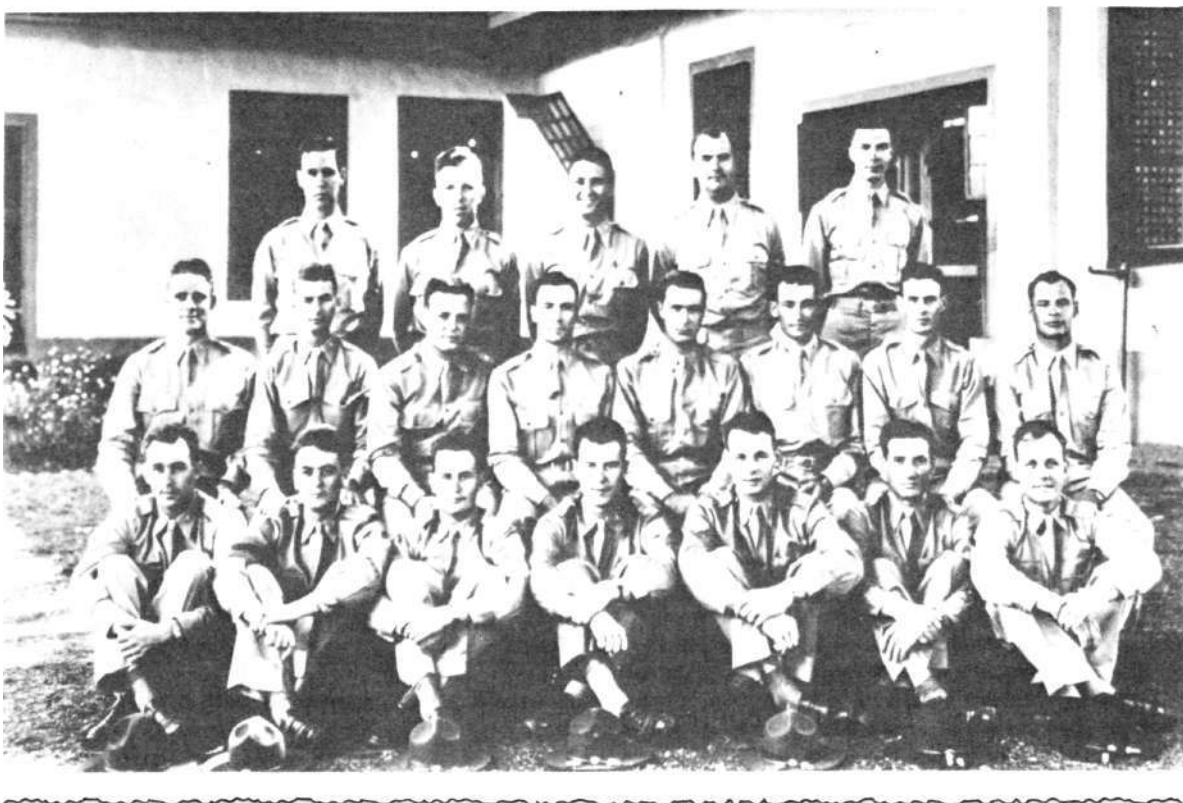




" We Are Doomed At The Start"

Lt. Max Louk And The 20th Pursuit Squadron In The Philippines, May-December 1941

by William H. Bartsch

Still awaiting orders from 24th Pursuit Group operations to scramble Section I's 18 pilots for interception of Japanese aircraft reported heading for Clark, 1st Lt. Joseph H. Moore, commanding officer of the 20th Pursuit Squadron, is startled by the cry of one of his crew chiefs standing near the squadron operations shack, "Good God Almighty, yonder they come!" Looking up, Moore sees a long line of planes, flying in a V of Vs. Moore hurriedly orders the squadron's red flag run up the pole outside the operations shack as the signal for takeoff and runs towards his waiting P-40B.

Not even taking time to buckle on his parachute, Moore taxis out 50 feet to the runway and starts his takeoff roll. Behind him, his wingman, 2nd Lt. Randall Keator, gives his plane full throttle for takeoff, followed by 2nd Lt. Edwin Gilmore leading the second two-plane element.

As Moore, Keator, and Gilmore cleared the grass strip, over 300 bombs of 60 kilos dropped by the first wave of 27 G4M1 Betty bombers begin detonating across the field. Bomb fragments tear both tires off the P-40B of 2nd Lt. Dan Blass, Gilmore's wingman. He extricates himself from the wreck and runs through the torrent of

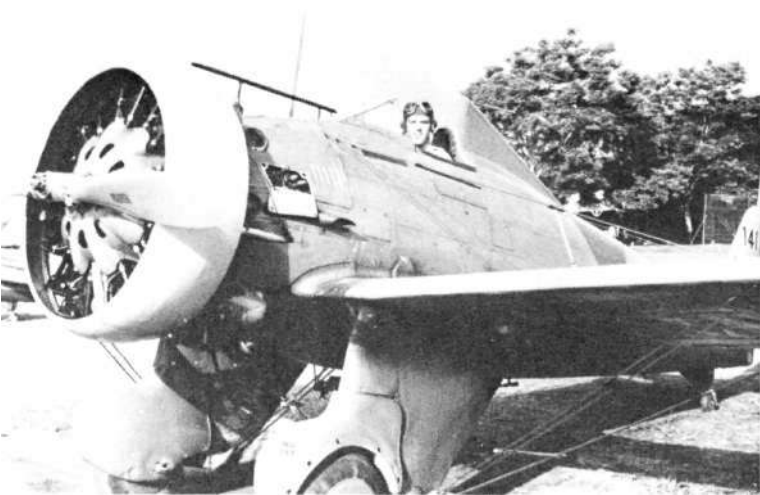
exploding bombs 100 yards to the V-shaped trenches near the 20th's operations shack.

In fifth position for takeoff, 2nd Lt. Max Louk has barely lifted off the end of the runway when his plane is hit by an incendiary bomb. Desperately, he pulls the emergency canopy release of the P-40B, but it is jammed on its tracks. Trapped in the flaming wreck, he burns to an agonizing death, the first American aviator to lose his life in combat flying in the Philippines.

The circumstances of the 22-year-old pilot's death have only recently come to light with the discovery of the wartime diary of his roommate and best friend, 2nd Lt. Carl P. Gies, who died in 1964. His daughter Martha retrieved the diary from his personal effects and has made it available to the writer, an invaluable document of the

Pilots of the 20th Pursuit Squadron at Nichols Field, mid-May 1941. Front row, left to right: Varian White, Carl Gies, John Valkenaar, Max Louk, Erwin Crellin, Harrison Hughes, John Geer. Middle row, left to right: Marshall Anderson, Tex Marble, Ossie Lunde, Joe Moore, Bill Cummings, Charley Sneed, Fred Armstrong, Edwin Gilmore. Back row, left to right: Morgan McCowan, Martin Connelly, Robert Duncan, Buck Weaver, Eugene Shevlin.

(Via George H. Armstrong)



Max Louk in a P-26A of the 20th Pursuit Squadron at Clark Field, summer 1941. Note the trace of the old triangular insignia of the 3rd Pursuit Squadron on the fuselage—this P-26A was one of the 28 originally assigned to the 3rd Pursuit in the 1937-40 period from Selfridge, Barksdale, and Wheeler Fields. On arrival of the 20th Pursuit in November 1940, eight were turned over to it. A few were retained by the 20th Pursuit as late as August 1941. (Max Louk)

early desperate days of the 24th Pursuit Group in the Philippines campaign.

Who was this pilot to suffer such a tragic distinction? In seeking an answer to that question, the writer first identified Louk's hometown as Lawrence, Kan. In the hope that there might still be relatives of the pilot with the same unusual family name in the small community, he located a current telephone book for Lawrence and discovered one Louk still listed, who turned out to be the young lieutenant's aunt. She was able to put the writer in contact with Max's niece, who, through a stroke of good luck, had maintained a collection of letters and photographs sent home by Max from the Philippines.

In a more effective way than any historical document, the six letters of Max Louk, written in the period May-November 1941 to his parents and sister, present us with a vivid picture of what life was like during this period for the pilots of the 20th Pursuit Squadron, the only one based at Clark Field. They also give us an insight into the character and personality of the young pilot, a 1937 graduate of Liberty Memorial High School in Lawrence and a student at the Universities of Kansas and Arizona before enlisting in the Army Air Corps in mid-1940 for flying training.

Nichols Field, (begun on) Sunday, May 11, 1941

Dear Mother,

Mother's Day is today and here I am on the other side of the world. How I wish I could be home for a day!

We arrived in Manila Bay at six o'clock Thursday morning and disembarked at 9:00 amid cheers and band music. There was a big reception for us at the Army-Navy Club at 10:00 A.M., and when it was over we went to the tailor to order our uniforms. We spent the evening "doing" Manila, and the next day we had to report to the field to get our physical exam.

On Saturday we looked over the town for a place to live and some servants. We finally found a house out near the field and hired two laundry women and a houseboy and a cook. The cook and houseboy keep our house shining all day long and keep our meals at any hour we choose. The lavenderes (laundry women) do our laundry every day. We just drop our clothes on the floor one evening and they are clean the next afternoon. They do all our white suits and silk shirts, etc. All our meals are served very formally—soup, salad, cocktail, meat course, vegetables, cold tea or iced coffee. The house, servants, utilities, etc., all cost us about \$50 a month per man, and there are three of us in the house.

We are obligated to join the Army-Navy Club and the Manila



Max Louk resting on a squadronmate's car at Clark Field, probably fall 1941. (Max Louk)

Polo Club. Army-Navy Club dues are \$5 a month and the Manila Polo Club dues are \$15 a month. We can swim, basketball, dance, etc., at both clubs.

I am stationed at Nichols Field and am a member of the 20th Pursuit Squadron.¹ We fly from 7:30 to 11:30 A.M. and have the rest of the day off. It is really the life—we don't turn a hand except for flying. Due to all the spare time on the boat and here, I have taken up bridge and chess very thoroughly and have been reading a lot.

The heat here is hard on me because I get a rash from it. The temperature runs around 100, and the humidity from 45 % to 85 %. I wake up in the morning as wet as if I were under a shower and stay that way all day.

We get up at 5:30 and shower, bathe, and eat. Report to work at 7:00. We have been getting off at 11:30 up to now, but as soon as they unload the rest of the planes we will have to fly in the afternoon for a while.²

Our flight commander said that we had better learn to fly for our own good, because soon we would be flying for our lives. We have already been reading sheets on evacuation, jungle fighting, etc. I guess they plan to fight the Japs soon.

I have gained about 10 pounds since I was home, and it looks as if I will gain more, because I sleep most of the afternoons and all night. Today I got up at lunch and slept straight through till supper without even turning over. Everyone here sleeps in the afternoon. The taxi drivers pull over to the side of the road and sleep from 2 to 4 in the afternoon.

I will send some pictures as soon as we get a camera. There are millions of strange things to photograph. Carabao pull carts around the streets. It is a screwy place. They drive on the wrong side of the street wide open and honk at every corner. Half of the traffic is carts drawn by carabao or ponies.

We go to Jai-Alai matches for amusement and wear shorts all over town during the day and white sharkskin suits at night. Gambling is open here and Jai-Alai is just like a horse race. They have a parimutuel machine there and half of the matches are fixed.

The Clipper is leaving so I will finish this letter which I have been on all week.



We have been flying all day, and I have to be ready to go at 5:55 A.M. tomorrow. My last flight will end after 6 P.M. We are working very hard, learning a lot. I have *already* flown three different types of planes,³ and we will learn several more before we leave this place.

If it weren't for the heat, I would really like it, but there isn't a cool place around, so I don't like it!

Love, Max

Clark Field, Sunday, July 6, 1941

Dear Dad,

There has been a lot of water go under the bridge since I left home last spring. We have been through a lot of training and a lot of new experiences.

After we arrived they gave us a week to get used to the place and get our houses and uniforms ready to go. Then we went through a very strenuous program of flying—sometimes we flew eight hours in one day—mostly formation and combat flying in P-35As. They have 950 horses and four guns. They are single-seater pursuit ships originally built for Sweden, but shipped here last February. Our squadron has about 40 of them.⁴

We now have new P-40Bs.⁵ Each of us has one with his name printed on it. We have our own crew for each plane.

In formation, we fly combat missions. Sometimes we skim the ground or water at four or five feet. Sometimes we attack bombers and occasionally we intercept a Clipper or a boat.

Nichols Field is about three miles from the heart of Manila and has three pursuit squadrons. We lived about two blocks from the field in a six-room house. Three of us lived together. We had our own cook and ate at home. Two girls did our laundry every day—white suits and uniforms included.

They started work on a new runway and some new hangars, so the field will be closed for a few months. We are consequently moved to Clark Field—two miles from Fort Stotsenburg—100 miles north of Manila.⁶

We now (four of us)⁷ have a government house at Stotsenburg and we eat with the squadron at Clark Field. Our house has eight rooms and two baths. We brought two of our servants from Manila with us.

We fly a lot less now because of the rainy season. It rains for days in a row and we do nothing. There are no towns close to here so we go to the post theater a lot—the show changes every day—and we

Max Louk's P-40B at Clark, summer 1941. He had flown it about 50 hours when he took this photo. Note that no 4th Composite Group marking or plane number has yet been painted on the aircraft. (Max Louk)

also go to the Officers' Club where we can play ping-pong, checkers, chess, throw darts, read, dance, and drink. There are tennis courts, a golf course, and bowling alleys on the post. We dress in white uniforms every night at 5 P.M. There are no women here except 25 nurses. We read a lot and sleep quite a lot—often we go to bed at eight in the evening.

In Manila we used to go to shows a lot because there were about five fine theaters—also there were a dozen nightclubs that were all right. In Manila they have horse races every Sunday and there are a lot of ball games, cock fights, and they play Jai-Alai with a big parimutuel betting system—it is all a big fix, but only costs one peso per bet. Now that we are at Stotsenburg that is all out of reach.

I like it here—gives me a lot of time to read and keep up on the news. I have a new camera and am taking a lot of pictures. I have a new album and have started work on it with pictures and white ink.

We have found out that we are to be here for three years instead of two.

I still like flying as much as ever, but am lonely for M.J.⁸ I really miss dancing and dining with her.

I have had some thrilling experiences flying—we have been doing a lot of dog-fighting and it is just like a war—you get so you can feel the bullets when someone gets on your tail. I dived a plane about 500 mph and the canopy came off. We flew along a beach at two feet and you could count the pebbles. Flew six miles high using oxygen. My roommate had a midair crackup in combat and came out without a scratch.⁹

I am assistant mess officer of the squadron—inventory the stock every 10 days.

One of my roommates is very smart and he keeps me on my toes playing chess and bridge. I have learned a lot about bridge, but not much about chess.

I would like to get out of the army and into international doings in China. I have met several Chungking men and know I would like to advise on military aviation over there, but can't get a discharge. I could make \$500 a month in China easy. They do a lot of things in the Chinese air force, training, just as we do in ours. They are getting a lot of old American training planes there and are trying to set up a new system. I was asked to conference with their chief advisor—a



Max Louk with his best friend Carl Gies resting on flying classmate Dave Conley's Ford convertible at Baguio, about 120 miles north of Clark Field, where they were spending the Labor Day weekend, August 30-September 1, 1941. (Max Louk)

former American pilot.¹⁰

Plan to get a sailboat when we get back to Manila. There are a couple of fine yacht clubs and we want to join one. We can ride government horses free, but I haven't ridden much yet. Time passes faster than one would imagine because of the easy hours one can spend reading, or engaged in sports. There is always something to watch. I hardly realize it before a week passes.

I am looking for Clipper mail—the Clipper comes in on Monday, if it is on schedule.¹¹

Love, Max

Clark Field, Monday, July 14, 1941

Dear Mother,

It has been raining all evening and I have just finished a book—the book: "Sagittarius Rising."

Today I got up at six, had a breakfast of hot cakes and coffee at six thirty, went to the squadron orderly room and read technical orders on a bomber I will check out in a week or so,¹² spent an hour in the cockpit studying instruments, etc. Went up and flew individual combat against my roommate for two hours and had lunch at one.

After lunch, I went over to the Officers' Club for a haircut—came home and bathed—went to the alleys and bowled three lines of ten pins and two lines of duck pins.

I drilled troops from four till five—had dinner at home, sweet 'taters, fresh onions, string beans, rice pudding and coffee (we never drink milk because the medical authorities don't approve of fresh milk and that reconstructed milk is lousy). After dinner, I bowled a line and came home.

We have a lot of spare time now, but in a few weeks we will start schooling in tactics, radio, engines, and armament.

The rainy season is on now so we don't fly every day. When it rains we usually do some paper work around the squadron. I write histories of all the men in the squadron and take care of the paper work of the squadron mess. Others do the engineering, supply, materiel, radio, arms, chemical warfare, etc. We all have a job or two.

Sunday we flew all morning and played a ball game with the

enlisted men in the afternoon. We lost a case of beer in the game.

Saturday we attended a reception for us here at Fort Stotsenburg. There were four generals in the receiving line: Generals King, Clagett, Grunert, and Wainwright.¹³ There was a dance after the reception.

I really love the rain we have here—it goes on for days—sometimes 10 days. Everything is green and half the countryside is covered with water—rice paddies which are terraced with dykes. There are a lot of mountains.

Although my roommates are playing a little golf, I haven't taken it up yet—you know how I hate to walk! Some tennis, but not much yet—it also involves a lot of footwork. I do plan to play some golf when spring rolls around.

All my classmates that are in the U.S. are getting married, and every letter makes me more jealous of them, although I don't doubt that this is good for me—it has slowed me down a lot. I am still entirely too nervous—move around too fast—especially for the tropics.

Certainly do envy Dee¹⁴ in her travels—she sure is catching up with me as far as seeing the U.S. goes. Don't know if I was so smart for seeing so much of it though—makes it all the harder to like the place I'm in. I keep thinking about Colorado mountains, Texas sunsets, California oceans, Arizona deserts, Kansas floods, San Francisco nightclubs, etc. Maybe I should have stayed in the U.S.

Clark Field, (postdated) August 22, 1941

Dear Mother and Dad,

First I will answer some of your questions. . . . Yes, I am orientated as I ever expect to be—it is easy to learn the habits of the people and the climate. Contrary to what you may think, it does seem like home. We live so close in our little society and the four of us that live together that it seems quite like we have been here for years.

The last five days have been solid rain and we are going to Group school. We take much the same courses as in school. It takes from 2-4 hours a day. Another hour or two goes to squadron duties, and I usually take a check of my plane and parachute every day even if we don't fly.

As yet we don't know where or when we will move again. We may go back to Nichols Field, or move to some outlying field. If war with Japan develops I hardly know what we will do—probably just move to the most strategic field and do interception work.

We have one B-10 bomber in the squadron and I have flown it a little—I hope that I can fly reconnaissance in it in another month or two. It is a relief to ride something so large and smooth after bouncing around in a pursuit plane.

Later

It stopped raining for a day, but it's going again—doesn't look like we have any peace. I just wish it would keep raining, because when the sun comes out we have to think about flying again, but it doesn't stay clear long enough to give us a chance.

I have had to give up golf lately, but am still bowling a lot. The rain also prevents tennis. We don't play much bridge because everyone seems to be busy reading, writing, or bowling. Also there are two theaters on the post and a different show every day.

I have been trying to get a discharge and join the defending forces of the Burma Road (China), but they won't give us a discharge. The boys over there have 100 P-40s just like ours and are getting \$600 per month. Here we have lost all hope of moving East because as I see it now we are a "token," so to speak. We probably couldn't protect the place, but it is good for morale and publicity to have us here. We copy the English so much!

I would like to see war just to know that we were getting somewhere—as it is, we may have to be right here for 5 years. If nothing happens to stop the Japs, and the Germans keep fighting, we will just sit right here indefinitely.

Love to you both, Max

I'm 22—wow! I'm really old—at least my hair is falling out! Ha ha!

Clark Field, Tuesday, October 21, 1941

Dear Mother and Dad,

It's Tuesday evening and I have just been reading a bit in the book, "Up and At 'Em." We played golf this afternoon and I stopped at the club and had a haircut before coming home.

Our flying has been cut down quite a lot lately because the P-40s are being used all day for training those who just checked out on them in the last two weeks.¹⁵

I am flying flights with the squadron commander¹⁶ and the "older pilots" now because I have been made an element leader and we are working out our flight plans and signals. I feel quite good about being an element leader because none of my classmates are advanced to that position. I will even get to lead training flights.

You see, we have two types of flights—the training flight and the combat flight. There are 40 pilots in the squadron and only 18 combat pilots in that 40, and there are only 4 of us who can fly the B-10 bomber.

Here is a picture of our 18-plane combat flight showing a 9-plane support flight furnished by another squadron as is done in simulated attacks on bombers. The support flight doesn't attack but just goes along and serves as protection from enemy pursuit.¹⁷ If only six plane flights go out, they work as three two-plane elements.

The reason that I got this new job is that we lost two pilots last week. One was transferred because he was raised in rank above the squadron CO.¹⁸ and the other was killed in a midair collision with me. Also, one of my classmates was transferred to Bombardment because he showed poor ability to fly pursuit—he crashed, killing an enlisted man about a month ago. He hit a parked plane in a crash landing and there was a man working on the plane.¹⁹

I was not at fault in the midair crash so was not kept from getting the element. The other plane hit my wing going 400 mph and our wings locked and he was thrown into my propeller. We were low and he didn't bail out until he was only 50 feet from the ground and he never opened his parachute. I was a pallbearer at his funeral.²⁰

There were five other men killed that day and the day following.²¹

We are still having flights at 4:30 A.M. We fly night formation until six and it is really thrilling. We land at six and have a critique at breakfast.

White (a classmate)²² and I have bought an old 1933 Buick together so now I know the problems of both auto ownership and partnership.

My last trip to Manila I bought the records "Ava Maria," "Santa Lucia," "Light Cavalry Overture," and "Artist's Life Waltz." That gives me quite a lot of records now and I certainly like them very much. Music and reading are about the only things that I have to do evenings except go to the movies, and I hate to go to them unless they are exceptionally good.

We have a lot of men here now. There are more officers here now than there were officers and men both when we arrived. The crowded conditions are very hard on morale because there aren't sufficient facilities for their proper amusement. There are no white women to speak of, not enough seats in the theater, not enough bowling alleys, golf courses, tennis courts, etc. The men in our squadron sleep in a hangar and work day and night keeping our planes in flying condition. We have had several cases of insanity among the men, and a couple of officers have had to take a week's rest.

I am feeling fine mentally and physically, so don't worry about your son—just take care of his parents.

Love, Max

Clark Field (postdated) November 23, 1941

Hiya Dee,

How are you getting along with that cadaver? I assume that you see enough of it that we don't need to talk about it.

Dee, things here have changed and are changing so fast that it is hardly a subject to write about. I would say that Fort Stotsenburg has been transformed from a country club to a concentration camp. Our water is turned off at 8-11 A.M., 1-4:30 P.M., 8 P.M.-4:00 A.M. Can



P-35As of the 20th Pursuit in flight over Clark, summer 1941. 2nd Lt. Jim Fossey is on 2nd Lt. Lloyd Stinson's left wing. (Col. Lloyd Stinson)

you imagine having no water for those hours every day? Besides that we have a shortage of electric power which causes us to read three to one light bulb. Six of us live in this one quarters and we get along very well—two bombardment pilots and four pursuers.²³

The 20th Pursuit has changed quite a lot since I first joined it. You would be surprised at the amount of change that has been brought about by mental conditions in the various pilots. Since June there have been two pilots killed in crashes,²⁴ one shot by a customs official,²⁵ and eight transferred out of the squadron.²⁶ You can tell by that how fast changes take place.

I am now ranked 9th among 40 officers and at the rate we are going I expect to advance within the next few months to the position of flight leader. (There are three flight commanders in the squadron. I am now a deputy flight commander.)

I have had two minor accidents and the one in which Weaver was killed—and at that I have a record better than most of the pilots.²⁷

My interests have been more or less forced into golf. I have bought a set of clubs and play about three times a week. It is a very nice game to pass away afternoons with. We stop flying at noon now, and it is a great temptation to sleep rather than exercise. We have a 4 A.M. flight and usually a pilots' meeting at 3:40 A.M., so you can see why we want to sleep.

My reading gets a bad time—sometimes I have books, sometimes not. Just the other day I found several good books so am now on quite a reading jag.

Our flying comprises mostly formation work. Our 4 A.M. flight is night formation which is quite interesting—you cannot imagine the thrills one gets doing half rolls in twelve-plane formations at night. We fly only with formation lights on. They are little blue lights designed for depth perception.

Occasionally I fly enlisted men in the B-10 bomber in the afternoon. The B-10 is an old twin-engined job which is very obsolete now, but we use it to give our enlisted men their flying pay.

I suppose you wonder what we think about the possibility of war. Well, we all hope it comes soon, because we are doomed at the start. We know that we are here for the duration, even if it be ten years, so we are anxious for it to start so it will be over sooner.

You might think that this is a good place for "self-improvement," but I assure you that one does well to keep sane—there are many who don't. Conditions are so bad that one is well off who can keep from getting drunk several times a week.

Monday (November 17) 2 P.M.

I don't really have time for a nap this afternoon, because I have to fly the Jeep at 3, and I am tired of reading Churchill's speeches.

I'll tell you what we did this morning. We had an attack mission on some heavy bombers which were coming towards Clark Field at 25,000 feet. Twelve planes of us in P-40s took off and climbed to 30,000 feet to intercept the bombers. We wore oxygen masks and life vests. You can just never know how complicated it is to fly with



Operations shack of the 20th Pursuit Squadron, Clark Field, summer 1941. Bill Cummings is standing in the front to the right. (Col. Lloyd Stinson)



The P-40B (No. 41-5276) that was cracked up at Clark Field by Louk's roommate John H. Geer on July 30, 1941. (Max Louk)



The same P-40B later, being taken apart for parts in the 20th Pursuit's "boneyard" near the squadron's operations shack. The propeller is off and the seat is on the ground. (Glenn Bowers)

the following equipment on your person: (oxygen) gas mask, headset, throat mike, life vest, chute, sunglasses, and flying hat. It's just like a circus! Our interception was OK, but the bombers are so fast that pursuit is ineffective.²⁸

They say that we are getting the latest equipment, but we who are here flying it know that it is no good. Our planes—the latest P-40s²⁹—are not good enough to fight with! Someone in Washington said, "They are the best" and so we have them. The English don't want

our pursuit, they want bombers. You know, Dee, one gets a bit disgusted when he lays his life on the line for our lousy out-of-date Air Corps. . . .

It is some time since I wrote that last—don't know just what interrupted me, but I suppose it was warranted.

Some of the boys went to Manila today, and bought 50 pesos of new records so we will spend the evening having a concert, I guess—music is just about the only thing we have that we really enjoy.

Tomorrow we are going to Del Carmen³⁰ to the Pampanga Open—golf tourney. There are ten of us here at Fort Stots who are going down as a group. We will play 18 holes before noon and have a big free dinner with beer and swimming and then a two-hour period for a siesta before playing the last 18 holes. It will be an all-day job but should prove some fun. Naturally I won't have a chance to win, but I need the experience under pressure.

I have shipped some handiwork home, but doubt that it will get there by Xmas—don't lose hope, though, time will tell. It hardly seems right that Xmas should be so close at hand—it is terribly hot here now and getting hotter because the rainy season is over, for sure.

Don't study too hard, Dee, look where hard work has put me. Ho! Ho!

Love, Max

Six days after Max's last letter home, on November 28, 1941, the USAFFE, including its Far East Air Force, was put on "readiness" status. General MacArthur was reacting swiftly to a secret radio message received that morning from General George C. Marshall in Washington, indicating that hostile Japanese action was possible at any moment and ordering reconnaissance and other measures deemed necessary under the conditions. The Commanding General of the Far East Air Force, Major General Brereton, put all personnel on one-hour call, headquarters of each station and group on 24-hour operating basis, and all combat aircraft armed.³¹

At Clark, the 20th Pursuit Squadron had 23 P-40Bs in V-shaped revetments at the north and west perimeters of the field. The squadron was divided into two sections of 18 pilots each, to rotate on missions with the 18 aircraft kept in tactical readiness. But the guns of the P-40Bs had yet to be fired—a continuing shortage of belted .50-caliber ammunition precluded any live firing practice for the pilots.³²

During the first week of December, night practice flights of the 20th Pursuit were running into unidentified aircraft flying near or through their formations. The pilots were sure they were Japanese reconnaissance.

The tension continued to mount. Then in midmorning of December 6, 1941, the situation was made bluntly clear at a meeting for the 3rd and 20th Pursuit Squadron pilots at the Clark Field Officers' Club called by Col. Harold H. "Pursuit" George, C.O. of the FEAF's Fifth Interceptor Command. A great Japanese fleet had been spotted in the western reaches of the South China Sea, drifting slowly south, destination unknown. On Formosa, 500 miles to the north, a large force of Japanese bombers was reported ready to descend on the Philippines. To oppose it and the carrier aircraft Japan could mount, five to eight groups of pursuit were needed, and "you men know how many planes we can get in the air."

Then, in a final remark at the brief meeting, Col. George brought the message home: "You men are not necessarily a suicide squadron, but you are goddamn close to it!"³³

For Max Louk and three other of the young pilots of the 20th Pursuit at the meeting, Col. George's assessment of the situation would prove fatally accurate only two days later.

EPILOGUE

Max's parents, Charles E. and Nina A. Louk, were not informed of their son's death until March 10, 1942, after only a week earlier having received a Red Cross report indicating that he was alive and well! Max was the first Kansan to die in World War II. His remains are interred in the Manila American Cemetery, gravesite A-13-3.

SOURCES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to Dr. Jane Terry, the niece of Max Louk, for making available his letters and photographs, as well as to his aunt, Miss Lavey Maxine Louk, and his uncle, Mr. Frank T. Louk, for providing information on their nephew's early life. For additional information on the 20th Pursuit Squadron during this period, the diary and prewar letters of Carl Gies provided me by his daughter Martha were particularly valuable, while correspondence with surviving members of the 20th Pursuit, including Joseph H. Moore, James E. Brown, W. James Fossey, Lloyd Stinson, and others has provided me with additional information. The aircraft history cards kept at the National Air and Space Museum on every individual aircraft afforded details on accidents incurred in the P-26As, P-35As, and P-40Bs of the 20th Pursuit.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Nichols Field is located on the southern outskirts of Manila. Of Max's classmates graduating from Stockton Advanced Flying School on March 14, 1941, in Class 41-B, 19 were sent to the Philippines, of whom Max and seven others were assigned to the 20th Pursuit Squadron at Nichols Field. The Stockton group had departed from the West Coast for the Philippines on April 22, 1941, on the Army transport *Washington*, arriving in Manila on May 8, 1941.
2. Max evidently is referring to the 31 P-40Bs en route to the Philippines on the freighter *American Manufacturer*, which arrived in Manila on May 17, 1941, with its crated cargo. Until then, the 20th Pursuit was flying seven antique Boeing P-26As and 19 Republic P-35As.
3. Max probably started on the North American A-27, a two-place attack plane variant of the AT-6 Texan trainer, then moved on to the P-26a and the P-35A.
4. A gross exaggeration—the 20th Pursuit had 17 only on June 30, 1941. The 57 sent to the Philippines were from a Swedish Government order of 60 taken over by the Air Corps for the three pursuit squadrons stationed in the Philippines, the 3rd, 17th, and 20th Pursuits (the latter two to arrive there in November and December 1940), among which the P-35As were distributed equally. (See monthly aircraft status reports sent by the Philippine Department to the Adjutant General in 1940-41.)
5. The 31 P-40Bs had arrived in Manila in mid-May 1941 without Prestone coolant and after they were uncrated and assembled, were lined up at Nichols Field, idle for the next four weeks. To fly them without Prestone would have destroyed their liquid-cooled engines in a few seconds. Following the arrival of Prestone supplies, they were flown up to Clark during the first week of July, where 25 were assigned to the 20th Pursuit Squadron. (Allison Ind., *Bataan: The Judgment Seat*, New York: Macmillan, 1944, pp. 18-19; aircraft status reports for May and June 1941; letters of Randall Keator and Lloyd Stinson to writer, February 24, 1979, and September 8, 1978, respectively.)
6. The 20th Pursuit had left Nichols for Clark Field on July 1, 1941, with its seven P-26 As and 17 P-35 As. A few days later, it was joined by the 3rd Pursuit Squadron from Nichols, also transferred to Clark on "temporary maneuvers" while Nichols was being reconstructed.
7. Max shared the house with classmates Carl Gies, Erwin Crellin, and John Geer. (Gies diary.)
8. Mary Jean, Max's girlfriend.
9. Max is referring to Erwin Crellin, who had a midair collision on May 28, 1941, in P-26A No. 33-131, ten miles south of Nichols Field, with John Valkenaar, another 41-B graduate of Stockton, in P-26A No. 33-62. Valkenaar bailed out and suffered a dislocated shoulder. Evidently Crellin brought his plane down safely, as it was subsequently transferred to the Philippine Army Air Corps in September 1941. (Aircraft history cards for P-26As 33-131 and 33-62; letter of Carl Gies to parents of July 6, 1941.)
10. Claire Chennault visited the Philippines in late June 1941 looking for volunteers to fly for his American Volunteers Group. (Frank Neri letter to Edie Neri, June 21, 1941.) However, at least in the case of Grant Mahony, the Philippine Department blocked the attempts of pursuit pilots to resign in order to join the AVG. (See Robert L. Scott, "Psychopathic Case," pp. 148-53 in *Damned to Glory*. New York: Scribners, 1944.)
11. Pan American Airways operated its *China Clipper* service with its Martin flying boat weekly from San Francisco to China via Manila. (See Ronald W. Jackson, *China Clipper*. New York: Everest House, 1980.)
12. A Martin B-10B bomber, one of which was assigned to the 20th Pursuit in July 1941. Each pursuit squadron had one or two.
13. The generals were Brig. Gen. Edward P. King, Jr., Commanding Officer of Fort Stotsenburg; Brig. Gen. Henry B. Clagett, Commanding Officer of the Philippine Department Air Force; Maj. Gen. George Grunert, Commanding General, Philippine Department; and Maj. Gen. Jonathan Wainwright, Commanding General, Philippine Division.
14. Max's sister Delphine, two years his senior, who was a medical student after graduating Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Kansas.
15. Max must be referring to the 20 pilots of flying classes 41-C and 41-D who arrived with 76 others on June 24, 1941, and were assigned to the 20th Pursuit. They had first to check out on the A-27, then the P-26A, then the P-35A. (Gies letter of July 6, 1941, to parents.) The 17 P-35As of the 20th Pursuit were reduced to 9 in August and 8 in September and October as the pilots transitioned to their P-40Bs. (Aircraft status reports.) The first accident in a P-40B by the group of new pilots occurred on October 14, 1941, when Jack Gates (41-C) ground-looped on landing in 41-5282. (Aircraft history card for P-40B 41-5282.)
16. 1st Lt. Joseph H. Moore, who moved up to Commanding Officer of the 20th Pursuit when Major Orrin L. Grover became Operations Officer of the 4th Composite Group in August 1941. (Letter of Frank Neri to Edie Neri, August 27, 1941.)
17. In his letter, Max illustrated six three-plane elements, with each element leader with two wingmen.
18. Evidently referring to Bill Cummings, who had been promoted to captain before October 14, 1941. (Christmas card of Max to "Bill" and "Don," October 14,

1941.) Cummings became the Operations Officer in the newly established (October 1, 1941) 24th Pursuit Group, which was made up of the three pursuit squadrons in the Philippines at the time—the 3rd, 17th, and 20th—plus a Headquarters Squadron.

19. Max was off by about two months on this accident. On July 30, 1941, his roommate John Geer in P-40B No. 41-5276 wrecked his plane on landing when he overshot the field and crashed into P-26A No. 33-111 staked down at the end of the field, killing a T/Sgt. next to it, who was filling out a report. (Gies letter of July 31, 1941, to his parents; aircraft history cards for P-26A No. 33-111 and P-40B No. 41-5276.) On September 1, 1941, Geer wrecked P-40B No. 41-5270 when he ground-looped on landing. He was subsequently transferred to the 28th Bombardment Squadron. Earlier, another 41-B classmate in the 20th Pursuit, John Valkenaar, had been transferred to the 28th following two accidents in P-26As on May 28 and July 7, 1941. (Aircraft history cards for P-26As 33-31 and 33-62.)
20. Max's collision was with 2nd Lt. J.H. "Buck" Weaver, the popular adjutant of the 20th Pursuit, a 40-H graduate of Kelly Field, on October 13, 1941. The squadron CO. was leading a flight of nine P-40Bs in practicing maneuvering in formation when Weaver (in 41-5262) momentarily got out of position. In trying to return to his slot, he inadvertently flew under Louk's P-40B (evidently 41-5275) and the plane's propeller cut through Weaver's canopy. (Frank Neri letter to Edie Neri, October 14, 1941; Joe Moore letter to Bartsch, May 18, 1979; Carl Gies letter to parents, October 15, 1941; Jim Brown narrative, May 25, 1978; aircraft history cards for P-40BS 41-5262 and 41-5275.)
21. On October 13, 1st Lt. Ruperto B. Luzon of the Philippine Army Air Corps, a close friend of Carl Gies, spun in his P-26A (No. 33-138) from 4,000 feet over Batangas and was killed in the crash. On the evening of October 14, 2nd Lt. Rex Kinsley of the 2nd Observation Squadron was flying a B-1 OB in searchlight practice with the 200th Coast Artillery over Clark Field when he was blinded by the light; the plane went into a vertical dive and crashed at the edge of the field, killing him and three enlisted crew members. (Letter of Gies to parents, October 15, 1941; Frank Neri letter to Edie Neri, October 14, 1941; Jim Brown narrative, May 25, 1978.)
22. Max refers to 2nd Lt. Varian K. White, one of the eight Stockton 41-B graduates assigned to the 20th Pursuit.
23. With John Geer now in the 28th Bombardment Squadron, evidently another pursuit pilot and another bombardment pilot moved in with Max, Carl Gies, Geer, and Erwin Crellin. The officers' quarters at Fort Stotsenburg were only suitable for four men. With the arrival of Headquarters, 30th, and 93rd Bombardment Squadrons from the U.S., there were now five squadrons of the 19th Bombardment Group at Clark, considerably adding to the overcrowding problem there.
24. Weaver was killed in October, but it is not clear to whom Max is referring as the second pilot killed in a crash. Kinsley was not a member of the 20th Pursuit.
25. Martin Connelly, a 40-H graduate of Kelly Field, had been sent back to the U.S. following a forced landing in a P-35A on May 31, 1941, when his engine failed. His face had been smashed in and his vision distorted. When he got off the ship at Honolulu, under the care of a nurse, a customs agent thought he was leaving with an illegal purchase under his arm and shot him in the back five times, killing him. (Diary of Donald D. Steele; aircraft history card for P-35A No. 41-17437.)
26. Transferred out were the CO., Major Orrin Grover; 1st Lt. Ossie Lunde; Captain Bill Cummings; 1st Lt. Benny Putnam; 1st Lt. Harold Cocanougher; 1st Lt. Pete Warden; and Valkenaar and Geer.
27. On July 19, 1941, Max overshot the landing field at Clark in P-40B No. 41-5268—the first accident in the squadron's P-40Bs, which were put into operation two weeks earlier—and on August 26, 1941, had an accident in P-40B No. 41-5284. Both planes were repaired. Max doesn't include his first accident, in a P-35A, on May 28, 1941, at Nichols Field when in 41-17441 he overshot the field on landing. (Aircraft history cards for P-35A No. 41-17441 and P-40Bs Nos. 41-5268 and 41-5284.)
28. The bombers the P-40Bs intercepted were B-17CS and Ds of the 19th Bombardment Group, 35 of which were based at Clark Field at this time. As noted by a 19th Bombardment Group navigator during this period, the B-17s "could fly circles around the P-40s at 20,000 feet. . . ." (Overseas log of Lt. Francis Cappelletti, 93rd Bombardment Squadron.) Above 15,000 feet, the P-40 performed poorly, since its Allison engine was not supercharged and couldn't develop sufficient speed at that altitude to maneuver.
29. Max here is referring to the P-40E, 50 of which now equipped the 3rd and 17th Pursuit Squadrons. The 20th Pursuit was still flying the earlier model P-40B and would enter the war with it.
30. Del Carmen, the site of a big sugar mill operation, was located about 15 miles south of Clark Field.
31. Radio, Gen. George C. Marshall to C.G., USAFFE, No. 624, November 27, 1941; Far East Air Force memo to all units, November 28, 1941.
32. John Toland interview of Joseph H. Moore, 1958?; Bartsch interview of Joseph H. Moore, July 11, 1981; letters, Moore to Bartsch, June 16 and July 28, 1979.
33. William E. Dyess, *The Dyess Story* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1944, pp. 27-28); Louis Morton, *Strategy and Command: The First Two Years* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1961), p. 123; Moore/Toland interview; letters of W. James Fossey, Joseph Moore, W.B. Putnam, and Edwin Gilmore to the writer, June 14, 1978, March 8, 1979, May 29, 1979, and March 13, 1979, respectively.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William H. Bartsch is by profession a development economist in the United Nations system. However, his real passion is the history of the early air operations of the Pacific War, particularly in the Philippines, which he has been researching for the past seven years. At present, he is preparing a detailed account of the history of the 24th Pursuit Group in the Philippines campaign, based mainly on the diaries and recollections of surviving officers and enlisted men. He has been a member of the AAHS since 1972.