

Valor at Vigan

When Japanese attacks on the Philippines left the AAF with more pilots than planes, Lt. Russell Church faced a supreme decision.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE

PEARL Harbor was a disaster, the Philippines a debacle. There the Japanese attack, some nine hours after Pearl was bombed early on December 7, 1941, was no hit-and-run affair but prelude to an invasion for which the vastly outnumbered Americans were ill-prepared.

Army Air Forces first-line aircraft in the Philippines numbered only thirty-five B-17s and seventy-two P-40 pursuit planes, some of the latter assembled the day before the attack. Airfields, the warning system, communications, antiaircraft defenses, and supplies were in deplorable condition, despite the fact that our planners believed the Japanese would hit the Philippines first, if war came in the Pacific.

The first waves of enemy bombers, heavily escorted by fighters, swept over Luzon in the late morning and early afternoon of December 8 (the seventh in Hawaii, east of the International Date Line). News of the attack on Pearl Harbor had left the Philippines command echelon in a state of confusion. Half the bombers and many pursuits were destroyed on the ground. What remained of the pursuit force put up a valiant and costly defense against subsequent bombing attacks.

By December 10, only twenty-two flyable P-40s remained to oppose a large enemy bomber force supported by an estimated 450 fighters. In order to conserve the P-40s, they were restricted primarily to reconnaissance missions.

On December 10, the Japanese landed at Vigan, some 200 miles

north of Manila on the west coast of Luzon. Five days later, twenty-five enemy planes were sighted on a field near the town. Abandoning reconnaissance for this opportunity, a fighter attack was ordered for the following day, to be led by Lt. Boyd "Buzz" Wagner, who commanded the 17th Pursuit Squadron. Two days earlier, Wagner had shot down four enemy planes while on a reconnaissance mission. He picked as his wingman for the Vigan strike Lt. Russell Church, one of the most experienced pilots in the squadron. Church had graduated from flying school with Class 40-A and had been flying P-40s in the Philippines for a year.

At dawn on December 16, the P-40s came in on their target from the sea, taking the Japanese by surprise. Wagner peeled off first, dropping his six thirty-pound fragmentation bombs on the neatly lined-up enemy planes. His pass across the field aroused enemy AA defenses. Church's P-40 was hit in the nose section as he started his bombing run, and he was immediately engulfed in flames. What happened then was recalled later by Buzz Wagner:

"I [ordered] him to turn back and bail out. Russell did not turn back. He dipped the nose of his blazing ship [and] went down like a hell-bent fireball . . . then flattened out right over the target. I watched

while every bomb he carried fell squarely among the grounded planes. . . . The ship still held its course, still flaming, and then it suddenly rocked wildly and plunged sideways to earth. . . . [Many] enemy planes were destroyed by his bombs and that meant we were able to go just that much longer in the Philippines. . . .

"I know that Church knew he was facing certain death when he decided to remain with his mission. . . . What Russell Church did at Vigan that day [was] the most courageous . . . thing I have ever seen in this Pacific war."

(After watching Church's heroic act, Wagner swung back across the field in a series of strafing runs, shot down the only Japanese fighter that got off the ground, and became the first AAF ace of World War II.)

Like so many others on Luzon, Church believed that reinforcements were on the way. If the Americans were to hold out until help arrived, he knew that nothing—not even a burning plane—could be wasted.

Russell Church was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross posthumously for his valor at Vigan. After the war, it was reported that he had been buried with full military honors by the Japanese who witnessed his self-sacrifice in the opening days of that long and bitter Pacific war. ■

