

Blue Yonder

Susan Gemmill

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Blue Yonder is a historical biography that captures the coming-of-age of a young soldier against the dramatic backdrop of World War II.

Susan Gemmill's biography of her military father, Bill Gemmill, reads like a novel; it is a loving and inspiring tribute.

Just after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Bill Gemmill finished high school in Chicago and went to the Air Force recruitment office with the dream of becoming a pilot. He was given a deferment to attend college, but after witnessing a bomber plane crash, he felt compelled to join with speed. His Air Force training took him to Arizona and California, before the call to war led him to North Africa, Italy, and Europe as a bombardier targeting Nazi-controlled oil refineries and airdromes.

Young men on Gemmill's crew were injured and died on missions. He had to bail with a parachute after a mission gone wrong, landing him alone in the middle of a Yugoslavian forest. His sense of determination, humility, and humor pulled him through. By the time he was twenty, Gemmill had survived the intensity of WWII with his joie de vivre intact. After the war, he had a family, and he shared his formative experiences with his friends and community.

The varied settings of Bill Gemmill's story are made tangible because of bold details, as of the stifling heat on a train carrying the young military recruits through the flat plains of Arkansas, of the beauty and chaos of a Marrakesh bazaar, and of the thick layers of clothing that the Chetnik people of Yugoslavia wore in winter, making them waddle "like windup dolls." Even the subtle expressions of crewmates are noted, whether they are relaxing on land or navigating storms and missiles in the air.

Gemmill is depicted as single-minded in his ambition through his forthright conversations with his mother and friends, which propelled him through the war and gave him a sense of pride and honor where others may have faltered. Though he was steadfast in his sense of purpose, he allowed himself to have fun along the way, making up funny nicknames for his friends and flirting with attractive young actresses when in training near Hollywood. Such interactions, no matter how small, are used to reveal his natural charisma, and to create a sense that he was beloved by all whose lives he touched—and that he loved and respected them just as much.

Susan Gemmill's ideas about her father bookend his story with poignant insights about his character. The rest of the book is written as if from Bill Gemmill's perspective, putting him in the context of history and making that history vibrant.

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AIMEE JODOIN (February 10, 2021)

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