

Hank scanned the empty skies hoping to find a dot on the horizon.

As time passed Hank began to wonder what to do next. He knew they were in the right place, but couldn't understand why there was no sign of the B-24. What could have happened? The bomber must have had mechanical problems and was forced to abort the mission, he thought. But if that were the case, why didn't they break radio silence and signal the rest of the group? What if they couldn't? What if they had radio trouble? What if they had total engine failure and had to ditch in the channel? What if they crash-landed in the channel? Or worse yet, what if they were jumped by a German fighter patrol and couldn't defend themselves? Maybe they had been shot down and killed instantly.

Suddenly Hank saw Hendricks's P-38 change course. He must have spotted something. The others followed. As their speed increased, Hank noticed a dot on the horizon. The dot grew larger in size as the swift fighters drew nearer until ...

"Bingo! There she is," cried Hank.

All the pilots made a straight course to intercept Wheeler's bomber in the distance. Hank was relieved at the sight, though he couldn't help but notice she still appeared to be struggling to stay in the air. It was apparent that all four engines were still straining, even under full power, which undoubtedly contributed to her being slightly off course and out of position.

Hank flew just above and behind the bomber, watching closely as Hendricks and Dandridge flew alongside—Hendricks on the left and Dandridge on the right. Both pilots used hand signals to get Wheeler's attention. Just then the Liberator lurched downward.

Hendricks and Dandridge peeled off out of the bomber's way. Hank was surprised at her rapid descent. Each fighter pilot then nosed downward, pursuing the bomber in a stable, controlled plunge, keeping a safe distance as they went. The Lightnings went first, then Brady's Mustang, with Hank bringing up the rear. The shuddering bomber rocketed downward, passing through ten thousand feet.

"C'mon, guys, get that pregnant cow under control. Straighten her up and fly right," said Hank in pursuit of the bomber. Hank felt the growing G-forces straining his aircraft and body and feared the Liberator

would soon be torn apart. His muscles fought against the tremendous weight on the stick, and he knew he had only seconds before he'd have to pull out of the dive or risk blacking out and crashing into the channel.

One by one the fighters in front of him pulled up and leveled off, leaving Hank and the bomber careening downward. They passed through three thousand feet with Hank's Mustang handling more like a runaway freight train than a sleek fighter aircraft. The altimeter spun rapidly like the hands on a clock gone haywire. He was losing control and couldn't stay with the bomber any longer. He had to pull out of the dive now or die. Just as Hank prepared to pull up, he watched and listened as the bomber drastically throttled back with flaps fully extended. The engines started to shake and sputter, but amazingly the Liberator began to level off! Hank followed the bomber's lead. The channel filled the view through the canopy as the Mustang passed through 550 feet. Hank watched as the bomber's flaps retracted and her engines were brought back to full power. With a mighty yank on the stick, Hank leveled off and was shocked to see the bomber now horizontal in front of him. He could only imagine the amount of strength and courage it took for Wheeler and his copilot to pull out of such a death-defying dive. They were flying at two hundred feet.

Wheeler now zigzagged the bomber toward the French coast. Still maintaining radio silence, the two P-38 Lightnings sliced through the air assuming the lead of the formation. The two Mustangs brought up the rear, maintaining a higher, covering altitude. The attacking unit was now in place and the strike plan was still intact and on schedule.

The straight-in distance from the rally point to the French target at Martinvast was roughly ninety-one miles, although the long, sweeping approach would add both distance and time. Even so, Hank knew that the attack force would be on top of the target sooner than anyone truly wished.

The channel below him screamed by with blinding velocity as the powerful Merlin engine propelled *Silver's Sweetheart* ever nearer the French coast. The sea remained rough and the whitecaps visible, but there was still no sign of German naval activity—not one ship or sub visible for miles. The barren seascape was a welcome sight for Hank, who was

not looking to lock horns with targets of opportunity until the trip back to England. Yet he remained ever watchful and alert. This was no time to have his force's position revealed to German coastal defenses by some lowly French fisherman sympathetic to the Nazi cause. This was the time to stay sharp and protect the bomber from whatever threat might rear its ugly head.

The small Allied air armada pressed farther and faster into enemy occupied territory. The uneasy waters of the English Channel rapidly gave way to the French Normandy coastline. Hendricks and Dandridge at the lead of the formation were the first to cross into occupied France. After altering courses several times, they made one final broad turn and started the approach to Martinvast from the southeast. As a probing, protective measure, they increased speed, intending to leave the rest of the formation behind. As the Lightnings started to fade from view, Hank became confused.

"Where the hell are they going?" A twinge of fear shot through his stomach as he worried the formation would break down and veer off course should the P-38s maneuver too far ahead and out of sight. Reacting with uncertain instinct, Hank throttled up and flew in formation behind the Lightnings, following them up the coast and inland to the northwest.

Soon Hank could easily make out a small village not heavily fortified with thick German defenses. The propaganda images of Hitler's impenetrable and indestructible Atlantic Wall, ingrained in the minds of most Allied pilots and soldiers, were clearly not evident here. What was evident directly below were small houses and barns, a cathedral with a tall bell tower, winding dirt roads, an occasional milking cow, and even an arbitrarily parked car. However, the most unsettling sight for the pilots, as their fighters pierced the boundaries of occupied France, was one of German soldiers frantically scrambling about from hidden concrete bunkers and strategically placed trenches. The fighters were flying so near the deck that the pilots could just make out the black-and-white eagle swastika decals on the side of the soldiers' steel-green, M1940 helmets. The sight was unnerving to Hank, who solemnly realized the element of surprise was gone.

On the ground, bells started to ring and piercing sirens signaled an

alarm. German soldiers poured from buildings, trenches, and bunkers and began pulling camouflage netting from hidden anti-aircraft machine guns and mighty 88mm flak guns. Hank felt his heart sink directly into his stomach as he caught sight of the German weaponry being aimed onto his position. The 88mm guns were especially terrifying as they were known to unleash as many as twenty high-velocity rounds a minute and could easily bring down a bomber with a single direct hit—not to mention the absolutely devastating effects they would have on a fighter at close range.

Before Hank could react, the sky filled with deafening German anti-aircraft fire that violently rocked his fighter and threatened to tear it asunder. Machine gun bullets ripped across the sky and puffs of shrapnel-filled black smoke exploded all around him. German soldiers not manning anti-aircraft batteries drew their personal weapons and fired madly into the sky. MP-40 machine pistol and Kar 98 bolt-action rifle fire mercilessly peppered the heavens as angry German troops behind the triggers hollered inaudible obscenities toward the airborne attackers and orders to each other, in hopes of maintaining some semblance of control on the ground. The flak guns also let loose a horrendous barrage of blue-white muzzle blasts, but could not be aimed accurately or quickly enough to be effective against the low-flying and fast-moving Allied aircraft. Nevertheless, the Germans put as much lead into the air as possible.

Hank looked on as Hendricks tightly maneuvered his fighter, trying to avoid the deadly enemy ground fire. Hendricks let loose a murderous fire of .50 caliber bullets from the nose of his P-38. Pieces of earth carved from the ground kicked up into the air in a perfect linear pattern. German soldiers in the open were instantly cut down by the intense strafing fire blazing from the Lightning's guns.

Gaining some altitude first, Hank observed from above and behind as Lieutenant Dandridge followed Hendricks' example and began a destructive strafing run of his own. His P-38 veered off course and lined up an 88mm gun half hidden in some trees. He swooped down on the target like an eagle going after an unsuspecting lake trout. With the German gun firing frantically and not aimed correctly to be a threat to the marauding fighter, Dandridge unleashed his Hispano 20mm cannon and

promptly reduced the German gun emplacement to a smoldering pile of rubble. Nearby troops who hadn't been killed in the blast returned fire with MP-40 machine pistols as Dandridge made his escape hard and fast, his fighter still hounded by bursts of anti-aircraft fire. Hank could see the sparks of pistol fire ricocheting and even punching through the fighter's smooth aluminum twin booms. Undaunted, Dandridge swooped back down to the deck with his guns blazing furiously, kicking up earth and destroying anything crossing his path. German soldiers caught in the track of the hailstorm of fire raining from above were thrown back and cut down by the impact of .50 caliber shells ripping through their bodies. They were immediately silenced and left to drown in thick red pools of their own blood.

Several fires sprang up across the rooftops of the wooden houses and buildings, and the air thickened with the smell of burning oil and cordite. Large explosions ripped through the German bunkers and trenches as the P-38 gunfire touched off small stores of ammunition and fuel. One after another, Hendricks and Dandridge pounced on anything that moved below or seemed like a threat and riddled it with bullets. German troops and anti-aircraft gunnery soon fell silent and were consumed by fire and exploding shells. Black smoke billowed from destroyed gun emplacements, shot-up automobiles, and burning buildings. The organized German resistance to this surprise attack swiftly crumbled into disorganized pockets of nothing more than small-arms fire.

Seeing that the immediate threat on the ground was significantly reduced, the P-38 pilots regrouped and returned to their original flight path. Stunned by the recent battle, Hank snapped out of his trance in time to see Wheeler's bomber and Brady's trailing Mustang fly over the smoldering coastal destruction wreaked by the P-38s. Scattered bursts of anti-aircraft and small arms fire continued to harass the attackers.

No sooner had Hank spotted the Liberator when both waist gunners opened fire on German troops clambering about trying to bring their remaining anti-aircraft defenses to bear on the larger, slower moving bomber. The B-24's tail and ball turret gunners also opened fire, spraying the ground with bullets in an attempt to knock down anything

that moved. The tail gunner rattled away at a German 88mm gun emplacement. His .50 caliber slugs sparked off the gun's long barrel until it toppled over and fell silent. The B-24 lumbered on under the strain of its extra heavy load. It adjusted course to match that of the two P-38s on the horizon, making every effort to keep on their tails.

The two P-51 Mustangs formed up and began trailing the Liberator at a higher altitude. Hank tried to concentrate on scanning the skies for enemy fighters, but was constantly drawn to the carnage inflicted below. He activated his reconnaissance camera and signaled Lieutenant Brady to do the same. Hank couldn't help but feel astonished. It had been several months since he had seen any action, and though he hadn't yet fired a shot, the chaos on the ground resulting from the P-38s' initial strike provided a grim reminder that the war was real and he was right back in the middle of it. Just then a blast of 88mm flak rocked his fighter, causing him to struggle to regain control. Fortunately his P-51 wasn't hit directly. The exploding burst was far enough away not to cause any damage.

"Jesus Christ!" he exclaimed, as he fought to steady the fighter. The scarce few remaining anti-aircraft batteries still able to fire had sighted in the higher-flying Mustangs and were trying desperately to knock them out of the sky. Hank looked to his rear and noticed, Lieutenant Brady's fighter wasn't faring any better. The young pilot and wingman struggled to stay on course behind his leader in the midst of the deadly Nazi flak.

At the point of the formation, the two streaking P-38 Lightnings closed up and flew side by side as they left the smoldering coastal village behind and headed inland toward the primary target. The threatening anti-aircraft fire subsided as the fighters roared deeper into the French countryside. In the distance, Hank saw an unsettling sight coming from Dandridge's P-38. He knew instantly he was in trouble.

The rising sun beamed brightly through the patches of broken clouds and cast distinct shadows of the low-flying aircraft on the ground below, Dandridge's port engine trailing black smoke. As the lead P-38s streaked across the French countryside, they encountered only small, annoying and inaccurate bursts of German anti-aircraft fire. Flying into the rising sun, they were soon lost to the view of Captain Wheeler and

the pilots in the trailing P-51 Mustangs.

Hank was flying less than half a kilometer above and behind the bomber, with Brady a bit farther back, covering the rear. Attempting to locate the two pathfinders, Hank maneuvered his fighter out of the direct sunlight.

“Where the hell are they? Why do they have to fly so far ahead of the attack group that they’re completely out of view?” he thought. “Maybe Wheeler’s got a better line of sight on ’em. Maybe Dandridge aborted and Hendricks is escorting him back to base.”

Just then Hank glimpsed two objects in the distance, coming directly out of the rising sun ahead of the formation.

“Is that them?” Hank asked. “Did they stray off course and get all turned around or something? Jesus, are we off target?”

Hank continued to watch the approaching planes, fully expecting to see the massive twin-boom signature of the P-38s become visible any second. However, as they came into full view, a frightening rush of adrenaline surged through Hank’s system as he witnessed two marauding German ME-109Gs pounce on the B-24 Liberator with unforgiving ferocity. The German fighters hit the bomber head on, strafing it mercilessly with 13mm machine-gun fire ripping from the fighters’ upper cowling. The two *Messerschmitts* walked white-hot tracer fire down its fuselage, then roared past before skillfully turning to reengage the target from the rear. This gave Hank a good look at what he was up against.

The two “Gustav” 109s were painted dapple-gray, with toned-down white spotty areas strategically placed along the fuselage, giving them a fearsome resemblance to menacing Pacific Ocean tiger sharks on the hunt. The underside of the aircraft’s cowling was painted a bright yellow, as was the rudder that prominently displayed a solid-black swastika, outlined in white. Behind the canopy, along the rear of the fuselage, was a large black German cross, also outlined in white. German crosses also adorned the tops of both wings, assuring that any enemy fighter that crossed their paths knew exactly who they were up against—staunch air warriors of the Reich. The last and most important unit markings Hank desperately strained to identify were typically located under the canopy and on the nose. Ordinarily, it was next to impossible to make them out

in the heat of battle, but Hank’s keen eyesight was able to zero in on such small details. However, he could spot no *Geschwader* badge under the canopy, nor any unit-marking artistry on the nose. With no exterior insignia to help him, and being relatively unfamiliar with the German fighter units protecting the Atlantic Wall, Hank could not identify the attackers, as the two 109s hit the Liberator once again.

Hank watched as the bomber’s right waist gunner took a bead on the German fighter and fired his .50 caliber machine gun in the direction of the attacker without scoring any hits. The 109 peeled off and set himself up for another attack run, while his wingman peppered the bomber from below, shattering the ball turret and killing the gunner before he could get off a shot. The bloodied, lifeless body of the unfortunate victim slipped out of the mangled blood-soaked turret and dropped like a stone to the Earth below.

Ignoring Wheeler’s order to maintain radio silence, Hank fired up his transmitter to address his wingman. It was now his turn to join the fight!

“Red 2, this is Red 1, drop your tanks, follow me down, and watch my tail. ... I’m going after the lead 109 fighter!” ordered Hank to Lieutenant Brady as he reached down to reset the fuel-selector valve and start drawing fuel from the main fuselage tank. He then jettisoned both his drop tanks.

“Roger, Red 1, I’m right behind you!”

Suddenly Hank’s headset filled with static and broken messages from his wingman. He adjusted the radio frequency and began to understand Brady’s words.

“Red 1, I’ve got another bandit on my six ... came outta nowhere ... can’t shake ... ”

Hank now saw a third ME-109 going after Brady’s Mustang, while the first two *Messerschmitts* continued to attack the bomber. The third 109 was directly on Brady’s tail, in relentless pursuit. He started to go after the bomber in hopes of disrupting the 109s’ attack pattern, but suddenly stopped and did a snap-roll maneuver in Brady’s direction. Hank firewalled the throttle and broke hard to get into position behind Brady’s attacker. The audacious American pilot figured if he could knock

out the third 109 and save Brady, the two of them could go after the 109s attacking the bomber.

Brady's Mustang swept side to side across the sky at full throttle, trying to dodge the heavy enemy cannon fire ripping past the cockpit from the pursuing 109. This 109 had a menacing 30mm *Rheinmetall-Borsig* MK 108 cannon sticking out its nose that was being put to good use by the German pilot behind the trigger. One direct hit from this powerful weapon would destroy Brady's Mustang. Fortunately for Brady, the German pilot hadn't found his mark but certainly had the advantage in this dogfight.

"Red 1, get this guy off me! I can't shake him loose!" cried Brady.

"Red 2, drop the hammer. Gain some altitude and get up in those clouds! You hear me, Brady? Get up in that soup fast! I'm still out of position!" hollered Hank into his mic, trying desperately to aid his wingman.

Hank finally caught up to the 109 and lined up the enemy plane in his crude, N-3B gun sight. Roughly calculating the enemy fighter's range and angle, he then focused on the thin pane of glass behind the quartz, inch-thick windscreen raked back toward him. On it was a small circle of light with a bull's-eye dot in the center, projected there by a thumb-sized bulb. The "pipper," as it was known, was used to line up and destroy enemy targets.

Skillfully leading the target, Hank flipped up the trigger guard, put the pipper directly on the mark, and pressed the trigger button, cutting loose all six of his .50 caliber machine guns. The intense firepower erupting from the Mustang's wings caught the unsuspecting German by surprise, and he immediately broke right to escape the intersecting fire of his attacker. The move was a foolish one; it brought him right into Hank's kill zone. Hank lowered some flaps and pulled hard inside the German's turn.

"I got your ass now, you Nazi son-of-a-bitch!" shouted Hank as he pumped several controlled bursts of machine-gun fire into the fuselage of the 109. As the shells savagely clawed at the 109, pieces of aluminum began to peel off the wings and the engine started to billow smoke. Spent shell casings poured from the Mustang's wings and rained down

to Earth below. The Nazi fighter dove to the deck in a desperate attempt to elude its pursuer and escape the deadly firepower bearing down on it. Feeling the strain of heavy G-forces punishing his body, Hank cleverly maneuvered his P-51 and matched his prey's every attempt to escape certain destruction. The fighters twisted and turned in every direction, as machine-gun fire continued to pour from Hank's guns. The French countryside raced by them as both fighters skimmed the treetops and hedgerows with reckless speed, ripping the leaves from their branches as they flew by. Down on the deck, Hank conserved his ammo and concentrated on keeping pace with the fleeing 109.

In a last desperate attempt to escape, the 109 pilot pulled his wounded plane into a steep, high-G climb, apparently hoping Hank would not react in time and fly right past him. Once clear, he would then dive and pounce on the Mustang from above and behind. However, Hank saw the German turn upwards in time and did not overshoot. Instead, he raised his flaps, applied full power, and stayed squarely on the 109s six o'clock, following it vertically upward without blacking out from the high-G maneuver. After a few seconds the 109s smoking Daimler-Benz engine could no longer handle the unbelievable stress being put on it and simply stalled out, as oil and smoke blanketed the cockpit. The ME-109 stopped, suspended in midair for a second or two, before plummeting downward. Hank swooped after the Nazi fighter and pressed home the attack, riddling the German plane with bullets until it exploded before hitting the ground. Hank pulled the P-51 out of the steep dive and started to regain altitude. He had no time to savor his first air-to-air kill, but began to scan the sky for his wingman.

"Red 2, this is Red 1, give me your position. Over." said Hank as he thumbed his throttle mic.

Hank repeated the call, but received nothing but static in return. The Mustang raced up and into the thick clouds above, temporarily impairing his visibility. As the fighter broke out of the clouds, it became apparent that he was both alone and lost. His eyes continued to scan both the sky around him and the Earth below for any signs of his allies. Nothing. With desperation starting to set in, Hank took a reading on his compass and pointed his fighter in the general direction of his last known