



“BLACKIE’S GANG”

Search & Rescue in the CBI, 1943–1945

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Modern USAF Search and Rescue techniques have become a science, with precision instruments and equipment specially designed to save downed aircrewmembers. In the jungle environment of Vietnam in the late 1960s and early 1970s, air rescue helicopters performed remarkable feats recovering stranded pilots. In World War II, before “the age of helicopters,” fixed wing rescue aircraft artfully recovered flyers in another remote region of the Far East. In the inhospitable territory bounded by Northwest India, Northern Burma and Southwest China, a group of Army Air Force pilots and ground personnel banded together in 1943 to form a pioneering aerial rescue unit known as “Blackie’s Gang.”

American C-47, and later, C-46, C-87, C-54, and other cargo planes of Air Transport Command (ATC) began in December 1942 airlifting supplies from India over the Himalayas to China to aid Chiang Kai-shek’s forces fighting the Japanese. During 1943 the tonnage of supplies reaching China steadily increased, but the number of aircraft that crashed in the remote jungles and mountains of China, Burma, and India also rose markedly. Aircrews that crash-landed or bailed out while flying “the Hump” faced the jungle, mountains, hostile tribes, and of course the Japanese. Organized search and rescue units did not exist in this region,

much of which remained uncharted and unexplored. When a plane could be spared from the China Mission, the friends of missing aircrews usually conducted any search and rescue operations undertaken.¹

This sobering situation, which lasted for the first six months of the airlift, might have continued had not a novel incident mustered headquarters to action. In early August 1943, 20 men successfully bailed out of their stricken transport plane into the dense jungles of Burma. Among those on board were several important State Department personnel, Chinese officials, and CBS war correspondent Eric Sevareid. The remarkable impromptu efforts of ATC’s India-China Wing and the ensuing publicity during the month-long operation that recovered the men sparked interest in rescue operations for the Hump region.² In September, search and rescue sorties were undertaken to recover other missing aircrews, though they remained essentially ad hoc efforts. In October 1943, Army Air Forces Captain John L. Porter acted to bring order and formality to these improvised rescue operations.

Captain Porter and his C-47 crew pose with the two British Bren guns after destroying the Japanese Zero on 6 November 1943. Left to right are: S/Sgt. John J. Ingram, Lt. Walter A. Gayda, Capt. John L. Porter, S/Sgt. Walter R. Oswalt, S/Sgt. Herman Itzowitz.
(USAFHRC Collection)

Captain Porter, better known as "Blackie" to his men, was a former test pilot and Reserve officer from Marysville, Ohio. He enlisted in the service in November 1940 and became an aviation cadet, earning his pilot's wings on 11 July 1941 at Barksdale Field, Louisiana. Porter spent the early months of the war testing and ferrying transport and bomber aircraft. Flight records show that he eventually accumulated over 2,250 flight hours in 23 different types of aircraft ranging from B-17s, B-24s and B-25s, to a few P-38s and a P-40. When assigned to Jorhat, India, in June 1943 to fly supplies across the Hump, Porter already had five transatlantic crossings to his credit—no small feat in the early 1940s. While flying C-87 cargo planes to China and back with the 22nd Ferry Group, Blackie acquired a veteran's knowledge of the routes and hazards of the region.³

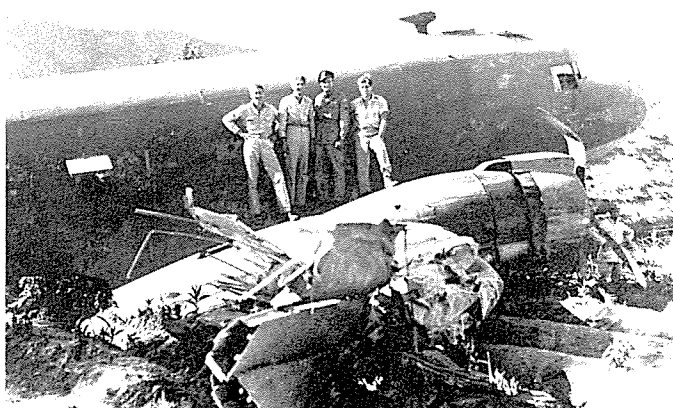
One of hundreds of Hump pilots, Captain Porter attracted little notice from his superiors. On the ground he was shy and reserved. His former copilot, then 2nd Lt. James F. Spain, remarked that Porter was "always a gentleman in everything he did, and I never heard him use a profane word or take a drink in the time that I knew him."⁴ But Porter harbored feelings of revenge, blaming the Japanese for the accidental death of his brother who died in the Mediterranean Theater, and he sought ways to participate directly in combat operations.⁵ The accounts of the Severeid rescue provided Blackie the inspiration for a challenging mission. Aware of the need for improved search and rescue in the China, Burma, India (CBI) theater, Porter decided that more lives could be saved with a permanent rescue network, and he set about securing it.

Given Porter's advertised interest in search and rescue, in October 1943 ATC's India-China Wing appointed him the Sector Air Rescue officer at Eastern Sector headquarters in Assam, India. At Assam, he recruited other wing members in an ad hoc group dedicated to rescuing fliers lost on Hump missions. Known as "Blackie's Gang" to the Hump pilots, this unofficial search and rescue force initially borrowed planes to conduct their missions.⁶

Early successes in October earned Captain Porter "official" approval of his efforts and formation of the first formal search and rescue team for aircraft flying the Hump. Organized on

The harsh conditions that often caused aircraft in the Hump region to crash also could affect the rescuers. On 1 November 1943 due to icing and decreasing visibility, Captain Porter force-landed a search and rescue C-47 at Wuting, China. Left to right are: S/Sgt. John J. Ingram, S/Sgt. Herman Itzkowitz, S/Sgt. Walter R. Oswalt and Capt. John L. Porter.

(Photo via Bill Blossom)



Armorer, gunners, radio operators, mechanics—all part of the "gang"—in front of Captain Porter's rescue plane, B-25D, s/n 41-30362. The haloed duck peering through the clouds was an unofficial Search & Rescue emblem. (USAFHRC Collection)

25 October 1943, Porter's search and rescue unit operated under Eastern Sector headquarters and consisted of three other pilots, 10 enlisted men, and two weary C-47 transports.⁷ Now located in extreme Northwest India, at Chabua aerodrome, Blackie's Gang became the nerve center for information and action to recover aircrews missing on the Hump route.

Among those recruited for the team were fellow pilots from Jorhat and men associated with the Severeid rescue efforts in August. Blackie had an eye for more than mere job qualifications, as ex-crew member Sgt. Bill Blossom recalled: "I was recruited because I was a parachute rigger which the unit needed. Captain Porter talked to me and explained what my tasks would be and felt me out as to my attitude and eagerness. I was 'gung-ho' so I was assigned. . . . I never rigged a chute [with Blackie]."⁸ As his men soon learned, Blackie changed character in the air. The sky was his element and in it he was utterly fearless. A skilled pilot, Porter became known for hair-raising deeds and actions that gained the respect and admiration of his men. He led by example and "his enthusiasm was infectious."⁹ Gaining confidence in themselves and their 27-year-old leader, the small rescue unit worked feverishly to obtain new skills and knowledge for their lifesaving work.

To supplement the C-47s, Porter's search and rescue unit later acquired two B-25 *Mitchell* bombers and a few L-5 liaison planes for rescue work. Each aircraft flew roughly two missions a day averaging from three to six hours per flight.¹⁰ A shortage of pilots sometimes meant only one pilot per aircraft with a spare enlisted crewmember occupying the copilot's seat, providing an extra pair of eyes. Because daylight was needed for search patrols, Blackie's mechanics worked frantically under floodlights at night to prepare each aircraft for the next day's sorties. Search and rescue missions required pilots to fly at treetop level, along narrow twisting river valleys and between the snowcapped peaks of the Himalayas. A common technique to locate a crash site in the thick jungles, Lt. Spain remembered, involved ". . . what we called a 'hair comb' pattern which was flying up and back, where we overlap every one of our passes. . . . This was the best way that we could cover every part of the ground and this was done in sections, a quarter section of land at a time."¹¹ The wartime conditions produced a breed of high-spirited pilot volunteers who became famous for aerial antics such as

buzzing airfields "to cut the grass," and "flying circles around transport aircraft."¹²

As the first American search and rescue unit in the Far East, Blackie's Gang developed novel techniques to aid airmen stranded in the formidable jungles.¹³ Once aircrew survivors had been located (which was an accomplishment in itself), communication was established with notes attached to yellow streamers, which also gave instructions to the survivors on how to communicate with the search plane using improvised ground panels. Supplies were then air-dropped daily as the survivors walked out, or parachuted to a ground rescue team guided to the downed party. Blackie's men worked closely with the Wing Intelligence Section (which provided the men for the ground teams), and perfected new air-drop methods. They also improvised signaling devices and jungle survival kits, and established contacts with native tribes in the region whose members aided in locating and helping aircrew survivors.¹⁴

To aid injured crew members, Captain Porter worked with the medical personnel at Chabua to form a volunteer group of air rescue medics. The medics parachuted into remote crash sites to save airmen in need of immediate medical aid.¹⁵ In one instance, raw blood was air-dropped to medics who performed a lifesaving transfusion for a critically injured crewmember.¹⁶ Light aircraft also played an important role. American ground teams and helpful natives cleared tiny jungle strips to enable the L-5 liaison planes to air evacuate personnel too seriously injured to be moved by land.¹⁷ With this ability, the unit was occasionally tasked with covert missions involving supplying, placing, or extracting Allied agents behind Japanese lines.¹⁸

All the while the Japanese posed a constant threat to Porter and the CBI search and rescue team. Involved in low-level search or drop missions near or behind Japanese lines, his lumbering C-47s and other rescue aircraft were ideal targets for enemy gunners and fighter planes. Blackie's Gang

"Blackie's Gang" and their "bus" at Chabua, India, in November 1943. Capt. John L. Porter, Search and Rescue Commanding Officer, is piloting the Jeep. Sitting sideways on the Jeep and directly behind him are SSgt. Walter R. Oswald and Lt. Walter A. Gayda. Lt. James F. Spain, copilot on Blackie's final flight, is second from the left on the trailer.

(USAFHRC Collection)

brought along hand-held machine guns, but mainly relied on surprise, stealth and skillful flying for protection. On one occasion, however, Porter's crew tossed a few fragmentation bombs on a Japanese position to even the score a bit.¹⁹

On 6 November 1943, a crewmember later recalled, a situation arose where the hand-held weapons were used. "We were searching all morning, and as we were about to start back to Chabua, flying low between mountains, we came across a Jap fighter that had apparently gone out of gas and made a forced landing."²⁰ Oblivious to the danger that the fighter might take off or radio his position, Blackie ordered his C-47 crew to attack. Both Sgt. John Ingram and SSgt. Walter Oswald ran for the two machine guns on loan from the British. Ordering his copilot 1st Lt. Walter Gayda to take over the controls, "Captain Porter . . . took over Oswald's gun so that he could put it out the pilot's window."²¹ Functioning like a modern-day gunship, Porter and his crew blazed away at the Zero from the pilot's window and the aft cargo door. After seven passes in which Captain Porter kept yelling "Slower!" to Lt. Gayda, the enemy pilot was killed and the plane left a worthless wreck.²² As the first transport in the CBI theater to destroy an enemy aircraft on the ground, Porter's jubilant crew painted a miniature Japanese flag below the cockpit.²³

In late November 1943, "John got word that there were two B-25s in a salvage yard and [he] proceeded to 'pull strings'" to obtain them.²⁴ With more speed, maneuverability and armament, the B-25 *Mitchells* were ideal for Porter's search missions. His ground crew converted the B-25s for drop missions by removing the bomb bay racks and adding a platform to aid in air-dropping parapacks.²⁵ The specially equipped B-25s soon became a favorite of Blackie and his gang.

While conducting daily low-level search missions, Porter customarily took time out to tangle with any Japanese he and his crew came upon. The Daily Tactical Summary report for 9 December 1943 observed:

"A B-25 rescue ship, piloted by Captain Porter, was fired on by Japanese machine guns, when flying on a routine mission today. Sighting two Jap emplacements, Porter and his crew strafed and silenced both positions. Some time after, a



Japanese encampment . . . and three trucks were spotted. The trucks and party were thoroughly strafed."²⁶

Whenever he located an enemy position too tough to crack, Blackie radioed its position to a regular combat outfit.²⁷

The 10th of December 1943 began uneventfully for the search and rescue unit at Chabua, India. Lieutenant Gayda piloted a C-47 on a search mission in Northern Burma while Captain Porter and his copilot, 2nd Lt. Spain, prepared a B-25 for their own search and rescue operation. Spain recalled that it was shortly before noon. "John and I were preparing to take off on a drop mission when we heard a 'May Day' from our C-47" which was under attack by Jap planes in the valley of Ft. Hertz, Burma.²⁸ With a brief "Let's go get 'em," Blackie slammed the throttles forward and lifted off the runway. The rescuers raced at top speed to their comrades about 140 miles away. Climbing to 18,000 feet, Captain Porter cleared the first north-south ridge as he entered Northern Burma. Nearing the point of distress, Porter and Spain spotted Lt. Gayda's C-47 transport burning on the Ft. Hertz runway.²⁹ (Lt. Gayda and his crew survived the crash landing.)

Sighting two *Zeros* in the vicinity, "Blackie" dove his B-25 like a fighter and attacked them. During the dogfight, a flight of about a dozen more fighters was seen heading their way. "As they were flying in two-plane elements," remembers Lt. Spain, we "believed they were the P-40s who had been called by radio."³⁰ As fate would have it, all were

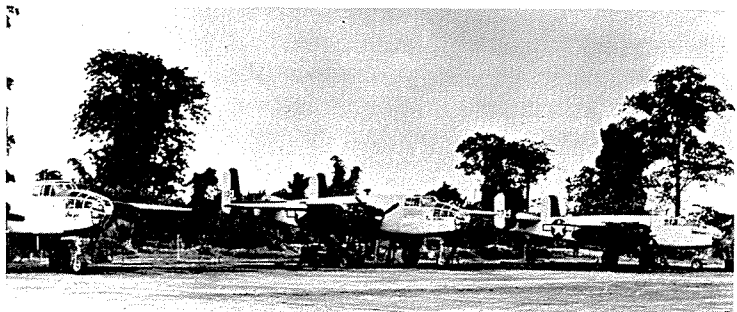
Japanese *Zeros*. Desperately, Blackie maneuvered his *Mitchell* bomber while his crew, from their gun positions, returned the scathing fire of the Japanese pilots. His plane peppered with holes, Captain Porter "decided to call it a day and headed for the clouds . . . towards Chabua."³¹ Still pursued by two of the fighters, Blackie dove his bomber, hugging the hills between Burma and India. As he approached the north-south ridge, the damaged starboard engine caught fire. Forced to feather that engine, the B-25's speed dropped from 300 mph to 160 mph allowing the *Zeros* to close.

"At this time," recalls the copilot, "a *Zero* attacked from eight o'clock position and the left engine was set afire."³² Blackie immediately ordered the crew to bail out. After opening the top escape hatch in the cockpit, Lt. Spain became stuck in the narrow opening. While maintaining a steady grip on the controls of his dying aircraft, Blackie stood up and pushed his copilot out the escape hatch. "I estimate that when I left [the] aircraft, we were approximately 200 feet above [the] mountains. By the time I had pulled the ripcord and made two swings and hit the trees, the airplane had crashed and exploded."³³ Either because the intercom had been shot out or because the aircraft was so low, Lt. Spain was the only member of the crew of six to bail out before the aircraft smashed into the ridge a mile inside the Indian border.³⁴

The next morning search teams, including Lt. Gayda and part of the crew shot down the day before, took off in the sole remaining C-47 and B-25 aircraft in a futile search for Blackie. The search continued for days, but not until Lt. Spain emerged from the jungle on Christmas Day 1943 did the fate of Captain Porter become known. For his pioneering and selfless efforts, Captain John L. Porter received posthumously the Distinguished Flying Cross. In a letter to a superior, Brigadier General Earl S. Hoag, Commander of the India China Wing, declared: "He was one of the keystones of the rescue organization and . . . his loss will be keenly felt."³⁵

The death of Captain John L. "Blackie" Porter did not end the operations of his search and rescue unit. Others carried on. Building on Blackie's work, search and rescue operations in the CBI theater continued to expand during World War II, increasing in size and scope. Led by several different commanders, the search and rescue team served throughout 1944 under the supervision of Eastern Sector headquarters and later for the 1333rd Army Air Forces Base Unit (AAFBU) at Chabua. On 1 February 1945, Captain Porter's original team moved from Chabua to Mohanbari, India, and activated as the 1352nd Army Air Forces Base Unit (Search & Rescue).³⁶ At Mohanbari, the search and rescue unit attained the complete autonomy that Captain Porter had envisioned when founding the organization. His unit continued to operate as the search and rescue unit for ATC aircraft flying the Hump and worked closely with similar units operated later by the Tenth and Fourteenth Air Forces.

Despite having to use "cast-off" airplanes and being forced to invent new techniques from scratch, Captain Porter's crews were extremely effective for their time. At the end of December 1943, of 58 known ATC planes carrying 276 personnel lost in the CBI theater, "Blackie's Gang" had directly or indirectly contributed to locating and returning 127 Allied airmen and identifying 61 Allied dead. This



C-47 rescue aircraft at Mohanbari, India, in 1945. In 1945 search and rescue aircraft were painted blue and orange-yellow for better visibility from the ground. "Somewhere . . . I'll Find You" became the unofficial motto of the unit. (USAFHRC Collection)

Three B-25 search and rescue aircraft on standby at Mohanbari, India, in 1945. They are painted a blue and orange-yellow combination for better visibility from the ground. (USAFHRC Collection)



amounted to a recovery rate of 59 percent.³⁷ Continuing to refine search and rescue techniques, and using an assortment of B-25s, C-47s, and short-field liaison aircraft, the number of aircrews "saved" rose in 1944. By the end of the war in 1945, even some experimental helicopters were successfully employed. The final search-and-rescue statistics in 1945 showed that of 590 Allied aircraft of all types carrying 2,830 men reported missing over the Hump, 1,171 men were saved and 1,314 confirmed dead. Thanks to Blackie's rescue unit, 79 percent of the airmen who survived the crashes and bail-outs in this inhospitable region made it home safely.³⁸

In March 1946, Air Transport Command (later Military Airlift Command) gained responsibility for all Air Force rescue operations, and established the Army Air Forces Air Rescue Service. Today, the Aerospace Rescue & Recovery Service of the Military Airlift Command supports the Air Force's rescue needs around the world. Men such as Blackie Porter who met the CBI rescue challenge in 1943, defined, developed, and employed many of the aircrew rescue techniques used today by their successors in the Aerospace Rescue & Recovery Service.

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Sketch of Captain Porter wearing his good luck Chinese cap.

(USAFHRC Collection)

Captain Porter's crash site in the rugged hills along the India-Burma border.

(Photo via Bill Blossom)

After returning from the jungle, Lt. James F. Spain points out to Chabua's intelligence officers where he and Blackie were shot down on 10 December 1943.

(USAFHRC Collection)

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