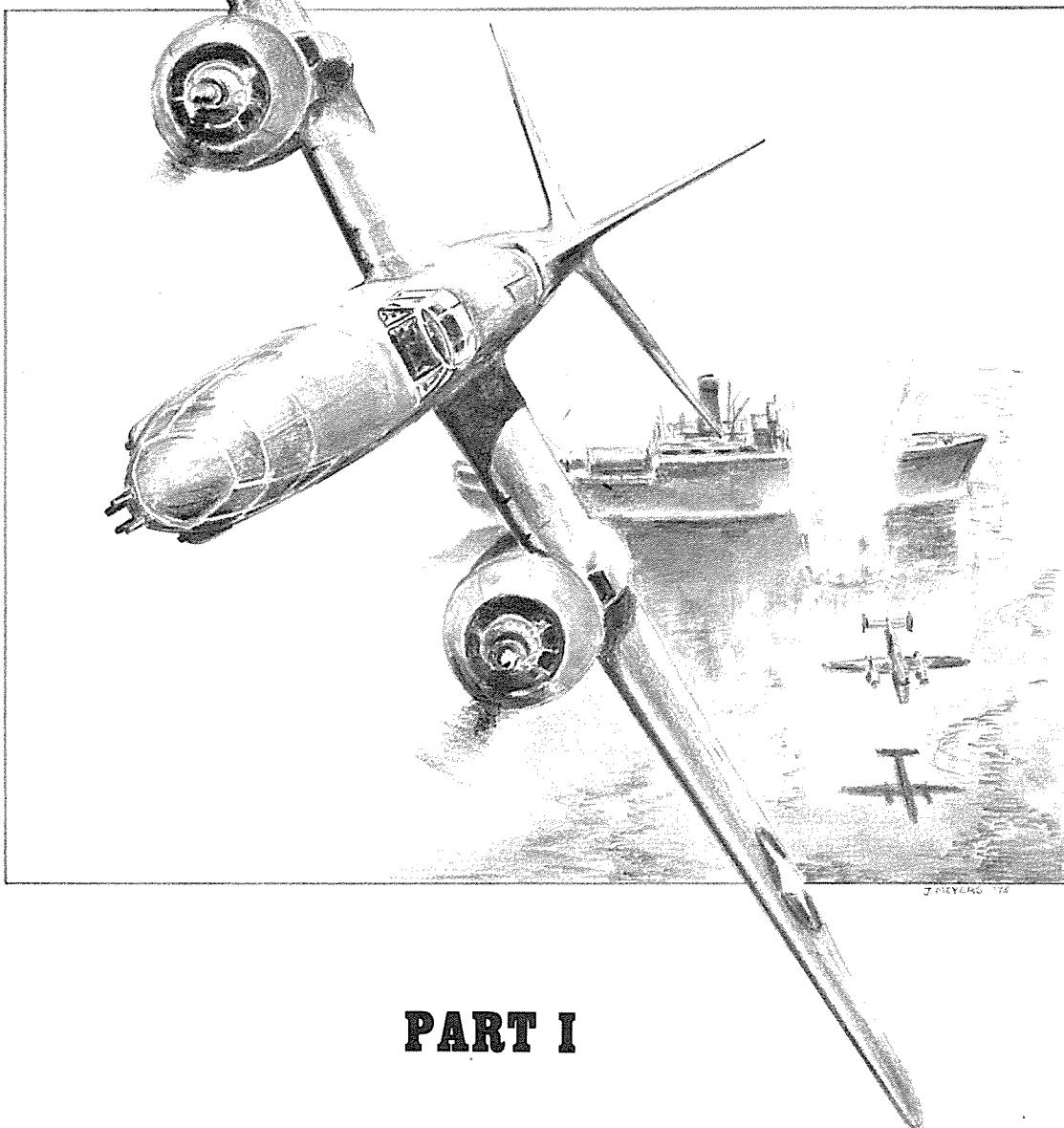


*The unforgettable Third Bomb Group wrote the book
on low level attack in the Southwest Pacific during
World War Two.*



Pencil rendering by John Meyers
(See Page 72)

PART I

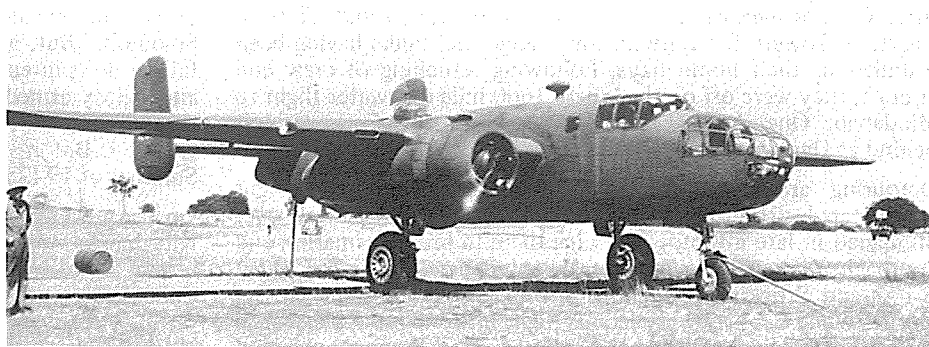
THE GRIM REAPERS

by John S. Alcorn

One of General Kenney's key units in the Southwest Pacific throughout World War II, the Third Bomb Group pioneered and perfected the martial art of low altitude attack. Combining devastating forward firepower with skip and direct bombing of shipping and the sowing of parafrags against ground targets, their B-25's and A-20's wreaked havoc among the Japanese at Buna, Lae, Bismarck Sea, Wewak, Rabaul, Hollandia and finally, in the Philippines and Okinawa. The Grim Reapers who survive have just cause to be proud of their unit and its many achievements during those trying times.

Certainly the 3rd Bomb Group entered World War II with sound credentials, with a distinguished history dating from 1919; in fact, its four initial squadrons, the 8th, 12th, 90th and 104th had seen service in France flying DH-4's and Salmson 2-A2's. Although first formed as the 1st Surveillance Group in 1919, it was redesignated the 3rd Group (attack) in September 1921, comprising the 8th, 13th, 90th and 26th squadrons; and finally, the 3rd Attack Group in January 1923. Principal equipment of

Charters Towers, 1942: One of the fifteen B-25C's acquired from the Dutch by Col. Davis on April 2. (Lt. Gen. Rob't Ruegg)



the 20's was the Curtiss A-3 Falcon. In 1932 they entered the monoplane era with the Curtiss A-8 Shrike, soon supplemented by the radial engined A-12. February to May 1934 saw the Group pressed into Air Mail service, flying often in treacherous weather. In February 1935 they moved to Barksdale Field, Louisiana and the next year they were re-equipped with Northrup A-17's; later these were replaced by A-17A's. In October 1940 the 3rd Bombardment Group (Light), as it was now designated, moved to Savannah with one of its basic wartime mounts, the Douglas A-20 Havoc. By 1941, the Group consisted of four Squadrons, the 8th, 13th, 90th, and 89th, the latter formed as a tactical reconnaissance unit.

THE THIRD GOES TO WAR

Almost as soon as they could pack and say goodbye, the 3rd, led by Capt. Robert F. Strickland, was off to war. On 19 January 1942 they departed San Francisco aboard U.S.S. Ancon for Brisbane, Australia, arriving, sans aircraft, on 25 February.

From this point the fortunes of the 3rd Bomb Group became inextricably entwined with those of the ill fated 27th B.G., twenty-six of whose pilots (and two enlisted men) were evacuated from the Philippines and Java to become the battle-hardened nucleus of the 3rd¹ Col. John H. (Big Jim) Davies, being senior to Capt. Strickland, was placed in command of the group, A number of the ex-27th pilots, including Capt. Floyd (Buck) Rogers as C. O., were assigned to the 8th squadron, equipped with eighteen of the battered A-24's which they had brought out. They were immediately sent to Port Moresby where on 1 April they flew the 3rd B.G.'s first mission. Five aircraft led by Capt. Rob't G. Ruegg (Capt. Rogers was ill) and escorted by Kittyhawks of the R.A.A.F.'s No. 75 Squadron, attacked Salamava without serious incident.

Meanwhile, the 13th and 19th Squadrons were equipped with

fifteen North American B-25's, originally intended for the Dutch and spirited from Archer Field near Brisbane by Col. John H. Davies and Co. with a minimum of fanfare and red tape (the Dutch had not been informed of the transaction and were none too cooperative). No time was lost putting these invaluable machines to work, as their first combat mission was flown on 5 April against Gasmata, New Britain.

Royce, called initially for eleven 3rd B.G. B-25's and three B-17E's from the 19th B.G. to stage from Australia to Bataan, and harass the Japanese for as long as possible. But, since Bataan fell on 9 April, the plan was changed to airfields on Mindanao.

Due to the unusual and historic nature of the mission, it is well to recount it in some detail.²

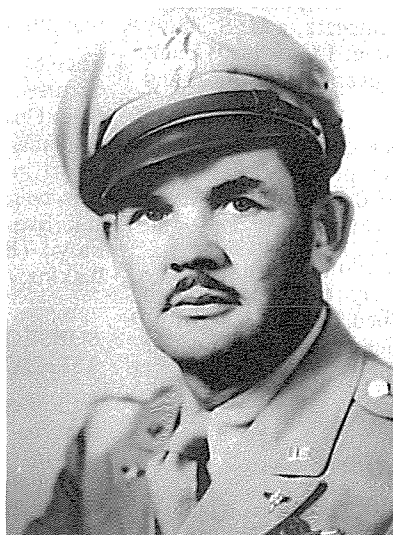
The following list of pilots and copilots of the 3rd B.G. who participated in the mission includes a large proportion (indicated) of the ex-27th B.G. personnel who had so recently escaped from the Philippines and who were eager to avenge their doomed comrades left behind.

A/C No. B-25C	Sqdn.	Pilot	Copilot
41-12483	*	Col. John Davies (x27)	Lt. James McAfee (x27)
41-12441	13	Capt. Herman Lowery (x27)	Lt. Lee Walker (x27)
41-12443	13	Lt. J. R. Smith (x27)	Lt. Peter Talley (x27)
41-12511	13	Lt. Maull	Lt. Howie West
41-12480	*	Capt. Robt. Strickland	Maj. Hipps
41-12472	13	Lt. Malcolm Peterson	Lt. Harry Mangan (x27)
41-12455	90	Lt. Wilson	Lt. J. J. Keeter
41-12466	13	Lt. Feltham	Lt. Linn
41-12442	13	Lt. Gus Heiss (x27)	Lt. Ed Townsend (x27)
41-12498	90	Capt. Paul I. Gunn	Lt. Frank Bender (x27)

(*) 3rd B.G. H.Q. Staff.

At 0100 on 11 April 1942, eleven B-25's and three B-17's led by

(Near right) Col. Robert F. Strickland commanded the group from 19 January to 2 April, 1942, and again from 26 October, 1942 to 29 April, 1943, following departure of Col. Davies (Col. Robert Strickland)



(Far right) Captain Frank P. "Pete" Bender whose many exploits, including the Royce Philippine Mission, culminated in his incredible survival from an exploding B-25 on 26, July 1942, and subsequent odyssey across Owen Stanley Mountains. (Col. Frank P. Bender)



Brig. Gen. Royce (in a B-17) and Col. Davies, took off from Charter's Towers for Darwin, long range fuel tanks having been installed in their bomb bays. Following refuelling of crew and aircraft, they were off on the lonely 1600 mile overwater flight to Mindanao. One crew (Lts. Schmidt, Birn and Co.) was left behind at Darwin due to a ripped main-wheel tire.

Detouring around Japanese held islands enroute, the flight encountered towering storm clouds upon their arrival over Mindanao in late afternoon, forcing them to break formation and approach the airfields more or less independently. The three B-17's and Strickland's flight of five B-25's landed safely at Del Monte, while Capt. Lowery led his flight into Valentia, a dispersal strip 40 miles away. During the night, excited Philippine ground personnel removed the long range tanks and bombed up the aircraft.

As dawn broke on 12 April the intruders assembled and set course for Cebu City, some 100 miles to the north, attacking shipping and dockside targets from low altitude. One can well imagine the dismay and confusion of the Japanese as the attackers roared over. Anti-aircraft fire was sporadic and inaccurate and of four defending aircraft, two float planes were claimed shot down. "Widespread damage" was claimed and "one 7000 ton ship sunk", although both claims were overexuberant.

Lowery's flight returned to Valentia and Strickland's to Maramag, another grass dispersal strip near Del Monte. Two P-40's, forlorn remnants of our doomed Philippine forces, flew protective cover as the B-25's were rearmed. That afternoon they again struck Cebu City and Davao, all returning safely as evening approached. Again the ground crews labored through the night servicing and rearming the bombers, while the weary aircrews slept and the Japanese doubtless pondered their whereabouts.

Again on 13 April the aircraft mounted attacks, one on Cebu and two on Davao. On the Davao attacks they enjoyed the protection of the last six P-40's left in commission and although the AA fire was "intense" no aircraft were lost. The B-17's went up to Luzon and bombed Nichols Field.

Meanwhile the Japanese attacked Del Monte and Valentia, destroying a B-17 left behind due to engine trouble.

The ten B-25's and two B-17's returned to Del Monte at dusk. Fuel, bombs and ammunition were running low and the day's visits made it certain that their time was running out--a raid that night seemed not unlikely. So the long range tanks were reinstalled and the aircraft serviced by men who doubtless realized that they were plying their trade for the last time in a long while, perhaps forever.

So, at about midnight, nine B-25's and the two B-17's lifted off and headed out through the night for Australia, laden with fuel and extra passengers, among whom were Nat Floyd of the Associated Press and New York Times; Col. Yamagata, a U. S. Army interpreter; Cdr. Bulkley of P. T. boat fame; Lts. John Wienert and Thomas Gerrity of the 27th B.G.; and several other pilots and a stowaway.

Gunn's extra fuel tank had been destroyed during the Japanese bombing of Del Monte, so he and his crew spent a very anxious and busy two days and nights fitting two B-18 tanks into their aircraft, finally arriving in Australia on the 16th.

The epic mission was over and, almost miraculously, all ten B-25's and two B-17's and all the aircrew had safely returned. For their trouble the 3rd B.G. received a Distinguished Unit Citation, Col. Davies a D.S.C., the aircrews a well-deserved rest, and the Philippines the last sight of American bombers for two years.

EARLY FORTUNES OF THE 8TH SQUADRON

The Douglas SBD "Dauntless" is justly remembered as the offensive aerial weapon primarily responsible for turning the tide

of war in our favor in the Coral Sea, at Midway and in the Solomons. But, as the A-24 in USAAF service, it was a relative failure in its intended mission of attack and ground support. Slow and lightly armed, it, like Germany's "Stuka", proved easy prey in the face of effective enemy fighter opposition unless well escorted. But it was all the 8th Squadron had in the Spring and Summer of 1942 and they lived, and died, with it.

On 7 April eight A-24's, escorted by six RAAF No. 75 Squadron Kittyhawks, ran a mission from Port Moresby up to Lae, where several Zeros were caught on the airstrip, but in the ensuing fray the defenders got Lt. Hank Schwartz.

On the 11th and again on the 13th the Squadron, led by Capt. Bob Ruegg and escorted by No. 75 Squadron, again struck at Lae, tangling with defending fighters each time.

The 8th and 75th Squadrons were a close pair indeed during those grim days, but the Japanese were taking a heavy toll of the gallant Australians, including Squadron leader J. F. Jackson on April 27th. The 8th received aircraft and personnel reinforcements in April, but they also received many visits from the Japanese, who still enjoyed air superiority in the area.



The Squadron stood anxiously by during the first week of May in anticipation of striking the Japanese naval forces moving into the Coral Sea, but their U.S. Navy counterparts took care of that.

So by the 17th of May, after remaining relatively inactive due to lack of fighter escort, most of the Squadron and all but five aircraft were moved back to Charters Towers to rest and begin re-equipment with A-20's.

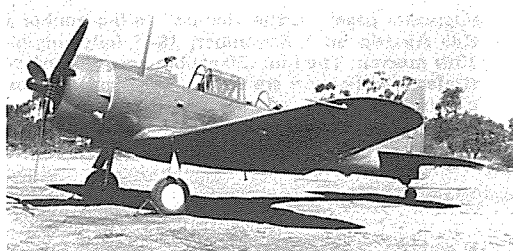
The 8th Squadron's final and fateful mission with A-24's occurred on 29 July. Seven A-24's, staging through Port Moresby from Charters Towers, were sent out to attack a convoy en route to Buna. Over the Owen Stanleys they somehow lost their P-39 escort in the clouds but went on to attack, damaging a destroyer. However, on their return they were jumped by Japanese fighters and five were shot down including their squadron C.O., Capt. Floyd (Buck) Rogers. Only one, piloted by Lt. Raymond H. Wilkins, returned to Moresby; the other limped into Milne Bay.

SUBSEQUENT EARLY OPERATIONS OF 13TH AND 90TH SQUADRONS

Following the April Philippine mission, the 13th and 90th squadrons, each partially equipped with B-25C's, settled into a routine of long, lonely, overwater reconnaissance missions, interspersed with medium level attacks against land and sea targets. Although based nominally at Charters Towers, Queensland, throughout 1942, they typically staged through Port Moresby for reconnais-

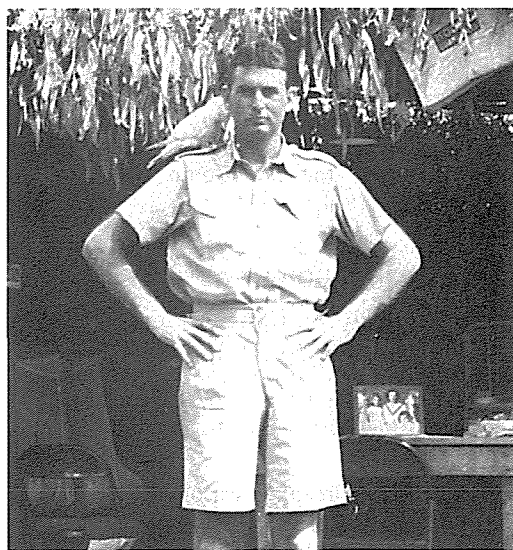


"Margaret" was one of the first B-25C's modified at Eagle Farm for strafing. (Maj. Gen. John P. Henebry)

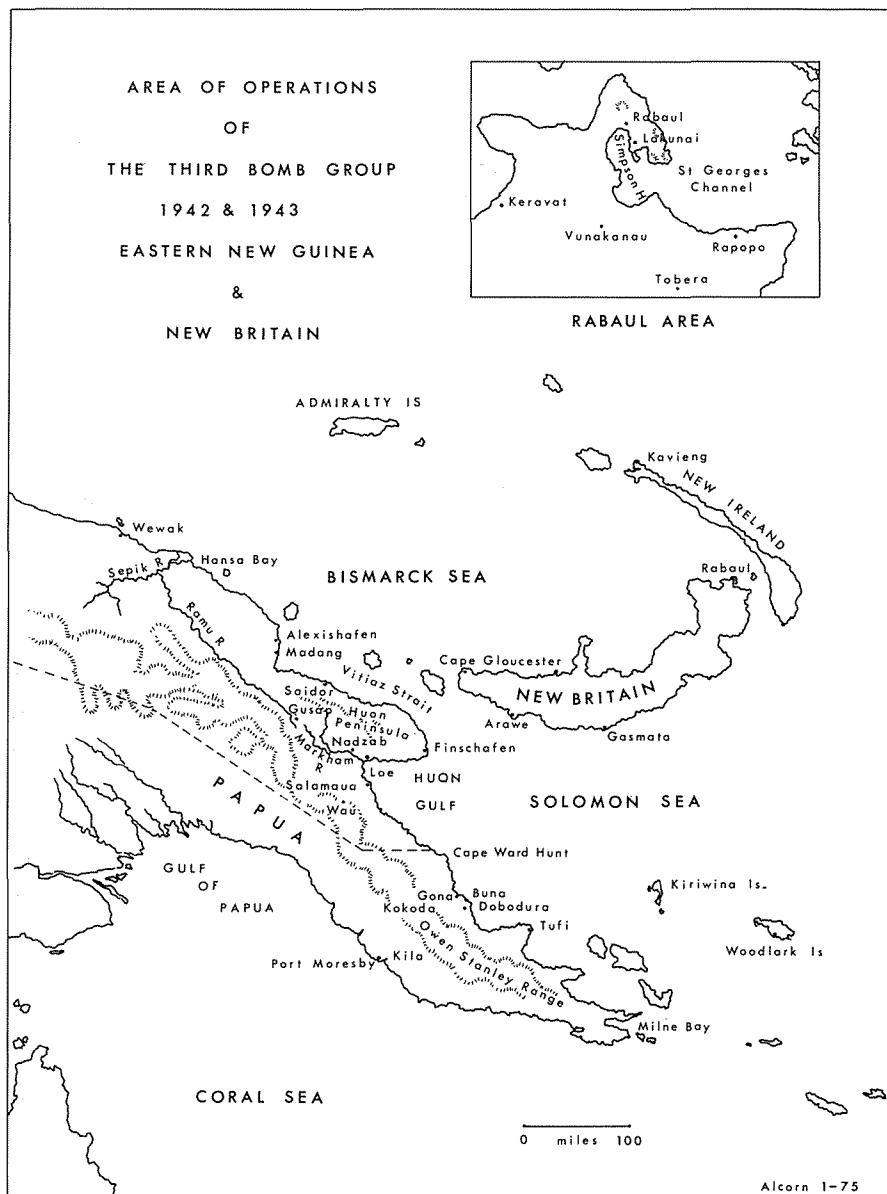


An ex-27th Bomb Group A-24. The 8th Squadron lived and died in their "Blue Rock Clay Pigeons" during the dark days from April to July, 1942. (Lt. Gen. Rob't Ruegg)

(Opposite page) A reconnaissance photo of Lae Airdrome, the infamous Japanese hornets nest, as it appeared in its heyday, spring, 1942. (Lt. Gen. Rob't Ruegg)



Ex-C.O. of the defunct 27th Bomb Group, Col. John H. "Big Jim" Davies commanded the 3rd Bomb Group from April to October, 1942, and let it on the famous Royce Philippine Mission. (Lt. Gen. Rob't Ruegg)



sance missions over the Bismarck and Coral Seas and for attacks against the usual targets of Lae, Salamaua and Buna. During these trying days, all such missions were hazardous, and the toll often heavy.

The following accounts of certain of these early missions, though not comprehensive, gives a good idea of the nature of the operations and of the difficulties and hazards they faced.

Lts. Ralph Schmidt and Roland Birnn had missed the Royce Philippine mission, but they were the first thereafter to begin operations, flying many long, tiring and dangerous missions from Port Moresby.³

Lt. Birnn's first such mission, run on 19 April, began at Charters Towers at 0100, where in the next seventeen hours he flew up to Port Moresby, reconnoitered the northeast coast of New Guinea, returned to Port Moresby and finally to Townsville after dark.

On 24 April, as related later, while enroute to Port Moresby from Charters Towers, five aircraft of the 90th Squadron encountered a serious storm, during which three became lost and eventually ditched into the sea some 100 miles southeast of Moresby. All hands from two aircraft (piloted by Bender and Johnson) survived and eventually returned to Port Moresby, but one pilot (Lt. Barker) crashed with but one survivor.



(Far left) Lt. Col. Paul I. (Pappy) Gunn, summer of 1943 at Eagle Farm, Brisbane. As a result of bomb frag injury, Pappy had persuaded flight surgeon to amputate little finger. Pappy claimed his "rigid digit" interfered with the use of throttle and mixture controls, and if finger was not amputated, he would shoot it off with his .45. (Ralph Oakley)

(Near left) Another of the "old 27th Bomb Group hands"; Capt. Rob't G. Ruegg led the first 3rd Bomb Group combat mission on 1 April, 1942, when five 8th Squadron A-24's visited Salamava. (Lt. Gen. Rob't Ruegg)



(Opposite page) "Little Hellion" in big-trouble at Kila Airstrip on 1 November, 1942 following her 13th mission. The four .50 calibre nose guns of the strafer modification are visible. The plexiglass nose panels were usually overpainted to eliminate greenhouse interior heating effect. (Official U.S. Air Force)

(Left) An A-20 A dropping parafrags at Soputa, 10 November, 1942. 23 pound parafrags, sown "on the deck" were among the most effective offensive-tactics of the 3rd Bomb Groups. (Col. Glen W. Clark)

Next morning, one of the aircraft which had arrived safely at Port Moresby, piloted by Capt. R. D. Hubbard, the Squadron C.O., performed a daring solo attack on Lae, bombing from 12,000 feet and fighting a 35 minute battle with a defending fighter on the way back.

At about this time it was learned that a 90th Squadron plane, piloted by Lt. J. J. Keeter with Capt. C. C. Stephenson and missing since 20 April, had in fact crashed into Mt. Bartle Frere in northern Australia during a severe storm.

On 30 April, Lt. Birnn flew clear to Bougainville from Port Moresby, encountering five "zeros" near Buna on the way back and claiming two before escaping into the clouds which blanketed the Owen Stanleys.

On 4 May, Lieut. Birnn flying his seventh reconnaissance mission in as many days, first spotted the Japanese invasion force headed for Port Moresby. Thereafter, all three active 3rd B.G. squadrons were brought up to Moresby, anticipating engagement with the invasion force, which was turned back without their help in the Battle of the Coral Sea on 7th and 8th of May.

By 5 May Lieut. Birnn remarked in his log, "Came back here (Charters Towers) today exhausted. Guess they never heard of pilot's fatigue. I think I have it." But he went out almost every morning thereafter until 17 May when he was granted a few days R & R at a 700,000 acre ranch belonging to a Mr. McConelhy. All in all the 3rd B.G.'s B-25's flew over 120 overwater reconnaissance missions during that crucial month.

On 24 May, disaster struck the Group. Eight aircraft, six from the 13th and two from the 90th squadrons, while on an unescorted low level mission to Lae, were attacked by a strong force of enemy fighters. Five of their B-25's, including that of Capt. Herman F. Lowery, the 13th Squadron C.O., were shot down and a sixth crash landed upon its return to Port Moresby.

This, and the aforementioned loss by the 8th Squadron of five A-24's on 29 July, was to mark the nadir of the Group's career: by the latter date morale was at a low ebb indeed from the months of constant gruelling combat operations under the most unfavorable of conditions and the loss of so many comrades. For the survivors of the 27th Bomb Group who had been exposed to combat against a numerically and materially superior enemy since December 1941, the strain was especially acute. Of the twenty-six ex-27th Group officers, eight had been killed or were missing (one, Bender, would later appear). Therefore, on 1 August Col. Davies recommended to Allied Air Force headquarters in Townsville that these ex-27th men be sent to the states for a rest. Their places were soon taken by replacement, Lt. Col. Robert Strickland again becoming C.O. of the 3rd Bomb Group on 26 October.⁴

CAPT. FRANK BENDER'S INCREDIBLE ADVENTURE

Today Frank P. "Pete" Bender (Col. USAF Retired) is on the go who spends very little time reflecting on the past. He is also a very lucky man. For on 26 July 1942, trapped in a burning B-25 over Buna, his chances of seeing 1974 didn't seem very good. How he got out, and eventually returned to Port Moresby, is a story right out of the Pulps.⁵

Capt. Bender was by that time already a seasoned veteran of the 90th Squadron. One of the "old" 27th B.G. hands, he had flown B-18's in the Philippines, been evacuated to Java aboard the submarine Sea Wolf in February 1942, and on 18 March made it to Australia in a derelict DC-3 which he and several others patched together just in the nick of time.

Bender was soon recruited into the 3rd Bomb Group and participated in the Royce Philippine mission as "Pappy" Gunn's copilot. On 27 April, while proceeding up to Port Moresby from Charters



Towers in company with four other B-25's they encountered the "granddaddy of all thunderstorms". His aircraft, and two others, became lost and upon running out of fuel ditched into the sea near the coast. Although knocked unconscious by the impact, Bender was saved by his copilot who swam to him, inflated his Mae West and towed him ashore where they were taken by Papuan natives to Mai Mai plantation. Two weeks later they arrived at Port Moresby, by which time Bender had contracted malaria.

By mid-June Bender had rejoined the Squadron at Charters Towers; on 23 July they staged up to Moresby and on the 25th fought a fierce engagement with Japanese fighters over Buna.

The 26 July mission was to be a five plane attack on Gasmata, New Britain, led by Lt. Ralph Schmidt. But, while passing Buna on the way out, they were jumped by an estimated twenty aircraft who attacked headon. Bender's ship was hit by cannon fire; it soon became a blazing inferno and went into a violent spin, throwing him against the jammed overhead hatch. He recalled thinking how soon it would hit the ground and how quickly and painlessly it would all be over. Instead, the aircraft exploded and when Bender came to and pulled his rip cord, he was about 3000 feet above the jungle. Parts of his aircraft were falling about him and he could hear the battle still in progress above (Lt. Schmidt's aircraft was also shot down, with no survivors).

He landed safely in a tree, but had been hit by shrapnel in the ankle, had a deep gash in one knee, apparently suffered as he was blown clear, and had badly sprained his back upon landing. He soon met with a group of Papuans who directed him to the wreck of his aircraft wherein lay the remains of his flight engineer, bombardier and copilot.

He was then taken to a missionary (a Father Hofland) and thence

to another mission where he was reunited with one of his gunners, Sgt. Thompson and introduced to a Captain Austin and Dr. Harry Bitmead, a W.O.2 of the Australian Army who for seven years had operated a small hospital at Buna mission. Confident the Japanese were on their trail, Bender, Sgt. Thompson, Doctor Bitmead and a native guide set off early the next day for Tufi, a small coastal town.

For two days Bender was able to hobble along, but by the third he was unable to walk. At this point Doc Bitmead and the native guide, convinced that the Japanese had probably occupied Tufi, decided to cross the Owen Stanleys to the south coast. Native carriers were hired for small quantities of tobacco, chocolate and salt, to carry Bender. During the next two weeks the party hacked their way through the steaming dense jungle, struggled up and down the mountain slopes and forded neck-high streams. They endured heat, rain, mosquitoes, spiders, and for Bender, the agonizing pain of his infected wounds. Inland the natives were less friendly and on one occasion when the jungle was especially dense, the carriers appeared ready to abandon the party.

Finally, on about the sixteenth day of the journey, the mountains gave way to hills and the jungle to bamboo thickets and three days later the party arrived at a mission--oddly enough, the same one Bender had been taken to following his April ditching. The ordeal of the journey itself was over for here was food, medical supplies, warm baths, beds, and above all, the missionary himself; but for Bender there was still the agony of his infected knee, swollen to the size of a football and discharging vile fluids, having burst a week before.

After a day's rest they were taken by native canoe and sloop to an Australian spotter's station at Abau and then by sail boat to Port Moresby, where Bender lay in a hospital for ten days before



being sent to Brisbane and finally to the States. His combat flying days over, Bender later served in England with the staff of the 9th Air Force.

THE DOUGLAS A-20A STRAFERS

The 3rd Bomb Group and the Douglas A-20 were made for each other. Ever since 1940 the Group had been perfecting low altitude attack and army cooperation tactics with A-20's, and had participated in four stateside maneuvers, including the Carolina and Louisiana affairs. The A-20 was a fine mount for the role, fast and agile near the ground, sturdy and dependable. By 1940 U.S. standards its four fixed .30 caliber forward firing battery seemed adequate, and its relatively short range enough for its envisioned role.

Thirty nine of the Group's original complement of A-20's followed them by ship to Australia, arriving in May. Meanwhile, the personnel of the 89th Squadron, slated for equipment with the A-20, had been biding their time as ground support for the 19th Bomb Group (B-17's) at Charters Towers.

However, by the time of their arrival and erection at Brisbane in May, it had been realized that the aircraft's forward firing armament was inadequate for the attack role for which it was to be used, and that its range was unequal to the tactical situation at hand: namely to operate from Port Moresby against targets to the north across the Owen Stanley Mountains.

Hence, a program was immediately initiated under the direction of Capt. Paul I. "Pappy" Gunn, and assisted by Capt. Bob Ruegg, to determine the feasibility and details of installing four .50 caliber machine guns into the bombardiers compartment (in lieu of the bombardier) and the addition of two 450 gallon fuel tanks in the bomb bay.⁶ A prototype installation proved successful and soon the task of modifying all 39 aircraft was underway, shops having been set up at Amberly Field near Brisbane. In the event, it took three months, June, July and August to complete conversion of all the A-20's. The program was plagued with many problems and frustrations, primarily logistical. To quote from "The 27th Reports",

"the next two weeks (from 12 May) were spent trying to get the necessary parts and put guns and tanks on A20's . . . Delays, lack of authority, no parts, no men, no supplies, and other things . . . And for three months trying

to get the A-20's going, shortage of parts again and more planes . . . No guns, and finally guns but no solenoid, solenoid and no brackets, brackets and no chargers, and so on."

Meanwhile, as soon as converted aircraft began arriving back at Charters Towers starting in June, an extensive program began of working up with them and developing attack tactics; strafing practice, skip bombing and combined operations with other squadrons (including RAAF No. 30 flying Beaufighters) and mock combats.

One final technical ingredient, however, was required to fully implement the A-20's ground attack potential, namely development of the parafrag bomb. Following a suggestion by General Kenney, the Service Command developed a successful parafrag using a standard 23 lb. fragmentation bomb armed with a very sensitive instantaneous contact fuse.⁷ Forty or more of these bombs could be carried in a special bomb bay rack.

THE PAPUAN CAMPAIGN

The focal point of overall Japanese strategy in the SWPA was, of course, acquisition of the Netherlands East Indies with its vast petroleum resources, and the establishment of an impregnable sphere of control to insure its security from allied attack. New Guinea, though of little intrinsic value, was an essential part of this defensive ring. Furthermore, the isolation of Australia from the United States was felt necessary in order to limit its importance as a staging and buildup area for Allied strength (the Japanese Army High Command had balked at a Navy plan to actually invade Australia). Such a blockade could best be achieved by a thrust to the southeast, through eastern New Guinea and the Solomons into the New Hebrides, New Caledonia and the Fiji Islands.

Hence the Japanese occupation of Buna in July and the subsequent overland advance towards the strategic allied base of Port Moresby. Initially their progress was swift; by the end of August they were threatening the Allied forces at Milne Bay and were driving down the Gap from Kokoda towards Ioribaiwa Ridge, only 25 miles from Port Moresby.

Logic, and Allied intelligence indicated the imminent possibility of Japanese amphibious landings against either Port Moresby or Milne Bay, the latter on the northeastern tip of New Guinea.

The airfields around Moresby were being subjected to sustained

(Opposite page) The straffer-modified Douglas A-20A "margie" in rivetment at Kila Kila (3 Mile) Airstrip near Port Moresby, November, 1942. (Col. Glen W. Clark)



(Right) Pappy Gunn and Jack Fox, popular NAA Field Service Representative, were mainly responsible for modifying B-25's into low-level strafers. The pair flew many missions with 3rd Bomb Group, when based in New Guinea. (Ralph Oakley)

bombing, and on 27 August a Japanese supply convoy arrived on the northeast coast in support of the offensive against Milne Bay. By the end of August the Australians had halted the Japanese before Milne Bay, but clearly, the fate of Papua was hanging in the balance.

On 3 September 1942, the Fifth Air Force was officially constituted, under the command of Maj. General George C. Kenney, who since 4 August had been in overall command of Allied Air Forces in Australia, with headquarters at Brisbane. Basically the RAAF was charged primarily with the defense of Australia and aerial offensive against the Dutch East Indies, while the Fifth's primary area of operations was eastern New Guinea and the surrounding waters of the Solomon, Coral and Bismarck Seas. But, since both were under the overall command of Kenney, the organization was flexible: a number of RAAF Squadrons operated in eastern New Guinea and, later on, the 90th and 43rd Comb Groups operated against the N.E.I.

Brig. General Ennis C. Whitehead was placed in command of ADVON (Advanced Echelon), with headquarters at Port Moresby, charged with direct tactical control over the eastern New Guinea area and of units based therein. (For the time being, heavy and medium bomber units normally were based in north-eastern Australia and only staged through Moresby, during which time they came under ADVON control.)

At its inception, the Fifth Air Force had a paper strength of one light bombardment group (the 3rd B.G.), three fighter groups (the 49th, 8th, and 35th), two medium bombardment groups (the 22nd and 38th) and two heavy bombardment groups (the 43rd and 19th, joined in November by the 90th). Actually though, only seventy B-17's, forty B-26's, forty-five B-25's, thirty-nine A-20's and 250 fighters (P-40's and P-39's) were on hand, of which only a fraction were operational. ADVON however, already had, or soon acquired, the services of several RAAF units, including No. 22 Sqdn. (Bostons), No. 30 Sqdn. (Beaufighters), No. 100 Sqdn. (Beauforts) and No. 75 and 76 Sqdns. (Kittyhawks).

A convoy moving down from the south coast of New Britain on 1 November was beaten back by ADVON, which dispatched almost all the aircraft at its disposal in the effort.

But bad weather during late November offered new opportunities for the Japanese to slip in reinforcements to the by now belea-

guered Buna garrison. They met with some success but Allied attack methods were beginning to improve. Under the inspired leadership of its C.O., Major William C. Benn, B-17's of the 43rd Bomb Group's No. 63 Squadron were occasionally coming down to deliver mast head skip bombing attacks. On the nights of 18 and 24 November they scored in this manner against Japanese shipping in the Buna area.

Four enemy warships got through to Buna on the night of 1-2 December, and although a 9 December convoy was turned back, a 15 December force of two cruisers and three destroyers managed to land substantial reinforcements at Lae and escape through a barrage of allied attacks.

Buna Mission fell to the reorganized and revitalized Allies under Lt. Gen. Eichelberger on 2 January 1943 and all organized resistance in Papua had ceased by the 22nd, but the close-in ground fighting was bitter. Here and on Guadalcanal the Japanese were for the first time tasting defeat on land and their tenacity in the face of adversity was being felt. Air power had played a decisive role. General MacArthur with generous praise stated, "To the American Fifth Air Force and the RAAF no commendation could be too great. Their outstanding efforts in combat, supply and transportation over both land and sea constituted the keystone upon which the arch of the campaign was erected." General Kenney's comment was, "We learned a lot and the next one will be better."

THE B-25 STRAFERS

By the fall of 1942 it had become painfully apparent that high and medium altitude bombing of underway shipping was yielding less than desirable results, the late Capt. Colin P. Kelley's apocryphal feat notwithstanding. Dive bombing had, of course, been well exploited by both the U.S. and Japanese navies, and on occasion RAAF Kittyhawks and US Aircobras had been so used in New Guinea; but, as discussed above, the 8th Squadron's slow and short range, underarmed and aging A-24's had not been a great success in spite of the courage of their pilots. Besides the USAAF hadn't taken dive bombing too seriously, and, of course, the Fifth Air Force's principal light/medium offensive equipment, the B-25 and A-20, just weren't dive bombers (although possibly the Germans would have hung dive brakes on them.)

In July 1942 Lt. Gen. George Brett, then C.O. of Allied Air

Forces, had seriously considered employment of torpedo bombing tactics against shipping. But Gen. Kenney looked with some disfavor upon this technique, as the delivering aircraft was highly vulnerable during the approach (witness Midway) and in any case, our Bliss-Leavitt torpedoes were less than reliable, although both the A-20 and B-25 were capable of accommodating them. (As it turned out, the Beauforts of RAAF No. 100 Squadron pressed home three torpedo attacks during the latter part of 1942, all without success.)

So General Kenney, who was an old low-altitude-attack man from way back, envisioned high speed approach with deck bombing of either skip, direct, or with delayed fuses, combined with this, heavy caliber strafing on the way in. He reasoned it was the most effective means of sinking ships.⁸

Accordingly, Kenney and his staff began a thorough study of the problem and by November had launched an extensive low level anti-shipping training program for the crews of several 5th Air Force units, under the overall direction of Maj. William Benn.

Although the 43rd B.G. and, later the 90th B.G., were trained for such tactics, and on occasion used them successfully, the faster and more agile B-25 appeared to offer the best promise of fulfilling the role, (the A-20 was also well suited but by this time only about 29 of the type were available, and all were heavily committed in the close support role). So the 90th Squadron was selected by Kenney as the pioneer B-25 unit for development and application of the new tactics, and began practicing whenever possible throughout December and into 1943.

It was at this critical juncture that the 89th Squadron of the 3rd Bomb Group became operational with their strafing A-20's, which from then on became a key close support unit of ADVON.

Thirteen of the A-20's arrived at their new home of Kila Kila (three Mile) strip, near Port Moresby on the 29th August. On 31 August, eight aircraft, led by the Squadron C.O., Capt. Donald P. Hall, flew their first operational mission, a strafing attack against the Japanese airfield at Lae, in concert with B-26 Marauders of the 22nd Bomb Group.

During the next few weeks the Squadron was heavily committed to close support for the Australians defending Port Moresby up at Ioribaiwa Ridge, and interdicting the enemy's supply route back to Kokoda and Buna. The 89th was operating under the most demanding of conditions, flying through rugged mountain gorges and low over dense jungle, often through some of the worst flying weather in the world, where tropical storm clouds hid the treacherous mountains, enemy positions and home airfields-to say nothing of ground fire from friend and foe alike and the threat of enemy fighters. Back on the ground at Three Mile, living and maintenance conditions were primitive and the supply line to Australia (and thence 7500 miles to Santa Monica) was tenuous, thus causing problems accentuated by the fact their mounts were by no means new or in the best of shape. Finally, of course, there was malaria, dengue fever, "jungle rot" and a host of other tropical specialties.

Interspersed with close support missions, the 89th flew frequent on-the-deck-attacks against the airfields and supply dumps at Buna. On 11 September, returning from such an attack through bad weather, two of the aircraft ran out of fuel and ditched in the sea. But they struck Buna again on the 12th, using parafrags for the first time in the SWPA, and after repeated strafing runs left an estimated seventeen aircraft destroyed on the ground.

By the end of September the weary Australians, with the help of ADVON, had driven the Japanese from Ioribaiwa Ridge and, in the face of tenacious resistance began driving them back through the Gap toward Kokoda-the immediate threat to Port Moresby was over and henceforth the initiative would favor the Allies, who were soon threatening Buna.

While the A-20's of the 89th Squadron, the Beaufighters of

RAAF No. 30 Squadron and the strafing Bostons of the No. 22 Squadron RAAF (from November) provided the main close support strength of ADVON, the B-25's of the 13th and 90th Squadrons were equally committed in various other roles. They bombed the strongholds of Lae, Salamaua and Buna, interdicted the all important sea lanes from New Britain and along the New Guinea coast, dropped supplies to our troops in the jungle, and, as always, flew endless reconnaissance missions.

ADVON had many organizational and tactical problems to overcome. Close support, though proving extremely useful, left much room for improvement, especially in the realm of ground to air communications and coordination. This wasn't Georgia or Louisiana where detailed and accurate maps depicted the richly and varied and familiar landscape of towns, farms, highways, railroads and rivers. Here the rugged terrain was almost uniformly covered by a dense green jungle beneath wherein lay friend and foe alike. Often when an urgent call was given for close support the target was never found, and on at least six occasions during the Papuan campaign the Allies were the victims.

Also, although ADVON had made Japanese reinforcement by sea of the Papuan area a dangerous undertaking, the results were mixed; on several occasions large vessels got through preventing a really effective blockade.

During September and October, few large convoys appeared in the area, most reinforcements arriving by cargo submarine, coastal barges, or down from Wewak and Madang by jungle trail. However, on 5 October a convoy of one light cruiser, one destroyer and a large transport delivered 1000 troops and substantial supplies to Buna after surviving medium altitude B-17 and B-25 attacks.

Although skip-bombing was being employed occasionally on operations, it was a rather tricky business-often the bomb skipped right over its intended victim. So, in addition, a method was developed whereby the bomb, equipped with a 4-5 second delay fuse, was released directly at the vessel. A wrecked ship near Port Moresby was used for practice (often with live 100 lb. bombs) and one aircraft was lost when it struck the ship's mast. Ultimately the 90th developed coordinated attack methods in concert with the A-20's and Beaufighters.

As regards armament, the success of the A-20's strafing conversion led naturally to consideration of similarly modifying the B-25. But operational demands during the fall of 1942 had precluded their withdrawal en masse for such an extensive conversion.

At General Kenney's behest, in mid-November Major Paul I. "Pappy" Gunn, Jack Fox, North American's field representative in Australia, and a Sergeant Evans, worked out a prototype arrangement whereby four fixed forward firing .50 caliber machine guns were installed in the bombardier's compartment, and an additional four .50's were installed, two on each side of the nose in an external "pack". Also, since the B-25's "remotely" operated belly turret was none too successful, and since for low altitude work it was of little value anyway, it was removed and a 300 gallon gasoline tank installed in its place. This "Turret Tank" as it came to be called, was normally used up first and then jettisoned (it was hung from a bomb type shackle) since it was non self-sealing.

The prototype, by now christened "PAPPY'S FOLLY", passed all its tests in mid-December and was then taken up to 17 mile strip near Port Moresby for demonstration to 90th Squadron personnel. Capt. "Jock" Henebry, later to become C.O. of the Squadron and still later of the Group, recalls that although its flying characteristics seemed O.K. and it was great sport to unleash its potent forward firing battery, the crews, nevertheless, were none too enthusiastic over the prospects of flying it on the deck and into hail of fire from a heavily armed warship.

However, in spite of their apprehensions, by February 1943 the 90th Squadron had become equipped with B-25C strafers, all modified by Gunn and Co. at Brisbane.

"Pappy" Gunn, Kenney's legendary "Special Projects Officer" deserves a brief biography.

Paul Irwin Gunn was born in Arkansas in 1900, and in 1939 retired from the U.S. Navy as a Chief Petty Officer with rating of enlisted pilot. At the outbreak of our war he was operating a non-scheduled three plane airline out of Manila, called the "the Philippine Air Lines." On the 8th of December 1941, he was unceremoniously "inducted" into the USAAF by General Brereton with the rank of Captain, with instructions to take over and operate P.A.L.'s three twin engined Beechcrafts for ferrying military personnel and delivering official mail, dispatches, drugs, food and other critical material as directed. From then until Christmas he and other pilots flew countless such missions throughout the Philippines, at which time he was sent to Darwin on a mission. But Manila fell on 2 January and Pappy's wife and four children were interned at Santo Tomas University, where they remained for three years. That and the disruption of his new career filled him with an unquenchable thirst for vengeance against the Japanese. His first chance came with the Royce Philippine mission in April and he flew a number of combat missions thereafter. But it was his talent for mechanical improvisation and "getting the job done" that earned him the most deserved part of his reputation. As for the rest of the Pappy Gunn legend, built largely from his own words, (now) Maj. Gen. Henebry has this to say: "Pappy would never ruin a good story for want of a few facts, although we doubted the truth of all of his tales, you had to be careful--every now and then that some of it would be factual and he could prove it."

Pappy continued supervision of the B-25 strafing conversion program at Eagle Farms, Australia throughout most of 1943, with time out in April and May for a trip to the States where he explained to the people at Wright Field and at North American how to turn the B-25 into an effective fighting machine.

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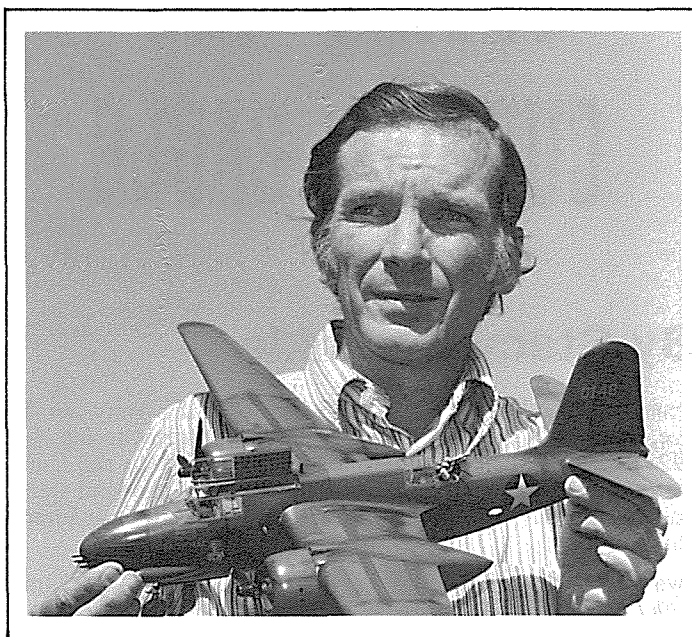
1. The 27th Bomb Group owed its genesis to the 3rd B. G., from whose personnel it was formed at Barksdale Field in October 1940, with Col. Clarence Tinker in command.
2. According to information furnished author by Robert F. Brooks, Col. Robert F. Strickland, and Col. Frank P. Bender.
3. A WAR DIARY, by Lieut. Roland R. Birnn. His accounts range from 1942 while flying A-24's with the 27th B. G., through April, May and June flying B-25's with the 90th Sqdn., until his untimely demise on the 4th of July while testing an A-20A over Brisbane Harbor. His diary offers a vivid and most personal account of operations and conditions during this period.
4. Col. Davies was later assigned to Fifth Bomber command H. Q. upon his return the following June.
5. "Crash in the Jungle", published in Harpers Magazine in 1944, was taken from "Pacific Diary", an otherwise unpublished personal account of the period October '41 to August '42, by (now) Col. Frank P. Bender. The diary includes a detailed account of the Royce Philippine mission.
6. Lt. Gen. Robert G. Ruegg in his letters to the author stresses the points that the A-20A's forward firepower and range deficiencies were generally recognized by Col. Davies and other members of the group, but that "Pappy" Gunn was the chief innovator and driving force behind the actual modifications. Ruegg periodically supervised the program in Brisbane when Gunn would get banned from there by the Brass for his 'unreasonable' demands for action and a general disregard for protocol. Both Gunn and Ruegg were ably supported by the material squadron of the 7th Bomb Group, and a Lieut. Tommy Tompkins, the local engineering officer.
7. According to (now) Col. Glen Clark, the group had practiced dropping parafrag bombs during pre-war stateside maneuvers.
8. THE ARMY/AIR FORCE IN WORLD WAR II, by Craven and Cate, was used as a major source of information for this article. According to their Vol. IV entitled, "The Pacific-Guadalcanal to Saipan", p. 107, it states that in July '42 General "Hap" Arnold had noted that the RAF had successfully employed four engined Short Stirlings on low altitude anti-shipping missions, and during the summer of '42 some experimentation with delayed action fuses for anti-shipping attacks had been performed in the states.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Alcorn has been an A.A.H.S. member since 1968, and authored a Journal article in 1972 on the 90th Bomb Group, "The Jolly Rogers".

He is shown holding a 1/32nd scale Douglas A-20A, "Scratch Built" from vacuformed polystyrene plastic. Not surprisingly, it is finished in the configuration and markings of an 89th Squadron aircraft: the model and 3rd B.G. research have gone hand in hand for the past two years. This model was recently awarded "Best of Show" at the 1974 I.P.M.S./U.S.A. Convention and Contest in Anaheim, California.

John is a mechanical engineer at the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center. He graduated from the Rice Institute in 1955 and served two years thereafter aboard a destroyer. He is married and has two boys, one of whom, at least, shows promise as an aviation enthusiast. John's other avocations include mountain climbing and pencil drawing.