



Martin B-26B, 41-17581, of the 70th Bomb Squadron over Nandi Bay in 1943. (All photos from author's collection)

PACIFIC MARAUDERS

By JOHN L. SHERLOCK as told to JAY SHERLOCK

For almost two years, from October 1941 to August 1943, I served with the 70th Bomb Squadron of the 38th Bomb Group (Medium). Fifteen of those months were spent in the Southwest Pacific Area. Our Group was one of only two units to use the Martin B-26 Marauder in the Pacific Theater.

We first received our new B-26Bs in November of 1941. This was long before they had achieved their deadly reputation ("One a day in Tampa Bay."), so to us they were merely fast airplanes. In May 1942 we flew our planes from Jackson Field, Mississippi to McClellan Field, California for the trip overseas. Our 38th Group was the only B-26-equipped unit to ferry its planes from California to Hawaii by air. The 22nd Bomb Group which preceded us to combat with B-26As had their aircraft dismantled and shipped over by boat.

At Hamilton Field, north of San Francisco, we ran gas consumption tests for two weeks. At the end of the practice period we were flying 2,200 miles and landing with 300 gallons of gas still remaining. On 1 and 2 June the 70th Squadron made the long, over water flight to Hawaii. We cruised all the way at 170 mph, my total time in the air being something over 14 hours.

When we arrived at Hickam Field we discovered that various planes from the group, mostly from the 69th Squadron, had been sent to Midway for the impending battle. It was at Midway on 3 June, that the group lost its first plane in combat. Captain Collins was leading a four-plane formation for a torpedo attack on the Japanese carriers when Lt Watson and another crew member were lost to anti-aircraft fire from the ships.

We later learned that Collins and his wingman had returned to Midway in flying wrecks. One of the planes had received over 500 separate hits, including shells going completely through both engines. The two crews were pretty bloody and the planes were scrapped, but this was our first indication of the sort of punishment the B-26 could take. It was Capt. Collins, incidentally, who had made history's first B-26 flight to Hawaii.

We practiced torpedo attacks around Hawaii until 3 July, when we left for our new base at Nandi, Fiji Islands. Lt Durbin crashed on takeoff due to engine failure. Durbin and his co-pilot, Lt Evans, were the only ones who escaped from the wreckage, and both of them spent some months in the hospital. We flew to Fiji via Christmas and Canton Islands. Both were amazingly desolate. We stayed on Christmas for two days, leaving for Canton July 6th. We made only a short fuel stop at Canton, with its famous one lone palm tree, and then flew on to Fiji. Total flying time for the whole trip was about 20 hours.

Our first view of Nandi was a shock. Only a few small native huts and two runways of five and six thousand feet were visible. Only one of the strips was paved and that one had an unpaved break in the middle where the other, dirt, runway passed through. Nandi Bay was only a short distance away. Within a few days we moved out the natives and appropriated their village as our base. For the first few weeks, until we had a good extermination program going, the rats almost moved us out every night. Our unit was one of the first to arrive, so everything was very primitive. As the months

went by, Nandi was built up into a fair-sized base, and by September 1942 it even had hangars and a tower. It became a major stop for Australia-bound aircraft but as on most other Pacific islands the maintenance, sanitation and living facilities were never very good.

There was not much action around Fiji until our first combat in November. We were too far from the enemy front to sustain air attacks, but of course, we were prepared with shelters, revetments and several anti-aircraft guns scattered around the field. Probably our worst non-combat loss occurred during this early peaceful period. On 13 October, during maneuvers over Nandi Bay, Lt Dreuyour's plane collided in mid-air with a P-39. We fished out the B-26 wreckage and those of the crew we could find, but we never found a trace of the P-39 or its pilot.

During my whole overseas tour, our B-26s were camouflaged with the standard olive drab top surfaces and medium gray undersurfaces. The serial numbers on the tail were in white and the props were the regular black with yellow tips. The late-1942 style national insignia (star in circle) was used. Our individual aircraft names always created a stir with any visitors, who constantly photographed them. In early 1943 we were told to remove anything offensive from all aircraft (meaning to either remove the pictures or make the girls appear a little more respectable), but the order was never really enforced. Our aircraft names never had quite the same value as in Europe since we were always changing to someone else's plane as the Marauders went in or out of service.

B-26 TACTICS

Our formations were basically simple. Theoretically, we would fly in two vee of vee's, each vee being composed of three three-plane elements, one stepped up from the leader and the other stepped down. The three planes within each element repeated this procedure in their own vee, so when viewed from head-on the formation resembled a giant staircase rising from left to right.

The aircraft of each element would take off at five to 15-second intervals. To avoid excessive turbulence the leader would take off down the left side of the runway and then the others would alternate between the two sides. The leader would fly straight out for a specified time and then begin a gradual turn to the left or right. His wingmen would fly so many minutes or seconds less and catch up to him in the turn. Once we were familiar with this procedure it took us a maximum of three minutes to get everyone into place and on the way.

This formation was designed to be the best defensive type for our area. We would normally fly with 50 to 100 feet between the planes in each element, tight-

ening up as we neared the target. Any enemy fighters which approached the formation could be sure of being fired upon by at least three planes. Due to the location of the B-26s' armament, we discovered the most difficult attacks to defend against were those coming from under the wings or from the front quarters. We always maintained complete radio silence in flight, even during emergencies. This even included notification of any unplanned maneuvers during formation flight. When the radio was occasionally used communication was entirely in code.

Most of our combat missions consisted of general area bombing of Japanese airfields. High-precision bombing just did not fit in our theater. We would cruise in at 13,000 or 14,000 feet, usually doing 180 to 200 mph. Once we began the actual bomb run we would begin to gradually accelerate, until we were coming off some of the runs at speeds as high as 230 or 240 mph. As soon as the run was completed we would dive three or four thousand feet to throw off the flak. We used the famous Norden bombsight and every bombardier did his own sighting. Each bombardier would sight for distance only, as it was the job of the lead plane to correct the formation for drift. On one occasion the leader's sight malfunctioned, but everyone else dropped anyway, scoring surprisingly well. The leader finally salvaged his bombs later. We usually set the bombs to go in train at intervals of 100 to 150 feet for maximum damage to the runways. At first our bombs malfunctioned frequently, due to the early Army fuses. Sometimes the malfunctions would be as high as fifty per cent of the entire load. After this happened on several consecutive missions, we switched to using Navy fuses, which ended the problem immediately.

Occasionally our formations had a fighter escort of P-38s or P-39s. Most of the fighters remained 3,000 to 5,000 feet above us as top cover, but three of them always stayed down with the formation as close protection. Incredibly, our squadron was never attacked by enemy fighters during the entire time I was overseas. We always seemed to appear over the target either just before or just after one of our fighter patrols had passed, so we saw Japanese fighters only in the distance. We would first notice them approaching about 65 miles out from the target, but they either disappeared or went after the B-17s and B-24s which were usually in the same area. Flak was encountered only when we were committed to the bomb run. It was always very intense, but we lost only three planes to it, even though many more were frequently damaged.

Although most of our bombing missions were of the medium-level type, we had extensive practice in skip-bombing and torpedo work. For skip-bombing we would come in at masthead height, preferably at a 90 degree deflection. The idea was to release the bomb so it would skip once, then hit the water again and go down



B-26B, 41-17576, flown by Lt Durbin, crashed on take-off from Hickam Field, Hawaii, on 3 July 1942.



Crews of the 70th Bomb Squadron, 38th Bomb Group, at Nandi, Fiji Islands, in the latter part of 1942.



The airfield at Nandi, Fiji Islands as it appeared in September 1942 with both Army and Navy planes based there.

about ten feet from the ship, acting like a torpedo. If we released too low the bomb would skip completely over the ship. If we released too late the bomb would not stop at the ship. This happened to me once when we were using 100-pound practice bombs on a beached enemy transport at Guadalcanal. We dropped late and the bomb skipped once, slammed right through the ship into the jungle behind, and then exploded. Despite all this training we never had a chance to use the experience, since we bombed moving ships only once and that was from high altitude.

Torpedo runs were another fun-type low-level maneuver. We always used the Navy Mark 7 torpedo in our work. It was connected under the bomb bay catwalks and then the doors were closed, so that the torpedo hung outside the plane under the belly. A 30-degree angle of approach on the bow was best, since it allowed for compensation if the target began to turn. The run would begin at 200 feet doing 180 to 200 mph. If we were able to slow down to 170 mph it was much better. The bombsight was centered on the ship so the pilot could be connected during the approach. The projected release point was about 1,000 yards from the target.

This was another type of attack we never used. We

first started practicing in Hawaii, on the way to Fiji, and made many practice runs on battleships. However, we never really released a torpedo or even went into combat carrying them. In fact, the only instance I can recall of a B-26 being used as a torpedo bomber was during Midway, when Capt. Collins led the raid. The Navy finally decided it was foolish to risk a five or seven-man airplane on such a mission when they had smaller aircraft especially designed for the job.

COMBAT

On November 14, 1942, the 70th Squadron left Fiji for combat. First we flew to Espiritu Santo in the New Hebrides, which was code-named **BUTTONS**. The other squadron of the 38th Group, the 69th, was stationed there, almost five hours flight time from Fiji. From there we flew another four or five hours to Guadalcanal, code-named **CACTUS**. At that time the ground fighting was still going on, so the place looked even worse than Fiji had on our arrival. We worked under the most primitive conditions imaginable, plus the added harassment of constant enemy attacks. As it turned out, this was our shortest and worst combat tour.

The next day, 15 November, we went on our first mission, which was also the only low-level mission we ever had. We were sent out to bomb a number of beached enemy ships which had been observed unloading during the night. Most of the squadron flew up the coast to strike shipping there, but three of us were detached to provide some ground support for the Marines on the island. Our planes were loaded with twenty 200-pound bombs and we dropped half of them from 10,000 feet on targets just ahead of the Marine lines. Then the three of us dived down to 200 feet and went in at maximum speed only 100 yards from our own lines. The gunners started strafing immediately, with every gun available. This was the only time we ever used waist guns in the B-26. We salvaged the rest of our bombs from this altitude and received a very bad concussion. The whole low-level run lasted less than one minute, but the bombardier and the top turret fired about 2,000 rounds, while the tail gunner ran out of ammunition completely.

Everything happened very fast on that first mission so none of us retained much of an impression right afterward. We were all keyed up at finally getting some satisfaction in taking a crack at the enemy.

On the 17th of the month we made another raid in the Guadalcanal area, accompanied by eleven B-17s and fourteen P-38s. We claimed one ship with a direct hit while the B-17s shot down two Zeroes. Later the same day, on the homeward leg between CACTUS and BUTTONS, we lost our first plane while flying as a squadron in a combat area.

At this time, in late 1942, the weather around Guadalcanal was terrible. The heat was unbearable, the temperatures sometimes reaching 180 degrees inside the planes on the ground, and the engines shot past the red line as soon as they were started. The Solomon Islands group was also the spawning ground for much of the weather in that part of the Pacific, so storms appeared unexpectedly and could not be accurately forecast. Before leaving Guadalcanal on the 17th, we had been briefed on a storm front which was lying between us and BUTTONS. However, the briefing officer could not, or forgot, to tell us where the front was located.

About an hour after takeoff we located the front. Two planes plunged through on instruments and, after a few minutes of darkness, broke out and flew on to Espiritu Santo in the clear. The rest of us flew along the storm's edge in heavy rain for almost three hours, until it began to break up. During this time one plane lost both engines, evidently from water entering the cowlings and short-circuiting the electrical system. One of the other planes followed him down and watched

him make a perfect ditching approach. Unfortunately, the waves were very high because of the storm, so when the plane hit the water it flipped end over end and broke in two just behind the wings. Two open parachutes were lying streamed out on the water but the other crew could see no movement in the debris. Two Navy PBY's searched the area for a solid week but located no survivors.

We arrived back at Nandi on 18 November and everything became quiet. Action came again on 24 December when Lt Morrison flew my plane into the ground on a night mission without injuries. On 1 January 1943, Capt. Eddy returned to Guadalcanal with two other planes. One of the three was shot down over Munda by flak January 10th. Two days later, on 12 January, both Capt. Eddy and the other plane were lost. Eddy was hit by flak over Munda and the crew bailed out over a small island. They were picked up by a submarine a week later. The other B-26 was abandoned over the field at Guadalcanal because of damage. The 69th Squadron also lost three planes on that same day.

Due to these losses the rest of the squadron was ordered back to CACTUS, arriving there on 23 January. For two weeks we raided Japanese airfields and received heavy retaliatory attacks in return. We usually hit Kolombangara or Munda, and it was over Munda on 29 January that I had one of my more memorable overseas experiences. Flak had been particularly heavy that day, when suddenly a burst appeared directly ahead of us. The co-pilot and I both ducked behind the instrument panel as a heavy fragment flipped toward our plane. We both realized at the same time that the panel was not about to stop anything that big, so we both came up in time to see the piece pass under the left wing. The plane picked up only a few small holes from the burst.

There were two other memorable events in the squadron during that tour. Most Japanese attacks on Guadalcanal had been night nuisance raids, but on the morning of 1 February we were caught flat-footed. A Betty and three Zeroes suddenly popped out of the overcast, bombed two Navy torpedo planes on the runway, strafed everything, and then slid back into the clouds. It was all over in a couple of minutes. A few minutes later we watched as a lone P-38 drove the pack out of the clouds and shot down the bomber in flames about ten miles from the field. The P-38 escaped without a scratch. That episode lifted our spirits considerably.

Then, on 2 February, Capt. Sharp's crew had one of those experiences that come up only a few times in war. They were cruising around Guadalcanal on sub patrol when someone spotted a Kawanishi Mavis flying boat at low



B-26B, 41-17575, of the 70th Squadron seen in flight from Lt Sherlock's aircraft. This was the average distance between aircraft while flying formation.



Lt Sherlock's crew on Guadalcanal, February 1943. Left to right, standing are: Lt Welsh, co-pilot; Lt Sherlock, pilot; tail gunner; Lt Golden, navigator.



"Arkansas Traveler II" with steel bands added to the nose in the field to help support .50 cal. nose gun.



Line-up of B-26Bs of the 70th Bomb Squadron on Guadalcanal, sometime during late 1942.

altitude. Sharp immediately dived on it with every forward-firing gun in operation. The Japanese gunners put up a terrific counter-fire which hit Sharp's plane a number of times. After about ten minutes, when the Mavis was drifting down slowly with two engines burning, Sharp's gunners ran out of ammunition, and he was forced to break off because of low fuel. No one believed that they had had a running battle with a flying boat until several weeks later. We received word that a Mavis with two engines burning had crashed and exploded near a small island, the natives killing all the survivors. They eventually got credit for it, the only plane in the squadron to shoot down an enemy plane.

When we finally left Guadalcanal on 4 February we had only two aircraft still in operation. All the rest had dropped out because of poor repair facilities.

We returned to Fiji February 5th, and that was the end of combat for the 70th while I was assigned to the squadron. In March the new B-25s began to arrive to replace the B-26s, which were being pulled out of combat and back to Australia. Also in March the 38th Group headquarters moved to the New Guinea area, so the 69th and 70th Squadrons stayed where they were and became part of the 42nd Bomb Group.

Between March and July we flew constant and tremendously boring anti-submarine missions. No one ever sighted anything. Of course, life was not completely

dull. Lt Haynes crashed on takeoff with no injuries. Lt Morrison took out another one at night, this time sliding it into a mountain, but again without injuries. I was caught by a pea-soup fog while on sub patrol. Fiji reported absolutely clear so we flew around waiting for the fog to vanish, which it never does when you are sitting up there wasting gas. Finally we set a course and prayed for a landmark. Just as we were about to give up we broke out and sighted a familiar piece of rock. There was unlimited visibility all the way back to Nandi, but we landed with almost dry fuel tanks.

Although the 69th Squadron saw a lot of action around Guadalcanal in late spring and early summer, it was not until 31 July that the 70th received two weeks notice for action at Guadalcanal. I was rotated back home on 6 August 1945, going into B-26 instructing and test piloting.

REACTIONS TO THE B-26

When we first received the new B-26Bs in late 1941 the crews hated them because of the high takeoff and landing speeds. We would make a steep approach at 140 mph, with flare-out and touchdown at around 110 mph. Normal cruise was about 180 mph.

After being in combat with the B-26s most of the crews swore by them, many saying they would rather fly B-26s than the famed B-17 or B-24. The aircraft had very good speed and excellent armament, with some optimists even believing that we carried too much ammunition. This, combined with the B-26's demonstrated ability to absorb a tremendous amount of damage, made the crews enthusiastic about them.

The B-26, like any new airplane, did have its troubles. First it was the landing gear. While the tricycle gear was a great improvement over the conventional type, the nose strut was too weak and would collapse even while we were taxiing. In order to strengthen the gear the whole squadron was grounded at Hamilton Field for several days before going overseas. That helped, but the gear could not be abused in any way. At other times the nose wheel would either come down cocked to one side or not at all, but working the gear up and down fixed this easily. Later, overseas, we were bothered with clogging gas lines, engines and bomb mechanisms. Although the engines never seemed to put out the power required, this was remedied when newer engines were installed. In the bomb mechanism we had trouble variously with dirt, moisture, indicator lights and bomb shackles.

We performed several field modifications on the planes while at Fiji. We first attempted to install package guns on the fuselage sides, such as were seen on later models, but this required major structural



Lt Morrison flew the Marauder "The Gallopin' Ghost", 41-17574, into the ground during a night mission on 24 December 1942. There were no injuries.



"The Peace Terms", 41-17579, flown by Lt Sherlock in early 1943. Weak nose gear struts were a common early fault.



A North American B-25C, "Sweet Eva", 42-53430, of the 70th Squadron over Fiji during 1943. Field-mounted package guns are on sides of fuselage, a feature standardized on later production models of the B-25 Mitchell.

changes and was abandoned. The most important modification we made was the substitution of a .50 cal. machine gun in the nose in place of the .30 cal. We soon added two steel bands around the plexiglass as a result of this change. The first plane to fire its new .50 had the entire plexiglass nose shattered from the heavy recoil, and the pilot had a hard time getting it home with the smooth airflow gone.

Later, when the B-26 was awarded its more popular aliases, we concluded that the trouble was mainly unfamiliarity with the aircraft. The older B-26A models had abnormal rudder forces, and we had to fight the rudder pedals constantly, whereas the "B" and later models were extremely stable. The main problem was always one-engine operation, particularly on takeoff. Unless you were able to roll the rudder tab fast enough, the torque from the other engine would cause the plane to slow roll and then spin into the ground--very tricky for the new pilot.

When I later became a B-26 instructor, I found that many students were sure they were already dead, merely by being assigned to B-26s. We always tried to give the new pilot confidence and teach him one-engine operation as soon as possible. But unfortunately, the B-26 maintained its reputation as sure death, despite its outstanding record in Europe. The B-26 really was a great aircraft, even though it was not a particularly easy or pleasant plane to fly outside of combat.

The closest competitor of the Marauder, the North American B-25, was only a fair aircraft to our squadron overseas. When they first arrived at the 70th everyone liked them, but after a while they seemed to have very flimsy construction in comparison to the B-26. The B-25 was much noisier in the cockpit, seemed to be slower, and was generally felt to be inferior to the B-26. The Marauder had instilled a lot of confidence in the crews, but the B-25 was just another airplane.

The only other bomber which might be classed as a medium, was the Lockheed B-34, which looked like a truck and flew like one. It had nowhere near the responsiveness of the B-26, or even the B-25, and was much slower. We flew several practice missions with the Royal Australian Air Force's Hudsons, which were somewhat similar to the B-34. Even though they took off an hour before us, we overtook them before reaching the target. If the B-25 was slightly inferior to the B-26, the B-34 should have been scrapped.

70TH SQUADRON MISSION LIST

Below are listed the active mission list of the 70th Squadron during its two tours of action in the Guadalcanal area, 1942-1943. The innumerable sub patrol missions have been omitted since nothing ever happened during the course of such missions.

No.	Date	Target	Losses	Remarks
1	11/15/42	ground support	0	only strafing by 70th Sq.
2	11/17/42	Guadalcanal	0	claim 1 ship
3	1/3/43	Munda	0	
4	1/3/43	Munda	0	
5	1/3/43	Munda	0	
6	1/10/43	Guadalcanal	1	No. 41-17550 lost to flak
7	1/12/43	Munda	2	Eddy lost to flak, 41-17587 lost over field.
8	1/23/43	Munda	0	
9	1/23/43	Munda	0	
10	1/25/43	Kolombangara	0	surprise raid
11	1/25/43	Munda	0	light flak
12	1/28/43	Kolombangara	0	heavy flak
13	1/29/43	Munda	0	heavy flak
14	1/29/43	Kolombangara	0	best bombing done by sq.
15	1/30/43	Munda	0	no opposition
16	1/30/43	Munda	0	raid with B-17 & B-24
17	2/3/43	Munda	0	heavy flak

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: For his first JOURNAL article, Jay Sherlock's subject stemmed naturally from the source of his aviation interest, his father's AAF/USAF career. One of our youngest writers, at the age of twenty, he's done a very fine job in adding to the record of "flying experiences." Jay lives at 4672 Flamingo Park Court, Fremont, California and is a student at California State College in Hayward. A plastic modeler and photographer of aircraft, he has been taking color slides of planes at a steady pace since beginning in 1963 while his father (now retired) was stationed in Japan.