

Tatra Eagle: Slovakia's Ace of Aces

by Jon Guttman

The titled story in the September 2001 issue of Aviation History magazine brings back memories of 758th Bomb Squadron Pilot **Lincoln E. Artz** on Mission #64, 26 June 1944. This was a mission to Moosbierbaum, Austria to bomb some oil refineries. The day went like this:

Ján Režňák, a Czech MSGT. Pilot was interviewed and said the day started out as a routine day. He was not selected among the eight pilots to make the intercept flight. His friend, Pilot Zeleňák, borrowed his plane, a Me-109G-6 serial #161717, which had the worst engine of all the planes in the squadron. Jan reminded him to be careful. Their commander, Ivan Halvzický, had given explicit instructions not to attack the Americans before 1st Lt. J. Puškár gave the order. They took off at 0840 hours and approached the Hungarian border at 24,500 feet. They saw the American bomber formations strung out for some 30 miles. Some dropped their bombs on the Hungarian city of Győr and then, upon reaching the Slovak town of Nové Zámky turned west. Pilot Puškár thought they were going to attack Bratislava again, but it later turned out that their target was Vienna. Some thought Puškár ordered the attack but Jan thought the American fighters started first.

As the Slovak and Fifteenth Air Force reports were compared the following picture emerges of the air battle that took place.

Pilot Puškár led the attack on the first bomber formation and damaged a B-24. Meanwhile, P-38 "Lightnings" of the 82nd Fighter Group and P-51s of the 52nd Fighter Group came down to join the fight. Czech Pilot SSGT. Gustav Lang was not so fortunate. After shooting down a B-24 from the 459th Bomb Group, piloted by 1st Lt. **Lincoln E. Artz** of the 758th Bomb Squadron, Pilot Lang was brought down, mortally wounded, by a P-51 of the 52nd Fighter Group. Other P-51 "Mustangs" accounted for three Me-109s. Pilot Puškár was killed, while Slovak Pilots Sgt. Major Stauder and SSGT. Stefan Ovcirk belly-landed their planes. Pilot SSGT. Stefan Jambor was shot down in flames by P-38s and had to bail out. His parachute tore and he was killed. Pilot Božik damaged a B-17 before being hit by its gunners, and then force-landed.

Pilot Zeleňák, flying near the rear of the formation, was concerned with the irregular R.P.M. and high temperature of his engine when the attack started. He saw one B-24 go down with its right wing in flames and the crew bailing out. Then the next thing he knew was there were 11 P-38s on his tail. He went into a steep dive at 560 mph and pulled out at 450 feet. He was able to make his way back to Piešťany with three P-38s still on his tail. Just before he reached the airfield, he was hit in the leg and head by 50-cal. bullets. He made a belly landing in a grain field before he lost consciousness.

Pilot Zeleňák's downing may have been credited to Capt. Richard M. Gangel of the 82nd Fighter Gp./96th F. Sqd. Only Geletko's plane returned intact.

The Slovak Czech Fighter Pilots showed the Luftwaffe that they were not timid about combat flying. Following the dissolution of the Czechoslovakia Communist government and the restoration of Slovak independence, Ján Režňák got his pilots license back on 18 September 1993. He was now able to fly again for the first time in more than 45 years.

Credits: AH Senior Editor
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