

Lightnings P-38 versus Stukas Ju-87

A deadly encounter over the Mediterranean Sea in 1943

By Hans Peter Eisenbach

On request of the British government General Eisenhower agreed in October 1943 to send some long-range P-38 fighters to the Eastern Mediterranean Theatre of Operations in support of British operations in the Aegean Sea. The 14th Fighter Group was moved from its base in Tunisia to Gambut/ Lybia near Tobruk, a few miles west of the Egyptian border. From there they were to escort Royal Navy ships. Based on the Combat Air Patrol Mission Report of Major William Leverette¹, Commanding Officer 37th US Fighter Squadron, and added additional information the following account gives an accurate picture of the dramatic encounter of German and American combat aircraft in the sky over the Strait of Karpathos in the vicinity of Rhodos on October 9, 1943.

On October 5, the 37th Fighter Squadron deployed, with minimum time allowed for preparation, to Gambut for a new venture. The first patrols were flown on October 7. 8 P-38s took off this day at 12.00 hours to escort a British convoy of two cruisers and four destroyers. The flight patrolled over the convoy for thirty minutes. The flight returned to base at 18.00 hrs after an intermediate stop. A second flight of eight P-38s took off to escort a convoy of warships at 14.00 hours and patrolled over the vicinity for thirty minutes without incident. They landed in Gambut at 17.30 hrs.

Another two patrols were flown on October 8. Eight P-38s took off at 09.05 hrs to escort the convoy that was also escorted the preceding day by the squadron. Two of the aircraft returned early and six patrolled over the convoy for thirty minutes without incident. The patrol landed in Gambut at 13.35 hrs. More Eight P-38s took off at 12.30 hrs to patrol over the Island of Leros. The flight was fired upon by flak from South of Heraklion and North of Leros Island. The flight landed at 16.25 hrs. In the evening a desert dust storm covered the airfield of Gambut and all the conversation of the crews included the hope of another movement to a better airfield. No one seemed to be greatly interested in the results of the mission and in fact some pilots believed that the mission has no worth. They began to despair of seeing any enemy aircraft.

On October 9 the US fighters were again scheduled to protect the British convoy consisting of the cruiser HMS *Carlisle* and the destroyers *Panther*, *Petard*, *Rockwood* and the Greek destroyer HHMS *Miaoulis*. The ships were now heading southeast in order to withdraw through the straits between Scarpanto and Rhodos to Alexandria. Strong combat air patrols for the ships were available. Almost continuous fighter cover was provided throughout the morning² till 11.55 hrs by 1st Fighter Group / 12th US Fighter Wing. The replacement for this squadron was the 37th US Fighter Squadron / 14th US Fighter Group led by Major William Leverette. The rendezvous with the British convoy was planned for 12.15 hrs. So towards

¹ Quoted in different variations in:

P-38 Lightning Aces of the ETO/MTO by John Stanaway, Page 36ff

The 14th Fighter Group in World War II, A Schiffer Military History book, Page 60-62

Churchill's Folly Leros and the Aegean, by Anthony Rogers, Page 86 - 88

² 1. Formation: 08.50-10.10 2.) 09.45-11.05 3) 10.10-11.00 4) 10.40-11.30 5) 11.00-11.55

midday several ten minutes elapsed during which there was no air cover. The flight led by Major Leverette took off in Gambut at 10.30 hrs. As they reached the vicinity of the island of Karpathos at exactly 12.00 hrs they already could see the British convoy. Leverette saw the cruiser smoking. Obviously the warships were under attack of German Stukas. But the flight was too far away so that they could not intercept the attacking Stukas. The German air strike caused very heavy damages on the Cruiser HMS *Carlisle* and HMS *Panther* was deadly hit and sank at 12.05 hrs. Without being attacked by US fighters the Stukas fulfilled their mission and returned to their base in Megara west of Athens with only one aircraft lost by ship anti-air-artillery. Among the successful Stuka pilots was the 22 years old Fritz from Frankfurt/Germany. It was his 19th combat mission and it lasted 230 flight minutes. For his missions in the Aegean theatre he was awarded the Iron cross.

In the meantime the P-38 Lightnings closed on the convoy from southwest. The flight time from Karpathos to the warships was approximately ten minutes in which the US fighter aircraft had to climb from low level up to 8000 feet. Simultaneously the Ju-87 Stukas from II. Group Stuka Wing 3 approached from northwest the British warships at an altitude of 10.000 feet. It was the *Luftwaffe's* second echelon. A hostile encounter between the attacking German force and defending US flight over the British convoy was inevitable. When the US Pilots sighted the formation of some 30 German dive bombers Leverette dispatched one flight of three P-38s to fly top cover while his flight closed with the Stukas. Leverette himself was flying the P-38 Lightning "*Stingeree*", tail number 81.

The Stuka was not a particularly nimble aircraft, but it wasn't to be approached casually, either, especially when encountered in wholesale lots. In addition to wing-mounted guns, it carried a rear gunner manning a flexible machine gun. And with so few hunters - Leverette's wingman was a new, nervous, slightly trigger-happy lad - attacking so many targets, conserving ammunition was the key: "Get in close and make every round count." Here is the report of Major Leverette.



Leverette: *"At 10:30 hours I departed with nine P-38s from Gambut. Shortly after takeoff, two planes were forced to return because of engine trouble, leaving four P-38s of my Red Flight, and three of Lt. Wayne Blue's flight.*

We went all the way on the deck to stay under German radar on Crete, and sighted the British warships at almost exactly noon, fifteen minutes before our scheduled rendezvous. The ships were approximately 15 miles east of Cape Valoca, on the Isle of Scarpanto. I contacted them on their frequency, and was told that they were under attack. I could see that the cruiser was smoking from the stern. Before we could get within firing range of the Stukas several of them made dive-bombing runs on the British warships. At least one hit was scored on a destroyer, which broke in two and sank immediately.

I led my P-38s up to 6000 feet, and began a counter-clockwise circle around the ships, just out of range of any nervous anti-aircraft gunners. As I reached 8000 feet and was about halfway through the first circuit Lt. Homer Sprinkle, the number four man in my flight, called

out, “Bogies at one o’clock!” There was a cloud of them in the distance. They were slightly higher and approaching the ships from the north-west.

I immediately added power to speed up the climb and I changed course to pass slightly behind the bogies, in order to make a positive identification as to the type of enemy aircraft. It quickly became clear that they were Junkers 87 Stuka gull-winged dive-bombers, probably out of Crete or the airfield at Scarpanto. There were 25 or 30 of them, in three flights.

As we closed on the Stukas – it was about 12.15- I told Lieutenant Blue to hold up his flight momentarily in case there were more enemy aircraft – possibly fighters following the Stukas. With my flight I immediately closed on the left rear quarter of the Stuka formation. The obvious plan of attack was to get in close to the Stukas and clobber them with short, accurate bursts from our .50-calibre machine guns.

Before the Germans knew we were there, I attacked the nearest **enemy airplane ahead of me**. I fired a short burst with the .50s from about 20°. Smoke poured from the left side of the Stukas engine.

The Stuka pilots who still had bombs aboard jettisoned them as soon as the shooting started. Several of my pilots also reported later that a number of the Stukas jettisoned their fixed main landing gear as well. As soon as I saw the smoke coming from the first Stuka, I broke to my left, and attacked a **second Stuka** from his rear and slightly below. After I fired a short burst from about 200 yards, this aeroplane rolled over and spiralled steeply downward. I broke away to the left again and turned back toward the formation of Stukas. As I did, I saw both Stukas I had already fired on strike the water. Even though each Stuka had a rear gunner armed with twin 7.92 mm machine guns on a flexible mount, I am sure that neither of the rear gunners had fired at me.

I attacked a **third** Stuka from a slight angle off its left rear. I opened fire at this aeroplane just as the rear gunner fired at me. The gunner immediately ceased fire, and I saw the pilot jump out of the aeroplane, although I did not see his parachute open. The gunner did not get out.

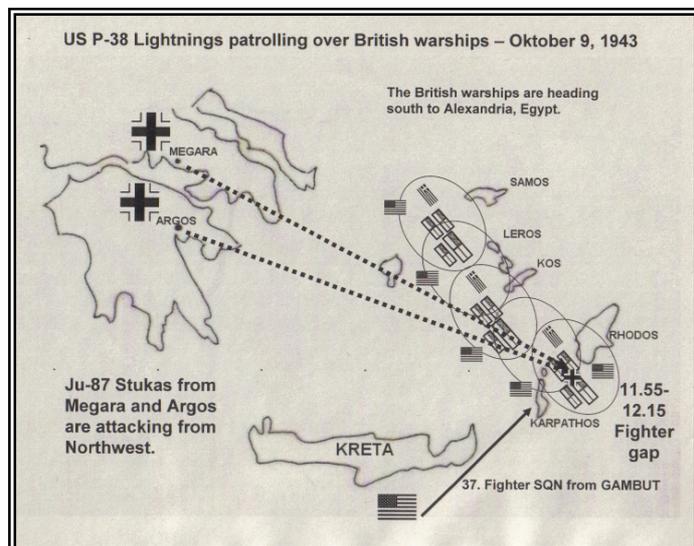
I continued on into the enemy formation and attacked another Stuka - my **fourth** - from an angle of 30°. I observed cannon and machine-gun fire hit the Stukas engine, and I saw large pieces of cowling and other parts fly off. The engine immediately began smoking profusely, and the Stuka nosed down.



I broke away upward to my left, and then re-entered the enemy formation. **Another Stuka** was nearly dead ahead. I opened fire again with my cannon and machine guns from an angle of about 15°. The canopy and various parts of this Stuka flew off, and a large flame shot out of

the engine and from along the left wing root. The gunner jumped out of the aeroplane as I passed it.

Continuing into the formation, I approached a **sixth Stuka** from below and to his left rear, but on a crossing course that would take me over to his right rear, heading slightly away from it. I was closing so fast, the only way to bring my guns to bear was to roll the P-38 tightly left, to



an almost inverted attitude. As my guns lined up on the Stuka momentarily, I opened fire at very close range and observed concentrated strikes on the upper right side of the engine. The engine immediately began to smoke, and I broke away slightly to my left. My element leader, Lt. Troy Hanna, saw this aeroplane hit the water.

I attacked the **seventh Stuka** from straight behind and slightly below. The rear gunner fired at me briefly, but he stopped as soon as I fired at short burst of my own. As the Stuka nosed

slightly down, I closed to minimum range and fired a short burst into the bottom of the engine and fuselage. Some Ju 87s were thought to have wooden props, and this one acted as though its prop had been shattered and completely shot away. The Stuka abruptly and uncontrollably pitched downward and I was instantly looking broadside at a nearly vertical Stuka directly in front of me. I was already committed to passing underneath him, so I intuitively jammed the control yoke forward as hard as I could. I heard and felt a large thump as I went past him. Looking back, I saw a falling object that I at first feared was my left tail. But the tail was still in place. The falling object was probably the Stuka pilot or gunner catapulted out of their seat by the negative G force of the plunging airplane. In the dog fights, lasting approximately fifteen minutes, fifteen JU-87s (and one JU-88) were shot from the skies by the attacking flight and the top cover had accounted for another JU-87 which brought the grand total to seventeen. We engaged the Ju 87s until they passed over the south coast of Rhodos at approximately 1230 hours. **Later on the ground**, the damage to the edge of my propeller blades proved to be very light. We reasoned that my props had cut into the tail of the Germans rudder and fin. Fortunately, he fell faster than I did, or I would have plowed headlong into him.”

2/Lt. Wayne L Blue	Ju-88
2/Lt. Harry Troy Hanna	5 Ju-87
2/Lt. Harry Troy Hanna	Ju-87 dam
2/Lt. Elmer H LaRue	Ju-87 prob
Maj. William Lawrence Leverette	7 Ju-87
Maj. William Lawrence Leverette	2 Ju-87 dam
2/Lt. Homer L Sprinkle	3 *Ju-87
2/Lt. Homer L Sprinkle	Ju-87 prob
2/Lt. Robert L Margison	Ju-87
2/Lt. Robert B Williams, Jr	Ju-88

Only the fact that the Lightning's were running out of fuel and ammunition caused the fighter pilots not to continue the massacre. In the official USAAF World War II Victory Credit list Major Leverette accounts seven air victories, Lieutenant Hanna accounts 5 more, Lieutenant Sprinkle got 3, Lieutenant Margison 1 and Lieutenant Blue also 1. German sources confirm a minimum of 6 Stukas with the call-sign: GM, DN, FP, KP, MP and AU The operational period at Gambut was finished the same day. On October 10 the squadron received the notification that they would return to Ste Marie du Zit. This information was gladly welcomed

by all concerned as it meant leaving the dust and sands of Lybia. On the four days of operations out of Gambut between October 6 to October 9 15 missions and 121 sorties were flown. By evening of October 13th, all personnel had returned to Sainte Marie du Zit. For his leadership and individual performance in the action on October 9, 1943 Leverette received the Distinguished Service Cross.

Epilogue

Major Leverette continued to down enemy aircraft in other actions, finally totalling 11 victory credits to become one of the top 20 aces in the Mediterranean theatre of war. During his military career, Leverette flew 45 different aircraft, from the BT-2 biplane to the F-104. He retired as a Colonel from the Air Force in 1965. He died April 7, 2003 in Beaverton, Oregon. He was 89 years old. Leverette was one of only two Americans in World War II to score seven victories in a single encounter with the enemy. The Stuka Ju 87D-3/Trop with the call-sign **S7-GM**, which also was shot down by Major Leverette on October 9, 1943 was found in 2004 in the Mediterranean Sea. Almost sixty years after her loss the wreck was caught to the net of a fishing boat. It was then drugged all the way to shallow waters. On 5 October 2006 the



Hellenic Air Force successfully carried out the salvage of this Stuka. Fritz, the German Stuka



pilot who participated as a member of I. Group Stuka Wing 3 in the attack against the British warships on October 9, 1943 is killed in action on March 30, 1944 on the Eastern Front. Fritz was 23 years old when his Stuka Ju-87D5 **S7+EH** was hit by soviet Anti-Air-Artillery and crashed 35 kilometres southeast of Ostrow near the town of Utkino at the Welikaya River banks together with his wireless operator Werner Smolla. In 2005 Fritz his Pilot's Flying Log Book "Flugbuch" was discovered and his story was written down in the book "Fronteinsätze eines Stuka Fliegers"³.

³ Hans Peter Eisenbach: "Fronteinsätze eines Stuka Fliegers, Mittelmeer und Ostfront 1943-44", Helios Verlag Germany 2009, ISBN 978-3-938208-96-0. Hans Peter Eisenbach is a retired Lieutenant-Colonel of the German Air Force.