

FORTY MISSIONS AND HOME

*One Man's "Simple" Equation
for Surviving World War II*

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INTRODUCTION

shrap·nəl¹
noun

- 1 Military
- 2 a hollow projectile containing bullets or the like and a bursting charge, designed to explode before reaching the target and to set free a shower of missiles.
- 3 such projectiles collectively.

¹ Shell fragments [Origin: 1800–10; named after Henry Shrapnel (1761–1842), English army officer, its inventor] ¹

It was 2002, and Maurice “Vic” Duvic was sitting at the dining room table of his Jackson, Mississippi, home, rummaging through a round, brightly colored cookie tin. At one time this tin likely held Christmas cookies, but it had long since become a storage box for things that no longer had a purpose, yet held too much meaning to be thrown away.

His weathered hand retrieved the 60-plus-year-old piece of metal. Shrapnel—the stuff that ripped through airplanes and into the bodies of the young men as they flew the planes and dropped the bombs that would ultimately help defeat a monster.

It was rusted with age but no less intimidating. Time had not dulled the sharp edges. The small piece was very heavy for its size, and it had ridges on the end—these held the projectile in the casing until it was fired. The German 88-millimeter

shells were approximately three and a half inches in diameter, fired from guns on the ground, in the hope of downing Allied planes. After the shells were fired, the projectiles were designed to explode at a certain altitude, sending fragments of metal ripping through anything in their path.

Fortunately, the piece he held that day had lodged in the bottom of the cockpit of a plane he'd been flying, possibly deflected by a bit of armor plate designed to protect the pilot. He couldn't recall that their training had included anything about shrapnel, though they knew about anti-aircraft fire and were trained to avoid it whenever possible. No one really talked about the times it wasn't possible.

Though once steady and sure, his hands would shake now, an unfortunate and annoying side effect of living a long life. But he was still tall and lean, and it was not hard to find him in the fading photographs, wearing khakis and a leather flight jacket, standing with his buddies in front of B-26 bombers with names like *Ready Teddy*, *Toni*, and *The Coughin' Coffin*. They were young and a little cocky, and they needed to be, because they had been called to take a hand in literally saving the world.

As the generations and decades pass and new conflicts arise, it's easy to forget the uncertainty and fear that engulfed the world then. It's easy to believe their success was always guaranteed, while today's threats are surely much more serious. But any true study of war will tell you that is not the case.

The enemies will change and the weapons will become more sophisticated and powerful, but some things will always remain. Wars will be fought and the young and innocent will die. And those who are left will have to believe it was worth it.

A LOW NUMBER

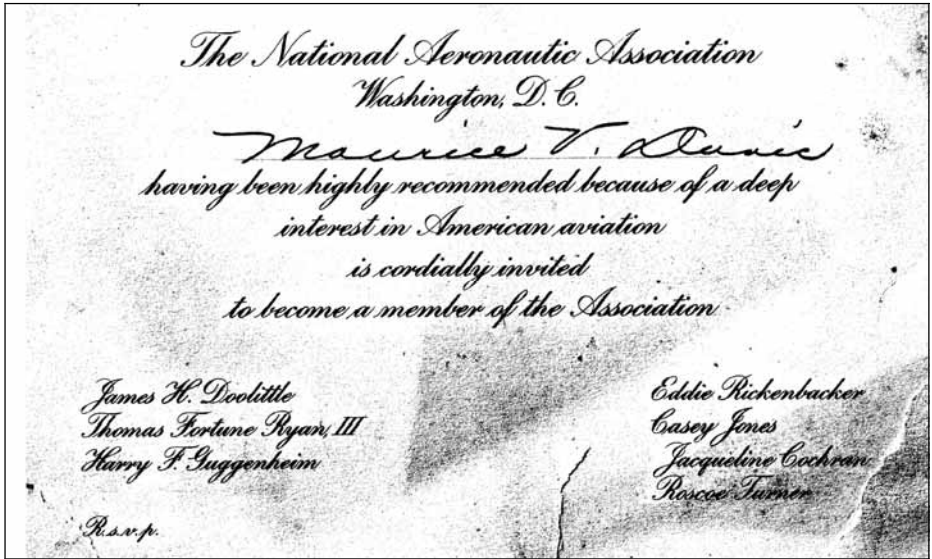
*“World War II was the single deadliest conflict the world has ever seen, causing many tens of millions of deaths.”*²

Only six years separate the beginning and the end of my career as a World War II pilot. But it seemed like six lifetimes.

I’m Maurice Duvic, but I have always gone by “Vic.” I was about 20 years old when I started Civilian Pilot Training, CPT, a program offered by the U.S. government to train young men and women to fly airplanes. It was never stated that the purpose of the program was to train pilots for combat, but it was 1939, and the war in Europe was well underway. It seemed likely the United States would become involved, so the government started this program for those interested in flying. If they happened to be young men of draft age who could be of service later, that was all the better.

And that is how I came to be a student in CPT school, taking night classes in downtown New Orleans. Most of the students had full-time day jobs, so ground-school classes were held at night. The weekly ground-school classes covered navigation, meteorology, engines, and theory of flight. Flight training was held in the late afternoon or early evening at a civilian field in a New Orleans suburb. There were about 12 guys and one woman enrolled. While many of the guys were there in the hope of becoming pilots, should we be drafted, I found out years later that the young lady became one of the Women Air Force Service Pilots, or WASP. After 40 or so hours in flight training, I was able to qualify for a private pilot’s license,

which, as I predicted, came in quite useful almost immediately. I received an invitation to join The National Aeronautic Association, which had among its members several prominent aviators of the day, including James Doolittle, a war hero under whom I would eventually serve during the war.



While aviation was still in its infancy, it played an important role in the First World War, and it was expected to play a large role in what many of us feared would be the second worldwide conflict. In 1940 President Franklin Roosevelt signed the Selective Training and Service Act, creating the country's first peacetime draft. Once this went into effect, I went to the local draft office and signed up for the selective service. I knew I would serve sooner than later when I received my "lottery" number and it was low. These numbers determined when we would be called to active duty. In July 1941 I became one of the more than 10 million men and women who would eventually serve in World War II, either by volunteering or being drafted into service.

Of those millions, just under 1 percent died in action, while thousands more died from other causes, and almost 2 percent were wounded. As a whole, we served an average of 33 months, with almost half of that overseas in many cases. My service was 54 months, with 10 months overseas.

The First World War, or the Great War, as I had always heard it called, ended in 1918, five months before I entered the world as the third child of Francis J. Duvic, Sr., and Marguerite “Rita” Connors Duvic. My father was 30 years old and married with two small children in 1917, when the United States became involved in the Great War, so he did not have to go. Still, I had studied the World War in school and knew people who served. I heard the horror stories of trench warfare, extreme frostbite, gangrene, and the other agonies of war. And then, just 20 years later, there were troubling things going on again in Europe. As I look back, I find it amazing that so much of my life was consumed by war. The First World War was all around me as a child—from the lessons in my history books at school to the young veterans I’d see who still bore the scars.

Then, as I entered my 20s, it all became reality for me. I was probably more aware of the problems brewing than most, young or old, because of my job with the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, a branch of the U.S. Department of Justice. It’s not that, as a 20-year-old clerk stenographer, I had any inside information. I spent every day, however, working with immigrants, tracking down their names on ships’ manifests to prove they entered the country legally so they could be naturalized. Thousands of immigrants who had come to the country around the turn of the 20th century were suddenly interested in becoming naturalized citizens. Many still had family in their native countries, so I’m sure they were very aware of the activities in Ger-

many and Italy, and they felt they needed to secure their place in this country. It sent a subtle but troubling message that was not at all lost on me.

I was also part of the board of inquiry for the Immigration and Naturalization Service, which investigated immigrants' requests for citizenship. As a stenographer, it was my job to record the hearings, as well as serve as a voting member. Many hearings involved members of Jewish families who had fled Europe.

One purpose of the citizenship hearing was to verify that he or she was not likely to become a "public charge." It was common for German-Jewish people to immigrate to a South American country, often Brazil, and then apply to the U.S. Consulate there for a temporary visa to visit the U.S. Once in this country, they would apply for permanent residency; hence, the hearing. I remember there was an organization called the New Orleans Jewish Aid Society (or something similar) that always had \$10,000 as a guarantee of "not becoming a public charge." I suspect the same \$10,000 might have been used more than once. I don't recall any case where an applicant was not approved.

Americans didn't have a full understanding of what was happening to the Jews in Germany—that wouldn't come out until the end of the war—but there were rumors, backed up by an occasional story in the newspapers. The stories and rumors seemed too horrible to be believed, but they were persistent enough to make one feel they had some merit. I don't recall the citizenship hearings focusing on the persecution of the Jews in Germany, probably because the law admitting people to the country due to persecution had not yet been enacted. But the sheer numbers fleeing Europe made it clear something was wrong.

The exodus increased at the close of the 1930s, as Germany continued its march across Europe. By 1940 Adolph

Hitler, commander of Germany's Third Reich, had invaded France, Belgium, Denmark, and Norway but was held out of Britain. That year, Italy invaded Greece and joined the war against England and France.

Even as all this was going on, there was a good bit of anti-war sentiment in the U.S. At least, that was what I observed in New Orleans. Looking back, I believe that might have been because of the large number of immigrants and first-generation Americans who were torn between two countries they loved. I remember there was a German club in New Orleans that seemed to promote an anti-war agenda. Though I don't recall any types of demonstrations, they made themselves known.

So, for all these reasons, I was very aware of the issues in Europe, especially for someone my age. Frankly, prior to the draft, I'm sure most 20-year-olds weren't interested. They're too interested in other things at that age.

As for my other interests, they were women and flying—not always in that order. When I wasn't working, I spent my days with friends in one of the most colorful cities in the world, my hometown, New Orleans. We often visited City Park and other places in the city that are still popular destinations today. It was a busy place then, and I marvel at how it has become even more so over the decades since I lived there.

After earning my private license, I immediately applied to the Flying Cadets of the Army Air Corps. (There was no separate air force at that time. It was a division of the U.S. Army and would remain so until September 18, 1947, when it became the U.S. Air Force.) While awaiting a physical exam for the Cadets, I was drafted on July 9, 1941, and, fortunately, assigned to the Air Corps 68th Squadron of the 44th Bomb Group (Heavy). After basic training, I ended up at MacDill Field, an air base in Tampa, Florida.



July 1941 – Selective Servicemen of the 68th Bomb Squadron, at Macdill Field in Tampa, Florida. I am the tallest one on the back row, close to the middle.

Though I had been assigned to the Air Corps, it was as an enlisted man rather than a cadet, so I continued my quest to get into the Cadets after being drafted. This was the only route to becoming an army pilot, which I very much wanted to be.

As I was preoccupied with my place in an army that was not yet at war, things took a very serious turn on a Sunday in December 1941. That was the day the journey began.

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It was not unusual for me to be running a little late for Sunday morning Mass, and that Sunday was no different. Half the time, Mass started late, so that worked in my favor. Afterwards, I headed to the enlisted men's beach club in St. Petersburg, where a dance was planned for MacDill servicemen. My buddies and I hoped to meet some local girls and have a nice quiet afternoon.

Isn't that always the way it is when you look back on the most pivotal days of your life? They always start out so innocently. I, along with the rest of the world, had just been waiting for the "other shoe to drop," and when it did, we were all caught completely off guard. Looking back, it seems somewhat surreal that I can remember a time when the name "Pearl Harbor" meant nothing to many people outside of the Navy.

But that day, December 7, 1941, Japan came crashing into the war on the side of Germany and Italy, dragging the United States—and every one of us—along with it. Japanese submarines and carrier-based planes attacked the U.S. Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor on the island of Oahu in Hawaii, which was, at that time, merely a possession of the United States. Nearby military airfields were also attacked by the Japanese planes. Eight American battleships and 13 other naval vessels were sunk or badly damaged, almost 200 American aircraft were destroyed, and approximately 3,000 naval and military personnel were killed or wounded.

No television existed at that time to show us pictures of the tragedy, and no Internet provided immediate information. Radio was still the primary source of news for us, but on that St. Petersburg beach, we didn't have a radio. I don't remember what my friends and I were discussing as we walked along, oblivious to the events of the morning, when a man approached us.

"Did y'all hear about Pearl Harbor?" he asked. We didn't know where in the hell Pearl Harbor was. He told us the almost unbelievable story, and we headed back to the beach club in shock. The party chaperone had us all say a prayer for the men who'd died, and they called off the dance. The truck came and got us and took us back to the base. Nobody knew what was going to happen.

But we knew one thing for certain. We were now soldiers.