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QUEENS DIE PROUDLY
by W.L. White W.N.U. FEATURES

THE STORY THUS FAR: Lieut. Col. Frank Kurtz, pilot of a Flying Fortress, tells of that fatal day when the Japs struck in the Philippines. Eight of his men were killed fleeing for shelter and Old 99, with many other Fortresses, was demolished before it could get off the ground. After escaping to Australia, what is left of the squadron flies to Java where they go out on missions over the Philippines. The bombardier takes up the story and tells of a flying trip to Brazil, Egypt, Iraq, India and Java. A battle in the clouds in which swarms of Zeros attack an E model Fortress is described, and in which the Zeros come out second best. Seven Zeros are shot down.

CHAPTER XII

"We've already lost altitude waiting for the Major (we'd boxed him in so he could stay with us and the Zeros wouldn't tear him to pieces), and he seems to have developed engine trouble. We're down to 23,000 feet. And I'm the lead bombardier. "But now the whole plan is again altered: I get it over the command radio. We're to lay them in chains across this target. So I set up the bomb sight again, put the cross hairs on that cruiser.

"It is a perfect run. I even have time to take my eye off the sight, and fire bursts at two more Zeros as they attack from the front. They start way out ahead, to the left and a little below us. Now, coming on in at me, they cross over and up, toward the center of my fuselage, their guns pounding, and then slip on back and dive straight down and away.

"I get one because he miscues. "Then I jam my eye back onto that bomb sight. Everything is riding pretty—the cross hairs right where I want them, the bombs about ready to be released.

"A second before the bombs leave my plane, I see that Jap cruiser starting to turn (he's figured our bomb-release line to the hair). He's turning toward us as I watch the bombs go down. By the time they arrived, the cruiser is three-fourths through a turn of 180 degrees. The first bombs are falling short—three of them. Now mine come—two direct hits on the cruiser, the other two going over. The plane back of me gets some direct hits. My left wing man's string is barely in front of the cruiser, my right wing man's string is barely behind it—the damned thing seems enveloped in bombs churning the water, and debris flying above the foam. Boy, that Japanese captain just turned the wrong way!

"But now our formation swings and heads for home, Zeros still swarming around us, and we're still losing altitude to stay back to protect the Major, who seems able to use barely enough throttle to keep her in the air. After forty minutes the last Zero drops away; they're short of gas and aren't chase us any further.

"Presently, over the command radio: "Robinson to Skiles. Go ahead." "Skiles answering." "Radio the base at Malang to have an ambulance ready. We have two badly wounded men aboard."

"We wonder who they are. One is probably the tail gunner, since we saw Robinson's plane taking so many tracers there. The other must be their radio operator, or else they could have sent their own dot-dash message back to base.

"Meantime our radio operator is telling Malang to have the ambulance out. Our plane is now leading the formation. Major Robinson's just behind us. We've drifted slowly down to 4,000 feet altitude, protecting Robinson. Then, all of a sudden, Robinson's plane swoops down beneath us about 1,000 feet, and the incline sends it scooting on out in front of us, heading a little toward the coast of Borneo. Is Robinson going to beach her? And now over the command radio:

"Skiles to Robinson. Is there anything wrong?" our pilot asks.

"But there is no answer. We watch. Now Major Robinson is making a gradual turn, as though to rejoin the formation. But halfway in the turn his plane starts nosing over, goes into a dive, goes faster—straight down at the sea. We watch, holding our breath. Just before he goes in, his tail elevator blows off. The poor guy must have had the stick clutched back into his stomach trying to pull out of that dive, and the terrible air pressure on those elevators ripped them off. There's a huge splash—flame—a spiral of black smoke, and a widening circle of yellows, reds, and black, which is burning gas and oil on that topaz-green water.

"The second after it hits I call Lieutenant Duphrane on the interphone.

"My God, Duke," I said, "did you see that?"

"Yes," he said. And then in a minute he said, "Thank God those Japs didn't see it."

"The formation circles above the dead Queen. We circle until the fire dies away, peering down at the widening disk of oil. But there is no sign of anything else on the surface.

"Until then it hadn't seemed like a battle—just a game. But now I feel like someone had kicked me in the guts. There were guys on there I'd drunk with. We'd sat around and lied to each other. I'd seen it happen, but I couldn't believe what I saw—it seemed like a bad dream.

"When we landed, all the crew assembled for the critique, each member dictating just what he had seen to the officer. That's when I was credited with three of the eight Zeros we knocked down. After the critique no one had much to say. We were all thinking about what we saw happen.

"We'd found out our machine-gun oil would freeze at high altitudes, and we were figuring how to clean and oil the guns so they would best



Boy, that Japanese captain just turned the wrong way.

operate up there. You couldn't tell the officers from the men (remember, we had no maintenance crews in Java; we did all the work ourselves) and my pilot had his coversalls on, installing an extra oxygen outlet in the tail. After seeing what had happened to Robinson's tail gunner, he figured if his tail gunner got wounded, another man in the crew could go back there and they would both stay on oxygen.

"The E of course was a big advance over the D. But any new model will have little things wrong that you never find out until you take one up and fight it.

"Anyway," said Frank Kurtz, "we had stopped the Japanese there in Macassar Strait for a while. The little Dutch Navy helped, but mostly it was American air power. We'd sunk quite a gang of them, so the rest had to go home and lick their wounds, realizing they couldn't move in on Java until they had air control. This meant they would have to clean us out of our advance fields in Borneo and the Celebes.

"But meantime Colonel Eubank had hauled me down to the ground for a while to do a different job. Too many wars were going on. The Japanese were running a pretty good one, but against them were the American Air Force, the Royal Dutch Air Force, the American, Dutch, and Australian navies, all of us running wars of our own.

"Finally it was agreed that every night they'd deliver to me in Surabaya a safe-hand message, giving the position of every American ship in those waters. We'd swap information about operations, so everyone would be pulling together. It was a liaison job, and since I'd have to deal with Navy men so heavy with rank and gold braid on their sleeves they looked like they'd had their arms up to the elbows in scrambled eggs, the Colonel gave me a set of captain's bars, so I could talk up to them. Presently I was dealing with everyone—the Dutch and the British, too.

"The Dutch, for instance, were begging for help in Sumatra. It's that long island which parallels Ma-

laya, pointing down in the direction of Java. The Japs weren't in Singapore yet, but already they were swarming across the narrow seas from Malaya trying to grab the oil refineries at Palembang. So the Colonel sent the Forts."

"We got to Palembang the last week in January," said Sergeant Boone, the gunner. "The Dutch there were certainly swell to us. There is a huge refinery in the town, and they took us to a club sponsored by Standard Oil Company—a palace. All the club members would drop around to be sure the Air Corps had a place for the night. A Dutch officer took the rear gunner and myself to his quarters. He'd married an American girl, so he spoke good English. We had on only greasy coveralls, but he took us right into his quarters—all air-conditioned and mosquito-proofed. The native couple they had as cook and houseboy gave us the first home-cooked meal we'd tasted since the war.

"The Dutch officer was a fine-looking big blond guy. He brought out clean pajamas for us, and some of his uniforms we could wear for dinner. He was depressed. Early in January he had evacuated his wife and child to Java—for safety, although that seems queer to say now. He himself was staying behind, in command of native ground troops, to defend those refineries. He hadn't heard from his wife. You could see he was very much in love with her. Also that he didn't think much of the military setup they had in Sumatra, so he doubted that he would ever see her again.

"He'd been back on a visit to Holland just before the Germans came in. Since then he'd had only one letter from his mother—smuggled out. She had had a couple of German maids from over the border. They made good servants for the heavy work, but just before the surprise invasion they'd been called back to Germany. It was the same, she said, all over Holland. So no wonder, he said, that the Germans knew the name of every Dutch officer in Holland. The morning of the invasion, the Gestapo would knock at the door, and when the officer opened it, would shoot him down in cold blood. This was why, he explained, the Dutch Navy was so incapacitated for officers. He was very bitter. He was in wonderful physical condition—been leading native troops through the jungles. Said his wife was high up in the Java mountains and hoped she was safe."

"We came up a little later," said the Bombardier, "and by the time we got there, the Japs were moving into the river's mouth, just below Palembang. The weather was overcast—a ceiling of 2,000, so we had to work down below that. None of us liked it, because a Fort is a hell of a big easy target so close to the ground—never built for that. As we came in, so close to the ground, our radio operator called Skiles on the interphone.

"Captain," he said, "oxygen doesn't agree with me, but I'm willing to begin chewing it any time now," and I broke in, "You can say that again."

"Captain Northcott was leading the mission—six planes we were, and when we sighted the target he called over the command radio, assigning our flight to a transport on the left.

"It was a monster, a huge Maru liner which I've seen as a luxury cruise boat tied up to the San Francisco docks. Suddenly she cut loose a hell of an antiaircraft barrage at us, all coming from this one transport—a regular Fourth of July at three o'clock in the afternoon. It was like looking down into a cone of fire, with this transport at the tip, and smoking red-hot rivets, they seemed like, whizzing up at us. They were rocking us around when suddenly we shuddered violently and almost went over on our back. An ack-ack shell had burst under one wing near the fuselage. Big pieces of it tore a huge hole just where the wing joins the fuselage, and one embedded itself just a few inches from Captain Skiles.

"We were already on our run, almost at the release line, and the jar had thrown out the bomb sight—it was completely inoperative. But I'd done some practice low-altitude bombing at Muroc back in the States, so I said the hell with a bomb sight—I'd guess at it. I was good and mad at the shaking-up we'd got. 'All right, you . . . here they come!'

I hollered, and dropped four in rapid succession. They landed in a cluster about twenty-five feet from the transport. The other four I released more slowly. We'd come down to 1,000 feet now, and that's low.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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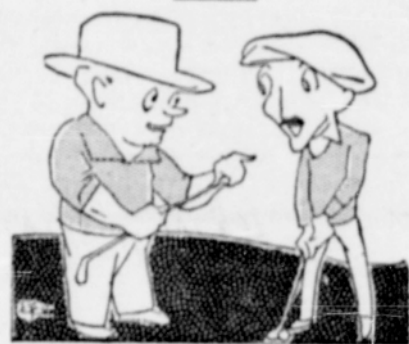
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