

Shot Down: The True Story of Pilot Howard Snyder and the Crew of the B-17 Susan Ruth

Steve Snyder

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Detailed research puts the reader inside the cockpit, shoulder to shoulder with the pilot and crew.

Steve Snyder's masterful book, *Shot Down*, does justice to the adventures of his father, pilot Howard Snyder, and the crew of the B-17 plane Susan Ruth. Using first-hand accounts from diary entries, letters, and family stories, Snyder revives experiences that are accessible and relevant both to historians and readers with a casual interest in WWII history.

The Susan Ruth's crew was composed of ten men, four officers and six enlisted, and made up a true cross-section of American society. "They were college graduates, farmers, lawyers, and coal miners, from all nationalities and all religious denominations." Their mission was to deliver 5,000 pounds of bombs on target. Snyder carefully outlines each crew member's background and their role aboard the Susan Ruth. Detailed research puts the reader inside the cockpit, shoulder to shoulder with the pilot and crew. From technical nuances, such as Luftwaffe flight formations, to excerpts from letters home, Snyder emphasizes the day-to-day details of the crew's experience.

In addition to diary entries, mechanical and technical details, and key points about the war's larger picture, Snyder includes some gripping passages from the cockpit: "Crippled B-17s staggered back towards England with lacerated tails, gaping holes in fuselages, wing damage, and engines out or on fire." *Shot Down* goes beyond a small handful of personal histories and links what is known to the bigger picture of the war, the action in Europe, and the families left waiting at home. The book is organized in chapters, beginning with individual biographies of each crew member. Working chronologically, Snyder assembles the team, describing each man's role. The story moves through basic training, the first few missions, and then the fated flight that ended with Susan Ruth shot down over occupied Belgium.

Excerpts from letters back to the States add flavor and character. Howard Snyder writes to his wife, Ruth, "There isn't anything to do [in Bedford] unless you are on the lookout for girls. ... Most of the girls are quite 'icky' as you would say. This damp climate gives them beautiful complexions though. When I see the English women and think of you, I can't believe there is that much difference." Snyder also includes photos of each character, their planes, the key sites in the book, and memorabilia from the war. The inclusion of these photographs makes the accounts more visceral, more tangible—Snyder succeeds at his mission to make the story as real as though it had happened yesterday.

As World War II fades into history, stories like the ones in *Shot Down* revive the past, give it new life, and offer a link between the heroes of yesterday and the men we now call "Grandpa." Steve Snyder's extensive research, careful storytelling, and humane treatment of his subjects make *Shot Down* a must-read for anyone with an interest in this gripping period of American history.

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