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The Spectator: A World War II Bomber Pilot's Journal of the Artist as Warrior

David Zellmer

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From Greenwich Village to Guadalcanal in just over a year, David Zellmer would find piloting a B-24 bomber in the South Pacific a far cry from his life as a fledgling member of the Martha Graham Dance Company. He soon discovered the unimagined thrills of first flights and the astonishment of learning that an aerial spin was merely a vertical pirouette which one spotted on a barn thousands of feet below, instead of on a doorknob in Martha's studio. Reconstructed from letters home, this captivating account traces Zellmer's journey from New York to the islands of the South Pacific as the 13th Air Force battled to push back the Japanese invaders in 1943 and 1944.

Spurred to action by encouraging letters from Martha Graham, who urges him to document his participation in the great tragic play of the Second World War, Zellmer struggles to come to terms with the fears and joys of flying, of killing and being killed. Each stage of the battle takes him farther and farther from those he loves, until the soft night breezes and moon-splashed surf no longer work their magic. From bombing runs against Truk, the infamous headquarters of the Japanese Fleet, to much savored slivers of civilization in Auckland and Sydney, the young pilot bemoans a gnawing concern at a loss of sensation, the prospect of life?not as a performer, but as a spectator. With distant memories of life on the stage, he finds that only the threat of death can bring the same intensity of feeling.

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