

Chapter 4: Feeling out the Enemy

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As most of us stood about the buildings eating our rations of beans for breakfast, a German Heinkel bomber flying low spotted us from the air. A mad scramble for cover was executed as the bomber circled back. We expected the worst but the only guns firing at us was from the tail gunner. No one was injured in our ordeal as the men were moving about watching the bomber fly in the direction of Tunis. Major Smits, flying over the airfield protecting the planes on the ground, spotted this Heinkel 111 and took off after it. It didn't take the Major Smits very long to catch the bomber and by radio ordered the German pilot to land at the airfield or be shot down. The German bomber circled once again and landed at the airfield with Major Smits right on its tail. To our surprise, the gunner that made us scamper was a petite, well-shaped woman.¹ The bomber was returning from a mission flying low hoping that they would not be spotted. The German crew expressed their delight that the war was over for them. They also expressed a healthy respect for the P-38 fighters and feared them. Every German captured remarked the fear of that plane that looked like two, staying that this plane was a menace to man and equipment. The P-38 fighter had 4 machine guns and one 20-millimeter cannon in the nose and flown by men who were superb pilots.

In the evening of December 26th, a German bomber circled the airfield. **(72)** The British opened up the ack-ack guns once again. We were in the buildings sleeping when the warning of air raid woke us up. Every man ran as fast as he could for the foxholes about 100 yards away. Halfway to the foxholes a latrine trench had been dug that the men used, and [it] being dark, Punchy thought he had reached his foxhole, making a flying belly whopper spreadeagle into the latrine. The yelling and commotion from the area of the latrine made us split our sides from laughter. This ex-prize fighter wanted to beat everyone and arrive first with a flying leap into his foxhole, but hit the latrine instead. Getting back to the buildings when the all clear was given, Punchy had to strip to his underwear and stay in an isolated corner. Orders from the Captain. The next morning Punchy had to hike it to the air post for a loan of some clothes to wear from the air force crew. The only clothes we had were on our backs, and we never did see the extra clothes issued to us until the end of hostilities in the Tunisian Campaign.

News of the assassination of Admiral Darlan on December 24th was handed down by the Battalion Commander. A blow to the allies, for Darlan did cooperate to make his commitments stick as promised. General Giraud was chosen temporary administrator by the French taking over Darlan's duties.² The Germans were now flexing their muscles against the French and the

¹ The Heinkel 111 did not have a tail gun, but did have a rearward firing machine gun mounted under the belly of the plane, which would have been all the same to the men on the ground. The story itself is difficult to verify. Published works on the Army Air Forces and P-38 pilots don't mention it, and the incident would likely have been classified. The presence of a woman in the crew seems odd, but not impossible. Pilots tend to be a law unto themselves, solo flights might not have been closely policed, and the pilot might have brought a female friend along for the ride. The identification of the American pilot as "Major Smits" is likely conjectural on Olexa's part. Virgil Smith, the "first ace," was still alive at this point, but none of his recorded kills matches this story.

² Despite Giraud's efforts to take command of all Allied forces in North Africa, he served largely as a figurehead, with the rather more capable Alphonse Juin in command of the French forces in the Allied army. Divisional records (MRC 301-3.0, G-3 Diary, 11) indicate that the Americans announced the assassination on Dec. 25, so the British may have announced it slightly earlier.

British. The fighting consisted of skirmishes with both sides see-sawing back and forth with no great effort for a big thrust.

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During the night we were awakened by the men on watch. The men on guard duty saw three flares shot into the sky. One green and two red in the direction of Gabes. All squad leaders went to the platoon command post for orders. If the Germans were on their way to Gafsa, we would have to evacuate. We surmised that it would take at least a few hours before the leading vehicles would reach us. The time would be about dawn. The men in the outpost would have to stay put until it was safe for them to make their way back to our lines. The outpost at Sidi-Bou-Zid would be safe for the time being. A Bazooka team was dispatched to El-Guettar to disable the leading two tanks to delay their advance. Waiting till dawn was a nightmare. No communication with anyone did not help our situation any. As the first rays of light began to appear in the sky, each man was alerted to watch for movements to their immediate front. Daylight was upon us and still no sign of the enemy approaching in our direction. Around nine o'clock Lt. Goods asked me to take a jeep and head for the outpost in the direction of Gabes. Taking George and Hasta with me, we drove to El-Guettar. The bazooka team was still in place, informing us that no patrols or armored cars were sighted. Moving with caution, we journeyed on toward the outpost. The day was cloudy, a cold wind from the east. We scanned the sky in all directions for planes as we moved forward. We all were jittery not knowing what to expect. What would our reaction be if we saw the lead tank coming at us? Our plan of action was to turn the jeep around and head for Gafsa as quick as possible. In case the jeep was destroyed, we were to make it to the high ground for protection. Hide in the hills if necessary, and make our way back to Feriana. If our luck would hold out, we hoped to make the 90 miles in two weeks. Reaching the area of the outpost was a great relief. The answer to our inquiry about the flares being fired during the night was that it was done by the Germans. The men at the outpost were surprised at the same sequence of firing the flares one green and two red. Chances of having the same signals as the Germans is one in a million. But it happened! Returning to Gafsa, Lt. Goods and the men were glad to hear that the Germans were not heading in our direction. The anti-tank crew set up their pea shooter, while the others relaxed near the foxholes for the rest of the day. The Lieutenant came to my area, reminding me our meeting with the Frenchman at Maknassy. "See you at dawn sergeant, with your automatic,"³ as he left to inspect the other men in our defense perimeter.

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"Photo Joe" appeared once again the next day at noon as expected. The plane was about the 40,000-foot level, [looking to us] about an inch long, making runs from north to south taking pictures of Gafsa and the area. As the day wore on, the jeep was readied for the journey to relieve the men at the outpost near Gabes. Hasta, George, Lew, and Claypool were the men chosen to man the outpost. Lt. Goods gave me orders to go with them, and it wasn't long before the driver got the jeep in motion. Nearing the oases of El-Guettar and on the road leading to Sfax, we saw three camels and four men coming towards us. Stopping the jeep, I made hasty

³ "Automatic" refers to the Browning Automatic Rifle

plans for each man to be ready to fire in case of trouble. With my automatic at my waist I listened to the lead man who was yelling at us, "Be careful of that automatic, it might go off." I replied, "I know how to use it," and for him to freeze and identify himself. I didn't know what was behind the bend in the road looking North a quarter of a mile away. "Keep the jeep running," I told the driver, "and you other guys be ready for action." "I'm Major Smits," the man yelled. "I was shot down over three weeks ago and I'm glad to see you guys. These Arabs with me are friends helping me get back from Tunis. "Where is your base, Major?" I asked. "Youks-les-Bains," was his reply. "What make of plane do you fly?" I remarked. "A P-38," was the answer given, cinching the identity of the man standing in front of the camels.

The Major was overjoyed with emotion, hugging and squeezing us as if we were his favorite girlfriend. The Arabs watched in silence as the Major asked us a zillion questions we couldn't answer. The Arabs were a little uneasy and asked if they could leave. Major Smits hugged each of them as they sheepishly headed for the oasis jabbering in Arabic. "What do you guys have to eat?" The Major asked. Between us we had 2 large chocolate bars and two cans of beans. Jumping into the jeep now really crowded we headed on to the outpost. "I've eaten nothing but wormy dates these last two weeks," he said as he gnawed on a chocolate bar. "Where is your defense line, Sergeant?" he asked, I remarked that we were positioned just north of Gafsa in an olive grove. Taking a map from a pocket in front of his knee, the Major opened it up, locating Gafsa. Marked on his map was the bombing and strafing line running from Gafsa in the South to Souk-el-arba and Beja in the north to the Mediterranean Sea. "We can bomb or strafe anything north of this line, Sergeant, until it changes with the advance of allied troops." "That's nice to know, Major, because we patrol some of these roads with a jeep. I'd hate to be strafed by our own planes." "I'll let the pilots know you fellows do recon work and make sure of their targets before strafing" the Major answered,

The Major was quite intrigued when told of the strafing near Maknassy. "Were you the pilot that scared us to death between Feriana and Gafsa? I asked. "Yep, it was me in the lead plane giving a hearty laugh. We saw the bright star on the truck when we circled for a second pass. Scare you sergeant?" "Ya," I said, "it would have been a long walk back to Feriana." This tickled the Major to no end. "See any other planes around Gafsa?" the Major asked? "Yes," was our response. "'Photo Joe' comes over every day at noon." "How high is he flying?" "He's about an inch long and silver in color if that will help you." "He's pretty high," the Major remarked, "about 40,000 feet. Every day at noon, eh Sergeant?" "Every day like clockwork, Major." "I'll get him for you, so watch for me." "I will, Major, and I hope you shoot him down." "Where are we headed Sergeant?" the Major asked. "To relieve some men at an outpost about 12 miles from here." The other man in the jeep sat silently, taking everything in as we rode on. The men at the outpost were happy to see us. It was nearly dark on our arrival and the men hurriedly loaded their gear as Hasta and the others said good bye. On our return trip, the Major talked about his work as a pilot and some of his experiences on missions against the Germans. What he told us was very interesting as we eagerly listened.

Arriving at Gafsa, the men in the jeep left with their gear for the foxholes to rest. I headed for the platoon command post with the Major in tow. "Lt. Goods, this is Major Smits. We picked him up at El-Guettar. The Major was shot down over Tunis." "Pleased to meet you Lieutenant," the Major shaking his hand. "When can I leave for Youks-les-Bains, Lieutenant? I'm anxious to get back to flying." "Tomorrow morning, Major, at dawn. You can sleep here with me at the command post," the Lieutenant pointing to the pile of blankets nearby. "You have some mail Sergeant." This was heartwarming to hear. Sgt. Fig had returned from Feriana bringing the mail

for the men in the platoon. We had to wait for daylight, though, to read them. News from home was encouraging and the sharing of cookies a morale builder. Most of the letters we received were postmarked September and October 1942.

At daybreak I hurried off to the command post to see the Major before he left. The jeep was warming up as he finished a warm can of beans. "Thanks, Sergeant, for your help in bringing me to Gafsa." "You'll see me in the sky in a few days, I promise." Two days later, he and his companions circled our position in the olive grove, and as we watched from our foxholes, the P-38's peeled off and headed straight down toward us. We were scared as hell, expecting the guns from the planes to fire at any moment. Nothing happened as they straightened out, zooming by like a flash of lightning. The planes circled Gafsa and came right at us again, just above the olive trees headed toward El-Guettar. As we watched them, the planes tipped their wings and were gone. Crawling out of our holes the first words spoken, "I'll bet it was the Major." Two days passed when a lone P-38 again appeared. Flying low and circling us once again we knew it was Major Smits. The Major kept circling and going higher and higher until he was like a fly so high in the sky. His message to us, "I'll get "Photo Joe" today." We scanned the sky for the German recon plane to appear. Sure enough, and on time, flying high "Photo Joe" approached, making a half-moon circle over Gafsa. Major Smits got behind the recon bomber and the battle was on. The German bomber was no match for the P-38. We could hear the guns spit their lead as the Major pressed the trigger. The bomber in a matter of minutes was leaving a big trail of smoke. Both planes were now near El-Guettar, headed toward Tunis. Four parachutes appeared in the sky as the bomber headed for earth in a spiral and disappeared. We never saw this wonderful pilot again, an ace among aces.⁴

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A message from the company commander arrived by jeep informing Lieutenant Goods to send a recon patrol to the oasis at El-Guettar. Orders from the "High Brass" was to have troops at company strength in this vital area where three ranges of mountains began. There were three valleys heading in three directions with a good road in each heading northeast, north, and northwest. At the oasis lived a band of Arabs about three hundred strong ruled by a chief. The oasis was divided into small square sections by three-foot high mud banks. Palm trees were scattered throughout the area about ten to fifteen acres in size. The water supply was a flowing spring 40 feet below. The Arabic women were the beasts of burden here. They had to lug the water in large jugs on their heads to their living quarters. The men did nothing but sit around and smoke from morning till dark.

The recon patrol picked out an area on the north side of the oasis for the company to move into. When the company would arrive, each platoon was given an area to dig in and make the defense perimeter secure while waiting for the company to arrive at the oasis. An Arab with a son and daughter approached us as we sat under the palm trees. The Arab walked up to me and

⁴ This story is problematic in that Virgil Smith, the original P-38 ace in North Africa, died in a crash on Dec. 30, 1942 (Stanaway, *P-38 Lightning Aces*, 10), and was flying missions regularly in December, and the limited information on him does not include a cross-country jaunt. The battalion diary does, however, note the appearance of three crewmen from a B-26 who had been shot down near Gabès, escaped their captors and walked west for a week before reaching an outpost near Gafsa. Olexa provides different details, so it is difficult to tell whether he is conflating his stories, or describing a different incident.

spoke in French. The only words I knew were (*bonjour*) good day. Lt. Goods was nearby to hear what the man was saying. When he was finished, the Lieutenant looked in my direction and smiled. "The Arab wants to sell you his daughter," the Lieutenant replied. "How much does he want for her?" "Two packs of cigarettes," the Lieutenant said. "I can't believe that he would sell his daughter," I remarked. "He's desperate for smokes I guess." "Ask him if he will sell the son, Lieutenant." "Not on your life, Sergeant, will he sell the son." "Tell him no deal the boy or nothing." I didn't want to Arab on my back. The girl was 10 years old and the boy twelve. She was pretty with black eyes and a nice smile. I was glad when the Arab trudged off in the direction he had come.

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We arrived just in time to get a hot breakfast. The cooks were dishing out powdered eggs, soupy oatmeal, burnt toast and black coffee strong enough to kill an ox. The oatmeal and powdered eggs were thrown on top of each other, looking a mess, but we ate it because it was hot. Our duties in the company area were light, pulling only security guard at night. We spent the day relaxing, writing letters and visiting with each other. Cigarettes were available for 10 cents a pack. I could not figure out for the life of me why we had to pay for them when the stamps bore the words "compliments of" G.M.C Chrysler, Ford, and other establishments in the States. We got our water from the running spring and the Arabs saw to it that no one went down to the spring till we were clear of the area. One day near the spring area while three of us were talking, we saw a woman carrying a huge basket on her head, followed by two girls and a boy also carrying objects, with a man on a little donkey following behind. The donkey was about three feet tall and the Arab was twice as big as the animal. "Let's have some fun," I remarked, "and make that guy carry the donkey a while." It wasn't long before we had the man dismount. By lifting the donkey ourselves and walking with it, we got the Arab to carry the animal about a hundred feet. Boy, was he mad. It was an insult to him. He spieled off in Arabic at us with fire in his eyes. Although it was funny at the time to us, we were later reprimanded by the Captain for this prank. Our punishment was to man the roadblock till relieved.

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