

## FAMILY TRAITS

Tallness has always challenged Deckers. Johannes DeDecker, government administrator for New Amsterdam; descendant Isaac Decker of Staten Island—oyster boat captain on the Jersey side, plying the Fresh Kills; his son Richard Tyson Decker joining the Eleventh New Jersey Volunteers, guest of a Union hospital after Gettysburg; finally Bob Decker—my father—first born to the streets of Elizabeth, then a teenager finishing high school while farming alone in west Jersey, finally drafted for Korea. Each man standing five foot five—although frequently claiming five six.

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War enveloped Europe—Nazis destroying mankind and our nation stood up. Uncle Johnny Decker joined the fight, leaving the city of Elizabeth, New Jersey, finding his place among the Eighth Air Force and the crew of *The Wild Hare*, a B-17 flying fortress carrying out missions across Holland, France, Poland and Germany, bombing factories, air bases, and refineries; flying during D-Day and in the Battle of the Bulge. Thirteen machine gun placements—the ball turret gun the smallest—defended *The Hare*. Nicknamed “Suicide Seat,” the ball turret descended from the huge ship’s belly, tiny in size for air drag reduction, requiring the shortest and toughest of the crew to man it—my Uncle, Sergeant John H. Decker.

Throughout 1943, after taking off from the safety of Suffolk England, six miles above the earth, Uncle John would rotate the plexiglass sphere until twin machine guns pointed straight down and then squeeze inside. He placed his feet on steel rests—one for rotation, the second for radio control with the crew. He crouched into a fetal position and buckled the safety belt tight before turning two locking hatch bolts overhead. Air supplied by tubes from oxygen bottles, frost-bite a constant companion, he sat with back and head against the rear wall of his plastic

bubble, hips at the bottom, legs in mid-air. His eyes leveled with the fifty-caliber barrels spanning the turret's width, nearing either side of his neck. Cocking the guns by pulling wire cables, reaching around ammo boxes stacked above, careful not to disturb belts of brass bullets lying at his elbows, he focused on the gun sight hanging from above and descending between his feet as he scanned the air for thin, light Messerschmitts and newer, heavier Focke-Wulfs.

November came and with its eleventh day, mission number thirty-three. This time, a substitute. Uncle Johnny would sit out for a needed rest, a newer gunner taking his seat. Over Munster, Germany, *The Wild Hare* released her eight bombs and turned for England as Major Schnoor, the rising Luftwaffe Ace, powered his Focke-Wulf upward. Flak hit *The Hare's* third engine, then three more strikes. She dropped from the protection of her squadron and into the path of Major Schnoor. Twenty-millimeter cannons punched holes through her aluminum skin as fires ignited explosions and parachutes opened above Nazis in Holland.

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Uncle Johnny returned to Elizabeth in 1945, surviving thrice weekly missions over German-held Europe. As he aged, he often seemed lost in thought, silent and preoccupied, never able to stay warm—remembering the numbness of cramped and frozen joints as he crouched in the bubble, eight to ten hours a stretch, wind blowing through, ice clogging oxygen masks, temperatures reaching forty, even sixty below, metal for a seat—wondering at his luck escaping Major Schnoor's cannon-fire, unaware his feet pedaled silently back and forth as he spun the turret and radioed his crew.