

The plane made an abrupt change of direction, darted into a cloud bank and we lost visual contact with it. I thought it was suspicious behaviour for a friendly aircraft to suddenly change course and hide itself like that, so I kept my eye on the clouds. Having noted the plane's speed, I tried to estimate where it might reappear. The officers didn't seem too concerned and went about their business. But I continued to mentally picture where it would be in the cloud bank. About forty-five seconds later I spotted the same plane emerging from the clouds, 1 nautical mile ahead, in a shallow dive toward us. It looked to be travelling at over 200 miles an hour, and at that speed, could close the distance in under twenty seconds. There was little time to think it over.

"It's a friendly. Looks like a Blenheim," I heard someone say.

Its angle of approach didn't seem very friendly to me. The nose-on orientation made it impossible to see any wing markings and tell if it was German or British.

I squinted to make out the glassed-in nose and cockpit and the radial engines. The Blenheim had those features, but this plane also had a gondola under the nose for a gunner. I knew my identification charts. This was no Blenheim.

I released the safety on the Oerlikon and began to track the plane, aiming not at it, but slightly below and ahead, to match its rate of descent.

In my peripheral vision, I noticed the petty officer raising his binoculars to take a closer look. A moment later he shouted, "Damn, it's a Junkers 88!"

I didn't hesitate. I squeezed the trigger. A stream of red tracers erupted out of my gun toward the German bomber. The first few shells passed beneath the plane. By this time its nose gunner was firing at us with a machine gun. His bullets whizzed past me and made a metallic clatter like hail as they ricocheted off our funnel. He was trying to force us to take cover and keep us away from our own weapons so the plane could press home its attack and drop its bombs on us.

"Not today, you don't," I muttered. I wasn't going to let this gunner scatter me or the other crew. I fired a burst and saw yellow flashes as my shells slammed into the gunner's position and exploded. Bits of glass and metal flew off the plane. Its machine-gun fire abruptly stopped.

But the bomber kept on coming straight at me. I adjusted my aim, fired again. Now yellow flashes burst on the leading edges of the wings as several of my shells scored direct hits. A few

more shots like that, and I'd blast this bird right out of the sky.

The pilot must have known too, because he immediately took evasive action, turning hard to starboard. As the plane banked I saw the Swastika on its tail and the black Iron Crosses on the underside of its wings.

The German pilot was good. He manoeuvred his plane so violently, skidding and yawing, I thought he would tear the wings right off it. It was almost impossible to track his course now, it had become so unpredictable. But I continued to lay down a curtain of fire and managed to score one more solid hit. He released his bombs into the ocean to lighten the damaged plane and make it easier to control. Then he hightailed it for home, skimming the wavetops.

My pulse was racing. This had been my first real test. I hadn't crumpled under the pressure, and I had survived. I hadn't shot the plane down, but I'd prevented it from sinking us. I'd damaged it badly enough that it would tie up German repair crews and keep it from attacking anyone else for a few days. If I hadn't trusted my instincts and taken the initiative to defend myself, there was a good chance that the plane would have dropped its bombs on us before we had time to react, and

we all might be dead now, instead of heading back to port.