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Joseph Heller's Combat Experiences in *Catch-22*

In the forty-one years since the initial publication of *Catch-22*, Joseph Heller's best-selling 1961 novel about World War II, the book has been a favorite subject for analysis and commentary, and an enormous body of literary criticism on the work has been published. There have been numerous essays on the novel's structure, its debt to other works of literature, its humor and logic, its moral and ethical values, and its religious themes and mythical overtones (Nagel 4). However, Heller's treatment of the war itself has received scant attention by most critics. A few writers have compared *Catch-22* to other war novels, especially the novels of Ernest Hemingway (Nolan 77-81; Aubrey 1-5), and David M. Craig has written two essays for *War, Literature and the Arts* demonstrating how *Catch-22* incorporated some of Heller's own combat experiences (Craig "Revisited," 33-41; Craig "Avignon," 27-54). But the majority of Heller's critics have taken the stance that *Catch-22* has very little to do with World War II and is in fact not a war novel at all (Kiley and McDonald v; Merrill *Joseph Heller*, 11). Heller himself consistently minimized the war's influence on the novel in many of his statements and interviews. For instance, in a 1970 speech in New York City, he told his audience that "*Catch-22* is not really about World War II" (Heller "Translating," 357), and in a 1975 interview he reiterated those sentiments: "As I've said, *Catch-22* wasn't really about World War Two. It was really about American society during the Cold War, during the Korean War, and about the possibility of a Vietnam" (Merrill "Interview," 68).

Thus it is not surprising to find that very few critics have actually studied the characters and plot elements in *Catch-22* that Heller borrowed from his own experiences as an Army Air Force bombardier. In this essay I will demonstrate that Heller's military career played a much greater role in the concept and structure of *Catch-22* than most critics have ever suspected. Many of the characters and incidents in *Catch-22* were in fact drawn directly from Heller's tour of duty, and were simply modified or exaggerated for dramatic effect. Heller's interviews and reminiscences about the novel, as well as secondary sources like the unit histories of Heller's squadron and bomb group, provide a wealth of such examples. In the same speech quoted above, Heller gave a rare confirmation of this influence: "I would say all

the physical details, and almost all of what might be called the realistic details do come out of my own experiences as a bombardier in World War II. The organization of a mission, the targets—most of the missions that are in the book were missions that I did fly on” (“Translating” 356). Heller’s untimely death in 1999 has now silenced his voice, and like so many of our World War II veterans, he is no longer around to tell his stories. However, we still have his novels, essays and interviews, and with these tools I hope to bring some of those stories back to life.

In the introduction to *Catch-22* Heller states, “The island of Pianosa lies in the Mediterranean Sea eight miles south of Elba. It is very small and obviously could not accommodate all of the actions described. Like the setting of this novel, the characters, too, are fictitious” (6). As we shall see, both the setting and the characters of *Catch-22* are less fictitious than Heller led us to believe in 1961. Pianosa is a real island, situated between the larger islands of Corsica and Elba in the Ligurian Sea off the northwest coast of Italy. In the novel, Pianosa is the base for the fictional 256th Bombardment Squadron of the fictional 27th Air Force. The year is 1944, and the 256th Squadron is flying North American B-25 “Mitchell” twin-engined bombers on tactical missions in support of Allied operations in northern Italy and southern France. One of the men attached to this squadron is the novel’s hero, Lieutenant (later Captain) John Yossarian, an “Assyrian-American” bombardier who has been flying combat missions since late 1943; by the time the novel ends in December 1944, he has logged a total of seventy-one missions (Craig 44-5; Burhans 45-7). Heller admitted in later years that the name “Yossarian” was derived from the name of one of his Air Force buddies, Francis Yohannon, but that the character of Yossarian himself was “the incarnation of a wish” (*Now and Then* 175-6). Although there are some minor inconsistencies, the internal chronology of *Catch-22* is detailed and coherent enough that Clinton Burhans Jr. was able to create a timeline of Yossarian’s entire military career, from his enlistment in 1941 until his desertion from his squadron in December 1944 (Burhans 45-7). This timeline bears a remarkable similarity to Heller’s own Air Force career as revealed in various published and unpublished sources.

Joseph Heller was a nineteen-year-old Jewish-American from Brooklyn, New York when he enlisted in the US Army Air Corps in 1942; his three years of military service included a tour of duty as a wing bombardier in the Mediterranean theater of operations. From early May 1944 until December 1944, he was stationed on the island of Corsica where he flew sixty combat missions in B-25 “Mitchell” bombers with the 488th Bombardment Squadron, 340th Bombardment Group, 57th Bombardment Wing, 12th Air Force (*Now and Then* 165-185; Ruderman 16-17; *History of the 57th Bomb Wing*). Like Yossarian’s fictional 27th Air Force, the real 12th

Air Force was engaged in flying tactical support missions over northern Italy and southern France. After Heller completed his required quota of missions, the Air Force rotated him back to the States under the point system in December 1944. "After short service as a public relations officer in San Angelo, Texas, Heller was discharged from the air force as a first lieutenant, with an Air Medal and a Presidential Unit Citation" (Ruderman 16).

While most *Catch-22* readers will remember Captain John Yossarian as a man who is deathly afraid of being killed and who wants out of combat at all costs, it is clear that at the beginning of the war he was as patriotic as anyone else. This patriotism is apparent in a conversation Yossarian has with Major Danby, the group operations officer, near the end of the novel:

"I mean it, Yossarian. This is not World War One. You must never forget that we're at war with aggressors who would not let either of us live if they won."

"I know that," Yossarian replied tersely, with a sudden surge of scowling annoyance. "Christ, Danby, I earned that medal I got, no matter what their reasons were for giving it to me. I've flown seventy goddamn combat missions. Don't talk to me about fighting to save my country. I've been fighting all along to save my country. Now I'm going to fight a little to save myself. The country's not in danger any more, but I am." (455)

In his 1975 interview, Heller revealed his own feelings at the beginning of the war. "I actually *hoped* I would get into combat," he related. "I was just 19 and there were a great many movies being made about the war; it all seemed so dramatic and heroic....I saw it as a war of necessity. Everybody did....Pearl Harbor united this country in a strong and wholesome and healthy way" (Merrill "Interview," 60). Later in the same interview, he reaffirmed his belief that World War II was a necessary war. "It offended some people, during the Vietnam war, that I had not written a truly pacifist book," he told Merrill. "But I am not a true pacifist. World War Two was necessary at least to the extent that we were fighting for the survival of millions of people" (64). Heller also made it clear that Yossarian's views about the war were not his own: "Yossarian's emotions, Yossarian's reaction to the war in the squadron were not those I experienced when I was overseas" (Heller "Translating," 357).

During the course of the novel, two important catalysts are responsible for changing Yossarian's attitude towards flying combat. The first is the continually increasing number of missions that the men are required to fly. When Yossarian first arrives in Europe, the airmen are required to complete

only twenty-five missions before being rotated home. In order to impress his superiors, the fanatical group commander, Colonel Cathcart, raises the number of missions from twenty-five to thirty, and he continues to increase the number in increments of five, until by the end of the novel the men are required to fly eighty missions before they can go home (Burhans 45-7; *Catch-22* 383-4). Yossarian becomes increasingly frustrated and despondent because, each time he gets close to his maximum, Cathcart raises the number again, so his chances of survival become smaller and smaller. When Yossarian reaches fifty-one missions, Cathcart raises the number to fifty-five, and Yossarian decides to take a stand and absolutely refuse to fly any more. He visits the group medical officer, Doc Daneeka, hoping to be grounded for medical reasons. "Why don't you at least finish the fifty-five before you take a stand?" Doc Daneeka advises. "With all your bitching, you've never finished a tour of duty even once." "How the hell can I?" Yossarian asks. "The colonel keeps raising them every time I get close" (180).

The number of missions required of the aircrews in *Catch-22* is an accurate reflection of the reality of the war in southern Europe. In northern Europe, the crews of the 8th Air Force's B-17 and B-24 heavy strategic bombers flew deep into Germany and were often in the air for eight to ten hours at a time. Until long-range escort fighters like the P-51 "Mustang" became available late in the war, they suffered terrible losses from German fighters and antiaircraft fire. As a consequence, for most of the war the B-17 and B-24 crews were required to fly only twenty-five missions before being rotated home (Freeman 29-32). In comparison, the shorter range B-25s in southern Europe flew missions lasting for only a few hours, and they often flew several missions per day (*Now and Then* 185-6). As Heller noted in his autobiography, his quota was raised several times during his own tour. When he arrived in Corsica in early 1944, the number of missions for his group was up to fifty, and during his tour it went from fifty to fifty-five, and then to sixty. By the time he was taken off combat status, the number of required missions had reached seventy (185).

By late 1944 the German Air Force, or Luftwaffe, was no longer a threat over southern Europe, and German fighters no longer blasted American bombers out of the skies by the dozens as they had done earlier in the war. However, antiaircraft fire, or "flak" as it was popularly called, was still a danger; and one target where flak was a particular problem was Avignon in southern France. It is over Avignon that Yossarian experiences the other catalytic moment in his tour of duty, an episode that absolutely terrifies him and that makes him realize he might not survive the war after all (Craig 28-9). This mission over Avignon is referred to in ever increasing detail throughout the novel, as Heller gradually reveals more and more about the experience until, near the end of the novel, we finally come to understand

just what it is that drives Yossarian to feel the way he does.

Yossarian's pilot on the Avignon mission is Lieutenant Huple. Although Huple is a good pilot, he is also a fifteen-year-old kid who has enlisted illegally—a fact that does not exactly inspire confidence among his fellow airmen. The copilot is Yossarian's friend Dobbs, and in the rear of the plane is a young radio operator/turret gunner named Snowden. Early in the novel Heller tells us that "Snowden had been killed over Avignon when Dobbs went crazy in mid-air and seized the controls away from Huple" (36). Later, we learn more about this mission "when Dobbs went crazy in mid-air and began weeping pathetically for help":

"Help him, help him," Dobbs sobbed. "Help him, help him."

"Help who? Help who?" called back Yossarian, once he had plugged his headset back into the intercom system, after it had been jerked out when Dobbs wrested the controls away from Huple and hurled them all down suddenly into the deafening, paralyzing, horrifying dive which had plastered Yossarian helplessly to the ceiling of the plane by the top of his head and from which Huple had rescued them just in time by seizing the controls back from Dobbs and leveling the ship out almost as suddenly right back in the middle of the buffeting layer of cacophonous flak from which they had escaped successfully only a moment before. *Oh, God! Oh, God, oh God*, Yossarian had been pleading wordlessly as he dangled from the ceiling on the nose of the ship by the top of his head, unable to move.

"The bombardier, the bombardier," Dobbs answered in a cry when Yossarian spoke. "He doesn't answer, he doesn't answer. Help the bombardier, help the bombardier."

"I'm the bombardier," Yossarian cried back at him. "I'm the bombardier. I'm all right. I'm all right."

"Then help him, help him," Dobbs begged. "Help him, help him." (51-2)

About midway through the novel, Heller gives us some more details, telling us that the Avignon mission "was the mission on which Yossarian lost his nerve" (230). After several subsequent references to "Snowden's secret," which serve to build up the reader's suspense and anticipation, Heller finally gives us the rest of the story, and we find out the true nature of this "secret." After Huple regains control of the aircraft, Yossarian crawls to the back of the plane to check on the wounded gunner. Snowden is lying

in the back of the aircraft with a large gash in one of his thighs, caused by a piece of flak that tore through the side of the plane and cut into his leg. Behind him, the tail gunner is on the floor in a “dead faint,” having passed out from the shock of seeing Snowden’s wound. Yossarian treats the wound as best he can with a first-aid kit and tries to reassure the wounded gunner, who keeps complaining, “I’m cold, I’m cold.” When Yossarian opens up Snowden’s flak suit to look for another wound, Snowden’s “secret” becomes apparent: a second piece of flak has torn into Snowden’s body from the other side, and as Yossarian unzips his suit, Snowden’s intestines spill out onto the floor of the aircraft in a “soggy pile” (449-50).

As Heller was to reveal in later interviews and his autobiography, this incident was a synthesis of several of his own combat experiences. Heller actually flew two missions to Avignon to bomb railroad bridges over the Rhône River in support of the Allied invasion of southern France, and both missions made a lasting impression on him. His initial mission to Avignon occurred on 8 August 1944, and it was on this mission that he first saw one of his comrades shot down by flak (Heller “Chronology,” 1; Heller “*Catch-22 Revisited*,” 56; Craig 29). “I was in the leading flight,” Heller recalled, “and when I looked back to see how the others were doing, I saw one plane pulling up above and away from the others, a wing on fire beneath a tremendous, soaring plume of orange flame. I saw a parachute billow open, then another, then one more before the plane began spiraling downward, and that was all.” Two men, the pilot and copilot, did not escape from the aircraft, and both were friends of Heller’s (*Now and Then* 181-2).

But it was Heller’s second mission over Avignon, on 15 August 1944, that provided most of the details for the Snowden incident in *Catch-22*. For both Yossarian and Heller, it was their thirty-seventh mission (Craig 29). As the B-25s approached the target, the German antiaircraft fire was once again accurate and deadly. As his squadron began its bomb run, a B-25 in another squadron was hit by flak and one of its wings broke off. The plane nosed over and plunged to earth, and none of the crew escaped. Two other planes also went down during the mission, again with no survivors. Heller’s squadron dropped their bombs and then quickly banked up and away from the target (*Now and Then* 179; “*Revisited*” 330). He describes what happened next in *Now and Then*:

And then the bottom of the plane just seemed to drop out: we were falling, and I found myself pinned helplessly to the top of the bombardier’s compartment, with my flak helmet squeezed against the ceiling. What I did not know (it was reconstructed for me later) was that one of the two men at the controls, the copilot, gripped by the sudden fear that

our plane was about to stall, seized the controls to push them forward and plunged us into a sharp descent, a dive, that brought us back down into the level of the flak.

I had no power to move, not even a finger. And I believed with all my heart and quaking soul that my life was ending and that we were going down, like the plane on fire I had witnessed plummeting only a few minutes before. I had no time for anything but terror. And then just as suddenly—I think I would have screamed had I been able to—we leveled out and began to climb away again from the flak bursts, and now I was flattened against the floor, trying frantically to grasp something to hold on to when there was nothing. And in another few seconds we were clear and edging back into formation with the rest of the planes. But as I regained my balance and my ability to move, I heard in the ears of my headphones the most unnatural and sinister of sounds: silence, dead silence. And I was petrified again. Then I recognized, dangling loosely before me, the jack to my headset. It had been torn free from the outlet. When I plugged myself back in, a shrill bedlam of voices was clamoring in my ears, with a wail over all the rest repeating on the intercom that the bombardier wasn't answering. "The bombardier doesn't answer!" "I'm the bombardier," I broke in immediately. "And I'm all right." "Then go back and help him, help the gunner. He's hurt." (179-80)

Heller made his way to the rear of the airplane and found the radio gunner lying on the floor with a large oval wound in his thigh; a piece of flak had punched through the side of the plane and torn open the gunner's leg, just as recounted in *Catch-22*. Fighting down his own nausea at the sight of the wound, Heller poured sulfa powder into the cut, bandaged it and gave the gunner a shot of morphine. When the young man began to complain of feeling cold, Heller reassured him that they would be home soon and that he would be all right. Once the plane landed, the wounded gunner was taken to the base hospital and eventually made a full recovery. It was apparently this action that netted Heller his Air Medal (177-8, 180-1). Heller took the rest of the Snowden story, the part about the horrible intestinal wound, from an incident that occurred on an earlier mission over Ferrara, Italy, on 16 July 1944. A radio gunner in Heller's squadron, Sergeant Vandermeulen, had his midsection sliced open by a burst of flak and died in the back of his aircraft, moaning that he was cold ("Chronology" 1; *Now and Then* 177). "For my episodes of Snowden in the novel," Heller stated,

“I fused the knowledge of that tragedy with the panicked copilot and the thigh wound to the top turret gunner in my own plane on our second mission to Avignon” (*Now and Then* 177). After this mission, Heller came away with a new appreciation of the dangers of combat:

I might have seemed a hero and been treated as something of a small hero for a short while, but I didn't feel like one. They were trying to kill me, and I wanted to go home. That they were trying to kill all of us each time we went up was no consolation. They were trying to kill *me*.

I was frightened on every mission after that one, even the certified milk runs. It could have been about then that I began crossing my fingers each time we took off and saying in silence a little prayer. It was my sneaky ritual. (181)

This dread of combat was to later show up as a trademark characteristic of Heller's *Catch-22* alter ego, Yossarian. Once he completed his required sixty missions, Heller had no interest in volunteering for any more (*Now and Then* 175). He chose to return home by ship, not airplane, and for many years afterwards he refused to ride in any airplanes at all—he had grown terrified of flying (171-2). Heller's attitude was not unique among air combat veterans. About ten years ago, I had a conversation with a former World War II Air Force pilot at an air show in Charlotte, NC. I asked the old veteran if he had maintained his pilot status after the war, and he said “No.” When I asked him why, he replied, “I felt like I had used up all my luck during the war, and I didn't want to push it any further.”

Many of Heller's other combat experiences found their way into *Catch-22*, including a mission to bomb an Italian ship that is recounted almost identically in both his novel and his autobiography. As Heller tells the story in *Catch-22*:

Intelligence had reported that a disabled Italian cruiser in drydock at La Spezia would be towed by the Germans that same morning to a channel at the entrance of the harbor and scuttled there to deprive the Allied armies of deep-water port facilities when they captured the city. For once, a military intelligence report proved accurate. The long vessel was halfway across the harbor when they [Yossarian's bomb group] flew in from the west, and they broke it apart with direct hits from every flight that filled them all with waves of enormously satisfying group pride until they found themselves engulfed in great barrages of flak that rose from

guns in every bend of the huge horseshoe of mountainous land below. (*Catch-22* 384-5)

In the novel, Yossarian's friends Dobbs and Nately are both killed on the mission to La Spezia. Heller's description of this mission in his autobiography is virtually identical to the account in *Catch-22*, with one important exception: although there was heavy flak, none of his friends were killed. He tells us that this mission, one of the last he flew, filled him with both "military and civilian pride, the civilian pride bred of my sole assertion of leadership and authority as an officer" (183). The La Spezia mission was flown on 23 September 1944 to destroy the Italian cruiser *Taranto*, and the 340th Bomb Group won its second Presidential Distinguished Unit Citation for this mission, a citation in which Heller shared ("Chronology" 2; *History of the 340th Bomb Group*). As he relates in *Now and Then*:

The assignment that morning was a hurried one. The destination was the large Italian seaport of La Spezia. The target was an Italian cruiser reportedly being towed out into a deep channel of the harbor by the Germans, to be scuttled there as an obstacle to approaching Allied ground forces pressing steadily north....When I looked behind us after we had flown through the flak at La Spezia and turned off, I was greatly satisfied with myself and all that I saw, and with all the others as well. We were unharmed; the turbulent oceans of dozens and dozens of smutty black clouds from the countless flak bursts were diffused all over the sky at different heights. The other flights were coming through without apparent damage. And down below I could watch the bombs from one cascade after another exploding directly on the ship that was our target. (183-5)

One of the most memorable episodes in *Catch-22* is the incident where Milo Minderbinder, a pilot in Yossarian's squadron, bombs his own airbase at night. After being appointed the base mess officer, Milo forms an international business syndicate that includes as members not only the Allied nations but the German government as well. He signs a contract with the German military to bomb and strafe his own men in order to save his syndicate from bankruptcy (264-6). It is no coincidence that Alesan Airfield on Corsica, the base for Heller's own 340th Bomb Group, was bombed and strafed by the Luftwaffe in the early morning hours of 13 May 1944. Although Heller's base was not bombed by friendly aircraft as in the novel, it is interesting to note that the first enemy plane over the field was actual-

ly a Bristol “Beaufighter,” a twin-engined British night fighter operated by both Great Britain and the United States in the Mediterranean Theater. The 340th Bomb Group staff officers speculated that the Beaufighter had been captured by the Germans and put to use as a “pathfinder” aircraft, whose job it was to drop lighted flares over the target before the main force came in for the attack. The Germans apparently left the British markings on the Beaufighter intact in order to fool the Americans into mistaking it for a friendly plane. The German aircraft used in the raid were identified as twin-engined Junkers JU-88 medium bombers, similar in function to the American B-25s, and Focke-Wulf FW-190 fighter planes. In addition, there were unconfirmed reports of Dornier DO-217 and Heinkel HE-111 medium bombers and Messerschmitt ME-109 fighters (*History of the 340th*). Twenty-two men in Heller’s group were killed, and two hundred and nineteen were wounded; only seven aircraft were airworthy the next day (“Chronology” 1). The description of the attack on the 340th Group’s online history bears a close similarity to Heller’s description of Milo’s raid in *Catch-22*. Although I am not aware of any instances where Heller alluded to this similarity in print, the conclusion seems inescapable that Heller has once again has taken an episode from his own combat background and, with some important changes for dramatic effect, incorporated it into his novel.

Heller was also quite capable of making use of his Air Force memories to describe the day-to-day operations of a B-25 bomber group. Take, for instance, this colorful description of the bombers warming up and taking off on a mission, a description obviously written by a man who has “been there and done that” many times:

Engines rolled over disgruntledly on lollipop-shaped hardstands, resisting first, then idling smoothly awhile, and then the planes lumbered around and nosed forward lamely over the pebbled ground like sightless, stupid crippled things until they taxied into the line at the foot of the landing strip and took off swiftly, one behind the other, in a zooming, rising roar, banking slowly into formation over mottled treetops, and circling the field at even speed until all the flights of six had been formed and then setting course over cerulean water on the first leg of the journey to the target in northern Italy or France. The planes gained altitude steadily and were above nine thousand feet by the time they crossed into enemy territory. One of the surprising things always was the sense of calm and utter silence, broken only by the test rounds fired from the machine guns, by an occasional toneless, terse remark over the intercom, and, at last,

by the sobering pronouncement of the bombardier in each plane that they were at the I.P. [initial point] and about to turn toward the target. There was always sunshine, always a tiny sticking in the throat from the rarified air. (*Catch-22* 49)

One memorable episode that was *not* incorporated into *Catch-22* occurred on 22 March 1944, when Mt. Vesuvius erupted and destroyed most of the 340th Bomb Group's seventy-nine aircraft. The group's base was located on the Italian mainland at the time, and the eruption of Vesuvius forced the group to move, first to Paestum for three weeks and then to Corsica on 16 April ("Chronology" 1). It seems odd that Heller did not use this incident in his novel—such an occurrence could only have served to convince the paranoid Yossarian that not only were the Germans and his superiors out to kill him, but God and Nature as well.

A study of Heller's writings and interviews reveals that Yossarian was not the only *Catch-22* character based on Heller's wartime acquaintances, in spite of some of his statements to the contrary. For example, in his 1975 *Playboy* interview Heller told Sam Merrill that the only character he took from real life was a pilot named "Hungry Joe" (Merrill 61). In *Catch-22* Hungry Joe has terrible nightmares whenever he is due to be shipped home and tries to pass himself off as a *Life* photographer so he can take revealing pictures of USO girls (52-6). Heller revealed that Hungry Joe was based on a good friend of his named Joe Chrenko, who actually did try to pass himself off once as a *Life* photographer so he could photograph girls. Joe Chrenko also lived in the same tent as Francis Yohannon, Heller's eponymous inspiration for Yossarian. Yohannon owned a pet cocker spaniel he bought in Rome, which became Huple's cat in the novel "to protect its identity" (*Now and Then* 176; Merrill 61).

As for the other characters, Heller told Merrill, "They're not based on anyone I knew in the war. They're products of an imagination that drew on American life in the postwar period" (Merrill 61). But later in the same interview Heller contradicted this statement when he described the Italian prostitute Luciana, whom Yossarian patronizes in the novel. As Heller related to Merrill:

His encounter with Luciana, the Roman whore, corresponds exactly with an experience I had. He sleeps with her, she refuses money and suggests that he keep her address on a slip of paper. When he agrees, she sneers, "Why? So you can tear it up?" He says of course he won't and tears it up the minute she's gone—then regrets it bitterly. That's just what happened to me in Rome. (64)

In *Now and Then*, Heller gives additional examples of *Catch-22* characters who were based on his fellow airmen. One of these is the squadron executive officer, Major ---- de Coverly. The men of Yossarian's squadron are able to enjoy themselves immensely while on furlough in Italy thanks to Major ---- de Coverly, whose most important duty apparently involves renting apartments for his men to use while on leave:

Each time the fall of a city like Naples, Rome or Florence seemed imminent, Major ---- de Coverly would pack his musette bag, commandeer an airplane and a pilot, and have himself flown away, accomplishing all this without uttering a word....A day or two after the city fell, he would be back with leases on two large and luxurious apartments there, one for the officers and one for the enlisted men, both already staffed with competent, jolly cooks and maids. (*Catch-22* 135)

As it turns out, Major ---- de Coverly was closely patterned after Heller's own squadron exec, Major Cover, who performed an identical role for his men:

The first American soldiers were in Rome on the morning of June 4 [1944], and close on their heels, perhaps even beating them into the city, sped our congenial executive officer, Major Cover, to rent two apartments there for use by the officers and enlisted men in our squadron...with cooks and maids, and with female friends of the cooks and maids who liked to hang out there.... (*Now and Then* 176)

One of the realities of the air war over Europe was the attrition of high ranking officers, which even included group commanders and wing commanders. In *Catch-22*, Yossarian's original group commander, Colonel Nevers, is killed on a mission over Arezzo and is replaced by Colonel Cathcart, who becomes notorious for steadily increasing the number of missions his men are required to fly (*Catch-22* 54). Not surprisingly, the commander of Joseph Heller's own 340th Bomb Group, Colonel Charles D. Jones, was shot down by the Germans on 10 March 1944 while on a bombing mission over the Littorio marshalling yards in Rome. Jones had only been the group's commander for three months. One of the group's earlier commanders, Colonel William C. Mills, was shot down and killed on a mission over Algeria in May 1943. On 16 March, Jones was replaced by Colonel

Willis F. Chapman, who was Heller's group commander throughout his tour ("Chronology" 1; *History of the 340th*). Like Cathcart, Chapman also increased the number of missions his men were required to fly, but in accordance with Air Force policy, not his own whims.

One of the most memorable characters in *Catch-22* is Yossarian's tent mate Lieutenant Orr, a bashful and optimistic young pilot who has a penchant for crash-landing his airplanes and a mechanical aptitude that drives Yossarian crazy. During the course of the novel, Orr assembles a home-made gasoline stove for the tent they share, and he builds an ornate fireplace complete with a mantelpiece. "He had constructed andirons for the fireplace out of excess bomb parts and had filled them with stout silver logs, and he had framed with stained wood the photographs of girls with big breasts he had torn out of cheesecake magazines and hung over the mantelpiece" (*Catch-22* 322). As Heller admitted in his autobiography, the character of Orr was based on a pilot named Edward Ritter who shared Heller's tent. Just like Orr, Ritter was a "tireless handyman," building the fireplace in their tent, assembling their gasoline stove, and creating a washstand out of a bomb rack and a flak helmet. Just like Orr, Ritter also had a penchant for ditching in the water and crash-landing safely on land without losing a single crewman:

Remarkably, through all his unlucky series of mishaps the pilot Ritter remained imperviously phlegmatic, demonstrating no symptoms of fear or growing nervousness, even blushing with a chuckle and a smile whenever I gaggled around him as a jinx, and it was on these qualities of his, his patient genius for building and fixing things and these recurring close calls in aerial combat, only on these, that I fashioned the character of Orr in *Catch-22*. (*Now and Then* 175)

The analogy is complete even down to the pictures of the girls on the mantelpiece, who are documented graphically in a photograph of Heller's tent interior reproduced on the dust jacket and inside covers of *Now and Then*. In this photo, which was used for the squadron's annual Christmas card in 1944, three pinup photographs of female models are clearly seen behind a uniformed Heller, and the pictures are hanging over the mantelpiece that Ritter constructed from an old railroad tie.

Throughout *Catch-22*, Yossarian is plagued by the presence of a "dead man in his tent." This dead man is a pilot named Mudd, who reports for duty in Yossarian's squadron, places his gear in Yossarian's tent, and is then sent on a mission without officially checking in with squadron headquarters. When Mudd's plane is blown up by flak on this same mission, his pres-

ence in the squadron cannot be officially confirmed; thus his gear remains in Yossarian's tent as a haunting reminder throughout most of the novel (*Catch-22* 111-2). Like Yossarian, Heller also had a vacant cot in his own tent until Ritter showed up to fill it. The cot had previously belonged to a bombardier from Oklahoma named Pinkard, who was shot down and killed on a mission over Ferrara (*Now and Then* 177).

Toward the end of the novel, Yossarian's squadron receives some replacement airmen, several of whom are billeted in Yossarian's now almost vacant tent. "The moment he saw them, Yossarian knew they were impossible. They were frisky, eager and exuberant, and they had all been friends in the States. They were plainly unthinkable. They were noisy, overconfident, emptyheaded kids of twenty-one....They reminded him of Donald Duck's nephews" (*Catch-22* 356-7). Similarly, at the end of his tour, as he was awaiting orders to return home, Heller received as roommates two "chaste beginners," young replacement pilots "not long past twenty" (*Now and Then* 169, 172-3). As Heller noted, there was a "huge divide" between him and the new replacements. He was through with his missions and was going home, and the replacements were just getting started. Heller had completed sixty missions, and the number of required missions for combat airmen in his bomb group had just been raised to seventy (185). But one of Heller's new roommates had brought with him a bonus that the dour Yossarian would not have appreciated: a typewriter (169). While his roommates were away flying combat missions, Heller was able to spend time alone with the typewriter, reviving a penchant for writing that he had pursued before the war and was anxious to renew (185). This desire to write would ultimately result in a best-selling novel about World War II called *Catch-22* and a long and distinguished career as a writer of fiction, a career that sadly ended only a year after the publication of his autobiography *Now and Then*.

In an even stranger quirk of fate, Heller's decision to incorporate his war experiences into a novel would ultimately guarantee that a large number of authentic World War II bombers would be saved from the scrap heap and restored to flying status, an occurrence that Heller certainly could not have anticipated when he first wrote *Catch-22*. In 1968, Paramount Pictures and director Mike Nichols began filming a movie version of *Catch-22* that was released to theaters in 1970. To lend authenticity to the movie, Nichols and Tallamantz Aviation of California assembled a fleet of eighteen vintage B-25 bombers for the aerial combat sequences. Over 1500 hours of flying time went into the production of the film, of which less than ten minutes actually appeared in the movie (Thompson 19-22). During the production of this movie, Nichol's B-25 group constituted the twelfth-largest air force in the world (Merrill 60). By producing *Catch-22* for the silver screen,

Paramount rescued these veteran aircraft from oblivion and guaranteed their survival into the twenty-first century. Most of these B-25s have been meticulously restored to their original military condition and are regular attractions on the air show circuit today. Their continued existence helps to keep alive the memory of Joseph Heller and the thousands of his comrades who fought and died in the aerial battles of World War II.

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