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'Big Week' shot down Luftwaffe

Knight-Ridder News Service

Though the "Big Week" bomber offensive of Feb. 20-25, 1944, had not destroyed the German aircraft industry, it had nevertheless been a turning point in the air war over Europe.

This was because of the damage done to the Luftwaffe in the air rather than in the factories.

During "Big Week" the Germans lost 282 fighters to all causes. Though this was a smaller number of aircraft than the Allies lost, the Allies were better able to replace losses in both equipment and pilots. When "Big Week" was launched, the U.S. had more bombers and twice as many fighters sitting in supply depots than they had in combat units.

The key factor, however, would be the replacement of pilots. The large U.S. training establishment was able to match well-trained airmen with the fighters and bombers pouring off the assembly lines. The German training establishment was unable to make up for the 100 veteran fighter pilots who were killed during "Big Week." They were forced to speed up training, thus putting less and less experienced pilots into their front-line units which degraded their combat performance.

During February, the U.S. 8th Fighter Command shot down 286 enemy fighters at the loss of only 85 American fighters.

The U.S. at War
Events of World War II
1941-1945

Generalleutnant Josef Schmid, commander of I Fighter Corps which controlled all fighters based inside Germany, believed "Big Week" marked the beginning of the end.

"In numbers as well as in technical performance, the daytime fighter units assigned to German air defense activity are inferior to the American fighter aircraft forces" reported Schmid, who concluded "in the long run, our forces are fighting a hopeless battle."

The American air commanders also understood what was happening. In January Maj. Gen. James H. Doolittle, commander of the 8th Air Force, had "unleashed" American fighters to take aggressive action against their German counterparts rather than be tied to the bomber streams.

On a visit to the 8th Fighter Command's headquaters, Doolittle spotted a sign in Maj. Gen. William Kepner's office which read "The first duty of the Eighth Air Force fighters is to bring the bombers back alive."

Doolittle ordered the sign changed to read "The first duty of the Eighth Air Force fighters is to destroy German fighters."

Said Doolittle to Kepner "We'll still provide a reasonable fighter escort for the bombers, but the bulk of your fighters will go hunting for Jerries. Flush them out in the air and beat them up on the ground as you go home. Your first priority is to take the offensive."

The fighters were now free to range ahead of the bombers to break up the mass fighter formations the Germans used against the bombers' box formations. During "Big Week" 700 to 800 fighters would be escorting the bombers each mission, mostly P-47s "Thunderbolts" but with two groups of P-51 "Mustangs" and more on the way.

Pure fighter sweeps had failed in the past because the Germans refused to come up and fight. But with the bombers hitting aircraft production centers, the Luftwaffe had to come up in an attempt to stop the bombers and thus became targets for the prowling American fighters.

This campaign was code-named "Operation Pointblank."

Persistent WWII veteran receives medal from Russia

Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel

DELRAY BEACH, Fla. — To Murray Sohmer, a promise is a promise — even if it was made more than 50 years ago by a Russian commander in the Persian Gulf.

After a five-year letter-writing campaign, Sohmer is a decorated veteran at age 72. Armed with his wife Ros' typing skills and his own determination, he was finally awarded the medal promised to him during World War II.

In 1942, while the United States was still reeling from the attack on Pearl Harbor, Sohmer embarked on a top secret mission with the U.S. Army Air Force.

Sohmer and 35 other troops were ordered to participate in the Army's $7 million Civilian Emergency Defense Aid to Russia campaign, known as the CEDAR Project. They received special passports for the relief effort.

The unit flew to the Persian Gulf to escort a group of civilians with the Douglas Aircraft Co. The federal government contracted with the technicians to assemble and test airplanes for the Russians at a plant on Abadan Island in Iran. The airplane parts were hidden in crates around the desert.

"It was hotter than Death Valley. If you picked up a metal tool during the day you could get blisters," Sohmer said. "We did most of our work at night. The Russians knew that their life blood was in those airplanes."

While crews worked on airplanes, the Air Force and Russian troops protected them from enemy fire. Some of the planes assembled on the island were used in the battles of Leningrad and Stalingrad.

"A Russian air field marshal told us, 'When this is all over, you will receive some sort of reward, probably a medal for your bravery,'" Sohmer recalled. "I've been looking forward to that medal for over 40 years."

Sohmer left Iran in 1943 when he became ill. He returned to the United States as a flight cadet and married his childhood sweetheart, Ros Weiss, now 69.

In the 1980s, Sohmer read that several U.S. veterans received the Russian Medal of Victory celebrating the 40th anniversary of World War II. Immediately, he wrote the Russian Embassy in Washington.

"I just hope that this medal by your government will be awarded to me before I die. You see, I am 70 years old and would like to have this very soon. A promise made is a promise kept," Sohmer said in a 1992 letter to Ambassador Vicktor Kompcektov.

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