

## ***“Letter to an American”, by Antoine de Saint Exupery***

I left the United States in 1943 in order to rejoin my fellow flyers of “Flight to Arras”. I traveled on board an American convoy. This convoy of thirty ships was carrying fifty thousand of your soldiers from the United States to North Africa. When, on waking, I went up on deck, I found myself surrounded by this city on the move. The thirty ships carved their way powerfully through the water. But I felt something else besides a sense of power. This convoy conveyed to me the joy of a crusade.

Friends in America, I would like to do you complete justice. Perhaps, someday, more or less serious disputes will arise between us. Every nation is selfish and every nation considers its selfishness sacred. Perhaps your feeling of power may, someday, lead you to seize advantages for yourselves that we consider unjust to us. Perhaps, sometime in the future, more or less violent disputes may occur between us. If it is true that wars are won by believers, it is also true that peace treaties are sometimes signed by businessmen. If therefore, at some future date, I were to inwardly reproach those American businessmen, I could never forget the high-minded war aims of your country. I shall always bear witness in the same way to your fundamental qualities. American mothers did not give their sons for the pursuit of material aims. Nor did these boys accept the idea of risking their lives for such material aims. I know – and will later tell my countrymen – that it was a spiritual crusade that led you into the war.

I have two specific proofs of this among others. Here is the first.

During this crossing in convoy, mingling as I did with your soldiers, I was inevitably a witness to the war propaganda they were fed. Any propaganda is by definition amoral, and in order to achieve its aim it makes use of any sentiment, whether noble, vulgar, or base. If the American soldiers had been sent to war merely in order to protect American interests, their propaganda would have insisted heavily on your oil wells, your rubber plantations, your threatened commercial markets. But such subjects were hardly mentioned. If war propaganda stressed other things, it was because your soldiers wanted to hear about other things. And what were they told to justify the sacrifice of their lives in their own eyes? They were told of the hostages hanged in Poland, the hostages shot in France. They were told of a new form of slavery that threatened to stifle part of humanity. Propaganda spoke to them not about themselves, but about others. They were made to feel solidarity with all humanity. The fifty thousand soldiers of this convoy were going to war, not for the citizens of the United States, but for man, for human respect, for man’s freedom and greatness. The nobility of your countrymen dictated the same nobility where propaganda was concerned. If someday your peace-treaty technicians should, for material and political reasons, injure something of France, they would be betraying your true face. How could I forget the great cause for which the American people fought?

This faith in your country was strengthened in Tunis, where I flew war missions with one of your units in July 1943. One evening, a twenty-year-old American pilot invited me and my friends to dinner. He was tormented by a moral problem that seemed very important to him. But he was shy and couldn’t make up his mind to confide his secret torment to us. We had to ply him with drink before he finally explained, blushing: “This morning I completed my twenty-fifth war mission. It was over Trieste. For an instant I was engaged with several Messerschmitt 109s. I’ll do it again tomorrow and I may be shot down. You know why you are fighting. You have to save your country. But I have nothing to do with your problems in Europe. Our interests lie in the Pacific. And so if I accept the risk of being buried here, it is, I believe, in order to help you get back your country. Every man has a right to be free in his own country. But if and my compatriots help you to regain your country, will you help us in turn in the Pacific?”

We felt like hugging our young comrade! In the hour of danger, he needed reassurance for his faith in the solidarity of all humanity. I know that war is indivisible, and that a mission over Trieste indirectly serves American interests in the Pacific, but our comrade was unaware of these complications. And the next day he would accept the risks of war in order to restore our country to us. How could I forget such a testimony? How could I not be touched, even now, by the memory of this?

Friends in America, you see it seems that something new is emerging on our planet. It is true that technical progress in modern times has linked men together like a complex nervous system. The means of travel are numerous and communication is instantaneous – We are joined together materially like the cells of a single body, but this body has as yet no soul. This organism is not yet aware of its unity as a whole. The hand does not yet know that it is one with the eye . And yet it is this awareness of future unity which vaguely tormented this twenty-year-old pilot and which was already at work in him.

For the first time in the history of the world, your young men are dying in a war that – despite all its horrors – is for them an experience of love. Do not betray them. Let them dictate their peace when the time comes! Let that peace reassemble them! This war is honorable; may their spiritual faith make peace as honorable.

I am happy among my french and american comrades. After my first missions in the P-38s Lightnings, they discovered my age. 43 years! What a scandal! Your American rules are inhuman. At 43 years of age one does not fly a fast plane like the Lightnings. The long white beards might get entangled with the controls and cause accidents. I was therefore unemployed for a few months.

But how can one think about France unless one takes some of the risks? There they are suffering, fighting for survival-dying. How can one judge those – even the worst among them – who suffer bodily there, while one is oneself sitting comfortably in some propaganda office here? And how can one love the best among them? To love is to participate, to share. In the end, by virtue of a miraculous and generous decision by General Eaker. My white beard fell off and I was allowed back into my Lightning.

I rejoin Gavoille (French pilot), of “Flight to Arras”, who is in charge of our Squadron in your reconnaissance Group. I also met up again with Hochedé, also of “Flight to Arras”, whom I had earlier called a Saint of WAR and who was then killed in war, in a Lightning. I rejoin all those of whom I had said that under the jackboot of the invader they were not defeated, but were merely seed buried in a silent earth. After the long winter of the Armistice, the seed sprouted. My squadron once again blossomed in the daylight like a tree. I once again experience the joy of those high-altitude missions that are like deep-sea diving. One plunges into forbidden territory equipped with barbaric instruments, surrounded by a multitude of dials. Above one’s own country, one breathes oxygen produced in America. New York Air in a French sky. Isn’t that amazing? One flies in that light monster of a Lightning, in which one has the impression not of moving in space but of being present simultaneously everywhere on a whole continent. One brings back photographs that are analyzed by stereoscope like growing organism under a microscope. Those analyzing your photographic material do the work of a bacteriologist. They seek on the surface of the body (France) the traces of the virus that is destroying it. The enemy forts, depots, convoys show up under the lens like minuscule bacilli. One can die of them.

And the poignant meditation while flying over France, so near and yet so far away! One is separated from her by centuries. All tenderness, all memories, all reasons for living are spread out 35,000 feet below, illuminated by sunlight, and nevertheless more inaccessible than any Egyptian treasures locked away in the glass cases of a museum.

Antoine de Saint Exupéry.