

# **The Last Mission Study Guide**

## **The Last Mission by Harry Mazer**

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# Contents

[The Last Mission Study Guide..... 1](#)

[Contents..... 2](#)

[Plot Summary..... 3](#)

[Part 1, The Crew: Chapters 1-3..... 5](#)

[Part 1, The Crew: Chapters 4-5..... 7](#)

[Part 2, The Missions: Chapters 6-9..... 8](#)

[Part 3, Bail Out: Chapters 10-12..... 10](#)

[Part 3, Bail Out: Chapters 13-15..... 12](#)

[Part 3, Bail Out: Chapters 16-17..... 14](#)

[Part 4, Home: Chapters 18-21..... 16](#)

[Characters..... 18](#)

[Objects/Places..... 22](#)

[Themes..... 24](#)

[Style..... 26](#)

[Quotes..... 28](#)

[Topics for Discussion..... 30](#)



# Plot Summary

The Last Mission is a novel by the author Harry Mazer. This novel is about Jack Raab, a fifteen-year-old boy who lies about his age in order to enlist in the Army during World War II. Jack wants to represent his family in the fight against Hitler. However, Jack underestimates how difficult being away from home will be as well as the dangers of fighting a war, even from the air. Jack survives more than twenty bombing missions, only to lose his entire crew on the final run. The Last Mission is a story of the passions that send young men to war and the reality that changes everything.

Jack Raab is in Louisiana training on a B-17 with his new crew. Jack has been in the Air Corps for a few months, longer than he imagined he would be. Jack lied about his age to get in and was sure someone would figure it out by now. However, no one seems to notice the small differences between Jack and his fellow soldiers. Jack notices the difference, though. Everyone else gets mail from their family and friends, but Jack does not. Jack cannot tell his family and friends where he is. Jack cannot visit his family when he goes home on furlough. Instead, Jack visits Dotty, a young woman he met while at basic training in Miami Beach.

After furlough, Jack is sent to Europe with the rest of his crew. Jack and his crew fly a plane called Godfathers, Inc. This is the name the entire crew chose because they are all godfathers to the newborn daughter of Pratt, a member of the crew. The first mission goes without a hitch despite the nerves of everyone on board. Before long, the missions become routine, even when the flak is flying around them, tearing holes in the plane's skin. However, one flight is not routine. While flying over Germany, Godfather, Inc. loses an engine. Martin, the pilot, turns the plane toward home. Before they reach the coast of England, another engine goes down. Martin is forced to ditch the plane into the English Channel. Luckily, however, all the crew members are able to get off the plane without trouble and they are rescued hours later.

Not long after Jack's sixteenth birthday, the Godfather II is sent out on a mission over Pilsen, Czechoslovakia. The lead plane does not release its bombs, so the Godfather II is forced to take a second run over the target. During this run, the wing is chopped nearly in half by flak. Jack is forced to parachute out. On the way down, Jack sees one of his crewmen below him and one above. Near the ground bullets start flying all around Jack. Jack sees the man above him fall slack. Jack hopes he is only playing dead. As soon as Jack hits the ground, he runs. Jack is able to outrun his pursuers. For several days, Jack walks the countryside, attempting to avoid capture. Unfortunately, Jack comes to a checkpoint he was not prepared for and is captured.

Jack is taken to a military base where he is put on a bus with other Allied soldiers. The soldiers are taken to a hospital where their wounds are treated. Jack meets Stan, a fellow American. Together Jack and Stan are marched across the countryside with two German soldiers who promise they are taking Jack and Stan to the American lines. However, the Russians are advancing sooner than the German guards anticipated. The



Germans leave Jack and Stan at a German camp. That night the war is declared over in Europe. Jack and Stan are able to leave the camp and return to the American lines.

Jack goes back to the military base where he was stationed before the last mission. Jack learns that all of his crewmates are dead. From there, Jack is sent back to the United States. Jack has to wait for his records to come before he learns if he will be able to return home. By this time, Jack has gotten over his fear of discovery and contacted his family. Jack's family is anxious to have him back home. Jack decides to tell the Army the truth about his age. Jack is given an honorable discharge.

At home, Jack goes to visit the parents of one of his crewmen where he is able to assure them their son did not suffer. Jack also visits Dotty and tells her the truth about his age, effectively ending their budding romance. Jack spends the rest of the summer without aim, unsure what to do with his future. Finally Jack decides to go back to school. At school, Jack is asked to make a speech to his fellow students about his experiences in the war. Jack tells his classmates that war is horrible and he hopes it never happens again.



# Part 1, The Crew: Chapters 1-3

## Part 1, The Crew: Chapters 1-3 Summary

Jack Raab is a Jewish teenager who wants to represent his family in the fight against Hitler. Jack lied about his age and joined the Army Air Corps. Jack has gone to boot camp in Florida and is now in Louisiana to undergo training with his flight crew, including pilot Lieutenant Martin.

Jack waits in the shade of a B-17 with the rest of his crew for the officers to arrive. Jack is nervous, afraid something he might say or do will clue the rest of the guys into his real age. Jack is shocked that the Army has not figured out his real age by now. When he enlisted using his brother's birth certificate, Jack thought for sure he would be found out quickly. However, no one has questioned Jack's right to be there. Jack thinks it's because he is a large boy, bigger even than his older brother, Irving. Jack and Chuckie, a fellow soldier Jack met at gunnery school, smoke a cigarette while they wait. Jack thinks of Chuckie as his closest friend and imagines if he ever tells anyone about his real age, it will be Chuckie. Finally the officers arrive and the crew is whole. The first time they go up together, Jack is excited, imagining he could do everyone's jobs, even the pilots. Jack is anxious to get to Europe and take some revenge on the Germans for all the Jews they have killed.

Jack and his crew go through training, attending classes with soldiers who have already been in Europe and flown large numbers of missions and have returned to train the new recruits. One of these classes teaches Jack and his fellow soldiers how to strap on a parachute and when to pull the chord. Also during this time, the crews fly in squadrons, learning how to fly the planes in close proximity. Jack witnesses one plane get caught in a downdraft causing it to fall down on another and causing a rip in the plane that leaves the crew scrambling to bail out. During training, everyone looks forward to mail call. However, Jack never gets any mail. Jack could not tell his family where he is because of the risk of getting caught in his lie about his age. Due to this, Jack has no one to write to or anyone to write to him. Jack did meet a girl, though, in Miami Beach who asked him to write her. Unfortunately, Jack is afraid to write her for fear she will figure out his real age in his immature ramblings. Jack focuses his energies on his training, admiring his instructors and imagining the heroic acts he will commit when he is finally sent to the war. The day Jack and his fellow crewmembers are promoted to sergeant it all seems so much closer.

## Part 1, The Crew: Chapters 1-3 Analysis

The main character, Jack Raab, is introduced in these chapters. Jack is fifteen, but he used his brother's birth certificate to enlist in the Army Air Corps. Jack is Jewish and he feels that someone in his family should go fight against Hitler. When Jack's brother is refused, Jack thinks he is the only one who can represent his family. Jack is impulsive,



young, and excited by the idea of becoming a hero. Clearly Jack does not understand what war is or at least has romanticized it. Jack imagines returning home a hero and winning medals for his bravery. The reader wonders what will happen when Jack faces the reality of war.

Jack goes through training, being taught by men who have survived the war and have returned to teach those coming up to replace them. Jack idolizes these men like they are rock stars, again warning the reader that Jack is not mature enough to realize how dangerous war can really be. At the same time, Jack's decision to get into the military illegally, has left him without a lifeline to home. Jack is deeply homesick, leaving him not only continuing to fantasize about going home a hero, but also making him somewhat depressed and moody. In this way, Jack is acting like the classic teenager despite his careful attention to his behavior. Jack is a child who believes he knows what he is getting into, but he does not.



# Part 1, The Crew: Chapters 4-5

## Part 1, The Crew: Chapters 4-5 Summary

Two weeks after getting his promotion, Jack and his crew complete their training and are given weekend leave. Jack goes into New Orleans with the rest of his crew, minus Pratt who is awaiting a call from his wife regarding the birth of their first child. Jack goes into town with Chuckie, but when Chuckie takes off with a girl, Jack remains behind. Jack wanders the streets on his own. Little cafes remind him of home, making him more homesick than he has been so far. Jack wants to call his mother, but is afraid that the moment he hears her voice he will tell her the truth. Instead Jack decides to call Dotty. Jack and Dotty speak for a time, mostly about their days together in Miami Beach. Dotty asks for Jack's address and promises to write. Dotty also asks Jack to come see her when he comes to New York on furlough. Before they leave on furlough, Pratt's wife gives birth to a girl and Pratt makes everyone on the crew her godfathers.

Jack tries to fly to New York, but is bumped off the flight. Instead, Jack decides to hitchhike home. Jack meets a kind truck driver who takes him to Manhattan. Jack goes to Brooklyn where he rents a room from a kind woman whose daughter is in the WAVES. Jack spends his furlough wandering the streets of home, but does not go to see his family. Again Jack considers calling home, but he does not. Instead, Jack wanders the streets and meets other soldiers. On his final day on furlough Jack visits Dotty. They spend the afternoon walking together. At the end of the afternoon, Jack gives Dotty his Star of David. Jack and Dotty share a kiss and she promises to write.

## Part 1, The Crew: Chapters 4-5 Analysis

Jack again faces homesickness. Jack goes to New Orleans with his crewmates, but feels left out when they hook up with girls. Instead, Jack wanders the streets alone with his thoughts, remembering home. Touching on the theme of family, Jack imagines what is happening at home and wishes he could hear his mother's voice again. Unfortunately, Jack cannot call because he is sure his mother's voice will make him admit the truth, or worse, it might make him cry. Instead Jack calls Dotty, the girl he met in Miami Beach. Dotty is open and caring, allowing Jack to pour out his heart to her, suggesting a future friendship between these two. When Jack gets furlough, he goes home even though he knows he cannot see his family. Jack misses his family and again considers calling them, but talks himself out of it. Finally, Jack goes to visit Dotty. Jack is frightened that Dotty will know how young he is when they meet, but Dotty does not guess. Dotty gives Jack a kiss and promises a kiss, once again foreshadowing a growing relationship between these two.



## Part 2, The Missions: Chapters 6-9

### Part 2, The Missions: Chapters 6-9 Summary

Jack is woken early in the morning on the day of his first mission. Jack and his crew are at Northumberland Air Base in England. When they arrive in the briefing room they learn their first mission will be over Berlin. Jack is excited about this because Hitler is in Berlin. However, once they are in the air and flak is flying around them, Jack becomes frightened. Jack curls up into a ball, but makes himself be brave. Jack looks out the window and sees another plane fall apart in the sky. Jack counts as the crew bails out, happy to see that everyone has survived. Godfather, Inc. named because of Pratt's daughter, drops her bombs after the lead plane drops hers. Godfather, Inc. and her crew return to England where Jack gratefully touches the ground once they land. Within a short amount of time, however, the missions become routine. Jack thought it would get easier with each mission, but he finds himself curling into a ball each time, hiding under a stack of flak jackets. On one mission, Jack discovers that a piece of flak came up through the underside of the plane and would have gone through his knee if not for the flak jackets. Jack keeps the piece of flak for luck.

In February, a bomb gets stuck when Godfather, Inc. turns to return to England after the bomb run. Martin calls Jack and tells him to go fix the problem. Jack goes into the bomb bay and is able to release the bomb. The experience is frightening, however, because he could have fallen out of the plane through the bomb doors. The crew continues to fly. They do not fly every day, but can go several days between missions. In between flights, Jack hangs out with Chuckie at a nearby bar. Chuckie has a girlfriend there even though he has a girl back home. On their nineteenth mission, Jack sees his first German fighter plane. It will be the only time Jack sees one.

During the bomb run, Godfather, Inc. takes a lot of flak. The fourth engine fails and the third begins to fail. Martin assures everyone he can nurse the plane back to England. Several fighter planes escort them until the third engine fails and they are forced to ditch into the English Channel. The whole crew survives unharmed and they are rescued without incident. A week passes before Jack and his crew is put back on alert in their new plane, Godfather II. When the call comes, Jack is ill and decides to stay behind. However, Jack is frightened that his decision might jinx the flight and chases after them, but he is too late. Jack spends the day in bed. When the planes begin coming in, Jack goes out to the airfield. Word comes in that one of the flights is in trouble. Jack is afraid it is Godfather II, but Godfather II returns without incident.

### Part 2, The Missions: Chapters 6-9 Analysis

Jack and his crew go to England to join the war. Their first mission is over Berlin, which makes Jack happy because this is where Hitler is rumored to be. Jack imagines the first bomb his crew drops will land on Hitler and end the war. For the first time, however,





Jack gets a taste of reality. Jack watches a plane fall apart in midair, leaving its crew parachuting out over enemy territory. Jack is frightened for the first time since joining the Army Air Corps. This is the beginning of a change in Jack's personality and in his maturity level. Jack is beginning to learn what war really means.

Jack is on board Godfather Inc when the fourth engine fails. The plane drops low and is struggling to make it back over friendly land. Jack discovers through this ordeal what it means to be alive and to fight for his life. Once again, Jack gets a taste of reality as opposed to the fantasies he had before coming to Europe. Jack's entire crew survives without injury, but Jack has again matured through trauma. Jack is no longer the same person he was when he joined the Army Air Corps and the reader can see it in his every thought and action. This is illustrated when Jack becomes ill and remains at the base during a mission, but is filled with so much guilt that he convinces himself that his whole crew will die because he did not go with them. Fortunately, the crew returns unharmed, but Jack pledges to never allow them to go without him again.



## Part 3, Bail Out: Chapters 10-12

### Part 3, Bail Out: Chapters 10-12 Summary

On April 25, 1945, a few short weeks after Jack's birthday, Godfather II is assigned a final mission. Godfather II is to fly a bomb run over Pilsen, Czechoslovakia. Jack does not understand why they are to fly this mission since the war in Europe is reported to be nearly at an end. However, Jack goes along because the Army tells him to. Godfather II arrives at the target without incident, but the lead plane fails to release its bombs when they reach the target area, forcing Godfather II to have to repeat the bombing pattern. On the second run, the plane is hit heavily with flak causing the wing to break and fall off. Jack goes to get Chuckie after he cannot raise the pilot on the intercom, but finds Chuckie dead. Jack returns to his position where he sees Dave coming out of the tail section, nearly suffocated because of a lack of oxygen. Jack gets the door open and jumps from the plane. On the way down, Jack tries to remember his training while worrying that he might have bailed out too soon. Below Jack he can see Johnson floating to the ground. Above Jack can see Dave. When they approach the ground, Jack can hear and feel bullets flying around him. Dave is attempting to climb his cords to escape the bullets, and then is suddenly limp. Jack hopes Dave is playing dead to discourage the shooters from targeting him any longer.

Jack lands and knows he should bury his parachute to hide his location from ground troops, but he can hear footsteps coming toward him. Jack picks up his parachute and runs. Jack reaches a low wall and hides behind it. Jack buries his parachute and then makes his way to a ditch where he hides until he can no longer hear his pursuers. When it becomes dark, Jack takes off his flight suit and buries it along with his helmet, his flight jacket, and his gun. Jack then turns his shirt inside out to hide his military insignia before making his way into the nearby woods, walking west in hopes of reaching Allied lines. Jack comes across a cabin, but he is too afraid to approach it. Jack sleeps during the day and walks at night. On the second night, Jack comes across another house. Jack slips into the house and drinks from a bowl of milk on the table. Before Jack can find anything else to eat, a man comes downstairs. Jack climbs out the window but the man manages to hit Jack's arm with a stick. Jack steals a bike and rushes away. Jack rides all night and all morning. Jack comes to a town. At the edge of town is a check point that Jack does not see until it is too late. A soldier chases after Jack, firing his gun until Jack falls from his bike.

### Part 3, Bail Out: Chapters 10-12 Analysis

Godfather II is assigned to fly a final mission over Pilsen, Czechoslovakia a few weeks after Jack's sixteenth birthday. This date reminds the reader how young Jack is and what a perilous situation he is in. Jack is confused as to why his crew must fly this mission since the rumor is that the war is nearly over. However, Jack is the consummate soldier and does not express his opinions to his supervisors, once again showing the



reader how Jack has grown since joining the war. The flight goes well until the bomb run when the lead plane fails to drop its bombs. Godfather II is forced to make a second run at the target and during this run is so badly damaged by flak that it loses a wing. Jack discovers that his close friend, Chuckie, has died. Jack does not have time to process this fact, however, leaving the reader convinced that the death will hit him later when he has time to deal with it.

Jack falls to the earth with two other crewmembers, but witnesses one of his crewmembers become limp. The reader is sure that Dave has been hit by the gunfire coming from the ground, but Jack convinces himself that Dave is only playing dead. This shows the reader how Jack is dealing with the shock and grief of the situation. Jack is simply not dealing with it at this point, preferring to believe that all his crewmembers have survived. On the ground, Jack thinks clearly and is able to escape the soldiers who are looking for him. Jack is hungry, however, and decides to break into a house for some food. Jack is nearly caught, but manages to get away. Jack is strong, dealing with the situation with action rather than allowing the situation to unfold without any effort on his part. However, Jack runs into a soldier he cannot hide from and is shot off his bike, leaving the reader anxious to get to the next chapter to be sure Jack is not mortally wounded. Now the reader knows that Jack will be taken as a prisoner of war, leaving the reader concerned for Jack's future.



## Part 3, Bail Out: Chapters 13-15

### Part 3, Bail Out: Chapters 13-15 Summary

Jack is grabbed by two German soldiers and taken to a building where they make him undress and examine his papers. Jack is then instructed to dress again and is taken to a German military base where he is interviewed by another soldier. Jack refuses to answer any questions except for giving his name, rank and serial number as instructed by his commanding officers. The German sends Jack to a cell where he spends the night. The next morning, Jack is put onto a bus with other American soldiers, many of whom are injured. Jack calls out the names of his crewmembers, hoping one of them are among this group. Unfortunately, no one knows what happened to Jack's friends. Jack and his fellow passengers wait aboard the bus all day until it finally begins to move at dusk. The bus takes the soldiers to a German hospital. On the way, a fellow passenger introduces himself to Jack. Jack and this other soldier, Stan, are the least injured of the soldiers on board the bus and are kept together once they arrive.

Jack and Stan are taken to a room where their wounds are treated. Jack and Stan then are placed in a room where they get to know each other a little better. Jack tells Stan his real age and how he came to be in the Army. Stan talks about his reasons for joining the Army Air Corps, the money, and about home. Stan is from Buffalo, so they compare the differences between Buffalo and the Bronx. They also talk about Hitler and what he has done to the Jews, a sore subject for Jack. Finally two soldiers come and take Jack and Stan out of the hospital. The guards, Willy and Karl, are unfriendly at first. Willy is a pilot who blames the Americans for the lack of fuel to fly his plane. However, as time passes, Willy and Karl tell Jack, who can understand their language because of the Yiddish his grandmother spoke, that they want to give themselves up to the Americans. The Russians are coming and Willy would rather take his chances with Americans than the Russians. Stan wonders if they should trust the Germans.

### Part 3, Bail Out: Chapters 13-15 Analysis

Jack is taken a prisoner of war. At first Jack is frightened because he believes the Germans will learn he is Jewish and kill him for it. However, the Germans seem uninterested in Jack. They simply put Jack on a bus with other soldiers, most of whom are wounded. Jack asks around for his crewmates or anyone who has heard of them, but learns nothing. Jack still hopes that some of his fellow crewmates are still alive even though he is haunted by the memory of Chuckie bleeding in the radio room and Dave hanging limp from his parachute. Again the reader notices that Jack seems unwilling to accept that either Dave or Chuckie are dead despite what his eyes told him. This touches on Jack's unwillingness to accept death either as a way of surviving or as a result of his immaturity. However, the reader leans toward the idea of survival because Jack has acted with nothing but maturity since landing in Czechoslovakia.



Stan is introduced in these chapters. Stan is a young man also in the Army Air Corps who was also shot down. Stan is much like Jack, except that Stan is a few years older. Rather than wanting to kill Hitler for his crimes against Jews, Stan entered the service in order to make the extra money he could get as a sergeant. Stan's reasons seem less passionate than Jack's, creating a contrast between the two characters even as they find themselves in the same boat with the same fears of not surviving their captivity. Jack and Stan begin walking the countryside with two German soldiers who claim to be taking them to the American lines so they can surrender themselves. However, Stan and Jack are still wary of the enemy and unsure if they should trust these men. Finally, the reader sees that Jack can understand the Germans because he grew up listening to his grandmother speaking Yiddish. It is ironic that a traditional Jewish language allows Jack to understand the language of the people who have been trying so hard to eradicate all Jews.



## Part 3, Bail Out: Chapters 16-17

### Part 3, Bail Out: Chapters 16-17 Summary

Jack and Stan are on the road with Willy and Karl for many days. Jack and Stan share half a ration of Karl's food, leaving them both starving. One day a priest gives them each a boiled egg. Jack holds on to his most of the day, wanting to wait until they stop before eating it so that he can enjoy it. However, when they stop a starving child comes over and makes gestures for the egg. Jack does not want to give the child the egg at first because he believes him to be a German, therefore the enemy. As Jack watches the child, however, he comes to realize that he is just a person like Jack. Jack gives the child his egg. Jack sees a lot of Germans during this trip and a lot of them are injured and broken. Jack comes to realize that all of these people are just like him and this causes Jack to begin to question the reasoning behind war.

After crossing into Austria, Jack, Stan, Willy, and Karl get a ride with a troop transport. As they are traveling, a Russian airplane flies over them and opens fire. Jack watches a German soldier who was complaining about the Americans killed with one of the bullets. Later, Willy and Karl take Jack and Stan to a German army camp. The Russians are coming, they tell them. Willy and Karl leave them there where they are placed in a cell. During the night Jack hears cries that the Russians are coming. In the morning, there are no guards on their cell. Jack and Stan slip out through the window. A soldier tells them the war is over. One soldier gives Stan his gun, so Jack asks another for his. They take a vehicle and drive to the American lines where they are welcomed back with enthusiasm.

### Part 3, Bail Out: Chapters 16-17 Analysis

As Jack marches across Austria with two German soldiers and Stan, he sees the towns and the people he bombed. Jack is suddenly faced with the reality of the destruction these bombs caused. Jack had not thought about it before, was afraid to allow himself to think about it. Jack cannot avoid it now. At first, Jack tells himself that these people are the enemy, but when he sees homeless, starving children, he cannot make himself think of them as his enemy. Suddenly the war has taken on a new dimension for Jack. Touching on the theme of war and morality, Jack has suddenly become aware that war is not the game that he once imagined it was, showing the reader how mature Jack has become in such a short time.

Jack and Stan believe their German captures are going to take them to the American lines, but when word that the Russians will be there soon reaches them, they give Jack and Stan over to a German army camp. Jack and Stan are once more prisoners. However, their captivity only lasts one night because the war ends the next day. Jack and Stan are back with the Americans. Now the reader wonders what will happen to

Jack. The reader imagines Jack could go home now, but first the reader is curious to know what happened to Jack's crew, and hopes he will be able to learn that truth soon.



## Part 4, Home: Chapters 18-21

### Part 4, Home: Chapters 18-21 Summary

Jack and Stan separate at the airport with Stan going to Paris while Jack goes to Camp Lucky Strike, a gathering place for ex-POWs. Jack is hoping to find some of his crewmembers there. Unfortunately, no one knows anything about any of Jack's friends. Jack waits for more than a week before his orders come through and he is sent back to Northumberland. When Jack arrives at Northumberland, he goes straight to the company clerk. There Jack learns that everyone on Godfather II died, their bodies all accounted for except for Jack's. Jack goes back to the hut he shared with his friends and grieves for their loss.

A short time later Jack takes a boat back to the United States. Jack has to wait several weeks for his paperwork to come from Europe before he learns where he will be assigned to next. Jack hopes to go home, but he has not yet earned enough points for a discharge. Jack talks to his family who have now learned the truth about his situation. Jack's father encourages Jack to tell his commanding officers the truth about his age. Jack does and after an investigation receives an honorable discharge. Jack returns home where he learns that his parents received an MIA telegram during his time in Austria. Jack feels guilty for putting his family through so much grief.

A few days after returning home, Jack goes to visit Chuckie's family. Jack is able to assure Chuckie's parents that their son did not suffer before he died. Later, Jack goes to visit Dotty at a camp where she is working. Jack tells Dotty the truth about his age. Dotty is upset that Jack lied to her, but wants to continue to be his friend. Jack spends the rest of the summer unable to decide what to do with the rest of his life. Dotty and Irving, Jack's brother, want him to return to school. Finally Jack decides to return to high school. During an assembly a few weeks later, the principal wants to honor the veterans who attend the school, especially Jack since he is the youngest. The principal asks Jack to give a speech Jack talks about the deaths of his friends and how he hopes another war will never take place. As the crowd applauds, Jack thinks of his friends.

### Part 4, Home: Chapters 18-21 Analysis

Jack and Stan separate, but promise to keep in touch. Jack returns to Northumberland where he was stationed with his crew. Jack learns that they all died. Now Jack knows for sure that his memories of Dave going limp and of Chuckie injured in the radio room are true. Jack finally grieves for his friends. This grief is very adult and shows how deeply Jack felt for his friends. Once again, the reader can see how the war has changed Jack. No longer is he the carefree child who wants to get revenge on Hitler for his cruelty toward Jews. Jack is now a man who has seen tragedy that a child his age should never have to face.





Jack returns to the United States where he hopes to be discharged from the army. Jack calls his family and tells them everything, eager to see them again. Jack's father encourages him to tell the truth about his age, which he does. Jack is honest with his superiors, finally admitting the truth about his lies and facing the consequences like the man he has become. Again, the reader sees growth in Jack, touching on the theme of coming of age. Finally, Jack is allowed to go home. Jack is welcomed by his family, but at the same time learns of the grief he put them through by not telling them where he was going. Jack learns a lesson from his actions.

Jack is honest with everyone now. Jack tells Chuckie's family the truth about Chuckie's death as well as the lies he told Chuckie about himself. Jack also tells Dotty the truth about his age even though he knows it will mean an end to their budding romance. Jack has learned his lesson about lying and it is apparent in his every action. Now Jack must deal with the lingering grief that remains with him after the loss of his entire crew. Jack's opinion on war has changed, touching on the theme of war and morality, leaving Jack not only more mature, but changed in irrevocable ways.



# Characters

## Jack Raab

Jack Raab is a fifteen year old kid who has decided someone from his family should fight in the war against Hitler. Jack has watched his mother grieve over family members in Europe who have been arrested by Hitler's army for the crime of being Jewish. Jack has listened to the reports on the radio, seen the soldiers coming home in glory. When Jack's brother, Irving, is rejected from the Army because of a heart problem, Jack knows it is up to him to represent his family against Hitler. Jack takes Irving's birth certificate and joins the Army. Jack goes through basic training and is assigned to the Army Air Corps, training to become a waist gunner in a B-17.

During training, Jack is eager to get to Europe and join the fight. However, the long weeks away from home have left Jack homesick and the absence of letters from those he loves becomes a burden he cannot overcome. Jack wants very much to tell his family what he has done, even fantasizes about coming home to them a hero, but knows if he tells them the truth it might mean getting caught. Jack does not want to be kicked out of the Air Corps. Jack decides he cannot talk to his family, cannot even see them on furlough, so he reaches out to a young woman he met while at basic training in Miami Beach. This girl, Dotty, is a college student and is receptive to Jack's attention.

Jack is sent overseas after his furlough and is stationed in England. The first mission Jack flies with his crew he is very scared, but he survives without a scratch. Jack thinks the missions will get easier, but they do not. When Jack sees other planes go down or crewmembers injured, it only reinforces his own fears. Once, Jack's plane loses an engine over Germany and another on the trip back to England. Finally the plane is forced to ditch in the English Channel. Jack and his crew wait for hours in two rafts for rescue, convinced it will never come. Finally, it does, however, and they continue on in a new plane. This new plane, however, is also damaged during their final mission. Jack bails out and survives on the ground for several days before being taken prisoner by the Germans. Jack spends the final days of the war in Europe traipsing across the countryside with two German soldiers and a fellow American. When the war is finally over, Jack returns home where he finally admits his real age and is discharged from the Army.

## Chuckie O'Brien

Chuckie O'Brien is the radio man on Jack's crew and Jack's best friend in the Air Corps. Chuckie is eighteen and has a girlfriend back home, but this does not stop Chuckie from enjoying the many girls he meets both while in training and while stationed in England. Jack spends all his free time with Chuckie, drinking and smoking and trying to pretend they are not afraid. If Jack were to tell anyone about his real age, it would be Chuckie. However, Jack is still afraid of getting in trouble for lying to the Air Corps, so he tells



Chuckie that he is an only child, that his mother died and his father in working in Alaska. This is the story Chuckie tells his own parents about Jack. During their final mission, the airplane in which Chuckie and Jack are riding suffers horrendous damage from a flak attack. Chuckie is killed where he is sitting at the radio.

## **Sergeants Dave Gonzalez, Billy Eustice, Fred Pratt, and Paul**

Dave Gonzalez is another member of Jack's crew. Dave is Puerto Rican and this causes some curiosity from the other crew members when they are first assigned together. Dave works the guns in the tail section of the aircraft. After the plane is hit over Pilsen, Dave survives the initial damage, but is shot by the Germans on the ground as he parachutes down. Billy Eustice is another crewmember and probably Dave's closest friend. Billy is overly curious and his curiosity causes some tension between him and the rest of the crew at first. Billy is a good person, however, and everyone quickly comes to like him.

Fred Pratt is the oldest of the crewmembers. Fred's wife gives birth to a baby girl while the crew is stationed in Louisiana, which leads to the crew naming their aircraft Godfathers, Inc after Fred makes the entire crew grandfathers to his child. Fred is positioned in the nose of the aircraft during missions. Paul Johnson is the most serious of the crew, always pensive and concerned about what is going on. Paul is one of only three who manage to parachute out of the broken plane over Pilsen. Paul is below Jack when he is parachuting down and Jack never sees him move.

## **Lieutenants Gary Martin, Milt Held, and Sam Seppetone**

Lieutenant Gary Martin is the pilot of Jack's crew. Martin is a strong leader, quick with discipline, but also quick to check on the welfare of his crew. Milt Held is Martin's co-pilot, a quiet man who is friendly, but somewhat distant from the enlisted men. Sam Seppetone is the navigator. Seppetone is a quiet man who often sleeps through briefings and crew meetings. It is Seppetone who gives the crew snacks and refreshments before a particularly long flight. All three men, Martin, Held, and Seppetone, are killed when the plane is damaged over Pilsen.

## **Dotty Landon**

Dotty Landon is a young woman that Jack meets while at basic training in Miami Beach, Florida. Dotty is from New York, but was in Florida for vacation. Jack and Dotty spend a couple of days together riding bikes and walking on the beach. When Jack has to leave, Dotty gives him her address. However, Jack does not write Dotty because he does not know what to say to her. Not only that, but Jack does not want Dotty to find out he is only fifteen. However, while in New Orleans Jack becomes so overwhelmed with



homesickness that he decides to call Dotty. They have a good conversation. Afterward, Dotty begins writing Jack regularly. When Jack has furlough before going to Europe, he goes to New York. Jack does not see his family, but does go to see Dotty. The meeting goes well.

All through his time in Europe, Jack thinks about Dotty and continues to receive letters from her. When Jack returns home, he is forced to tell the Army about his true age so that they will let him go home. Afterward, Jack decides he must tell Dotty the truth. Dotty is shocked, but she does not hold it against Jack. However, Dotty decides they must remain friends and not become lovers. Jack is happy with this friendship.

## **Father, Mother, Irving, and Marcia Raab**

Jack's father and mother are hard working people who have raised their children to believe in their faith and to be kind, honest people. Jack is particularly close to his mother and worries about how she would take it if something happens to him. When Jack returns home, he feels a deep sense of guilt for the grief he put his mother through. Marcia is Jack's youngest sister. Marcia is proud of Jack and excited when he returns home. Irving is Jack's older brother. Irving has a heart problem that kept him out of the Army. However, Irving is a studious man who is doing well in college. Jack used Irving's birth certificate to get into the Army.

## **Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien and Danny**

After returning from Europe, Jack goes to visit Chuckie's parents, Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien. The O'Brien's are anxious to meet Jack because Chuckie wrote about him in many of his letters home. As part of these letters, Chuckie told his parents how Jack lost his mother and his father is in Alaska. The O'Briens are surprised when Jack tells them the truth about his home life. At the same time, Jack tells the O'Briens about Chuckie's death. Danny, Chuckie's younger brother, eats up everything Jack has to say about the war. This upsets Jack because he does not want Danny to grow up to go to war like he and Chuckie did.

## **Stan Wakowski**

Stan Wakowski is another American Air Corps soldier. Jack meets Stan on board a bus after he is taken prisoner of war. Jack and Stan are taken to a hospital where they are then put into a room together. Stan is the first person Jack tells the truth about his real age. From the hospital, Jack and Stan are marched across the countryside by two German guards. During this time, Jack and Stan get to know each other really well. Jack and Stan become close friends. When the war is over, Jack feels a sense of loss when he separates from Stan. However, they exchange phone numbers and address. When Jack is back in New York he goes and sees Stan.



## Willy and Karl

Willy and Karl are the two German soldiers who march Jack and Stan across the countryside. Willy is a pilot who is angry with the Americans for cutting off the supply lines so that he can have fuel for his plane. However, as the days go by, Jack is able to understand enough of their German to understand that Willy and Karl want to surrender to the Americans. Willy and Karl know the war is almost over and the Russians are coming. Willy and Karl are afraid of the Russians. However, before they can reach the American lines, the Russians catch up to them. Willy and Karl leave Jack and Stan at a German war camp and disappear before the Russians can catch up with them.

## Wolpe

Wolpe is the company clerk at the camp where Jack and his crew are stationed. Wolpe is in charge of keeping track of who is flying and when, as well as waking them up in time for their flights. Wolpe is the last person the flyers want to see early in the morning, therefore he is not a popular guy. When Jack returns to the air base after the war is over, the first person he goes to see is Wolpe. Unfortunately, Wolpe does not have good news for Jack. Wolpe tells Jack that his entire crew died. Most of them were found on board the plane after it went down. Johnson and Gonzalez were found shot to death behind enemy lines. The only person not accounted for was Jack, but everyone had assumed he was dead as well.



# Objects/Places

## Irving's Birth Certificate

After Jack's brother, Irving, is refused admission into the Army, Jack takes his birth certificate and enlists himself despite the fact that he is only fifteen.

## Letters

Jack does not receive letters during his training because he cannot tell his parents where he is. However, Jack begins receiving letters from a girl named Dotty that he keeps with him during his bomb runs with the hopes that it will bring him luck.

## MIA Telegram

The Raab family receives an MIA telegram informing them that their son is missing in action after Jack's plane goes down over Pilsen. This telegram is a surprise to the family because they are unaware that Jack is in the army.

## Flak

Flak is metal and other debris that is shot at planes in the hopes that it will damage the planes or their crews and bring them down. Jack discovers after a flight that he was nearly hit in the knee by a piece of flak. Jack keeps this piece of flak as a good luck piece for the rest of his time in the war.

## Flak Jacket

Flak jackets are heavy vests designed to protect the wearer from injury from bullets and flak.

## Parachute

Jack and two of his crewmates use parachutes to bail out of their plane when it begins to crash over Pilsen.

## B-17

B-17 are large bomber planes. Jack and his crew fly a B-17.



## **B-29**

B-29s are bombers that are slightly larger than B-17s. Jack is almost assigned to attend B-29 school after surviving his POW status in Europe in order to join the fight against the Japanese. However, Jack tells his commanders the truth about his age and is given an honorable discharge.

## **Godfathers, Inc**

Godfathers, Inc is the name of Jack and his crews' first B-17. The crew chose godfathers because they are all godfathers to Fred Pratt's daughter and it is the only name they can agree on. The plane is damaged over Germany, causing the crew to ditch it in the English Channel.

## **Godfathers II**

Godfathers II is the name of the second plane Jack and his crew fly. This plane crashes over Pilsen, Czechoslovakia after the left wing is broken off by flak.

## **Northumberland Air Base**

After training, Jack and his crew are assigned to the Eight Air Force, 398th Bomb Group at Northumberland Air Base in England.

## **Berlin, Germany**

Berlin, Germany is the capital city of Germany and is believed to be where Hitler is. Jack and his crew run three missions over Berlin.



# Themes

## Coming of Age

At the beginning of the novel, Jack Raab is a fifteen-year-old boy who thinks it would be great to go kill Hitler for the atrocities he has committed against Jews. Jack looks at war as a sort of game, something that is strategic and fair, unaware of the darker side of war. Jack is homesick when he first gets into the Army, anxious to contact his parents even though he knows that he cannot. Jack wants to receive letters and to have someone to write to, but has no one he can send letter to because no one who knows him is aware that he is in the Army. When it comes time to go overseas, Jack suddenly realizes that what he has desperately wanted to do for weeks is now this dark, mysterious future that he afraid to face. Jack is now a homesick kid who would rather go home and be with his family than to join the war he lied to fight.

Jack arrives in Europe and finds himself a part of a war he did not understand. Jack sees planes suffer damage during the bomb runs and the reality of war when men he has shared his mundane moments with come home burned and injured. Jack continues to want to get Hitler, but after the first bomb run on Berlin he is a part of, this desire begins to wane. Jack and his crew are shot down on the final bomb run over Czechoslovakia. Jack is the only survivor from his crew and finds himself forced to run and hide from danger. Jack is eventually taken as a prisoner of war. During this time, Jack sees injured Germans, starving children, and all the damage he could not see his bombs causing from the air. Jack suddenly comes to realize that there is nothing exciting or good about war. Jack lost his best friend, lost all his crewmates, and nearly lost his own life. Now Jack is dozens of years more mature than his age, having come to the adult realization that war is distasteful and difficult to understand.

## War and Morality

As a young man, Jack listens to the reports of the war in Europe. At the same time, Jack watches as his mother sends parcels to their Jewish relatives in Europe only to have them returned. Hitler is killing the Jews because he believes Germans are the superior race, especially the blond haired, blue eyed ones. Jack sees and hears all of this and comes to believe that as a Jew it is important for someone in his family to fight Hitler. When Jack's brother, Irving, is turned down for enlistment because of a bad heart, Jack knows he is the only one who can stand up for his family against Hitler. Jack lies about his age and enlists in the Army. Jack believes the war is a game of sorts, a fair battle between the good guys and the bad guys. However, Jack soon learns that war is not that black and white.

Jack knows in his heart that what Hitler is doing to the Jews is morally wrong. However, when Jack is shot down in Czechoslovakia, he discovers that the people he hated so much, the enemy, are people just like him. Jack sees starving people, injured people,





and children who have become homeless and orphaned from the bombs Jack and his fellow soldiers dropped on their homes. Suddenly war becomes less of a game and more of a reality to Jack. Jack begins to question the necessity of war and expresses the hope that there will never be another war.

## Family

Jack is the middle child of a family of five. Both Jack's parents still live as well as his older brother and younger sister. Jack is fiercely proud of his family and love his siblings. Jack also embraces his religion with a deep sense of pride. It is because of his love for his family and his religion that Jack knows he must go to war. Jack wants to be one of the soldiers who stops Hitler from executing Jews. Jack also believes that someone in his family should stand up for them against Hitler, so when his brother cannot go to war, he volunteers despite his young age.

Due to the fact that Jack enlists when he is only fifteen, he cannot inform his family where he has gone, afraid they will tell the Army the truth and force him to stay home. During his training and service time in Europe, Jack thinks of his family often. Jack dreams of the deli down the street from his house, the apartment building where his family has lived for many years, and the sound of his mother's deep voice. When Jack is shot down and becomes a POW, his dreams of home become more intense. Jack is afraid he will not see his family again. At the same time, Jack's family gets a telegram informing them that their son has gone missing in action. The family did not know Jack was in the war, but the telegram lets them know the truth. They worry for a long time for their son until he is finally able to send them another telegram informing them he is safe. Family is why Jack decides to go to war and what keeps him focused during the war, making family a theme of the novel.

# Style

## Point of View

The point of view of the novel is third person omniscient. The point of view character is Jack Raab, a young man who enlists in the Army at fifteen by using his older brother's birth certificate. The author remains with Jack throughout the novel, never moving into the mind of the other characters. The reader is allowed to see Jack's thoughts and emotions, creating an intimacy between the reader and Jack so that when Jack is forced to parachute out of his plane, the reader cares about what might happen to Jack.

The third person point of view works well in this novel because it keeps the story focused on the main character, Jack Raab, and it allows an intimacy between the reader and Jack that is necessary for the plot to achieve its intended impact. By focusing only on Jack, the author is able to build a strong story while also creating a connection between the reader and his main character. If the author had chosen to use another point of view, or to use more than one narrative character, the novel may not have the impact it has. The only other point of view that might have worked just as well in this novel would be the first person point of view.

## Setting

The novel begins in the Bronx, New York where Jack was born and raised. The Bronx is a small community within the larger New York City and is populated by a large number of Jewish families. The Bronx is an intimate neighborhood that gave Jack a deep pride in his religion and a strong sense of family. After Jack joins the Army, he goes to Miami Beach, Florida and then Louisiana. These places are very different from the Bronx and begin to instill in Jack a deep sense of homesickness. Later, Jack is sent to Europe where he lives on a military base between bombing missions. Finally, Jack is shot down over Czechoslovakia and spends several days wandering the countryside before being taken prisoner by the Germans.

The settings within this novel work for a variety of reasons. Jack's hometown of the Bronx is important because this community has instilled in Jack a deep sense of pride for his family and his religion. It is because Jack is Jewish that he chooses to join the Army and fight Hitler. The settings of Miami Beach and Louisiana are important because they begin to show Jack the world, but also show him how different the world outside the Bronx can be. Finally, Europe and Czechoslovakia are important because they are realistic locations that a soldier might have gone to during World War II, the war in which Jack participates. These settings lend authenticity to the novel, allowing the reader to believe that they are reading the story of a real teenager who chose to go fight in the war in order to help his fellow Jews.



## Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is simple English. The novel is written for young readers, therefore the grammar and sentence structure is simple, but not so simple as to be distracting to an older reader. The novel includes many phrases in German, especially after Jack is taken as a prisoner of war, as well as a few phrases in Yiddish, the ancient language of Jews. These phrases are spoken by the Germans or are remembered phrases that Jack has heard his grandmother say. These phrases are often explained immediately within the text and therefore pose no obstacle to the comprehension of the novel.

The language of this novel is simple, but well structured to entertain both young readers and older ones. The language includes phrases in German and Yiddish, allowing the reader to grasp the full experience of being in a place where Germans live. The language lends some authenticity to the novel, giving the reader a realistic feel of what Jack was going through when he became a prisoner of war. The irony of the similarity between German and the Yiddish that Jack's grandmother speaks allows the reader, as well as Jack, to see how little differences there are between Germans and Jews. In this way, the language of the novel helps to illustrate the theme of coming of age.

## Structure

The novel is divided into four parts, beginning with the crew, moving to the missions, then to bail out, and finally home. Within these parts, the novel is divided into twenty-one chapters. Most of the chapters are short, some as short as only a page or two. The story is told both with exposition and dialogue, moving from descriptions of locations to internal dialogue, and including many conversations Jack has with his crewmates and fellow soldiers.

The novel includes only one story line. The plot follows Jack Raab as he goes through crew training for a B-17 in Louisiana. From Louisiana, Jack goes to Europe where he and his crew fly more than twenty missions, dropping bombs on various targets throughout Germany and other axis countries nearby. The story takes Jack from an eager fifteen year old who lies his way into the Army to a mature sixteen year old who is the soul survivor of the final, fatal flight of his crew.



## Quotes

"He had never really believed he would fool the Air Corps this long. The only reason he had was his size. He had always been big for his age. At fourteen he'd been taller than his older brother and nearly as tall as his father, who was just a hair under six feet."  
Part 1, The Crew: Chapter 1, pg. 10

"He had nightmares about the Nazis coming to get his family. He'd hear them in the hall outside their apartment, their black boots striking the floor like the clop of horses' hooves. He'd wake up in a sweat, his hear pounding, feeling as if he were suffocating."  
Part 1, The Crew: Chapter 1, pg. 11

"He'd dream about coming home a hero, covered with ribbons and decorations. Maybe limping from a wound in his leg, and with a black eye patch over one eye. Everyone would cry when they saw him, his mother, his brother, and sister, his cousins and aunts and uncles, even his father would be crying. And Jack would just smile and say, I had to enlist...I had to go and fight Hitler..." Part 1, The Crew: Chapter 2, pg. 25

"But going into combat was a bigger divide then the Atlantic Ocean. It was the test. It was what all his training had been about. And though Jack had dreamed over and over about all the great things he'd do in combat, deep down inside himself he didn't know how he'd really act until the time came." Part 1, The Crew: Chapter 3, pg. 35

"Get up, he ordered himself. He was horrified to find himself crouched over that way. Get up. He forced himself up. He made himself straighten up. And as he did, he saw a bomber snap in half." Part 2, The Missions: Chapter 6, pg. 70

"Squatting down, he rubbed his hands over the ground. He was back. He was safe. He'd flown his first mission. Dirt had never felt so good." Part 2, The Missions: Chapter 6, pg. 72

"At night Jack dropped into the sack and fell dead asleep. He didn't think, he didn't want to think. But two or three hours later he'd wake up, his heart pounding, sure that his name was being called for the flying rooster." Part 2, The Missions: Chapter 8, pg. 85

"The last week in April, Jack turned sixteen. He'd been in the Army nearly a year. In the latrine he studied his face in the mirror. There were dark patches around his eyes and hollows in his cheeks. He thought he looked older, but he wasn't sure. He knew he felt older. He didn't say a word about his birthday to anyone, but he thought about it all day long."  
Part 2, The Missions: Chapter 9, pg. 97

"The plane was going crazy, dipping, sliding, slipping. Jack crawled to the window. The



wing was broken right back to number two engine. It was just hanging there, and as Jack looked, it broke free and fell away." Part 3, Bail Out: Chapter 10, pg. 105

"Jack threw himself forward on the bike. There were no side streets, no turnoffs, just a long straight street that seemed to stretch for miles. A shot rang out. He felt it pass beneath his legs. His neck shriveled, his whole back felt skinned raw. He never heard the next shot, only felt the bike exploding under him." Part 3, Bail Out: Chapter 12, pg. 121

"But even seeing them crippled, wounded, no longer whole, Jack felt a chill. Hitler's master race. Forget it, he told himself. There never was a master race, just a lot of dumb clucks who swallowed Hitler's garbage." Part 3, Bail Out: Chapter 14, pg. 132

"He sat down. He hardly heard the applause. The floor of the radio room was still slippery with Chuckie's blood...Dave was still fumbling with his chute...the plane was still falling through the sky..." Part 4, Home: Chapter 21, pg. 188

## Topics for Discussion

Why does Jack join the Army? Why does Jack feel so strongly about fighting the Germans? Why is it important to the plot that Jack is Jewish? Would Jack have done the same thing if he had been another religion? How does Jack get into the Army? How old is he? What might happen if someone found out the truth? Why is Jack's brother not able to join the Army?

Why does Jack not tell his family where he is going? Why does Jack not write to his mother? Why does Jack not call home? Why does Jack not go home when he has his furlough? Why does Jack tell Chuckie that his mother is dead, that he has no siblings, and that his father is in Alaska? Why does Jack never tell Chuckie the truth? Why does Jack tell Stan the truth?

What is flak? Why does it surround the plane when they fly over enemy territory? Why does Jack surround himself with flak jackets? What are the flak jackets do? Why do some of the men carry good luck objects? What do the men hope these objects will do? Do the objects really work? What are some of Jack's good luck objects?

Who is Dotty? Why does Jack call Dotty from New Orleans? What does Jack hope to get from this phone call? Why does Dotty begin to write Jack? How does Jack feel about these letters? How does Dotty feel about Jack? Why does this feeling appear to change when Dotty learns the truth about Jack's age?

Why does Jack bury his gun and his jacket when he first lands outside Pilsen? What is Jack afraid of? What could Jack have done differently after his landing? Did Jack have a chance of survival if he had not run into the guards at the checkpoint? Why or why not? How much longer could Jack have survived without food?

Why does Jack give the starving child his egg? What is significant about Jack's encounter with the child? How does this encounter change Jack's opinion of Germans? How does this change in attitude change Jack's opinion about war? What is Jack's opinion of war at the beginning of the novel? What is Jack's opinion at the end of the book? What caused the change? Did the book change your opinion of war? Why or why not?

Discuss age restriction in the Army. Should there be age restrictions? Why are there age restrictions? Should boys as young as Jack be allowed to fight in wars? Why or why not? Do you think boys today would be able to get into the Army at fifteen? Why or why not? What should be the youngest age a person should be allowed into the Army? Defend your answer.