

## Triumph and Tragedy

Maj. Ralph Cheli's war in the Pacific was an unparalleled drama of heroism and outrageous fate.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE

**B**Y THE summer of 1943, General MacArthur's strategic plan of advance along the north coast of New Guinea to reach the Philippines was well under way, supported by Gen. George Kenney's Fifth Air Force.

In July, his troops had secured a foothold in the Huon Gulf area and were preparing for the next step—capture of the Japanese stronghold at Lae—scheduled for early September. But first, Japanese airpower concentrated around Wewak, some 300 miles west of Lae, had to be neutralized.

General Kenney knew that Wewak and its satellite fields at But, Boram, and Dagua were being heavily reinforced. By mid-August, there were more than 100 bombers and about ninety fighters on the four fields. It was time to strike.

On the night of August 16–17, fifty B-17s and B-24s hit the four fields. On the morning of the seventeenth, thirty-two B-25s from Port Moresby and Dobodura, escorted by eighty P-38s, strafed and parafragged the fields.

For the Moresby-based B-25s, the 500-mile flight to Wewak was the deepest penetration into enemy-held territory yet made by medium bombers. Both the heavies and mediums were met by intense anti-aircraft fire but little fighter opposition. A follow-up daylight raid was laid on for the eighteenth, with Maj. Ralph Cheli, one of the most experienced Fifth Air Force bomber pilots, leading the B-25s from Port Moresby.

The previous August, Cheli, then a captain, had led a flight of 38th

Bombardment Group B-25s from Hamilton Field in California to Australia in the first air movement of B-25s from the States to the combat zone. Two months later, the 38th moved to Port Moresby in southeastern New Guinea, and Cheli was given command of the 405th Squadron.

On March 3, 1943, during the Battle of the Bismarck Sea, he led his squadron in the first daylight, mast-head-level attack against a Japanese convoy. Now, on his fortieth combat mission, Ralph Cheli would take the Moresby B-25s over 500 miles of jungle and past 15,000-foot peaks to Dagua, a few miles west of Wewak.

Unlike the conditions during the first Wewak strike, the weather was bad on August 18. Only twenty-six of forty-nine heavy bombers reached their targets, bombing through broken clouds. Visibility was down to about two miles in rain and haze. Again, AA fire was heavy, but this time enemy fighters attacked the B-25s savagely and persistently.

Ten to fifteen Zekes and Oscars dived out of the clouds, concentrating their fire on Cheli's squadron. As the B-25s started their strafing run, an Oscar scored many hits on Cheli's plane, setting the right engine and wing afire. A crash was inevitable, but rather than disrupt the squadron at this crucial point by pulling up for a bailout, Major Cheli

chose to continue the attack, dropping his bombs and strafing as flame streamed back from the doomed bomber.

As they pulled up from the most successful attack of the day, Cheli ordered his wingman to take the lead. He would try to ditch in the ocean.

There were varying reports as to what happened next: Cheli's B-25 exploded and crashed in the jungle or in the sea, or ditched successfully. All that was known for sure was that Ralph Cheli and his crew—1st Lt. Vincent Raney, Flight Officer Don Yancey, T/Sgt. Raymond Warren, and S/Sgt. Clinton Murphree—were missing in action.

On October 28, 1943, Major Cheli was awarded the Medal of Honor for his courageous decision not to abandon the attack on Dagua.

Several months later, an unconfirmed Japanese broadcast reported that Cheli and three members of his crew had been taken prisoner. The story was not verified until after the war.

Cheli and at least two of his crew had in fact been captured and taken to a Japanese prison at Rabaul. Cheli was badly burned and "banged up." As the senior American POW at that time, he was interrogated and beaten frequently over the next several months but refused to give any information beyond name, rank, and serial number. According to repatriated fellow prisoners, Cheli was always cheerful and optimistic, despite his atrocious treatment.

Finally, the Japanese gave up and decided to send Cheli and about twenty other prisoners to Japan. On the evening of March 5, 1944, the POWs were put aboard a ship in a convoy bound for the home islands. Ninety minutes later, in one of the great ironies of the war, Fifth Air Force bombers attacked the convoy. The ship bearing Major Cheli and the other prisoners was hit. There were no survivors. ■



Maj. Ralph Cheli bombed Dagua in a doomed B-25, won the Medal of Honor.