

Introduction

As the number of surviving veterans of World War II dwindles, the appearance of new memoirs from participants in that conflict appears less likely. Fortunately, in 1989 Herschel Ponder, from Asheville, North Carolina, felt compelled to put pen to paper to inform his three daughters and grandchildren of his part in the greatest armed struggle of the twentieth century. A broad audience will welcome these well-written and fascinating recollections, which his family has agreed to share with others.

Herschel Ponder's memoirs describe his experiences as a P-47 pilot in the European theater in the final months of World War II. His reminiscences begin in September 1942, when he enlisted in the military at 20 years of age, and end in 1946, shortly after marrying his beloved wife, Eleanor. He joined the US Army Air Corps, as the US Air Force did not exist as a separate branch of service until 1947. In September 1942, while awaiting orders to report for active duty, Ponder attended Clemson Agricultural College (now Clemson University) in South Carolina, an all-male military institution at the time. He received his call-up early in 1943, and traveled to Miami to an army induction center.

Ponder attended a bewildering array of training programs in Pennsylvania, Texas, Oklahoma, and Virginia before boarding a ship for Great Britain in 1944. He relates several humorous and a few not so humorous experiences from this time, revealing just how dangerous pilot training could be in those days. He clearly loved to fly and quickly learned many maneuvers which would later help to save his life in combat. Upon his arrival in Britain, Ponder was sent to France and joined his unit, the 510th Fighter Squadron of the 405th Fighter Group, part of Ninth Air Force.

Although not as famous as the US Army Eighth Air Force, which carried out strategic bombing of German industry and transportation, the Ninth Air Force played an equally important role in the defeat of Nazi Germany. The task of Ninth Air Force was primarily to provide close air support to troops at the front, and to bomb and strafe targets behind enemy lines. If American ground forces encountered strong German defensive positions, or if Nazi tank units proved troublesome, American aircraft were called in to attack the Germans from the air. In addition, Ninth Air Force aircraft struck airfields, rail lines, bridges, and supply dumps behind the front. Near the end of the war Ponder stated that he flew missions as far east as Magdeburg on the Elbe River, and as far south as Linz, Austria. Ponder mentions that the 510th Fighter Squadron also provided escorts (protection against German fighter aircraft) for light bombers (A-26 Invaders) on at least one occasion. But most of his missions were to bomb rail lines and motorized columns, hunt enemy tanks, and blow up ammunition dumps.

Because of their mission to furnish close air support, many Ninth Air Force units, such as Ponder's, frequently changed bases as the front advanced. The 405th Fighter Group provided close air support primarily to General George Patton's Third Army. Lieutenant Ponder belonged to the 510th Fighter Squadron, one of three such squadrons in the 405th. Ponder does not give a precise date, but he reached the 510th at St. Dizier, about 120 miles east of Paris, sometime in the fall of 1944, probably in October. The squadron was based in St. Dizier from September 11, 1944 until February 6, 1945.

A brief review of the general course of the war in Western Europe may help to provide the context for Ponder's narrative. Following the D-Day landings on June 6, 1944, the Allies built up their forces in Normandy, and at the end of July they broke out of their beachheads, and liberated Paris in late August. By mid-September the Allies had driven the Germans out of

virtually all of France and Belgium, but they had outrun their supplies. Nazi troops still defended most French ports, making supply of Allied forces on the continent extremely difficult. The halt in the Allied advance gave the Germans a chance to re-form their units and to rebuild a line of defense. British commander Field Marshal Sir Bernard Law Montgomery then proposed an ambitious plan to use paratroopers to capture bridges over the Meuse and Rhine Rivers, in hopes of quickly striking into Germany and winning the war by the end of the year. This plan, carried out in mid-September (Operation Market Garden, the subject of the film *A Bridge Too Far*), failed due to unexpectedly fierce German resistance, and the Allies realized that they still had a difficult struggle ahead of them.

Because of the shortage of supplies there was little change in the situation during October and November. Furthermore, Allied armies in France and Belgium ran up against the West Wall (also known as the Siegfried Line), a belt of fortifications along the German border. The US First Army began a grueling battle along the German-Belgian border for the ancient city of Aachen, the first major German city captured by the Americans, and for the Hürtgen Forest, a horrific struggle which began in mid-September 1944 and continued into February 1945.

On December 16, 1944 Hitler launched the last major German offensive in the west, known to the Germans as the Ardennes Offensive and to Americans as the Battle of the Bulge. Some thirty German divisions, around 200,000 men, attacked American lines in the forests of southern Belgium and Luxemburg with the goal of capturing the port of Antwerp, which had only recently opened to Allied supply ships. Although the German attack caught the Americans by surprise, US troops denied the Germans possession of two vital road junctions, St. Vith (which the Nazis finally seized on December 23) and Bastogne, which the Germans surrounded but never captured. But on December 23 the weather cleared, permitting Allied aircraft to deal

punishing blows to German units in the bulge, and an American attack relieved Bastogne on the 26th. By mid-January 1945, the Germans had been pushed back to their original positions. Ninth Air Force aircraft played a major role in defeating the German offensive, although its squadrons—including Ponder's—suffered heavy losses doing so.

Allied armies launched a series of attacks along the Rhine River in March 1945, and on the 7th American troops captured a bridge intact at Remagen. Patton seized another bridgehead near Oppenheim on March 22, and a few days later British forces launched a major offensive and crossed the Rhine in the north. The German defensive position along the river had collapsed. By April 1 the Americans had surrounded the Ruhr, Germany's major industrial region just east of the Rhine, leading to the surrender of over 300,000 German soldiers. On April 11 American troops reached the Elbe River, the previously decided upon demarcation line between Soviet and Western Allied occupation zones. As the Russians battled their way into Berlin, Anglo-American forces quickly occupied western Germany. Hitler committed suicide on April 30, and the Nazis surrendered on May 8, 1945.

To examine Ponder's specific area of operations, let us look more closely at the activities of Patton's Third Army, which the 510th Fighter Squadron supported, and which played a major role in these campaigns. More so than most other Allied commanders, Patton relied heavily upon tactical air support, both to strike German forces in his path as well as for aerial reconnaissance to protect his flanks from counterattack. Third Army participated in the later stages of the Allied breakout from Normandy, and its rapid advance across northern France aided in trapping several German divisions with tens of thousands of men in the Falaise Pocket. The US Third Army reached and crossed the Seine River before the Germans could establish a defensive line there, which played a role in Hitler's decision to retreat from France. After

crossing the Seine, Patton's troops pressed on to the east into Lorraine. At the end of August, however, lack of supplies forced Patton to halt his advance, just short of Metz, which Ponder mentions was still under German control when he arrived in St. Dizier. Since Montgomery then received most of the scarce fuel and ammunition available to support his airborne operation (Market Garden), Patton's supply situation did not improve. Third Army surrounded and besieged Metz, whose defenders held out until late November 1944. Elsewhere in Patton's sector, his units moved up to the German border.

When the Germans launched the Ardennes Offensive (Battle of the Bulge) in mid-December, Patton's troops were engaged in bitter fighting along the West Wall in the Saarbrücken area. In one of the most difficult and impressive operations of his career, Patton quickly ordered six divisions to disengage, make a ninety-degree turn, and attack to the north against the southern flank of the advancing German armies. With clear weather permitting close air support, Patton's forces advanced rapidly and relieved Bastogne on December 26. He thereby blunted the German offensive only ten days after it had begun.

After halting the German offensive and pushing the Nazis back, Third Army advanced to the Rhine River, once again short of supplies. Patton nonetheless secured a crossing over the Rhine on March 22, 1945 at Oppenheim. In April, Third Army moved across southern Germany and into Austria and liberated Pilsen in Czechoslovakia on May 6, two days before the Germans surrendered. At the end of the war Ponder's squadron was in Kitzingen, in northwest Bavaria.

Lieutenant Ponder's aircraft was the P-47 Thunderbolt, a single engine, propeller-driven fighter bomber that proved mechanically reliable, structurally sturdy, and highly maneuverable. It also was heavily armed, with eight 50 caliber machine guns mounted on the wings, and capable of carrying up to 2,000 pounds of bombs. Ponder flew fifty-one combat missions,

mostly in a ground support role, but he often mentions bombing German transportation links and supplies some distance behind the front lines.

Although Ponder expressed great confidence in his P-47, on two occasions he describes encounters with German Me-262s, a new jet aircraft produced near the end of the war. Obviously impressed by their speed, which was unparalleled at the time, he suggests that if the Germans had been able to deploy a good number of these jets as late as September 1944, they could have won the war. While this is possible, it is unlikely. By this stage of the war the Germans were desperately short of fuel, trained pilots, and raw materials. It is impossible to determine whether their use earlier in the war would have been decisive or not, but the American and Soviet economies had the ability to far out-produce German industry. Furthermore, Nazi scientists were nowhere near developing atomic weapons, and if the Germans had held out longer than they did, there is little doubt that Berlin, Munich, or some other German city—rather than Hiroshima—would have been the first to face nuclear destruction.

Ponder describes several close encounters with death. The most constant danger he faced came from heavy anti-aircraft fire, but he also had confrontations with German fighter aircraft. He provides a particularly harrowing account of being shot down by enemy anti-aircraft fire. Mechanical malfunctions were almost as perilous as the Germans, as evidenced particularly in his description of a bomb failing to detach, and having to land with an armed bomb still attached to his wing. “Friendly fire” also posed problems. Once Ponder was almost hit by American artillery shells, and on another occasion bombers flying above him nearly dropped their bombs on his P-47.

Readers of these memoirs will find that they provide more than a depiction of a soldier at war. We also gain a portrait of Herschel Ponder the man, who loved his family and the North

Carolina mountains around his Asheville home. He was a man of faith who enjoyed athletics, hunting and fishing, and who also painted, sang, and acted on stage. He was a Renaissance man. Ponder graduated from high school at age fifteen. By the time he was twenty he had completed two years at Mars Hill Junior College and served two years of a four-year apprenticeship at a Southern Railway shop in Spartanburg, SC, indicating that he possessed mechanical ability as well. It was at this point in his life that he enlisted in the Army Air Corps.

Ponder's memoirs are notable for their honesty. He was not ashamed to admit that he was lonely, or that at times he wanted to cry. He even states that he once tried marijuana, surely an unusual experience for a young man in the 1940s. Furthermore, he was modest. There is no mention of his being awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and Air Medal, with clusters, or the Purple Heart. In addition, he explains that learning various flying maneuvers saved his life in combat, but he never really clarifies how. He describes several accidents in which he barely escaped death due to mechanical problems or anti-aircraft fire, but his accounts of dogfights with German fighters lack his usual detail. Whether this is due to modesty or his desire not to relive those obviously terrifying encounters is uncertain.

The reminiscences are not without humor. In addition to describing several amusing incidents during training, he also recounts interesting escapades when off duty. When he and his comrades received R & R (rest and recuperation), they often barely avoided trouble with the Military Police. Ponder relates one particularly unusual account from the time immediately after the German surrender. As his unit's recreation officer, it was his duty to improve morale, and he believed that obtaining alcohol would be the best way to do so. For that reason, he drove from the Austrian border to Belgium, a roundtrip of over 1,000 miles, to obtain several cases of Johnny Walker scotch for his comrades.

When the war ended, Ponder experienced an emptiness and fatigue not unusual for those who endured the stress of prolonged combat and the loss of close friends. He described himself as “an emotional and physical disaster.” Although he does not dwell upon it at length, he obviously experienced what is now known as post-traumatic stress disorder after his discharge from the army in October 1945. His transition from “the best exterminator in Europe” and “a professional destroyer” to civilian life as a married university student was disorienting and, at times, jarring. He was shocked by the sudden change to life as a student in Chapel Hill, “where people seemed to play all the time” and “there never seemed to have been a war.” Only a few months earlier he had dropped napalm on German soldiers in their trenches, shot up a passenger train, and once he left a whole town in flames. After experiences such as these, how does one so young make the transition to civilian life? At the Christmas Eve midnight church service in 1945, Ponder recalled how he asked God’s forgiveness for committing murder. The war made him much more emotional than he had been before the conflict. His wife Eleanor obviously provided him a sense of peace and stability. He also confirmed that it was a cathartic experience for him to write his memoirs, forty-four years after the ordeal of war.

After the war, Ponder completed college at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and then returned to work for Southern Railroad as a supervisor in the maintenance department. Herschel Ponder departed this life on December 16, 2007.

Howard D. Grier
Erskine College

