

The Path of Duty

Though Germany's surrender was imminent, Lt. Raymond Knight's war was not over.

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BEFORE the Allies landed in France on June 6, 1944, ground action against the Axis was confined largely to North Africa, Sicily, and the Italian peninsula, where Allied armies landed early in September 1943. With Mussolini out of power, the Italians switched sides on September 3, but in anticipation of that defection, Hitler had moved a formidable force into Italy and had taken control of the war on that front.

After fifteen months of bitter fighting over difficult terrain, the Allies had breached successive German defensive lines before weather halted their advance north of the Arno River in the winter of 1944-45. From the start, the Italian campaign had been secondary to a buildup of forces for the invasion of Western Europe. The 350th Fighter Group, for example, had flown obsolete P-39s and P-400s until August 1944. Twelfth Air Force in Italy was frequently short of aircraft and parts.

Despite their secondary status, Allied air forces in Italy had conducted a classic interdiction campaign and had won complete air superiority over what few aircraft the Luftwaffe could send to the peninsula. There was no significant air opposition after November 1944, but in the absence of fighter planes, the Germans had defended all vital targets with unusually heavy concentrations of antiaircraft guns. This was the status of the war on December 7, 1944, when 2d Lt. Raymond L. Knight reported for duty with the 350th Fighter Group, based at Pisa on the Arno.

In the next four months, often fly-

ing his P-47 in weather that grounded the medium bombers, Lieutenant Knight completed more than seventy interdiction and close-support missions. He was twice wounded in action and was promoted to first lieutenant. Then on April 5, 1945, the Allies began the final drive that would push the Germans back across the Po River. Escape routes to German-held territory had been blocked by Allied air action.

Raymond Knight must have known that the war was almost over. "Why stick your neck out now?" many pilots might have asked. Not Ray Knight. On the morning of April 24, he volunteered to lead a flight of three P-47s against German fighters and bombers that had been spotted on a well-defended field a few miles north of the Po. Knight went down alone to reconnoiter the field and discovered eight Luftwaffe planes under camouflage. He then led his flight in a strafing attack, destroying five enemy planes himself while his wingmen accounted for two more.

Later that day, Knight again volunteered, this time to look over an airfield at Bergamo, forty miles north of Milan. While the other Jugs held out of AA range, Knight made a low-level pass and was hit by flak several times. He found a squadron of twin-engine bombers and some fighters. After leading his flight in a strafing attack, Knight returned alone to make ten more passes, destroying six loaded bombers and two fighters. His P-47 was hit again.

The next morning, April 25, Knight returned to Bergamo with a flight of four P-47s. He knew there were still enemy aircraft there. And so was the deadly flak. In one strafing run, he destroyed a bomber on the runway while the other pilots burned two more of the few remaining bombers. Knight's fighter was critically damaged, but knowing the shortage of aircraft in his group, he



Lt. Ray Knight beside his bullet-pocked P-47. His was the last AAF Medal of Honor of World War II.

—Photo by J. Robertson, courtesy of David Weatherill and William J. Bennett

decided to attempt a return to base rather than bail out over friendly territory. Over the Apennines, the plane crashed, and Lieutenant Knight was killed. A few days later, the Germans opened surrender negotiations, and on May 2, the war in Italy ended.

The goal of every true fighter pilot is to become an ace, but there are no credits given and little glory earned for shooting up enemy planes on the ground, the most dangerous of fighter tactics. Genuine heroism is not a virtue to be coldly calculated in terms of risk and possible gain, however. *The* war was virtually over, but Raymond Knight's war was not, as long as there was still a threat to the men on the ground he was there to protect. He was driven by duty, not by thoughts of personal glory.

Ray Knight would have been proud of the Medal of Honor awarded him posthumously and perhaps a little surprised. It was a rather special award of our highest decoration for valor. He was one of only two fighter pilots to be so honored during the war in Europe—the other was Col. James Howard (*see "Valor" in the November '83 issue*)—and Knight's was the last Medal of Honor earned by an AAF airman in World War II. ■