

By John L. Frisbee, Contributing Editor

A Distinguished Crew

Maj. George Glober and his crew volunteered for a perilous mission to photograph enemy forces at Wake Island.

AFTER the Japanese Navy was defeated at Midway in early June 1942, Japan's easternmost base in the central Pacific was Wake Island, where many fighters were believed to be stationed. Because of Wake's great distance from the closest US base at Midway—about 1,300 miles—the only immediately feasible means of attack was by carrier aircraft. The Navy did not want to risk one of its two remaining Pacific Fleet carriers without detailed knowledge of enemy forces at Wake. Twice aircraft had been dispatched from Midway to photograph the island. Neither returned.

In mid-July, headquarters at Honolulu called for volunteers to make a third attempt. Maj. George Glober, commander of the 31st Bomb Squadron on Oahu, and his crew were selected from among eight volunteers. Before staging forward to Midway, bomb bay tanks, a nose gun, and a camera hatch were added to Major Glober's early model B-17E.

Early in the morning of July 31, Major Glober's B-17 broke ground at Midway and headed southwest toward Wake Island. South of Midway they penetrated a violent front. When 150 miles from the island, Major Glober descended to the wave tops to avoid enemy radar. When the tiny island appeared on the horizon, he climbed to 2,000 feet for the first photo run. From his ball turret, Cpl. Robert Holliday reported enemy AA opening fire and six fighters taking off. Four were Zeros, and two were unfamiliar "Me-109" types. As the fighters climbed to attack, Major Glober made two more passes at 4,000 and 6,000 feet while SSgt. Edward Caton photographed the island, then manned the right waist gun.

Major Glober knew that their salvation lay in altitude, where his supercharged B-17 could outperform the enemy fighters. A forty-minute battle

was joined as Glober flew the B-17 in a twisting, jinking climb to 25,000 feet. With his two .50-caliber guns, ball turret gunner Holliday disintegrated the first "Me-109" to open fire. The second was destroyed by tail-gunner Sgt. James Sanford. One Zero was demolished by bombardier TSgt. Claude Phillips with the recently installed nose gun and a second Zero by the left waist gunner, Cpl. Robert Fries. Sergeant Caton scored a probable as he sent a Zero spinning toward the sea. One damaged fighter followed the B-17 until it was too far at sea to return to Wake.

During the violent evasive maneuvers of the air battle, the B-17's navigation instruments were useless. Navigator 2d Lt. Harry Smith had to plot a course to Midway by dead reckoning from an unknown point with a compass damaged by enemy fire. Since they were either in weather or under a high overcast, celestial navigation was not possible. At their estimated time of arrival, blacked-out Midway was nowhere in sight. Major Glober broke radio silence to contact Midway radar. The fuel gauges were bouncing off the peg. After the excruciatingly long period that primitive radar required to locate and identify the B-17, it was cleared to land. As Major Glober touched down, the number two engine died of fuel starvation. They had been in the air for seventeen and a half hours.

After a few hours' rest, the crew flew back to Honolulu with the desperately needed photographs. Gen. "Hap" Arnold sent a message of commendation to the entire crew. Looking back on those years, Ed Caton says that he flew photoreconnaissance missions with thirty-three crews, but none of them came up to the standards of George Glober's.

Several days after the Wake Island mission, Major Glober was told that he was to be awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. He declined to accept unless all members of the crew received the same award. All were volunteers who knew the odds against them, and all shared equally in the hazards of the mission, he said. On September 17, 1942 in a ceremony at Hickam Field, all ten members of the crew were presented the DSC—one of the few instances when an entire crew was so honored. That crew went on to achieve an outstanding combat record in the southwest Pacific. Robert Holliday and Claude Phillips became two of the most decorated airmen of the war.

Today, four members of the crew, all retired from the Air Force, survive: Col. George Glober, CMSgt. Robert Holliday, Col. Edward Caton, and Maj. Claude Phillips. They will always be George Glober's crew. ■

Thanks to Col. Albert James, USAF (Ret.), for calling this mission to our attention.

