

Seven Come Eleven

In the March "Valor," Bill Shomo was credited with being the only American to score seven victories in one mission. A sharp-eyed reader has named another who matched that feat.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE

ON September 3, 1943, as the Allied invasion of Italy got under way, the Italians threw in the towel. Even so, there were to be many months of fighting before German troops were driven out of the peninsula in a bloody campaign that absorbed virtually all Allied military power in the Mediterranean.

While granting that Italy had first priority in the Med, Winston Churchill also had his eye on another prize—the Greek Dodecanese Islands lying off the southwest coast of Turkey in the Aegean Sea. They were garrisoned largely by Italian troops who, Churchill judged, would cooperate if the islands could be seized before the Germans took over. Capturing the islands, he thought, might bring neutral Turkey into the Alliance and open the Dardanelles and Bosphorus as a short supply route to beleaguered Russia. But Allied forces in the eastern Med had been stripped to support the Italian campaign and to prepare for the Normandy invasion. About all that was left was a Royal Navy squadron of a dozen ships and a few RAF aircraft.

Churchill's plea for a minor diversion from Italy fell on nearly deaf American ears. Finally, General Eisenhower agreed to send some long-range P-38 fighters and a few cannon-carrying B-25s to help out. The 14th Fighter Group was moved from its base in Tunisia to Gambut 2, an RAF strip of sand near Tobruk, a few miles west of the Egyptian border. From that desert paradise they were to escort Royal Navy ships and to attack German convoys headed for the Greek islands.

The group's 37th Squadron was commanded by Maj. William L. Leverette, who had arrived in North Africa late in

August. Bill Leverette was not your average replacement. He had spent two years teaching fighter tactics in the States, had more than 1,000 hours in fighters, and was no stranger to the gunnery range.

On October 9, Major Leverette led seven P-38s on a mission to protect Royal Navy warships near the island of Rhodes. As they reached the ships, a formation of some thirty Ju-87 Stuka dive bombers was sighted approaching from the west. Leverette dispatched one flight of three P-38s to fly top cover while his flight closed with the Stukas.

The Stuka was not a particularly nimble aircraft, but it wasn't to be approached casually, either, especially when encountered in wholesale lots. In addition to wing-mounted guns, it carried a rear gunner manning a flexible machine gun. And with so few hunters (Leverette's wingman was a new, nervous, slightly trigger-happy lad) attacking so many targets, conserving ammunition was the key: "Get in close and make every round count." What happened in the next few minutes is best described by Bill Leverette himself in this debriefing account:

"We peeled off into the middle of them, and I got two almost before they knew we were there. The gunner in the first started to fire, but stopped as soon as I let go. We came back behind them again, and I got on the tail of another. His gunner stopped firing as soon as I opened up, and the pilot bailed out. My fourth was a thirty-degree deflection

shot from 200 yards. Then I gave a lone plane a burst of cannon and machine-gun fire from a twenty-degree deflection. That finished him.

"I came in directly behind the sixth. His gunner opened up before I did, but I got him with my first shots. The plane nosed down a little, and I gave him a burst in the belly. I was closing fast and had started to go under him when he nosed almost straight down, his propeller shot off. I tried to dive under him, but didn't quite make it. My left prop cut two feet into his fuselage as he went down. My last hit was the best. I was closing on him from the right when he turned into me. I rolled into a steep bank to the left and got him while firing from an almost-inverted position."

While all this was going on, the leader of Leverette's second element downed five Stukas, and his wingman got three. After disposing of a Ju-88 that was escorting the dive bombers, the top-cover flight came down to drop another Stuka. A few got through to make their bomb runs; the rest either jettisoned, headed for home, or ended up in the sea.

For his combat leadership and individual performance, Bill Leverette was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, this nation's second highest award for valor. But his combat career didn't stop there. The group soon returned to the Italian campaign where Leverette downed two Me-109s and two Me-110s for a total of eleven victories, ending his war as one of the top twenty aces in the Mediterranean theater. ■



Bill Leverette stands proudly beside the P-38 Lightning he was flying on October 9, 1943, the day he shot down seven German Stukas on a single mission.