

## HILDRETH CREW

Lewitt Hinkle  
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Dear Jake:

8/27

You asked for it!

First, I want to compliment you and your co-workers for the wonderful jobs you are doing - I can't express enough admiration!

As for corrections - there was no "order to bail out" as I will explain. I didn't think Hildreth had died so long ago and you had Kettle's death in 1993 in your last new letter.

I don't often get asked to tell a war story, so here goes.

We were a lucky and well disciplined crew - I believe the only one shot down July 14<sup>th</sup> 1944 who all survived and made it home. If there had not been so many individual acts of heroism that day, I believe Hildreth would have received at least a D.F.C.

We were flying 008, the plane we flew overseas and one we didn't get much chance to fly on missions because it was the favorite plane of Col. Sperry who liked to

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fly as many missions as they would allow him - on that day, he wasn't allowed to fly as pilot so he was flying tail gunner on, I believe, a plane in the lead squadron.

I have his after mission report in case you'd like a copy.

When we saw those several hundred fighters approaching, I wasn't so much frightened as I was shocked - on all our previous missions we had scarcely seen fighters and those mostly miles off. On their first pass, they knocked out all seven of our squadron. I was hit by a small piece of  $\frac{1}{2}$  20mm in a nerve in the right leg which collapsed. As I got up, I noticed smoke from my ammunition box, grabbed an extinguisher and was about to spray when I felt a tug on my leg.

An aside - at MacDill, we had all seen one of the new planes catch fire on a parking stand and seen that it only took minutes to become a heap of ashes. Hildreth got the whole crew together and we agreed that in case our plane was ever to catch fire, nobody should wait for a bail out order but to jump

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as soon as possible. Since all communications were knocked out on that first pass, this agreement prevailed.

Worcester had been told by Hildreth to get us out of the nose. I turned and saw the whole left wing in flames, I pulled Englehart away from his gun and we all three jumped.

Ream in the ball turret was the first to see the fire and came out of the ball only to find that the waist gunners were still firing. He started to climb back in the ball but was barely in when the rest of the crew saw the fire and started leaving.

Meanwhile, Hildreth had kept the plane in a level attitude although it was losing altitude rapidly. I had pulled my rip-cord fairly quickly - read immediately - when I jumped and by the time I had made sure the parachute was open and holding me. I looked down to where about 500 ft. below me I could see 008 was still keeping level although the whole left wing was a bonfire. A few seconds later, the plane went into a spin, broke up and exploded.

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Koller and Eck landed near me -  
Koller in a tree with a badly wounded leg.

Kettle didn't see the fire and barked out of the tail just in time to grab his chute when he saw the rest of us jumping. He fell out of the plane when the tail broke off, attached his chute, then had to pull it open by hand when the rip-cord didn't work. The chute opened at minimum altitude - he had some small flap wounds.

Bardon claimed he was blown out of the upper turret and was entangled in his chute so that he landed on his head. Ream must have jumped about the same time as Hildreth as they landed near each other.

It may have been only a minute, but I don't believe many could have held that plane level in the condition it was in that long so that everybody had a chance to get out.

Eck was taking the place of Miller that morning. I don't know who was his regular crew.

That's All!  
Lunt