

The last gasp of the Allied aerial defenders of the Philippines was a futile fight by P-26 “Peashooters.”

by Brooks Whelan

The date was December 12, 1941. The scene of action was Batangas Airfield, home base of the 6th Pursuit Squadron (PS), Philippine Army Air Corps (PAAC), on the island of Luzon. The aerial arena was dominated by 27 Mitsubishi G3M2 Type 96 bombers and their 41 escorting Mitsubishi A6M2 Zero fighters. The bombers were busily engaged in unloading their lethal cargo onto the hangars, runways and parked aircraft below. Harassing this large force like a swarm of mosquitoes were five small Boeing P-26A “Peashooters” flown by Filipino pilots.

Two days before, the members of the 6th PS had been attending an air defense briefing at Zablan Field in Rizol, the home base of the 1st School Squadron, PAAC, when Japanese bombers attacked around noon. Although the 6th PS was no match for the escorting Zeros, its unit commander, Capt. Jesus A. Villamor, had scrambled his P-26s, which had managed to harass the Japanese enough to prevent them from causing further damage. Unfortunately for the tiny 5-year-old PAAC, most of the parked aircraft were destroyed, including several Stearman PT-17A Kaydets, a Keystone B-3A, a Martin B-10, a Stinson Reliant and a visiting Boeing P-12E.

Now, for the second time in two days, the 6th PS was in the air, this time in a brave but futile attempt to defend its home base against crushing odds. Flying alongside Villamor were Lts. Godofredo M. Juliano, Jose Mondigo, Cesar Basa and Jose Kare. During the ensuing melee, members of the 6th PS became separated from each other. Villamor had gone directly for the bombers and severely damaged one of them before being driven off by the Zeros. The other four pilots were less successful - they were scattered by the Zeros before they could inflict much damage.

Mondigo and Juliano were herded off by the enemy fighters, and soon Mondigo’s P-26 was burning. Mondigo bailed out and was immediately set upon by the Zeros as he dangled helplessly from his chute. Seeing his countryman’s plight, Juliano, flying No. 306, dived on the enemy fighters and drove them off while avoiding being shot down himself.

Later that same day, while returning from a reconnaissance flight, Basa was shot down and killed. Subsequently, on December 23, Kare was attacked by two Zeros while on patrol. Although he was wounded and flying a badly damaged airplane, he managed to score hits on one of the enemy planes and, just before seeking cover in the clouds, observed the Zero smoking heavily. He was later credited with a kill.

Following those encounters with the pilots of the 6th PS, the Japanese landed by the thousands on Luzon and overran the island. Many of the American and Filipino pilots were killed or captured, or managed to flee into the jungle to join guerrilla bands.

I began work in 1991 on a series of paintings, titled “Other



Story of the scene depicted in the artwork featured on the back cover of this issue.

Planes...Other Battles,” that would feature lesser-known aircraft and battles. I included the P-26 in the series because of my childhood love of the aircraft in the 1930s.

In the spring of 1937, 14 P-26As arrived at Clark Field to equip the 3rd Pursuit Squadron, U.S. Army Air Corps, stationed at Clark, Nichols and Iba fields. The 17th PS at Nichols received several more in 1940. They were eventually replaced by Seversky P-35s and Curtiss P-40s, and in July 1941 the first of 12 Peashooters was transferred to the PAAC to form the 6th Pursuit Squadron.

My original plan for the painting was to feature the “Peashooter” in combat, surrounded by enemy aircraft - waves of bombers accompanied by a swarm of Zeros and, below them, a cratered and smoldering Batangas Airfield. After many sketches and color-comprehensive drawings, I decided to simplify the scene in order to feature the more important elements: the P-26 and two of the Filipino pilots engaged in combat with the Zeros. I chose to depict the moment just before Mondigo bailed out of his stricken plane. Juliano’s plane is in the foreground, with the Zeros positioned to contrast their advanced aerodynamics with the appealing but hopelessly outdated lines and structure of the P-26.

Initially, I was interested principally in the P-26 itself. The pilots who flew the little pursuit plane had nothing but praise for it. But somewhere between the start of the project in 1990 and the last brush strokes in 1996, the composition went through a metamorphosis. I sincerely hope that my painting conveys some of my respect for those brave few Filipino pilots who flew and fought against such difficult odds.

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