

That December 1943, Stewart's 445th Bomb Group made two successful raids over Germany. Stewart flew on both missions—his baptism by fire. Foul weather held up further strikes until 7 January, 1944; and on that day, Captain James M. Stewart became a real-life hero.

At ten hundred hours (10 a.m.), five hundred B-24 "Liberators" and B-17 "Flying Fortresses" assembled over East Anglia (East England) and set course over the turbulent North Sea, their noses pointed toward Germany. There were ten bomb groups totally, with Jimmy leading the 445th.

The first German fighters hit them over Belgium, a tempest of Messerschmitts and Focke-Wulfs shooting out of the sun's glare and tearing through the American V-formation. Smoke trails interlaced the sky as burning aircrafts spiraled earthward. Valiantly, the remainder of the squadron closed the gaps and droned onward, heading in the direction of Frankfurt. More German pursuits came at them, and more aircraft spun downward in fiery explosions; but thus far, by the Grace of God, the 445th had come through unscathed. Suddenly, the entire formation altered course, veering across the near-cloudless sky toward their *real* target—Ludwigshafen. The initial course had been a feint designed to confuse German fighter controllers.

Then, the ten bomber groups split, each making its own precarious way to the objective. Stewart's squad began the run-in, the huge bombers lurching hard as they proceeded through heavy flak. The bomb doors of Stewart's "Liberator" swung open, and a shell exploded under the port wing, sending the aircraft in a violent roll to starboard. Exhibiting no fear, Jimmy fought with the controls, finally managing to bring the damaged B-24 back to level flight. Less than two minutes later, the forty-eight "Liberators" dropped their loads over the target and turned their bulldog noses northwest for England, pursued by the unremitting flak.

At this juncture, these brave airmen would never have guessed that their tribulation was just beginning. As Ludwigshafen fell behind, Stewart noticed another squadron away to the west—seriously off course and seemingly headed for the English coast via a route that would take them over northern France, which would be stiff with German pursuits and anti-aircraft fire. A lesser man would have left them to their fate, but James Maitland Stewart was not that sort. Without pause, he ordered the pilots of his group to increase speed to catch the straying bombers. He was praying the extra fire-power of his forty-eight "Liberators" would spell the difference between survival and disaster.

Getting in closer, Jimmy identified the off-course "Liberator" squad as the 389th, its leader a friend. Immediately, Stewart tried radioing him over the R/T, but each attempt failed. He ordered his own unit to tighten formation, as he swung the big bombers in till they were cruising directly behind the 389th, and slightly below. He figured that if any pursuits tried to pick off his friend's "tail-end Charlies," they would meet a barrage of fire from the 445th's rapid-firing machine guns.

Never, before or since, had a flight seemed so long. Time and the miles home ticked by with excruciating slowness.

Stewart's narrowed blue eyes swept across the horizon. The afternoon sky was clear, nearly cloudless still, and, except for the "Liberators," empty. But experience—and something else—told him they would not be alone for long.

It happened about thirty miles southwest of Paris. There was a sudden flash of light on a 389th wing above him. Squinting, Stewart could barely make out the glittering shapes. In an instant, his eyes took on that burning sapphire gaze, the one moviegoers have seen over the cocked barrel of a Peacemaker or Winchester. That intense gaze we have so often witnessed

directed at evil and injustice on the silver screen was now focused on those flashing avian forms— Messerschmitts and Focke-Wulfs, thirty, perhaps forty, arching across the sky toward them, and those fellows meant business!

Straightaway, the enemy fighters split into threes, attacking from several directions at once. The sharp tang of cordite fumes filled Stewart's nostrils, as his gunners opened up. A Messerschmitt, hit from the firepower of several "Liberators," blew apart like so many matches, the bits spinning crazily downward, whirling over and over in a near-mesmerizing pattern.

Then the 389th's lead "Liberator" took a direct hit, exploding in an oily, black mushroom of smoke through which Stewart's squadron flew seconds later. Jimmy could only watch helplessly as his friend's burning sarcophagus dwindled against the bleak French countryside.

More fighters darted at them, and a second 389th "Liberator" took a hit, rolling over on its back then vertically descending in flames. A third followed, its tail seared off by a hail of German shells. A brief lull, and the Luftwaffe fighters zoomed in again. Several were shot down, but two more of the 389th's "Liberators" crashed in flames.

Bits of staccato chatter from the 389th straggled over Stewart's radio. Again, he warned his own pilots to tighten formation so that their guns could cover one another. He figured wisely that it was their only chance. Another of the 389th B-24s went down.

Now they could see France's northern coastline and the Channel, and I imagine it was just about the most welcome sight they had ever set eyes on. As expected, the German fighters made one final all-out assault before breaking off, short of fuel and ammunition, but not before sending the eighth "Liberator" spiraling toward the snow-covered French fields below.

Of a sudden, Stewart caught a glimpse of more black forms racing toward them from the north. Yet again, against an eerie silence, except for the drone of their engines, gunners tensed behind weapons, aching fingers on sweaty triggers— and then eased, the silence exploding this time with laughter and cheering as the Americans recognized the graceful shapes of Spitfires.

Approximately two hours hence, Stewart led the 445th Bomb Group in to land at Tibenham; not a single aircraft had been lost. Sometime later, an official citation credited him with saving the 389th from complete destruction, due to his decision to escort it clear of peril.

James Stewart flew more than twenty combat missions, leading as many as a thousand planes at a time over Germany, and winning a Distinguished Flying Cross with Oak Leaf Clusters, the French *Croix-de-Guerre* with Palm, and four Air Medals. He returned home to the United States in 1945 with the rank of full colonel.

I think it wholly indicative of Stewart's character to reveal that during his service in World War II, he faithfully sent his agent ten percent of his earnings; the two-dollars-plus was posted out of every military pay. It is important to note, too, that after the war, Stewart remained in the Air Force Reserve, and in 1959, was promoted to the rank of brigadier general. This great American retired from the service in 1968.

When World War II ended, Jimmy returned home to Indiana, Pennsylvania, where he was given a hero's welcome. Now, no longer under contract with MGM, the former Hollywood box-office draw speculated, I am certain, about his career. It had been several years since he had made a film, but *never* did he exploit his military record.

As I write this I am sharply reminded of another great American, Alvin York, who, after World War I, refused to capital-