

LIBERATORS AND RED TAILS

Nov 14, 1944: On a mission deep over Germany the 30-ton four-engine B-24 Liberator bomber 'Tail Heavy' took a direct hit from deadly 88mm anti-aircraft fire. The lethal flak tore into the oxygen system supporting four of the eight crewmembers. The four airmen, including the pilot, passed out from lack of oxygen. Flying at 25,000 feet without oxygen meant death, or if they did survive, permanent brain damage.



Their lives and the fate of the bomber depended on the judgment of a 20 year old copilot named Jim Scheib. Scheib

didn't have an abundance of options; in truth, he only had two choices. Scheib could remain in the formation of 27 other B-24 Liberators with their protective blanket of 270 combined machine guns which would give 'Tail Heavy' the best chance for survival, but that 'protective blanket' meant certain death for four of the crewmembers. Or, the young copilot could power dive the cumbersome bomber from 25,000 to 15,000 feet and with a bit of luck save the four unconscious airmen. However, the tricky maneuver would expose their damaged B-24 to loitering and opportunist German fighters.

A 20 year old kid, barely out of his teenage years and legally unable to purchase alcohol, chose the power dive. By comparison, a B-24 had greater range and carried a bigger bomb load than the legendary B-17, but the ungainly and unsightly Liberators had a reputation for difficult handling. In a power dive, a B-24 was like driving an 18-wheeler with 18 flat tires. Albeit, the young copilot fought the controls and flew like a seasoned pilot until reaching 15,000 feet. The four unconscious men groggily came back to life, but now the Liberator formation was 2 miles above and 'Tail Heavy' was all alone. German fighters loved to pounce on weak and wounded Allied aircraft.

The flight engineer tapped Scheib on the shoulder and pointed out the window. There on their wing sat an escorting P-51

Mustang with a Red Tail – a Tuskegee Airman. Another escort, a P-38 Lightning, pulled up on their other wing. The two fighter pilots had left the big formation to escort the wounded bomber to safety. It was Scheib's first encounter with the Red Tails, an encounter that most likely saved his life. His next meeting with the Red Tails would be much more personal.



Dec 29, 1944: Scheib and a squadron of 18 B-24s had to abort a mission due to inclement weather. En route home to their base at Venosa, Italy, the bombers were informed that the airstrip was covered in 5" of snow. Their B-24s could not land under those conditions.

The heavy bombers were sectored to the Tuskegee base at Ramitelli, home of the Red Tails. Landing on an airstrip built for fighter planes along with their Red Tail escort, the lumbering B-24s came to a haul on an all-black, segregated air base. It was

the first time during World War II that immediate integration of the races took place.



Tuskegee Airman in the control tower at Ramitelli

Stranded at Ramitelli for 5 days, 180 white B-24 airmen mingled with, slept with, ate with, and talked the talk of aviators with the Tuskegee Airmen. No racism, no insults, and no misunderstandings. War, it seems, was an equal opportunity mediator. They swapped war stories and tactics, Intelligence information, and drank a whole lot of beer.

The following is an article from 'Bombs Away', a restricted publication of the 485th Bombardment Group, dated January 7, 1945:

5-DAY VISIT WITH AN ALL-NEGRO FIGHTER GROUP!

"A story of hospitality far beyond expectation was revealed this week when, coming back from a mission last Friday, several of our crews, having run into bad weather, were forced to land at the base of the 332nd All-Negro Fighter Group, the only one of its kind in this theater."



THE TUSKEGEE PILOTS 'RED TAILS' AT RAMITELLI

“According to Lt. Lurser of crew 178, ‘For five days they treated us like we were kings. Every one of those men were wonderful to us and the quartermaster immediately sent out to another field for food and five blankets apiece for us. We remained in the tents with the men and our sleeping quarters were ideal.’

‘They insisted on serving us our breakfast in bed, and provided us with beer, PX rations (their own), Cokes, writing paper, and whiskey, and the New Year’s dinner they served us was out of this world.’

‘And when we left we found in each plane a letter which read in part, “You have been the guests of the 332nd All-Negro Fighter Group, and we hope our facilities, such as they are, were adequate to make your stay a pleasant one. On behalf of Col. Davis and the Command, we extend to you our most hearty wishes for a happy new year and many happy landings.....Remember, when you are up there and see the red-tailed Mustangs in the sky, they are your friends of the 332nd!”

‘We only can hope that the men of the 332nd will realize how much we appreciate their kindness and thoughtfulness. We certainly won’t soon forget it!’

The Commanding Officer of the 485th Bombardment Group wrote the Tuskegee Airmen a letter of appreciation:

‘Dear Major Jones,

On behalf of the officers and enlisted men of the 485th Bombardment Group, I want to personally thank you for the courtesy and assistance which you and your personnel so splendidly offered to our crews which landed at your base on 29 December 1944. I fully realize what an inconvenience this forced landing must have made on your facilities, and the remarkable manner in which you people of the 15th Fighter Command rose to the situation is all the more commendable.

The very able assistance which your Service Squadron has given to the 332nd Fighter Group is well known and now you have proven yourselves just as capable in servicing our heavy bombers.

Sincerely, Colonel Jack P. Tomhave.'



Ground crewman loading .50 cal ammo into P-51 Mustang

The Red Tails were among the best; they had to be. Their dedication to a mission was legendary; their willing sacrifice known all too well. For a maximum effort mission, the Red Tails could put 48 P-47 Thunderbolts and P-51 Mustangs into the air to protect the B-17s and B-24s on long range missions over Yugoslavia, Austria, France, Rumania, Germany, and Greece. During a 2-day span in March '45, the Red Tails downed 25 German fighters.



A **'RED TAIL'** WATCHING THE GROUND CREW TEND HIS P-51

Included in their total victories were one German Destroyer sunk in the Adriatic Sea near Trieste, 111 airplanes shot down in aerial combat and another 140 enemy planes destroyed on the ground. Included in their totals were three of the new Messerschmitt Me-262 jet fighters.

The Red Tails lost 66 pilots in action and over 30 captured. In March of 1945, the 332nd received a Presidential Unit Citation.

“No one has been barred on account of his race from fighting or dying for America – there are no “white” or “colored” signs on foxholes or on the graveyards of battle.” - President John F. Kennedy, 1963 -