

Instant Ace

After sixteen months of shooting up ground targets, Bill Shomo finally got a crack at a whole squadron of enemy fighters.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE

THERE are pilots who fly fighters, and there are fighter pilots. Bill Shomo was a fighter pilot, and a frustrated one at that. For sixteen months, the 82d Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron to which he was assigned had moved from strip to strip along the north coast of New Guinea and finally to Morotai, some 250 miles northwest of the big island. The squadron was equipped with obsolete P-39s and P-40s, too short-ranged to reach the air-to-air combat action where every true fighter pilot wants to be. The P-38 and P-47 jocks got the glory, while Shomo and his squadron mates supported General MacArthur's drive to the Philippines by photographing and shooting up ground targets—hazardous work, but not very satisfying for a fighter pilot.

As 1944 drew to a close, it looked as though the war would end before Bill Shomo had a chance to test his skill in air-to-air combat. Then, in December, things began to pick up. The squadron learned that it was getting North American P-51Ds equipped for photo-recon work. Shomo had flown two local check-outs in the P-51 and one short mission to test its guns when, on December 24, he was called to group headquarters on Leyte. There he was made commander of the squadron and ordered to move it to Mindoro, an island off the southwest coast of Luzon, to support MacArthur's landing about seventy-five miles north of Manila, which would take place on January 9, 1945.

A fortnight after Shomo took command of the 82d, it was in place at Mindoro, and on January 9 he led

his first P-51 combat mission (which was also only his sixth flight in the Mustang). It was a low-level recce to find out what air strength the Japanese had in northern Luzon. As they approached the Japanese airfield at Tuguegarao, Shomo spotted the first aerial target he had seen while airborne in all his months of combat—a Val dive bomber, turning onto its final landing approach. One burst from his six .50-caliber guns brought it down at a spot Bill Shomo can describe as precisely today as he could on that January day thirty-nine years ago. And with good reason.

Two days later, on January 11, Captain Shomo and his wingman, Lt. Paul Lipscomb, were heading north on the deck to photograph and strafe Japanese airfields at Tuguegarao, Aparri, and Laoag at the extreme north of Luzon. Over the exact spot where Shomo had picked up the Val, they caught a brief glimpse of enemy planes flying south above broken clouds at about 2,500 feet. How many enemy planes? What difference did it make? Shomo and Lipscomb pulled up through the clouds in an Immelmann and rolled out behind a Betty bomber that was being escorted by a squadron of fighters—eleven Tonys and one Tojo.

On their first pass through the formation, Shomo and Lipscomb had the advantage of surprise. Shomo shot down four Tonys, then came up under the bomber, putting a burst

into its belly. The flaming Betty headed for a crash landing with two Tonys still hanging to its right wing.

Shomo and Lipscomb pulled up in a tight vertical spiral to regain altitude while the Tojo latched onto Shomo's tail, firing until it stalled out and dove into the clouds. The Betty blew up as it bellied in, and the two escorting Tonys headed for the hills, staying on the deck. Shomo made a second diving pass, nailing each Tony with a short burst, for a total of seven victories. In less than six minutes, Bill Shomo had become an ace, the ultimate goal of every fighter pilot. Lieutenant Lipscomb got three-fifths of the way to that goal. The last three enemy fighters then disappeared into the clouds.

On April 1, 1945, William A. Shomo, by then a major, was awarded the Medal of Honor for leading an attack against heavy odds and destroying seven enemy aircraft. No other American pilot scored that many confirmed victories in a single mission.

In more than 200 combat missions, Bill Shomo, now retired and living in Pittsburgh, saw only fourteen enemy aircraft from his cockpit. He attacked and shot down eight of them. Shomo credits that remarkable record to closing within forty yards of each target and not wasting ammunition on deflection shots. It may be credited equally well to the valor of a fighter pilot who didn't stop to count the odds. ■



Shomo, by then a major, received his Medal of Honor from Lt. Gen. Ennis Whitehead (center), Commanding General of Fifth Air Force, on Luzon in April 1945. At right is Col. William Sams, CO of the 71st Tactical Recon Wing.