

By John L. Frisbee, Contributing Editor

Beating Four Aces

Lt. Henry Brown pulled off one of the most amazing bluffs of the war.

LT. HENRY BROWN was on his second tour in fighters, based at Steeple Morden, UK, with the 355th Fighter Group. On the morning of April 11, 1944, in his *Hun Hunter From Texas*, he was number four in the 354th Fighter Squadron's Blue Flight, escorting bombers to their target on the outskirts of Berlin.

After the bombers unloaded and headed for home, the 355th turned its escort duty over to another group and prepared to strafe targets of opportunity, the most dangerous of fighter tactics. The four squadrons fanned out, each to find its own targets. Blue Leader picked the Luftwaffe airfield at Strausberg to the east of Berlin. The four P-51s went down in a screaming 400-mph dive, their props cutting weeds as they came in over the field.

On the first pass, Lieutenant Brown burned a Ju-52, then riddled a Ju-88 bomber on his second pass. Spotting an FW-190 fighter taking off, he performed a chandelle to the left, pulling up behind the German fighter and shooting it down just as he ran out of ammunition. While Brown was busy reducing the Luftwaffe's inventory, the other three members of his flight had formed up and were on their way home.

Climbing to 15,000 feet, Lieutenant Brown saw four fighters in the distance, heading west. Maybe they were members of his group. As he closed on them, he discovered that they were Bf-109s—difficult to tell from P-51s at a distance. In perfect firing position but out of ammunition, he reduced power and slid into their blind spot at six o'clock low. Why had they not seen him? Then he spotted two Mustangs ahead and below. The -109s were so intent on hunting the Mustangs that they had not seen him.

Brown called a warning to the Mustangs, which broke sharply to the left with the -109s now almost in firing range. He told the Mustang pi-

lots he would try to disrupt the enemy formation. At that moment, the Luftwaffe pilots picked up on Brown as he closed on their tails, not knowing he was out of ammunition. Henry Brown didn't pause to calculate his chance of survival. He saw what needed to be done, and he did it.

There followed a twenty-minute engagement in which Brown outturned his four adversaries, who held all the aces, forcing them one by one to roll out of a Lufbery circle and dive for the ground. While Lieutenant Brown hovered constantly on the verge of a high-G blackout, the two Mustangs he had saved disappeared to the west, leaving him alone in an unfriendly sky.

Having won the Lufbery fight against incalculable odds, Henry Brown throttled back and turned for home. In that moment of relaxation, one of the -109s climbed back up and got on his tail. Suddenly, *Hun Hunter* was taking hits. Fortunately, the Luftwaffe pilot overshot, giving Brown time to split-S to the treetops. His sigh of relief was short-lived. There were holes in his left wing, but more serious, his compass had been shot out. With no friendly aircraft around, he could only guess at the correct heading for England.

Brown called in the blind, giving his approximate position and asking someone to tell him the sun position on his canopy for a rough heading to the UK. At length, a voice came back, telling him to put the sun on the second screw from the top of his left canopy railing. Correcting his course, he realized he soon was going to be above solid-to-broken clouds. No more ground checks. At last, through a small break in the clouds, he saw the coast of Holland.

A call to Air-Sea Rescue got him a rough heading to Steeple Morden. From there, he got a home steer from Steeple Morden tower. Six hours and fifteen minutes after takeoff, Henry Brown touched down at home plate. He found out later that the two Mustang pilots he had saved, and who apparently had deserted him, also had been out of ammunition.



Lt. Henry Brown and his P-51, Hun Hunter From Texas, achieved 14.2 victories over the Luftwaffe.

For a day marked by superior skill and unsurpassed valor, Henry Brown was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross to go with his Silver Star, multiple Distinguished Flying Crosses and Air Medals, and a Purple Heart. He tallied eleven more air-to-air victories, ending the war with 14.2, plus more than fourteen planes destroyed on the ground. What his score might have been had he not been downed by flak while strafing an airfield on October 3, 1944, is only conjecture.

On the day he bellied in, his squadron operations officer, Maj. Chuck Lenfest, landed to rescue him, but Lenfest's P-51 became stuck in soft ground. Lt. Alvin White also landed in an attempted rescue. The downed men were escaping and did not see him. White was able to take off and returned home alone. Brown and Lenfest ended the war as guests of the Luftwaffe.

Henry Brown remained in the Air Force, serving among other assignments as test pilot, combat pilot in Vietnam, wing commander, and deputy director of Operations, 7th Air Force. He retired as a colonel in 1974, one of the most decorated Air Force officers, and now lives in Sumter, S. C. ■