“Cass? Are you in, captain ma’am, or folding like a sane person would?”

Walled in by the drone of the cargo plane and the din of her own thoughts, Cass forced her attention back to the cards in her hand. Pair of jacks, deuce, trey, ten; could be worse, could be better. The flight plan of the C-47 gooneybird, monotonously circling in bumpy air for the last half hour, could have stood improvement, too. She wasn’t in charge of that, at least. Just the lonely one-eyed jacks staring her in the face. Across from her, Della teased a finger back and forth across the edge of her cards as if sharpening them for the kill. Glancing right and left, Cass caught up to the fact Beryl and Mary Catherine had already thrown theirs face-down on the makeshift table of parachute packs, bluffed out. It was a shame Della was not as good a pilot as she was a poker player.
“I’ll see you in Hell first, Maclaine.” Cass took a dollar bill from her depleted stack and tossed it into the ante.

“Tsk, Cassie. That’s one for Mother.” Reaching across, Della plucked up another wrinkled bill from Cass’s pile of ones and dropped it aside into the cuss pot, which they always divvied after the game.

“What’s the program here,” Cass said crossly, “to get rich off my vocabulary? That’s chickenshit, Della.”

The other three looked at her. Beryl, elder of the group, was about to say something but thought better of it. This time, Della only crept her fingers a little way toward Cass’s pile, asking as if it was a matter of etiquette: “Another for Mother?”

Knowing she had better get a grip of the situation, Cass fanned at her mouth as if shooing off flies, then forked over another dollar for swearing during the game. As everyone laughed, she cast another quick glance at the nearest window port and still saw only fog; Seattle was socked in tighter than she could ever remember—that was saying a lot—and there were mountains out there. Even she, who had to have faith in instrumentation, was ready to divert to sunny Moses Lake. She caught the eye of Linda Cicotte, B flight leader, and pointed urgently toward
the cockpit. Linda nodded, teetered to her feet and felt her way forward to talk to the pilot. The rest of the dozen women, all in the baggy flying gear called zoot suits, slouched in sling seats along one side of the aircraft; the entire rest of the cabin was taken up with bulky crates. TARFU Airlines, these numbing transport trips in the equivalent of a boxcar with propellers were known as: Things Are Really Fucked Up. Circling in Grade A fog was worse than usual on these trips to the Coast, but there was nothing to do about it but go with the routine. Linda’s team of fliers as usual were curled up as best they could, trying to catch some sleep. C flight, Ella Mannion’s, did crossword puzzles and read books. Cass was not sure she wanted to know what it said that hers always sat on their parachutes in the tail of the plane and played cutthroat poker.

Right now Mary Catherine palmed the deck in cardslick fashion, ready to keep dealing. “Cards, sisters in sin?”

“Honey”—Della was only from somewhere in southern Ohio, but when she poured it on, she sounded like Tallulah Bankhead on a bender—“I couldn’t possibly stand one more good card.”

Cass flinched inwardly. What am I getting myself into here? A lot of that going around lately. Saying “Hit me twice,” she slid the deuce and trey to the
discard pile. The new cards might as well have gone straight there, too. *Lucky in
love doesn’t seem to count in poker either, Ben.* Even so, when Della upped the
ante, she stayed with her. Della raised her again, which mercifully was the limit.

Cass met the bet and, fingers crossed, produced the jacks.

“Pair of ladies.” Della laid down queens and scooped up cash. “Thank you
for the money, y’all, it’ll go for good causes, widows and orphans and the home
for overmatched poker players.”

Cass looked at Mary Catherine, and Mary Catherine at Beryl.

Simultaneously they reached to their piles and each flung a dollar into the cuss pot.

*“Piss in the ocean, Della!”* they chorused.

“My, my,” Della drawled, cocking a delicate ear. “Do I hear a whine in one
of the engines?” Cass had to hand it to her; shavetail latecomer or not, she was
sharp as a porcupine on most things. The full lieutenants, Beryl Foster and Mary
Catherine Cornelisen, had earned their wings in the very first contingent of

WASPs, as Cass herself had. The three of them together had endured the bald old
goat of a flight instructor at Sweetwater, Texas, who claimed women pilots would
never amount to anything because they couldn’t piss in the ocean—the Gulf of

Mexico, actually—from ten thousand feet through the relief tube like the male pilots.
If that had been deliberate motivation toward every other kind of flying skill, it worked in their case. Sometimes the aircraft they ferried from the plant were finished products and sometimes they weren't. Mary Catherine once had been going through a cockpit check on the factory floor when the engine of the shiny new fighter burst into flames; pure textbook but against all human inclination, she rammed the throttle open and blew out the fire. And Beryl knew what it was to land at East Base with nothing but fumes left in a leaky auxiliary tank. With scrapes enough of her own, Cass would not have traded their cool heads for reincarnations of Amelia Earhart. Della, though. Nearly a year behind them in flight school and immeasurably more than that in experience, Della still showed signs of thinking of herself as a hot pilot. Hot pilots tended to end up dead pilots. Cass knew she was going to have to keep working on Della.

Starting about now; Della was shuffling the cards in such a fashion that they purred expectantly, but she did have the smarts to check with Cass before dealing out another hand. Cass shook her head. “That’s it, officers. Time to ready up.” She climbed to her feet, stiff from all the sitting. “MC, where’d you put those newspapers?” They had grabbed up a pile of the Great Falls Tribune before takeoff; the article about them and the picture of the squadron proudly posed on the
wings of an Aircobra had brought whoops of tribute to the earnest war
 correspondent in the fancy flight jacket. And they're not even in the sack with him.

Cass tried to stifle that thought and keep a straight face as Mary Catherine
 uncovered the newspapers from under her gear and began passing them out. “Here
 you go, read all about our esteemed squadron leader and her Flying Women. How
 many does everybody want? Cass?”

“Oh, a couple.” One to send to Dan. What a case I am. Show the hubby
 the nice things the other man I love writes about me. Dry-mouthed, Cass hoped
 she was better at a straight face than she was at stifling.

During this, Linda Cicotte came weaving her way to the back of the plane.

“We’re in the hands of a hero, Cass.” She jerked a thumb toward the cockpit. “He
 still says he’s going to get us on the ground in Seattle.”

“He didn’t happen to say, ‘Or die trying,’ did he?” Cass asked wearily.

Linda simply rolled her eyes. “Are we going to fly out in this, do you
 think?”

“Too soupy for good health.” Cass herself didn’t mind instrument flying,
 bracketing the radio beam and the rest of the things you did to let the machine
 navigate itself through limited visibility. But she couldn’t risk her fliers; Della in
particular tended to trust her own instincts over the instruments, a good way to meet a mountain. "You know what a hard-ass this dispatching officer can be," Cass shared her thinking with Linda, who had flown the Seattle run nearly as many times as she had. "I'll work on him unmercifully. Tell your bunch and Ella's we're going to try to RON this one." Remaining overnight, when they were supposed to be picking up planes and heading back, would not be popular with the higher-ups at East Base. It also threw off tonight with Ben. Briefly she felt better about herself for not letting either of those get in the way of her decision.

Beryl looked up from the newspaper she was holding. "Cass? I didn't know that about the ring. Mine won't come off even if I wanted."

The line in there about the ringless hand, nothing between it and the controls of an Aircobra: _Damn it, Ben, you don't miss much, but I wish you'd been looking the other way that time._ They'd started off deadly stiff with one another when he showed up to interview her and the other WASPs, as was to be expected after that run-in in the hangar. Proceeded to all business when he quickly found she gave a straight answer no matter what the question was and she realized he knew plenty about flying. That moment, though, when she climbed into a tethered P-39 to show him the cockpit routine, automatically slipping off her wedding band as she
straight answer no matter what the question was and she realized he knew plenty about flying. That moment, though, when she climbed into a tethered P-39 to show him the cockpit routine, automatically slipping off her wedding band as she slid into the seat and he wanted to know what that was about. Somehow it went out of control from then on.

"My husband is too busy to mind about something like a ring, he’s in New Guinea."

"So is one of my football buddies—I just came from there."

"You did? Is it as bad as they say?"

"I’ll bring you the piece I wrote there, you can decide."

All that. Then before they knew it, nights at the roadhouse or his room at the Excelsior. And the part she hated: if she wanted to hang onto her marriage and officer’s rank, they didn’t dare get caught at it. Tell nobody. Show nothing.

Staying casual was a surprising amount of work, but now she managed to shrug at Beryl’s remark. “I’ve just always done it. Dan and I knew a mechanic who slipped off a ladder, caught his ring on a bolt head. Pulled it right off.”

“The ring?” Della was deep in admiration of the newspaper photo, where the flip of her blond hair showed to advantage. “So what?”
“The finger, fool.”

“Yipe. Guess I better stay single, keep on playing the field.”

“Is that where you head out to with that warrant officer who has the Jeep,” Mary Catherine wondered, “the nearest field?”

“Nice talk, Mary Cat. I don’t see you around the nunnery.” Della tucked away the newspaper into her ready-bag. “Maybe I ought to set my sights higher, a war correspondent. Anybody find out, is he taken?”

To not let that hang in the air, Cass handled it crisply: “I didn’t have any reason to ask, did I? Everybody, strap on those chutes in case this moron pilot isn’t any better at reading a fuel gauge than he is the weather.”

Mary Catherine couldn’t resist a last dig on Della. “That correspondent you have your eye on is bound to be married,” she said with the air of one who had been through enough men to know. “The good ones always are.”

“Lieutenant Reinking, sir? I’ve been looking all over for you.”

Oh Christ, not again. Doesn’t that general have anything else to do? On edge anyway, Ben had intended to slip into his office only for a minute before heading to the communications section and then checking the flight board again.
The last two times, the board showed NTO ZV--no takeoff, zero visibility--for Cass’s squadron. *Seattle wrote the book on fog, surely to God they’ll scrub the flight, won’t they?* Along with fretting about Cass and trying to wind down from leave, he had spent the afternoon with his typewriter in a back room at the base library wrapping up the piece on Vic. The war did not recognize Sunday, but somehow it was the slowest day of message traffic and his intention was to send in the piece while the sending was good. In the way of that stood a squat broken-nosed hardcase in rumpled uniform, nervously fiddling with his cap. Ben eyed him distrustfully until he realized there was no armband of a day-room runner on this one.

“All over is the right place to look for me,” Ben admitted. “What’s on your mind, soldier?”

“Didn’t they tell you, sir? I’m your new clerk.”

Caught off guard, Ben glanced at the desk in the corner; it had been swept clean of everything except the typewriter and the Speed Graphic camera, making his own chronically overloaded desk look even more like a dump. “What happened to Wryzinski?”

“I wouldn’t know that, sir.”
Ben had just been getting used to Wryzinski. “Tepee Weepy taketh away and Tepee Weepy giveth,” he intoned, offering the new man a handshake. “What do I call you?”

“Jones, sir.”

“Nobody’s named that,” Ben responded, grinning to put him at ease. “It’s taken.”

“I don’t quite catch your meaning, sir.”

This was going to take some invention, Ben realized. “Let’s do this over, soldier. First off, I’ll try to remember to wiggle my ears when I’m making a joke and you try to pretend there is such a thing as a joke. Second, drop the ‘sir’ when there’s no one here but us, and that’s all the time. Maybe then we can get along reasonably well, okay?” The plug-ugly face said it was determined to try. “So, Jones, enlighten me--what did you do in civvie life to condemn yourself to being assigned to me?”

“College. Religious Studies, ahead of seminary.”

Ben peered at him. Jones looked as if any study time he had put in likely would have been with Murder Incorporated. “No kidding. At any place I ever heard of?”
"Out at the university." This drew him closer scrutiny from Ben. "I was a freshman in '41. Yelled my head off at every game, lieutenant. What a team you guys were."

"Then you know what this is about," Ben indicated the overloaded small office. "Go ahead and move into that desk. I'm just on my way over to the com section and--"

"Sir--I mean, lieutenant? I was just over there. Figured I could at least check on things until you showed up." Jones looked uncomfortable. "There's a slew of messages, but they said for your eyes only. They told me to, uhm, get lost."

_They told you to go get fucked, didn't they, Parson Jones. Welcome to the East Base version of close combat._ "I'll have a word with them about giving you confusing directions like that. Just so you know, I need to sign off on all messages. Don't ask me why, I don't write the regulations for the war." The war clock ticking in his head, he suddenly asked: "Any skinny about where these came in from?"
Jones pursed his lips as if calculating where gossip fell on the scale of sin.

“Uhm, I did pester the telex operator until he’d tell me that much. Pacific theatre, lieutenant.”

Friessen and Animal Angelides and Danzer. Rest camp in Australia and troop ship in convoy and destroyer on usual station. Those should be okay; routine reports this time of day. Relieved, Ben grabbed up the materials from his desk that he had come for and turned to go. Jones still stood there fidgeting.

“Lieutenant, I ought to tell you, I don’t know I’m supposed to be doing here. I never heard of this TPWP outfit until I was assigned to you.”

By now Ben could have recited it in his sleep, the same spiel he had given Wryzinski, and Torvik before him, and Sullivan before that, that the government was in the habit of setting up special projects for certain war priorities. There was one for timber production, and one for the artificial rubber called guayule, and who knew how many others. “We produce stuff for the newspapers, to put it politely. You do know how to handle a typewriter and a camera, right? Where is it you were stationed, before?”
“The Aleutians. I was on the base newspaper at Dutch Harbor, the Williwaw.” A mistily nostalgic expression came over the thug face. “They really had the weather up there. It was great for Bible study.”

“I’ll just bet.” The Aleutian Islands were known for sideways rain. That remote Alaska outpost also was about as distant as possible from Montana and any logical assignment to this office. Another of those gap-in-the-law-of-averages chills crept up Ben’s spine as he studied Jones. The war blew people like scraps of paper to far corners of the world, except those who happened to have attended Treasure State University in ‘41. Those it was busily sifting back to Great Falls. Jake Eisman, first. Then himself, and now this clerk with nothing sticking out on his record except piety. Would coincidences never cease: the tangled situation with Cass, and all of a sudden a Ten Commandments officemate who would definitely know which number the one against adultery was.

“Tell you what, Jones, things are kind of slack at the moment and it’s late in the day,” he resorted to, wanting time to think over this latest circumstance, “so why don’t you just get settled in the barracks. I’ll collect the messages and we’ll start work in the morning--with any luck, the two of us will have the war won by noon.”
Jones cleared his throat. “Sir? We have company.”

Another soldier was standing in the office doorway wringing a cap. This one wore an armband.

“I have been reprimanded,” the base commander set fire to each word.

“Because of you, Lieutenant Reinking.”

Standing at attention in the same old spot at eyechart distance from the desk nameplate that read GENERAL GIDDINGS, Ben mentally tried out “I was just trying to do my job, sir,” and decided silence sounded better.

The general went on, at volume. “A certain United States Senator read your article on the WASPs. Ordinarily that wouldn’t matter a shit’s worth, but he’s chairman of a committee the Pentagon has to get along with. It seems he wants to know why, if women have the training to fly these airplanes of ours in American air, they can’t cross a meaningless line on the ground called the Canadian border and do the Alaska run. The interfering old fart.”

“Sir?” Ben risked. It drew him a glare, but also a nod for him to speak if he dared. “Could you maybe fill me in as to why the WASPs can’t fly north?”
The general said sardonically, “I thought you were supposed to be bright, Reinking. I use the Alaska run to weed my pilots. It’s the next thing to combat flying.” He whirled in his chair and slammed a hand to the wall map behind him. “Shit’s sake, man, just look at the terrain! The hop from here to Edmonton, anybody in ATC can fly that with one eye closed. But then comes the real flying, every goddamn Canadian mountain there is and then the Alaskan ones. That flight is long, the weather is bastardly, the Fairbanks airport is no cinch--do you see what I’m driving at? Those who can hack it on the northern hop”--the general reached high to resoundingly slap the Alaska portion of the map--“I see to it that they have a good shot at transferring over to be fighter or bomber pilots. Those pilots, perhaps you have noticed, lieutenant, according to United States Army Air Force regulations need to be m-e-n.” The general spelled it out for him ever further: “Putting the goddamn WASPs on that run gets in the way of that.”

“I see, sir.” Does the Senator?

General Giddings slumped back in his chair as if under the weight of that thought. “Not that it matters, now that I have to screw the mongoose on this”--Ben wondered if the Senator would have savored that description--“but what do I have to look forward to next from you, Reinking? I am supposedly in charge of all
personnel on this air base, yet you have orders from somewhere on high that lets
you flit around here doing whatever you damn please. Exactly who is behind this
kink in the chain of command? The President? Joseph Stalin? God?”

A colonel, actually.

Ben’s war then had not yet become an endless maze of map-plastered base
offices and florid commanding officers discomfited by his existence, but it was
about to. That last spring morning in 1942 at the pilot training base outside
Nashville, reporting as ordered but so mad he could barely see straight, he stepped
into the briefing room the visiting colonel had borrowed. He still was reeling from
the epic chewing out inflicted by his training squadron CO, minutes before. “So,
Reinking, is your father possibly a Congressman? He’s not? Then where the hell
does your pull come from? I’m supposed to produce fighter pilots. I get
somebody who looks like the second coming of Von Richthofen, and two weeks
before graduation he chickens out. First thing I know he’s detached to the
goddamned puzzle palace in D.C. A colonel flies in from Washington just to fetch
you—if that isn’t pull, Reinking, I don’t know what is. Have a nice safe war, and
get out of my sight.”
Torn between outrage and trepidation, Ben approached the waiting colonel prepared to plead this as a case of mistaken identity. His rigid salute went unanswered, the officer casually waving him to stand at ease. That and the way the Pentagon man perched on the edge of a desk instead of requisitioning it said he was not a military lifer, Ben deciphered. Instead he looked like someone off the cover of *TIME*, the slicked-back hair, the executive attitude; there was always a smokestack or an assembly line over the tailored shoulder on the magazine cover.

Colonel Whoever-he-was meanwhile had given Ben an equal looking-over and now said as if it was the first of many decisions, “Light one if you’ve got one. Or try one of my Cuban ‘rillos?” He held out a pack of thin dark baby cigars.

“I don’t smoke, sir.”

“Still in training, good.” The colonel flipped open his lighter and puffed a cigarillo to life. His sudden question caught Ben off guard. “Did you happen to hear the Ted Loudon show last Saturday?”

*Loudmouth? You couldn’t pay me enough to listen to that creep.* Ben stuck to, “Can’t say that I did, sir.”

“Too bad. You were mentioned. Here’s a transcription.” He held out a thin sheaf of yellow telex paper for Ben to take.
"Good evening, America, and our fighting men and women everywhere. This is Ted Loudon with the latest Sports Lowdown. And have I got a super-size scoop for you tonight." Ben could just hear that rat-a-tat-tat radio patter. Not for the first time, however, Loudon's brand of spiel went beyond anything that could be expected. "On the gridiron of life, champions now are taking the field in a game for all the world to see. Every true follower of football will remember the war-cry of the Golden Eagles of 1941. That Treasure State University team gallantly rallied to the memory of its 'twelfth man,' the teammate whose heart tragically gave out on the practice field, and went on to an undefeated season. Now those Golden Eagle players have heroically committed themselves to victory on a field as large as the world. Every starting player of that unforgettable Treasure State team--now get this, fans--those eleven players all are now in the service of their country. Folks, I have searched the records high and low, and with the natural exception of the military academies of West Point and Annapolis, no college football team has ever before offered up every member in simultaneous service to our country. Count on
it, friends, Hitler and Tojo are in for some rough tackling from these fellows. The roster of this supreme team is quite amazing:

*Moxie Stamper, the slinging quarterback.*

*Jake Eisman, 'the Iceman,' cool head at fullback who always delivered when vital short yardage was needed.*

*Slick Vic Rennie, as fast as a halfback gets.*

*Dexter Franklin, deceptive as a ghost at the other halfback spot.*

*Then the outstanding line, beginning with ends Larry Danzer and Ben Reinking, two of the catchingest receivers this side of Don Hutson."

On down the list. The one surprise to Ben was Dexter Franklin, who always claimed the only blood he intended to be around any time soon was in med school. Dex must have decided not to wait for the draft.

Ben passed the transcription back to the colonel, wishing he could wash Ted Loudon off his hand. “All due respect, sir, I already knew most of that.”

Swallowing hard against the possibility that he was going to throw up, he managed to croak out: “Could you possibly tell me why was I yanked out of pilot training to read a telex?”
"For one thing," the colonel said mildly, "because you know what a telex is. Two summers with the United Press bureau in Helena, am I right? And you know how to meet a deadline is, as well. 'Letter from the Hill' every week for, what, three seasons?" Staring at the man, Ben felt a rush of blood through his head, although he couldn't have told whether it was draining from his face or coloring it up. His football diary had run in only the college newspaper; what was the Pentagon doing reading the Treasure State Nugget? "An upbringing in your father's newspaper office on top of that," the colonel was going on as if he was ordering parts for something he wanted built. "Plus football fame, and academic honors. Quite a pedigree, young fellow." All at once he shifted ground. "Was it a pact? The eleven of you talking it over and deciding to go into the war sooner than later, one for all and all for one, that sort of thing?"

"No, sir." However much else this Pentagon whiz knew, he didn't know Stamper and Danzer. Nor, for that matter, Dex. "Sure, a few of us went to the enlistment office together right after Pearl Harbor. But other than that it was strictly one by one, guys trickling in as they felt they had to, from what I hear."

"Pity." "But that doesn't change the essential story, fortunately."
The colonel sprang it then, the ‘supreme team’ coverage for the duration of the war, that Ben’s background singled him out for. He listened in a daze as the colonel brought it all home to him. “Naturally we will accredit you as a full-fledged correspondent. You’ll be on detached duty to TPWP and there are a few ins and outs that go with that, but you’ll learn the ropes quickly enough.” Then the brief one-sided joust, with Ben heatedly asking whether he had any choice in this and the colonel replying not really. Heart thudding, knowing this would take endless sorting out between the writing chance of a lifetime and the loss of flying, Ben ended up blurting what he had to:

“Sir, begging your pardon, but there’s something about this I think is nuts. Following the team all during the war that way—what if not everybody makes it through?”

A sharp nod from the colonel. “Good, let’s get that contingency out of the way. We’ve had the casualty figures run,” he said as if Ben had asked that as a favor, “all the way back through the Civil War. General Sherman was right, war is hell. But it is also quantifiable.”

Another cigarillo appeared in the manicured hand, another flare of the lighter. The colonel appraised Ben through a puff of smoke before going on.
“You aced your statistics course in college, so you’ll be interested in what our stix
section came up with. An American male of military age had a greater chance of
being killed or maimed in a logging camp than in the front lines of either the Civil
War or World War One. Does that surprise you? It did us, but not unduly. The
size of veterans’ groups from both wars indicates that many, many more soldiers
survived than people generally think, and our figures merely back that up.” He
paused. “I won’t mislead you, lieutenant. The law of averages tells us that at least
one of your teammates, possibly two, in all probability will not last out this war.
But that would occur whether or not we”—he gestured with the cigarillo as if
striking that word—“or rather you, lieutenant, do this.”

No uniform of authority Ben had come up against in the many months since
held a candle to that. Now he looked at at the steaming East Base commander and
told him he was not at liberty to divulge who was behind this kink in the chain of
command, as the general called it. In the same dead-level tone of voice he added:
“General Giddings, since you ask, my next piece is about a teammate of mine
wounded in action. He has one leg left.”
Warily the base commander took another look at Ben. “That’s a shame, I’m sure. What about the article you said you’d do on Eisman?”

“His turn is coming. Will that be all, sir?”

The flight board still was not doing Cass nor him any favors. Chalked slots swarmed with on-time departures and arrivals across the entire vast trellis of routes into and out of East Base, every B-17 and P-39 and all the birds of the air evidently having enjoyed a day of fine weather for flying, with the lonely exception of Squadron WASP 1 still sitting in murderous fog in Seattle. Swearing under his breath, Ben banged out of the Operations building. He hit the communications section next to send off the piece on Vic, remembering to threaten the telex clerk with certain demotion and possible dismemberment if he didn’t keep a civil tongue toward Jones.

Back out in the dusk breeze where the runway yawned empty, he stood there sick with love and worry and finally decided there was nothing to be done but call it a day until further word on Cass’s flight. His body agonized that there was little hope now of seeing her tonight, even if her squadron lifted off before sunset in Seattle; his brain tried to fight down the wave of desire and encourage the fog to
hold so Cass would bunk there for the night instead of flying blind into murk and mountains.

Jake Eisman wasn’t bunked in anywhere, he could count on that. Halfway up the whitewashed walkway to the Officers Club, Ben caught the sound of his penetrating baritone—in their playing days, Jake was restricted to whispers in the huddle lest he be heard the length of the football field—in the mob of song emanating from within; the Club always tuned up drastically when a planeload of pilots returned from the Alaska run. Ben never ceased to marvel at how fertile the war was for songs. He intended to write about this someday just for the havoc that lyrics such as the ones Jake was enwrapped in would create at Tepee Weepy:

“Oh, the Russians are drinking in Fairbanks, While we fly through snow, ice, and shit. When we land they shout out, ‘Thanks, Yanks! Now watch us bomb Hitler, And Himmler, And Fritzie, And Mitzi, While you fly through snow, ice, and shit!’”
Central as a vat in the bibulous bunch ganged around the piano and hoisting another drink at the end of each chorus, Jake jerked his head toward the bar as soon as he spotted Ben. They hadn’t seen each other for a week and the ATC’s largest and possibly most boisterous pilot always came back from the far north with more Alaska tales than Robert Service. Tonight Ben was more than ready to let the conversation flow from that direction. Ordering a beer for himself and another as reenforcement for Jake, he drifted to their usual corner table while the bass-and-baritone crowd around the piano roared through a final chorus like walruses.

Tense as he was about Cass, he didn’t manage to have the best face on things when Jake showed up at the table. Jake plainly had been indulging in beer and song long enough to be justifiably somewhat askew. His dark hair flopped to one side—on him it looked good—and his tie was loosened. His breast pocket nametag was a radical number of degrees off angle; a hand-lettered last name only on everyone else, his as ever notified the world in full: LT. JACOB EISMAN.

“What’s eating you, scribe?” The big man roughed Ben’s shoulder with a mitt of a hand as he went around to a facing chair. “A three-day leave don’t agree with you? Send the next one my way, and you can freeze your ass over the Yukon while I party.”
“Why would they hand me an airplane when they barely trust me with a pencil?” Ben roused himself and got busy deflecting the topic of his leave. “No substitutions allowed anyway, you ought to know that. General Grady himself told me within this very hour you are the pride of the ATC--”

“Only because I slipped him tickets on the fifty-yard line for the Homecoming game.”

“--so there you go, who’ll mush the flying dogsleds north if not you? The serum must reach Nome, Nanook.”

Jake snorted. “Alaska runs on vodka these days, ain’t you heard?”

“War is heck,” said Ben, cracking a smile in spite of himself.

“I’ll clink to that.” Jake tapped Ben’s beer bottle with his own, drained what he had left, and reached for the next bottle. “Been meaning to ask you, Ben friend. If I’m so all-fired popular, when do I get my moment of fame again?”

That particular question had more behind it than Ben wanted to deal with. Juggling the ‘supreme team’ pieces into some kind of monthly sequence was always tricky enough, even without what had happened to Vic and what waited in the file after his. Now this, thrown in. Time to get yourself some radar, Reinking--
he hadn’t walked in here at all expecting this from Jake. He said shortly, “Dex is
next. No cutting in line.”

Jake leaned in, covering the table like a cloud but grinning as he came.

“Where is he, Ben? C’mon. Where’s the dexterous one putting in his war?”

“Goddamnit, Ice, will you lay off that? I still can’t tell you. They’d have
me cleaning latrines from here to eternity if I did.” And you wouldn’t like

knowing.

“That rich sneak,” Jake was saying appreciatively. “He’s in something like
the OSS, isn’t he. Greased his way in there with Archie Roosevelt and the other
blueblood daredevils. The glamorous war, that’d be his. Parachuting into
Krautland in the dark of the moon with a knife between his teeth. That it?”

“Have another beer, Jake.”

With lazy grace Jake signaled to the bar for another round apiece. “Okay,

zipped lips don’t sink ships or whatever the hell the poster is.”

Just then the hubbub in the Club went up several more notches as yet

another flock of pilots came rollicking in. Several of them were shorter guys,

fighter plane jockeys who looked even more compact beside the brawn of the

bomber pilots, and their particular reason for celebration, Ben could overhear, was
that they hadn’t had to bounce through the air to the cold of Alaska, only Alberta.

Edmonton was the first hop for P-39s, with their limited fuel tanks, and Canadian reserve pilots in need of flying time sometimes ferried the planes onward to Fort Nelson and ultimately Fairbanks. These flyboys swarming the bar were home from an easy day’s work before dark. Glazed, Ben stared past them out the Club’s picture window to where the defining lines of evening were making the buttes across Great Falls stand out like oldest earthen fortresses. Sundown would reach Seattle in less than an hour, on top of fog. Consumed with fret about Cass, he tried not to hate the lucky pilots elbowing to the bar.

During this there had been a distinct lack of words from across the table, and he realized Jake had been studying him critically. A different kind of grin came onto Jake now. “Benyamin, you’ve been holding out on me another way. But I found out about it, ho de ho. Can’t fool Yukon Jake.”

Ben’s insides lurched. He and Cass had tried to be as hard to spot as chameleons, how did they stand out all the way to Alaska? “You don’t want to believe everything you--”
Impatiently Jake wiped that away with a paw and came to the point: “I hear you earned a purple one, in your spare time over there in the paradise of the Pacific.”

“Where did you pick that up?”

“Carlo the Friesian, who else.” Jake sat back, folding his firelog arms in satisfaction. “Probably comes as a surprise to All-Conference ends, but tackles can write and fullbacks can read. Letter from Carl the other day says you and him got a New Guinea welcome from the Japs and you came out of it with the wound, the Purple Heart, the commendation, the whole shmear. How come you didn’t tell me about it?”

“It was just a graze.” It was everything beyond that for the infantryman an arm’s length away from him and Friessen. The memory churned his stomach.

“Don’t look at me like that, Jakey. I’d have told you sooner or later.” Maybe.

“It’s not something I’m particularly proud of. Correspondents are supposed to stay out of the way of metal objects flying through the air.”

“That your next piece?” Jake pressed. “After Dex? Hell, I’ll give up my spot to read about it. Carl said it was pretty hairy.”

Ben made a zipper motion across his lips, hoping it would end this.
Jake gave a huge sigh of exasperation. “Then I might as well give you a bad time about something else while I’m at it. I read in the newspaper you went calling on Grady’s Ladies. So tell me, how’s the hunting there?”

Ben hid behind a swig of his beer. Clearing his throat as if the alcohol was the problem, he covered with: “Too many of them are married.”

“That’s a sonofabitching shame, you know that?” Jake let out over the increased noise, the piano gang lustily singing a filthy tribute to Daisy in the grass. Ben squirmed and wished they would work their way to something that did not rhyme with Cass and the rest.

“I mean, can you imagine a marriage like that?” Jake was shaking his head.

“The old lady gets up in the morning, puts on her flying suit and straps on her .45 and goes off to war. Wow.”

“Jake, something like that happens these days more than you might think.” In the Excelsior Hotel some mornings, for instance. “People do what they do.”

“I know you,” Jake bridged right over that, pointing the neck of a bottle at him, “you were too busy scribbling things down to sniff out the needy bachelor girls for us needy bachelors. Myself, I never get a crack at our sisters in arms. I fly out, they fly in, round and round we go.”
Good thing, too. That's all I'd need next after Jones, you linking up with that she-wolf blonde in Cass's flight. "Ships that pass," Ben philosophized hopefully.

"Besides, I don't need any of your hotshot WASPs," Jake stated with startling primness. Then leered goofily. "I've got something of my own going. Tell you about her sometime." Ben was surprised. It wasn't like Jake to be mysterious about any female conquest.

"You made them sound pretty good, you know." This time Jake spoke soberly, and Ben went back on guard. "Like maybe they could handle the Alaska run, Ben buddy?"

"All I said in the piece was some of them, all right, a bunch of them have as much flying time as any of you and if they were handed a map could quite possibly find their way to Fairbanks. But I didn't mean--""

"I'm for it," Jake broke in. "Let the WASPs fly that run and send me after the Germans. Sooner the better."

Ben sat up. "Jake, serious a minute. Bombers over Germany get the guts shot out of them--I've seen them land with holes the size of boxcar doors. You really want in on that?"
“If that’s what it takes, hell yes. I don’t like what Hitler has in mind for me if the little cocksucker wins.”

“Plenty of those bomber pilots end up bailing out over occupied territory,” Ben said slowly. “POW camps are no picnic.” His throat was tight as he tried to find a right way to say it. “They might put you some place worse.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Jake said in the quietest tone he was capable of. “The Nazis are playing for keeps. I need to, too.” The voice took on a calculating timbre. “Those assholes have to single me out from a lot of guys dropping bombs on them, first.”

_Goddamn it, don’t count on that._ Half in despair, Ben stood ready to point out that the law of averages had not been any suit of armor for certain ‘supreme team’ members so far, but Jake knew as much about that as he did, almost. It was always a mistake to see the formidable fullback known as the Iceman as mainly a physical specimen. Jake stood 6’5” in stocking feet but the upper several inches were brain. The chips in his grammar from smelter work were deliberately maintained, Ben understood; on Black Eagle Hill, the melting pot under the stack, someone like him had to make his words register on people high, low, or in between, as needed. Drinking with Jake was treacherous, but in any other human
endeavor Ben would have trusted him with his life. Seven years they had been
friends, since the high school all-star game that put them together on a team for the
first time. Then hundreds of TSU football practices, banter, bull sessions, a long
winning streak of camaraderie. Joshing arguments were nothing new between
them; this had turned into something far beyond that. Ben felt he had to pierce the
matter:

“That’s why you wanted me to hurry up and do the piece on you, isn’t it.
So you could wave it at somebody who might have some influence and say, ‘Hey,
I’m a famous guy, wouldn’t it be great to have me over there bombing the boots off
the Germans?’”

“Couldn’t hurt, could it?” Jake said defiantly. Then all at once he looked
sheepish. “Sorry I asked. Sonofabitching war, I don’t know what gets into a
guy.” He set about working himself toward normal with a boost of beer. “I mean
it, though, about getting over there somehow. Ben? I’m not saying you got any
pull, because if you did, you’d be up, up and away like the rest of us, wouldn’t
you. But if you ever stumble across any, remember your poor deserving teammate,
okay?” The old grin came back. “Who’s gonna look out for me if not you?

What’s that poem”—Jake said it pome—“‘O captain! My captain!’”
Relieved, Ben said in the same vein: "You're looking for pull from someone who took a demotion from civilian life, are you? Good thinking, Ice. Didn't I help you crib your way through the logic course any better than--?"

Jake was holding up a hand for silence. He cocked an ear at the preliminary commotion from the piano. "It's bad luck not to sing this one. Everybody in."

Swinging his beer bottle to the beat, Jake joined in mightily to the swelling roar of music that filled the building:

"Bought the farm, bought the farm!

Crashing the plane leads to harm!

There was blood on the cockpit,

and blood on the ground.

Blood on the cowling,

and blood all around.

Pity the pilot,

all bloody and gore,

For he won't be flying

That airplane no more."
After the last chorus tailed off into drinking, Jake looked across at Ben.

"You’re not singing these days?"

"Frog in my throat."

"You really are off your feed. C’mon, Ben, it’s just a song. Lets off the steam."

"I know what it lets off, for Christ’s sake." He shoved back from the table and popped to his feet. "Just remembered, I need to check something in Ops. A VIP flight I’m supposed to keep tabs on in case there’s any brass worth interviewing. Be right back."

He sprinted to the Operations building, slowing only as he walked into the room where the flight board covered one wall, hoping his heart was not hammering audibly to the night Operations staff. As ever, he whipped out his notebook and stood there jotting random flight information, scanning the entire board like a good working reporter, but the chalked entry midway down instantly had told him what he needed to know: WASP 1 RON.

Since meeting Cass he had never imagined looking forward to a bed without her in it, but this night he did.
Back at the Officers Club, before rejoining Jake he veered to the bar. He told the barman, “Fill the tray.”

The bartender crowded beer bottles onto the round serving tray until there were ten or a dozen, Ben didn’t bother to count. He picked it up and steered toward the table.

Jake peered at the forest of bottles on the tray. “What’s all this?”

“Anesthesia. I have something to tell you about Vic.”