

3rd Place (High Schools, 2023): Zac Browne, Home School, Death's Siren

A piercing wail shatters the lethargy of the cold December night. There is a moment more of darkness, then it is slowly overtaken as, one by one, powerful spotlights light up the heavens, searching. Anxiety laces the air so thickly that I can taste it.

Beside me, Clyde is peering into the sky. "Nae a thing 'sides th' clouds, far as ah kin see," he says, his thick accent rendering the words almost unintelligible. He shoves his hands deeper into his jacket. I keep my numb hands gripped onto the handles of my anti aircraft gun. "Ach, calm doon, man," says Clyde, "ye look like ye—" Whatever comparison was to be made is cut off by a sound that sends shouts of alarm up from every gunner in the city.

At first, it is barely distinguishable from the air raid alarms. As it grows louder, however, it becomes clear that this sound is quite different. Its pitch continuously heightens, an ugly tortured drone that climbs toward a terrifying scream of triumph. As the cacophony of the first bombs reaches our post, Clyde curses, hands no longer in his pockets. "Stukas!"

My mouth is dry and my knuckles white as I search the sky, finger a feather's weight from pulling the trigger. Nothing. Clyde's spotlight catches only fog until—

"There!" Clyde yells. I turn to see a dark shape exposed for a moment in his beam.

The demonic shriek of the Stuka's dive rises above all other sounds. I can feel it in my mind, that shriek. It freezes me in place and liquefies every muscle in my frail, mortal body.

"Look lively, lad! Hit 'im already!" screams Clyde, voice cracking. His reproach wrests me away from my terrified trance. I bring the bomber into my scope's line of sight and pull the trigger. Flame erupts from the gun as shells are launched towards the Stuka. Lit sporadically by Clyde's searchlight, the plane weaves through the barrage and continues its course. As it draws near, it releases its payload and levels out—

One of my shells takes out its right wing. The Stuka flails for a moment, then it hits the ground and is enveloped in a burst of orange fire. One triumphal second passes before his bomb detonates beside me.