



MIG Alley, Korea. A Russian-built MIG-15 is: (1) hit by .50-caliber slugs from an F-86 Sabrejet, (2) enveloped by smoke, (3) afire, (4) crash-bound. U.S. AIR FORCE

One of our greatest aviators reveals—for the first time—just what went on in his own mind when he “went forth to kill” in World War II. Here, intimately exposed, are the innermost

Thoughts of a Combat Pilot

By CHARLES A. LINDBERGH

The article which begins on this page was written originally, by America's most famous airman, as a chapter of a book which he later decided not to publish in its entirety. During World War II, Charles Lindbergh flew many combat missions in the Pacific Theater.

—The Editors.

GUNS charged and ring sights glowing, our four Corsairs float like hawks over enemy-held land. Below us are the jungle hills of New Ireland; ahead, the purple volcanoes of Rabaul. Elsewhere, our eyes see a wilderness of cloud, sky and blue Pacific water.

We are cruising at 8000 feet, on a marine patrol, to cover the morning's strike, to make sure that Japanese Zeros don't interfere with American bombing crews. Our planes are from VMF 223, based on a rolled-coral strip in the Green Islands—200 miles east of New Guinea—four degrees south of the equator.

This is my first combat mission, and therefore unlike all other flights. My senses are peeled of the calluses formed by everyday routine. They awoke this morning with new awareness, crying out that I'll go forth to kill, and to run the risk of death; that, like man of primitive times, I'm both the hunter and the hunted. Inside this sun-browned skin that covers me, civilized perception and barbaric instinct are melting into some not-yet-tested-out alloy. Ever since my ears heard the noises of daybreak, all things around me—the air I breathe, the ground I walk on, the very trees of the jungle—seem to have taken on new qualities of beauty and of danger.

There was the graceful curve of my fighter's wing, as I climbed into the cockpit before take-off, testifying to the godlike creativeness of man. There was the awkward bulk of my pistol, digging into my chest, reminding me of our satanical destructiveness. I

Lindbergh as a technical representative in the Pacific during W. W. II.



watched the bunched heads of coconut palms streaming past as my landing gear retracted and my air speed rose; they were followed by anti-aircraft cannon at the strip's end. After that, the power of 2000 horses pulled me skyward to aviation's supermortal view, until a voice in my receiver shouted, “Clear your guns!”

Now, we are spread wide—the four of us—in combat formation, so we'll have room to maneuver in attack. At the foot of those hills below, hidden in that thick jungle mat of leaves and branches, are our enemies—men of different language and ideas, but with bodies and brains quite similar to ours. We know that their glasses are now trained upon us, that their loaded batteries will anticipate our course. At any moment puffs of black may shatter this crystal air. We are like the animals in that jungle—nerved to spring upon our prey; alert lest we be sprung on. One shot, and a Corsair may fall, like a feathered bird to an expert marksman. One swoop, and a dozen Japanese may lie dead in a badly camouflaged position.

Sixteen hundred rounds I carry, of .50-caliber ammunition, and I can spew them out at the rate of 5000 rounds a minute. Suddenly the grace of flight is gone. I see with war-conditioned eyes—these are wicked-looking planes we fly, manned by ruthless pilots, built to kill, trained to kill, hoping to kill, as we approach the heavily defended fortress of Rabaul.

At 10,000 feet, we tilt our wings and circle the bomb-pocked city. I see that its harbor is reefed with sunken ships—monuments to strikes that came before us. A single burst of ack-ack, high and wide, announces our arrival. The enemy is not wasting ammunition on patrolling fighters, and it's doubtful that he has enough Zeros left to put a squadron up. We range over the nearby Japanese airstrips; a few planes are in the revetments, but we see no sign of activity on the ground.

Army B-25's are bunched closely in the sky above us. Navy torpedo-bombers are coming in from the west. Flights of P-40 fighters fly high cover. The strike has begun. Airacobras, at much lower alti-



tude, dive on their targets. Black puffs of ack-ack spatter the air.

One of our Corsairs reports a "bogey" at seven o'clock, low. We bank, nose down and arm our guns. It's a twin-engine plane, American, the circled star is clear upon each wing. We pull out of our dives, spiral upward. I see an outskirts of Rabaul erupting like a new volcano—bombs from the B-25's have hit. The radio is full of chatter: a life raft has been reported on the water, fighters are already circling above it, and a "Dumbo" flying boat is coming in to rescue the downed man.

We swing southward. Columns of smoke and flame from magnesium clusters mushroom up in a grove of coconut palms—an enemy fuel dump was there. I see a TBF making its get-away, low over the water, while a shore battery's splashes follow it out from the coast. Another bogey is reported. We dive. It's only a P-39, strayed from the flock, somewhat nervous lest we mistake it for a Zero.

The B-25's have disappeared. Several fork-tailed Lightnings pass above us. I watch the torpedo-bombers re-forming out at sea. A trail of smoke marks one which has been hit; it will probably have to ditch on the way home.

The strike is over; the air above Rabaul deserted; old ack-ack bursts grow large and haze away. On the ground a dozen fires are burning. Now our secondary mission will begin. Since our ammunition boxes are still full, we have targets to strafe—long wooden buildings surrounded by palm trees. The flashes of guns were reported near them during a previous raid. We take up an angular course which may throw the defenders off guard, fly on beyond, whip into position, set our trim tabs for a dive. I reach down and purge my wing tanks.

Seven thousand feet . . . 5000 feet . . . 4000 feet . . . I wonder how many guns are shooting at us . . . 3000 feet . . . perfect range, but a Corsair is too close to my line of fire . . . 2000 feet . . . buildings and palms rush up at me . . . 1500 feet . . . the Corsair ahead pulls away, and I squeeze the trigger.

Six guns clatter in my plane as tracers streak from wings to roof, and walk the building's length. I level out twenty feet above the treetops at 400 miles an hour. All this is forbidden land, just over a wing span beneath me, apparently deserted by life; actually full of watching eyes, and hands that would gladly feel a bayonet pierce through my belly. An airstrip lies ahead—probably bristling with machine guns. We bank toward the sea, flash past the shore line, hold low until we are out of range of anti-aircraft cannon.

It's almost eleven o'clock. In eight more minutes a patrol of freshly fueled Corsairs will appear overhead to relieve us. Our assigned missions are completed, but we have plenty of ammunition left—that means we'll drop in on the Duke of York before returning home.

The Duke of York is an island lying in the channel between New Britain and New Ireland. A Japanese airstrip has been built on it. Near the strip are several small villages in which, our intelligence reports, enemy troops are quartered. Patrol planes have been instructed to keep these villages well strafed and to be on

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A wounded crewman is lifted from a Navy torpedo bomber after an air raid on Rabaul in 1943. Later, flying a mission in the same area, Lindbergh wondered, "How can you justify a church in a gunsight?"

A screaming Navy Panther jet dive bomber looses a rocket and a bomb at a North Korean bridge during a mission over communist supply lines. (Note: The bomb can be seen below the rocket exhaust.)



THOUGHTS OF A COMBAT PILOT

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the alert for ground guns. How about the natives? "They took to the hills long ago. Besides, they're all unfriendly on New Ireland. Don't forget what happened to those pilots they turned over to the Nips."

We come in low above the palms and zoom 500 feet to start our runs. I get a row of huts in my sight and rake through them as I pull my nose up . . . dust rising . . . fragments flying . . . incendiaries ricocheting at all angles . . . watch the palms . . . easy to hold a dive too long when you're moving at five miles a minute . . . level off . . . bank left . . . hug the ground so Japanese guns can't follow you.

We break formation. Now each plane is on its own, to harass the enemy.

My heading takes me out to sea. I swing back toward the coast. A thatched-walled structure perches on a cliff; beside it are steel barrels. I let my bullets rip through air until I'm 100 yards away . . . chandelle to miss the palm tops . . . bank left . . . another row of huts . . . nose down . . . too close . . . only a short burst before I have to pull the stick back . . . circle toward the airstrip . . . two Corsairs diving on my right . . . dust . . . tracers . . . incendiaries.

I climb to locate my position . . . dive to evade enemy machine guns . . . center a building in my sight . . . squeeze the trigger . . . no . . . a steeple! . . . a church! . . . hold fire . . . ease back on the stick . . . pick out another target . . . dive . . . fire . . . ammunition almost gone . . . only one machine gun answers . . . Corsairs are rendezvousing out at sea. I join them.

"Onyx 12—Onyx 12." That's our radio call. The message comes in clearly, "Sweep St. George Channel for a rubber boat." We spread out 1000 yards apart and fly 500 feet above the

water. A moment ago our mission was to kill; now it is to rescue. Some American plane is missing, and some report said it was last seen above this channel. We find nothing—take up our homeward course. Flying boats will continue the search.

We tighten to parade formation as we approach the Green Islands. Right echelon for peel-off . . . one . . . two . . . three . . . four. Watch intervals for landing . . . gear down . . . flaps down . . . canopy wide open. My wheels touch ground at 12:20, local time; it's been a three-hour-and-forty-minute mission.

Other planes warm up as we taxi in. A new strike is getting under way.*

Leaf points of a coconut palm spear into the Southern Cross. A Marauder bomber drones off through distant night. The roaring fury of our war is replaced by damp, tropical silence. I smear bug repellent around my neck, and sit down on a grenade box. I can't wipe the vision of that church from my mind. Steeples don't fit into gun sights. Thoughts of God are antagonistic to the thoughts of war.

"I almost shot up a church today," I told a young marine captain after we landed. "I just recognized what it was in time."

"Oh, you mean that little church on the Duke of York?" He laughed. "We strafe it on every mission. The Nips used to use it for their troops."

I suppose our enemies say the same about churches they destroy. Both sides find excuses for doing anything in battle, and the other fellow always commits the first atrocity. When you shoot a Jap trying to surrender, it's because some other Jap, apparently surrendering, tossed a hand grenade instead—"the rats will kill you if you

*Pilots of the patrol:

Maj. Alan J. Armstrong, Onyx 1
1st Lt. James L. Whitacre, Onyx 2
1st Lt. Bert L. Strohl, Onyx 3
Charles A. Lindbergh, Onyx 4
Date of patrol: May 22, 1944

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give 'em half a chance." One incident has led to another, until ground guns flash in church windows, and tracers streak through air in quick reply. If you're captured in enemy territory, "the Nips just chop your head off," and, on our side, "the boys don't take prisoners any more."

If God has the power over man claimed by his Disciples, why does He permit the strafing of churches and the atrocities of war? How can one return from battle and believe that an all-powerful God desires "peace on earth, good will toward men"? One questions the extent of God's power. One questions the very existence of God.

A breath of wind flutters palm leaves. Waves of the Pacific break softly off the island shore. My thoughts drift half-way around the world to America and home. I find it hard to place myself in space and time. My family is almost upside-down from me, with day, instead of night, approaching. Bloomfield Hills is not in the direction my arm would point, toward a northeasterly horizon; it's really down beneath my feet. I imagine looking through earth and distance, at the soles of my children's shoes. The flat state of Michigan bulges convex on a planet's surface, and my long route across the ocean becomes a great circle on a sphere.

But this moist ground my feet are touching is not, in childhood's sense, beneath me; it's a vertical wall of earth, rotating at a thousand miles an hour around an axis capped by frozen poles. Only a mysterious force named gravity gives me the sense of stability and keeps me from tumbling downward into space. Tumbling downward—tumbling toward what star? Which way is up, which down, in the vastness of the heavens? Up for my children and up for me are now opposite directions. There's no universal plane of reference from which to judge; planets spinning around balls of fire, suns rushing with celestial speeds—rushing where? Do they hurtle on forever? Do they follow some tremendous orbit of their own? How can the universe be endless? But what could lie beyond its end?

I look out into trackless spaces where light, leaping to the moon while a hu-

man step is taken, travels for billions of years between galaxies of stars, where the entire span of life on earth forms but a moment of celestial time; where there's heat to vaporize carbon, cold to liquefy air, nothingness beyond measure, substance from which world and man have come. How was this universe created? What made the laws by which it runs—the mathematical perfection, the complexity of detail, the simplicity of plan, the importance of a single atom, the triviality of a thousand stars? In space there's clarity which lets me see through ages, and there's mystery opaque to my brain. Here, now, I'm confined to my body, but when I think of my family, some element within me exists 10,000 miles away. I feel dwarfed by the entire concept, as an ant is dwarfed by the being and intelligence of man.

Are humans severely limited in comprehension, too, like the insects that crawl and buzz around me? Does understanding expand forever, like space, while life develops into higher forms? And if there's a graduated scale of awareness, what mark have humans reached? In magnitude of mind and shape, does the difference between man and insect point toward the difference between man and God? Maybe God can't be reached by worldly measures; maybe He prefers no shape, no tangibility at all.

But whether one attributes them to God, nature or some other name, the power and the plan are there, manifest in the orbits of the heavens, in earth's gravitation, in the existence of human eye and mind. The endlessness of space is no more astounding than the domed ocean holding to its bed or the reproduction of new generations through the ova and the sperm.

An engine coughs and roars through night. Some crew chief is readying his fighter for tomorrow's strike. I get up from the grenade box and begin walking toward my tent. Where, in life and space and matter, is the place for war? How can one justify a church in a gun sight? How can one merge concepts of religion and of slaughter? Is strife an essential part of the universal plan or will man, evolving, find a path which leads to world-wide peace? THE END