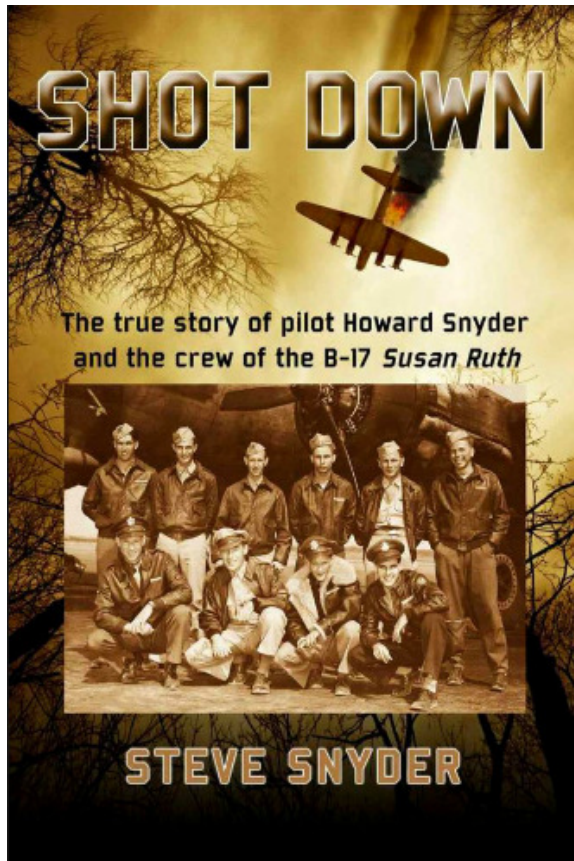


# 'Shot Down' a harrowing WWII story

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*"Shot Down: The True Story of Pilot Howard Snyder and the Crew of the B-17 Susan Ruth" by Steve Snyder. Seal Beach, CA: Sea Breeze Publishing, 2015, 360 pages, \$27.95.*



“Because Howard Snyder was the last man to bail out of the plane, he came down about 10 miles further west than the rest of the crew,” Steve Snyder explains in “Fate of the Crew,” the 28th chapter of “Shot Down: The True Story of Pilot Howard Snyder and the Crew of the B-17 Susan Ruth,” his meticulously-researched account of his father’s experience during World War II.

“When he landed in Macquenoise, Belgium, at around 1:30 in the afternoon, his parachute snagged in some trees, leaving him hanging some 20 feet above the ground,” he continues. “Two young Belgian farmers, Raymond Durvin and Henri Fraikin, saw Snyder coming down and ran to the area. Seeing him dangling from the trees, they went to get a ladder and rope to rescue him. When they came back, they threw him the rope so he could tie it around his waist, and then Durvin pulled him over to one of the tree trunks from where Snyder was able to climb down the ladder to the ground. They told him to remain hidden where he was for the time being to avoid the German patrols and their dogs that were prowling the area hunting for him and the other members of his crew

who had bailed out. It helped that there was snow on the ground; the German dogs had trouble tracking.”

Be honest. Tell me after reading those two short paragraphs you were not almost magically transported back in time and living the events portrayed in a very visceral and almost surreal manner. Such is the power of Snyder’s prose; I could almost sense the wind against my skin as I was suspended above the ground on that fateful day so many years ago. Certainly, I could feel my heart pounding in my chest as the uncertainty of my dire circumstances slowly took over every thread of consciousness. For a brief moment, I was Howard Snyder, with the weight of the world crushing against me balanced against the urgent need to take the steps necessary to ensure my survival. The odds, it seemed, were stacked against me. How could I possibly make it through this nightmare? What would be my next move?

“Shot Down” consists of a preface and 40 relatively succinct chapters that chronicle Howard Snyder’s extraordinary experiences during World War II as commander of the Susan Ruth, a B-17

heavy bomber named after his older sister. The book is lavishly illustrated with an abundance of vintage photographs, drawings and other diagrams that serve to bring the text to life in a way that would not have been possible had they not been included. The narrative is written in a very personal voice; reading through the various vignettes, you get the sense you are actually witnessing the events described as they play out all around you. By the time I finished the last few pages, I felt as if I knew Howard Snyder, along with many of those profiled in such rich detail, intimately.

The author is the son of the principal character in the volume. He was born in 1947 and grew up listening to his father talk about the challenges he faced, along with his crew, in helping to bring about the ultimate defeat of Nazi Germany. Like many veterans of this global conflict, he did not talk much about what he had encountered during the war until much later in life; specifically, until after a couple of trips he and his wife took to Belgium in the late 1980s. Apparently this was not unusual for the Greatest Generation, as they are often called. My grandfather fought in World War II and he never talked about what he saw during his time in Europe. Most of what I know about that part of his life came from my grandmother and a few close friends who knew him. He was obviously scarred forever by what he saw and endured.

After his retirement, Snyder became very interested in researching what his father – and so many others – went through during this trying time in our nation’s history. To that end, he became involved in several World War II associations, culminating in his current role as a member of the board of directors of the 306th Bomb Group Historical Association, the military organization to which his father belonged. He accompanied his parents to southern Belgium in 1994 to attend the 50th Anniversary Celebrations of the Belgium Liberation. This memoir follows Howard Snyder and his associates through their initial training, their subsequent deployment to the European Theater, the air battle in which they were shot down over hostile territory, their rescue and capture by the Nazis, their struggles in the concentration camps, and eventually the key role they played in the French resistance.

I learned quite a bit through my exposure to Snyder’s detailed and innately fascinating journey; the poignancy he packs into each passage is a key strength of his literary style. Witness the following excerpt from “1943 Problems,” the 15th chapter and one which gives a unique insight into what it could be like to fly a B-17: “The challenges each crew member faced on every mission were formidable: enduring the physical strain of using oxygen in an unpressurized aircraft at an altitude where the temperature dropped to minus 60 degrees; suffering the heartache of watching a buddy’s aircraft suddenly blow up and instantly disappear in a cloud of grey smoke; seeing the tail, wing or engines break off and the plane then drop like a stone; witnessing a bomber slowly rolling over and begin its slow plunge to the earth below; and watching for parachutes to see how many men got out, if any. If a plane went down too fast, the crew would be sealed into what would become their coffin.”

“Shot Down” is a real page turner; I can see it being made into a motion picture – or maybe even a miniseries – at some point. As “profiles in courage” go, this is a must-read for anyone who wonders why we call those who triumphed in the defining event of the 20th century the “Greatest Generation.” Needless to say, I recommend this one highly.

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