

Because the Swiss border extended so far to the east, our planned flight path took us up along the east coast of Italy and the length of the Adriatic before we crossed inland at Venice. We continued northwesterly over the Alps to the vicinity of Innsbruck and then turned almost west to the target. This time we were taking the B-24s of the 47th Bomb Wing.

The flight was uneventful except for the Swiss gunners throwing up a couple of rounds at some heavies that apparently strayed over Swiss airspace. The gunners didn't hit anything, which I suppose was the idea; they were just establishing their sovereignty with a little show of bravado.

On the way home - somewhere around Bolzano, Italy I spotted a lone Me-109 stooging blithely along between cloud layers. I succeeded in slipping

up on him from his six o'clock low, a very vulnerable position on any fighter. As I pressed in I got my gun switch on. When I thought I was in range, I squeezed the trigger. Silence. Nothing happened. I glanced down quickly and saw that I had somehow put the gun switch in the Camera Only position. I knocked the switch into Guns and Camera and, when I looked back up again, the 109 filled the whole windscreen. The first rounds went home, and the flashes on the fuselage and wing roots made a pyrotechnic display the like of which I had not seen before. Pieces were flying off and whipping past me. I held the trigger down until I overran. Then I half-rolled so I was looking down at him through the top of my canopy at very close range. I could see the pilot slumped in his seat, but it was the damage to his aircraft that really shocked me. I expected to see some holes a little larger than the projectiles. What I saw were really huge, gaping tears, and the left half of the stabilizer was almost shot away. The 109 fell off on a wing and disappeared into the undercast. The plane was trailing coolant, oil, and smoke from the flames that appeared to be coming from under the engine.

The rest of the way home was uneventful. Coming down the Adriatic, I relaxed a little and pondered what I had just seen. Surely some of the damage must have been caused by the two additional machine guns, but not all. By accident I had been shown the ideal firing position; zero deflection and so close that you were positive you were going to collide. In a proper fight, that position might be hard to achieve, but shooting from any other position was probably a waste of time and ammunition. Later that afternoon I walked out to the parking area, paced off 200 yards from aircraft in various attitudes, and tried to visualize the sight picture in a combat situation. I realized that, when I thought I had been in range, I had actually been 350 to 450 yards out. I began to wonder

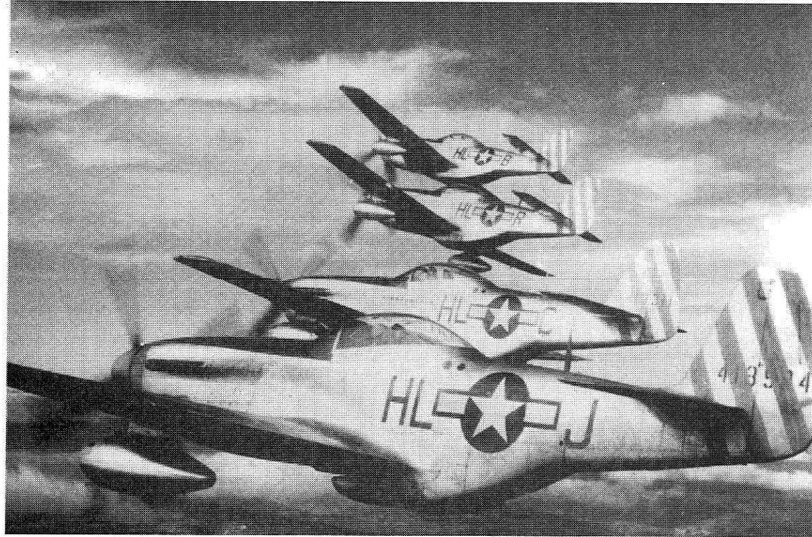
how I had gotten one victory, let alone five, which was my current score. I noticed that on much of the gun-camera film that was shown, the target appeared as a small smudge on the screen, hardly discernible as an enemy aircraft. Small wonder that there were no strikes to be seen; the pilot was firing at over 800 yards! In-

variably the unproud owner of the film protested vehemently, "That ain't my film. They got it mixed up with somebody else's. I was right on top of the guy." Commenting on someone else's film was not de rigueur, but I couldn't help thinking that the film had obviously been shot by somebody and that there was a hell of a lot of it.

The pictures of my last encounter were pretty spectacular except at the end, when the glycol and oil began to coat the camera lens. The film caused a murmur of comment from officers

and enlisted men. Afterward, while the projector was being threaded for the feature film, I caught sight of Langlois standing up near the front, waving to get my attention. He smiled broadly and gave me a thumbs up, I suppose for the benefit of his armament buddies, with whom he was sitting. I felt that I had redeemed him-and myself, too- from the ignominy of the time my guns had jammed.

This victory, my fifth, made me an ace. That was nice, but I didn't feel much different about it than my third or fourth. I'm sure that all combat pilots were aware of the distinction accorded the title, but in our outfit no one put a great deal of stock in it. There was no celebration-not even a handshake or a pat on the back from anyone, and I don't remember ever congratulating anyone else on his fifth victory. It just wasn't that important. Five did make a nice string of crosses on the side of my aircraft, though. With the paint still wet on the latest, I lost no time in having Little Henry take a picture of me in the cockpit.



*A flight of the 308th fighter Squadron over Italy*

*Editors Note:*

*The author of this book lives a few miles from me. Where he speaks of bomber pilots flying as fighter pilots, it brought to mind a story one of our pilots told me of his "days off" spent flying fighter missions. At the time I thought this was just another war story. Now, with the evidence in this book, I would like to tell him, I believe you. Unfortunately, he passed on some years ago.*