

The Adventurer

Colonel Demas *Nick* Crow was the perfect compliment to Major Hamilton. A career Army Air Force officer, he had been through more precarious situations in his life than one could imagine. A daring and scrappy fighter, he always managed to emerge from each unscathed.

Born in Traverse City, Michigan, at the turn of the century, Demas Crow lied about his age and joined the Army at seventeen. His enlistment was just in time to send him to the Mexican border with the Twelfth Cavalry during the tense border war of 1917. Itching for action, upon learning that a skirmish was developing at Nogales, Crow went AWOL (Absent With Out Leave) to join the fracas. Soon thereafter his commanders learned his true age and he was promptly discharged and sent home. The following April he turned eighteen and enlisted legally, arriving France in time to see action on the Marne and in the Argonne Forest with the Third Division. His courage was unmatched and he was promoted to second lieutenant before returning home.



Though most young soldiers would be thrilled to receive a battlefield commission, for Crow it was a step backward. He did want to be an Army officer but, more importantly, he wanted to build a successful military career--the kind that required the right education. In order to qualify for West Point he gave up his temporary commission and began attending night classes to prepare himself academically. In 1920, after passing his exams, he was appointed to the Class of 1924.

It was at West Point that Demas Crow earned the nickname that followed him for the rest of his life, a welcomed moniker since he had never been fond of his given name. Initially fellow cadets called him "Nicodemas"; which was soon shortened to "Nick". For the rest of his life Demas Crow became *Nick Crow*.

Though Nick Crow excelled in sports, in fact it seemed--in EVERY sport, academics were not so easily mastered. With determination he worked hard, he accepted tutoring from a fellow cadet, and on June 12, 1924 graduated 271 out of his class of 405. Commissioned an infantry lieutenant, Crow requested transfer to the Army Air Corps where he became an avid flier.

Nick Crow's early career was unimpressive and mundane; he was just one more air officer in an experimental air force. In 1939 Crow was *flying a desk* as a

member of the Air Corps staff in Washington, D.C. when fighting began in Europe. Early the following year he was ordered to Egypt as an American observer of the Royal Air Force's combat actions against Germany. For Nick Crow that role meant more than sitting behind a desk and writing reports, it meant going where he could watch the RAF in action. Long before the United States entered World War II Crow had flown twenty-two air missions against the Axis.

Crow was with the RAF in Athens when German forces overwhelmed the island early in 1941. When Crow's retreating British friends informed him that a seat on an airplane to safety was being reserved for his departure, he declined the offer. Nick felt that his own departure would deny some other British pilot evacuation. The RAF left without Demas Crow.

One day later he was approached by two British ground officers and a Greek who had been unable to get off the island. The men informed him they had found and repaired an old, two-engine Anson bomber but that they needed a pilot. Throughout the night and into the following morning the four men worked to prepare their rescue-plane for takeoff, only to see it destroyed by a dawn strafing attack by a formation of Stukas. *"They really plastered us,"* Crow later recalled. *"They killed the Greek and wounded one of the British. I never ran so fast in my life."*

A short time later Crow and the unarmed British soldier were captured while trying to get their wounded comrade to a nearby seaport. Interred together for a brief time by the German forces, Crow was subsequently released when his West Point ring identified him as the citizen of a neutral nation. In the days that followed his release he remained in occupied Athens, moving about freely and observing all that was going on around him.

In his youth Crow had been an unstoppable fighter, excelling in boxing at West Point. While still in occupied Athens he created something of an international incident after an Italian major accidentally side-swiped his car. The angry officer ordered two of his men to restrain Crow while he slapped him across the face. Crow wrenched his arms free and dropped the Italian to the ground with a single punch. One of the nearby soldiers raised his rifle to deliver a butt-stroke but Crow was faster, dropping his second opponent in less than half-a-minute.

The scene attracted the attention of a nearby German officer who promptly intervened. Crow explained he had been insulted by the Italian major's lack of respect in slapping an officer of a neutral country, and informed the now-standing major he was ready to finish the job at any time he wished. The major declined saying he was too busy. Crow responded, *"All I need is ten square yards and one minute."*

The following day after a report of that incident reached the American foreign minister in Athens, the Italian major arrived at the American legation to tender his apology. Doubtlessly, those who knew Craw had all they could do to keep from smiling during the sober event. The Italian major was sporting a highly prominent black eye.

The following year when Craw sailed with Patton's *Task Force 34* he was a full colonel, an experienced and well respected leader, and a man with a good understanding of the varied cultures in the Mediterranean. Despite his short fuse he was possessed of good judgment and self control. He could be diplomatic in the pursuit of the special mission he had volunteered for, but if the bottom fell out of diplomacy, he was the kind of fighter any soldier would love to have on his side.