

# Hells Bells

## Learning the Hard Way

### LOW-ALTITUDE COMBAT IN THE P-40

BY CAPTAIN WILLIAM DAVE GATLING, USAF, RET.  
AS TOLD TO AND WRITTEN BY JAMES P. BUSH



By the time a very green staff sergeant pilot, William Gatling, made his way to the North African combat theater and found himself in the ground-support role, the P-40 had been in combat for more than two years, initially courtesy of the Flying Tigers. (Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)

#### **October 1940: Off I go into the wild blue yonder!**

I was the oldest of six kids growing up in Tarboro, North Carolina, and enlisted in the Army Air Corps in October 1940. I was assigned to the Third Reconnaissance Squadron in Orlando, Florida, as an aerial photographer. I was a wide-eyed 18-year-old, and I learned quickly that the Air Corps was far from ready for war. We lacked pilots, mechanics, and airplanes as we sat back and watched other countries in Europe building up their military air army.

But the Air Corps knew that and instituted a program whereby, if you were already enlisted in the service, you could volunteer to learn to fly and bypass the college-degree requirements. If you earned your wings, you would be classified as a staff sergeant pilot—so that's what I did.

After flying PT-17 Stearmans, BT-13s, and AT-6s, I earned my sergeant wings in October 1942 and was immediately assigned to the 324th Fighter Group, 315th "Crusaders" Squadron in Manchester, New Hampshire, where I checked out in a P-40 Warhawk. It was more than double the horsepower of the AT-6, and after my blindfold checkout, I learned quickly about getting your head out of the cockpit with 1,300hp roaring out in front of you. My instructor told me to take the Warhawk up to 10,000 feet, get to know the airplane by doing some gentle turns, then do some stalls with the landing gear and flaps down to get the feel of it. I got the feel of it right away—and it was all bad!

As I climbed through 9,000 feet, I must have gotten too slow, and the P-40 snap-rolled, throwing me into an inverted spin. I hadn't planned on stalling the airplane yet and really didn't know what I was doing at that point. We were trained in spin recovery early on, and so I did what I was taught and popped the stick forward and stomped down on the opposite rudder. The P-40 threw me back into a spin, as I watched the snow-covered fields below rapidly spinning around me. I must have done that four or five times before I finally woke up and realized that I was in an inverted spin. Because I was upside down when I popped the stick forward, all I was doing was pushing my nose up and stalling the darn thing. I finally managed to get out of it, but in the process, I had lost 7,000 feet and pulled out at less than 2,000 feet of altitude. I was wringing wet with sweat and had to go back up and do my assigned maneuvers, but I learned more about flying the P-40 on that checkout than any other time in my training. When I came back in to land, I shot three of the most perfect landings ever performed in a P-40!

### March 8, 1943: Have guns will travel

After 60 hours of flying time in the P-40, having never fired a single shot from its six .50-caliber machine guns, I was sent to Nigeria where our crated P-40s were waiting for us to assist in assembling them. Once that was done, we had

to flight-test and slow-time our engines as we cruised over the dense jungles and hot deserts of Africa on our way to Cairo, over 2,600 miles away, without even a set of railroad tracks to guide us. The British had established refueling fields every 500 miles for us. When we hit the Nile River, we turned north to Cairo with only 1,000 miles of desert ahead of us. Once we arrived in the northern deserts and mountains of Tunisia, we were assigned to the British Eighth Army to assist in pushing Rommel's *Afrika Korps* out to the sea.

We were all as green as green could be when it came to combat, so in early April 1943, we had to fly "shadow gunnery missions" to test our shooting skills. We set out in pairs. One P-40 would fly at 500 feet over the hot sunny desert as he cast his shadow on the ground. The other P-40 would make gunnery runs on the shadow, and you could tell right away if you scored hits on the shadow because the sand and dust would kick up in the shadow fuselage. Immediately after that training, we were deemed combat ready and sent to the slug it out with the Axis. Our primary mission was strafing and bombing the Axis troops on the ground, but on my fourth mission, we were sent out to sea to attack a different kind of target.

### April 30, 1943: Lucky strike

We got a call at our 324th Group HQ that there was an enemy Italian destroyer out at sea, and

White 62, a Curtiss P-40F belonging to the 65th Fighter Squadron, was based in Tunis, Libya, around May 1943. It was used for ground-attack purposes, as can be seen by the 500-pound bomb fitted under the fuselage, and is being prepared for a mission. (Photo courtesy of EN-Archive)



*OUR PRIMARY MISSION WAS STRAFING AND BOMBING THE AXIS TROOPS ON THE GROUND, BUT ON MY FOURTH MISSION, WE WERE SENT OUT TO SEA TO ATTACK A DIFFERENT KIND OF TARGET.*

**Top:** In-theater armorers and mechanics often had to build their own equipment, as seen by this jury-rigged bomb cradle. In North Africa, they were at the very end of the supply chain, so even basic tooling and equipment was slow catching up with them. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

**Bottom:** It is a testament to John Browning's fabulous machine guns that their legendary reliability could be maintained by new recruits under the crude conditions found in almost any combat theater of operations. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)



our British counterparts asked if we would give a Yankee try at dive bombing it. Because the 315th Squadron arrived later in theater, we were assigned to fly with some of the more experienced pilots of the 316th "Hells Bells" Squadron, and I was chosen as one of the lucky ones to go along. Our ground crews loaded a single 500-pound bomb on the centerline of our P-40s, where our belly tanks would normally sit. Needless to say, removing the belly tank cut down on our combat range.

As a new pilot, I was positioned as the number 10 slot in our string of dive bombers. We left our base flying in a four-ship box formation with 12 P-40s and climbed to 7,500 feet. Our top-cover escorts were British Spitfires, to protect us from the even-higher-flying Me 109s that were sure to show up—and, as if on cue, they did. When we got to the warship, the Spitfires were tangling with the 109s. Our flight leader called for echelon right, and everyone pulled off to the right; it turned into a deadly game of follow the leader. Our distances between each P-40 was between 250 and 300 yards, and we had been warned that, when you squeezed that gun trigger, you'd better make darn sure there wasn't another P-40 sitting in front of you!

As soon as we got close to the destroyer and peeled off to dive, it started zigzagging and throwing up a huge screen of ack-ack. I remembered my earlier training back in the states to deal with the torque of the Allison engine when I pushed the nose over in a dive. The P-40 was manufactured with the vertical stabilizer offset to cause the airplane to fly straight at a designed cruising airspeed, which was around 230mph, as I recall. As

long as I flew straight, the offset stabilizer and the engine torque balanced each other out. The problem was, though, that the faster you went over 230mph, it caused the P-40 to want to turn to the right. And as you can imagine in a dive-bombing run, the airspeed picks up quickly, and zooming through 230mph really made that sucker want to turn right. But that was a minor problem com-



pared to the bigger one that filled the sky: All I saw was tracer fire streaking my way.

My eyes locked in on the destroyer down below, using my iron crosshair gunsight for aiming. When I saw 900 feet on the altimeter, I thought, "Holy smokes, I got to get out of here!"

I took my eyes off the gunsight because I got distracted by the antiaircraft fire for a second. When I looked back, my nose was pointed way off

the target, so I stomped down on the left rudder, all the while pulling back on the stick. My hand came off the throttle as I grabbed the wooden T handle located on the floorboard just under the throttle and trim tab controls and pulled it to release the bomb. I tried to toss the bomb to the left. Bingo—it hit dead center on the deck! The delayed action on the fuse caused the bomb to penetrate the deck before it exploded. When

I looked back from my pullout, I saw an enormous plume of black, blue, and white smoke pouring from the center of the ship. I didn't see it actually sink, but it was reported that it did.

### June 5, 1944: Too hot to handle

On June 5, 1944, I was leading four P-40s on a recce mission in support of the American Fifth Army when one of them developed engine problems. I sent a buddy to go back with the rough-running Warhawk as the two of us, Lieutenant Jerry Lennon and I continued on. We were cruising along at 800 feet, looking for German motor transportation in Italy as part of Operation Strangle northwest of Rome. It appeared that the Germans were pulling out rapidly, and there was a lot of traffic up ahead on one of the roadways. There was already a bunch of P-47s strafing the convoy, and they looked like they had matters well in hand, so we went looking for our own targets as we turned north toward the Bolsena area. We had only flown another 50 miles when I spotted a semi tractor trailer with camouflage netting over it, parked under a group of trees next to a roadway. I dropped down to 80 feet and turned toward the truck. I tried to give it a squirt, but I couldn't get my guns on it because I was too close as my right wing almost clipped the treetops. I decided to go out 500 yards and circle back for another try. The machine guns on the P-40 had been boresighted for 300 yards. As I made my run, I kept telling myself, "Not now...not now...now!" as my finger depressed the trigger and my rounds impacted the target. I only saw one tracer round from my guns, so I knew that I had only fired about 30 rounds at the truck. I remember the first explosion, but it was the second one that really rocked me—literally.

I had seen gas tanks explode on other vehicles in the past, so I didn't expect anything big to happen on this gun run. Boy, was I ever wrong! The first clue I had that this one was different was the big boiling cloud of black smoke billow-

The P-40 represented a period of transition from early fighters of the 1930s, so many of its systems were not nearly as reliable or as sophisticated as that of the Mustang. However, the early ring-and-bead iron sights were quickly replaced by optical, reflector units. (Photo by Jim Busha)



THE MACHINE GUNS ON THE P-40 HAD BEEN BORESIGHTED FOR 300 YARDS. AS I MADE MY RUN, I KEPT TELLING MYSELF, "NOT NOW...NOT NOW...NOW!"



Although the P-40 was wildly outclassed by later fighters, pilots always comment on the lightness of the controls and its overall balance. They also mention the narrow landing gear and the additional attention needed on landing, compared to something like a Mustang. (Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)



There is something about the P-40's outline that is just short of being svelte, like a Mustang or Spitfire, but is nonetheless thoroughly classic. (Photo by Jim Busha)

The P-40 didn't create as many aces as the Mustang or Thunderbolt, but Lt. Jim Fenex of the 324th FG managed to get three FW 190s and two Bf 109s while flying a P-40F, a credible accomplishment. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)



ing in front of me. I began to ease left as I pulled back on the stick, and as if I had been moving in slow motion, I saw a 55-gallon drum hovering in front of me in that cloud of smoke, just missing my right wing tip. I immediately saw a flash of something that I thought was just a dust or sand cloud. It went on and off quickly, then there was a catastrophic explosion, followed by a mass of red flames. I saw this mass of gray and tan residue engulf me, and I lost sight of the

trees, the road below, and the sky above. I estimated it to be more than 100 yards wide, and I froze on the stick to keep it centered. I saw a thin white cloud moving my way, which turned into a shock wave. It felt like a sledgehammer when it hit the P-40, as my shoulder straps tightened hard around me. At first, it was a push, then a hard pull, almost like a vacuum as I got pulled forward. I thought that I was still straight when I entered the fireball, and I felt something strike the airplane. For a moment, I was confused because I saw a hole in the fireball. But beyond that, I saw the ground rushing up at me—I was going in left wing low! I pulled the stick back to raise the nose and get the left wing up, and missed the ground by about six feet.

I was fighting it the whole time because, when I moved the stick back to neutral still in a climb, the left wing would drop again. I saw some trees up ahead, so I tried to turn right. But when I did, I thought the Warhawk was going to snap-roll on me. I didn't try that again. I cleared those olive trees by the skin of my teeth. For some reason, I looked down and saw this man; he must

have been a German soldier. His eyes were as big as pancakes, and his mouth was wide open—I was only 75 feet from him. The funny thing was that my expression mirrored his as I zoomed past him. A minute later, I was out over no man's land, with my wingman about 100 yards away on my right side. That's when the shooting started, and there must have been 12 to 15 different streams of automatic tracer fire arcing all over the sky, as the German soldiers on the ground were shooting in all directions. Because we were below the treetops, they could only hear the roar of our Allison engines and couldn't catch a glimpse of us. We flew straight ahead until the firing stopped before I even thought about climbing.

When I decided to climb, I had to do everything gingerly because any sudden movement would cause my left wing to drop. We were heading north, so I had to wait until my compass read 270 degrees so that I could aim for the Mediterranean Sea. My wingman called me when we were only five minutes away from the Mediterranean, and I could tell that he had some excitement in his voice when he asked me if we were still over enemy territory. He was on his 13th mission, and I was on my 175th—he never told me he had been hit. When we got to the coast, I knew he was as relieved as I was as we limped back to base. I was fighting the P-40 all the way and thought I might have to bail out or crash-land.

I looked in my rearview mirror and saw my wingman, and asked him to pull up on my left

wing to give me a look to see what he could find. I saw him move below me, and that was the last time I saw him that day. When he didn't show up, I looked back again in the mirror and saw an empty sky. I was still 125 miles from base and couldn't get my crippled P-40 to turn around to look for Lt. Lennon. At 25 miles out, I called for emergency-landing instructions, and "somebody" put that runway dead center on my nose; there would have been no way for me to circle and land.

### Beat up but home!

I came in with a little bit of speed and no flaps, as I made a wheel landing and had to use more right rudder as I was headed left off the runway. I cut the engine and got the tail down as I slowed to a stop. The engine was steaming like a freight train as I began to count bullet holes in the airplane. The heat from that explosion had melted the doped fabric on my ailerons, and they resembled baggy pants on a hobo. I walked in front of the right wing, and there was a 12-inch hole in the leading edge, just outside the wheel well. I am sure that the airflow over that airfoil was so dis-

*THERE WAS A 12-INCH HOLE IN THE LEADING EDGE, JUST OUTSIDE THE WHEEL WELL. I AM SURE THAT THE AIRFLOW OVER THAT AIRFOIL WAS SO DISTURBED, ALONG WITH NO AILERON CONTROL, THAT IT'S NO WONDER I COULDN'T KEEP IT LEVEL.*

turbed, along with no aileron control, that it's no wonder I couldn't keep it level. The oil cooler was smashed in by flying debris, and it was a complete miracle that the propeller wasn't hit. But although the P-40 brought me back home, I wondered what had happened to Lennon. The next day his P-40 was spotted on a beach, its red nose resting above collapsed gear with countless bullet holes smothering the wings and fuselage. I feared the worse and had to wait almost two weeks to hear his story when he walked back into our base.

Lt. Lennon told me that he picked up a lot of damage on the way home when we went on our low-level journey, and he tried to call me but his radio must have been shot out. After he bellied in, he was picked up by the Italian underground and returned to American lines almost two weeks later. He said that the funniest thing was, when he tried to bury his parachute in the sand, as his hands were busy digging and throwing sand all over the place and he was sweating like a butcher, he looked back and thought, "How in the heck am I ever going to bury the P-40?" I often wonder what ever happened to that Warhawk. †

*William Gatling flew 195 combat missions in the P-40 and five in the P-47 before returning back home. He still thinks about all his buddies who didn't make it back.)*