

to twenty Me-109s away to the northwest and high, at 32,000 feet. Everyone stayed with their part of the bomber stream, which had gotten strung out. Although the bombers were not attacked, everyone sat up a little straighter in the cockpit and redoubled their vigilance.

The increasing cloudiness above and below our altitude made doing our job progressively harder. Scattered clouds lying below the bombers allowed them to bomb visually, but the clouds above occasionally caused us to lose sight of the B-24s. In addition, the clouds were a potential screen for lurking German fighters.

Quite suddenly, without anyone calling them out, we collided with a formation of eight to ten Me-109s. It didn't seem like a bounce; it was more like the two formations just blundered into each other. I don't think anyone even called a break. It was instant pandemonium. The radio was useless, absolutely saturated by a half dozen pilots trying to transmit at once, I broke sharply, without even looking back; got my tanks off and my guns on; and went to full power. In the vertical turn the Mustang felt a little rubbery. I immediately remembered the fuselage tank, but it was too late to worry about that now; I was going to have to play the hand I had dealt myself. A lot of airplanes—both kinds—were going in all directions. In the brief instant I looked around, I couldn't pick out the rest of my flight.

What I did see was a 109 close on the tail of a 51 below me at about ten o'clock, 600 to 700 yards away. A string of tiny smoke puffs strung out behind the 109 told me the German pilot was already firing. As I took after them, I could see that the 51 was doing a lot of jinking. It hadn't been hit. Not yet. I was about 450 yards from the 109. With the spread harmonization the group used, I was still too far away to shoot—the inboard guns crossed at 250 yards and the outboard at 300. But waiting for a proper shot might prove fatal for the Mustang pilot. I tried to make a guess where the rounds would go at that range and snapped off as good a shot as I could get. The one-second burst produced one or two hits on the German's left wing, enough to make the pilot break off. Just as he did, I got off another burst, again getting a few strikes back in the tail area. Now he was turning hard! I tried to follow, but no way. My P-51 started shaking immediately. When I tried to force it into a tighter turn, it quit flying and fell out. The recovery was easy enough, I just let it go and it started flying again. The 109 was still there, above me now and still turning, almost opposite me. I thought I could see a thin streak behind him. Coolant! Was it my imagination? Was I merely seeing something I desperately wanted to see?

Reef it in! We became locked in a plain old-fashioned turning duel, a Lufbery circle. I was working hard, sweating. My heart was pounding as I tried to out turn him, playing the stick just to the point of a high-speed stall. Was it enough? He seemed to be closing on me a little, but then I saw that thin streak again. He really was losing coolant! But could I hang on long enough to get some help or until he overheated? He was definitely gaining on me. One-third of the circle was between his aircraft and mine, two-thirds between mine and his. In my semi panic I pulled the stick back hard again. Again I literally fell out of the sky and had to direct my attention to regaining control of the plane. Nose down, ease the stick. We were flying again. Now where the hell was he?

He was gone and so was everyone else. Several sharp turns confirmed it. I switched the fuel selector to "Fuselage," eased

myself into a cloud bank, and burned off the fuel in my fuselage tank as fast as I could. I was still pretty excited and not doing a very good job flying on instruments. The needle and ball went their own separate ways; the only time either one was in the middle was when it was passing from one side to the other. I was all over the sky. I just concentrated on keeping the wings level and dropped the nose slightly until I came out into the clear. I was still alone.

It didn't take long to get the fuselage tank down to 20 gallons, at which point I reduced power to normal cruise and went looking for the rest of my flight. I spotted the 24s straightaway. Since the R/T traffic was down to normal, I arranged for a meeting with the other three members of my flight and used the bombers as a marker. In a surprisingly short time, we re-formed.

I unhooked my mask momentarily and wiped the sweat from my face with my sleeve. My heart rate and breathing had slowed almost to normal. Finally, my aircraft was ready to fight, but I wasn't. Fortunately, no one was left to fight with—all the enemy airplanes were long gone.

Later, when I was telling Lam the substance of the encounter, as well as I could piece it together, I said I wasn't sure what kind of claim to make. "If you hit him and you saw glycol, why not claim a probable?" That was fine with me; Lam's offer was more than generous. A bit much, perhaps, almost getting my ass hammered and still making a claim. But who could resist an offer like that?

I couldn't forget my close call; I went over it again and again in my mind like a cow chewing its cud. Had the extra fuel made that much difference? Or was the 109 pilot that good? I had caught a Tartar, that much was certain. My brush with my own fallibility made me think of an old cowboy line: "There never was a horse that couldn't be rode, never was a cowboy who couldn't be thrown." So much for leaving the fuselage tank almost full, I thought. It'll be a cold day in hell before I try that again. But it was all of two months.

The next day, July 3, I was airborne again. This time it was back to Bucharest. We were to provide escort for the 304th Bomb Wing's B-24s, which were going to have a go at the Malaxia Locomotive Works and the Titan Oil Refinery there.

Takeoff from San Severo was at 0933, somewhat later than usual. This was to save fuel because we were going to have to take our bombers in and back out again without any relieving fighters. While providing close escort—scissoring back and forth over the bombers—the fighters actually had to fly much farther than the distance made good by the bombers. Thus, the fuel consumption for distance traveled was greater than it would have been if the fighters had been flying to the target on a straight course. At some small risk to the bombers, we often improved our fuel margin by moving the rendezvous point closer to the target and having the fighters take off later than the bombers.

The July 3 rendezvous was made 40 miles east of Craiova on time at 1141. After rendezvous, the R/T traffic began to pick up with a steady stream of bogie call-outs, so I called for my flight to drop tanks. About 15 miles northwest of the target, a gaggle of fifteen Me-109s approached the bombers in small groups from the direction of Bucharest, at 26,000 feet. I spotted two Me-109s above at about one o'clock. I think the leader saw my flight about the same time. He had balls, I'll say that for him. The two 109s started down to attack either the bombers below or the four of us;