



## QUEENS DIE PROUDLY

by W. L. White

W.N.U. FEATURES

**THE STORY THUS FAR:** Lieut. Col. Frank Kurtz, pilot of the old Flying Fortress, known as "The Swoose," which escaped from Clark Field, tells of that fatal day when the Japs struck in the Philippines. Old 99, another Flying Fortress, is struck down before it can get off the ground, killing eight of her crew. Kurtz explains how Old 99 was due for camouflage, then orders were countermanded, and instead they were to load with bombs. Then he was ordered to jerk the bombs and reload with cameras for a reconnaissance trip over Formosa. They get word over the air that bombs are dropping over Clark Field. Then all are electrified by the shout, "Here they come!"

### CHAPTER III

"I hadn't long to wait, because the nose of that leading V had passed the bomb-release line, and now came the first, unmistakable whistle—just as we'd heard it thousands of times over Muroc—and then the dull cr-r-rump! The first bomb of their pattern had hit way up the field, three thousand yards away. I didn't know then it had hit the mess hall I had just left, and killed Bill Cocke, our group engineering officer.

"But now was the time to run for our lives, because here came more whistles, and the nose of the formation was over us now, like a huge cloud with giant hailstones falling from it.

"So now Glenn and I ran for the nearest foxhole. It was a shallow one, two feet deep, built to hold one man, but we both jumped for it, and not until later did we realize there was a man already in it. We could think of nothing then except this earthquake roar and grinding and the whistling of a mighty storm moving down the field. You see there were about seventy planes in that formation, and each plane was to drop a train of about twelve bombs,

which made around eight hundred bombs that were to cover that rectangular pattern in about the time it's taking me to say a few of these sentences. Meanwhile we were bracing ourselves—getting our arms and legs adjusted, worming as low as we could in that shallow hole—for what we knew was coming. I pulled my tin hat down to cover the side of my face and cheek against bomb fragments. Now it began. Not so much the thunderous roars as the shaking—at its mildest, the hard dirt quivered like a steel-tired truck thundering over cobblestones, and at its worst, bucked and pitched like a bronco. I kept feeling if I could only stay on a little longer I would live, because death was very close now—the grinding roars and whistles, the quivering, pitching earth—was coming closer, was thundering over us. And then quite suddenly was gone—the bomb trains had crossed the field, the pattern abruptly ended a thousand yards beyond it, and the Japanese formation was moving off.

"Yet even as the low hum of motors died away we were afraid to move. I was afraid to take my tin hat from my face for another half-minute, because maybe another V might be above us at its bomb-release line, and other trains might start thundering down.

"But the quiet continued and now we raised up in our trench. The black cloud of bombers was moving off, empty of its hailstones—probably just now closing their bomb-bay doors, wheeling in the distance to head back for home. It was very still except for a rising crackle of fire—the smoke from our burning planes was just starting, the climbing columns had not yet blossomed into thick black plumes.

"Again and again the Jap comes in—making his approach (it was beautiful flying) after he has rolled

as we peered east over the edge of the field: a string of fighters—they must be our P-40's! We didn't know that all but a few of our P-40's had been bombed and shot down and their field ruined before the bombers came to us.

"So we stood there brushing the dirt from our clothes (one bomb had hit only fifteen feet away from me) and watched this formation approach. They were coming around beautiful Mount Arayat in a long string like geese flying north in the fall, and at only a little higher altitude—say 2,000 or 3,000 feet.

"Can you blame us for feeling good—to see some of our own gang in the air at last? And also a little sore, because, damn it, here they were, putting on this pretty low-altitude show, but if they'd been only a little earlier and higher, they could have knocked hell out of that Jap V of V's. Meanwhile the smoke was pillarizing higher from our smashed Forts, some of the pillars starting to mushroom and billow at the top while the attack string came on and started to circle the field, each with a wing now cocked up making its turn, pretty as you please—only all of a sudden Glenn Rice yelled: 'Look! For God's sake look at that red circle!' There it was on those up-cocked wings—not a lipstick red, but a kind of orange red, the Rising Sun of Japan. They weren't P-40's, as we now could see, but Nakajimas—and some Zeros—coming in from the direction of Corregidor, an attack string, each Jap leaning out as he circled to pick out which Fortress on the ground he would attack.

"As they circled we could hear our ammunition dump going up—it was like Fourth of July as the bombs burst in the heat—and in between the bangs there was that rising crackle.

"A three-quarter circle they made, like cracking a blacksnake whip over our already stricken airfield, and then they began to peel off to clean up with strafing what few Fortresses their bombers had missed.

"We had started coming out of our foxholes, but now we ran back—we were in the rat stage now, the whole idea being to get the hell out of the target area, because there was nothing we could do. We were all running and looking over our shoulders to be sure there wasn't a Nakajima coming straight with spitting guns at the small of our backs.

"Ahead of me I could see men disappearing into a ditch—some diving head foremost into it. (Bob Meyer almost broke his neck.) I tumbled in, and when I picked myself up I saw a soldier deliberately, slowly walking up to it, but just as he stood at the lip he seemed to collapse and came tumbling down. I thought the earth had caved in under his feet. Then as he struggled to his feet I saw his whole hip had been blown away. Now he collapsed in the arms of a sergeant and a private and died before our eyes—there was nothing we could do.

"Meanwhile we are watching the Jap fighters. Near our ditch is a Fortress snugly in a revetment, which is a curved sandbag wall fitting snugly around the wings and motors of a plane and over which is thrown camouflaged netting to conceal it from high-altitude bombers, but which of course is no protection against strafing, as it isn't concealed from a low-altitude plane.

"There is a sudden hammering of guns, and we see one of the Nakajimas has picked out this particular Fortress as his prey.

"But over this crackle we could hear another hum. Then we saw it,

out of his turn at about 150 feet—but his flight path brings him down as low as fifteen feet above the Fortress' wings. There is a routine about it. As he straightens out from his turn and comes at the big motionless bomber, first his small .25-caliber wing guns open up with a rattle, filling the air with a skein of tracers. Then, when these white threads show him he is dead on his target, we hear him open up with his 20-millimeter cannon—a slower, deeper thud over the high quick rattle of his little wing guns.

"And as he pulls up off the target, he sprays with steel the lip of the ditch right over our heads as we crouch in the bottom. Each time we glimpse the pilot as he rolls in for the attack. He wears a yellow scarf, but for the rest, in goggles and helmet, he might have been any of us. I don't think he notices us—he is too intent on the Fortress. It is only that we are right in his line of fire, and each time as he starts



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to pull up, his guns spray our trench lip before he has time to take his thumb off the button.

"But suppose he does see us? Some of the men had been loading bombs when the attack came and have their shirts off—their white backs are wonderful targets. So now we start to organize ourselves in our rat trap, pounding away with orders. If he does spot us, all he's got to do is come right down that ditch with his guns open.

"So we organize with three lookouts—Lee Coats takes the southeast corner, Bob Meyer the northwest, and I the southwest. Each of us is a pilot who can put himself in the place of those Japs. We know more or less what each maneuver means—whether it will be just a pass or a real attack. So we tell the rest of them to take it easy, keep well down, but they needn't roll down to the very bottom of the ditch until we shout the orders.

"What antiaircraft we have is thumping away now, but it isn't doing much good. In the first place it is so placed that the black smoke billowing up from the burning For-

tresses gets between the Zeros and the ground gunners, blanketing their field of fire. In the second place, it was never designed to operate at as close a range as three hundred yards.

"So in our ditch we start a little war of our own—forty of us versus the Imperial Japanese Air Force; or rather those of the forty who have .45's, which is the pilots and the bombardiers. Every time that Jap strafing comes over, we bang away at him—I can't say we do any damage, and all we had to show for it afterward was a damn dirty pistol to clean, but it gives us some satisfaction.

"Meanwhile from all over the field you can hear two sound sequences—first the high rattle of the Jap .25-caliber wing guns as the tracers feel for the target, then the slower pounding of the untraced as they drive the main punch home—that I've described before. The other sequence was more heartbreaking. You'd hear a rising, hissing p-p-p-f-f-o-OFFF! which means a tracer has gone sizzling into the gas tank of one of our dear old Fortresses—followed quickly by a great roar (everyting letting loose at once), which means that the burning gasoline has exploded her bombs.

"But the Jap pilot with the yellow scarf who is working on the Fortress in the revetment next us is now really getting down to business, coming in lower and closer each time. As we spot him coming tearing in for the attack we yell out our orders and grovel on our faces as his wing guns rattle and his cannon thump, followed by the ear-splitting roar of his motors as he swishes past over our heads—we popping futilely at the racing shadow with our .45's.

"On the eighth pass his tracers found their target—there was the hissing roar of gasoline, and from every one of the many bullet holes in the fuselage there billowed black smoke, enveloping her completely. But he made the great mistake of coming back just once again—maybe only to see what he had done. But for whatever reason, at this point the antiaircraft opened up on him through a hole in the smoke. He seemed to jump a little in the air, and at the end of the run he didn't chandelle as he usually did, but kept on going and—"Look!" somebody said. 'A puff of smoke!' Sure enough it was—only maybe he was only clearing his engine—but three seconds later it was a definite black trail behind him.

"We held our breath as he wobbled and wavered off like a wounded bird, and when he rolled over on one wing down behind the horizon, never to rise again, we let out a cheer that shook more dirt down the walls of our ditch. Because up to then it had been all their Saturday.

"This seemed to signal the end of the attack, for now the Nakajimas and Zeros rose from the field like crows from a well-picked carcass and, falling into formation, disappeared around Mount Arayat in the direction of their carrier, which lay somewhere out of sight off Luzon down under the horizon.

"Now we climbed out of the ditch and started back toward Operations to report. But first we had to walk around the wreckage of the poor old Fortress. We walked wide not only because of the shimmering heat, but because it was a shameful thing we could hardly bear to watch which no one will understand who doesn't love those big, beautiful B-17's as we did. There she was in her death agony—the plates had weltered quickly, leaving only her naked skeleton shimmering in the heat,

and licked by oily flame. It made you sick and you wanted to look the other way.

"By some miracle the operations tent was still standing, and we saw in Major Gibbs' face the change I know he saw in ours as we looked out over the wreck of our field and the burning or smoldering carcasses of what had been the mightiest fleet of four-motored bombers in the world.

"'Frank,' he said—it was the first time he had ever called me this in squadron meeting—I think you'd better go over and take a look at your plane—see if by chance we can still fly her.' Old 99, remember, was out of sight over the runway hump.

"The rest of the field was littered with charred skeletons of planes. You'll remember the 19th Bombardment Group had comprised thirty-five proud Flying Fortresses. A dozen of them had been down at Del Monte Field in the southern island of Mindanao and so escaped this attack. Colin Kelly, who had come up from Australia, was flying one of them. But of all the rest which had been here on Clark Field, only five could be called airplanes any more. Even these five were badly damaged, and none of them could fly. But by pooling the five wrecks, replacing a wing here, a tail there, and taking two undamaged engines from a third, the Colonel hoped we could salvage in all, of the two dozen which stood on the field that morning, three planes which might get into the air—when the runway was cleared.

"As for the boys who hadn't come back from the hills yet, the Colonel wasn't in the least worried. 'It's like any good hunting dog,' he explained. 'The first time you put steel across him, of course he's scared. But after that—well, those fellows that ran away today will make as good soldiers as they come.'

"It was now late in the day, and he told me there was nothing I could do, and it would be all right to leave the target area until morning—in fact we'd better, because the Japs would probably be back to night.

"Lieutenant Elmer Brown happened to be standing there with me, so we decided to go out together, and I left my bike, because it wouldn't be fair to Brownie. Brownie, who always has had a comfortable amount of money, said he'd call a taxi. But I knew nothing would come of that. The servants and almost everybody else were back in the hills, some of them still running, and anything you wanted done that day you had to do for yourself. So we collected a bedding roll apiece at the barracks and started off down the road. We'd walked for quite a while when at a crossroads we came on a convoy of trucks—it was an antiaircraft outfit being moved back into position, I suppose where they could better protect the charred carcasses of our bombers.

"So we hooked a ride on one of these trucks, which was headed for a little native village around the other side of our field and a reasonably safe distance away. We got out when they stopped and, going to the nearest house, by signs asked the owner if he had a room for the night. He was a very nice fellow and took us upstairs to his own. I don't know where he slept. We unrolled our bedding on the bamboo floor and spread our mosquito nets, and Brownie went right off to sleep.

"I lay awake. That ack-ack convoy was still moving in and getting settled. Now and then a truck-driver wouldn't hear a sentry call 'Halt!' and would go rumbling by, and you would hear a rifle crack a couple of times.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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