



# Book of the Month

## *Lightning Down* by Tom Clavin

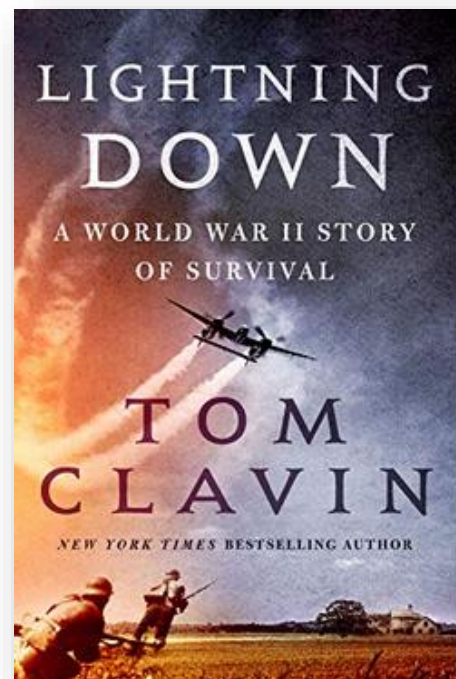
**Book Review by Lynn Reinschmiedt, Friends of the Starkville Library Board Member**

Tom Clavin has written numerous historical books, four of which have been *New York Times* best sellers: *The Heart of Everything That Is*; *Dodge City*; *Halsey's Typhoon*; and *The Last Stand of Fox Company*. The book, *Lightning Down*, a historical biography, centers around Joe Moser a young pilot from northwest Washington state who was drafted late World War II and is trained to fly the P-38 Lightning. Stationed in Europe, he is shot down on his forty-fourth mission over France in August 1944.

While the generalities of war have been covered extensively by many excellent war historians, Clavin in this book depicts the atrocities bestowed upon prisoners of war (POW) during the conflict and later in life through the first-person perspective of Joe Moser.

After successfully parachuting to safety Moser is aided by two young farmhands in violation of German policy against aiding the enemy. Moser and the two individuals are arrested by the Germans. Hearing two shots the following morning Moser assumes the two young men have suffered the fatal consequences of their actions in assisting him. This haunts Moser until late in his life.

Moser, along with 168 other pilots from New Zealand, England, Canada, United States, and other countries are initially interred in Buchenwald, one of the more notorious concentration camps of the Third Reich. Throughout his and his colleague's imprisonment, case after case of murder, abuse, and other unspeakable offenses are documented in vivid detail throughout the



book. Later when these POWs were transferred to a more traditional POW camp and the question of conditions in Buchenwald came up a common refrain often was heard, "Whatever you heard about Buchenwald, it was worse."

While the physical ordeals of these POWs came to an end, the concentration and other POW camps were liberated by the Allies and their atrocities were exposed to the world, the mental effects were taking hold. Many of these "members of the greatest generation" were just beginning to experience what we now know as post-traumatic stress disorder but then known as "shell shock" or "battle fatigue." These individuals returned to the best sense of normalcy they could. Often their families knew little of what they had endured during captivity or what caused the nightmares that haunted them throughout their lives. Stories of these concentration camps were not common knowledge: 1) because the administration was helpless to do anything about it and did not care for it to be common knowledge anyway; and 2) returning POWs were unwilling or unable to talk about their experiences while incarcerated.

While most of *Lightning Down* is devoted to depicting the experiences endured by the POWs and others interred in the concentration camps and is most interesting and informative in and of itself, the most vivid and poignant points for me personally were driven home in the "Epilogue." Here Clavin begins to document how the life of Joe Moser, the ordinary husband, father, family man more commonly known as the furnace repairman, and the many thousands of others like him returning from the war take on a new dimension. In 1982 at the age of 61 Moser attends his first POW meeting since the war's end and at the request of a fellow POW describes his and other pilots' ordeal at Buchenwald in his presentation. His story is depicted in a local newspaper and was picked up by national and international news outlets with numerous other pilots coming forward to corroborate Joe's account.

Six years later some archival data were translated and found to reveal the two farmworkers who rescued Joe Moser were not in fact executed, the deaths which had haunted Joe all these years. Upon receiving and confirming this news, the nightmares that haunted Joe all these years stopped and never returned. As he neared ninety Joe collaborated on a book entitled *A Fighter Pilot in Buchenwald*. Joe succumbed to cancer at the age of 94.

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