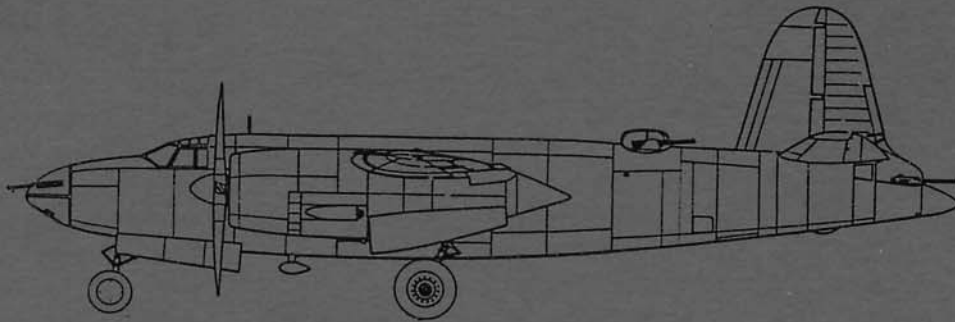


O. F. Gage

Harold V. Larson

BOMBS AWAY!

**A HISTORY OF THE 70TH
BOMBARDMENT SQUADRON (M) IN
EARLY WORLD WAR II**



MARTIN B-26 MARAUDER

Property of Orland F. Gage
T/Sgt 823 Sgd
38th Bm Grp (M)

Harold V. Larson

BOMBS AWAY!

A History of the 70th

Bombardment Squadron (M) in

Early World War II

SeaCliff Press

This First Edition is limited to two hundred numbered copies, several of which were personally signed by surviving members of the Squadron present at their 57th Anniversary Reunion, held at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio during the period May 26-29, 1998.

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Dedication

This history is dedicated to the members of the 70th Bombardment Squadron, both the survivors and those no longer with us, for doing their best to aid their country in trying times, when that help was desperately needed.

Acknowledgements

The compilation of this history would not have been possible without the generous contributions from Squadron members of their personal narratives, photographs, diary entries, books, memorabilia, Form 5 entries, and other factual data in support of the writing.

Special mention is made of the diary entries of Lt. Conrad A. Ray, who died in July 1980, which were copied and provided by his widow, Adelaide Ray, and which were extensively used throughout the book. His diary material assisted immeasurably in making this history "come alive."

Many thanks also to our wartime Squadron Commander, now Colonel Leroy L. Stefen, U.S. Air Force (Ret.), for his numerous additions to this history which provided significant historical perspective and a framework for the writing.

At home, my wife, Signe, has been of enormous help in providing constant encouragement, advice and assistance on the entire project. My daughter, Jennifer has been of great help in editing the manuscript and in providing suggested changes to make the writing more clear and understandable to the layman reader.

We must also mention sadly the fact that four members of the Squadron who made narrative contributions to this history during the course of its writing are no longer with us, namely:

Lyman H. Eddy (Moose)
Thomas W. Moore (Tom)

William T. Freeman (Bill)
Richard M. Thorburn (Dick)

The various contributions by Squadron members, in terms of narrative data, photographs, diary entries, documents and books, are next to impossible to list specifically by individual. In addition to those listed above, however, we are grateful for the material from Harold Clack, Ted Cope, Floyd Corty, Jerry Davis, Fred Durbin, Lou Edwards, Joe Feldberg, Callie Hall, Tom Hendrix, Frank Nemeth, Bob Owen, Pasqual Palacios, Joe Palmieri, Ed Sethness, John Sharp, John Sherlock, Gil Smith, Roger Soles, Jim Story (69th Squadron), Bill Talley, Mark Treat, Howard Troy, and Abe Wilensky. Thanks are due also to the B-26 Marauder Historical Society, particularly John O. Moench, Stanley W. Akers and Trevor Allen, for their assistance in identifying technical details of the Squadron's early version of the B-26B aircraft.

A sincere thanks to all of you.

Harold V. Larson

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Introduction

*History cannot be more certain
than when he who creates the
things also narrates them.*

Vico

This is the story of the 70th Bombardment Squadron, a lone squadron of the U.S. Army Air Corps, which flew its B-26 aircraft “island hopping” across the Pacific, and which fought the early months of World War II, as a separate Squadron, from Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands.

This is also the story of the Ground Echelon of that Squadron which served with distinction, under adverse conditions, for twenty-five months on various remote islands of the South Pacific.

How did a single, land-based squadron of Army bombers operate in wartime across the vast Pacific, under U.S. Navy operational command and without the customary Group Headquarters and specialized field and depot support units?

This history traces the Squadron from its inception in January 1941 through the Declaration of War and the early part of World War II. The sequence will be chronological. The story will involve pre-war activity, operations in the U.S. subsequent to Pearl Harbor, activities in Fiji and combat operations from various remote islands in the South Pacific.

The story is being written in 1998 — over fifty years later. While some recollections may grow dim or distorted with the passage of time, there are certain vivid and unique events in the history of all human endeavor which remain indelibly inscribed in memory and, seemingly, compel recording.

A determined effort will be made to depict historical events as accurately as possible — to separate fact from fiction. In this effort, however, we are reminded of a quote from Winston Churchill that, “History will treat me kindly for I intend to write it.” To paraphrase the Churchillian expression and transpose it to our story, it might be said that, “History will treat us kindly for we intend to write it.”

The centerpiece of this history consists of a number of personal narratives and diary entries, detailing various events; vivid recollections and lasting impressions of Squadron survivors — those who were there at the time. As names and ranks are mentioned, they will be addressed as we knew them then.

1: Pre-World War II

Historic continuity with the past is not a duty, it is only a necessity.

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.

Early Beginnings

Our pre-war history involved an inseparable mixture of men, machines and the circumstances of the domestic and international situation prevailing at that time. Official records reflect that the Squadron was "Constituted 70th Bombardment Squadron (Medium) on 20 November 1940. Activated on 15 January 1941."¹

In its earliest days, the 70th Bombardment Squadron consisted of one officer, Lt. Leroy L. Stefanowicz,² and nineteen enlisted men. The following are the recollections of our first Squadron Commander, relative to our beginnings:

"The history of the 70th Bomb Squadron began in early 1941 when it was activated as part of the 38th Bomb Group and was housed in a farm house on the edge of Langley Field, Virginia.

Our Group Commander was a man named 'Swede' Larson, not our Harold V. ('Swede') Larson, but a Westside T. Larson.

The three squadrons of the 38th Bomb Group were the 69th, 70th and 71st. Each squadron had one officer: Second Lieutenants Doerr, Bacon and Stefanowicz. Lieutenants Doerr and Bacon were subsequently killed while flying the B-26.

At the time of our beginning, the war in Europe was being won by the Germans. President Roosevelt and his advisors in Washington reasoned that we might be drawn into the war, and whether we were or not, it would be best to be ready. A big expansion of the military began.

The Army Air Corps was run from Washington by Major General 'Hap' Arnold at that time. There were no Air Divisions, no Wings, no numbered Air Forces, just the Chief of the Air Corps and a few groups of bombers, fighters, and some squadrons of reconnaissance type airplanes. If the Air Corps was to

¹ United States Air Force. USAF Historical Division. Air University. *Combat Squadrons of the Air Force; World War II*. Edited by Maurer Maurer. [Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama] (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1969), 258.

² Now Colonel Leroy L. Stefan, U.S. Air Force (Retired).

strengthen and expand, new units had to be formed, hence the genesis of the 38th Bomb Group and the 70th Bomb Squadron.”³

Author

The Harold V. (“Swede”) Larson mentioned above is the author of this history. I was assigned to the 70th Bomb Squadron from the 22nd Bomb Group as a Second Lieutenant on 15 May 1941, two months after my completion of the Army Air Corps flying schools at Randolph and Kelly Fields in Texas.

Training

In defense of the pre-war Army Air Corps, and in an effort to be as objective as possible, it must be said that training, in one form or another, was a continuous peace-time effort. For example, the cadres of officers from the 22nd Bomb Group, reassigned to the 70th Bomb Squadron of the 38th Group at Langley Field, Virginia, namely Lieutenants Stefonowicz, Sharp, Eddy, Callaham, Larson and Boden, had received training, in varying amount, in the following categories:

Air-to-Air Gunnery — This was conducted over the Atlantic using a flexible .30 caliber machine gun, firing out of a B-18, against a sleeve target towed by another B-18.

Bombardier Training — The ground “training aid” for the super-secret Norden bombsight rolled across a concrete floor inside a hangar. It was designated an A-2 Bomb Trainer. The device is perhaps best described as a miniature oil derrick, or steel scaffold about 12–14 feet high, mounted on wheels, battery-powered, with a platform on top which carried the student, the instructor and the Norden bombsight. Pilots (student bombardiers) “thumbed” the bombsight, and the motorized, movable scaffold was thereby directed, at a snail’s pace, across the hangar floor toward the “target.” Not like flying, but it worked!

Practice Bombing — After graduating from the hangar training, pilots were given the opportunity of actually riding in the nose of the B-18s and dropping bombs. The real-life target was Plum Tree Island off the Virginia coast, near Langley Field. The bombs were the 100 lb., sand-filled, sheet metal variety with a small spotting charge that enabled the airmen to see what they hit. The pilots were elated when they hit anywhere near the target. The objective, of course, was not to produce a bombardier, but to have the pilots become more aware of a bombardier’s problems.

Small Arms — The pilots were given small arms training using the Colt .45 caliber pistol and were encouraged also to shoot skeet at a designated local skeet range.

Formation Flying — Occasionally, pilots participated in large formation flying using all squadrons equipped with B-18s at Langley Field. This could involve 15–18 ship formations over the field on special occasions.

³ Stefen, Leroy L. Letter, January 1996.

Transition Training — Pilots were in absolute awe of the early B-26 “straights” when they began arriving from the Martin plant outside Baltimore. Compared to the slow, under-powered, tail-dragging B-18, it was not unlike strapping oneself into a rocket ship. The B-26 had its problems, as all new production aircraft have, but transition from the B-18 to the B-26 moved ahead cautiously, geared to the aircraft production availability. There was a certain challenge involved and a distinct “macho” image associated with getting checked-out in the B-26.

Indoctrination Training — The general procedure in all of the squadrons of the 22nd Group in the pre-war era at Langley Field was for the Squadron Commander to assemble the officers of the squadron early each morning in a hangar, and for the CO, who was generally a Major (and next to the Almighty himself) to indoctrinate the “troops.” This could and did take a variety of forms — everything from lectures on Army Regulations and the avoidance of political activity to quizzes on infinite details of the B-18. For example, “Lt. Boden, what is the bomb load of the B-18?” or, “Lt. Larson, what are the operating frequencies of the radio compass?” The officers stood in a semi-circle, around the CO at “parade-rest” while this went on. It was a no-nonsense, serious business.

Relative to the growth of the Squadron, we learn from official records that on the 15th of May in 1941, seven flying officers bearing the rank of Lieutenant (Sharp, Eddy, Larson, Boden, Hawkins, Jones and Griffith) were assigned as a nucleus officer cadre for the 70th Squadron.

Jackson Army Air Base

Further growth and the first deliveries of B-26 aircraft to Jackson is reflected in the information below provided by our Squadron Commander:

“Next came a move to Jackson, Mississippi, where we operated for a few months with one airplane, a B-18. More people were assigned to us including our first navigators. Then, in the summer of 1941 we began to get the new Martin B-26. Pilots who flew it said that the B-26 was the hottest airplane they ever flew. It was a new airplane, not thoroughly tested, and was being flown by inexperienced pilots.”⁴

A Jackson, Mississippi newspaper carried the following account under the headline, “WORLD’S BEST BOMBERS ASSIGNED AIR BASE”:

“First of 49 of Uncle Sam’s fastest and most effective bombing planes — the new Martin B-26 — arrived at the Jackson Air Base this week, assigned to the 38th Bombardment Group, under Lt. Col. Robert D. Knapp, a unit of the Third Bomber Command under General Bradley...The first of new arrivals...piloted here by Major Fay R. Upthegrove, Executive Officer of the 38th Bomb Group, who with his crew brought the ship here from Langley

⁴ Stefen, Leroy L. Letter, January 1996.

Field in little more than three hours. Two other B-26s arrived this week and delivery of the remaining 46 is expected at the rate of three a week.”⁵

B-26 Difficulties

Notwithstanding the above “upbeat” newspaper article, the situation was not all wine and roses relative to the B-26. The real-world situation regarding these early B-26s is captured by Colonel Stefen as follows:

“It quickly gained the reputation of a dangerous airplane. Such slogans as, ‘One-a-day in Tampa Bay,’ resulted from a large number of accidents at the B-26 training base at MacDill, Florida. We had our share. John Doerr and his crew were killed when they lost an engine on take-off at Jackson. Tom Bacon was killed while service testing the B-26 at Wright-Patterson.”⁶

There were three primary sources of difficulty. The first involved the very early aircraft delivered to Langley without combat configuration, particularly without the powered top turret. The absence of this equipment brought on a “weight and balance” problem, a nose-heavy condition on landing which, in turn, caused several nose-gear collapses. This was a temporary condition, however, solved by loading sand bags in the rear of the fuselage to compensate for the weight of the missing turret.

The second problem had to do with the relatively short wing span (65 feet) of the early aircraft, which gave rise to an exceptionally high “wing loading” which, in turn, necessitated high take-off speeds and high approach speeds for landing. On the subject of approach speeds, a retired wartime WASP ferry pilot is quoted as saying the B-26, “had the gliding capability of a piano.”⁷ (The WASPs were Women Air Force Service Pilots.)

A third source of problems related to the huge, four-bladed Curtiss electric propellers which had a nasty inclination of going into “flat pitch” on take-off for no reasons apparent to us at that time.

Flat pitch is a term applied to the individual blades of a controllable pitch propeller when the angle of the blades is rotated to a flat position. It is the opposite of a “feathered” position in which the blades are lined-up parallel to the airstream. In a flat position, the blades no longer “grab” air effectively and power is lost. The condition was sometimes called “runaway props” and “prop overspeed.” Whatever the term used, the result was that the entire 4-blade assembly would overspeed at a crucial time because the individual blades were not in the proper angular pitch to produce thrust.

The fact that flat pitch or runaway props occurred just after lift-off, when maximum power was needed, produced serious and often fatal consequences. The cause was later found to be associated with excessive use of the aircraft batteries in starting engines and other ground operation. The propeller control mechanism on early aircraft was driven by

⁵ *Clarion Ledger*, Jackson, Mississippi, 14 November 1941, 10.

⁶ Stefen, Leroy L. Letter, January 1996.

⁷ Goddard, Don B., “The Lady Was a WASP,” (Andrea Shaw), *Ruralite Magazine*, September 1991, 10–11.

battery power, and with drained batteries on the take-off roll, anything could and often did happen.

In the B-26B MA, which was ultimately assigned to the 70th Squadron, the prop control mechanism was driven by the generators, and the 12-volt electrical system was replaced by a 24-volt system. Additionally we were provided gasoline-powered EPUs (external power units) to be used in starting engines and miscellaneous ground operation. Insofar as can be reconstructed, these modifications were effective. The 70th Squadron lost no aircraft due to propeller flat pitch; however, this exact problem caused three forced landings between Baer Field, Indiana and Sacramento, California for Bill Griffith's aircraft (17550), which will be reported later.

Most pilots greatly admired this aircraft for its speed and its power while, at the same time, they treated it with the deep respect it demanded. It has been said, regularly, that the B-26 was "terribly unforgiving" for the least neglect, carelessness or incompetence. This is true; however, it could spoil your whole day, even when accorded its due respect. We looked at it as a challenge.

In July 1941, Major Flint Garrison took command of the 70th Squadron and three non-flying officers were added to the list of personnel. They were Lieutenants Wilburn, Baucom and Glover. On the 25th of the month over fifty draftees were assigned to the Squadron, part of the first group of Selective Service men to be assigned to a tactical Air Corp unit. Subsequently, in October 1941, microfilm records reflect that Lieutenants Morrison, Sherlock, Sethness, Treat, Martin, Miller, Smith, Evans, Durbin and Washington were assigned to the Squadron, followed shortly by Cadet Navigators Viens and Schaper. Following closely on the heels of the above officers, eighteen other Lieutenants were assigned. They were Lieutenants Otis, Saul, Haynes, O'Connor, Ray, Rudolph, Thorburn, Van Story, Hahlen, Perry, Reardon, Cushing, Quinn, Lindsay, Huggs, Neeld, Mitchell and Patterson.⁸

Under Major Garrison at Jackson, I was designated as Adjutant of the 70th as an additional duty. In this capacity, my job was in the so-called Orderly Room. Here, I learned about the Morning Report, Sick Report, Squadron Fund, Bulletin Board and Pay Table from Sergeant Hathorn, who was then our First Sergeant. Major Garrison insisted on a neat and tidy bulletin board, but the most interesting function for me was the Pay Table. Before a pay day, my duty involved going to a downtown Jackson bank, armed with a caliber .45 pistol, and with some trepidation, bringing back sacks of money to pay the troops. I remember well at some pay tables being required by "higher authority" to read certain "Articles of War" which had to do with desertion. One of these articles stated, "shall suffer death or other such punishment as a Courts Martial may direct." It was an awesome thought and made a person gulp! The redeeming feature of the Adjutant's job was that it enabled me to associate names with faces among the Squadron's enlisted personnel.

For flying time, I flew co-pilot for Major Garrison in the old B-18 — that is, when the weather was good and he needed the "time."

⁸ Squadron records in microfilm at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama.

In summary, during the Summer and Fall of 1941, a Squadron strength of approximately three hundred men was brought together from all walks of life. The total was divided roughly into forty officers and two hundred-sixty enlisted men.

As a generalization, the Squadron could be characterized as a group of citizen-soldiers, except that it had a group of approximately forty senior non-commissioned officers, of many years service, who formed the core of its maintenance, supply, transportation and other support or administrative functions. Draftees from the Selective Service System composed the vast majority of the enlisted ranks, including a large group from the State of Pennsylvania.

2: Pearl Harbor

*Those who cannot remember the
past are condemned to repeat it.*
Santayana

Declaration of War

The *New York Times* of Monday, December 8, 1941 carried the following banner headline:

**“JAPAN WARS ON U.S. AND BRITAIN
MAKES SUDDEN ATTACK ON HAWAII
HEAVY FIGHTING AT SEA REPORTED”¹**

President Franklin D. Roosevelt on December 8 addressed a joint session of Congress, asking that a state of war be declared between the United States and Japan in the following historic quote:

“Yesterday, December 7, 1941 — a day which will live in infamy — the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by the naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan”...“I ask that Congress declare that since the unprovoked and dastardly attack by Japan on Sunday, December seventh, a state of war has existed between the United States and the Japanese Empire.”²

After a period of time, it began to become clear that the Japanese, at Pearl Harbor and in other attacks in the Pacific and in the Far East, had in just a few hours, destroyed more than 500 U.S. and British aircraft, and had either sunk or badly damaged all eight of the U.S. Pacific Fleet’s battleships in Pearl Harbor. They had gained control of the skies and seas across a quarter of the earth’s surface. Further, in the coming weeks they would largely extend their control from the borders of India to the central Pacific and from Alaska to the northern coast of Australia.

Stationed in Jackson, Mississippi, we were stunned! Prior to the attack, very few of us had even heard of Pearl Harbor, or knew where it was. To say the least, a period of frenzied activity followed, marking December 1941 as probably the most memorable turning point in the history of the Squadron.

¹ *New York Times*, 8 December 1941, 1.

² Roosevelt, Franklin D. Message to Congress, 8 December 1941.

In the words of Colonel Stefen, "When the war began in December 1941, we were 'knee deep in inexperience,' as the saying goes. But we were at war, and were scheduled to go to India to fight the Japanese."³

Hectic effort and confusion dominated practically all activity at the Jackson Army Air Base. A story told by Lyman Eddy, who was "Officer-of-the-Day" on December 7, will illustrate the confusion. Lyman, affectionately known as "Moose" because of his huge frame, had decided that the proper thing to do, under the circumstances, was to cluster all of the base aircraft together on the parking apron under the control tower, surround them with lighting, and double the guards. Why? Because, he reasoned, that the primary threat to the air base was sabotage of the aircraft by Japanese "infiltrators." His actions were reversed that same night by Lt. Col. Knapp, the Group Commander, who ordered that all aircraft be dispersed to the far corners of the base and that the lighting be removed in order not to present an attractive target for a Japanese air attack on the base — an air attack on Jackson, Mississippi!⁴

Savannah Sub-Patrol

On 9 December 1941, the aircraft and crews were sent to Savannah, Georgia with other squadrons of the 38th Group for coastal search and anti-submarine patrol duty. It turned out to be somewhat confusing and certainly uneventful. The 70th neither saw nor sank any submarines. The mission was called off after a few days and everyone returned to Jackson. Official records blandly state, "Operated from Savannah, Georgia 9–14 December 1941."⁵

Christmas Dinner 1941

The 70th Bombardment Squadron enjoyed a sumptuous Christmas dinner at the Jackson Air Base in December 1941. The dinner menu itself provides an unexpected historical reference document in that besides the menu, it lists all officer and enlisted personnel who were members of the Squadron at that time. The personnel listing and the menu are both attached to this history in the Appendix at page 153 and 154.

We have recently learned from Frank Nemeth that he and Michael Bobovsky cooked the turkeys for our big dinner. In Frank's own words, "Bobovsky and I cooked fifty-two turkeys for the Christmas Dinner. It was some job, but we were complimented by Major Garrison for a job well done." Frank continues his story, "When we arrived at Fiji, I asked to be taken out of the mess hall. I wanted to work on airplanes. I became a mechanic, and in 1943 was crew chief on the B-25s. We had a good bunch in the 70th Bomb Squadron. All of us got along well."⁶

³ Stefen, Leroy L. Letter, January 1996.

⁴ Eddy, Lyman H. Communication, 18 February 1996.

⁵ United States Air Force. USAF Historical Division. Air University. *Combat Squadrons of the Air Force; World War II*. Edited by Maurer Maurer. [Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama] (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1969), 259.

⁶ Nemeth, Frank. Letter, January 1996.

Before leaving the subject of the 1941 Christmas dinner and the listing of attendees, an important point must be made. The listing of personnel on page 153 is not in any sense a final listing of the 70th Bomb Squadron's personnel deployed to the South Pacific. Numerous shifts of personnel, both in and out of the Squadron, took place regularly and frequently. For example, our bombardiers and our ultimate group of navigators were yet to be assigned.

So, there we were in Jackson, Mississippi, partially manned and partially equipped one full year after activation, with a war going on and weighted down with innumerable problems.

Practice Bombing

Before moving on we must say that in writing a history we learn something new almost every day. Until now, most Squadron members had been under the distinct impression that no one had ever dropped a bomb or fired a shot out of the B-26 prior to our being deployed overseas. It now seems that one person did some bombing out of a B-26, and that it was in the early days at Jackson, Mississippi. That person was Pfc. Callie N. Hall, an enlisted bombardier. He has provided the following information:

"I flew three practice missions out of Jackson, Mississippi with Lt. John Washington as pilot and Lt. Dick Thorburn as co-pilot in B-26s. On the first two, on the 13th and 15th of January, 1942, we made dry runs, but on the third, which was on the 16th, we took 100 lb. practice bombs. We actually dropped some of these on sand bars in the middle of the Mississippi River. T/Sgt. Darel Snyder was the head of the Armament Section, and after first checking out 45s, we checked out the Norden bombsight.

We only had enlisted bombardiers in the 70th in the beginning. Some of them were Tom Hendrix, Ferrel P. Lawrence, Frank L. House, Walter B. Haynes, Callie N. Hall, and others I can't seem to remember."⁷

⁷ Hall, Callie N. Letter, 5 February 1996.

3: Moving Out

The first qualification for a historian is to have no ability to invent.

Stendhal

Jackson to San Francisco

About January 18, after much confusion, many orders, counter-orders and amendments, the 70th Squadron, as part of the 38th Group, received orders for overseas shipment, completed packing for movement and left shortly thereafter by troop train for the San Francisco Port of Embarkation — destination unknown, but rumored to be India or Burma.

Personnel changes continued. Just prior to movement to San Francisco, Lieutenants McMurdy, Lindsay, Quinn, Neeld, Perry, Cushing, Mitchell, Hahlen and Patterson were transferred out of the Squadron. Also, Lt. Col. Upthegrove relieved Lt. Col. Knapp as Commanding Officer of the 38th Bomb Group. More important to the Squadron, on January 24th, Major Garrison was relieved of his command of the 70th Bomb Squadron and Lt. Stefonowicz became the Squadron's Commanding Officer once again. This was a welcome change and well-deserved. "Stef" was a natural leader. He was greatly respected, thoughtful in his decisions and always mindful of the Squadron's welfare.

After a four-day troop-train journey, the Squadron camped-out in San Francisco's "Cow Palace," and the officers ensconced themselves, initially, in the Fairmont Hotel on the top of Nob Hill.

Ground Echelon Shipment

On January 29, the Ground Echelon composed of three officers, Captain Shockley (the new Adjutant), Lieutenant Palmieri (our new doctor), and Lieutenant Schmedes, plus two hundred and four of the Squadron's enlisted men boarded the U.S. Army Transport *Tasker H. Bliss*, but did not sail until January 31 for a destination, still rumored, but not officially known.

The 70th Squadron, however, was not alone on the troop ship. One thousand twenty-one officers and men of the 38th Headquarters units and ground echelons also boarded the *Tasker H. Bliss*.

At this point, clarity requires that a distinction be made between the Air Echelon and Ground Echelon. The Air Echelon consisted essentially of those who manned the various aircrew positions in the aircraft plus essential ground personnel, such as crew chiefs and specialists necessary to perform minimum essential daily "organizational" maintenance on

the aircraft. The Ground Echelon consisted of all other personnel assigned the squadron, such as supply, maintenance, administration, medical, ordnance and other support functions.

The convoy carrying the group to Australia was the earliest to make the non-stop run across the Pacific. Leaving San Francisco 31 January 1942 when the enemy was advancing rapidly south and eastward, the ship was pitifully unprotected by present-day standards. The original destination, by now established as Rangoon (railhead to the Burma Road), was under attack while the 70th was at sea, and the destination was altered to Brisbane, Australia. The report cited below contains a well-stated, descriptive summary of the journey in which William J. Talley (Bill) of the 70th writes amusingly about life aboard the freighter:

“Life on the boat was marked by undulating stomachs, endless chow lines, PX lines, barber lines, water lines, and worry lines, The trip from San Francisco to Australia was on the *SS Tasker H. Bliss*, a recently converted freighter belonging to the American President Line, and formerly known as the *President Cleveland*. It was not designed to carry as many of us as were loaded on there, so it was unbelievably crowded...below decks, sleeping area, latrines, etc. We were told we were going to Rangoon, Burma, and were told later that we got diverted to Australia, because the Japanese had invaded Burma, and were closing in on Rangoon. I know a lot of us slept on deck, and the sun would come up on the same side that it had gone down on the evening before. We were dodging submarines, and the captain would do a 180 regularly...the primary reason for taking 26 days. Several fellows were glad they had bought a box or two of candy bars in San Francisco, as the hard-boiled eggs got a little tiresome after a while. The second Sunday at sea the cooks decided that we were going to have turkey and dressing...with ALL the trimmings, for our main meal. The turkeys had been in the reefer too long...but they got cooked and served before anyone seemed to realize that they were completely spoiled. Our resident artist, that drew cartoons regularly for the cover of our newsletter, drew a cartoon of a cook throwing the turkeys overboard, with the shark surfacing and throwing one back at him.”¹

Air Echelon to Patterson

With the Ground Echelon at sea, and in order to maintain the chronological sequence, our story now turns to the adventures and mis-adventures of the Air Echelon.

The Air Echelon of the 38th Bomb Group had been ordered to San Francisco on or about January 19, 1942, as indicated earlier. The Ground Echelon had shipped out on 31 January, but the Air Echelon was held up in San Francisco for about six weeks while somebody, somewhere, was trying to figure out what to do with us. The Air Echelon had no inkling of what was going on, what was in store for them, or when it might happen. We were told to make a daily check of a bulletin board and roster mounted in the Fairmont Hotel for any information pertaining to us, and initial by our name. That's it, except that the pilots were required to get their flying time, which was accomplished by flying BT-13 aircraft at Moffett

¹ Talley, William J. Letter, 19 January 1996.

Field, several miles south. As time passed, some officers moved from the expensive Fairmont to other hotels or apartments in downtown San Francisco.

With the war on, San Franciscans were extremely cordial and hospitable to all men in uniform. On many occasions during the stay, one found that one couldn't pay for a meal in a restaurant or a drink in a lounge because somebody had already picked up the tab — generally anonymously. Very often people would shake hands, clap us on the back, offer words of encouragement, and tell us to go get those “— — Japs,” or something similar. The theme of the day, it seems for everyone, was “Remember Pearl Harbor.” We were anxious, even eager, to go — but where, when and how?

A decision was finally made by headquarters that the Air Echelon, instead of moving by sea, was to report to Patterson Field near Dayton, Ohio to receive new production B-26s, specifically the B-26B MA, and undergo further training. It is important to note that training in this case consisted primarily of learning to take off and land a “hot” airplane. It did not include combat applications of the B-26, such as dropping bombs, firing the guns or combat tactics. In fact, there were no available aerial gunnery or bombing ranges in the area. Even with the limited training, we had fatal aircraft accidents. On the evening of 20 March, Lt. Hawkins, Lt. Van Story, Lt. Rux and Sgt. Morgan were killed in the crash of a B-26 during a night flight. Then the next day, a second calamity occurred. On a ferry mission from Patterson Field to Jackson, Mississippi, Lt. Jones and Sgt. Gemein were killed and Lt. Huggs injured in the crash of an aircraft on which they were passengers.

The training, such as it was, continued, and in April 1942, the command of the 38th Bomb Group changed again from Lt. Col. Upthegrove to Lt. Col. Lewis, and seven more navigators were taken into the squadron at Patterson. They were Lieutenants Burns, Drewyour, Honett, Lewis, Snodgrass, Sullivan, and Winemiller.

Navigator Assignments

The assignment of additional navigators to the squadron was both piecemeal and hectic. Everything was urgent! Other navigators, including Lieutenants Soles, Ryder, Koch, Hufstедler and Lunquist joined the squadron. We know that three of these latter navigators were from the Pan American School in Coral Gables. W. Roger Soles, one of the Pan Am graduates, reported the following sequence of events relative to their assignment:

“Our trip to San Francisco to find you guys (70th Squadron Officers) was an interesting one. We were commissioned in Florida on January 17, 1942, and held on the alert for three or four days while the Army tried to decide what to do with us. After all kinds of rumors, we were given orders to report to the Air Force Combat Command in Jackson, Mississippi, with normal travel time of about three days. On the night we were to report in Jackson, I and several others had driven downtown and decided to go into a restaurant I knew (Primo's) before we reported in. As soon as we walked in, Primo gave us each a bag meal and told us to report to the base immediately. When we got to the base, they told us that you people had already gone to San Francisco and they had chartered airplanes to take us.

got to the base, they told us that you people had already gone to San Francisco and they had chartered airplanes to take us.

I don't believe we were in Jackson more than an hour before we were on a Delta DC-3 — transferring to Braniff — to American — and into TWA to San Francisco. Each airline flew only its permissible route. Nevertheless, everything worked like clockwork until we arrived in San Francisco. There was no one to meet the flight and we couldn't find you. After calling around, someone sent a telegram to the Office of the Chief of the Air Corps, asking where is the 38th Bomb Group? The reply was immediate: 'The 38th Group is at Langley Field, Virginia.' We knew better, so we kept hunting and found you fighting the war at the Fairmont Hotel."²

New B-26B MAs

The new production B-26B MAs we received at Patterson Field were the short wing (65-foot) version, equipped with two Pratt & Whitney R-2800-41, twin row, radial engines developing 2,000 horsepower each. The propellers were huge, four-bladed, electrically controlled types made by Curtiss. Our B-26Bs were from a production run that retained the large propeller spinners and the small carburetor air intake vents on the engine cowlings. They also incorporated an improved 24-volt electrical system, and were configured to carry armor plating and considerably more armament. Our armament consisted of a powered top-turret with twin .50 cal. machine guns; a flexible twin .50 cal. mount in the tail; single flexible .50 cal. mounts at each "waist" position and a single .30 cal. mounted on the centerline of the nose compartment. Our maximum bombload was considered to be eight 500 lb. bombs or a total of 4,000 lbs. The aircraft was also configured at the factory to carry a 2,000 lb. torpedo, slung externally, below the fuselage, with bomb-bay doors closed — all arranged for release by the pilot. More on the subject of torpedoes later. A total of thirteen aircraft were authorized and assigned to the Squadron as unit equipment.

A diary entry from Lt. Conrad A. Ray (Connie) at this time is most interesting:

"May 16. General Wolfe and some Colonels arrived here to make the arrangements for our moving out. He gave us a big pep talk. We are to take B-26Bs over. It seems that the 26s had their baptism of fire in Coral Sea and made good."³

Red Letter Day

May 20, 1942 was a red letter day. We were detached from the 38th Bomb Group and, at that point, the 70th became an individual Squadron, destined to go to war as a separate unit. When fully considered, and when viewed in retrospect, the implications of deploying a single

² Soles, W. Roger. Letter, 3 November 1995.

³ Ray, Conrad A. Diary 1942–1943. Lt. Ray's diary is cited extensively throughout this history by including the reference to the diary in the narrative rather than the repeated use of footnotes.

In this new status as a separate Squadron, Captain Stefonowicz was still in command with Captains Sharp, Eddy and Callaham in command of "A," "B," and "C" Flights, respectively. The 38th Bomb Group, however, prior to the detachment of the 70th Squadron, had issued Special Order Number 19, dated May 7, 1942, which assigned the following 2nd Lieutenants (bombardiers) to the squadron:

John E. Criswell	Joseph Feldberg
William H. Moore	Leonard M. Feldman
Russell E. Cooke	Edward H. Fredrick, Jr.
Charles A. Coon	William T. Freeman, Jr.
Elmer A. Deblitz	Jack T. Gillis
Merlin C. Douglass	Milton J. Golden
John P. Ellis	Abraham Wilensky

Bill Freeman, listed above, appended a handwritten note to the order stating that all of the above bombardiers graduated from Midland, Texas on 30 April 1942, joined the Squadron on 7 May and departed for the South Pacific on 17 and 18 May. That's the way it was done!

In other assignments at about the same time, Captain Callaham and Lieutenants J. D. Ryder and McNeese were transferred to the Squadron, along with Lt. Dulac, our Armament Officer.

Status Report

It might be of historical interest to provide readers with a report summarizing the state of preparedness of the 70th Squadron in May 1942:

- We were in a declared war and in the words of our Squadron Commander, "...the war in the Pacific was going badly with the Japanese taking one group of islands after another to cut Australia off from communications and supplies from the United States. The war was being fought mainly by the U.S. Navy and U.S. Marines."
- We were a separate Squadron unit, without a Group Headquarters. Again, in the words of Colonel Stafen, "The leaders in Washington decided that the U.S. Army should make a contribution and decided to send two individual Squadrons of the 38th Group to the Pacific to help stop the Japanese advances through the islands. The plan was for the 69th to go to New Caledonia and the 70th Squadron to go to Fiji."⁴
- The bombardiers had only recently been assigned at Patterson Field, and had no experience or training in our assigned aircraft.
- The navigators, also recently assigned, were well-trained in navigation, but had no experience in long overwater flights or in our new-production B-26 aircraft.

⁴ Stafen, Leroy L. Letter, January 1996.

- A decision had already been made that the B-26 could and should be flown from California to Hawaii, instead of being disassembled in California, deck-loaded and shipped to Hawaii, as in the case of the 22nd Bomb Group.
- The pilots and co-pilots were young reserve officers, mostly recent graduates of flying school, without combat training in the B-26 or experience in long overwater flights. Their average age was twenty-two.
- The Squadron had no tactical training or crew training involving employment of the B-26 in combat situations.
- With only one individual exception, discussed earlier, it can be said that no one in the 70th Squadron had ever fired a shot or dropped a bomb out of the B-26 prior to our being deployed to the South Pacific. Patterson Field had no bombing or gunnery ranges and, in fact, had no runways. The entire take-off and landing area was sod — and in rainy periods, mud.

Although we harbored some doubt about flying a B-26 the 2,400 miles to Hawaii, we saluted and turned to the task.

Patterson Field to McClellan

Given the above situation relative to personnel and training, and having been equipped with thirteen new production B-26B aircraft, the Air Echelon was ordered to California to prepare for deployment overseas. Long range fuel tanks had been installed at Patterson Field and from the diary of Connie Ray, we have description of the fuel load at that time.

“May 18. Out to the field at dawn but ships are not ready to go. They are all new B-26Bs which are arriving rapidly day by day. As soon as they arrive they are checked, inspected and filled with auxiliary tanks for the long hop. Our ship is #41-17569 — all our own. I am flying with Miller, navigator Styler and radioman Savitski. The plane is full of gas tanks and I am busy examining the fuel transfer system. It holds 1,837 gallons, and will have a gross weight of over 36,000 pounds. I dread that first take-off loaded. Max (Miller) banged fuselage taxiing. Being repaired tonight. Ready to leave tomorrow.”

The aircraft were to be flown first to Baer Field near Ft. Wayne, Indiana to take advantage of the long, paved runway at that airfield. From there, the plan was to fly to McClellan Field, near Sacramento, both as a test of the long range fuel tanks installed at Patterson and for additional work on the aircraft. A diary entry from Connie Ray provides details on the long Ft. Wayne-Sacramento flight.

“May 21. We took off at 1005 for Sacramento, California and it wasn't hard to get the ship off the ground. All went well with the whole flight. Started out in formation. We flew according to the maximum range chart for a test leading to the ocean hop. We varied manifold pressure and rpm as the

load lightened, using gas most economically. The ship flies in a stalling attitude — hard to keep to range data. Ran into instrument weather at Des Moines and lost the formation. Griff sat down with broken oil line. Dodged squalls all the way into Cheyenne. I transferred all fuel. I flew the ship over the last half of the flight — very rough from Salt Lake on. Used much gas climbing over the mountains. Navigated by radio compass that worked well. Hit one down draft and dropped 1,000 ft. in valley. Sweated out the fuel. On landing approach, the fuel warning lights came on. Landed at 2135. Total time in air was 11 hrs. + 30 min. and burned 1,599 gallons of gasoline. Capt. Callaham and ourselves only ones to make it. Griff and Smitty forced down enroute.”

Applying arithmetic to the above data we find a fuel consumption of 139 gallons per hour — an important figure.

On this same flight from Baer Field, Indiana to Sacramento, California, however, propeller troubles plagued Bill Griffith’s aircraft and caused three forced landings enroute. Bill’s co-pilot, Mark Treat, has provided a narrative of their problems.

“Our B-26, 41-17550, flown by Bill Griffith, pilot and Mark Treat, co-pilot, navigator Don Sullivan and radioman George Snodgrass, left Baer Field, Indiana to fly nonstop to Sacramento, California on 21 May 1942. We had three forced landings enroute, all caused by runaway propellers.

As we approached Des Moines, Iowa, the props weren’t holding rpm, power was fluctuating, so we landed. Supposedly they were fixed by the next day, so we flew on toward McClellan Field, Sacramento.

On the next leg our most harrowing problems occurred in the mountains east of Ogden, Utah. While flying at about 10,000 feet, the props started fluctuating, we started losing power and altitude. As we got down to between 8,000 and 7,000 ft., still not getting ready to bail out, we went through a pass and there in front of us was an airfield. Bill made a descending turn and landed on the very end of a runway. The field wasn’t even on our map. We learned in Base Ops that it was Hill Field, Ogden, Utah. Supposedly they fixed the electrical system and prop controls that night and the next day we went on to Sacramento. Same problem on that flight, props ran away as we descended to land.

A couple of days later they told us we had only one 12-volt battery for power and they fixed it so we’d have 24 volts from now on. Our flight to test the fix before flying to Hawaii was a 45 minute flight to Hamilton Field.”⁵

⁵ Treat, Mark G. Letter, 2 July 1997.

Long Range Fuel Tanks

While at Sacramento, the armor plate and guns were removed from the aircraft to save weight. This equipment was later flown to Hawaii in LB-30 aircraft and re-installed. Also, because of calculations made, still another 125 gallon fuel tank was installed on the floor of the aft section of the fuselage. Entries from Lt. Ray's diary explain the additional fuel:

"May 27. Results of range test today showed too low a margin of safety in case of headwinds.

May 31. Planes in hangar last few days having extra tanks installed. Guns and armor plate removed to lighten. Our ship out today to leave tomorrow."

From a wartime pocket notepad made by Thomas W. Moore, a radio operator on one of the aircraft, we are able to reconstruct the aviation gas fuel load for the flight to Hawaii, including the tank installed at Sacramento, as an unbelievable total of 1,962 gallons. With the wings and fuselage loaded with fuel, the result was a flying gas tank! Converting the 1,962 gallons to pounds at approximately 6.7 pounds per gallon, the total is 13,145 pounds of fuel and a gross weight near 37,000 pounds. Quite a load for a short-wing B-26.

Liaison Officers

Prior to this, two officers were sent to Hamilton Field (near San Rafael, California) to assist in preparing for the overseas movement. Lt. Charles B. Lingamfelter (Brownie) represented the 69th Bombardment Squadron and Lt. Harold V. Larson (Swede) represented the 70th Bombardment Squadron. Their orders were to report to a Lt. Col. Huglin and a Major Montgomery who had been sent to Hamilton Field and to McClellan Field near Sacramento by General Arnold to coordinate and expedite the movement of the 69th and 70th Squadrons overseas.

In brief, Lieutenants Lingamfelter and Larson served as liaison officers between the representatives of the Chief's office and their respective squadrons, in assisting in arranging for the numerous administrative and equipping details involved in their departure — everything from official orders to tin helmets and external power units ("put-puts") for the aircraft. It resembled a present-day POM (preparation for overseas movement), except that it was far less comprehensive. Time was of the essence.

The over-riding concerns of the pilots at this time were whether there was sufficient fuel to reach Hawaii, and whether the installed fuel transfer system would, in fact, do the job. The system involved a complex set of cross-feed, by-pass and check valves, designed to enable transfer of fuel from the various tanks to the mains and from there to the engines. If and when the various valves were set correctly, fuel was transferred by an electrically-driven pump from one tank to another and finally into the mains. In the event of an electrical failure, we were provided with a wooden-handled, hand-powered "wobble pump" for emergency fuel transfer.

Would the system really work, particularly in the crucial area beyond the "point-of-no-return?" Testing was essential before leaping off over the broad Pacific. The following is an account by Lt. Gilbert G. Smith (Gil) of his test flight up and down the West Coast, after having had his long range fuel tanks installed:

"When we took off from Baer Field at Ft. Wayne, Indiana, I had less than 10 hours as pilot of the B-26. I checked my Form 5, and I also had about 40 hours of co-pilot time. While we were at McClellan, I got another 12 1/2 hours on a fuel consumption check between Bakersfield and Redding."⁶

Hamilton-Hickam Flights

After having the final long range tanks installed, the thirteen aircraft were flown to Hamilton Field near San Rafael, California for the incredibly long flight of 2,400 miles to Hickam Field in Hawaii.

Secret Operations Order No. 109a, dated 1 June 1942, issued by Headquarters, Air Force Ferrying Command,⁷ ordered the Air Echelon to "Proceed in the following military aircraft at the proper time from Hamilton Field, California to Hickam Field, Oahu, T.H., to report to the Commanding General of the Hawaiian Defense Command, thence to proceed by military or commercial air by route designated by the Commanding General to Fiji to report to the Commanding Officer thereat for further orders."

The above order, in its entirety, is reproduced on pages 155-157 of the Appendix. The order lists the four aircrew members for each aircraft (pilot, co-pilot, navigator and radio operator) plus the serial number of each of the thirteen aircraft.

A few days prior to this, on 22 May, three aircraft from the 69th Bomb Squadron (our sister squadron) took off for the flight from Hamilton to Hickam. According to the records of the 69th Squadron, Captain Collins, Lieutenant Long and Lieutenant Watson piloted the three planes. The flight lasted thirteen hours. At the time, we at Hamilton Field were unaware as to whether their flights were successful, undoubtedly due to security restrictions. Two of the pilots, namely Captain Collins and Lieutenant Watson arrived in Hawaii in time to participate in the Battle of Midway. This historic event will be discussed in some detail later.

The date set for departure of the 70th Squadron was 2 June 1942. A determination was made that the mission should be flown separately by Flights "A," "B," and "C," taking off at intervals, and that each flight should be assigned an Air Transport Command navigator who had previously made the flight to Hawaii. The schedule called for very early morning departures to take advantage of all possible daylight.

⁶ Smith, Gilbert G. Confirmed by letter, 27 March 1996.

⁷ Air Force Ferrying Command was redesignated as Air Transport Command on 20 June 1942.

The pilots in the three flights were as follows:

<u>Flight A</u>	<u>Flight B</u>	<u>Flight C</u>
Sharp	Eddy	Callaham
Cressy	Boden	Griffith
Morrison	Martin	Miller
Washington	Durbin	Smith

Our Squadron Commander at that time, Captain Leroy L. Stefonowicz, flew with "A" Flight, as the thirteenth aircraft — in this case, a lucky number. All fuel tanks were "topped off" during the cool of the night and Master Sergeant Arthur Jolly, our Line-Chief, was overheard reporting this fact early in the morning to Captain Stefonowicz.

Also, a very conscientious Major Montgomery, along with Swede Larson, stationed themselves alongside the take-off runway. Major Montgomery, stop watch in hand, clocked the take-off roll of each aircraft and was later heard to say, very profoundly, "Well, they're off." Speaking of take-offs, every aircraft used the entire runway length, and pilots raised their landing gear as they climbed by slowly, in a tail-low attitude over San Francisco Bay. Whew!

The account of Captain John F. Sharp, "A" Flight Commander, relative to the flight to Hawaii is reproduced below:

"As 'A' Flight Commander, I was to lead the first flight of 5 B-26s to Hawaii. Major Montgomery, in charge of dispatching all aircraft, assigned a 2nd Lt. navigator to my airplane because he had been there once, and 'knew the way.' I was happy with Nathan Koch, my regular navigator, and he had everything laid out and ready to go. This new kid insisted on swinging the compass again, so on the way back to the field I flew under both bridges and he was so mad at me he told Major Montgomery he wasn't going to fly with me. Well, the old man made him go anyway and just past the 'point of no return,' Koch came to me and said this guy is way off course by at least 400 miles. I checked with the other navigators in the flight and they confirmed it. I immediately relieved the new kid and put Koch back in charge. He gave me one helluva big course correction and brought us into Hickam. This is what gave us the long 14 hours + 5 minutes flight time to Hickam."⁸

Another account of the flight to Hawaii is told by 2nd Lt. Gilbert G. Smith of "C" Flight:

"On our flight to Hawaii we had our own navigator and Cal (Walt Callaham) had an ATC navigator. We flew loose formation (Callaham, Griffith, Miller and me). We used half our fuel load (960 gal. internal and 1,000 gal. in bomb bay tanks) during the first third of the trip. We weren't at all sure that we would have enough fuel to make it. At the calculated mid-

⁸ Sharp, John F. Letter, 5 December 1995.

point, Cal said that he was going on, but if anyone wanted to turn back, it was O.K. with him. I figured if Cal could make it, I could. None of us turned back, but as we got further along the route, all of our 70th navigators said, 'We're way south off course.' When we got within about 200 miles south of Hilo, we could pick up the radio signal and we were way south of course. In fact, we would have gone at least 100 miles south of Hilo. Instead of approaching Hickam Field from the N.E., we would have come from the S.E. So, we landed at Hilo (I had 200 gallons left) and flew on to Hickam. My greatest amazement was seeing all the burned-out hangars at Hickam and the sunken ships and destruction at Pearl Harbor. It was devastated."⁹

Information from Captain Lyman H. Eddy, our "B" Flight Commander, remarkably parallels the experience of the other flights. Lyman was also assigned a Transport Command navigator for the flight. When arriving within radio compass range of Hawaii, he noted a large 20-30 degree deflection of the needle to the left, indicating, disturbingly, that they were well off-course. Lyman turned the problem over to Lt. Roger Soles, his regular crew navigator, who had been 'following' the Ferry Command navigator. Roger made necessary corrections, and brought the flight in, right on target.¹⁰

We have additional interesting information about this flight from Connie Ray's diary. He writes as follows:

"June 2. Up before daylight, had breakfast and went to the ship. It was ready to go. "C" Flight took off first and assembled over the Golden Gate. We were well out to sea when sun came up. First part of the flight over an overcast. The ship was running perfectly. Flew on AFCE (automatic flight control equipment) in loose formation. It was my job to handle gas and take instrument data. I was busy. The weather was good all the way. Began to tire soon. Our sandwich lunch and black coffee wasn't so good. Navigator kept track of course by DR (dead reckoning) and sun shots. Griff was running low on gas and was getting worried about making it. He sweat it out with Cal over the radio. Last part of the trip very tiring. Saw nothing but water and clouds. Saw Hawaiian Island in distance and changed course for Hilo because of Griff. That island with high volcanoes looked good. Gassed at Hilo after 13 hrs. + 40 min. flying. Hard to believe where I am. The sea is pretty blue, no familiar vegetation, an active volcano. Came in on radio compass to tune of 'Aloha.' Took off for Hickam right away."

It should be noted that the distance from San Francisco to Hilo, Hawaii is ninety miles shorter than the distance from San Francisco to Hickam.

We are fortunate also in having an account of the Pacific crossing written by James B. Story (Jim) of the 69th, which was our sister squadron.

⁹ Smith, Gilbert G. Confirmed by letter, 27 March 1996.

¹⁰ Eddy, Lyman H. Telcon with Harold V. Larson, February 1996.

“As aircraft modifications were completed, we flew cruise control flights up and down the San Joaquin Valley using power settings recommended by weight and balance officials. As I recall, it was 167 mph for the first 500–800 miles, then increase speed to 180 mph. When these practice flights were completed, the aircraft were ferried to Hamilton Field, the departure point for the flight to Hickam. Experienced ATC navigators who had previously made the flight and ‘knew the way’ were assigned each flight.

On June 2nd, the 69th and 70th Squadrons began launching flights of four beginning at 5:30 a.m. The weather was foggy and an indefinite ceiling of 500 feet. With the fuel load, our main tires appeared to be half inflated which added to our take-off roll. As we lined up on the runway, we used all the runway including the extension to give us a wee-bit more runway. The sensation of the take-off is one I’ll never forget. It appeared we would never get lift-off speed necessary for flight. But, fortunately we did as we struggled in the air and cleaned up the aircraft before entering into the overcast. However, we popped out at about 1,000 feet. We could see the Golden Gate Bridge and we flew between its stanchions as our point of departure for Hawaii.

In our flight of four, two aborted due to maintenance problems and the two of us continued on as planned. As I recall, we flew at an initial altitude of 6,000 feet and a power setting to maintain the 167 mph. However, it was soon evident that this was too slow for our initial weight. As the aircraft continued to mush, we increased power to maintain altitude and speed. The attitude of the aircraft made the auto-pilot useless. Our fuel consumption ran higher than planned and as the flight progressed we became concerned that we had sufficient fuel to make Hickam. We were briefed at Hamilton that if someone went down enroute, don’t be a hero and try to help out as you might not make it either.

Beyond the point of no return, it was also not evident to the other flights ahead of us that they had enough fuel for the flight. One of our 69th pilots announced on the air that he was low on fuel and wouldn’t make it, ‘but I’ll keep on going as long as I can!’ Silence followed, then a voice came on the air, ‘and what other choice do you have, Waddie?’ One flight from the 70th Squadron with an ATC navigator aboard found themselves 100 miles south of Hilo, and diversions were made to that Island after 12:40 flight time.

From May 22nd to June 10th, both squadrons ferried 26 Marauders from California to Hickam Field without a single mishap. However, we arrived in Hawaii with less than twenty minutes of fuel left. But all thirteen of us made it and all thirteen of the 70th Squadron made it. It had not been done before and it was never tried again!”¹¹

¹¹ Story, James B. Letter, 16 May 1996.

One final item relative to the Hamilton–Hickam flights is reported by Tom Moore, radio operator on Eddie Morrison’s aircraft. He recalls that:

“Aircraft #117574 piloted by Cressy and Sherlock had to be the longest flight to Hickam, because they had to wait for Stef and Sharp and Ed Morrison in #117564. We were definitely out of fuel! In fact, Morrison was threatening to land on one of those beaches and had, in fact, opened the bomb bay expecting John Burns and I to jump. No way! John and I were scared spitless seeing all that water and decided to ride out the crash if Morrison put the aircraft on the beach...That trans–Pacific flight proved some things about *Irene* (#117564). She was the slowest aircraft, the biggest gas guzzler and had the sweetest radio equipment in the Squadron. Both engines quit when we entered the taxi-way at Hickam. I thank you, Stef, Sharp and Cressy for letting Morrison go in first.”¹²

In a recent Squadron contest to determine who had the longest flight time between California and Hawaii, verified by Form 5s, we learned that the “winner,” by-a-nose, was John Sherlock, who logged an official flight time of 14 hours and 10 minutes. Stef and John Sharp were “runners up” in that they both logged 14 hours and 5 minutes on that historic flight.

Flight times varied but were generally in the range from 12 1/2 to 14 hours. Splitting the difference in flight times and assuming an average of 15 minutes fuel remaining in each aircraft, calculations show an average fuel consumption near 151 gallons per hour and average airspeed of 185 miles per hour.

Colonel Leroy L. Stefen, our Squadron Commander, recalls the flight with the words, “We made it from Hamilton to Hickam but just barely. When we got there we had just a few more minutes of fuel left.”¹³ Captain Eddy, the “B” Flight Commander is quoted in a video interview as saying, “All thirteen of the 70th made it, and all thirteen of the 69th made it. It was a miracle.”¹⁴

There are a number of reasons for writing this history — an important one is to give long overdue recognition to those heroic aircrew members in the 69th and 70th Squadrons who accomplished this hazardous and unparalleled mission. Insofar as official records are concerned, very little or no mention was ever made of their achievement, nor were any commendations of any sort ever made for that flight. This writing, therefore, should be considered as a recognition and commendation for their exemplary courage and a job well done.

¹² Moore, Thomas W. Letter, 3 February 1996.

¹³ Stefen, Leroy L. Letter, January 1996.

¹⁴ Eddy, Lyman H. Video-recording made by the B-26 Marauder Historical Society, Orlando, Florida, October 1991.

Kipapa Gulch

After our arrival in Hawaii, the Squadron was placed on alert status at Kipapa Gulch, an airstrip high in the hills of Oahu. As indicated earlier, some of the 69th Squadron had already arrived and some of the 70th had diverted their flight plans to land at Hilo, and did not arrive on Oahu until 4–5 June. These dates are important since the Battle of Midway took place during the period June 4, 5 and 6. The 70th Squadron was not directly involved in the Midway battle, but was alerted to stand-by for an “imminent attack” on Hawaii by a huge Japanese fleet. Historians report that Admiral Yamamoto’s force consisted of some 350 ships and 100,000 officers and men.

Battle of Midway

Numerous books and articles have been written in detail relative to the Battle of Midway. Without any doubt, it was one of the turning points of the Pacific war. The headline of the *New York Times* on June 6, 1942 reported, “SEVERE DAMAGE INFLICTED ON JAPANESE FLEET IN BATTLESHIPS, CARRIERS, CRUISERS, TRANSPORTS; FOE RETIRES FROM MIDWAY; BATTLE CONTINUING.”¹⁵

Word of the battle, of course, reached the 70th Squadron in Hawaii. It is of great interest to read the diary entry of Lt. Ray, also dated June 6, regarding the participation of four B-26s in this historic sea battle:

“June 6. The remaining flight of the 70th arrived today. Making the record of the flight of the Squadron from Patterson Field here without putting a scratch on a plane. However, in the Battle of Midway, Watson with Whittington and Schuman were lost in combat. Two of the 26s that returned were badly damaged. They left to get carriers behind Navy dive bombers, which arrived at target a few minutes before them. 95% of these planes were shot down. 26s encountered Japs before the target. This is when two ships were lost, Collins and Villnes and other plane came in low, released and went on over, 10 feet over the water. Both made hits and sub followed up with 3 more. For 45 minutes after, Zeros gave them running fight. They are excellent fighters. So fast they make pass after pass at 26s even though they were pulling over 70" Mercury at over 300 mph indicated. Bullets went whole length of Collins’ ship. He had no casualties, but made crash landing at base with hydraulics shot up. They continually dodged tracers from planes and ships, going up when below and down when above. On other plane, a 20 mm shell blew turret and gunner out. The tail gunner was badly shot up in legs. Co-pilot went back to attend their injuries and manned tail gun. While these Zeros pulled alongside, and pilot yelled on interphone for gunners to get him, interphone was out, but they finally ran away from Jap when speed gained in his dive finally dissipated. They made their attack through encircling ring of all types of Jap war vessels. As Collins came over, forward gunner poured constant fire into flight decks. Smoke just poured from gun on

¹⁵ *New York Times*, 6 June 1942, 1.

up into pilot's compartment. We need more guns there, for that one scattered the men on carrier decks. This battle is an important victory for U.S. All four carriers, couple battleships, couple cruisers, several destroyers and troop transports may be considered lost. They were forced to turn about with remaining units. Our Navy, in running fight, should increase the toll of enemy ships and planes. Uncle Sam sent us the best and gave us the best possible chance. We will do the rest."

At this point, we wish to commend the aircrew members of the four B-26 aircraft which took off from Midway on June 6 to attack the aircraft carriers and battleships of this huge Japanese Task Force. Consider for a moment the courage of these crews of land-based Army aircraft engaging an enemy fleet at low altitude, with torpedoes! The opposition was fierce and the odds for survival were incredibly small. Two of the B-26s were from the 69th, our sister squadron, and piloted by Captain Collins and Lieutenant Watson. The remaining two aircraft were "holdovers" from the 22nd Bomb Group deployment and were flown by Lieutenants Muri and Mayes. Of the four B-26s, only two returned (Collins and Muri) and their aircraft were so badly damaged that they never flew again.

How did we maintain our aircraft on a remote airfield in the hills of Oahu when our Ground Echelon was at sea and we had only the flight crews? It wasn't easy at first, but our situation improved later when crew chiefs, specialized maintenance personnel together with the special tools and equipment, were flown from California to Hawaii by LB-30 aircraft. An LB-30 was, in effect, a B-24 bomber converted to carry passengers and cargo. One of these LB-30s, taking off toward the mountains at Hamilton Field, crashed and burned in the foothills, causing the death of some of our experienced maintenance personnel. Records indicated that those tragically lost were Sergeants Alex Mazeikas, John Pilarcik and Joseph Kulis plus Pfc. Walter B. Haynes.

Swede Larson and Brownie Lingamfelter, still at Hamilton Field, visited the crash site the evening of the crash and again at dawn the following day. It was a horrible scene with charred bodies everywhere — two were seen in a crawling position on the hillside. Swede had talked to Sergeant Pilarcik and others that afternoon about their scheduled flight. Nothing could be done at the crash site that night because of the intense heat — the entire hillside was ablaze with fuel from ruptured gas tanks. In fact, the bare earth was still burning in some areas the following morning. Official records indicate that the LB-30 lost two engines on take-off and the pilot attempted a 180° turn from the hills back to Hamilton.

During the alert at Kipapa Gulch, Lieutenants Lingamfelter and Larson rejoined the 69th and 70th Squadrons respectively, having arrived by LB-30 from Hamilton Field. Kipapa Gulch was the Squadron's first experience at what might be termed true "field conditions." We lived in old barracks and pyramidal tents, ate at field kitchens, used our mess kits for meals, waved off the flies, and washed dishes in two garbage cans — one filled with hot soapy water, and the second with hot rinse water. The food, of course, left much to be desired. But, we had work to do and there was the constant threat that the Japanese fleet might yet be on its way to invade Hawaii. We received training on torpedo tactics and filled the days completely with loading ammunition, loading and unloading bombs, practice bombing runs and regular aircraft test flights.

The following is an extract from the diary of Connie Ray, however, which indicates that the living situation for some was not bad at all:

“June 8. Our ships were dispersed over Oahu Island today to remain on the alert for enemy. Most of “C” Flight was sent to Wheeler Field. We came once around the island looking it over good. Our quarters are what used to be the Hostess House. It looks bare with windows blacked out, etc., but the furniture is nice. Tile bath rooms and divans make it pretty nice. Pineapples and bananas are growing in the back yard.”

Another entry the following day reads:

“June 9. We have a complete combat crew on our plane now. It is as follows: Pilot Lt. Miller; Co-pilot myself; Navigator Lt. Brinskelle; Bombardier Lt. Ellis; Radio Operator Sgt. Savitski; Engineer Sgt. Hanson; Turret Gun Cpl. Lawrence and Tail Gunner Pvt. Smith. It is a good gang and I think we will work well together.”

Ground Echelon

Chronologically, we should now pick up the story of our Ground Echelon which had arrived in Australia by freighter and had been taken to a race track outside Brisbane. The story of the Ground Echelon's travels and experiences at various places in Australia is told by William J. Talley (Bill) who was a member of the group.

“A lot of you (70th Squadron personnel) got in some New Zealand R & R time, so you didn't miss the Aussie experience totally, but there are a few things I'd like to tell you about. Twenty-six days on the *Tasker H. Bliss*, two meals a day, mostly hard-boiled eggs, and we disembarked in Brisbane. We were taken to the Doomben Race Track...very famous, still operating today, so I'm told by Aussies. Tents had been put up in the infield, but we had to walk a few blocks to an Aussie installation to get fed. As we approached the mess hall, late on the first afternoon...kitchen outdoors...we encountered this terrible smell, and couldn't figure out what it was. We soon learned it was mutton, being cooked and served for supper. I don't recall what we got by on, but we sure didn't try to eat that mutton. Couldn't get past the smell, and it was swimming in about six inches of grease. One of the disadvantages of the Lend Lease program, as we were supplied with LOTS of mutton during our stay in Australia, AND while in Fiji, but it was sure wasted on our bunch of beef eaters.”

After Brisbane, Bill Talley continues that they were herded aboard the *Tasker H. Bliss* and, on 3 March, they departed for a five-day sea voyage to Melbourne. On 8 March, the *Tasker H. Bliss* pulled into port at Melbourne where trains were waiting to take them to the Gold City of Ballarat. Arriving in Ballarat in the evening, all men were soon billeted in private homes belonging to the Ballarat citizens. After eight most pleasant days of living in private homes, all were moved into a recently established tent camp miles from town.

"The first night we were in town, Tokyo Rose¹⁶ welcomed the 70th Bombardment Squadron to Ballarat on her radio broadcast that ALL the Aussies listened to. The Aussies were almost panicky anyway, especially those in the north, like around Brisbane, because she was telling them regularly that they were next on the invasion list, after New Guinea. So just our presence gave the Aussies some comfort. They discovered a transmitter in the basement of a home in Ballarat not long after that, by which a couple that had returned to Australia from consular duty in Tokyo was transmitting news of troop movements, etc. to Japan. I assume they strung them up later, but we never heard.

After about six weeks in Ballarat, we got on a train and headed for Wagga Wagga, where there was an RAAF base. In those days, at least, the gauge of the railroad tracks changed at the state lines, and we had to change trains in Albury, on the line between Victoria and New South Wales. Some of us walked down into the center of town, while waiting for the train from NSW to arrive. It was about 9 a.m., and some ladies were out in front of a shoe store, washing the windows and polishing the brass. They were young and attractive, so we decided that we needed to make their acquaintance and walked toward them. When they saw us coming, they ran into the store. We followed them, naturally, to see what had caused them to run. They were all (three) sort of cowering in the back of the store when we came in, but we continued to try to get them into conversation, even pretending to be interested in buying some shoes. Their boss came out of his office and laughed at the situation. When we asked him why they ran from us, he replied, 'After all, fellows, you are the first Yanks they've ever seen, and all they know about Yanks is what they read in the Melbourne papers.' There had been some serious misbehaving written up recently.

We went on to Wagga Wagga, a nice RAAF base and a nice friendly little town. They were bringing in planes that had been shot up around Darwin and we were assigned the task of dismantling them. All of us worked on them, not just the mechs, and it was interesting. After about a month there, we got back on a train and went to Brisbane, where we picked up some armament at a depot outside of town, and got on a ship bound for Fiji. Not many of you...in fact, possibly only a few of us are still living, who will remember the *SS Batavia*¹⁷...a little Dutch freighter out of Java, that took us from Brisbane to Lautoka, Fiji. Quite a grubby little scow, but not a bad trip...especially

¹⁶ A Los Angeles native, Tokyo Rose (Iva Toguri de' Aquino) was tried for treason in a Federal court and convicted of a lesser charge of "undermining U.S. troops' morale." She was sentenced to 10 years in prison. At her trial she insisted that she was only one of at least 20 "Toyko Roses" who broadcast messages to enemy troops for the Japanese government. U.S. National Archives. *The Record*, September 1995, 10.

¹⁷ *The Crusaders: A History of the 42nd Bombardment Group (M)* identifies the name of the Dutch steamer as the *Cremer* at page 26.

compared to the one on the *Tasker H. Bliss*. As I recall, we dropped the 69th off in Nouméa, before going on to Fiji.”¹⁸

Christmas–Canton–Fiji Flights

After a month on the alert in Hawaii, the Air Echelon received orders to move on. The schedule called for take-off on 1 July for Christmas Island on the first leg of the island-hopping to Fiji. Again, these hops were to be made separately by Flights “A,” “B,” and “C.” A diary entry by Connie Ray describes his experience:

“July 1. Up early and went down to the ship. It was all loaded and in shape. All of “C” Flight took off. Because of light wind and heavy load, we just made it into the air. It was my closest take-off. Headed out to sea. Griff turned back for unknown reason. After seeing nothing but water for hours, we hit Christmas Island and landed there. It is the perfect South Sea island — low, sandy and covered with palms. The men there are very much alone and were eager to hear from outside. We carried several sacks of mail to them.”

“A” Flight did not fare as well. First, Lt. John M. Washington had just received orders transferring him out of the squadron, and Lt. Harold V. Larson (Swede) was assigned as pilot of Washington’s aircraft for the flights to Christmas, Canton and Fiji. Other members of this crew were Lt. Richard M. Thorburn, co-pilot, Lt. Everett R. Lewis, navigator, and Cpl. George T. McGraw, radio operator. Swede Larson and Dick Thorburn were later to become the Squadron Operations Officer and the Squadron Engineering Officer, respectively of the 70th Squadron.

“A” Flight scheduled its take-off for 3 July, a day of tragedy. Lt. Fred W. Durbin, loaded with fuel for the flight to Christmas Island experienced a right engine fire shortly after becoming airborne and crashed off the end of the runway, along the Oahu coastline. The take-off and crash were witnessed by Swede Larson and Dick Thorburn, who were in an aircraft immediately behind them in take-off sequence. As we flew past the column of smoke, Dick shouted, “My God, that’s Durbin!”

Durbin-Evans Crash

We are very fortunate in having the full story of the accident for our history as written by the pilot, Lt. Durbin, who survived, as did Lt. Dick Evans, the co-pilot.

“As for the crash at take-off on July 3, 1942 at Hickam Field, the only part I don’t remember is flying through air without a plane under me.

After taxiing out to the runway, I tested the mags and took off. When we were about 150 feet in the air, flying at about 150 mph, Dick Evans shouted that the right engine was on fire. As you know, we had full wing tanks plus full front bomb bay tanks. There was no way that the plane could stay in the air at that speed and at that height, so I headed for the shallow water at the

¹⁸ Talley, William J. Letter, 19 January 1996.

beach off Barbers Point. While losing altitude, trying to find a landing site, feathering a propeller, adjusting trim tabs, and telling Dick to pull the fire extinguisher ring all at the same time, we proceeded to self-destruct by hitting a camouflaged, steel-girder look-out tower which tore off the left wing. That contact ejected both Dick and me out of the plane, and I was unconscious during my unsupported flight from plane to ground. However, I immediately became aware of what had transpired. I tried to get up but my arm would not support me — it was a compound fracture. As I tried the limbs, I found that they were fractured, and that I still had 150 lbs. of armor plate strapped to my back. The whole seat tore loose from the deck when I was thrown out.

Military personnel, stationed nearby, arrived shortly after. I remember one of them asking me if there were bombs on board — and I gave him a negative response. I was lifted onto a stretcher and taken to a nearby first-aid station where I was given morphine to deaden the pain which hadn't even come yet. The trauma had been too severe. I was placed in an ambulance and taken to Tripler General Hospital. I remember just what was said as they backed up to the emergency entrance! 'We don't want him here.' At the time, I thought that they didn't want to waste time on someone who wasn't going to make it. But that wasn't quite the reason — almost but not quite! Tripler was full of casualties from the Pacific theater — and they had opened an auxiliary hospital by taking over Farrington School, which is where they took me.

While in the operating room, I was barely conscious from the pain killers I had been given, but I remember 6–8 doctors standing around the operating table deciding what course of action they should follow. I didn't find out till later what the problem was. I had not only broken arms and legs, hip, shoulder, ribs, ankle bones, etc., but also had second and third degree burns from gasoline that exploded at the time of the crash. As a result, they couldn't splint-cast or wrap the bones. So they put me in a bed for a few days to find out if I was going to make it — and giving me morphine.

In the meanwhile, the broken bones in my right leg had so injured the blood vessels to my foot that gangrene had set in. My doctor, Col. Spitler, would come into my room and stick a needle into my foot and ask if I felt it. At first, I thought I did, but after about the third day, I said no. He asked me if he should take my leg off, which I thought was a 'funny' question — but I had such implicit faith in him that I said, 'Whatever you think, Doc,' — and that was that.

During the first two or three weeks of my hospitalization, Lt. Winemiller would come to visit me frequently. I know that some who read this are going to say that's impossible since he was a member of my crew and did not survive the crash. Not so! The day before we were to take off, several of the Squadron went to Waikiki. Winemiller rented a surf board and went out several hundred feet from shore. About the time he thought he had enough

sun, he started for shore. Unfortunately, the tide had turned, and he couldn't make any headway. After paddling on his stomach on the board for 5-6 hours, he was so badly sunburned with blisters, that he was hospitalized, and was scrubbed from the mission. I think his replacement was Lt. Brinkskelle.¹⁹

Without going into any more of the events during hospitalization, suffice it to say that six months were spent in Hawaii, six months at Letterman General Hospital in S.F. and one and a half years at Bushnell General Hospital, Brigham City, Utah."²⁰

As a matter related to the Durbin-Evans crash, aircraft B-26B number 41-17584, their aircraft had been purchased by public-spirited citizens of the city of Philadelphia and christened the *Liberty Bell* in a formal ceremony April 20, 1942 at the Martin plant in Baltimore. The purchase price, paid in full by patriotic citizens, is quoted in a Philadelphia newspaper as \$178,116.23, which amount was sent as a check to the U.S. Government.

Insofar as can be reconstructed at this time, the aircrews for the flights to Christmas Island, Canton Island and to Fiji were as represented in the chart on page 158 of the Appendix, which appears to have been made up just before the take-offs for Christmas. The crews on these flights did not include the bombardiers listed. There were also other last minute changes not reflected in the chart. Swede Larson was substituted for Lt. Washington in aircraft #41-17576 and according to Lt. Ray's diary, their Radio Operator Savitski took sick and did not make that flight. There may have been other last-minute changes also. The remaining twelve aircraft continued with their island-hopping flight without further loss and essentially without incident. It may be useful to the reader to provide brief descriptions of these islands.

Christmas Island

Even though billed as the largest coral atoll in the Pacific, with an area of 140 square miles, the land area was only 94 square miles — a small target in the broad Pacific, after about 7 1/2 hours of flying. In a reversal of the American holidays, Dick Thorburn and I spent the 4th of July on Christmas without either fireworks or a Santa Claus.

Canton Island

Canton is an isolated atoll with an area of about 3 1/2 square miles. Within its narrow pear-shaped ring of land is a lagoon more than 8 miles long and 4 miles wide. Stunted vegetation grew on the island and there were some coconut palms. Beautiful, in one sense, but desolate. Canton is in the Phoenix Group of islands approximately 280 miles southeast of the Baker and Howland island area where Amelia Earhart and her navigator, Fred Noonan, disappeared in July 1937 (sixty plus years ago) on their planned round-the-world flight.

¹⁹ Both *The Crusaders: A History of the 42nd Bombardment Group (M)* and Squadron records in microfilm at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama report that Lt. Winemiller and Sgt. Arnold were killed in the crash and that Lieutenants Durbin and Evans were seriously injured.

²⁰ Durbin, Fred W. Letter, 30 January 1996.

For the flights to Christmas and Canton, we used the main tanks and auxiliaries in the wings (which totaled 962 gallons), plus two bomb-bay tanks of 250 gallons each, for a total of 1,462 gallons. The flight route and distances from Hickam Field in Hawaii to Christmas Island, Canton Island, Fiji, Espiritu Santo and Guadalcanal are outlined on page 159 of the Appendix. Also shown is Midway Island northwest of Hawaii.

Fiji Arrival

There were occasional delays due to tropical storms, but the last of the 70th Squadron's aircraft completed the journey to Fiji on July 9, 1942. Finally, the Ground and Air Echelons of the squadron were united with much back-slapping and handshaking. We were together on Viti Levu, the main island in Fiji and our new home away from home.

Connie Ray's diary tells the story of his flight from Canton to Fiji in the following entry:

"July 3. Off early again. Passing through the doldrum area we hit very bad weather. The black, formidable clouds worried me. AFCE²¹ dicked-up and gave us a big pushover, dumping tools, ammunition, etc. all over the plane. Max²² tore up a finger turning it off and getting control. Landed at Nandi, Fiji O.K. The islands are pretty from the air with mountains and green reefs off shore. Our long, lost ground crew was waiting and there was much hand shaking. We have a nice field here and a new camp is under construction for us."

²¹ AFCE, automatic flight control equipment (auto pilot).

²² Lt. Harold G. Miller (Max), Pilot.

4: Fiji — Our South Pacific Home

The essential matter of history is not what happened, but what the people thought or said about it.

Maitland

Description

This history would not be complete without devoting time and space to our impressions of this new home. The following is a well-written description of the island and its inhabitants, quoted directly from the records of the 70th Squadron's Ground Echelon:

“Viti Levu, the largest island in the Fiji's, is a typical, lovely tropical island. Lofty mountains, high plateaus, jagged volcanic peaks, rolling dissected plains, meandering rivers, mangrove swamps, retreating deltas, coconut groves, and bush country. It is fringed by coral of a hue no brush can reproduce and numerous bays and bars. Half the natives — the original stock — are Melanesian, a people amiably indolent, generous and tactful to a fault. The other half are descendants of Indian coolies, imported by the Colonial Sugar Refining Company to work its sugar mills and plantations.

The 70th acquired its first camp site in Fiji by offering to the owners tobacco and chewing gum. After the natives better understood the secrets of foreign exchange, a similar quantity of smokes and candy would not have paid for a single GI's laundry.

The Finance Department was slow in getting set up, and, as a result, the boys received their first pay in Fijian and New Zealand currency. Change was made in matches and shaving cream.

Inhabitants

The Indians were a clannish lot, and the soldiers had few dealings with them, other than getting laundry done and haggling over the prices of their exquisite handmade jewelry.

The Fijians, however, lived in their native villages, governed by a Turanga, or chief. They had Mekes, ceremonial dances, tra-la-las, social dances, and celebrations of various sorts in the Army's honor. They made gifts of fruits and vegetables: bananas, guava, mango, papaya, pandunas, breadfruit, sago palm, taro, tapioca, sugar cane, pineapple and uvi or yams. Acceptance was to a toast of kava, a beverage that tastes like the dregs of

concentrated torpedo bilge. It's mighty powerful stuff. Sometimes they would also give a whale's tooth — signifying an abiding friendship — and a woven mat to the Commanding Officer. In exchange, he would raid the canteen for goods they desired most: cigarettes, bonbons and juices.

The Fijians are natural singers, and they have a song of the islands called *Isa Lei*. Hearing it sung in harmony by a group of natives is an experience never to be forgotten. There is scarcely a man in the Squadron who doesn't know at least the opening words:

Isa, Isa, vu-la-gi lasa dina
Nomu lako au na rara wa kina

Isa, Isa, you are my only treasure
Must you leave me, so lonely and forsaken

The traditional greeting was Bula (Boo-Lah), meaning hello, health and good life, all wrapped into one word.

The girls are in their own way, comely, but the American movie has sadly misrepresented the type. The Fijians have a high moral tone of first and second generation converts to Christianity. Besides, native tabus (pronounced tamboos), strictly control and limit the social lives of the people. The result is that native girls kept their distances."¹

Life Style

We were fortunate in having a native village within walking distance of our base area which we visited occasionally. It was a most interesting experience. On a Sunday morning one could hear a group of Fijians in a large village hut singing "Onward Christian Soldiers" in Fijian, in beautiful harmony. On our visits we were treated with utmost courtesy and hospitality. They were a very happy people, open and direct with visitors, and seemingly eager to talk about their village and their life style. We listened and were impressed by their outlook and approach to living.

Village life in Fiji was based on what might be termed communal living. The individuals, young and old, male and female, shared the various obligations of community life, as well as the rewards of their efforts. They fished together, and later shared the catch. They worked the village gardens and distributed the harvest to the entire village. They worked together in preparing feasts for special occasions. They washed clothes for one another on rocks in the river. They built their huts and did the maintenance and repair as a community effort.

The village near us had a large hollowed-out log, about four feet long, that served as a drum when hit with a club. This drum was used to announce meetings and to summon people to work — much the same as a village clock or a bulletin board.

¹ Squadron records in microfilm at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama.

At that time, communal living, Fijian style, may have had its negative aspects, but the system worked and, most importantly, the Fijians were happy with it.

During our stay, Fiji was a British Crown Colony with a British Governor. As a tribute to the Fijians, we should remember that in December 1942, a contingent of approximately thirty Fijians was sent to Guadalcanal to assist the U.S. Marines who were tenuously holding a beachhead there. The Fijians were assigned the task of wiping out the dug-in groups of Japanese. They so distinguished themselves in this early action that the Fijian authorities were, later in the Solomon campaign, called upon to furnish additional jungle warriors, numbering in the hundreds. The assigned tasks were extremely difficult, yet word spread quickly among the U.S. forces of their courageous performance and their distinct contribution against the Japanese.

The initial quarters for the officers were in New Zealand's wooden barracks on the side of the hill above the airfield and, as a luxury, we had a large shower room. This, however, was interim housing.

Tropical Rainstorm

Before the arrival of the Air Echelon in Fiji, the ground crews were inundated in their first encampment by a huge tropical storm. Floyd L. Corty, who was then Sergeant Corty, has written the story of what happened:

“The campsite was hidden under a canopy of trees along a fairly wide stream bed of sand and gravel — an ideal place for a picnic. As such, we hurriedly set up mess facilities, pitched tents, stashed equipment, built picnic tables, etc. About three days later, it started to rain, rain and rain. The troops got a lot of sack time. But at dawn, June 13, the ravine was filling with water. Within an hour, the stream was a raging torrent of muddy water, 2 to 3 feet deep, toppling tents and washing away tarps, tables, clothing, etc.!

Most of us who had gotten up early managed to carry our barracks bags to higher ground. As we gathered along the stream bank, we heard screams. One of the men was in midstream holding on to a partially submerged tent, and yelling, ‘Save me, you bastards, save me!’ Two guys waded into the waist deep water and escorted him to the bank.

Subsequently, we were housed in tin huts. As water subsided, some of the equipment was retrieved downstream.”²

Sambeto Village

Our final campsite in Fiji amounted to a converted native village, on relatively high ground, called Sambeto. Native huts called “bures” (boo-rees) were updated with heavy concrete slab floors, yet above ground level, they maintained the native-style, woven-mat

² Corty, Floyd A. Letter, 14 November 1997.

walls and deep thatched-sugar cane roofing. There were also a few old wooden frame buildings in the camp area — one of which had been a small school house which was converted to what we called our “Officers’ Club.” Eddie Morrison often acted as bartender with whatever beverages he was able to scrounge, here and there, now and then. Connie Ray describes a bure and the camp in a diary entry:

“July 20. Spent morning fixing up the bure to be comfortable. This is what a bure is like. It is built around a frame of posts set in the ground and bamboo poles laid close together from the eaves to peak of roof. It has one door and three windows covered by screens. Walls are made by a covering of woven bamboo, which is prepared for weaving by crushing the poles. The floor is Americanized by making it of concrete. The roof is a foot thick thatching of sugar cane tops. The camp is very beautiful especially in the moonlight. It is in a grove of palms.

In afternoon, practiced for maneuvers.”

An aerial photograph, taken December 19, 1942, showing the final campsite of the officers and enlisted men nestled in a grove of palm trees, is contained in the photo section.

Dispersal Area

Our aircraft were located in a dispersal area off the main runway at Nandi. A large aerial photograph of the area, taken April 24, 1943 is contained in the photo section.

Stef and I shared a small wooden shack as an office in the dispersal area. The building was partitioned in the center; one half being the CO’s office, and one half being my Squadron Operations office. We cut a hole in the partition wall about a foot square so we could coordinate with each other without using the telephone.

The building’s corrugated roof was shaded by a large mango tree — which was both good and bad. The shade was welcomed, but when the fruit ripened, it dropped with a bang on the metal roof and clattered across the steel before dropping to the ground.

The non-commissioned officer in charge of the operations shop was Sergeant Floyd L. Corty, assisted by Corporal Abe Prenskey and two others. A primary task of the clerical staff was to process the flight records. This involved transcribing the Form 1, which was the pilot’s flight report, into the Form 5 which became the permanent individual flight records for all aircrew members.

Our military neighbors nearby on Fiji were a Royal New Zealand Air Force squadron equipped with Lockheed Hudson type aircraft, and the 70th Fighter Squadron equipped with P-39 fighters and commanded by Major Henry Vicellio.

Coconut Joe

Our history on Fiji would not be complete without mentioning Coconut Joe. He was a short, rather old, native Fijian who liked Americans and regularly peddled coconuts down in

the aircraft dispersal area. Everyone knew him and liked him — he was both jovial and persistent in selling coconuts. If an individual indicated even the slightest interest in either coconut meat or coconut milk, he would immediately unlimber a huge machete, hack open a coconut and offer it for a small fee. One could not resist!

Training

With a place to live, a place for our aircraft, and with our support functions established, we maintained alerts, conducted long-range search missions at sea and simultaneously engaged in serious training for combat. In one sense, our training might be characterized as OJT (on-job-training), in that we were our own critics. We experimented, tested and essentially wrote the book as we went along. We knew the aircraft quite well by now and, with our overwater experiences, the search missions were not a problem. So we went to work on the combat employment of the B-26 in the South Pacific environment.

We made simulated bombing runs. Gunners became better acquainted with their weapons. We practiced skip-bombing missions. Transition training was conducted for copilots. Bombardiers and navigators were “cross-trained,” to some extent, in each other’s functions. We also had additional torpedo training with the overall result that we began to shape-up as an operational unit.

The cross-training of the bombardiers and navigators had mixed results. Harold Clack, who was the radio operator/belly gunner on Bob Boden’s crew, recalls the following interesting episode on a search mission from Fiji:

“We had to maintain radio silence on our missions. About the only radio activity involved was getting direction information for the navigator. This was done by receiving a signal on a compass from transmitting stations. This information was used by the navigator as an aid in calculating plane headings. We had voice capability, but we were required to maintain silence. My training was received at a radio school in Jackson, Mississippi.

We had an interesting experience during a flight when the navigator was training the bombardier in navigation. We got lost and the navigator asked me to get a direction signal from the Fiji transmitting station. After using the direction of the signal with his other calculations he was sure that the compass was 180 degrees out of phase. He was correct and we made it back to the base with just a small amount of gas in the tanks.

We had another unusual experience when we were trying the machine guns that had been mounted on each side of the nose of the plane. The gun on the right side came loose while being fired and shot into the nose of the plane. The bombardier came out of the nose bleeding from many wounds. We thought he was seriously wounded, but the wounds were from small pieces of metal torn from the side of the plane by the machine gun bullets. They

pierced his skin but did not go deep. He was in the hospital only a short time. Our plane was out of commission during the repair of the damage.”³

Torpedoes

Our B-26s and those of the 69th Squadron were not the only units equipped to carry torpedoes. B-26 units deployed to Alaska also had this capability. The torpedoes weighed some 2,000 lbs., and were configured with intricate guidance, propulsion and fuel systems, in addition to the explosive charge. Therefore, after our arrival in Fiji, a U.S. Navy torpedo maintenance unit, numbering 18–20 personnel from the ill-fated aircraft carrier *Lexington*,⁴ was attached to our Squadron to handle the torpedo technicalities. So far, the story is rather straightforward, but it becomes complicated later for a variety of reasons.

Chronologically, the torpedo and torpedo training should be discussed more thoroughly at this point. As mentioned earlier, the B-26B was configured at the plant to carry a torpedo, hung externally below the fuselage and wired for release by the pilot. Somewhere, somehow, someone had come up with the idea that a good way to help win the war in the Pacific was to attack Japanese fleet units and miscellaneous shipping with a torpedo slung under a B-26. Consequently, after our arrival in Hawaii, and while on alert for the Japanese fleet, we were given torpedo training. We made simulated torpedo runs on U.S. Navy destroyers outside Pearl Harbor. The arrangement called for pilot release of the torpedo, using a “torpedo director” mounted in the cockpit in front of the pilot. The sighting device was designed to solve the intercept angle with the surface vessel while the pilot maintained the proper release airspeed and altitude — which was approximately 200 mph at 100 feet of altitude.

An entry from Connie Ray’s diary at this time written in Fiji is most interesting:

“July 22. Today we flew the practice attack mission for which we have been preparing for the last few days. There were Lockheed Hudsons, B-26s and P-39s in one big formation. All together there were a large number of planes. It was impressive to see them there above and below. All were there to protect the torpedo planes, of which we were one.”

But all was not moving ahead smoothly.

Aircraft Loss

Another aircraft was lost on August 12, when Lt. Morrison’s aircraft #41-17564 was taxied into a large drainage ditch in our dispersal area by one of the ground crew members while being checked out in taxiing. This brought the aircraft inventory down to eleven aircraft, considering the earlier loss in Hawaii.

³ Clack, Harold. Letter, 22 January 1996.

⁴ The *Lexington* was lost in the Battle of the Coral Sea, May 1942.

B-26 Armament

We were very much aware from the experience of the B-26 crews at the Battle of Midway that if we were to attack Japanese shipping at low altitude, using either torpedoes or skip-bombs, we needed a much improved forward-firing capability. As indicated earlier, our B-26Bs had only one flexible .30 cal. machine gun, mounted in the plexiglass nose, and firing forward.

Lt. Gilbert G. Smith (Gil) provided the following report on his mission from Fiji to Australia for the first .50 cal. package guns to be installed on our aircraft:

“When Stef (Major Stefonowicz) decided that a crew would go to Australia (Amberley Field) to get the B-26 equipped with pilot controlled, forward firing .50 caliber machine guns, the pilot names were put in a hat and mine was drawn as the crew to go. This was done after the Coral Sea battle when the B-25s did such a great job of skip bombing and strafing.

I don't recall the name of the engineer who did the work on my airplane, but he designed and the shops manufactured one set of four (two on each side) forward firing machine guns and I flew them and fired them over the ocean off Brisbane. They seemed to work O.K. so they manufactured enough sets to equip all of our B-26s back at Nandi.

Some of the kits were shipped by LB-30 back to Fiji and I took the others with me when I returned. I flew to Australia on October 14–15, 1942 and returned to Fiji on November 11–12. As an aside, we flew to Guadalcanal for our first combat missions on Nov. 14, 1942 — total flight time that day was 7+55 (7:55 hours). That was two days after I returned from Australia. I don't know how many airplanes we had equipped with the side mounted guns by that time, but I'm sure it wasn't many of them. The engineering was not too accurate because we had the rear gun mounts break on two of our aircraft and shot up the nose of both airplanes. I don't believe we ever used them after the second one failed.”⁵

Capt. John F. Sharp, “A” Flight leader, also experimented with improvement of our forward-firing capability. A flexible .50 caliber machine was installed in the nose, supported by metal straps across the plexiglass to handle the recoil. Two flexible .30 caliber guns were also installed out the sides of the nose. John has told us that these installations made the aircraft “look like a tank,” but that in the long run, the changes did not prove to be practical. Reason? “There wasn't any room for Wilensky's head.” Wilensky was John Sharp's bombardier. Another of the Sharp innovations consisted of “home-made, side package guns,” one .50 cal. machine gun in a fixed mount, firing forward from each side of the fuselage.

⁵ Smith, Gilbert G. “First Package Guns,” *Marauder Thunder*, November 1993, 67.

Later, some production models of the B-26 carried two fixed, forward-firing .50 caliber guns as standard equipment, similar to those installed in Australia on Gil Smith's aircraft. In retrospect, whether fixed, forward-firing guns were required or not depended in large part on the missions we were expected to accomplish — for low altitude attack, yes; for medium altitude bombing, no.

Skip Bombing

The B-26 was designed and configured basically as a medium altitude bomber. Because of the nature of the war in the Pacific, however, strategists and tacticians searched continuously for more innovative ways and means of increasing combat effectiveness in that theater, particularly in low-altitude attack against shipping and airfields.

The configuration of the 70th Squadron's B-26s for torpedo launching was one of these efforts and the installation of fixed, forward-firing .50 caliber guns was another. This led us into the practice of skip bombing while we were in Fiji. We claim no innovative credit for the technique; however, it can be said without doubt, that we significantly advanced the art.

Essentially, skip bombing was a means of low-level attack against shipping, whereby a bomb is delivered close to the hull of a ship, either by "plunging" it at the waterline or by skipping it on the surface of the water — like skipping a flat rock over a body of water.

We used normal GP (general purpose) bombs, but plugged the nose fuse and installed a tail fuse having a 4.0 second delay before exploding. The purpose for the delay, of course, was to allow our escape and eliminate (hopefully) the possibility of blowing ourselves up. The procedure was to approach "on the deck," attack the ship at masthead level and place the bomb in the water just short of the hull.

A 500 lb. bomb exploding near the hull of the ship, below the waterline, could do considerable damage. The explosive charge in a 500 lb. bomb was approximately one-half of its total weight. In a torpedo, on the other hand, the explosive charge was approximately one-quarter of the total weight, because of its guidance, propulsion and fuel systems. Also, several bombs could be carried, and with skip-bombs, the pilot was more free to perform evasive maneuvers inbound to the target. Given the proper set of circumstances, it could be a very effective weapon and we trained hard in its use. We used a small island west of the Nandi airfield as our practice target, employing 100 lb. sand-filled bombs with a small "spotting" charge.

Relative to experimenting with skip-bombs, we have an account from Bill Talley recalling an experiment of mounting the skip-bombs backward in the bomb bay:

"One time, in scheming as to how best to skip bomb these small freighters, etc., Stef and, I believe, John Sharp, decided that we should try hanging the bombs in the rack backwards...with the tail toward the front of the airplane. I never heard what they thought of the idea after dropping a few practice bombs this way, but I know that Palacios went on the practice mission, and took

pictures from the door of the bomb bays, when the bomb (or should that be plural?) was dropped.”⁶

Social Diversion and Morale

Training of combat crews continued throughout the month of September, with occasional time out to maintain alerts because of enemy threats. By way of social diversion, the officers put on a vaudeville show for the enlisted men. From Connie Ray’s diary, we learn that, “It was a crazy affair and pretty silly, but everyone seemed to have a good time. The fact that each man was given two quarts of beer helped. The show was sort of to jack-up morale.”

The enlisted men reciprocated later with a show of their own. By this time, facilities for a squadron theatre were installed and better entertainment started.

One diversion from the daily routine on Fiji involved a hunting party for wild cows high in the hills of the island. The details of this hunt came to light only during the writing of this history. Here’s the story from Bill Talley:

“I’m sure we all remember how it could rain in the islands. One siege in Fiji was especially memorable...at least three days, as I recall, of just constant heavy downpour. At times, it would rain so hard that visibility must have been about 100 feet. No one foolish enough to get off the ground in that weather.

It was during, or just after, one of these storms that we went hunting. I believe that Stef ordered Lt. Dulac (or it may have just been Dulac’s idea) to find two or three of the wild cows that ran around the area, kill them and let Andrukitis and Palacios butcher them for celebrating our first anniversary on Fiji. Dulac protested that the weather was too bad, but Stef said, “Go anyway, Lt.” So Dulac rounded up two or three guys, including Palacios and Schmidt, and went cow hunting in the rain. At one point, Dulac thought he had one in his sights, but just before he pulled the trigger, Palacios pointed out to him that it was a horse, not a cow. But they finally found and killed two cows. Palacios gutted them, prepared them for butchering, but they were too heavy for Pasqual and Schmidt to get them into the weapons carrier. So Dulac said he would take the jeep back to camp for more help. Leaving the area where they had killed the cows, he got the truck stuck. That was not easy to do, so you can imagine the problem they had getting him un-stuck. Palacios and Schmidt were worn out by then, so they left the chore of getting the meat back to camp to others. The next morning, Palacios says that he went to the kitchen early and asked the cooks if the meat had arrived. They said yes, about 3 a.m. and it took 16 men to get it in. I’m sure we enjoyed the break — from corned beef and mutton — as we had some great hamburgers.”⁷

⁶ Talley, William J. Letter, January 1996.

⁷ Ibid.

Another rather amusing incident on Fiji involves a giant fish, said to weigh some 400 pounds. We had a medium-sized stream, flowing from the mountains, which was used by the natives to bathe and to wash clothes. The stream flowed into the ocean near the Nandi airfield. Some called it the Nandi River. The fish story came recently from John Sherlock, one of our pilots, who at the time was also Acting Mess Officer:

“The story was as Mess Officer I was trying to fill our larder when one of the cooks said the natives knew where a lot of fish could be caught in an inlet near the bay. Good deal, so I took two grenades, a jeep, two natives and a couple of men with me. Natives took us to an area of the river and said lots of fish here. No hooks or line so I had everyone get behind a tree — me included — pulled pin and lobbed grenade into the river. Longest ten seconds before it went off and glad we were behind trees as shrapnel came whizzing out of river and zinged off jeep and trees. No more grenades used for safety reasons so natives went into river to get fish as we had promised them half the catch. After grabbing fish in water they started to feel on bottom for more, then one ran out of water yelling, ‘Big fish!’ (I thought he meant shark.) Too big to get out so they pulled it close to shore and we used tow cable on front of jeep around the tail and pulled it on shore. What a whopper. All of us got a hand on it and dragged it up onto the hood and went back to camp. Gave the natives the rest of the fish. At camp we finally hoisted it up a tree for picture and got ready to clean and skin it. After that, the cooks were not sure how to clean it, so yours truly (having fished for many years) took a bolo, ripped the belly open and cleaned it out. I let the mess boys get rid of the entrails and told the cooks to skin it and slice off fish steaks.”⁸

The account of the big fish is accompanied by a group photograph showing the fish hung from a tree surrounded by a number of squadron members including John Sherlock, Lt. Dulac (Henry), and Lt. Feldberg (Joe).

Despite our efforts, plus those of an Army Special Service Detachment and a Red Cross Field Unit, it was inevitable that unit morale would deteriorate over time and that boredom would result, particularly for those not regularly or heavily engaged in daily squadron activities. Simply stated, you cannot uproot and transfer a group of fine young American men to a remote South Pacific island and expect them to be completely happy with their situation and surroundings — especially in time of war. Families were split, promotions were slow or non-existent, food was monotonously poor, recreation was minimal, mail was sporadic, and, as yet, we hadn’t even seen combat! Notwithstanding the natural beauty of Fiji, for some the situation was rather depressing.

Some played volleyball, some played basketball, some played poker, some wrapped themselves in their jobs, some drank (when it was available) and some probably just twiddled their thumbs. We cannot, however, and must not blame the men. Under difficult circumstances, they were doing what they were told and were reacting to a situation over

⁸ Sherlock, John. Letter, 23 February 1997.

which they had little or no control. We had one suicide in the squadron during our stay on Fiji, the cause of which was not determined.

We have a letter from Pasqual C. Palacios who was a “jack-of-all-trades” in our Squadron on Fiji. The letter is reproduced in its entirety for the reason that it provides an insight to the character, both of Pasqual and Stef, our Squadron Commander. Pasqual writes:

“Before the bombing of Pearl Harbor they were sending the soldiers to different schools for special training, but when war was declared I was without any special training other than basic.

I was detailed to help in the kitchen while on the ship going to Australia. When in Australia, I was butchering meat for the squadron. When we left for the Islands, I was on general duty. I was detailed to help the electricians, plumbers, and when we finally settled in the ‘Sambeto’ area, Fiji, I was detailed to pick up trash. I was somewhat disappointed that I had no special job. So I asked 1st Sgt. Day if he would give me permission to speak to the CO, Major Stef. He gave me permission.

When I spoke to Major Stef he requested that 1st Sgt. Day send him my records. After reviewing my records he assigned me the duty of chauffering for him.

To this day I feel proud to have served for a wonderful CO, Stef. When Major Stef was relieved, I went to painting till the war ended.”⁹

General Arnold Visit

General Arnold, the Chief of the Army Air Corps, visited Fiji and we have a diary entry from Lt. Ray recording his thoughts on the event:

“Sept. 23. This morning General Arnold came in here by plane. All personnel gathered at the hangar to hear him speak. He brought us up to date on the problems we are facing. Told of the plans of our military leaders and what we could expect. It was a privilege to see the Chief of Air Corps, yet wished he could have given us more information and inspiration.”

We also have recollections from Bill Talley relative to the Hap Arnold visit. He has reported the visit very interestingly in connection with our line chief Master Sergeant Arthur Jolly, as follows:

“Some of you may remember that General Hap Arnold stopped by in Fiji in his C-54, for refueling, and several of us gathered down on the airstrip, including our CO, who was asked by Arnold if we needed anything. Stef gave him a few items, and the General told his aide to make notes...M/Sgt. Arthur Jolly, our line chief, was one of several of our non-coms that had been in the

⁹ Palacios, Pasqual C. Letter, 22 April 1996.

Air Corps for thirty years or more (Curtis, Tanley, Weatherford, for example), and would have been retired were it not for hostilities breaking out. Jolly told us of having been Arnold's crew chief at Langley Field, when Arnold was a Lieutenant. We sort of took several of Jolly's tales with a grain of salt, and he knew it, so when Gen. Arnold recognized Jolly in the group around him, and greeted him by name, Jolly's face lit up and I'm sure he was quite pleased."¹⁰

Much can be said and must be said relative to Master Sergeant Arthur Jolly, our Squadron Line Chief. Howard C. Troy sent an article by Sergeant Jolly to us that appeared in *Air Force Magazine* of August 1944. The two-page article has his picture, some pictures of the squadron-level maintenance on the B-25 (which we flew later), but, most importantly, it captures the ingenuity of our maintenance people in improvising equipment and tools to get the job done while working as a single, independent, operating squadron, far away from the luxury and comfort of hangars and shops. The article concludes with a number of maintenance tips, and as Arthur Jolly says, they were "lessons learned the hard way."¹¹

The ground support personnel in the Squadron made our air operations possible. A group of relatively young "fly-boys" could never have accomplished what they did without the unflagging support of all of our enlisted men in their various specialties. The true backbone of our Squadron was found in our maintenance, supply, transportation, medical, food service, parachute riggers, instrument specialists, welders, sheet metal workers, and administrative personnel on the ground; as well as the enlisted aircrew members, such as radio operators and gunners in the air. In this connection, every good squadron has a group of men that are not particularly specialized (the jacks-of-all-trades), who could always be counted on to give their best effort in support of the squadron and help to "keep 'em flying" under adverse wartime conditions. Looking back, they were great young men.

Aircraft alerts were boring, with hours of 'hanging-out' in the dispersal area. Someone in the higher echelons of the Second Island Air Command, however, evidently wanted to stir up some activity or possibly test the alert system. Connie Ray tells the story in his diary entry:

"Oct. 3. Had some excitement when the report came in that 50 planes were approaching the island just off the water. That was followed by another report that planes could be heard out of sight above the clouds. At night we were blacked out because of six planes which passed over Suva toward our base. It is queer that all of these should occur in one day without having any raid materialize. Makes one wonder what in the devil is going on."

Aircraft and Crew Loss

Records reflect that on Friday, October 13, a P-39 collided in mid-air with our B-26 number 41-17590, killing all members of the crew: Lieutenants O'Connor, Otis, Douglass, Drewyour and enlisted men Ramsey, Spencer and Howard. Lt. Ray's diary provides considerable more detail in the following entry:

¹⁰ Talley, William J. Letter, January 1996.

¹¹ Jolly, Arthur. *Air Force Magazine*, August 1944, 24-25.

“Oct. 13. Just after landing, I looked out to sea and saw that column of black smoke that always means a plane has crashed. A pursuiter came in from that direction and cautiously zoomed the crash boat to start them toward the smoke. Several of our planes took off to investigate and turned on the radio hoping to hear the reports sent back. When they reached the spot, the fire had stopped, leaving two large oil slicks on the water. Dick Otis, with Tom O’Connor as co-pilot, Drewyour, Douglass and three gunners were test firing guns low over the water when two 70th pursuit planes made a pass at them. One cut the tail from Dick’s plane and both crashed instantly. All that remained to mark the site was the oil, a little wreckage, sharks and the floating bodies of Drewyour and Douglass. The others will probably remain there in the blue water, near a sunken coral reef, 300 yards south of our low, small, palm covered, target island in Nandi Bay. The loss of Tom and Dick is great to me. We had been together since joining the Air Corps, and two finer fellows never lived.”

In this accident we lost seven fine young men and another aircraft — bringing our inventory down to ten.

Command and Administration

Before launching into a discussion of combat operations it is necessary to explain somewhat the command and administrative arrangements existing at that time in the South Pacific area. On Fiji, we were under the Second Island Air Command. They were responsible for supply, mess, transportation and all the customary base housekeeping functions.

Early in the war, command of the theater was in the hands of Vice Adm. Robert L. Ghormley, who on 13 April 1942 became COMSOPAC, but command of air units (Army, Navy and Marine) was given to Rear Adm. John S. McCain, who became COMAIRSOPAC on 20 May 1942. Since the South Pacific Theater was basically a Navy area, it was not until 7 July that the Army named a Commander, Maj. Gen. Millard F. Harmon who became COMGENSOPAC and took charge of U.S. Army Forces in the South Pacific, establishing his headquarters at Nouméa in New Caledonia on 29 July 1942.¹² On 13 January 1943, six months after our arrival on Fiji, the 13th Air Force was activated at Nouméa, New Caledonia under Maj. Gen. Nathan F. Twining. This activation, however, was not the final word, insofar as operational control of the 70th Squadron was concerned.

In relation to Guadalcanal and the Solomons, operational control of the 13th Air Force combat units was in the hands of Command Air Solomons, a sub-command of COMAIRSOPAC, formed on 15 February 1943. COMAIRSOLS controlled all Army, Marine, Navy and New Zealand air units in the Solomons.

¹² Rust, Kenn C. *Thirteenth Air Force Story...in World War II*. (Temple City, CA: Historical Aviation Album, 1981), 5-6.

It may be that the readers at this point have been given more information about the command and control structure in the South Pacific than they really care to know. Our overall purpose, however, is not to critique the command arrangements in the early days of the war, but to paint an accurate picture of the command structure as it was at that time — allowing the readers either to draw whatever conclusions they might, or to ignore the subject entirely.

Colonel Stefen has written an interesting description of our situation at that time:

“When we arrived in Fiji, we were told to take instruction in how to drop torpedoes. We carried torpedoes on our first flight to Guadalcanal, but never actually dropped them. Inasmuch as we were not part of any bomb group, our administrative and operational set up was rather unique. Administratively, we were part of the Second Island Air Command at Fiji, and answered to and were supplied by them. Operationally, we were assigned to the 13th Air Force in New Caledonia. They had the authority to order us into combat. On our first flight to Espiritu Santo, when we carried torpedoes, it was the U.S. Navy that told us to take our torpedoes and fly to Guadalcanal and attack the Japanese Task Force, then engaged in a naval battle with our Navy ships. It didn't seem to bother them that we would very likely expend ourselves making such an attack.

When we were on Guadalcanal, we were under the operational control of the U.S. Marines. Generally, they gave us missions that were within our capabilities. They wanted us to go to the Bougainville area with torpedoes, but backed down when we told them that we didn't have much range. They let us fly those missions with delayed fuse bombs instead of torpedoes.”¹³

One might say, “The better part of valour is discretion.”¹⁴

Fiji Revisited

John Sharp and his wife, Betsy, traveled to Fiji in 1978 to visit some of the old wartime squadron haunts. In a recent letter, John tells some of the details of this trip. Of particular interest in Fiji was the visit to Sambeto Village and information received from the Fijians on the final disposition of the remains of our seven-man combat crew involved in the B-26/P-39 collision. John writes:

“The taxi driver took us on a complete tour of the places I wanted to see and then to Sambeto Village where Chief Eliasha declared a holiday. We met with all the school children in our club (schoolhouse). The next day, he threw a banquet for us, complete with goat meat and kava and to meet all the guys who remembered the B-26s. Two 50-year old men were very excited. They

¹³ Stefen, Leroy L. Letter, January 1996.

¹⁴ Shakespeare, William. *King Henry IV*, Part 1, Act 5, Scene 4.

were our kitchen boys. One of them sang, 'God Bless America,' which our guys had taught him — started way too high and almost split a gut.

Chief Eliasha told me that after we were gone they took all traces of war materiel and dumped them in the ocean. He also sent divers out to our B-26/P-39 crash site, recovered all the remaining bodies and buried them on the beach of our target island, all properly identified. When the "Graves Registration" people came through after the war, he took them to the beach and all bodies were recovered. They now rest in the Punch Bowl in Hawaii. I have seen all their names there."¹⁵

¹⁵ Sharp, John F. Letter, 12 September 1997.

5: Guadalcanal and Combat Operations

History is on every occasion the record of that which one age finds worthy of note in another.

Burckhardt

Background

The month was November 1942 and the situation on Guadalcanal was absolutely desperate for the U.S. forces involved in the battle for that island.

To set the stage, the *Thirteenth Air Force Story* reports that, "On the night of 12/13 November, the Japanese opened their great assault as their twelve transports waited to approach. Just after midnight, two Japanese battleships, accompanied by a cruiser and fifteen destroyers, came in to shell Henderson (the airfield) out of existence.¹ But before they could do so, the U.S. Navy intervened with five cruisers and eight destroyers. The result was the First Battle of Guadalcanal, the 'fiercest naval battle ever fought.' In 34 furious minutes the Japanese battleship *Hiei* was sunk. The U.S. Navy lost the cruiser *Atlanta*, and later the *Juneau*, and four destroyers."

Following this, we learn from the same source that after midnight on the 13th, "One thousand shells from three cruisers and four destroyers smashed into Guadalcanal. Two F-4Fs and one SBD were destroyed, seventeen F4Fs and one P-38 damaged. Next day, the 14th, the transport force approached, preceded by a bombardment force. Cactus bombers (Cactus was the code name for Guadalcanal) hit two heavy cruisers, then SBDs from *Enterprise* sank one of them and damaged a light cruiser...Seven transports were sunk, but the four remaining continued toward Guadalcanal."²

With this as background, on the evening of the 14th, ten B-26s of the 70th Bomb Squadron arrived at Cactus (Guadalcanal), trained and ready to use torpedoes against enemy ships. They would not be needed in that role, however, for at midnight the Second Battle of Guadalcanal took place.

A fierce naval battle ensued between battleships and destroyers on both sides, in which the Japanese battleship *Kirishima* was severely damaged and scuttled. The Japanese fleet withdrew, all except the transports.

¹ For geographic orientation, see maps of the Solomon Islands, the "slot," Guadalcanal and Henderson Field at page 160 of the Appendix.

² Rust, Kenn C. *Thirteenth Air Force Story...in World War II*. (Temple City, CA: Historical Aviation Album, 1981), 13.

November 14–15 Missions

Delving further into the *Thirteenth Air Force Story*, we learn that “only the four transports remained, and at dawn of 15 November a P-39 pilot on early patrol found three of them beached near Tassafaronga Point and being unloaded and the fourth coming in to shore. In the following hour, thirteen Navy and marine SBDs and one TBF scored seven hits on three transports. At 0720, five P-39s took off and put two bombs on the fourth ship. Three B-26s (70th Squadron) followed with 1,000 lb. bombs, getting one hit on a transport and two on small craft unloading supplies.”³

This was the initiation of the 70th Bomb Squadron into combat!

A diagram of the B-26, showing the various combat crew positions on a typical bombing mission is illustrated on page 162 of the Appendix.

The 42nd Bomb Group history has additional detail, but tells a slightly different story, both with respect to the torpedoes and the date.

“This month marked the initiation of the 70th in actual combat maneuvers. On November 13 General Harmon’s headquarters ordered the Squadron airplanes to Espiritu Santo. Next day, loaded with torpedoes, they took off in flight order and arrived without incident. At Santos the torpedoes of four planes were replaced by two 1,000-pound bombs. Orders were soon given for the Squadron to take off for Guadalcanal. At 1600 of the same day, the planes took off, arriving at the ‘Canal’ at dusk. The night was spent near various foxholes while a naval battle raged off the coast. On the 16th the Squadron saw its first action in an attack on four transports and their landing parties. Lieutenant Griffith’s plane, No. 50, was credited with a direct hit on one of the transports, while the other planes caused considerable damage to personnel and equipment. At noon orders to return to ‘Buttons’ were received and by 1400 all planes except Lieutenant Boden’s and Captain Eddy’s took off.”⁴

The diary of Lt. Ray provides the correct information, both on the date and the handling of the torpedoes:

“Nov. 14. Up at 3:00 a.m., ate and went to the planes, ready to move out. The entire Squadron took off by flights, 15 minutes apart, at 0610. Flew through good weather and landed at Espiritu Santo at 1000. Each plane carried a torpedo, minus exploder. The number of aircraft collected on the field was amazing. We ate lunch consisting of pancakes. Went back to planes where our torpedoes were being exchanged for complete ones...Took off for the Solomon Islands at 1600. Flew in formation as protection against attack

³ Ibid.

⁴ *The Crusaders: A History of the 42nd Bombardment Group (M)*. (Baton Rouge, LA: Army & Navy Pictorial Publishers, 1946), 27.

through fair weather. Arrived at Guadalcanal just before the big naval battle. Sea was covered with oil. Morrison was only one to turn back with engine trouble. Landed at 2000, just at dark. Field was poor for 26s, and we were some time getting down. U.S. AA (anti-aircraft) fired at those circling without landing lights on, due to our unannounced arrival. We parked planes and were hurried off field since it had been shelled previous night. Were driven several miles in captured Jap truck to eat, and could get no transportation back. I went to sleep on ground. Awakened at midnight and was driven to fighter field where I went to sleep in the mud near a dugout. Before I went to sleep, a naval battle started close off shore. The gun flashes, dull booming and star shells were awe inspiring. Jap ships had been intercepted coming in to shell the airport.

Nov. 15. Truck came out at dawn and carried us back to the field where we lined-up for chow. Got halfway down the line when a Jap artillery shell from the hills landed close by. I didn't come any closer to eating for we took cover in dugouts for about two hours. Shells came over regularly with their tell-tale whistle, causing me to hug the ground. Patrol found 3 transports unloading troops on the island. We loaded 500 lb. bombs to attack them, following dive bomber's attack. Cal, Griff and Smith got into the air ahead of us and made hits on and near a transport and landing barges."

The point to be made from Lt. Ray's diary on 14 and 15 November is that the 70th Squadron carried torpedoes to Guadalcanal, not bombs, and that the attacks on the beached transports were made on 15 November, not 16 November 1942.

We have an account from Mark G. Treat, relative to the 14-15 November mission. It is reproduced below:

"We all got up about 0300-0330 on the 14th of Nov. 1942 and had the best breakfast since we'd arrived on the Fijis. We had fresh eggs. Delicious after those tasteless powdered eggs.

The events that day led to our first combat from Henderson Field, Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands. It was just about two weeks after the Red Cross had notified me that our first child, a daughter, Janette Ann, was born in Akron, Ohio on 19 Oct. 1942.

Our crew of B-26 #17550, named *KreJan* for Kretie Griffith and Jan Treat, consisted of: Bill Griffith, pilot; Mark Treat, co-pilot; Dan Sullivan, navigator; Jack Gillis, bombardier; George Snodgrass, radio operator; Tommy Hendrix, top turret gunner and engineer; and Bracey, tail gunner.

We all took off from Nandi, Fiji in mid morning for the flight to Espiritu Santo. Think the whole Squadron except for Fred Durbin and Dick Evans and their crew who had crashed on take off in Hawaii. We had a torpedo as ordinance that I think we picked up in Espiritu Santo. Also had loaded guns.

We waited beside our planes until about mid afternoon. Think we had a sandwich for lunch. At about 1500 I remember hearing someone yelling, 'Everyone in your plane, we're going to Guadalcanal.' So we all jumped in. I don't remember any mission briefing.

Once we got in the air I recall that I learned later that the aircraft with the IFF (identification, friend or foe) had turned back because of mechanical trouble. This led to a problem later when we were trying to go into Henderson Field. Next, as we turned short of Guadalcanal and headed north along the island, I remember suggesting that our gunners test fire the guns to check operation and they did that. We rounded the island northwest of Henderson and turned southeast toward Henderson. We were on the lookout for a Japanese Task Force. I'm sure it's fortunate we didn't find it.

As we got close to Henderson, we started to descend to enter the traffic pattern. But we could see that there was anti-aircraft fire coming up at us, our friendly forces had evidently mistaken us for Mitsubishi bombers since we had approached from the direction of their bases. We entered the traffic pattern and I don't think anyone got hit by the anti-aircraft fire. It was getting dark as we lined up to land. As we got lower and fairly close to the ground we saw an aircraft still on the runway ahead of us and Grif called, 'Gear up.' Instead I pulled up the flaps and we really went down fast. I recovered right away and pulled up gear and we made a go-around.

When we came around again and lined up, the runway was clear. I did put down flaps and then gear and we landed without a problem. As we pulled off the runway, which the tower wanted us to clear quickly to let other planes land, we got off the taxi way and got stuck in the mud. So we just got out and left the plane there for the night. We took our sleeping bags and mosquito nets and maybe a shaving kit.

We were met by trucks, got aboard but didn't know where we were going. I remember that they gave us the password, 'Sassafras.' They said the Japanese couldn't say that without hissing. We ended at the 70th Fighter Squadron area as the location for us to stay. I found a place in the area and put my bed roll on the ground and tied my mosquito net up to some bushes or trees there. We were later told that a Japanese shell had wiped out the 70th Fighter Squadron Headquarters there and some of the people the night before.

We tried to sleep after getting some Spam to eat and the next thing I remember was a Marine guard yelling, 'Everyone in a foxhole!' I went to the entrance of three foxholes and found them full but I think it was Tommy Hendrix in the entrance of the next one. He said, 'Come on in Lt.' And shoved someone farther in and made room for me. I really appreciated that since the shells were falling around us (from Japanese battleships). Think we were there about an hour or two and a guard came by and said we could go

back to our sleeping bags, which I did and fitfully slept until a little after dawn.

The next morning is a little vague, but I recall we were all lined up outside the mess tent. I was surprised to see a Marine approach and say hello to me. It was Jimmy Jones from Kent State University in Ohio, a football player and fraternity brother. Good to see someone from home.

While we were still standing in the chow line, there was an air raid. We scattered but there really wasn't any place to hide, so we got back in line. No one there was hit by falling bombs. I saw some infantry men marching back toward the frontlines and didn't envy them. They looked scared, dejected and dirty. I was happy we were flying. A little later we were shelled from the hills by Japanese big guns. Didn't get hit.

After breakfast we went to the plane and in some way got help and got it out of the mud. Our torpedo had been down-loaded and we had 500 or 1,000 lb. bombs on board. We were briefed to take off and go after (bomb) some transport ships on the coast that had landed or were landing enemy troops near the air field. The mission went well and Jack Gillis, our bombardier, got some good hits on a Japanese transport ship. His hits were confirmed by a Marine pilot who had been flying near us.

Think it was the next day that we were ordered to go back to Espiritu Santo and then to Nandi, Fiji. The story I heard was that we were using too much aviation fuel and there wasn't a lot (of aviation fuel) at Henderson Field."⁵

Clearly, the arrival of the 70th Squadron at Guadalcanal for the first time was, in every sense, chaotic. To paint the picture further, Gil Smith has provided his recollections.

"Dates: November 14, 1942 – Nandi to Buttons 4+00 & Buttons to Cactus 3+55. After almost 8 hours of flying, we arrived at Guadalcanal (Cactus) after dark. We had been instructed to fly around the NW end of Guadalcanal and toward the airfield. When we were within a few miles, make a 180 degree turn and fly back for two minutes, then turn toward the airfield. We followed this procedure and then peeled off over the runway to land toward the north (water). We were directed to maintain radio silence. The tower would shoot a green flare, followed almost immediately by a red one. The pierced steel plank runway was only about half completed and later we found that, after landing, we had to taxi back about half way to get off the runway. How we all landed without running into someone taxiing back, I'll never know. When we would turn onto the downwind leg, the marines on the shore would shoot at us with .50 cal machine guns from the beach. Not a very friendly reception! But they didn't know that we were friendly. My crew and

⁵Treat, Mark A. Letter, 29 January 1996.

I slept under the wings of the airplane until they woke us about 3 a.m. and had us load up with 500 pound bombs and at daybreak bomb the transports which had beached about 5 miles from the airfield after we had landed. Although my Form 5 shows only one local flight besides the flight back to Buttons that day, I know that I flew a bombing mission against the ships at 8 or 9 thousand and then loaded up with 100 pounders and bombed along the shoreline where the troops and equipment had been unloaded. On the flights that we made at Guadalcanal, we used half the fuel that they had. All fuel had to be barged over from Tulagi.”⁶

Torpedo Decision

Looking back, our downloading of torpedoes and the loading of bombs was the correct decision. Given a shortage of aviation fuel and a tactical situation at that time which involved swarms of Japanese invading Guadalcanal, it was clear that the situation called for bombs, not torpedoes. As it turned out, we never dropped a torpedo in a combat situation and we never carried a torpedo again. The U.S. Navy torpedo maintenance unit, attached earlier to the 70th Squadron, was turned back to the Navy along with whatever torpedoes we had at the time. It was good riddance. A large, twin-engine bomber plus a 6-7 man combat crew was not needed to drop a single torpedo.

Low-level Attack

John F. Sharp has provided an account of the situation on Guadalcanal on 15 November and an attack he and others made that day at low-level against Japanese troops assembling in the jungle not far from the beached transports:

“The 70th Bomb Squadron with short-wing Marauders was based in Fiji in 1942. In the Solomon Islands, the Marines had just taken Henderson Field on Guadalcanal, code name ‘Cactus,’ and the Japanese were hell bent on getting it back. In a massive attempt to save face, they had assembled a humongous task force with fresh troops, equipment and warships. This time they fully intended to overwhelm any defenses the Americans could muster.

On the 13th of November, we were alerted to ‘prepare for torpedo action in the Solomons. We spent the rest of the day uploading torpedoes on all ten airplanes. We got the order and took off early the next morning. We landed at Espiritu Santo, code name ‘Buttons,’ and were held there. A giant naval battle was in progress on Guadalcanal and its outcome was uncertain. Radio communications had been lost and B-17 reconnaissance painted a dismal picture. The American Navy was withdrawing leaving the Japanese in control of the sea. The ‘Cactus Air Force’ was fully involved and was sustaining casualties.

⁶ Smith, Gilbert G. Letter, 26 May 1997.

Finally, in one desperate move, the Navy Command dispatched our Marauders to 'Sink any ship in the water,' a real No-Win situation.

Off again in flight order armed to the teeth, we headed for 'Cactus' hunting for ships and not knowing who held the airfield. Arriving at dusk, we saw no ships; and when we landed, the Navy took our torpedoes and said they would give us bombs to attack the task force at daylight. The CO (Stef) and I were taken to the command post to await instructions. It was a dimly lit tent with people speaking in low tones. The invasion was inevitable.

At about 11 o'clock, all Hell broke loose. The sky lit up, the sea lit up and another major sea battle was underway. Two of our newest battleships had slipped out of hiding and intercepted the Japanese Task Force. The invasion was on so we went back to the airplanes to await target assignments.

At daylight somebody in a jeep came by and said, 'A' Flight change the bomb load — 20 100 pounders — the troops have landed and we've got to get 'em!' Oh, no. I didn't have enough bomb shackles. I sent Al, my bombardier, to a wrecked B-17 to get all the shackles he could. The bombs arrived about the same time and we started loading manually. About halfway through, I got the crew aboard and started engines. When Al came aboard, I moved out and right into a rolling take-off.

We were first off and immediately saw 4 large troop transports beached less than two miles away. I climbed to 2,500 ft. and flew behind them. There was a lot of activity around the ships but the bulk of the troops were assembling in the jungle about 150 yards in front. These troops could not be allowed to link up with the main attack force. This was our target. Just past the transports, I started a diving turn towards the beach. The turret gunner started raking the ships. We could see the troops and I turned towards them for a low-level attack. No package guns, Al toggled out the bombs. Oops! Too low! We got a hell of a jolt when our string of bombs hit. Major Stefanowicz followed me and Lieutenant Cressy followed him. We returned to Henderson and prepared to re-arm.

The rest of the Squadron was now taking off to bomb the ships with 500 and 1,000 pounders. Any bomb dropped in that quarter-mile square was effective because there was so much activity concentrated there. The ships were clobbered and the Japanese never got their heavy equipment off the decks.

My airplane had been hit several times with small arms fire and one big hole up through the wing just missing the gas tank. The situations had been touch and go until noon and we may have used most of the bombs the Navy had because we never were re-armed. They were also short of gas because they asked if we could make it back to 'Buttons' on the gas we had. Every combat and support element had been used and stretched to the limit, but our

perimeter held. Henderson Field was in extreme peril on November 15 and it is possible that our ten Marauders were a key element in this victory at Guadalcanal because we were the only heavy strike force available that morning.”⁷

Captain Callaham Crew Loss

Lt. Ray's diary continues on 15 November regarding the bombing of the transports and, later that day, the loss of Captain Callaham's crew returning from Guadalcanal:

“Nov. 15. In end, all transports were afire and we were told not to take-off, but load 100 pounders to drop on the beach. Stef and Sharp dropped theirs, receiving holes in planes from AA, which was constantly thrown up. We finally stood by with 500 pounders to hit a task force out at sea. It was lost, and we were cheated out of the fun all around. Ordered back to New Hebrides due to gas shortage and took off at 1450. Weather extremely bad. Had to fly just off the water. Whole squadron nearly hit a mountain due to navigation error. We were on it in a second and all of us had a close call in getting over or around. Later, Cal called on radio and said he was making forced landing because of prop trouble. He was seen to land in a heavy sea, the ship going over on its back. I am afraid it hit too hard for anyone to survive. The crew consisted of Callaham, McNeese, Hufstedler, Feldman, 3 enlisted men and a Marine passenger. I am trying to make myself believe they are still alive for each was a very close friend. That plane was the leader of our flight and fills a big part of our daily life. Landed at 1910, ate and went to sleep under the wing of the plane...Cal went down at 12° 37' S — 163° 50' E, 237 miles from the New Hebrides.”

The three enlisted men were S/Sgt. Frank L. House, Pfc. Richard Gray, and Pfc. John E. Lawler. There are two additional accounts of the Callaham ditching. A recent letter from Mark Treat contained further information on the loss of the Callaham crew. Mark Treat was a member of Capt. Callaham's "C" flight.

“Capt. Walter ‘Cal’ Callaham was leading our flight back to Espiritu Santo and we were flying just off the water in a driving rain. I heard him call on the radio, ‘Pull up, pull up.’ We did, and you could see through the rain that we were climbing up the side of an island. We got down to about 150 mph and I could see it was clearer to our right, so I advanced to full throttle on both engines, turned the plane to the right and cleared the island.

Shortly after, Cal called us and said, ‘We’re having trouble, losing power and are going in follow me down, if you see us.’ I thought it was his plane

⁷ Sharp, John F. Letter, 5 December 1995.

that I saw ahead, but it didn't try to land. Cal and his crew tried to land in the water, but we didn't hear any more of them."⁸

Continuing Lt. Ray's account of the Callaham ditching, we have the following information from his diary the next day at Espiritu Santo.

"Nov. 16. Made repairs on plane today, cleaning guns, loading ammunition, etc. Sent man to Solomons with replacement parts for Eddy's and Boden's planes which broke down and remained yesterday. PBYs went out patrolling the spot where Cal went down. They didn't find them, but did locate 3 men from a TBF on a raft. It looks the worst for Cal and the rest. This life is telling on some of the fellows, several are sick. Went to sleep at the plane. Awoke at midnight to load bombs. We are to return to the Solomons and make raid on Jap harbor at Bougainville. It is to be a raid by combination of B-26, P-38 and B-17 planes."

Capt. John Sharp, "A" Flight leader has provided additional information on the Callaham ditching by letter in the following account:

"I was in radio contact with Cal and told him I was turning back to cover him. I watched it less than a mile away. Cal said his propellers were surging and he couldn't control them. In the few seconds before ditching we only talked about controlling the propellers, not realizing at that point that it was the engines that were failing. I was over him in about 10 seconds — airplane upside down — tail gone. Made a tight turn to come back and drop a life raft. Airplane sinking and almost gone out of sight. Koch (Capt. Sharp's navigator) gave coordinates to the Navy and had destroyers there the next morning. No sign of our guys, but they did find a TBF crew on a life raft."⁹

Connie Ray's diary entry of 15 November, as written above, clearly states that the "whole Squadron nearly hit mountain" and that later, Captain Callaham "called and said that he was making a forced landing." Also in the diary entry we are given the position of the ditching as 12° 37' S and 163° 50' E, 237 miles from the New Hebrides. It is noted also from Mark Treat's account that Mark heard Captain Callaham call, "Pull up, pull up," and that Mark found himself "climbing the side of an island" and later, Cal called to say, "Losing power and going in." John Sharp's account, however, makes no mention of encountering an island in connection with the Callaham ditching.

Mysterious Island

The island in question is a mystery. Research on nautical chart number 82020, which covers the area from the Solomon Islands to the New Hebrides,¹⁰ reveals that the geographic coordinates of the ditching lie on or near the course line between the Solomons and the

⁸ Treat, Mark A. Letter, 29 January 1996.

⁹ Sharp, John F. Letter, 19 March 1996.

¹⁰ U.S. Defense Mapping Agency. *Solomon Islands to Vanuatu*. 82020. 7th ed. 1996.

Hebrides and that the cited distance of 237 miles from the Hebrides coincides with the reported coordinates. The mystery lies in the fact that there are no islands of any sort appearing along the course line or within a 100-mile radius of the ditching site.

Does anyone have the answer? It may be that the island was so small that it does not show on the chart which has a scale of 1:1,660,000; however, the depth of the ocean in the area of the ditching is reported as 3,932 meters. It's a puzzlement!

After raising the above question about the mysterious island, Gil Smith provided a contribution that, with reasonable certainty, identifies the island as San Cristobal, the southern-most island in the Solomon Island group. Gil Smith's input follows:

"Date: November 15, 1942 — Since the supply of fuel was so critical at Guadalcanal and they didn't want to have a bunch of B-26s on the ground, they sent us back to Buttons (Espiritu Santo in the New Hebrides Islands). Walt Callaham, with 'C' Flight was leading the formation. I was on his right wing, and Griff was on his left wing. I don't recall where other 70th airplanes were in the formation.

We took off toward the water, formed up, javelin down, and headed southeast. We were climbing up over an island (San Cristobal, I believe) and it looked like we would not be able to clear the mountain tops because they extended up into the clouds. Someone in the flight said, turn right or something like that. I don't know if it was Sharp or Eddy but we all, including Cal turned to the right and flew around the island at a lower altitude. Shortly after this we dropped down to, not more than 150 feet above the water. We approached what turned out to be the heaviest weather front that I had ever seen. It was raining so hard that I couldn't see my own wingtips. Wing-men turned right and left, in the soup, to give them clearance from other aircraft. Normal procedure for weather penetration was to turn 45 degrees, fly one minute, then take up the original heading until clear of weather. I turned the 45 degrees but instead of stopping the turn back, I looked off my left wing and was not more than 100 feet above the water in a vertical bank to the left. With the Lord's help, I managed to level out. Shortly thereafter, I saw another B-26 at my altitude and I dropped down and crossed just under him. I heard Cal and John Sharp talking. That had to be one of my closest calls of all my flying. No one felt worse than I did when we lost Cal and his crew. He was a great leader."¹¹

An indication of the possible cause of the Callaham ditching is found in the diary entry of Lt. Ray, written the following day at Santos:

"Nov. 17. Got up early and waited for take-off time, which didn't come until afternoon. When the Squadron started up their engines, half the planes were having trouble and had to remain behind. We were one of them. Capt.

¹¹ Smith, Gilbert G. Letter, 26 May 1997.

Sharp returned after getting a half hour out. On investigation, troubles were found in the conduit to the plugs on outside bank of cylinders full of water causing them to short out. This an unusual and unheard of failure in B-26s. The terrific rain that we came through yesterday must have been to blame. This may have been Cal's trouble. Those to complete the trip were Stef, Morrison, Cressy and will be joined by Eddy and Boden for raid. I wanted to go badly. Had my heart set on a Luger pistol taken from a Jap."

If this produces an image of a small force, it is because it was precisely that. With the Callahan crew loss, our B-26 inventory was now down to nine aircraft. We received no replacements from the U.S. The upcoming raid on 18 November to Bougainville harbor, combining our B-26s with the B-17s and the P-38s, could not have involved a total force of more than twenty-five aircraft. Compared to aircraft operations elsewhere in the world, we were operating on a shoestring.

November 18 Mission

In his diary, Lt. Ray gives us an excellent report and a critique of the 18 November mission:

"Nov. 18. Engines were dried out and made ready to go again. In late afternoon, the boys returned (Stef, Morrison, Cressy, Eddy and Boden). They made raid on Bougainville Strait this morning. They arrived at target ahead of B-17 and P-38 planes and were all attacked on bombing run by about 6 Zeros which were circling over their field. They bombed their target that was boats in harbor making only one hit because of Zero interference. They didn't see any results of the P-38s. Two Zeros were shot down without putting a scratch on our planes. The speed of the 26s fooled them in their pass, making them a good target for turret and tail. As they left, Zeros just poured up from their base and intercepted the B-17s that were shot up very badly. The plane in which Col. Saunders was riding (B-17) was shot down, but it is possible to rescue him. That was our only loss. It was a mistake not making the airport the 26 target. They arrived by surprise, and could have ruined the runway with 500 lb. bombs in train. The P-38s could follow up strafing. After that no or very few Jap planes could have taken off, giving the B-17s a field day with the ships in the harbor. I wish it had worked that way."

Relative to the above mission, additional information from the 42nd Bomb Group history reveals that of the two Japanese aircraft shot down, one was by tail-gunner Kittle in Lt. Boden's aircraft, and the other by tail-gunner Doerr in Captain Eddy's ship. Also, regarding the shoot-down of Colonel Saunders in the B-17, the 13th Air Force history reports that the aircraft crash-landed on the water at Baga Island, just of Vella Lavella, and that all survivors reached shore in rubber rafts and were rescued the following afternoon by a PBY.

Aircraft Loss in Fiji

On Christmas Eve of 1942 in Fiji, according to 42nd Bomb Group records, Lieutenant Morrison took off on a practice-bombing mission and after landing, his nose gear collapsed. The aircraft caught fire and was totally destroyed, while the crew escaped. Our dwindling inventory was now down to eight aircraft.

Back to Guadalcanal

The 70th Squadron was ordered back to Guadalcanal in January 1943 for additional combat duty. The U.S. foothold on the island was more secure and the aviation gasoline situation on the island had improved somewhat. The fuel, incidentally, was brought ashore in 55 gallon drums loaded on barges. Refueling of the aircraft was accomplished by means of hand pumps and hoses. Small refueling trucks were few and far between.

Lyman Eddy Shoot-down and Rescue

Early in January 1943, Captain Eddy's aircraft (41-17586) was hit in the right engine and set afire by Japanese anti-aircraft. He was leading a six-aircraft formation over Munda, a Japanese airfield. The dramatic story of the shoot-down and rescue of Captain Eddy and his crew has been written in detail by Mr. W. Roger Soles, who at that time was the navigator on the crew. (For Munda, *see* page 160 of the Appendix.

"I remember very well the morning of January 3, 1943. It was Sunday, and we had waited under the airplane since shortly after dawn. Finally, we got our target for the mission that was Munda Air Field, a new airfield being built by the Japanese. We had already bombed it three times in the preceding two days without much interference except light to moderate flak. Hence, we thought of this mission as a milk run.

Finally, we took off shortly after 11:00 and had an uneventful trip to the Island of New Georgia. Munda Air Field was located on the south side of the northwest tip of New Georgia Island. We made a bombing run coming in over land on a northwest heading. Our airplane was the lead ship of the three-plane flight. My assignment as navigator was to navigate until we started the bombing run, then go back and take pictures of the results of the bombing using a hand-held camera and then to man one of the waist guns if we were attacked by Zeros.

I was in the back of the airplane taking pictures when I heard the shell hit the right engine. Apparently, it was a direct hit in the oil tank, spraying oil all over the engine that immediately caught on fire. Flames were coming in the back of the airplane, so I called the tail gunner out of the tail and told him, the radio operator, and the top turret gunner to put on their parachutes. Then, I went back through the bomb bay to my seat up front where I had left my parachute. I sat down in the parachute and buckled up.

By that time, Eddy had made a left-hand turn of the airplane and we were over water. He had sounded the alarm for us to bail out. The bombardier had come out of the nose, and he and I prepared to bail out. I jumped out tail first (or fanny first) since I figured that was the biggest part of me, and I remember very clearly the next few moments. It was very quiet and very cool when compared to the heat and noise in the airplane. I watched the airplane fly off, and then I decided I would see if the parachute would work. My chute opened with no problem, and I drifted down towards the ocean. I saw Coon and his parachute not far from me, but I saw no other parachute.

As I approached the water, I remember very distinctly throwing away the rip cord which was still in my hand, and I hit the water probably going under three or four feet but immediately popping back to the surface. I inflated my Mae West but had a problem getting free of the parachute. My feet were tangled in the shroud lines, so I pulled off my shoes and let them go with the parachute and swam away. About that time, one of the wing men, Art Martin¹² who had followed us down, threw out his life raft some two or three hundred yards from where I was in the water. I started swimming towards it, but when I was about half way, I saw Charles Coon get to it, inflate it, and get in. He was between me and Rendova Island, and he started paddling away from me until I yelled at him and he came back and picked me up. Then, he and I started paddling towards Rendova.

We saw several Japanese airplanes on two or three occasions but always at altitude, and none came down to spot us. We had already planned to get out of the life raft and turn it over (the bottom of the life raft is blue and not easily spotted) if any Japanese airplanes came down low. It was slow going in the strong currents, but late in the afternoon we got close to Rendova Island.

We could see a coconut plantation on the north end of the Island, so we headed towards the middle. As we approached the island, we saw someone walking on the shore but he disappeared. We decided to go on in anyway, hoping it was one of our crew or a friendly native. As we approached the shore, we could see the bright yellow of the Mae West the person was wearing. We went on in and found that it was Eddy. He had a very badly broken shoulder and was in very poor shape. We had seen no other member of the crew, although all afternoon we had looked carefully on the water, had seen things bobbing in the water several times, paddled over, and each time the object proved to be floating coconuts which we brought aboard the life raft.

We tried to make Eddy comfortable in the sand, but he was needing water very badly. The only weapon we had was a machete that Coon had saved

¹² Capt. Arthur Martin from Fresno, California, along with 18 other men, was killed in 1944 when three B-25s ran together during a low-level fly-over during our Saturday morning parade. He was a close friend and my BOQ roommate at Greenville, S.C. Army Air Base.

from his parachute backpack. We also had a rubber bucket that came out of the life raft. He and I took these with us to go looking for water. We went north towards the coconut plantation. We didn't know whether there were Japs on Rendova or not, but as we neared the plantation we discovered footprints in the sand and whoever made the footprints was wearing shoes. We didn't believe any natives wore shoes. It was getting dark by that time, so we decided to go back to Eddy and feed him some coconut milk rather than water — at least until morning.

The next morning before dawn, Coon and I headed back north to search for water and shortly after we passed the spot where we had turned around the night before, we found a stream coming down out of the jungle but ending about 40 or 50 yards from the ocean. We tasted the water, and it was fresh. We drank our fill and then carried a bucket full back to Eddy. We also fed him some coconut meat from one of the coconuts. He was in pretty bad shape, but we decided we needed to move south around the point to get out of sight of Munda Air Field. We expected (or rather hoped) that the Navy would send a PBY up to pick us up, and we wanted to get out of sight of the Jap installation if we could. We put Eddy in the life raft and started paddling south.

Shortly thereafter, we ran into Doerr and Wilhite who had floated into Rendova sometime during the night, about midnight they thought. Wilhite had been badly burned when the flames came in the rear of the airplane. Doerr and Wilhite had gotten together out in the water but when Doerr became completely exhausted, Wilhite, despite his burns, pulled him for the last four hours before they got to the Island. Doerr had lost all of his clothes, so Coon and I took off our underwear and gave it both to Doerr and Wilhite — Doerr to clothe him and Wilhite to wrap around his severely burned arms and legs. Incidentally, shortly thereafter, we found more water up in the jungle and replenished our supply.

We again proceeded south on the coast, some walking and some paddling Eddy, and about a mile further down we ran into Sayger who had drifted in about daybreak. I remember he still had his shoes on, and he was the only one who had shoes. I marveled that he would stay in the water that long and keep his shoes, but they served him well for the next two days.

The six of us proceeded on down the coast, occasionally stopping to rest. During the afternoon a couple of P-39s made a sweep down Rendova and spotted us. One of the pilots threw out his cigarettes, but they fell in the ocean and we did not recover them. This lifted our spirits because we thought that the Navy would certainly send a PBY.

We spent the second night on the edge of the jungle back from the beach and witnessed the bombardment of Munda Air Field by our Naval ships. Shortly after daybreak the next morning, we saw a boat coming towards shore.

We didn't know whether the occupants were friendly or Japanese, so we hid in the jungle and watched them. As they got nearer, we could see that they were wearing yellow Mae Wests and paddling a life raft. We thought that they might have bailed out of an airplane during the night. There had been a lot of airplanes flying around while the shelling was going on. I remember remarking that if we could get a few more men we might be able to take this little island. After the men from the life raft came ashore, Eddy and Wilhite, our two men who were injured, went out to investigate them while the rest of us stayed in the jungle with our clubs which we had armed ourselves with. Shortly thereafter, we heard them speaking English, so all of us came out of the jungle.

Our rescuers were a Lieutenant Davis from Chicago and a Chief Gunner's Mate whose name I do not recall, but they identified themselves as coming from the *Grayback*. I remember asking what is the *Grayback* and was relieved to find out it was an American submarine which they assured us was lying just off shore. After the naval bombing the night before, these men volunteered to go into Rendova Island to look for us. They knew within four or five miles where we were but they came in exactly where we were. However, they had planned to come under cover of darkness, but they had so many problems with the currents and the rubber boat that it was broad daylight when they came in. They told us we would make contact with the submarine during the day and that we could all go aboard that night.

During that day, a New Zealand Lockheed Hudson airplane came searching for us. It made several passes up and down the Island, but we had hidden hoping that it would go away and not attract attention to us. However, when this didn't succeed, we decided to stand out where the pilot could count and find that there were eight of us and perhaps he would realize that the submarine had made contact with us. We did not succeed in delivering this message to him, so he made another pass and dropped out two parachutes — one in the ocean which we didn't retrieve, and one in the edge of the jungle which we did retrieve. In that package was a map of the Island showing Japanese installations on each end and the location of a coast watcher¹³ in the hills on the other side of Rendova Island. Also, there was food, fish hooks, money, and a couple of pistols, I believe. We ate some of the food, and this was the first food I had eaten since I left Guadalcanal.

We considered the situation and unanimously agreed that we would stay with the Navy and go aboard the submarine that night. After dark, we used

¹³ Coast watchers were a dedicated and daring group of Australian and New Zealand naval personnel, island officials and others who lived in the Solomon Islands before the war. When the Japs took the Islands, they moved back up in the hills and lived off the land supported by air drops of food and equipment. With their radios, they kept watch on Japanese ship and plane movements and reported them to the allies. They were also responsible for saving many fliers who were shot down.

our life raft as well as the Navy life raft, and we all paddled out to the submarine.

We spent the next 16 days aboard the submarine on war patrol, at the end of which we went into Brisbane, Australia, where the submarine tender was stationed. Incidentally, after the Navy picked us up, they continued on war patrol but somehow the message that we had been picked up was not delivered to the Army until after we arrived in Australia. The coast watcher sent some natives over to look for us on Rendova. They found where we had gotten the parachute drop, where we had eaten some of the food and had buried the rest of it, and simply disappeared. He reported that he didn't know what had happened to us, whether we had been captured or what.

After I rejoined the outfit some time later, my friends told me that they had continued to bomb Munda Air Field and they kidded me about how they figured the Japanese had us down there filling up the holes they were making in the runways. I also told the P-39 pilot who threw his cigarettes in the ocean that he should have gone to bombardier school.

Except for the depth charges and the aerial bombs, I thoroughly enjoyed my trip on the submarine. Its officers and men were the finest people I have ever been associated with. We had much in common. Lieutenant Davis and the Chief Gunner's Mate were very brave men to land on Rendova looking for us. Incidentally, the United States Army made the next landing on Rendova exactly six months later, July 3, 1943."¹⁴

Captain Behling Crew and Aircraft Loss

Later on January 7, Captain Behling of the 69th (our sister Squadron) using one of the 70th Squadron aircraft (Mark Treat's 41-17550) was shot down on a low-level attack on Rekata Bay, a Japanese base in the Central Solomons. The tree-top mission encountered a heavy curtain of ground fire from automatic weapons. The entire 70th Squadron at Guadalcanal was greatly affected by this crew loss. We knew "Linc" and the others very well and admired them all.

With our aircraft inventory now down to six aircraft, it might be useful to turn from combat missions for a time and review the situation on Guadalcanal to provide some sense of how we lived, slept and operated in this jungle environment.

Guadalcanal Living Conditions

We lived in canvas pyramidal tents with dirt floors — generally three or four to a tent. We slept on the usual cross-legged canvas cots, under what was termed a "mosquito-bar." A mosquito bar consisted of T-shaped metal rods at the head and foot of the cot, over which we suspended a mosquito netting. (Malaria!) The usual drill in going to bed was first to try to

¹⁴ Soles, W. Roger. Report, 8 December 1987.

kill all the mosquitoes inside the netting, and then to tuck it in all around to avoid their entry during the night. All of this worked fine, except that we rarely had a peaceful night's sleep without an air raid of some sort, or even false alarms, which had the same effect.

The procedure for air raids was to don the tin helmet, rub on mosquito lotion, jump out of the sack and run for the nearest foxhole or anything below ground level. With regular and frequent air raid drills, this turned out to be very annoying and nerve-frazzling. Stef, Sharp and Larson, living in one tent, hit upon the idea of digging a foxhole in the floor of the tent, large enough to hold all three. This cut down on the running, but didn't entirely solve the problem — we still had to get out of bed, put on a helmet and rub on the mosquito lotion. Later, we made our tent foxhole a little more livable by lining the bottom and sides with burlap bags.

Washing Machine Charlie

The main culprit on the regular Japanese night air raids was "Washing Machine Charlie." Much has been said and much has been written about him. The stories differ in detail, but not in substance. First, Washing Machine Charlie flew at a very high altitude which, at that time, was beyond the mission performance of the P-61 night fighters. Next, he invariably flew at night, making several passes over us in the course of a single evening. Some passes were dry runs and on other runs he might drop a bomb or two. Sometimes he hit something and did damage, but most times he missed by wide margins. This could and did go on for hours. We believed it was a long-range maritime patrol boat, rigged to carry a few bombs. The name Washing Machine Charlie derived from the wah-wah, wah-wah sound of unsynchronized propellers that the engines on the aircraft always produced.

All we can be sure of is that the Japanese were very clever in making sure that we rarely got a good night's rest — harassing us was undoubtedly the major, if not the whole purpose.

Washing Machine Charlie was by no means the only source of attack on Henderson Field. We also had "Pistol Pete" up in the hills. Pistol Pete was the name given to Japanese artillery on the hillside above Henderson Field. As the name may imply, it was not a single artillery piece, but a number of pieces. Caves were used as shelter and the artillery was wheeled out to fire a few rounds and then hidden in caves. Eventually, they were all located and wiped out.

Air attacks on Henderson Field were not limited to night or to high altitude. Ed Sethness has written about a low-level morning attack by a lone Japanese bomber, witnessed by many in our squadron.

Lone Japanese Bomber

"One early morning, some of us had the opportunity to see one of these (twin-engine bombers) at close range. As I remember it, three of us (three B-26 crews) were getting ready for a run up to Munda. We were alongside Henderson Field relieving ourselves before getting into the planes when suddenly a Betty bomber came out of the clouds inland where the hills were

and came straight down the runway, strafing anything in the way. Some of us drew our .45 automatics from their holsters and fired at the Jap plane. What a thrill! We didn't seem to affect him, but there was one of our boys from the fighter squadron circling overhead (as I remember it was a P-38) and he peeled off and BINGO, he blew up the Betty bomber and it looked like a giant firecracker exploding. Wow! It made us feel soooo good."¹⁵

Outdoor Movie

We had an outdoor movie on Guadalcanal, built in a natural, Roman-style amphitheater, with equipment and films provided by the Navy. One night, with the movie well underway, bombs started dropping nearby without the usual air-raid warning. Everyone panicked. The immediate reaction of the projectionist was to cut off the movie and douse all lighting, plunging the area into absolute darkness. This created bedlam among the movie-goers. An account of the incident has been provided to us by Stef, our Squadron Commander:

"Our 'theater' was a hillside a few blocks from our tent. We were watching a movie one night when the bombs began detonating close by. The first thought was to get to the tent and the foxhole, which was up hill. As I ran up hill to get to the tent, some fellow three times my size was running down hill for his foxhole. We met head on in a collision that made me see stars and peeled my nose of most of its skin. I lost about twenty yards on that one. When I picked myself up and put the skin back on my nose, I completed the run back to the tent and dove into the foxhole. There I bathed in blood and perspiration listening to the quiet of the Guadalcanal evening. The bombing raid was over."¹⁶

How We Operated

In short, we did those things that worked and eliminated those that didn't. It was a matter of trial and error, or, in one sense OJT (on-the-job training). To be more specific, we knew quite well by now the capabilities and limitations of our B-26 aircraft. We knew, for example, that we could take-off from Henderson Field, rendezvous over Koli Point, and reach Buin or Shortland Harbor on the south end of Bougainville Island with a load of bombs plus a full load of ammunition for all guns. The radius of action in this case was 300 nautical miles or 347 statute miles, using only the main and auxiliary tanks in the wings. Although we had the capability of carrying 4,000 pounds of bombs, we rarely, if ever, carried that amount on a mission of that distance — more often, it was 2 or 3 thousand pounds.

Those in charge of operations from Guadalcanal, on the other hand, knew what missions they wanted accomplished, but they did not know the aircraft as well as we did. The solution as to what missions were to be flown, therefore, generally involved discussion and mutual agreement between the two parties. We had no significant disagreements in this regard. After all, we were both fighting the same war and everyone wanted to do his part.

¹⁵ Sethness, Edward. Letter, 17 February 1994.

¹⁶ Stefen, Leroy L. *Bombs Away!* September 1992, 3.

Mission Briefings

Pre-mission briefings, always personally conducted by Major Stefonowicz, were simple and direct, giving the essentials relative to the target, bombload, rendezvous, altitudes, route in, initial point, route out, fighter escort, expected opposition, etc. Upon return from missions, we were interrogated as to mission results: what we hit, what we saw, enemy opposition, battle damage, weather conditions, etc. Every mission had its lessons learned and we were not averse to learning.

Mission Debriefings

One aspect of post-mission debriefs was quite bothersome. The annoyance had to do with the eternal question of, "What did you hit?" The question came from Intelligence Officers asking details about bomb hits — not at all sensitive to the pilot's need, with anti-aircraft bursts all around, to get the hell out of there.

We had no aerial cameras and our bombardiers had to stand, literally, on their heads if they were to follow their bombs all the way to the ground.

On a bombing mission over Munda, I was flying co-pilot for Stef. We had agreed on a procedure whereby I would leave the co-pilot seat on the bombing run, lean out over the open bomb bay doors and visually follow our bombs all the way down. I don't remember if I wore my chute, or left it in the seat.

The procedure worked and, on that mission, we were able to report with absolute certainty that our string of bombs crossed the Munda Airfield runway in a shallow "x" pattern. It was a satisfying experience in one sense, but I don't recall ever doing it again.

Weather

Fiji and Guadalcanal lie in a band of latitude ranging between 9 and 18 degrees south of the equator, producing tropical climate and weather, which was warm and even hot at times. We wore lightweight cotton clothing the year around. On missions, we generally wore summer flying suits and, occasionally, A-2 jackets. In season, rains were frequent and heavy — some storms lasting only a few minutes, while other downpours could last for 2–3 days.

One rather unique feature of the weather had to do with cloud formation over islands. With virtually all of our flying time over water, it was not unusual to see isolated cloud formations develop over islands in a sky that would otherwise be absolutely cloudless. This cloud phenomenon could even be seen over the smallest of the islands, giving us good checkpoints and telling us generally that land was below.

Pierced Steel Planking (PSP)

The island of Guadalcanal, rather than being formed by coral, was volcanic in origin. As a consequence, Henderson Field had been bulldozed through a jungle growth, which we were told, had once been a coconut plantation. Jungle growth does not provide as substantial a

foundation for an aircraft runway as might be obtained from a coral base. This generated a problem, but there was a partial solution in the use of pierced steel planking (PSP).

PSP consisted of long sections of interlocking steel matting, approximately sixteen inches wide, with circular perforations. These were laid on the jungle floor for the length and width of the entire runway. The purpose was to prevent heavy aircraft, such as the B-26 and B-17, from bogging down in the spongy jungle mud and undergrowth.

The principle was good and it permitted operations that otherwise would have been virtually impossible. It had its negative aspects, however. Pilots learned that a heavily loaded aircraft on take-off roll would depress the matting under the main gear and thereby induce a "mound" of PSP in front of the gear which produced the unusual sensation of a take-off roll with built-in braking pressure. The opposite, of course, was also true. On landing, one had automatic, built-in braking.

In summarizing the situation of the 70th Bomb Squadron on Henderson Field in January 1943, it can be said with accuracy that we had been shelled by Japanese warships; fired upon by artillery from the hills; bombed regularly day and night; experienced food shortages and lack of sleep; were subjected to malaria and other tropical diseases; lacked aviation fuel and spare parts, etc.; but we never had a man chicken-out in a combat situation. We took what the Japanese threw at us and, in our small way, gave them everything we had in return.

Notwithstanding our limited inventory, now down to six aircraft, we continued to fly combat and search missions on a regular and frequent basis. Some of these missions had become comparatively routine, such as our regular plastering of Munda Airfield (eleven times in January); while others were unique, both in the type of mission flown and in results. Two of these missions will be covered here in some detail.

Night Skip Bombing

As an example of one of the 70th Squadron missions using skip-bombing techniques, we have an account of a low-level, night mission from Guadalcanal "up the slot" to Bougainville harbor in the Solomons. The story is written from memory over fifty years later by our Squadron Commander, now Colonel Leroy L. Stefen, USAF (Retired):

"In early 1943 the United States and Japan had reached a sort of stalemate in the Solomon Islands. U.S. troops held Henderson Field in the south end of the Solomon Islands, and Japan dominated the north part of the Solomons with main forces in Bougainville. We sent raids against their northern bases like Munda and Bougainville, and they sent their night raider, Washing Machine Charlie, to keep us in our foxholes most of the night. They also sent some raids against us during daylight.

Reconnaissance missions were regularly made into Japanese held territory so that we would know as much as possible about their activities. In January a recon flight brought back pictures of a tanker with thirty Zero fighter airplanes strapped on deck making its way along the eastern shore of Bougainville

headed for their big base at the southern tip of the island. What a tempting target!

The Navy was running air operations at Guadalcanal. The question at that time was what kind of airplane should they send to attack that tanker. The dive bombers and torpedo bombers had too little range to fly such a mission, so it turned out that our B-26 was the only airplane then available with enough range to attempt it.

Perhaps the ideal weapon would have been a torpedo, but with a torpedo hung beneath the airplane the B-26 could not fly a mission of that distance either. However, with bombs carried internally the range was adequate, so we were asked to send two B-26s with 500 pound bombs to find and attack the tanker. These bombs were to have four second delay fuses. The tactics were to fly low to the target and release the bombs so that they hit the side of the ship, sink for four seconds and detonate close to the ship below the water line. This was a maneuver we had practiced many times against a canvas strip target erected on an unpopulated island off the coast of Fiji. For the safety of the airplane and crew, this mission was to be flown at night. There was a full moon, so any target ship found could be seen as a silhouette in the moonlight. The mission had to be timed so the airplane could land back at Henderson in daylight. It was determined that night takeoffs were OK, but night landings were too hazardous. So the mission was planned to take off at 2 a.m. and return four hours later and land about 6 a.m., at which time it would be daylight.

Gil Smith and I volunteered to fly the mission. Gil flew the planned mission but didn't see any suitable target so returned to Henderson with his bombs. It would be nice at this point to report that we found, attacked and sank the tanker therefore destroying thirty Zero fighters. Such was not the case. We flew up the slot to Bougainville and headed right to look for the tanker along the east coast. The moon was bright creating a large illuminated area on the water. We spotted what appeared to be a Japanese destroyer, but passed it up as being too small and too poor a target compared to a tanker with 30 Zeros on deck.

We continued our search up the east coast of Bougainville, but didn't find anything, and we were concerned about our fuel. We gave up the search for the tanker, but reasoned that it might be well to try to do some good on the mission by attacking the destroyer, the smaller target. Bill Schuster was our bombardier. I told him that he should be the one to release the bombs so that I could concentrate on evasive maneuvers in case the destroyer started shooting at us. Apparently our attack was a surprise, because we did not see or hear any guns being fired at us.

We made our attack on the destroyer that was clearly silhouetted in the moonlight. It was the prescribed low altitude attack, in a slight dive, two

hundred miles an hour. Bill Schuster released the bombs at what appeared to be the proper split second, and we flew directly over the destroyer, probably waking the crew. If so, they got a second wake up call four seconds later when the bombs detonated. Our tail gunner could see the flash of the explosions. By that time we were very concerned about having enough fuel to get back to Guadalcanal, so we didn't linger in the area to see if the destroyer sank or not.

This was not a very glamorous ending to what could have been a really exciting mission. Imagine a low altitude mission, at night, by an Army Air Corps B-26, four second delay fuses in 500 pound bombs, sinking a Japanese tanker carrying much needed fuel to Bougainville, going down with thirty Zeros on deck. What a story that would have been. Such a story was not to be. Instead we attacked a destroyer with undetermined results. This is a kind of weak ending to what could have been a great story."¹⁷

Although Colonel Stefen modestly speaks of a rather "weak ending" to his story, it should be of interest to readers to note that in the published history of the 42nd Bomb Group, Stef's crew is credited with the sinking of that destroyer. The date, incidentally, was 20 January 1943.

Japanese Flying Boat

Another unique mission occurred in late January during a search north of Guadalcanal. While on this search, Captain Sharp's plane engaged a Mavis (a four-engine Kawanishi Flying Boat) in a "dogfight" which compels recording in our history precisely as John has written it:

"In early January 1943, the 70th Squadron returned to Guadalcanal for an extended combat tour. We were gaining air strength at Henderson Field, but the Japanese still held the rest of the island.

On the 31st of January, Navy intelligence had determined that a large Japanese Task Force was underway and it had to be found. At a late night briefing, ten Navy TBFs and six B-26s were assigned search patterns. Our area was a 500-mile, wedge-shaped pattern north of Guadalcanal. Take off at 4:00 a.m., extremely dark, we climbed to 9,000 ft. At daylight a small silhouette appeared on the horizon. As it grew, we were obviously on a collision course. This huge silhouette soon took shape and we recognized it as a four-engine flying boat, code name "Mavis." We held course and suddenly this giant airplane made a turn toward us; and as it flew overhead, the turret gunner let him have a burst. I immediately firewalled both engines and started a steep climb. The Mavis headed for home and we climbed up high on his right side. A long-stream of white smoke on top of the fuselage signaled high speed guns in a power turret. I went into a steep dive, leveled off and flew

¹⁷ Stefen, Leroy L. *Bombs Away!* September 1992, 3

directly under the hull. Raising like an elevator, the turret gunner raked him over good. Then I pulled up and gave him a burst with my homemade package guns, one on each side. Then into a violent breakaway and pulled up high on the right side again. His turret guns were silent now and one inboard engine was on fire.

This guy wasn't going to get away and now we very deliberately planned our next attack. Again I went into a steep dive, leveled off under the hull and raised up so the turret could sew him up. Then, I pulled up steeply and emptied my fixed guns into him. WHAMMO! Too late! We were hit by cannon fire and the right wing started coming apart. No break this time. I told the crew I was leveling off and would hug this guy real close and pass underneath. I was trying to slow down now and as we came out the front, the tail gunner turned on his guns point blank like a fire hose and the giant Mavis was gone.

I knew I was in trouble and was slowing down to keep the wing from tearing open. At 180 the tearing stopped but the airplane was shaking and mushing. I dropped 1/4 flaps, she leveled off and flew smoothly. I started descending toward a spotty cloud layer. The bombardier got rid of the bombs and we settled down for a long flight home.

In sight of Guadalcanal, I tested the airplane for stalling and we had a definite roll-off stall at 170. I told Henderson Tower I would make an overhead at 5,000 ft. With gear and flaps down, I couldn't recognize a stall so I came in very fast. I felt the roll-off just before touch down and hung on the brakes all the way to the end of the PSP. After we parked, our maintenance men said the main spar had been blown completely in two. Our sheet metal men and the Seabees repaired the wing spar, replaced the leading edge and we flew another mission the next day."¹⁸

We have learned from other records that a coast watcher later reported that the Japanese Flying Boat crashed off Santa Isabel Island, which lies in the Solomon Island chain northwest of Guadalcanal.

Lt. Conrad A. Ray whose marvelous diary entries have been used regularly in this history contracted malaria while on Guadalcanal and was later hospitalized at the 42nd General Hospital, high in the hills of Fiji. The medical aspects of our tour in the South Pacific will be covered in detail by Doctor Joseph F. Palmieri, our Squadron doctor, in a subsequent chapter of this history. It is both interesting and revealing to see the following two diary entries from Lt. Ray, written while in the hospital in Fiji.

“Jan. 17. I want to get out but it seems hopeless the way they work here. In the Solomons, they let you take Atabrine (a synthetic drug used to treat

¹⁸ Sharp, John. Letter, 5 December 1995.

malaria) to hold it down and keep on flying. I am beginning to ask myself just how many days I will be here and what will finally be done about me.

Jan. 18. Just as predicted, my blood test came out positive. I expect they will start me all over again on another treatment. It is getting very annoying. Made a few dollars today betting on whether it would rain. Those are the levels to which we have degenerated...Gillis (Griff's bombardier) came back from Solomons and gave me first real news of the gang. Behling (69th Squadron) and his crew in Treat's airplane (70th Squadron) were shot down and all lost. They ran into a curtain of fire just over the tree tops in Rekata Bay (a Japanese sea-plane base in the Solomons). Moose (Capt. Lyman H. Eddy, 70th Squadron) with his crew were shot down, but all parachuted out safely, and other planes dropped rafts to them. He (Gillis) said they weren't sure when he left whether any of them were Jap captives or not."

Dick Thorburn's SNAFU Mission

Our Squadron Engineering Officer was Lieutenant Richard M. Thorburn (Dick). Dick was a graduate of Sandhurst, the Royal Military Academy in England, and an outstanding officer. We kidded him, good-naturedly, when he gave demonstrations of "Right Face," "About Face," and "Hand Salute" in the very proper British style. Dick wrote a letter recently, recounting a SNAFU night mission he flew from Guadalcanal. It is reproduced below:

"My war experiences are fairly limited, as you can imagine, because I did not have a plane or a crew, but I did fly one night mission to try and skip-bomb Japanese supply ships coming down from Bougainville to Guadalcanal. Perhaps you had left by then. It was rather late in our stay, and we were already getting new crews. I cannot remember the exact date, as I cannot remember the code names we used. However, with a new bombardier and one of my flight chiefs (the one who was a turret gunner in the Battle of Midway), and some others, we set off. On pre-flight, the switch in the cockpit for me to drop bombs was "kaput," which was not a good omen, as I would have to co-ordinate with the bombardier, and that never works. It is hard enough to gauge your own drop point, and not have to say, "Now," and wait for the normal reaction time. However, there we were.

As we approached the supposed combat area, I looked down, and there to my amazement was a very large cargo ship with two destroyers — one in front and one astern. We could see them clearly in the moonlight. The moon was bright and in the west, so in an ideal position for our approach from the East. I only had two 500 lb. bombs. I don't know why the load was so light.

I decided to try and skip-bomb in mid-ships. Naturally, my evaluation was correct, and by the time we coordinated — the bombardier and I — the first bomb dropped aimlessly about 25 yards short. In reflection, I probably should have left it to him, and told him to drop it down the funnel. However, I

do not think we had a Norden bomb sight aboard — just one of those compasses with a piece of string.

I thought to myself as we made the run, if we hit the ship and damage or sink it, the destroyer Captain would commit “hari-kari” right on the bridge. As I pulled up, my crew shouted that there were a flock of Zeros flying around. Initially, they could not see me, but I realized that any maneuvers I made for another run would light up the plane in the moonlight. However, with an inexperienced crew and gunners, maybe a lone 500 lb. bomb would be fairly useless, so I turned sharply and took off for home, and soon was out of range for the Zeros. I don’t know whether I was right or wrong, but it was a “snafu” mission from the start. So, there it is. My one combat mission in the “slot” coming down to Guadalcanal.”¹⁹

Return to Fiji

Other missions were flown from Guadalcanal in late January and early February 1943. Orders came through, however, on February 4 for the 70th Squadron to return to Fiji from Guadalcanal. At that point in our history we were in rather sad shape — worn out, but in reasonably good spirits. 42nd Bomb Group records indicate that when orders came through for our return only two of our B-26 aircraft were fit for combat! This is probably correct, but it seems incredible that in starting with thirteen aircraft, we now had an inventory of six and of these six only two were fit for combat. Lost B-26 aircraft were never replaced in the Pacific theater.

The Squadron landed at Fiji on 5 February, and on 11 February, Lieutenants Boden, Treat and J. D. Ryder were given orders to take three aircraft to Tontouta Airport on New Caledonia for major repairs. The atmosphere at the time is very well captured by Connie Ray in his diary entry:

“Feb. 5. At 1300 today the boys arrived back from the Solomons. They were as glad to be back as we were to see them. Their losses were Treat’s plane with Capt. Behling’s crew and Capt. Eddy’s and Headrick, his co-pilot. He is considered lost. It was a tough reunion for the gang and they are full of tall tales. Many have souvenirs such as flags, rifles, pistols, Jap money, etc. Tonight many are getting drunk, which when they get over their hangover will relax their tensions. Old 69 (B-26 serial 41-17569) brought Max (Lt. Harold G. ‘Max’ Miller) and our crew through with flying colors. She got a direct hit by small caliber cannon in the right wing which had to be repaired. Everyone did a really good job. Grif (Lt. William M. Griffith) in a 38 (P-38) was with them on one raid as escort.”

¹⁹ Thorburn, Richard. Letter, 27 March 1996.

Another B-26 Loss

Mark Treat has reminded us that we lost yet another B-26 in a ground accident in New Caledonia in connection with the repair mission mentioned earlier. This brought our squadron aircraft inventory down to five. Mark has recounted the accident as follows:

“We lost a B-26 at New Caledonia which Pat Haynes and Dan Sullivan were in. We had taken it from Fiji for depot repair. I put Pat in the left seat to check him out on the return trip to Fiji. The right tire blew out at about 90–100 mph on takeoff. Pat hit both brakes and pulled both throttles. We were headed straight for two B-25s that were parked on a cross runway. I pushed the right throttle full open and we took a wing off one B-25 and part of our wing. Rode back to Fiji with Bob Boden.”²⁰

Summary

In summary, we had bombed cargo ships at Buin, in the North, and ships that were landing troops on Guadalcanal itself. We attacked the Japanese seaplane base at Rekata Bay and raided Kolombangara Island installations. In the month of January, alone, we bombed the airfield at Munda eleven times.²¹ We received credit for sinking a destroyer (Stef mission) and for downing a 4-engine flying boat (Sharp mission). Several had contracted malaria while others found themselves with peculiar infections and “jungle rot.” As indicated earlier, we had been bombed and shot-at both day and night and had lost aircraft and fine combat crews. We had done our share. Organized Japanese resistance on Guadalcanal ended in February 1943.

As a matter of historical interest, only two of the 70th Squadron original thirteen aircraft were lost due directly to enemy action. These losses occurred during the medium altitude bombing of Munda Airfield (Eddy mission) and the low-level attack on Rekata Bay (“Linc” Behling crew) flying Mark Treat’s aircraft (41-17550). Strictly speaking, we (the 70th) lost only one aircraft to combat.

Horrors of War

On Guadalcanal, we were operating as part of a comparatively small force stationed in a remote corner of a huge worldwide conflict. Yet, in our small corner, the war and its horrors were very real — right in our backyard, so to speak.

Picture for a moment a haggard Marine returning from front-line, hand-to-hand combat, carrying a handful of gold-filled teeth and offering the gold to you in exchange for your caliber .45 pistol or a bottle of whiskey.

There is also the heart-rending story, after the Squadron’s first arrival on Guadalcanal, of seeing a 2 1/2 ton truck passing by filled with dead U.S. Marines, all stacked like cord wood.

²⁰ Treat, Mark. Letter, 2 July 1997.

²¹ Rust, Kenn C. *Thirteenth Air Force Story...in World War II*. (Temple City, CA: Historical Aviation Album, 1981), 4.

More could be written to make the point, but some stories are perhaps best left unsaid and unrecorded.

42nd Bombardment Group (M)

During the month of March 1943, the 70th Bomb Squadron and the 69th Squadron were incorporated into the 42nd Bomb Group under the command of Colonel Harry E. Wilson (Lighthorse Harry). We were no longer a separate operating squadron. Now, after almost a year, we had a parent Group Headquarters.

The new Group and its B-25-equipped 75th and 390th Bomb Squadrons arrived at Nouméa, New Caledonia on 15 April to join the 13th Air Force. Before the Group's arrival, the 69th and 70th Bomb Squadrons were assigned to it and began converting to B-25s.

Disposition of B-26s

Referring to Connie Ray's diary, there is an entry which sheds light on how and when the conversion to B-25s was accomplished:

“Feb. 25. The 69th has turned all of their 26s over to us, making us a complete squadron of 13 planes again. We are now back where we started last July, except for a shortage of personnel. They (the 69th) are to get 25s. This makes home seem a long way off.”

Later, on April 23, Ray's diary entry reports, “This afternoon I was assigned 89 (a B-26) which made me feel good, since I was the first in my class to get a plane. Stef must have liked the ride I took him on a while back.” In a diary entry the following day, he writes, “Checking back, I find there is only 28% of the original Squadron of Jackson days remaining.”

Gradually over a period of weeks starting in May, the 70th Squadron began receiving B-25s, and as the B-25s were received, our B-26s were transferred to the Fifth Air Force in Australia.

Key Officer Promotions

Following the chronology of this history, Gil Smith has provided the following information on promotions and other happenings during the period June–September 1943.

“In June, Art Martin, Max Miller, and I were promoted to Captain. All of us wanted to get back to the States. The conversation from Stef was something like this. “You three have just been promoted to Captain and this new outfit with B-25s needs some experienced pilots to be flight commanders so you three will have to spend another tour in the Solomon Islands.” I can't say that we volunteered, but we got the jobs anyway. In August 1943 we moved permanently to Guadalcanal and were on Carney Field, just a short way east of Henderson. We lived in Quonset huts and living accommodations were much better than our earlier trips to the Solomon Islands. On September

24, 1943, we left Guadalcanal for Nandi with a stop at 13th AF Headquarters on New Caledonia where we were awarded the DFC and Air Medal. We flew back to the States on LB-30s with orders that said, 'to form a cadre of new bomb sqdn. to return to the South Pacific.' Fortunately, John Sharp had been able to get the orders changed by the time we got back and Art Martin and I ended up at Greenville, SC."²²

Rotation to U.S.

By September 1943, after some 15–16 months in the South Pacific, most of the original Air Echelon had rotated to the U.S. Essentially, all of the Ground Echelon stayed behind, however. For some, the combat experience was over, but for the Ground Echelon there remained months of additional duty on various islands in the Pacific, involving movement to Guadalcanal, then to the Russell Islands and later to Stirling Island, then back to Guadalcanal before returning home.

The ordeal of the Ground Echelon on these islands and their experiences with B-25 aircraft and replacement aircrews constitute the subject of the next chapter.

²² Smith, Gilbert G. Letter, 26 May 1997.

6: B-25 Combat Operations

*Our ignorance of history makes us
libel our own times. People have
always been like this.*

Gustav Flaubert

Extension of Squadron History

The original intent in writing this history was to cover the period from activation of the Squadron on 15 January 1941 to the rotation of most of the original Air Echelon to the U.S. in August 1943.

Subsequent events and additional information received have compelled the author to continue the history and extend the time period to March 1944, when the original 70th Squadron Ground Echelon from Jackson, Mississippi returned to the U.S., after some 25 months overseas. There are amazing accomplishments also in B-25 aircraft by the replacement aircrews that should be included in the history.

Official records reflect that the Squadron operated from Guadalcanal during the period 16 August to 20 October 1943; from the Russell Islands in October 1943 and from Stirling Island in January 1944.¹

Russell and Stirling Islands

The Russell Islands are in the Solomons group approximately 50 miles northwest of Henderson Field on Guadalcanal and somewhat closer to lucrative targets in the northern Solomons. Stirling was a small island approximately 250 miles northwest of Henderson Field and only 45 miles from the Japanese-held Shortland Islands located off the southern tip of Bougainville. The island itself was less than 4 miles long. The island subsequently became the headquarters of the 42nd Bomb Group and three of its squadrons, including the 70th. Small maps showing the locations of the Russell Islands, in relation to Guadalcanal, and Stirling Island, in relation to Bougainville, are featured on page 161 of the Appendix.

In terms of aircraft radius, the move to Stirling placed the Squadron very much closer to prime enemy targets and, most importantly, within striking range of Rabaul, at that time the pre-eminent Japanese sea and air bastion in the South Pacific.

¹ United States Air Force. USAF Historical Division. Air University. *Combat Squadrons of the Air Force; World War II*. Edited by Maurer Maurer. [Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama] (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1969), 259.

Key Personnel

A roster of the key men of the 70th in October 1943, as far as can be ascertained from records available to writers at that time, reads as follows:²

SECTION HEAD	SECTION CHIEF
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Commanding Officer, Maj. Jean Daugherty Operations Officer, Capt. Savell L. Sharp; S/Sgt. Abe Prensky Intelligence Officer, Lieut. William Trone; S/Sgt. Meyer Bernstein Engineering Officer, Lieut. Homer H. Noar; M/Sgt. Arthur Jolly Executive Officer, Capt. Harley Kabrud Ordnance Officer, Lieut. Walter Beam; T/Sgt. Chas. M. Williamson Armament Officer, Capt. Henry Dulac; M/Sgt. Darel Snyder Communications Officer, Lieut. Wm. D. Davis; S/Sgt. David W. Lynch Flight Surgeon, Capt. George Sifert; S/Sgt. Melvin C. Ogden Adjutant, Capt. Howard N. Merritt First Sergeant, Richard A. Day Mess Sergeant, S/Sgt. Frederick C. Westbrook	
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The pioneer members of the Squadron from the Jackson days will recognize the names of Abe Prensky in Operations; M/Sgt. Arthur Jolly in Engineering; Captain Henry Dulac and M/Sgt. Darel Snyder in Armament; Captain Merritt as Adjutant; First Sergeant Richard Day and Mess Sergeant Westbrook.

Continued Combat

The combat history of the Squadron contains the following additional information:

“When the 70th flight echelon returned to Guadalcanal in August, it was equipped entirely with B-25s, the transition and training being done during the long stay at the Fiji’s. This time the 70th was attached to the 390th ground echelon at Carney Field.

The Allied ground forces were beginning their drive in the Northern Solomons from newly captured Munda air strip on New Georgia. The 70th helped to prepare landings on nearby Kolombangara and Vella Lavella Island with concentrated attacks. Jap barges carrying retreating troops northward along Choiseul were searched out and sunk. A surprise tree-top level attack on the crowded, heavily defended Jap airbase of Kahili eliminated danger from enemy air attacks for several days during Allied landings when our supply lines were vitally exposed.

The October move to the Russells united the ground and air echelons of the 70th and permitted our planes a slightly increased range in the Bougainville

² *The Crusaders: A History of the 42nd Bombardment Group (M)*. (Baton Rouge, LA: Army & Navy Pictorial Publishers, 1946), 48.

area. Buka and Kahili took the brunt of the 70th attacks although there were few spots on the coast of Bougainville that weren't attacked or looked over nearly every day.

The First Rabaul Mission was flown on January 12, 1944 when that powerful naval and air base was still one of the strongest in the Pacific. Over 100 planes were parked on the Vunakanau runway when the 70th came in at minimum altitude. The Squadron strafed and holed 20 bombers, 44 fighters (three of which attempted to take off), and exploded or left burning at least seven of these. Two control towers, two heavy gun positions, 20 barges in Keravia Bay nearby, and several personnel and supply areas were bombed and strafed in this single attack. Major General H. R. Harmon, commanding the 13th Air Force, personally wrote the 70th commending them on their courage, determination and high devotion to duty."³

The Rabaul Bastion

Rabaul was often called the Japanese "Pearl Harbor of the Pacific." It was truly a military bastion. It had excellent harbor facilities loaded with shipping, over a thousand buildings, an estimated 75,000 troops and five airfields, of which Vunakanau was one. The entire area was one grand, lucrative target, to say the least.

One of the highlights in this chapter of the history relates to the Japanese field at Vunakanau and the 12 January 1944 mission by the 70th referred to earlier. The author has received detailed information from Ted Cope on missions flown by the 70th Squadron during the month of January 1944. This information takes the form of a series of twelve very detailed "Mission Reports," prepared between 1 January and 20 January 1944, originally classified SECRET, and which provide a wealth of historically valuable information on the tactics employed and the results achieved on these missions.

Vunakanau Mission

Rather than discuss these missions abstractly, it would undoubtedly be more understandable and realistic to reproduce one of these Mission Reports precisely as written at that time. The mission selected for this purpose is Mission No. 74, conducted on 12 January 1944, the "Low Altitude Bombing and Strafing of Vunakanau," at tree-top level from Stirling Island — the first mission by the 70th against Rabaul.

Parafrag Bombs

Before proceeding, the terminology "parafrag" bomb should be explained. "Para" is an abbreviation of parachute. Parachutes were attached to the bombs to retard their descent to the ground and to enable the aircraft and crew to escape from the bomb explosion. "Frag" is an abbreviation of fragmentation. After explosion of the bomb, fragments were dispersed over a wide area — similar to a large-scale version of a hand grenade.

³ Combat History of the 70th Bombardment Squadron (M). Microfilm. Maxwell Air Force Base.

Mission Report No. 74

The report in its entirety follows.

70th BOMBARDMENT SQUADRON (M)
Office of the Intelligence Officer
APO # 709-2

DATE : 12 January 1944
MISSION No. : 74
MISSION : Low Altitude Bombing and Strafing of VUNAKANAU.
AIRCRAFT : 12 B-25's (8 Modified, 4 Unmod.) Also 1 ship from 390th.

Pilot	Plane No.	Take Off	Landing
			Stirling
Capt. Morris	564 D	0405	0808 L
1st Lt. Carlson	332 C-1	0405	0809
1 st Lt. Kuhn	149 C-1	0406	0810
Capt. Paxton	291 C-1	0407	0811
F/O Risvold	328 C-1	0407	0812
F/O Story	211 D-1	0408	0812
1 st Lt. Wattenbarger	571 D	0408	0813
1 st Lt. Blackburn	646 D	0409	0813
1 st Lt. Gadd	652 D-1	0409	0814
Capt. Boswell	566 D	0410	0814
1 st Lt. Van Schaick	437 C-1	0411	0815
F/O Brisick	430 C-1	0411	0815

13 Planes over target. (Including 1 from 390th)
Total flying time 4 hrs, 10 minutes.

ESCORT : 6 P-38's and 2 F4U's furnished close cover at the rally point.
2 F4U's furnished close cover en route.
It was understood before take off that high cover would also be given.

BOMB LOAD & AMMUNITION : Each A/C carried 12 Parafrag clusters of 3 23# bombs per cluster, plus a full load of ammunition.

ROUTE : STIRLING to TOROKINA to CAPE GAZELLE, circling to the left, up the WARANGOI RIVER to initial point where turn across tar-get was made.

Retirement was made at the same heading skirting KERA VIA BAY and RALUANA POINT, then north of GREDNER ISLAND

- thru ST. GEORGE CHANNEL direct to TOROKINA and thence to STIRLING.
- WEATHER** : Clouds from STIRLING to ST GEORGE CAPE at 1500' to 3000', very heavy winds, 300° 25 knots. Weather over target CAVU.
- TIME AND ALT OF ATTACK** : The target was attacked at 0643 L (two minutes later than scheduled time due to twelve minute delay at TOROKINA in rendezvousing with fighters) from treetop level at magnetic headings varying between 60 and 70 degrees at air speeds varying between 240 and 260 mph. All planes abreast.
- BOMBS DROPPED** : 11 A/C dropped 387 parafrag bombs in the target.
- 1 A/C salvoed 9 of its bombs (3 clusters) due to mechanical failure.
- 1 A/C salvoed its bombs due to mechanical failure.
- 1 A/C failed to drop its bombs due to personnel failure.
- 15,150 rds. of .50 cal. and 1950 rds of .30 cal. Ammunition were expended.
- BOMB HITS OBSERVED** : The entire area was well covered by bombs and strafing.
: Strafing also included the RALUANA POINT area.
- RESULTS** : 5 twin engine bombers were strafed in the northeast revetment area.
- Waist gunner in ship No. 437 fired 100 rds. at a parked Betty which was seen to smoke and then explode.
- 4 Bettys were strafed by one ship.
- 3 Bettys exploded when parafrag bombs went off in their midst northeast of the runway in the revetment area.
- 1 Betty was exploded by a parafrag bomb SE of runway.
- 1 Betty SE of runway was set afire by the waist gunner in ship No. 328.
- 2 Bettys in revetments north of the runway were strafed.
- Ship No. 652 strafed and bombed a Betty which blew up on the west side of the runway.

Ship No. 291 strafed 2 Bettys and 6 fighters near the center of the target, exact position not certain.

5 Fighters at the west end of the runway were strafed and bombed.

25 Fighters (3 warming up engines) in the apron on the north side of the runway were thoroughly strafed.

Ship No. 571 strafed 8 fighters in revetments north of the center of the runway.

Tents in the bivouac area southeast of the runway were thoroughly strafed.

RESULTS CONT'D : A machine gun nest 500 yds. due west, of the northwest end of the runway was knocked out.

Turret gunner in ship No. 437 strafed the DF Range Station NE of the field.

1 ship thoroughly strafed two control towers at the runway, and also strafed 3 or 4 Bettys.

Personnel areas along RALUANA POINT were strafed.

Tents which appeared to be engineering tents SW of runway were thoroughly strafed.

2 Bombs were observed to fall into two revetments, each of which contained one aircraft.

4 Bombs dropped on heavy gun positions two miles off the NW tip of the field.

8 Bombs dropped in revetments at west end of field.

A small fire was observed as a result of strafing the east coast of RALUANA POINT.

Turret gunner of ship No. 437 strafed quite a sizable man who was climbing up the rigging on the side of an AK which was anchored in KERAVIA BAY. The man was seen to topple backwards into the bay.

15 to 20 Barges were strafed along shore in KERAVIA BAY west of RALUANA POINT, 5 parafrag bombs were dropped on gun positions in this area, with unobserved results.

ANTI AIRCRAFT : Generally meager, light, and medium calibre and inaccurate AA was encountered. See overlay attached.

The following positions not shown on the diagram, 5 gun positions observed firing from RALUANA POINT a mile and a half due west along coast.

5 gun positions observed firing 1 1/2 miles east of RALUANA POINT along coast.

4 or 5 machine guns were observed firing inaccurately on the 1400 foot bridge 4000 yds. due north of the east end of the runway, in the neighborhood of TALILIGAR.

Machine gun fire was encountered from PRAED POINT, but fell far short of our A/C.

Light calibre machine fire was seen from GREDNER ISLAND.

ANTI AIRCRAFT : Medium and also light calibre AA was received from a large DD or CL in SIMPSON HARBOR.

Machine gun fire coming from an AK in KERA VIA BAY was encountered.

No AA was encountered from LESSON POINT, CAPE GAZELLE, or DUKE OF YORK ISLAND.

Two gun positions were observed in the vicinity of the Radar station. These fired after the formation was well past that point.

ENEMY INTERCEPTION: None

OBSERVATIONS : A very large barge on a small AK 120 ft. in length was seen in the neighborhood of WARANGOI RIVER mouth, several additional smaller barges were seen in the vicinity.

15 to 20 Japs were seen in the vicinity of the Radar station plotted at 4 degrees 22 minutes south, 152 degrees 11 minutes east. These Japs apparently at first thought our formation were friendly A/C's, then upon recognition scampered in all directions. They were clad only in their underwear.

An opening believed to be an underground hangar was observed, but the position could not be definitely located.

A gasoline truck was observed in a revetment at the NE corner of the runway.

30-40 barges and 4 PT boats were observed along south shore of KERA VIA BAY west of RALUANA POINT.

1 large 300-400 foot AK was observed in the south portion of KERA VIA BAY with smaller craft pulled along side.

One large DD or CL was observed near the mouth of SIMPSON HARBOR. Considerable numbers of other unidentified craft were also seen in SIMPSON HARBOR.

- RADIO SILENCE : Broken by Lt. Blackburn concerning formation. It is questionable whether his transmitter was working because none of his flight were able to hear him.
- PHOTOGRAPHS : A roll taken by K-24 camera, and also by nose camera of strafing run.
- BOMB RATING : Excellent
- REMARKS : In view of the tremendous amount of damage inflicted, with minimum amount of opposition, it is considered to be a highly successful mission.

1st Lt. Rowland of the 390th Bomb. Sq. joined on our formation, and his results have been incorporated in our report.

WILLIAM D. TRONE
1st Lt., Air Corps
Intelligence Officer

STATEMENT BY FORMATION LEADER CAPT. ROBERT J. MORRIS

The first plane of the 70th Bombardment Squadron took off at 0405L and the remainder of aircraft followed in regular procedure. By the time the lead ship was in the downwind leg, all our planes were in formation. I believe this rapid assembly was due to the system of recognition lights the squadron uses (the leader flashes thru the astral dome a red Aldis lamp the second, third, and fourth, green, amber, and white, in that order). We made two wide circles of Stirling Island and then turned for the rendezvous with the 390th Squadron slightly behind. We pulled from 20 to 30 degrees to the left of our course to allow the other squadron to get ahead. And at this point we lost visual contact with them.

We circled rendezvous (TOROKINA) twice endeavoring to tack on to the lead squadron, but we were unable to do so.

We left TOROKINA twelve minutes behind schedule, with two Corsairs visible as escort. We took a direct course as planned, cruising at a high speed to make up for late departure.

We lost sight of one of the two escorts en route, and opposite the south-east tip of NEW IRELAND (CAPE ST. GEORGE) the other fighter pulled away. As a result of briefing and informal talks with pursuit pilots, however, we felt sure that the fighters would be at the rallying point as planned. So we continued with our mission.

We arrived over the target two minutes late, in line abreast, not quite covering runway and areas at 90 degrees as scheduled, but at a slight angle. This was due to the difficulty in recognizing terrain features. Nevertheless the entire area was thoroughly strafed and peppered with well placed bombs. All planes kept shooting even beyond target and I believe some further damage was done.

We returned low over the water at a high speed, and almost immediately we were able to re-assemble javelin down formation with the lead ship at about 500 feet. The only apparent fire we drew was as we retired over the water, previous to reforming.

We rallied to the south of GREDNER ISLAND as gun flashes were observed coming from there, then proceeding out the channel as planned.

Several of our escort were mistaken for bogies, so we retired at a much higher speed than we normally would have. The balance of the mission was uneventful.

Our fighter escort deserves a lot of credit for the way they covered us, and despite the fact that for a while we could not see them, we were sure they were there, and we depended upon them. Navigation and liaison problems were added to by a defective air speed indicator and command radio in the lead ship. It is my opinion that a slightly earlier attack, under the same light conditions would have been more satisfactory. Further I believe that a subsidiary sweep by fighters would have caught anything we missed.

Weather to and over the target was ideal.

REPORT OF MALFUNCTIONING OF EQUIPMENT:

1. When the bomb door handle was moved from doors open position to doors select the bombs in ship 564 failed to release and were salvoed by the undersigned.
2. The BOMB BAY ONLY switch was in up position, and the switch on the intervalometer was in select position.
3. Bombs were salvoed on target as undersigned did not care to pass through the ground fire with bombs in the bomb bay.

HAROLD C. CAMPBELL
Capt., Air Corps
Squadron Navigator

In reviewing this classic mission from the standpoint of the tactics employed and the results attained one cannot escape being greatly impressed — even fifty years later! One key feature was, of course, surprise and attack by all aircraft in line-abreast; strafing on the approach, releasing fragmentation bombs over the target and firing on the way out. The Japanese on the airfield must have been devastated by the attack!

Stated in another context, an attack of this type by the Japanese against Henderson Field, if it had occurred in the early months of the battle for Guadalcanal, essentially would have wiped out the entire U.S. air effort for quite some time.

As a matter of record the 70th Squadron, in the earlier B-26 days, had neither “parafrag” bombs nor gun-nose aircraft, such as the B-25. We recognized the need, however, for forward firing guns on our B-26s for low altitude missions, but our efforts at field modifications to accomplish this were not entirely successful and most certainly fell far short of the requirement.

There were some versions of the B-25 that had fourteen fixed .50 caliber guns firing forward. They were modified to include eight guns in the nose compartment, four guns mounted externally on the sides of the aircraft, and two guns in the top turret position.

Letter of Commendation

The verbatim language of the commendation by Major General Harmon, who was then Commanding General of the 13th Air Force has been found in the history of the 42nd Bomb Group, cited earlier, and is reproduced below.

SUBJECT: LETTER OF COMMENDATION

TO: CAPTAIN ROBERT J. MORRIS, AIR CORPS

1. It has come to my attention that on the early morning of January 12, 1944 you were commander of a formation of B-25s of the 70th Bombardment Squadron, and that your squadron was one of two medium bomber squadrons charged with a combat mission in the vicinity of Rabaul. It appears that for various reasons the leader of the squadron, who was in fact in command of the entire expedition, deemed it advisable to abandon the mission and return with his squadron to its base.

2. I am informed that you on the other hand led your squadron to the objective and delivered a successful attack. Whether or not you were aware that the other squadron had turned back is beside the point. The essential fact is that you carried out your assigned mission with courage, determination, and high devotion to duty. I desire to commend you on your fine leadership and aggressive spirit. We need plenty of both in the winning of this war.

H. R. Harmon
Major General, U.S. Army, Commanding⁴

⁴ *The Crusaders: A History of the 42nd Bombardment Group (M)*. (Baton Rouge, LA: Army & Navy Pictorial Publishers, 1946), 64.

Retrospectively, and over a half century later, we, the surviving members of the 70th Bomb Squadron, give a hearty salute to our successors and all those involved in this and other missions from the northern Solomons, for a job well done!

Ground Echelon

Apart from the accomplishments and glory accorded to the Air Echelon in early 1944, this history would most certainly not be complete without specific reference to the Ground Echelon at that time.

The *Combat History of the 70th Bombardment Squadron (M)* states that in March 1944, "the old original ground echelon was entirely replaced by a new echelon fresh from the States."⁵ Standing alone, this is a rather drab statement.

Among the members of the original Ground Echelon, we had a group of some fifty or more draftees from the State of Pennsylvania. They had no specific training prior to induction, but what they clearly had was a determination and dedication to giving their best to the war effort. We now call them the "Penny Group."

The Penny Group

For this portion of our history, we are fortunate in having a narrative prepared by Lou Edwards of the recollections and experiences of the "Penny Group." This group consisted of some fifty or more draftees from the State of Pennsylvania, essentially untrained in any military-related specialties, yet they turned to the tasks under the conditions confronting them and performed impressively, while retaining to this day a modest view of their accomplishments — an intrepid group.

"On July 18, 1941, a bus load of 'Coal Crackers' said goodbye to our friends singing, 'Goodbye Dear, I'll be Back in a Year.' Twenty-five months later, more or less for some, we returned to our old stomping grounds...some back to college, many back to their former jobs, and a few back into the coal mines, facing a life as dangerous from overhead as the nightly visits of Washing Machine Charlie.

We were older, wiser, and while we had no desire to repeat those more than four years, we had developed some close ties, and a better understanding of people from other parts of the United States. We arrived at Jackson, Mississippi, after having led a rather provincial life in our formative years, we looked askance at our new associates, particularly the Southerners. It took some doing to smooth our relations with the 'Rebs,' but the trials and tribulations of isolation and war did much to erase that hostility on both sides — a plus for combat!

There are many stories about the ground crews, enough to fill a book, and some which couldn't be told as they would come under 'X' rated.

⁵ Ibid., 3.

By and large everyone realized the reason for our being at war and the urgency to give our best effort. The ground crew worked hard to make adjustments to conditions and improvise to keep our flying crews in the air.

Not having a depot on Fiji, we were dependent on what could be flown from Hawaii. Big items were out of the question for understandable reasons. We were pretty much 'on our own.' For an example, on one typically hot Fijian day, outside of our Tech Supply shack, we decided that we needed a contraption to change airplane tires, that is, to remove them from their rims. Under the direction of Sgts. Jolly and Curtis, the group worked to design a 'Rube Goldberg' affair that would serve the purpose. With a couple available jacks, some wood blocks, a lot of welding, and gallons of perspiration, they completed it. This saved us much time and a lot of inter-island transportation. This was typical of the ingenuity of a dedicated ground crew.

The tedium of twenty-five plus months of the same daily routine and no R & R made the need for recreation a priority, which was self provided. On a slow day with the planes off on a mission, hiking became popular. The fellows would head out in all directions looking for infantry, artillery or other allied outfits, searching for possible acquaintances from 'back home.' Jerry Davis was a 'Pro' at this and one discovery netted our immediate hometown group some extra gas stamps on our first trip back to Pennsylvania. The soldier's sister happened to be in charge of issuing those scarce items, so an accounting of brother's whereabouts was worth some much appreciated gasoline for us.

Bob Owen, tech supply partner, and I took a very long hike up into the hills one day looking for, among other things, educational facilities, which happened to be our field of college background. That day we found none. It was extremely hot and after many miles, we took off our shoes and socks and waded a long time in the water of a cool stream. Eventually we came upon a thatch-roofed hut occupied by friendly English-speaking Indians. We stopped, chatted for a while, and they invited us into the coolness of their home. We politely asked if we might have a drink of water. The man of the house disappeared and eventually returned with two tin buckets of water. 'Tub' and I emptied both. We thanked him profusely, and asked him where he secured such extremely good drinking water. 'From the stream,' he replied. The stream in which Bob and I had been cooling our feet for half an hour...and Doc Palmieri was constantly concerned about procuring safe drinking water for the troops. We didn't get sick.

The principal recreation of the Pennsy gang was basketball. Wherever we located, we set up a court. Our best was a former tennis court not too far from the landing strip in Fiji. Jerry Davis kept us supplied with basketballs he had his folks ship from the States. The nearby 821st Engineers, with access to heavy equipment, made a beautiful white coral court, and had it lighted for night games. Quite a novelty, and a lot cooler than playing during daylight

hours. We developed some new friends there, and incidentally their star, the 1st Sgt. of the outfit, was a Pennsylvanian. We had formed an island league of sorts and spent many enjoyable hours playing ball. I remained a corresponding friend of the 1st Sgt. until his untimely death in the sixties, after his serving many years with the Y.M.C.A.

Our same Pennsy basketball gang has remained close for over fifty years and we still try to get together occasionally. It was an annual affair for many years, but we are a slowly diminishing group. There is sadness for those who have passed away, but many fond memories for what is left of that segment of the glorious 70th Bomb Squadron.”⁶

Added to the above narrative, it is also important for historical purposes to record the feelings of the Ground Echelon members specifically during their four months of duty in the Russell and Stirling Islands.

Recently, three surviving members of “The Pennsy Group,” namely Lou Edwards, Bob Owen and Howard Troy, met to discuss their memories of events and circumstances of that duty. Surprisingly, but certainly with a large degree of modesty, fifty-two years later, their most lasting impression seems to be that “there was not much to do.” On Stirling Island they sat in on an occasional movie and watched the tracers chasing Washing Machine Charlie. On other occasions they ducked bombs. Speaking of bombs and other matters, Lou Edwards had this to say:

“Our tents were adjacent to where our B-25s were parked. We thought we had had it one night when bombs fell just feet from us and damaged two of our planes. Troy said the wings of one sagged just from the heat. Thank goodness for slit-trenches!

We saw no natives on either island...just pack rats with big ears; eating the meat from coconuts which were not being harvested and swimming in our GI cans when we went to rinse our mess kits. The PX got in a few items. I had bought a pile of candy bars and snack crackers. During the night, I heard screaming. I had neglected to close the lid of my home-made locker. One large rat was in the locker, tossing out my treasured food to another who was pushing the packages off the mahogany floor of the tent to those waiting on the ground — like a gang of stevedores on an assembly line.

You can see that it was ‘dullsville’ except for the high spots of excitement. The guys on the line were patching up holes as planes came back from missions.”

⁶ Edwards, Louis S. Letter, 15 June 1997.

The 70th Ground Echelon left Stirling Island for Guadalcanal on 7 March, and as Lou Edwards says, "Left Guadalcanal for home in a liberty ship, operating on one screw — not too well — but happy to be home for Mother's Day."⁷

The above modest account by survivors of the "Pennsy Group" of watching tracers, ducking bombs and patching holes in aircraft, written fifty-two years later, does not capture the valuable contribution that the original 70th Ground Echelon made to the successes of the Air Echelon, as exemplified by the 12 January Mission Report, reproduced earlier. An important point must be made, and emphasized at this time. It was the Ground Echelon that serviced and maintained the aircraft which, in turn, made the air missions possible. The Ground Echelon was without any question the *sine qua non*, and any history of air warfare should acknowledge the contributions of the ground crews in that context.

An Inglorious Return

To provide further detail relative to the rather dismal return of the Ground Echelon to the U.S., we have a letter from Thomas W. Moore, a radio operator on one of the combat crews, which is reproduced in part below:

"After thirty months in the Pacific area, these men were going home! I'd seen these guys put twelve B-26 bombers in the air every day, day after day. That thirteenth was mine and formed our Tech Supply. I'd seen these same men show the aircraft sailors from the *Lexington* how a well-functioning 'line' gets that way!

Armorers, mechanics, radio men, cooks, orderlies, flunkies, painters, wood butchers, sheetmetal men and prop specialists, all these Marauder Men going home.

It was rough and getting rougher. The men were tired and sick. I had t.b. and was down to 113 pounds. After two months and many rumors, after supper the word was passed. 'It' finally would be tonight well after dark. There was to be no talking, no helmets, no mess-kits and no cigarettes! Sometime after 0100 we were to be dressed, pick up our bags and single file to a big lifeboat. Our Executive Officer, bless him, had found a cargo ship returning to the States for repairs! We sat in huddled silence for what seemed like hours and then the signal came. No falling, no cussing, no noise whatever; we filled those lifeboats, maneuvered to the side of the ship which seemed like a mountain of net to climb — but we scampered aboard. Whatever flat place we found on deck in the pitch dark we collapsed and slept the night with stateside dreams.

⁷ Edwards, Louis S. Letter, 30 July 1997.

Forty-two days later, with but one screw turning, buffeted by storms, two meals a day and fear of Jap subs, we strained for the sight of the Golden Gate Bridge. I had flown under that sucker exactly twenty-four months ago!"⁸

Tribute to Ground Echelon

A fitting and well-deserved tribute to the Ground Echelon of the 70th Squadron is contained in the document entitled, "70th Bombardment Squadron (M), Ground Echelon Returns to the United States After 25 Months in War Zones." Portions of this document are reproduced below, precisely as written.

"In their 25 months in three war zones, the 70th ground echelon has probably done as much to 'keep 'em flying' as any other single unit in the AAF. Those mechanics, instrument specialists, parachute repairmen, welders, sheet metal workers, electricians, radio men, armorers, ordnance men, bomb sight technicians, painters, carpenters, medics, clerks, and handy men have serviced a total of twenty five B-26s and ninety B-25s, only a part of these belonging to the Squadron; making 52 engine changes; 25 depot shake down inspections; 155 100-hour inspections; and countless routine inspections. Frequently short of equipment, especially in the early days, the ground crews have done a staggering job of salvage and improvisation. Nothing, not even a plane smashed into unrecognizability was a total loss. The communications section could somehow find enough parts to build new radios. Valuable and hard-to-get structural members could be retrieved and placed in other ships. And during their tour of duty in the Solomons, there was scarcely a period when sometime during 24 hours all planes were not in commission, a remarkable accomplishment. And only a single aircraft was lost thru mechanical failure.

Like most Squadrons the 70th had several outstanding men, but its record has not been due so much to unusual individual performance as to the teamwork among all sections. In over two years the boys have learned to pull together like the muscular coordination of a seasoned athlete. The medics, the cooks, and even the latrine orderlies played their part in maintaining a high degree of Squadron efficiency.

The Squadron's personnel come from a hundred towns and cities and thirty states. Most of the soldiers are regular army men, but a group of about fifty selectees joined the Squadron in July 1941. Practically all of these came from Pennsylvania.

The ground echelon, altho anxious to do all it can to hasten the winning of the war, is glad for this intermission in its duties. The boys are looking forward to seeing their families and sweethearts again for the first time in more than two years. Except for less than a dozen lucky crew chiefs, the

⁸ Moore, Thomas W. Letter, 17 August 1995.

ground echelon did not once leave the rain and heat of the tropics from May 1942 to March 1944. There was not even a rest camp on the islands. No Red Cross or USO after Fiji. Most of the soldiers have never had a furlough overseas, and those who did had no place to go.

But they don't mind that now. It was worth it to get a beachhead at Frisco."⁹

With the Air and Ground Echelons having returned to the U.S., and to round out this history, a separate chapter follows on the Squadron's "Medical Story" written by Dr. Joseph F. Palmieri, our able, amiable and conscientious Squadron doctor.

⁹ "70th Bombardment Squadron (M) Ground Echelon Returns to the United States After 25 Months in War Zones." Microfilm. Maxwell Air Force Base.