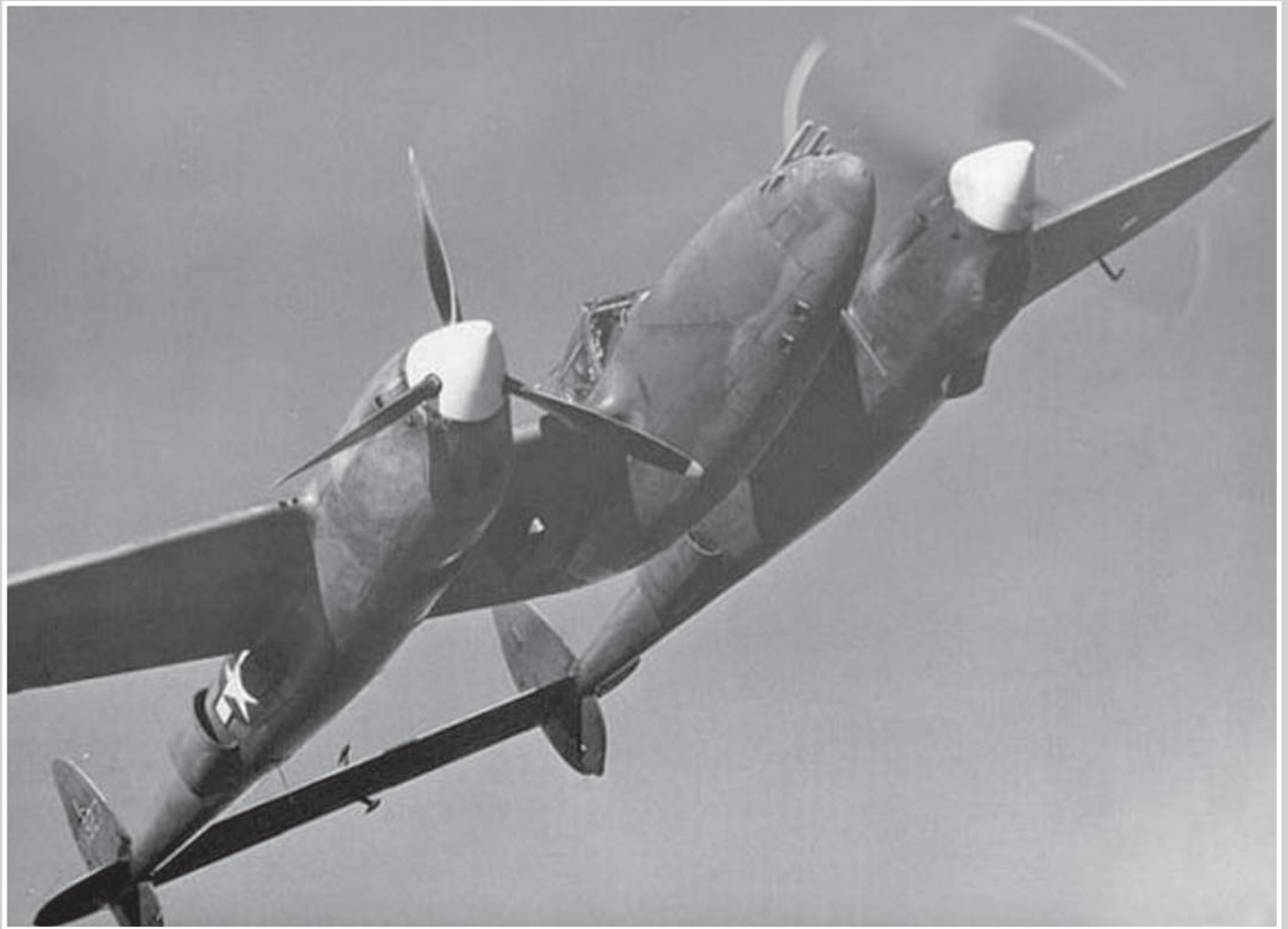


*Bomber  
Legends*

# **B-17 Escorts P-38 to Safety**

**By Lee Fisher**



Reading Bomber Legends rekindles memories of escorting B-17s and B-24s into the territorial belly occupied by Germany.

My stateside training for combat was some 50 hours in the razorback P-47, firing nary a shot. We did get considerable low-level navigation flights which was invigorating to skim at tree top level or below, but likely not amusing to the local residents who endured our devilish tactics.

Debarking at Tripoli, quickly found myself near the village of San Servero, westerly of Foggia at the spur of Italy. Displaying my best 2nd Lt salute to the squadron commander, Major Lee Wiseman, I was informed to take a short flight in the P-38. I had never seen a P-38 or been in the cockpit of a twin engine aircraft, so I asked for the Pilot's Operating Manual. He stated there was no manual available and move as I was scheduled for a mission.

Checked out a parachute, oxygen mask and canvas helmet and was jeeped to a P-38 where the crew chief instructed me on the procedure for getting to the cockpit by opening a retractable scissor like ladder at the trailing end of the gondola fuselage. Settling into the cockpit, the crew chief reached over and started the engines. Taxiing on the steel mats to the runway, I felt at home in the cockpit. At the end of the dirt runway, which was the width of a residential street and some 2000 feet long at best, pushed the throttles forward and was impressed by the purr of 1400 horse power on each side. With no external load, the counter-rotating props thrust me into the air in short order. This was love at first flight and the machine endeared me with each passing mission.

My first mission was a short strafing run in northern Italy, staying on the deck until reaching the target. The next day was an exposure to our primary mission; escorting long range bombers, this time to Ploesti.

Awoke that morning to the distant sound of bombers herding into formations and heading to the target. After a hefty breakfast - there were no snacks for the next five hours or more - the skies were silent as we were briefed on our role in protecting the bombers; namely, do not get sucked into a battle that would expose the bombers to assault. Briefly, we were to position between the bombers and any enemy aircraft, entering into battle only if the bombers were threatened. The more agile P-51s were responsible for engaging the enemy fighters and pursue them, even to tree top level.

Our flight became airborne some two hours after the bombers set course for the target area. We would rendezvous with the bomber formations about 150-200 miles from the target. Over the bomber formation, reduced the RPM and increased the manifold pressure to conserve fuel. My more experienced tent mate instructed me on this procedure, which was passed over from Charles Lindbergh who was flying the P-38 in the Pacific area. We split the squadron into flights of four to cover the bomber string, staying two to three thousand feet above in lazy S turns to stay abreast of the bombers and have better sight for enemy fighters.

The temperature inside the cockpit was the same as the outside temperature - damn cold - 50 to 60 degrees below zero. I had traded my leather jacket for British fur-lined boots, but my feet were numb. Looking down on the graceful B-17s I began to absorb the plight of the crews jammed in a tube of thin aluminum at sub zero temperature and sitting on several tons of explosives. Had those crews been aware how green I was behind [and between] the ears, their apprehensions would have been increasingly tense. More aggravating were the bursts of antiaircraft fire over the target - Ploesti - incessant blasts of fire leaving a thick cloud of black smoke. I agonized for the crews that flew into that

pulsating dark mass of fire power with its attendant shrapnel. It did not seem plausible that any aircraft could survive such compact antiaircraft defense. No words or monuments can adequately portray the skill and courage of those bomber crews.

Nearing the flak area, we broke off coverage. Fighter pilots may not be the most intelligent lot, but neither the allied or German fighters penetrated the flak zone. While skirting the target area I noted a conspicuously large burst of flak which I reported in my intelligence debriefing. Only on later mission did I realize those bursts were bombers receiving a direct hit in the bomb bay. We would pick the bombers up as they exited, often scattered vertically and horizontally. The German fighters preyed on the stragglers or crippled aircraft as we sought to provide cover. It was at this stage that we were more likely to engage the enemy.

Believe it was on my sixth escort mission to Ploesti that I was separated from my flight short of the target area, so maneuvered to the north to pick up any stragglers. Obviously too close to the flak zone, my plane took a hit in the right engine, which I feathered while pushing the throttle forward on the left engine to retain airspeed. The power in the left engine diminished, inadequate to maintain altitude, thus began a slow descent toward home, some 500 plus miles distance. My objective then was to reach Yugoslavia, bail out and have the local tribes return me home through a network of those friendly to the U.S.

Heading away from Ploesti, the visibility was unlimited and no other aircraft were in sight; it was like someone flipped a switch and the war was over. It was an eerie sensation being in a war zone of tranquility - and a bit lonely. I grasped the placid beauty of the quilt of farmlands and villages basking in an admixture of midsummer greens and scattered patterns of gray and brown. At about 15,000 feet, I could maintain altitude at a comfortably speed above stalling. However, I felt

like a piñata hanging on a heavenly string awaiting someone to swat me.

In that moment of mixed emotions - serene anxiety - observed a crippled B-17 several miles to my left and eased toward it cautiously so as not to be mistaken for a German at the controls. In North Africa there were reports of downed U. S. planes being repaired, and German pilots mischievously attacking allied planes. Hanging off the right wing of the B-17, the waist gunner waved and I signaled in return, comforted by the protection of their gunners and relaxed knowing some 16 or so other eyes were scanning the skies, allowing me to check my instruments and calculate my fuel and position for the flight home. I wondered how this would look on my fighter pilot resume; "Crippled B-17 escorts fighter to safety". At that juncture, I didn't care.

Am unaware how long I ambled along under the protective wing of that B-17 - seemed like hours. As we approached the mountains of Yugoslavia, I drifted down and away, picking up speed. Shortly, the gleaming Adriatic reflected the sun streams and some small boats were hugging the crusty shore, a scene that made me complacent. That was short lived as some tracers altered my composure, dictating some modest evasive action. I was directly over Spit where the Germans harbored one of the elite antiaircraft units. I assume most of the soldiers had called it quits for the day as I was an easy target. From there it was clear sailing.

I wonder if that B-17 crew made it back okay and are readers of Bomber Legends. I'd like to thank them for their hospitality and security of the escort.

(Editor's note: If anyone has information on this incident, please write to Lee Fisher, c/o Bomber Legends, 1672 Main Street, Ste. E-124, Ramona, CA 92065)