

A DAY TO REMEMBER

Herschel H. Green

The day dawned clear and crisp, and as the sun climbed out of the Adriatic we prepared to face the rigors of another day of combat flying. The day was 30 January 1944.

We were members of the 325th Fighter Group (The Checkertail Group) who had recently converted to the Republic P-47 Thunderbolt, also fondly known as the "Jug" because of the similarity in shape. At this time, we were based beside Lake Lesina, located on the coast of the Adriatic just above the "spur" on Italy's east coast; an unremarkable spot except for being one of the most highly malaria-infected areas in the world.

By the end of November 1943, we had completed transition from the P-40s we were equipped with in North Africa to the P-47, and early the following month we moved to Italy and began escorting the 15th Air Force B-17s and B-24s with our new Thunderbolts. By the end of January, we felt quite comfortable and pleased with the performance of the Jug.

By monitoring enemy radio transmissions, Allied intelligence agencies had learned that the Luftwaffe almost invariably scrambled their fighters about 15 minutes before the U.S. heavy bombers reached their targets. As a result, a plan was developed to take advantage of this information. Our Group Commander, Col. Bob Baseler, was instrumental in the development of this plan and thus our group was assigned responsibility for the primary role in its execution.

Basically, the strategy was to dispatch six heavy bomb groups with normal fighter escort to attack five enemy airdromes in the Villaorba/Udine area at the northern end of the Adriatic. The 325th FG was to precede the bombers, arrive over the target area exactly 15 minutes before the bombers did, and conduct a fighter sweep of the area. To avoid detection, the 325th would fly the entire route to the target, a distance of some 300 miles, over the Adriatic at zero altitude. It was hoped the enemy fighters would be caught either as they were taking off or joining up.

The day for the execution of this plan was 30 January 1944.

On that beautiful Italian morning as we ambled into the old barn which served as our briefing room, the tension was apparent. We sensed something special was in the offing but none of us had any idea what it was. As the details were revealed, our excitement soared; this had all the earmarks of being a real fun mission. As the initial euphoria began to recede, we realized there was one dangerous complication to this exciting mission: the exceedingly long over-water flight at extremely low altitude. I could not help but vividly recall the admonishment of the 8th Air Force P-47 combat veterans that had helped us transition to the P-47: "It's a great airplane but don't ever get caught below 15,000 feet in a fight!" Despite this warning and the fact that we had never trained for such a mission, we were all anxious to get underway.

The takeoffs were completed on schedule and at 0945 hours, 60 P-47s set course from our base flying at an altitude of less than 50 feet. Bob Baseler was leading the Group and I was leading the 317th Squadron. Flying as my wingman on this mission was F/O Cecil O. Dean, Panama City, Florida; leading my 2nd element was Lt. George P. Novotny, Toledo, Ohio; and flying his wing was F/O Edsel Paulk, Vernon, Texas.

As we crossed the wide beach which is characteristic of that part of the Adriatic, I dropped down as low as I dared go and set my altimeter to zero. That would be my primary reference for the remainder of the 300 mile flight to northern Italy.

The sea on this eventful day was as smooth as glass and a heavy haze lay right on the water completely obscuring the horizon. Additionally, the sky was cloudless so no matter where we looked, from straight down to straight up, there were no visual references to assist us. It was a potentially deadly situation.

We flew so low that the undersides of all our airplanes were streaming water from the spray picked up by our large four-bladed propellers. Maintaining altitude to such exact tolerances under these conditions required unbelievable concentration. The maximum of 20 to 30 feet clearance we had above the water could have been lost in the blink of an eye with disastrous results. All the leaders could do was fly on instruments to the best of their ability while the others hung on praying they were doing a good job.

When we finally made landfall on the north coast exactly on course and started our climb, I was totally drenched with perspiration and absolutely exhausted, physically and mentally. As we climbed northeast toward the target area, I was gradually able to loosen up and relax a bit. It had been a long grueling flight accomplished, fortunately, without incident.

We arrived over the complex of airfields at 20,000 feet and immediately upon leveling out and starting a sweep of the area, I spotted a number of large aircraft way below us in a loose, gaggly formation approaching one of the airfields. My pulse rate immediately shot up as it always did when I was about to engage in combat and taking a quick look around for other enemy aircraft, I pushed the nose of my P-47 over and started down with my flight of four aircraft leaving the remainder of the squadron at altitude.

I went down in a vertical dive from 20,000 feet toward the enemy aircraft which by this time were almost directly below us. The rest of my flight dropped back a little and spaced themselves in trail to follow me. I knew we were building up excessive speed in the dive, but I just could not bring myself to deviate away from the target long enough to slow down any. Had we done so, our firing would have been more accurate and easier.

As we rapidly overtook the aircraft from behind and above, I immediately identified them as Ju-52s (Junkers, German trimotor transports). They were flying at 1,000 feet above the terrain apparently strung out to take spacing for landing. I managed to get the last one in the string in my sights and almost immediately it exploded. Whipping the stick over hard, I put my plane into a vertical bank and pulled back hard on the stick in order to line up on another Ju-52. Because of my extreme speed, I only had time to walk a few hits along the fuselage and see it burst into flame as I flashed by and snapped the stick over to line up on another. In this manner I went through the gaggle of transports and was able to get four of them. With momentary thoughts of grandeur, I pulled into a hard climbing turn to position myself for another pass. This might be an opportunity to set a record for the number of aircraft shot down on a single mission! But, alas, it was not meant to be for when I completed my turn, I could see all the Ju-52s were on the ground having been expertly accounted for by the other members of my flight. It had all happened like a flash; just a handful of seconds and all the transports were down, most of them burning fiercely.

Cecil Dean reported later, "I came down on the tail of one Junkers in a flight of three. One burst and he went down, another burst sent the next one down almost

on top of the first. The third was almost on the ground when I hit him."

"We dove on those Junkers on the deck," George Novotny remembered, "and I picked out a couple that turned to the left and destroyed them both. After turning to rejoin my flight, I saw a little Hs-126 (Henschel, a small German observation plane) right in front of me. He came along wagging his wings at me, so I gave him the works. One burst and he disappeared. Only a few pieces were left of the plane, and they fluttered to the ground."

With all the Ju-52s down, I now became acutely aware of the extremely heavy ground fire we were receiving. We were in close proximity to several airfields and the overlapping defensive fire being directed at us was terrifying. I scooted out of their immediate range and started climbing back to altitude with the others in my flight following behind me. About the time we reached 10,000 feet, an Me-109 (Messerschmitt, German fighter plane) came diving past us fleeing from the fight above which was by now in full swing.

My flight of four had been clawing for altitude to get clear of the automatic weapons fire from the ground when the 109 from above plummeted past us. Just like a well rehearsed drill team, we instantly executed in-place reversals and started after him. Only now I was number four instead of lead. That was typical of the way the day continued. We never did get back to altitude.

Major Chick later recalled, "At Venice we started our climb to 20,000 feet and then Herky shouted he saw a bunch of Jerries and went down after them with his flight. Just as he dove I spotted a gaggle of 109s climbing towards the bombers and went after them with my eight Jugs. The flights in the other squadrons started calling out Jerries at about this time, too. It was a real hassle, and Hollywood would have given a million to have gotten the overall picture of the action. It still scares me when I think of all the near misses and the mid-air collisions I almost had."

At one point I was flying up a dry river bed, right on the deck, concentrating on getting within firing range of an Me-109. I had been pursuing it for several minutes when I was shocked to realize that another airplane, just a few feet above me and slightly to my left, was shooting at the same 109. It was another P-47 but the pilot couldn't see me hidden beneath the huge nose and wing of his plane. I quickly gave up the chase and slipped off to the side out of danger. Edsel Paulk was flying the other plane, and he downed the 109 several seconds later. As the 109 crashed, Paulk pulled up sharply and flew right through a bunch of high voltage power lines that crossed the river at that point, obviously not seeing them in the excitement of the moment. Great balls of blue fire flashed across Italy along the broken lines, but Paulk's old Jug never missed a beat and just kept on flying.

Once again I started climbing for altitude and this time I encountered a Ma-202 (Macchi, an Italian fighter plane) diving for the safety of the ground. Turning as quickly as I could, I dropped in behind him and began closing the distance between us to a reasonable firing range. By this time I was separated from the other members of the flight and felt a little apprehensive about being that far from home and flying at ground level in enemy territory.

The 202 pilot was flying flat out on the deck, and we were having to pull up over trees, houses and fence rows. I was doing my best to catch him but at the same time, the 8th AF warning about being caught below 15,000 feet in a fight was flashing in my brain like a neon sign. Was I caught or not, and if so, what was going to happen?

Suddenly the 202, after flying straight and level for about a minute, rolled into a very tight 360° turn and then straightened out again on his original course. I was

able to follow him in the turn without losing any distance and in doing so gained a couple of hundred feet of altitude on him which I immediately converted to additional speed by slowly bleeding the altitude off.

Again he made an abrupt 360° turn with the same results. As he started a third turn, after a minute or two of straight flight, I figured I was in range and let him have it with my eight 50 caliber guns. Flashes appeared all around his cockpit like a pinball machine. The pilot was obviously hit for his airplane executed a perfect snap-roll at that extremely low altitude coming back to almost level flight just before the right wing started slowly dropping. When it touched the ground, the 202 cartwheeled away in a ball of fire.

Quickly I scanned the sky and as no aircraft were in sight, I figured the best thing to do was head south and try to get home. As I was climbing through 15,000 feet on a southerly heading, I saw a twin-engine plane crossing behind me headed east. As he was about 5,000 feet below my altitude, I throttled back and started an easy, descending right turn which brought me in on his tail at his altitude. I recognized the plane as a Do-217 (Dornier, German medium bomber) and when I opened fire, there were numerous hits on and around his left engine, which immediately exploded into flames. I also saw several tracers come out of my guns which was a signal that I was down to my last 50 rounds of ammunition per gun. It was the practice in our group to insert 5 rounds of tracer into each belt, 50 rounds before the end. In that way we knew when we were running out of ammunition.

Having seen my tracers and not wanting to expend the last few rounds I had, I pulled off and watched the Do-217 to see what would happen. The pilot fought valiantly to control the aircraft but was unable to extinguish the fire and constantly lost altitude until it crashed, exploding on impact. I had previously heard reports of these planes being used sometimes to drop mines in the sea lanes. From the size of the explosion, I concluded that this one still had some mines aboard.

Again I headed south toward home and had almost the same situation develop a second time with what appeared to be another Do-217. Since I was running low on ammunition, I decided prudence dictated that I continue heading south although I was sorely tempted to turn back and try for a seventh victory.

The ultimate irony of this little tale is that on that mission, I was flying the airplane assigned to Capt. Bunn Hearn because my own had been redlined for maintenance. Although the P-47 had been designed to carry 800 rounds of ammunition for each of its eight guns, most of us only carried 400 rounds per gun because we felt the weight reduction gave us significantly improved aircraft performance. After landing, I found out that Bunn, bless his soul, did not subscribe to that theory and kept his plane loaded with the full design load of 800 rounds per gun. His armorer just joined two of 400-round belts the rest of us used to achieve the 800 round capability. This meant that five tracers appeared just before the end of the first 400 rounds and again just before the end of the 800 rounds. The punch line is that I had landed with more ammunition aboard than I thought I had taken off with!

I can't complain, though, for that had to be the best day of the war. The 325th FG was credited with the destruction of 37 enemy aircraft in aerial combat and my flight of four accounted for 15 of that total: I was credited with six and the others with three each. By the end of World War II, the individuals of that flight of four had amassed a total of 37 victories: Green 18, Novotny 8, Dean 6 and Paulk 5.

As I look back over the years of World War II, 30 January 1944 has to be my day to remember.