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Agile<sup>THE</sup>-Minded  
**EXECUTIVE**

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Drive Better Results by  
Shifting How You Think

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Tommy's Story: An Airman's Mind Shift Saga

The squadron of eleven B-29 bombers took to the air at 0330 on December 14, 1944 and soon approached its targets over Japanese-held Burma. This was supposed to be a “milk run”—a routine mission. That assessment couldn't have been more off target.

It was Tommy's turn to move to the bomb bay hatch door of his plane, Gambler's Choice, and peer through the small glass window. His task was to ensure the bombs were away and to let the bombardier know that no bombs were still hung up in the bay. He looked through the small window as the orders “Bombs away!” were given. In one moment, all the bombs dropped away from the bay, the swinging bay gates waving good-bye as the high-explosives plummeted toward their targets. Tommy turned to make the call to the bombardier and suddenly—a deafening explosion.

Tommy was immediately pinned to the floor as the hulking B-29 flipped in the air. The sky was red with flames from burning fuel, his hand was bloody, and air was rushing all around. Tommy made his way to the swinging bomb bay hatch door and looked down through the open bomb gates. The bomber was in a flat spin spiraling toward earth. He saw bodies some with parachutes, some horridly not, hurtling past the open gates as he realized that he had to act—now. He had to parachute to save his life using the empty bomb bay as his escape route.

He turned toward the other crew and to his best friend, Vernon, yelling, “Are you coming?”

Vernon answered, “Yes, go, go! I’m right behind you!”

Centrifugal force pushed Tommy back into the plane but Tommy fiercely grabbed hold of the sides of the bomb bay opening and with all his strength pulled himself downward out of the plane. He shot into the air, tumbling and keeping watch as the spiraling plane came around again toward him. Finally he saw it was clear and pulling the ripcord, activated the chute. But in his confusion and haste to get out of the plane, he made a major error: He had forgotten to refasten his chest strap to secure his upper body when the chute deployed. Upon activation, the chute yanked Tommy upward and, because his chest strap was unfastened, he fell out of the arm harness and hung upside down. He was descending rapidly

only hanging by his legs but finally got himself upright by grabbing his pants leg and working his way back upright. He got a hold of his straps and just hung on trying to regain his senses. Tommy was light-headed as the oxygen was thin at that altitude. He got lost in the momentary silence and the realization that he saw no more chutes coming out of his plane. He watched in horror whispering, “Please, please let me see someone else getting out of that plane.” But there were none. With great sadness, he saw Gambler’s Choice spin in a fiery, smoking descent into a final explosion. The realization crashed through the silence of the air around him. He knew that he lost some of his closest friends, Vern being the best of them. As he looked out across the Burmese jungle that was coming closer into view, Tommy’s thoughts drifted to what brought him to this moment.

Tommy was born in Manhattan in 1924. He was the only child of immigrant parents of Armenian descent. Because no one could remember his Armenian name, Karnig, he was often called “Tommy” due to his last name being Thomasian. His father owned his own business in the city. He created fine beaded and sequined designs which were carefully sewn onto gowns in the top fashion houses

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*“Please, please  
let me see  
someone else  
getting out of  
that plane.” But  
there were none.*

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*Tommy in uniform, age 18.*

in New York City. His mother was a piano teacher and a woman with an intuitive mind that was way ahead of her time. Both parents had a great influence on Tommy. His father—one of Theodore Roosevelt’s Rough Riders—had a quiet dignity and honest work ethic that was respected in his professional circles. His mother had a kind heart and a sharp wit spiked with practical jokes. She was also a forward-thinking person who asked Tommy questions about his life and shared her views. She encouraged him to think about his own choices and behaviors. She challenged him when he did wrong and listened when he needed compassion. Both parents gave him a healthy respect of all people, which was supported by the very diverse neighborhood of immigrants who had also come to this country seeking a new life.

When Tommy was eighteen, he had a job working in a factory as a riveter working the night shift building Catalina bombers. He felt this was his way of doing his part in aiding the war effort. One day, the union boss saw that he wasn’t taking his smoking break like the others. The foreman barked at him, asking him why he wasn’t on break to which Tommy responded, “I don’t smoke.”

At this remark, the foreman became upset and threatened to not approve him to join the union unless he put his tools

down and took a break. Tommy looked him square in the eye and asked, “Don’t you care that a war is going on? They need what we’re building so what’s wrong if I am willing to keep working?”

The foreman glared at him repeating his threat about the union. Confused, Tommy took his break and contemplated what had happened. He just couldn’t be with people like this and still look at himself in the mirror. So a week later on November 6, 1942 he quit the job, left high school, and



*B-29 Bomber*

*Image is from Airforce Image Gallery and have been modified and can be found at Planes of World War II page*

volunteered to join the Army Air Corps. He discussed his decision with his parents and, realizing his deep commitment, they gave their blessings as long as he promised to finish his last term of high school after his military service. How excited he was! He decided to pursue a flight engineer route. Even

though he’d be up against guys who went to college and he hadn’t yet finished high school, he really wanted to go for it so he hunkered down and studied hard. Tommy had a higher purpose that fueled his will to give this a shot. He believed that this was how he was going to become a good man. Serving others and making sure that the planes were sound



for our pilots flying to defend our country and bring them home safe to their families. This was his thinking that drove his choices to join the war effort. Three weeks after he finished his initial training in Chanute Field, IL he was shipped out to Seattle to the Boeing plant and it is there that he learned of The Flying Superfortress—the B-29 bomber that was just beginning to roll off the factory lines and was being tested. Though he failed some of the technical exams, he did pass the ones he needed to in order to become an Electrical Specialist/Gunner on the B-29. He was eventually assigned to his own B-29 named Gambler's Choice. Two years later on December 13, 1944, Tommy's squadron received orders to fly a mission to drop bombs on Rangoon, Burma. They were to leave on December 14, 1944.

Tommy's mind was snapped back to the present by his sudden awareness of bullets whizzing by his head and body as he continued to plummet toward the area where Japanese soldiers were gathered. With a jolt, he realized the Japanese were shooting at the men as they descended out of the sky. Tommy looked up and saw that there was a v-cut in the strap right above him. A bullet had pierced it just a few inches from his head. He decided to become less of a target and curled his body into a ball eyeing the field where he was likely to land. On the way down, he thought of a plan to get to a station on the north coast that had provisions for this kind of emergency. Tommy hit the ground in a field of rice paddies. He shed his parachute and began to run for

the coast but was quickly surrounded by an army of local peasants who took him and presented him to the Japanese soldiers. They tied his hands behind his back. At the precise point that his freedom was taken from him was when he truly understood the value of such a gift.

Upon arriving at Rangoon Central Jail, he and others were stripped, searched, interrogated, beaten, and put into solitary. He eventually was put into a cell with one of his crew who survived, Norm. Of course, starvation, further interrogations, and beatings ensued but Tommy kept thinking of ways to survive, to prepare for what might come next. Fear was his enemy and eventually, his enemy began to gain some ground in his mind. Did anyone know what happened and where we were? Were they coming to get us? What was going to happen to us? These and other uncertainties racked his mind, and the minds of all the POWs.

Days dragged on to months as Tommy, standing at six feet, withered to 120 pounds. He wasted away just like everyone else who was imprisoned there. Those imprisoned, the Chinese, British RAF, and Americans, began to wonder how many more suns would rise over their captivity. For some, their thoughts began turning to desperation, futility, and hopelessness. Then, there came the pivotal moment that re-awakened Tommy's thinking and became the lightning rod for a critical shift in his attitude and actions. Tommy noticed that there were some men who were brought into

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the compound broken, with the blood dripping through the makeshift stretchers made of leaves and branches from the jungle that somehow survived with little-to-no medical care. Yet, other prisoners with no noticeable wounds would go into their cell, lie down, face the wall, and be dead in two days. It came to Tommy in a flash of insight: These men gave up mentally. They told themselves the story of “I can’t” and “no hope.” They couldn’t imagine a future beyond their present circumstances and so they became a true prisoner, held hostage by the daily beatings, starvation, uncertainty and mental anguish.

Tommy made a decision in that moment to tell himself a different story, which became his vision and purpose: *“This is not where I’m going to die. I am going home and I will see my family again and I’m going to help as many guys as I can go with me.”* And with that, he shifted his thinking to create a new habit of mind that drove him to make better choices each day. Once he engaged this new way of seeing his circumstances, he realized that he had control of what he thought about them. He began to ask different questions,

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*“He began to ask different questions, which helped him make better decisions...taking actions that he could control that would help him endure his current reality.”*

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which helped him make better decisions as to how he would move about each day engaging in behaviors and taking actions that he could control that would help him endure his current reality and increase his chances of achieving his vision: Going home and embracing his family again. He chose to believe. He chose to think differently about what he had to face daily.

Throughout his time in prison camp, Tommy and others were put in the execution stance on their knees many times. Each time, he thought his end was only a few breaths away as he felt the cold steel of a sword resting on his neck. Another time, a Japanese prison guard cornered Tommy in his cell and shoved the business end of a rifle at the base of his skull; laughing, the guard said he was going to kill him now and then pulled the trigger on an empty chamber. Tommy passed out right then. But Tommy had made the decision that he was going to make it home and he kept his mind on his goal: “I’m going home. I’m going to see my family again and I’m going to help as many guys as I can do the same.” Did he have fear and nightmares? Of course he did. Did he struggle with keeping his goal crystal clear and getting through each horrific day? Yes, at times he did. But he kept the mantra going. He kept the picture in his mind that would help him endure what he saw and what he felt physically, emotionally, and mentally.

The rest is history. With the growing impact the American B-29s were having in the power of their bombing payload and the advancing British armies making their way south from Mandalay, the Japanese realized the end was near. In 1945, the Japanese evacuated the Rangoon prison camp, taking with them those that could walk and leaving behind the weaker and barely surviving prisoners. Tommy was one of them. When he and another fellow prisoner realized that their captors had gone, they scoped out the compound before letting the other prisoners know. Though he was suffering from swollen legs and feet due to gangrene, Tommy and his friend carefully inspected the camp to ensure there were no remaining Japanese or booby traps. Upon doing so, they heard planes coming in overhead and realized they were allied planes. “Hallelujah! They’re coming for us!”

Then cheers turned to horror as bombs began to drop.



*Tommy after his liberation*

The allies didn’t realize that the only people in this camp were allied prisoners. Quickly Tommy and a buddy found the supply hut, got white paint, and scrambled up onto the roofs of two prison houses and painted the following phrases: *Japs Gone. Extract Digit.* At that

point, the bombing stopped and food and medical supplies were parachute-dropped into the camp.

Soon, they were liberated. Tommy is seen above a few days after his liberation at a hospital in Calcutta. In the end, he and other men who endured their time as POWs finally came home. Tommy fulfilled his vision of hugging his family and knew that other men were doing the same.

Life-altering experiences leave their mark on us. What we do with it is the opportunity we all have. Will we be victimized by our painful experiences and live a less vibrant and powerful life under a cloud of fear, anger and doubt? Or will we forge a foundation of strength from which we will build a way of thinking that will create the best possible life and contributions that we can? Not many of us will face the kind of extreme circumstance that Tommy did; however, everything is relative, right? We all will face some challenge that we each will consider extreme for us. Let's look at how developing an agile mindset gives you the best shot at becoming the victor, not the victim, regardless of circumstances you are facing now and will throughout your life.

In the last chapter I will return to conclude Tommy's story to tell you what he made of this experience and how it shaped his life.