

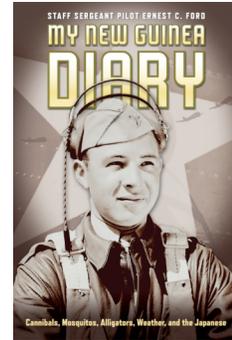
## **EXCERPT FROM *MY NEW GUINEA DIARY***

By Staff Sergeant Pilot Ernest C. Ford  
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On 15 August 1943, we were briefed that we would be flying in group formation with full fighter coverage. The mission was to Tsilli-Tsilli, located in the Markham Valley area behind Lae. I was flying as Tail-End-Charlie in the Squadron formation. When we joined in formation, climbing out from Wards, two other 47s from the group closed in, one on my left and one on the right wing. Whenever we flew with two or more squadrons, we were always briefed to close in all gaps for better fighter protection. This was the same way as when flying formation by the individual squadrons. Both the top- and close-cover fighter escorts on this mission were P-39s.

As we entered the Markham Valley, Japanese fighters caught us just as we were pulling up to enter a 500-foot traffic pattern. Grassi was standing on his little stool looking out the Navigator's Dome. He began to shout, "A Zero is diving and firing at us." We were already on the base leg in an extended right echelon with the gear down and a quarter flap. One of the enemy Zeros came diving from high and behind. On the first pass he shot down both of my trailing wingmen. When Grassi first started yelling, I chopped the throttles back. The airspeed dropped below 100 mph as I pushed the nose for the trees. 200 feet below I raised the gear and flaps. As the fighter over-shot and passed overhead, the "Meatball" of the Rising Sun insignia never was so big or so close. Then I pushed the throttles to the fire-wall, flying straight ahead. No. 3 wingman went into a graveyard spiral. He crashed and burned near the edge of the grass airstrip. The right wingman was last seen heading for the mountains on fire, trailing smoke and vanished into oblivion. The Zero did a sharp 180 and came back, head on for me. By this time I was just above the trees at full throttle. Here came his tracers. How they missed, only God knows. Not one single bullet touched Irene. We skidded, banked and reduced airspeed, flying too low and slow for the Zero to line us up in his gun sight. What evasive tactics can an unarmed, fully loaded transport take against an armed, attacking enemy fighter? From the first firing of his machine guns at my trailing wingmen, until the head-on pass at me, could not have been over three to four minutes by the clock. These few seconds went into slow motion and the compressed time seemed to be hours. There was nothing I could do about it, except to only depend on training and instinct. In my memory, some sixty plus years later, it was an eternity. I can still see the tracers and the Jap fighter pilot's big flying goggles as he pulled up from a head-on attack to avoid a mid-air collision at tree top level.

He was not a Kamikaze Pilot—one of the "Divine Wind Boys,"—so he did not ram us head on. Our closure speed was as high as 550-560 mph and 230 mph on the low side. At this time in World War II, that was fast, that is, if one aircraft was a transport and the other one a fighter. Most fighter pilots arrange their ammo belts so that 1 to 5 or 1 to 7 are tracers. The tracers are so the pilot will be able to see where he is shooting and correct accordingly.

In my case, I was sure he was aiming for my No. 1 engine because all the tracers were off and below the left engine. After many changes of heading, airspeed, banks and skids, here came two of our P-39s, and that is all that saved us. Our escape literally defied all odds. You don't have time to think if

you want to stay alive. It's all by reflexes. This took place over the jungle to the side of the newly cut, lush grass field where we were to land. All transports that had not yet landed, cleared the area as fast as we could, making a crooked zigzag path just above the kunai grass all the way to the mountains.

All the airborne C-47s were clearing the area and heading back for Moresby. As fierce air battles were going on all around and above us, fighters, bombers, and transports were being shot down. All of this was taking place over and near the grass strip which was nothing but a clearing hacked out of the kunai grass. We could see that several of our fighters were shot down as the enemy had many more aircraft than we had. While in that valley most of the flying was "in the weeds," then at treetop level, while changing course at least every minute. We headed for Wau. When we were well out of the area we climbed up over and through the mountain passes, in and around the towering thunderstorms, and returned to Wards without escort. Each aircraft came back on its own, not in formation. All we were interested in was getting away from the enemy fighters.

The only way I can figure that we were not shot down was that initially, the attacking Zero was so high, going so fast, that when he first started firing and with the relatively short distance between the three C-47s, Irene's reduced airspeed and flying in the actual tree tops, he simply overshot us. If the Zero had continued its dive and firing there would be insufficient time and altitude to keep from crashing into the jungle. He had to pull up and make another pass.

The enemy fighter made a 60° hard left bank and a 180° change of direction and came back for a head-on attack. At the same time Irene was going straight towards him at full throttle, hoping to shorten the time for him to shoot at us on this pass. All the time I was flying as low as I dared. Grassi was yelling that our P-39s were diving for the Zero. The enemy fighter pilot had to reckon with the short time he had to get us in his sights, avoid flying into us, or, if we exploded, flying into the wreckage. Since both our aircraft were on the deck he had very little maneuvering room and only three or four seconds at most to act. He may have also seen our diving fighters. Whatever the reason, on this pass he only got one short burst and all tracers went into the trees below and to the right of our No. 1 engine. The Zero passed over and just off our left wing-tip. By now, our two P-39s were after him and we left the area at full throttle. Who said, "THE GOOD LORD won't protect you!!" This was another mission where, "GOD was my CO-PILOT!!"

This is the kind of mission that will pump a shot of adrenalin into the blood stream. In flight training we were told that training reduces fear, and that you do what you've been taught to do without thinking. I would say that is correct. If you stop to think about what you should do, you're dead. Even before Colonel Robert L. Scott published his famous book, *GOD IS MY CO-PILOT*, I knew that GOD was MY CO-PILOT. Later we heard that more than one of the "Fly Boys" was so scared that some voided in their flight suits. Fear, horror, fatigue, and anxiety are all demoralizing. Combat has all of these, whether it is in the air, on land, at sea, or under the ocean. As it has been said about war, there are hours and days of pure boredom and then minutes of sheer terror and that is so true. Pilots are not trained to get shot down, but they are trained to fly another day!