

## PART 1

1944

William Cameron was 23 years old by a few months and already a Captain. In this war, young men were taking on responsibilities far beyond their years.

He had been flying combat missions since just after D-Day. While he had arrived in England about 10 days before the invasion, several weeks of mandatory combat transition training in Shrewsbury resulted in him missing the the start of the invasion. Later, when he was considered ready, he was assigned to fly from an airfield in Staplehurst, Kent.

Once the Allies had pushed inland enough from the D-Day beachheads in Normandy, the fighter-bomber units started hopscotching from one airfield to another in the liberated areas of France.

On the morning of 24 November, *wheels in the wells* had been 0900. Their mission was to attack the railroad yard at Pforzheim, Germany, about one hundred twenty-five miles east-northeast from their advance airfield, designated “A-90”, at Toul-Croix de Metz in France.

The primary targets were the destruction of any locomotives and railroad cars, the supplies they contained, and the ability to move them. This last directive necessitated the destruction of the track switch at the far western end of the railyard - not far from the passenger railroad station - and the railroad tracks themselves.

The weather was very calm but cold. The weather report they’d received also indicated the sky overcast at 6,000 feet, approximately a thousand feet thick. The cloud cover extended over the southern half of Germany and most of France.

This weathwr meant the enemy would have a far more difficult time throwing antiaircraft fire at them on the way to and from the target, but it also meant the mission would need precision navigation and timing to descend on Pforzheim at the correct location.

The Republic Aviation P-47 Thunderbolts he and the squadron were flying constituted the largest single-engine airplane in the war. Its size and design made it perfect for ground attack missions, its air-cooled engine able to withstand more damage and still operate when liquid-cooled engines like those in the P-51 Mustang would cease operating after minor damage.

Being what pilots call a “tail dragger”, the P-47 had a twelve-foot nose-high attitude on the ground. The entire airplane was essentially designed around the massive 18-cylinder dual radial engine which displaced a bit more than 2800 cubic inches and provided 2,000 horsepower with its conjoined turbosupercharger, the latter greatly improving high-altitude performance.

Its large airframe and powerful engine gave this airplane-type the ability to carry a substantial amount of ordnance, which made it invaluable in its ground attack role: up to 2,500 pounds of high-explosive or incendiary bombs or napalm, and 3,400 rounds of .50 caliber Armor Piercing Incendiary - API - ammunition feeding eight wing-mounted machine guns. On some occasions the aircraft might also be fitted with six to ten 130mm rockets slung under the wings. Fully loaded, a P-47 weighed more than 15,000 pounds.

For this mission, their airplanes would be loaded with the usual full complement of .50 caliber ammo and two 1,000 lb. bombs, one under each wing, except for Will's aircraft which would have no bombs. As squadron leader that day, Will's job would be initial reconnaissance of the intended target followed by visual evaluation of the mission's results.

Will lifted off the ground in his Thunderbolt and circled above the airfield while the three other P-47's in his flight of four took off then joined him in the usual V-shape formation: one of the planes trailing just to his left, and the other two planes trailing just to his right.

In a very few minutes the entire squadron of the sixteen P-47's available that day had formed in four groups of four each and spaced themselves - one flight of four to the left and the other to the right of Will's flight; the fourth flight was a short distance directly behind and slightly above Will's flight.

The four flights in the squadron were designated by colors; Will's was "White", to his left the flight was "Red", to his right was "Blue" Flight, and behind him was "Yellow". Yellow Flight also had no bombs since their job today was to provide "top cover" against enemy aircraft, allowing the other three flights to focus on the ground attack.

The squadron ascended through the overcast to discover that, above, this cold late autumn morning was crystal clear - the sun blazing in the blue sky and near blinding as its beams reflected brightly off the top of the cloud cover.

Will liked the others he flew with in his squadron, but especially the three fellow pilots in his flight today. They had a broad mix of backgrounds and geographical origins.

At the number two position to his left and just abaft was 1st Lt. Harry James, who hailed from a potato farm in far northern Maine; Harry was a calm, steady hand in all things. Harry flew often as Will's wingman and, just as often, they reversed roles.

A huge man at six feet, eight and one-half inches in height, Harry had a broad, solid build. Everyone in the squadron joked that the P-47 was the only single-engine airplane in the war large enough to accommodate Harry. Will remembered thinking when they first met that if Harry ever got into a fight, he'd simply have to fall on his opponent to crush him. Despite his size, Lt. James was a gentle, kind Teddy Bear.

Will and Harry had been assigned to the same squadron the day they both arrived in England; they flew together frequently so knew each other's strengths and weaknesses well.

To Will's immediate right and slightly behind in the number three position was 2nd Lt. Jim Biggs, "Slim Jim" to everyone. "Slim" was a native of the Texas plains, his family operating a small cattle ranch. However, despite being a lanky, wiry for-real cowboy - having demonstrated his prowess on horseback recently using a 'borrowed' French farmer's steed - he strangely lacked self-confidence in his flying skills and always seemed unusually nervous, even on the ground.

Will and Slim had now been flying together on and off for about a month since Biggs had been transferred in from another squadron - with no explanation offered. Will and Harry had been trying to instill more confidence in him, but they couldn't help thinking that Biggs' nervousness contributed both to his transfer and his lack of promotion to 1st Lieutenant.

Bringing up the rear to the right of and just behind Biggs was the rookie of the group, 2nd Lt. Robin Sutter from Truckee, California. His family was reasonably well off, owners of a successful logging firm.

Being from the Sierra Nevada mountains with that surname, everyone always wanted to know where his family hid their gold stash, although this Sutter bore no relation to *the* famous California Gold Rush family.

Robin was short, only about five feet five inches, slight, with a ready smile - he was so short that when seated in the huge Thunderbolt the other pilots laughed that he needed a milk crate to sit on so he could see over the 'steering wheel'.

These qualities, and his pretty-like-a-girl whiskerless face framed with straw-blond hair and punctuated by mischievous ice blue eyes made Robin a hit with the female-starved squadron. Though there was nothing effeminate about Robin, he took their teasing about his almost girlish looks and size with such good humor he became an immediate favorite with the other pilots.

Will had coincidentally been Sutter's advanced flight instructor in the States just before being assigned to wartime duty. He'd liked Robin from his first day of training and remembered him being an apt pupil.

Completion of Robin's advanced flight training, though, had been delayed due to his recovery from a broken leg suffered in an unavoidable training accident; hence he had only just arrived for combat duty.

Since Will had provided Robin with his advanced flight training, he knew the boy's fundamentals were sound; what Will didn't yet know was how well Robin's eventual transition to the mighty P-47 had gone.

Immediately on Robin's arrival, Will had flown with him locally for several days, putting Robin through the maneuvers he could expect in combat; all went reasonably well, but today would be Robin's first actual combat mission.

Will, feeling a bit of a mother hen, asked Harry that morning to act as Robin's wingman in order to keep a close eye on him during the mission and, should anything happen to Will, to continue looking out for the boy. Will would take Slim as his wingman.

Will himself came from a family of Scots-Irish ancestry who lived on a very modest subsistence farm in the Appalachian Mountains of far western Virginia's Allegheny County. The western property line of the family's farm was situated directly on the state border with West Virginia. Will knew that to the rude and uninitiated, his family would be considered hillbillies.

The individual planes in each flight were identified by color and number, so Will, as leader of this Flight would normally have been "White One", but as squadron leader for the day his radio callsign would be "Vanguard Leader", the individual mission code name assigned to each mission.; Harry would still be "White Two", and Slim and Robin's callsigns White Three and White Four respectively.

In the calm, clear morning they were making about 250 miles an hour ground speed. They'd arrive over Pforzheim, assuming no delays, in about a half hour.

Twenty-five minutes after take-off, based on time and groundspeed, Will calculated they were a few miles east and about 10 to 15 miles south of the town.

Radioing the squadron, he instructed everyone to hold and maintain their altitude at "Angels 10" - ten thousand feet, while he went down to have a look.

Will knew there would be antiaircraft fire and wanted to test how heavy and where it was worst. He also would identify which part of the railroad yard hosted the highest concentration of targets beyond just the marshalling yard itself.

He applied full throttle pulling ahead of his flight and then rolled to the left and began to descend at about 1,000 feet per minute. He penetrated the cloud cover and stayed there for concealment as he noted the minutes going by on his chronometer. When six minutes passed, Will estimated he was about 4 miles south of Pforzheim. He began his descent from the clouds and noted the altimeter reading when he cleared the overcast. True to the weather report, it was about a thousand feet thick and, as he emerged from the cloud cover on his northerly course, he could see he was facing the far southern edge of the city. He noted the city was in a valley surrounded by low mountain ridges. This would make the attack descent and climb-out much more challenging - bombing accuracy demanded the lowest safe altitude from the P-47s.

Almost immediately he began to see the tracers and puffs of smoke from antiaircraft fire. Will began evasive action, forcing himself to ignore the explosions so he could focus on the job at hand.

As Will irregularly rolled the plane left and right, he maintained a due north heading. He spotted the railroad yard, the major part of which was positioned slightly west-southwest to east-northeast ahead of him. He also noticed the largest

concentration of flashes from the artillery firing at him to be at the two ends of the railroad yard with a few flashes here and there originating from the ridge on the southern ridge of the town perimeter. Will noted, too, that the largest concentration of railroad stock was at the eastern end of the yard.

During the mission briefing they'd seen in the reconnaissance photos the railroad yard ran parallel and just north of the main east-west highway through the town; that highway, in turn, ran parallel to and just north of the Enz River. This would help make identifying where one was in the confusion of battle.

Having seen what he came for, Will poured on full throttle, banked to the south away from the town and made a rapid climb to re-join his squadron, continuing evasive action until he was well concealed in the overcast. Will hoped, as a single aircraft with no visible ordnance, the Germans would think he'd only been doing reconnaissance and would not be expecting an imminent attack.

Clearing the overcast, he spotted the squadron circling to the south and maneuvered into position in the formation.

Will decided the safest but most effective plan of attack, as safe as any in ground-attack combat, was to send Red Flight, in file, on a north-westerly heading from due south of the town – the least concentration of AA fire – to bomb the switch at the western end of the railroad yard.

Giving Red Flight a fifteen second head start, Blue Flight would then attack, staggered side by side, on a north-northeast heading from the same starting point south of the town so they could broadside the rolling stock at the eastern end of the railroad yard with machine gun fire and, at the last second, drop their bombs on the concentration of railroad cars.

Finally, another minute later White Flight would attack, in file, from east to west so they would have the entire length of the marshaling yard on which to release their



bombs to destroy as much of the actual railroad tracks as possible. This would also assist with further demolition of any remaining locomotives and railroad cars.

Will, not having any bombs, would lead his Flight's attack in the hope of drawing most of the AA fire, firing his machine guns at any target of opportunity. After his run he'd gain altitude and circle over the area to determine the effectiveness of the overall attack.

Slim, as Will's wingman today, would go second, strafing until releasing his bombs at the far end of the railroad yard, followed by Robin who would release his bombs at the center point of the yard; finally, Harry, behind Robin – to keep a watchful eye – would release his bombs at the near end of the yard. As each released his bombs, he would make a steep climbing turn to the south to avoid the blast of the bombs released ahead of him.

Yellow Flight would patrol at will, above and below the overcast, to intercept enemy aircraft should they appear.

Once the entire squadron had played their part, they would regroup at their holding location and altitude south of the town to determine the next step based on the results observed by Will.

Communicating the instructions to the squadron, Will included an urgent warning about where to expect the heaviest anti-aircraft fire. Each flight leader acknowledged, and Red Flight banked north and descended through the overcast. Fifteen seconds later, Blue Flight did the same.

Will navigated White Flight to a point well east of the railroad yard, made a 180 degree turn to a west-southwesterly heading and began their descent about 2 minutes after Blue Flight had descended, the time difference preventing any possibility of collisions as their flight paths crossed.

As Will broke out of the overcast, he made a quick survey of the battle zone. The usual chaos of airplanes, tracers, bomb explosions, and explosive flak was everywhere; but it appeared Red and Blue Flights were wreaking havoc.

The AA gunners seemed to be taken off guard by this third flight arriving from a totally different direction, briefly dealying their targeting of White Flight.

Will took full advantage of this delay. At barely 200 feet above the ground, he set a straight course to the rail yard and opened fire. His armor-piercing incendiary ammo visibly raked railroad cars and personnel on the ground, starting small fires here and there.

At a ground speed of better than 250 miles per hour only a few seconds passed, and Will was at the far end of the yard banking south, applying full power again to get some altitude so he could see the strike play out.

He quickly glanced east and could see the other members of White Flight over the rail yard taking care of business.

At about 2,500 feet, Will turned east and looked north noting the last of Blue Flight just climbing into the overcast. Red Flight was nowhere to be seen; Will surmised they were already above the clouds, well on their way to the rendezvous point.

Flying evasively, Will took in the scene and was satisfied: the western end of the yard was a mass of bomb craters and twisted metal rails where the switch had been. Most of the railroad cars at the eastern end were either destroyed or burning fiercely, and secondary explosions brightened the daylight scene as munitions in some boxcars ignited. The entire length of the railyard was pocked with bomb craters, effectively halting its transportation abilities, if only temporarily.

Still on an easterly heading, Will was about to turn south to re-join the squadron when he spotted a large column of German troops and vehicles approaching the town from the east, plodding along the main highway. Oddly, they didn't seem particularly concerned about the carnage they must have been able to observe ahead of them - they continued at a regular pace, no hesitation, but no hurry either.

Will directed his P-47 into the overcast, relatively unscathed: he thought he'd heard one or two metallic bangs indicating possible flak damage, but his plane was responding well and didn't seem the worse for wear.

The order of the day for all fighter-bomber pilots was once the primary and secondary targets had been hit, and allowing for enough fuel and ammunition, any other targets of opportunity were to be attacked - the German troop column was such a target.

As Will re-joined the squadron, he noted two aircraft missing, both from Red Flight. Will radioed for a status from the other Flight leaders.

"Vanguard Leader from Red Leader, we lost Red Two on the attack run, Red Three saw him take a direct hit and spin in. Red Four was last seen climbing into the overcast trailing a lot of smoke - no radio contact, don't know his status. Both Red Three and I are low on ammo, over."

Will called, "Roger, Break. Blue Flight Leader report, over."

"Vanguard Leader from Blue Leader, I'm out of ammo, as are Blue Two and Four. Blue Three has a little left but is shot up pretty badly - he's getting some misses on his engine, over."

Requesting a status from Yellow Flight, its leader replied they had seen no action, no evidence of enemy aircraft.

“White Flight report - White Two?

“White Two, I’m good with ammo; you, and Blue Flight shot things up pretty well ahead of us. I have no obvious damage, over.”

“White Three, same as White Two here, over.”

“White Four, I took a couple of hits in both wings, but all seems ok, and I still have a good amount of ammo, over.”

“Roger, assessment is you boys did a good day’s work, but there’s a troop concentration moving into the town from the east. Red & Blue Flights, head home, keep trying to raise Red Four. White Flight, we’ll take the same course as before, in file, hit them from behind; run finished, we’ll turn south and, once above the overcast, west and home; Yellow Flight will again provide top cover. After, if fuel permits, Yellow Flight will strafe the column as well, over.”

“Red Flight Leader, roger, see you boys later, over.”

“Blue Flight Leader, roger, break a leg White Flight, over.”

In turn, the Yellow Flight Leader acknowledged the plan.

Will watched Red and Blue Flights bank away to the west.

“Ok, White Flight, follow me down, over.”

As Will broke through the overcast well beyond the eastern edge of the town, he noted that the troop column had penetrated well into the outskirts of Pforzheim, still in plain view on the road. Quickly he surmised they must be either, blind, green, or thought the attack was finished.

The anti-aircraft fire started almost immediately. Will began evasive maneuvers as he rapidly descended, speeding through a mountain pass toward the troop column.

Once in range, he shallowed his ship's descent. Attaining 250 feet above ground, Will drew a bead on the last vehicle in the column, a small Kraut "jeep", the closest target on his approach. Pressing the trigger on the control stick, his eight .50 caliber machine guns began their deadly bursts.

The vehicle was raked and immediately set ablaze by the first rounds; the driver may have been hit: the vehicle struck several soldiers on foot around it then careered into the side of a building.

The troops began scrambling off the road looking for any cover they could find, but they were now sandwiched between rows of homes and shops on either side of the street, making it difficult to easily hide.

Will next fired on a troop truck. Soldiers leapt from the truck, some rolled underneath it for protection only to be engulfed in flames as Will's bullets pierced and ignited the truck's fuel tanks.

Will continued his pass until he ran out of ammunition; at less than a hundred feet from the ground, the last glimpse he had was his final bullets carving a German soldier into several chunks.

He turned south and began climbing away. In a few seconds he saw Slim join on his right, followed a few seconds later by Robin joining to Slim's right. After a moment he was happy to see Harry on his left. All had made it.

The Krauts must have been hopping mad, though: as White Flight disappeared into the overcast the German AA fire continued, shooting blindly into the clouds hoping for a lucky hit.

With the German flak continuing, Will thought it best to make a quick course change and radioed, “White Flight, turn immediate right to 265, increase climb rate to 2,000 feet per minute, level off Angels 10. Let’s go home, over.”

As they began the climb and steep turn, Robin dropped behind the formation, apparently not providing enough additional throttle for the increased angle of attack and steep turn and so demonstrating his combat maneuvering skills still needed some fine tuning.

The more serious problem became Slim. He’d made his turn and increased his angle of climb but inexplicably forgot to add any throttle at all. They had been at best climb speed of 165 knots but with no additional power and the steep turn, the speed of Slim’s heavy Thunderbolt bled off rapidly and his plane began to stall. As the P-47 was known to do when it stalled, the left wing dropped, causing the plane to slide to the left and down, placing it directly below Will's plane.

Apparently not noticing his altered position in the Flight and unable to see Will's aircraft, Slim dropped the nose momentarily to recover from the stall and then added full throttle to regain his climb rate - as he did, he pulled up directly ahead of Will's plane.

In an instant, Will saw the massive form of Biggs’ P-47 appear in front of him. They collided.

The propeller on Will's aircraft cleanly sliced off Slim’s P-47 tail assembly at the point where it joined the main fuselage and Biggs’ plane began a sharp roll to the right and disappeared into the cloud cover.

“Shit!” said Will.

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