

For 30 minutes, James H. Howard single-handedly fought off marauding German fighters to defend the B-17s of 401st Bomb Group. For that, he received the Medal of Honor.

One-Man Air Force

By Rebecca Grant



Tuesday, Jan. 11, 1944, was a rough day for the B-17Gs of the 401st Bomb Group. It was their 14th mission, but the first one on which they took heavy losses—four aircraft missing in action after bombing Me 110 fighter production plants at Oschersleben and Halberstadt, Germany.

Turning for home, they witnessed an amazing sight: A single P-51 stayed with them for an incredible 30 minutes on egress, chasing off German fighters attempting to hack away at the bombers. A “one-man Air Force,” said Maj. Allison C. Brooks, group leader for the 401st’s mission.

Extraordinary valor was needed in the skies over Germany, as Eighth Air Force began its long-range attacks

on Nazi aircraft and fuel production. Devastating missions to targets such as Ploesti in Romania had already produced Medal of Honor recipients. Many were awarded posthumously, and nearly all went to bomber crewmen. Waist gunners, pilots, and navigators—all were carrying out heroic acts in the face of the enemy.

The lone P-51 pilot on this bombing run would, in fact, become the only fighter pilot awarded the Medal of Honor in World War II’s European Theater. “With utter disregard for his own safety, he immediately pressed home determined attacks,” the citation read in part.

In the teamwork environment of aerial combat, this was a rare example of one man braving enemy fire repeatedly to save others. “Who was that

Mustang pilot who took on the German Air Force single-handedly, and saved our 401st Bomb Group from disaster?” wondered Col. Harold Bowman, the unit’s commander.

Soon the bomber pilots knew—and so did those back home.

“Maj. James H. Howard was identified today as the lone United States fighter pilot who for more than 30 minutes fought off about 30 German fighters trying to attack Eighth Air Force B-17 formations returning from Oschersleben and Halberstadt in Germany,” reported the *New York Times* on Jan. 19, 1944.

Howard was a tall, quiet squadron commander from the 354th Fighter Group. He had a reputation for doing things his way. One reporter termed him “as American as the Jeep,” but the reality was more complicated. Howard was born in China, where his father,

a prominent eye surgeon, had spent several years on a university exchange. He left China at age 14 and finished high school in St. Louis before earning a degree at Pomona College in California. Lured away from medical studies by a Navy recruiter, he'd started his aviation career as Ensign Howard, flying Grumman F3F-2 fighters off the aircraft carrier USS *Enterprise*.

But impatient Howard had a yearning for adventure and combat. In 1941, he joined the American Volunteer Group, better known as the Flying Tigers, and journeyed back to China. Howard took quickly to AVG head Claire L. Chennault, particularly for P-40 fighter tactics. In January 1942, he became an ace, "an arbitrary title which is supposed to distinguish a fighter pilot who has achieved a high level of success," he wrote in his 1991 autobiography, *Roar of the Tiger*.

Under Chennault, Howard also demonstrated leadership qualities, rising to become a squadron commander, then group operations officer and head of the AVG's confirmation board, which officially credited pilots with their proven kills of Japanese aircraft. Fourteen months of action also left him with a debilitating case of dengue fever. He turned down a direct commission in the US Army Air Forces when the AVG disbanded and headed home to St. Louis to recuperate for the remainder of 1942.

Offers of flying jobs from both the Navy and Army awaited him there. Eventually Howard traveled out to see old Navy friends at North Island, in San Diego, Calif. Cold-shouldered by an officious Navy base commander, Howard revolted and accepted the Army's commission offer.

Within weeks he was at Muroc Dry Lake (now Edwards AFB, Calif.) flying the P-38, though he was leery of the aircraft. "There we so many problems with the P-38, it was cynically called the engineer's dream—as opposed to a pilot's dream," he recalled.

A Pilot's Dream

Howard was happier back in the P-47 with Fourth Air Force. He rose quickly to squadron command, and the summer of 1943 found him preparing a new squadron for assignment to Europe.

The bomber offensive in the winter of 1943 to 1944 was at its peak. In August, the massed missions to Schweinfurt and Regensburg had claimed horrific losses.

Eighth Air Force, in the fall of 1943, either confined itself to targets in France and the Low Countries within the combat radius of the fighters, or took the losses for deep attacks, as at Schweinfurt. With attrition often greater than 10 percent, the deep strike missions could not be sustained unless something changed.

There was only so much the fighter pilots could do. Lacking range, the P-47s and P-38s could only provide limited assistance to the bombers. The Luftwaffe was still at full strength. Not until March 1944 did the shortages in aviation gas and trained pilots begin to seriously affect the Luftwaffe. The last three months of 1943 saw the German Air Force fighter pilots holding a slight edge as they struggled desperately to defend German industry against daylight bombing.

"All the German fighters had to do was to wait until the last escort fighters turned back and then pounce on the bombers," Howard summed up.

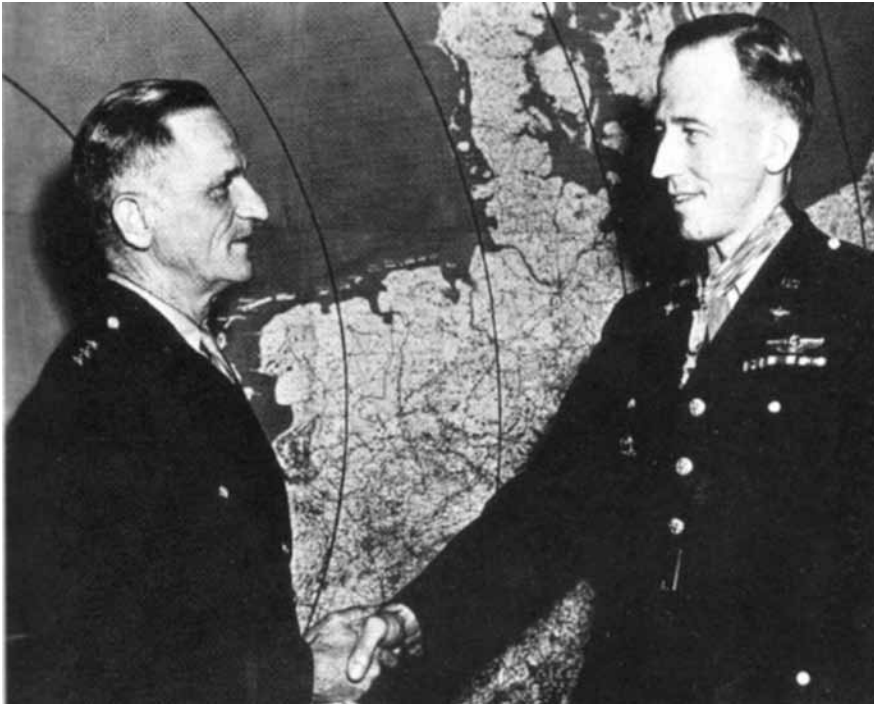
Howard was stepping in to a brand-new mission—long-range fighter escort—when the 354th arrived in England. Arriving with no inkling of what aircraft they would operate, the pilots were delighted to learn they'd be the first unit assigned to Ninth Air Force to fly the P-51B Mustang.

"All of the advance rumors of the P-51's excellence proved true," said Howard. "It was a fighter pilot's dream."

The P-51B Mustangs, with improved Merlin engines and extra fuel capacity, began to arrive in England in late 1943.

Left: Howard in his P-51, dubbed Ding Hao! (Chinese for "Very Good"). Below: A German fighter attacks a damaged B-17 over Bremen in December 1943.





Lt. Gen. Carl Spaatz (left) presented the Medal of Honor to Howard in London in June 1944.

With drop tanks, the combat radius of the P-51B exceeded 880 miles. These “little friends” could fly from England to rendezvous with bomber formations over their targets deep in Germany, and help bring them home.

“The only limitation of the P-51, if you could call it one, was the pilot,” said Howard. Six-hour missions and the multitasking demands of flying, navigating, and tuning out German radar and jamming could be a strain.

Air tactics were about to change. With P-51s, fighter cover could be provided over the target as well as on ingress and egress. The relatively small numbers of P-51Bs in theater were responsible for validating the disputed theory that long-range fighters could give cover to bombers at long distances from their bases. To Howard, the extra fuel of the P-51B answered the need, and none questioned the Mustang’s superior aerodynamic performance.

The purpose of the Mustang was to defend what fighter pilots called “big friends”: the B-17 Flying Fortresses and B-24 Liberators.

Dispatching hundreds of bombers to targets deep in Germany was no easy task.

Bombers flew in formations, staggered lead, middle, and rear by distance, and stacked low and high by altitude. In formation, the main preoccupation of the B-17 gunners was spotting enemy fighters. Bomber crews

started scanning the skies as soon as they crossed the English Channel. Fighters assisted the formations in relays, with groups covering assigned sections of the route. The fast silver flash of P-47s was a welcome sight, meaning relief from the incessant attacks was at hand.

The bomber escort mission was not like the wild flying Howard knew from his days in China. Air discipline was everything. “If you’re out hound-dogging it alone, you’re asking for it because a formation of [Me] 109s who’ve spotted you from above will certainly make mincemeat of you,” Howard told his pilots.

500 German Fighters

As 1944 began, the Luftwaffe was throwing everything it had at Allied bombers. Bombers faced lethal layers: Fighters on the way in, flak over the target, then more fighters on the way out. Lead formations took the onslaught, and low bomber boxes in rear formations earned the nickname “Purple Heart Corner.” Sprays of .50-caliber fire from bombers in formation could sometimes drive off German fighters, sometimes not. If the bombers closed up tight for mass protection, Ju 88s stood off at 1,000 yards or more, out of B-17 gun range, and lobbed in rockets.

Egress from the target was especially dangerous, with German fighter control

fully alerted and formations by now struggling to stay together. The favorite prey of Luftwaffe pilots was a lone bomber that broke from the formation, perhaps crippled by flak or flying too slow, with a feathered engine.

The “best place to find German fighters was in the vicinity of struggling Forts—they were like honey to the bee,” observed Howard.

Howard’s 354th Fighter Group was tutored by the legendary Lt. Col. Donald J. M. Blakeslee. They learned to rendezvous with the bomber streams at 22,000 feet and got experience with missions to targets such as Kiel and Bremen, Germany. Howard found his 60 combat hours with the Flying Tigers served him well.

By early December, Blakeslee deemed the 354th ready to operate on its own. Under the system of rotating combat operations leads used by bomber and fighter groups, Howard and group commander Col. Kenneth R. Martin took turns as combat lead.

Howard’s experience was about to be tested as the new P-51Bs allowed Eighth Air Force to resume deep strikes on Germany industry. The mission to Oschersleben and Halberstadt—about 100 miles southwest of Berlin—was a return to the long-range bombing of aircraft production plants so vital to the Allied strategy.

Gaining air superiority was the precondition for an invasion of France, and the Luftwaffe fighters had to be whittled down. Targets included the A.G.O Flugzeugwerke, the principal center of FW 190 fighter production after the Marienburg plant had been destroyed in October, and the Junkers plant at Halberstadt, manufacturing wings for Ju 88s, according to the Army Air Forces’ official history.

Eighth Air Force sent up 525 B-17s and 138 B-24s to hit the aviation targets near Oschersleben and Halberstadt on Jan. 11, 1944—of which 60 would not return.

The plan called for P-47s to escort in and P-51s to pick up support over the target, while fresh P-47s met the formation on its return. But deteriorating winter weather in England led to a recall order, which some P-47s obeyed.

Flying in the bomber stream that day was a group embarking on its 14th combat mission. Combat operations for the 401st Bomb Group began on Nov. 26, 1943. So far, they’d lost only one aircraft in combat, to flak on Dec. 30. Oschersleben would change this.

On that day, Luftwaffe fighters put up the stiffest battle since Schweinfurt and Regensburg. The German pilots had also updated their tactics. Belly tanks enabled German fighters to wait out the P-47 and P-38 relays, then commence large attacks on the relatively unprotected AAF formations.

Howard's 354th Fighter Group launched 49 P-51s and planned to split up to meet the bombers at both target areas. Flying in over the Netherlands, the whine in their radio headsets indicated German radar had acquired them. Howard was combat lead, so he vectored off a few two-ship elements to tackle fighters en route, but pressed his main force toward the rendezvous with the bombers.

The bombers had completed their target runs and were already in trouble when Howard spotted them. "As we reached the bomber stream, I discovered it was under intense attack by dozens of enemy fighters," Howard recalled.

Eighth Air Force headquarters estimated 500 German fighters were swarming the bombers.

Howard sent his two other squadron commanders to the middle and rear formations, where they'd break out flights to cover the bomber boxes. He took his own squadron to the head of the stream.

Suddenly an Me 110 moved up right in front of Howard and headed for the lead B-17s. "I waited until his wingspan filled my gun sight and opened up with a four-second burst," said Howard. The Me 110 began smoking, dove, and its wings split off. He then raked an Me 109 headed the same way. Next an FW 190 crossed his path. Howard took off after it, only to see the German pilot bail out.

Now Howard was alone. His wingman had filtered back to the rear bomber groups, and Howard was preparing to do the same. Then he noticed the bomber group he was protecting "seemed to have more than its share of enemy fighters," so he decided "to stick around."

Howard throttled back to stay even with the slower cruising speed of the bombers. He kept well away from the waist and turret gunners who were still new to distinguishing the Mustang's silhouette from that of the Me 109. For a moment, he was close enough to see the faces of the pilots of one of the 401st's B-17s.

Soon, more fighters came. Howard gunned his engine and fired at an Me 110, which was soon smoking toward

Earth. "It wasn't long before I saw another Me 109 tooling up behind the formation," said Howard. The Me 109 spotted Howard and dove, but Howard chased and fired, pulling up 3,000 feet later, after the Me 109's smoke turned into a steady column. In came another Me 109 from the side, and Howard dove again.

Too much gravity pressure had jammed the ammunition feed to all but one of his guns. Howard thought he'd been with the bombers for 30 minutes, but was disappointed there were still enemy aircraft around.

Excitement Filled the Room

Heading in to the bombers was a twin-engine Ju 88. "I decided to bluff my way by making feints in their direction to scare them off," he recalled. He drove off the Ju 88, but it climbed up again. Several times more, he battled off the same Ju 88. Soon, things quieted down. Seeing no more fighters, Howard wagged his wings, collected three stray P-51s, and headed back to his base at Boxted, England.

"When our bomber crews landed, a high-pitched excitement filled the briefing room," recalled 401st Bomb Group commander Bowman. Debriefings yielded 16 accounts from 401st crews about the actions of the lone P-51.

Brooks had led the 401st that day. "He was all over the wing, across it and around it," Brooks reported. "For sheer determination and guts, it was the greatest exhibition I'd ever seen."

Bowman collected the debriefings and sent them to Maj. Gen. Jimmy Doolittle at Eighth Air Force headquarters. Meanwhile, Howard had filled out his report of kills and probable kills. Crews unloaded the film of his mission from the wing-mounted gun camera, standard on all fighters, and sent it up to headquarters for processing.

Headquarters narrowed the possible identity down to two pilots, finally naming Howard.

Howard was credited with four kills for the day. It was time to take the wraps off the secret of the P-51B and its long-range prowess. Good news stories of the air war were few and far between, and the tale of the "lone wolf" P-51 was genuine gold. Howard

soon found himself in front of 100 war correspondents, recounting the mission. They were awed—he was not.

One reporter asked why he'd risked his neck. "I fixed my eyes on the simpleminded questioner and replied facetiously, 'I seen my duty and I done it.'" Of course, this was the headline.

Less than two weeks later, Howard was back from a brief London leave and leading fighter escort for a mission to Frankfurt. Eighth Air Force plunged into Big Week, a series of massed bombing raids on German industrial targets. Spring found them switching to missions against targets in France and Germany to hinder German response to the upcoming invasion of Normandy.

The fate of the individual 401st Bomb Group crews that marveled at Howard that day put the brutal dangers of the air war in perspective. Of the 25 crews from the 401st Bomb Group that survived Jan. 11, eight were lost before the June 6, 1944, Normandy landings. German fighters destroyed six, with two more lost to flak.

Capt. R. W. Beers' B-17 went down over Frankfurt on Jan. 29.

German fighters again claimed B-17Gs from the 401st over Leipzig on Feb. 20, Frankfurt again on March 2, Marienburg on April 9, Oschersleben again in May, and at Dessau on May 28.

Some crew members bailed out and were taken prisoner, but many were killed in action.

Howard himself went on to fly more missions and help plan close air support for the Normandy landings. He was promoted to colonel in 1945 and retired from the Air Force Reserve in 1966 as a brigadier general. After the war, he founded a defense systems engineering corporation working on the Navy Polaris program and later merged it with Control Data Corp.

Jan. 11, 1944, was not forgotten, though. The 401st Bomb Group received a Presidential Unit Citation for its mission, and unit histories after the war called that mission "one of the greatest air battles of World War II."

"War is not a feast of excitement, but a series of cruel episodes that do not always end in glory," Howard concluded 50 years later. He died on March 18, 1995, at the age of 81. ■

Rebecca Grant is president of IRIS Independent Research. She has written extensively on airpower and serves as director, Mitchell Institute, for AFA. Her most recent articles for Air Force Magazine are "Omar Bradley's View of Airpower," in the October issue, and "Airpower Over Water," p. 52.