

One-Man Air Force

The odds against fighter pilot Jim Howard were thirty to one when he took on the Luftwaffe's best—and won.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE

WHEN James H. Howard arrived in China with Claire Chennault's American Volunteer Group (AVG), it was a homecoming of sorts. He had been born in China, where his father was an eye surgeon with the Rockefeller Foundation's hospital at Peking. Young Jim's fourteen youthful years in the Far East were climaxed by an encounter with bandits while on a hunting trip with his father. Dr. Howard was captured and held prisoner for ten weeks, but Jim, riding in another car, escaped.

Back in the States, young Howard graduated from Pomona College in California, became a Naval aviator assigned to Fighting Squadron 6 aboard the USS *Enterprise*, then resigned his commission in late 1941 to join Chennault. During the AVG's brief existence, Howard shot down six Japanese planes and was himself downed once by ground fire, again escaping capture by the skin of his teeth.



Lt. Col. James Howard is shown here with his crew chief and his P-51B, *Ding Hao!*, at Boxted Aerodrome, England, in March 1944.

The AVG was disbanded in July 1942 to be succeeded by the Fourteenth Air Force, and Jim Howard returned to the States to recuperate from dengue fever. A few months later, he was back in uniform, a captain in the AAF, assigned to the 354th Fighter Group as one of its two combat veterans. In the fall of 1943, the group moved to Boxted, England, and became the first AAF unit in the European theater to be equipped with long-range P-51 Mustangs. Although the 354th belonged to Ninth Air Force, it was under the operational control of VIII Fighter Command. Its job: long-range escort of Eighth Air Force B-17s and B-24s.

Less than two months after the 354th started flying escort, Jim Howard put on what retired Gen. T. R. Milton, then a lieutenant colonel assigned to the 91st Bombardment Group, describes as the greatest display of combat flying he witnessed during two tours in Eighth Air Force B-17s.

On January 11, 1944, the Eighth sent three bombardment divisions against aircraft factories in the Brunswick area. While they were climbing up through 25,000 feet of solid overcast, the weather turned sour in England and the mission was recalled. The 1st Division, however, continued on toward its target at Oschersleben, about 100 miles southwest of Berlin, escorted by fifty of the 354th Fighter Group's P-51s, led by Maj. Jim Howard.

As the division, now in clear weather, approached its target, it came under exceptionally heavy attack by crack Luftwaffe day and night fighters concentrated for the defense of Berlin. Major Howard released squadrons and flights of his P-51s to defend the bomber stream while he climbed to meet attacks against the lead box of bombers. He immediately shot down a twin-engine Messerschmitt Bf 110 night fighter. After that initial engagement, he found himself alone, con-

fronted by some thirty Luftwaffe fighters whose attacks were centered on the 401st Bombardment Group.

Rather than waiting to reassemble some of his P-51s, Major Howard took on the swarm of Bf 109s, Fw 190s, and Bf 110s single-handed. In a violent, exhausting, climbing-diving melee that lasted for thirty minutes, he shot down three enemy aircraft, scored one probable, and damaged at least two others. Howard continued the fight until he was out of ammunition, then broke up enemy attacks on the bombers by diving at incoming fighters until his fuel was dangerously low and there were no more bandits in sight. By that time, the 401st had bombed its target successfully and had begun the long return flight to England. Not one of the group's B-17s was lost during Jim Howard's epic battle against overwhelming odds.

When Howard landed at Boxted, there was one bullet hole in the wing of *Ding Hao!*, his P-51, and that a stray .50-caliber from one of the B-17s.

The 401st Bombardment Group, whose crews were astounded by the skill and heroism of the "One-Man Air Force" who had defended them, finally ran down his identity and sent to Washington a recommendation for award of the Medal of Honor. Gen. "Tooev" Spaatz, Commander of US Strategic Air Forces in Europe, presented the medal to Jim Howard, the only fighter pilot in the European theater to be so honored.

Howard, an ace in China and again in Europe, later commanded the 354th, which led all fighter groups in the ETO with 701 aerial victories. After the war, the tall, quiet double ace formed his own research organization, later merged with Control Data. He remained in the Air Force Reserve, retiring as a brigadier general in 1966, and now lives in Florida. ■