

YB-40 Gun Ship Completes a Successful Mission

HAROLD FISHER

It began on June 4, 1943 when a formation of B-17s was returning from a "hammer" mission against the island of Pantelleria. Well behind the bunched four-engine bombers, visible only as a small dot in the sky, a last Fortress dragged its way home to Africa. The B-17 was crippled with both engines on the left wing dead and feathered. The pilot, 1st Lieutenant Harold Fisher, fought the controls of his battered airplane. This was his twentieth mission and he had the skill and experience to handle the machine. But he questioned how much longer he could maintain full control. Fisher thought seriously of ditching while the airplane responded to his movements, because if the Fort ever "got away" from him, his crew would have to bail out, and fast, and some of them might not make it from a gyrating bomber. Yet, Fisher didn't like the idea of his men parachuting into the sea. That was always a tricky proposition. He was a veteran, they weren't. For the nine men aboard the Fortress this was their first mission.

Fisher committed himself to staying with the B-17 as long as she would fly. He ordered the crew to dump excess weight — machine guns, ammo belts, flak suits — everything that would come loose. A few pounds would make a difference of a gnat's hair, but with two engines gone even that was not enough. He didn't want to think about German fighters. Jeez not now, the Fortress, Bonnie Sue, was always bobbing through the air. A single lazy pass by a Messerschmitt or a Focke-Wulf could ruin what was left of the day.

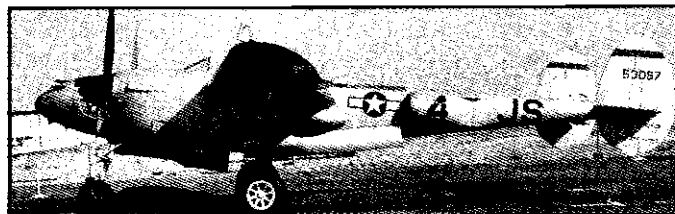
Then the dreaded call, "Fighter one o'clock high", shouted the right waist gunner. "Closing Fast".

There wasn't that much time for panic. The crewmen were at their chutes immediately, hooking up, checking last items. Then, almost immediately, they relaxed. No mistaking that baby. No one could mistake the twin-boomed signature of the P-38. One of the "Little Friends." By God, they were glad to see him. The Lightning eased in so close that Fisher grinned at the sight of the pilot waving to him. Fisher went to VHF radio, asked the 38 driver for escort back to his base. The pilot agreed and eased back to take up a weaving escort position above and behind the Fortress. Harold Fisher looked down at the Mediterranean four thousand feet below. It didn't look so bad now. That P-38 was good news.

Until a moment later. A locomotive seemed to crash directly against the Flying Fortress. A sudden, savage blow heeled the B-17 over sharply. They heard a roaring continuous crash as a stream of heavy machine gun slugs and exploding cannon shells tore apart the airplane. Fisher barely had the time to see the P-38 closing in fast, the long nose ablaze with the five weapons. Just enough time to see the P-38 chopping the Fortress into slashed ribbons; just enough time to hear the cold laughter in his ear-phones. Then the bomber dropped in a screaming dive toward the sea, banking into a spiral that kept tightening. Fisher fought the controls with all his strength. Just before they hit the water he righted the plane, brought up the nose. They plowed into the Mediterranean with all the force of smashing into a stone wall. The nose gave way and at more than a hundred miles an hour the sea burst through the airplane, killing men, trapping the others. Fisher remembers crawling through a shattered windshield. He struggled to the surface, grabbed at a raft floating alongside him. He was the only survivor. That night a British rescue team fished him from the water.

The next day Fisher found himself of unchecked fury on the part of P-38 group and squadron commanders. They'd listened to his story and they reacted unpleasantly to his details of being shot down by a Lightning. They didn't like it, they didn't believe him, and they read off the equally incensed bomber pilot. The Intelligence officer, Major Walker B. Higgins, soothed the ruffled feathers of those at the interrogation. What he had to say put a new light on the matter. It didn't matter much at first, but it turned out to be everything.

Several weeks previously a P-38 pilot, low on fuel and lost over the Mediterranean, sighted land and ran for it, bringing his Light-



ning smoothly to earth at Elmas Airdrome, just outside the main port city of Cagliari, Sardinia. Before the pilot could set his fighter aflame with a few wellplaced shots from his 45, Italian troops hauled upon the canopy and dragged him unceremoniously from the big airplane. That's where it began. The Italians tested their new Lieutenant Guido Rossi, one of their better pilots (and also one of their more imaginative and colorful fighter jocks), looked long and hard at the Lightning and beamed with a sudden inspiration. He presented his idea to his superiors, who in turn bucked it up to Rome, who in turn took it into the Duce, until Mussolini himself personally approved Rossi's suggestions.

Rossi had himself his own personal Lightning. His plan was simple. He would leave the airplane unchanged; not a marking would be altered. Then he would wait for progress reports on American air strikes. After the Americans made their bombing raids Rossi would take off and follow the formations, looking for stragglers. Who would suspect a P-38? Indeed, any bomber crew in trouble would be delighted to see the fighter to gain protection of its speed and heavy firepower.

The system worked beautifully and Italian headquarters was delighted. Guido Rossi, taking his time, always waiting for the right opportunity, shot down several B-17's. No crewman survived his unexpected attacks to report the ruse to the Allied Camp. Not until the British netted Harold Fisher from the sea and came home with his startling tale of the renegade P-38 did we get wind of what was happening.

Bomber crews were alerted to be on the watch for a strange P-38 that might suddenly attack their aircraft. Most crews thought headquarters had fractured its collective skull. How were they to tell what was happening until it was too late? Rossi, despite the warnings, maintained his unnerving manhunt for crippled or straggling bombers. Finally he caught his quarry trailing a formation swinging away from Naples and shot another Fortress from the sky.

Fisher went to Colonel Bill Hall, his group commander, with a suggestion to try to set up Rossi. Since he was so fond of stragglers, why not set up a decoy? Not a standing B-17, but one of the experimental YB-40 gunships then being tested out of England. Engineers had modified a standard B-17F into a flying gun platform. They installed a power "chin" turret beneath the nose with twin fifties to overcome weak forward armament against head-on attacks. Where the radio operator had fired a single ball socket-mounted fifty amidships, they placed another power turret with two heavy guns. Instead of the single fifties in each waist position there were now two guns per position. Into the bomb bays went ammunition boxes to keep the YB-40 firing long after the normal B-17 ammo supply would have been exhausted. The concept of the YB-40 was to provide self-escort to the bomber formations in cases where fighters were not available for escort, or targets lay beyond fighter range. Each YB-40 had sixteen heavy machine guns, a major ammunition supply and extra armor for the crew. While the concept was not being sustained where mass fighter attacks were involved, and the bomber formations once they were free of their bomb loads, chances were that a P-38, its pilot unsuspecting of the heavy firepower, would be a fair target for the YB-40. Especially if they could sucker in the Italian in precisely the same manner he used to trap the crippled Fortresses into setting themselves up for the kill.

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YB-40 GUN SHIP *(continued from page 4)*

Bill Hall gave his approval, and the request for a single YB-40 was bucked up to England. The gunship arrived in Africa early in August and, as he had hoped Harold Fisher received his assignment to fly the gun-bristling decoy.

For the next two weeks Fisher and a picked crew did their best to flush out the marauding P-38. Returning from missions against Salerno, Foggia, Naples and Rome he dragged back of the main formations, and "obvious cripple" trailing the safety formations and a sitting duck for fighters. But Lieutenant Rossi came nowhere near the YB-40, and instead went after the real thing. On August 19 the Italian flamed a straggler south of Benecento. A week later Rossi chopped down another Fortress. As Intelligence pieced together the fragments with a strafing P-38 and at the right moment was reported to have shot down the unsuspecting American Pilot.

Fisher kept badgering Intelligence for details of his elusive quarry. The break came when he learned that Rossi's wife lived in Constatine, occupied by the Allies. That night Fisher visited Gina Rossi and her child—never seen by its father—and as soon as he returned to base he dragged an artist from his workbench. When the artist finished his job, the YB-40 carried on its fuselage a painting of a beautiful dark-haired woman. In large letters beneath the painting was the name Gina.

On August 31 Fortress struck targets in Pisa, with Fisher's gunship holding trail position. They didn't see Rossi during the bomb strike but might have preferred of the Italian, instead of the German fighters slashing at the B-17s. They stayed with the Fortresses through the bomb drops and then, as they swung away from the bomb run, Fishcer planned to ease back to the position of a straggler. But his co-pilot, Lieutenant John Yates, blanched at what was going on about them. Not even the extra guns and firepower of the YB-40 were going to do that much good against formations of fighters.

Then the Germans took all decisions out of their hands. Two Me-109s shot out the number four engine. Over loaded from the heavy weight of guns, ammunition and armor plating the YB-40 rolled onto its back, picking up speed and dropping swiftly. Fisher had no help from Yates, the co-pilot had been hit and was unconscious. It took 10,000 feet to pull out of the rolling plunge. Fisher came back on the power, rolled in nose-up trim and hauled back on the yoke with all his strength. The YB-40 threatened to leave its wings behind as Fisher pulled and the airplane groaned its nose upward—and blacked out Fisher from the g-forces he came to with the airplane still descending. Fisher went to full power on one and two and feathered four. Then he discovered number three was out and he had to feather that one. It was only temporary reprieve. With all the weight aboard the YB-40 would never make it home on two engines. Responding quickly to the pilot's orders the gunners started dumping everything except the ammunition in their guns. Yates came to slowly. His first move was to stare through his window and then bang Fisher on the arm.

"Hey! There's a P-38 out there . . . He's got one feathered."

The P-38, one engine showing its propeller blades knife-edged

into the wind, slid beneath the wing and eased alongside the YB-40 on its left side. The P-38 pilot waved at Fisher. Could it be Rossi? There was no way of telling. Yates went on the intercom and told the gunners to stay alert for anything from the P-38. Fisher switched radios to the assigned fighter frequently. The voice he heard spoke perfect English. The pilot told Fisher he'd like to ride home with the bomber. Fisher agreed, then turned his attention back to more pressing matters. But with the P-38 along they could dump even more weight. Fisher told his gunners to get everything overboard. The order was to jettison the ammunition and every machine gun they could release from its mounts.

Then he sat bolt upright in his seat. The P-38 pilot was talking to him. ". . . pretty name, Gina. She's from Constantine?" Fisher snapped back to reality with warnings pounding his ears. He switched to intercom and shouted for his men to keep their guns. The left waist gunner and radioman had already heaved theirs over the side. Fisher went back to fighter frequency. During the next several minutes he baited Rossi, wanting to be absolutely certain of who might be in that P-38. So he told the pilot details of what is was like to shack up with the girl named Gina.

Rossi blew his stack. Even as the P-38 eased away from the YB-40 Rossi — for him it was all right — started the dead engine and with a string of oaths pulled ahead of the Fortress. His maneuver was clear to Fisher. Rossi would bring the P-38 around in a long head-on run to pour his concentrated firepower straight into the YB-40 cockpit. He bored in carefully.

At the last possible moment Fisher roared "Now!" Every gun that possibly could fire foward opened up. Two turrets blazed away, the gunners dead on their target. The P-38 seemed to stagger in mid-air, then slid off to the side with a heavy smoke trail behind. A gunner called out on the intercom that the left aileron of the P-38 seemed to be shot away. Rossi was now the man in trouble. Flames erupted from the smoking engine and streamed back almost to the tail.

But the Italian wouldn't quit. Cursing Fisher, he brought the Lightning in without wavering. Fisher was afraid Rossi would ram. The four heavy guns and cannon of the P-38 chopped into the Fortress, slamming the big airplane to the side. Closer and closer came Rossi, finger jammed on the firing pin, apparently determined to take the Fortress and its crew with him.

He almost made it. The P-38 was coming apart in the air from the furious battering of the YB-40's multiple guns. The flames lengthened, the canopy twisted wildly through the air, and pieces of airplane were shedding steadily. Rossi standing on the wing, shaking his fist at them. The crew wanted to go down and shoot "the son of a bitch while we got him" Fisher ordered his men not to fire. He notified Air-Sea Rescue of the position of the Italian pilot.

The Twelfth Air Force awarded Lieutenant Harold Fisher the Distinguished Flying Cross, and each crewman the Air Medal, for their roles in the bizarre ending of the aerial duel.

Harold Fisher and Guido Rossi both survived the war. Fisher's luck ran out several years later when he flew a transport on the Berlin Airlift. There was a crash, and Fisher was dead.

One of the men who mourned his passing was Guido Rossi.

**Perry Burnham, Chairman,
needs some money for Reunion events,
see other side.**