypoxia.

Cole flew comfortably at 25,000 feet and deep within German territory three hours into his mission. Although his target was located near centralized Germany, he was shocked by the lack of German resistance; no Luftwaffe intercepted him and no flak to dodge. Of course, naturally, he had jinxed himself. With only 30 minutes left until his arrival, a barrage of flak surrounded him. The explosions were reminiscent of fireworks, but instead of colorful explosions, they were thick black smoke and shrapnel. As the barrages of gunfire fell, he began to maneuver his plane, diving, climbing, and rolling left and right, all while trying not to stray too far off course. Slowly but surely, the Germans, also known as the sharpshooters of Western Europe, zeroed in on his trajectory as they attempted to predict his next move. When it came to the German anti-aircraft abilities, it was only a matter of time before they zeroed in on him. Cole rolled the aircraft to the left, a fatal decision as one perfectly placed flak led to shrapnel splintering his left engine, oil glazed over his windscreen, impairing his vision. Smoke was visible from the engine, which meant a fire was imminent, and flames began to exit. Cole went into emergency procedures as he cut the fuel to the left side, feathered the prop, and turned off the magneto. This was detrimental as Cole was left with one operable engine far behind enemy lines; he needed a plan.

At that moment, as smoke and flames danced along his engine, Cole began to accept his fate that he had his last meal, that he would not bring his plane home in one piece. For a fleeting second, he stopped thinking about the war or death. Instead, he remembered the smell of jasmine, the mystery woman who wore that sweet perfume, and how he would never find out who she was. That realization was all the motivation he needed as the engine roar returned to his ears, and his will to survive coursed through his body. He snapped out of his thoughts and remembered the contingency plan to bail out over Switzerland, with Zurich being the goal. They were neutral during the war and one of the few countries not invaded, and RAF Membury was too far away and over the water. His best chance of survival was Switzerland. As he looked towards the horizon, he thought he could have some of their famous chocolates and bring some back to the maintenance crew to apologize for the plane, hoping they would let him off easy.

Cole rolled his aircraft into a hard right turn as Sam's Vision struggled to not stall during such a hard bank with only one engine operating. He had to survive for three more hours, and then he could land in Zurich or bail out with his parachute donned. That decision did not have to be made now but later; he needed to find his way out of Germany before the Luftwaffe scrambled. His aircraft was in no condition to dogfight with a fully operational Bf 109. Cole Von Cole engaged the supercharger on the right engine. He pushed the revolutions per minute beyond their maximum in hopes of escaping the flak. Cole pushed his F-5B to 330 miles per hour, which was impressive, with only one engine running and just shy of the top speed of 414 miles per hour. Thirty minutes had passed, although it felt like a lifetime, and like the calm before the storm, the flak barrages ceased to exist. He felt safe again and could not let his guard down as he waited for the Luftwaffe to intercept him.

For the remainder of his escape to Switzerland, Cole decreased his altitude to 15,000 feet as he remained conservative on his right engine. Looking out of the cockpit, he could see the propeller spinning on the left engine due to the frigid air hitting it; it was mesmerizing. Cole could not believe he survived, although he knew that he would soon return due to failing the reconnaissance part of the mission. "Well, maybe I will get lucky, and they will send another in my place; after all, they need this for the raid on the 14th." He thought to himself as his aircraft calmly exited Germany and entered Swiss airspace.