

## **In Celebration of the United States Air Force**

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"I want to be a pilot," said the eldest son  
"Me too, me too," chimed in the youngest one  
"To fly high in the sky defying gravity  
That's the life for me!"

Whether a high school grad  
A GED  
Or a graduate  
Of the Air Force Academy

Young men and women  
Dream of flying  
idealism of youth in their bones  
A sense of purpose permeating  
Their very souls

My father was one of those dreamers  
Defying his parents  
Lying about his age  
Not yet 17, he joined the Army Air Corps  
With an assumed name  
Nobody questioned him  
Six feet tall  
180 pounds  
This perfect specimen of young manhood  
Eager to lay his life on the line for our country  
at the outset of World War II

Joseph "Joey" Perlman  
A Jewish boy from the south side of Chicago  
Morphed into Timothy Manno  
Passing as Italian  
a buffer against anti-Semitism  
prevalent then in the military  
as was racism and sexism

The dark skinned Tuskegee airmen of World War II  
Fought long and hard  
Separately  
While still subject to Jim Crow laws at home  
It was liberating to fight for their country  
Even a racist country

Timothy Manno was a Jew  
 Masquerading as a Christian  
 With a cross around his neck  
 His mother would have been aghast

No one doubted him  
 His thick black curls  
 And shining dark brown eyes  
 Charmed the recruiter

Timothy said all the right things:

“This is me  
 Where I want to be  
 This indeed  
 Is my destiny”

“I was meant to join the Army Air Corps  
 To grow and learn  
 To earn experience  
 To last forever  
 To prepare me for life  
 And a solid career”

The recruiter heard him loud and clear

“Will I be enough?  
 I know the training can be tough  
 Rough on many  
 Who can't take it “

In the war to save his people from Auschwitz  
 Tim became a Master Sergeant  
 Stealthily flying to deliver food and medical supplies

One fateful day  
 He heard the thunder of destruction  
 His vulnerable plane attacked  
 Quickly instructing his crew to  
 Use their parachutes  
 Before the inevitable  
 Crash  
 But there was no time

The plane hit the ground catching fire

With excruciating pain in his right leg  
Tim pulled each member of his crew out of the wreckage

As the plane lay smoldering  
He smelled the stench of blood  
Heard the moaning of his companions  
Praying for rescue soon

“Please God soon”  
Tim cried in vain  
Used his first aid training to do what he could  
Until help arrived

At the hospital  
His companions became lifeless one by one  
Leaving Tim the only survivor  
A severely broken leg his only injury

Tim came home using a cane  
Bearing survivor guilt and PTSD  
“Why me?” What did I do to earn the right to live  
When my brothers died?”

Tim’s story is not unique  
Today, brave men and women  
Choose to serve our country  
Choose to become skilled and competent  
Knowing there is no guarantee of safety

Young men with muscled arms and sturdy legs  
Young women svelte and strong  
Top notch physical condition is the norm  
For members of the air force

Not just the body  
But the mind must be  
Keen and sharp  
Always leading with their hearts  
Fearless  
Focused  
Forceful  
Phenomenal  
Freedom fighters all  
Purposeful  
Passionate

Persistent  
Pleasure in helping others  
Working well under pressure

We've come a long way  
Since the day  
The Wright Brothers  
Sold the Army Air Corps their very first airplanes  
A long way since the United States Air Force  
Officially became an independent branch of the military  
75 years ago

Now  
Brilliant scientists and engineers  
Continue to make progress  
Each plane more advanced than the one before

Recruits of all faiths and colors  
Serve side by side  
Women  
Once relegated to non-combat roles  
Became official members of the Air Force in 1976  
Now 21 % of the Air Force population

In classrooms  
Across the country  
Girls and boys daydream  
Drawing planes and helicopters  
Letting their imaginations flow

Envisioning flying above the clouds  
Seeing the sun rise and set  
Colors sweeping across the sky

As we celebrate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United States Air Force  
Wide eyed young men and women  
Eager and enthralled  
Wait willingly to give their all