



A team of ground mechanics from the 90th FS posing on a P-47 at Moran. (All photos from the author's collection)

“Burma Banshees” 90th Fighter Squadron P-47s

By Gregory Pons



A line of 90th FS Thunderbolts freshly arrived at Moran airbase equipped with additional big tanks under their wings. These planes have yet to be painted with their combat markings.

Several articles have been published about the famous 80th Fighter Group assigned to the 10th Air Force in the China-Burma-India (CBI) theater while the unit flew P-40s. The recent discovery of a photo album that belonged to a ground mechanic of the 90th Fighter Squadron gives us an insight to this period during the time the unit was transitioning to P-47s, replacing its tired and obsolescent P-40Ns decorated with a painted skull on their hoods.

Here Comes the Thunderbolt

June 8, 1944, while the 90th Fighter Squadron was temporarily based at Moran in India, Lt. Col. Albert L. Evans Jr. (CO of the 80th Fighter Group) led the first flight of 12 P-47s in from Karachi. Captains Bulkeley and Daine, Lieutenants Cherry, Roane and Pedersen, and six new pilots flew the new planes. These P-47s were the first to be assigned to the squadron in this theater. The planes were equipped with additional droppable wing tanks. Two days later, 10 new P-47s arrived from Karachi with five new pilots. Eight of the squadron's P-40s were sent to the 88th Fighter Squadron. During the following days, war markings were applied on the planes. Each P-47s of the 90th Squadron wore an individual fuselage number ranging from 70 to 99 and a blue ring around the engine cowling. Black stripes were also applied on their tails as fast identification markings.

On June 20, 10 pilots left Moran with P-40s to take them to Panaghar. They would continue on to Karachi to bring back more P-47s. A few days later, Major Powell took off with a P-47 carrying two 1000-lb bombs. On June 25, two strafing missions were carried out with P-47s in the Myitkyina area in Burma. These two missions were the first successful missions since June 6, due to weather interfering with operations.

On June 27, the first enlisted men from the 90th FS started on their way to the United States under the War Department rotation policy. Two days following, Captain Frey and nine other pilots returned from Karachi with P-47s while another detachment of eight pilots with their P-47s went to Shingbuiyang to carry out tests with these planes from the forward strip.

Saturday, July 1, "D" flight leader Captain Ward and



Brothers in arms. The new massive aluminum-finished Republic P-47 Thunderbolt is facing a tired Curtiss P-40N Warhawk. (All photos from the author's collection)

Lieutenant Wells returned from 20 day leave in the "Hill Station" of Darjeeling where they had found relief from the heat and had been able to refresh their recollections of such things as fresh meat, milk and white women.

In the morning of July 3, 1944, Major Powell and a four-ship flight of Thunderbolts took off at 0700 and did not return until 1115. Their determined, persistent efforts to get through the weather on an offensive reconnaissance to the Japanese airfield at Lashio were frustrated because of stratocumulus and rain clouds to 20,000 feet.

Back from Shingbuiyang after five days came flight leader Captain Daine with nine pilots and 17 enlisted men of the ground crew. Returning with them was Captain Rowntree and nine pilots of the 88th Fighter Squadron who picked up Thunderbolts for their squadron at Karachi after checking out in them here.

Independence Day Fireworks

On Tuesday July 4, 1944, the Ghosts of the Revolutionary Fathers were very good to the 90th FS. For the first time in weeks there was a break in the weather that enabled Major Powell and Lieutenants Roane, Bell and Eastman to get through to Lashio Airfield and catch Jap planes on the ground. In spite of intense



Republic P-47D-23-RA, 42-27394, MSN 1056. This P-47 was later named "Miss Ann III" and wore the individual number 78. (Drawing by Jean-Marie Guillou)



LEFT: These three P-47s of the 90th FS pictured at Moran airbase are showing their combat markings : black stripes on the rudder and horizontal stabilizers, blue ring around the hood and individual number. Note the M2 Cletrac tractor in front of a Thunderbolt and the Stearman PT-17 which was also used by the members of the squadron. RIGHT: Fitted with their droppable tanks these 90th FS Thunderbolts are ready for takeoff.

ground fire, Major Powell's flight destroyed four Japanese fighters and probably destroyed six more. The Thunderbolts all returned unscathed. Another offensive reconnaissance to Bhamo and Loiwing Airfields failed to discover enemy planes, but two bombing missions successfully hit Japanese concentrations on the railroad south of Nogaung.

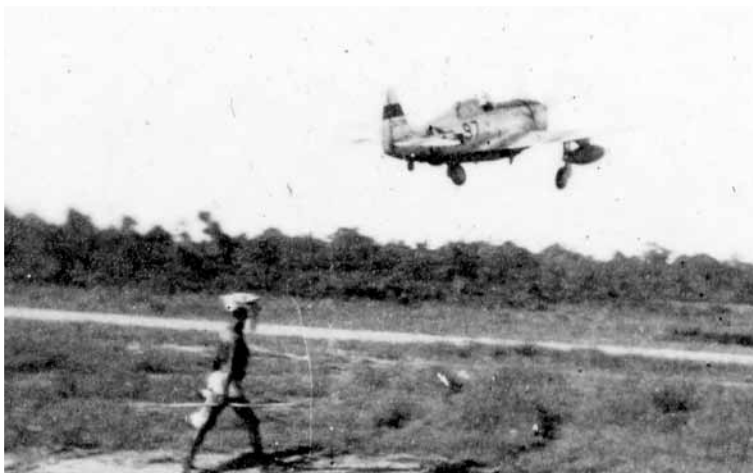
Maj. Richard Powell stated in his combat report:

"On July 4, 1944, I left Moran with a flight of four to strafe the Lashio Airfield. Only four planes were taken as we were unable to get a favorable weather report for the area. There was a five to six-tenths cloud coverage over the entire route and a slight front to go thru 20 miles south of Bhamo. We approached Lashio at an indicated 14,000 feet and upon sighting the field the first element peeled off and made their strafing passes while the second element acted as top cover. It was necessary to retain the wing tanks since there was some gas left in them and since the weather was questionable for the

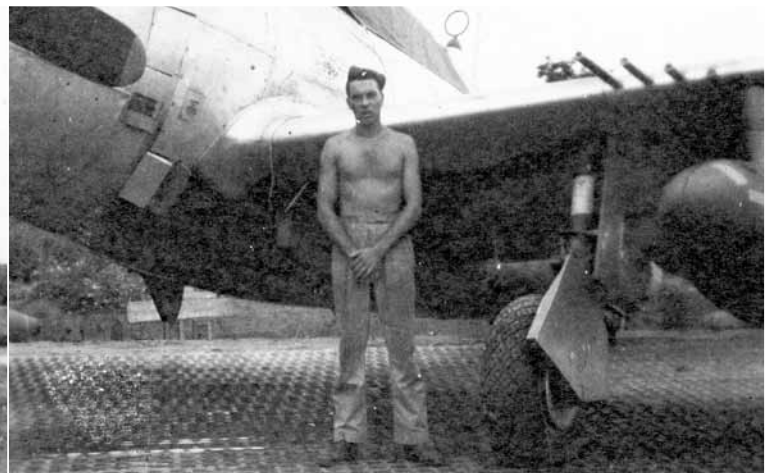
return route. Buffeting was encountered in speeds over 350 miles per hour with wing tanks attached and strafing runs were made between 250 and 300 miles per hour.

I counted three serviceable airplanes in the area on the north end of the North-South runway. The second element saw six planes in this area. Photos of the area taken on June 26, 1944, which showed planes labeled dummies were evidently unserviceable wrecked aircraft left in the area to act as decoys. A group of well camouflaged planes (probably four) were in the area on the south end of the North-South runway. These were almost impossible to see above 300 to 400 feet. They seemed to be painted gray brown while the ones on the north end were silver.

As I pulled off my last pass, I looked back and observed flames and smoke coming from one of the planes on the north end that I had just finished strafing. My wingman who passed near the ship said the flames were shooting out 20 feet to the side and there was much



This P-47 numbered 97 is taking off from Moran airbase. The planes of the 90th FS wore combat numbers from 70 to 99.



T/Sgt Joseph L. Schaffer was in charge of several P-47s of the 90th FS. Note the loop antenna behind the canopy. This type of antenna was later replaced by another type.

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LEFT: This armorer is hauling a bomb with a crane to attach it the P-47 behind him. The parking areas and taxiways at Moran were made with Pierced Steel Planking (PSP). **ABOVE:** These armorers are attaching a 250-lb bomb under the wing of the P-47. The detonator is not installed yet.

black smoke. This plane is claimed destroyed. One other plane in the north area that appeared to be serviceable was demolished. This is the plane believed to be an Oscar claimed destroyed by Lt. Bell.

From top cover a big fire was observed in the South area which the second element claimed as a plane destroyed.

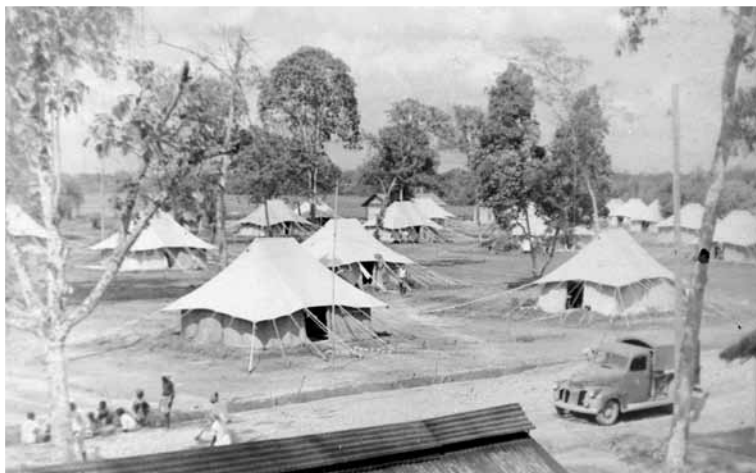
Speed was maintained by making two or three quick passes, then zooming back to altitude while the other element came down. All planes that could be seen on the field, serviceable or unserviceable are believed to have been hit. Each man made at least five passes apiece.

No A.A. fire was observed on the first pass. Some heavy A.A. was noted from the second pass on and a good deal of machine gun fire was encountered especially

during the last half of the attack, but my plane was not hit. It was necessary to climb off the fields to 14,000 feet to get through a cloud formation and during this time and East-West strip approximately 10 miles northeast of Lashio which was noted on the way in was studied again. From a distance, it appeared to be under construction and unusable. We passed over Loiwing Airfield on the way home. No aircraft or activity was observed there. "

Three days later, on July 7, a flight of four P-47s bombed the Namkwin Railroad bridge, getting one direct hit that made the bridge unserviceable. The day after, Lieutenant Wright was badly burned around the face, arms and legs when his P-47 undershot the landing strip and caught fire following a training flight. He was rushed to Chabua Hospital.

During a fighter sweep on July 9 to Shwebo and Onbauk airfields in Burma, the 10-ship formation failed to catch any



View of a part of Moran airbase where the 90th FS pilots lived under tents.



On July 8, 1944, Lt. Wright undershot the landing strip at Moran and was badly burned. His P-47 wore individual number 71 and serial number 42-27436.



This P-47, 42-27394 was later named "Miss Ann III" and wore the individual number 78.



LEFT: Logo of the 80th Fighter Group. RIGHT: Patch of the 90th FS.

Japanese planes on the ground, but succeeded in strafing gun positions on the field and shooting up box cars on the way home. One P-47 picked up seven .25 cal. bullet holes, probably while over the enemy airfields, but its performance was normal. Lieutenant Cook led another eight-ship flight that successfully bombed Moynin. From ground sources, it was later reported that this flight hit a Japanese ammunition dump and that there were explosions for hours after the P-47s left the area.

On July 11, Lieutenant Ekins led an eight-ship flight to Nanyinbya in the Hopin area. Ground report on the damage done: "Minimum of 100 Japs were killed by bombs in the raid, an ammunition dump was also hit and the Japanese Civil Officers house was burned." Lieutenant Jenkins was promoted to captain and there was a big celebration at the officers club at night.

Strike Hard, Strike Sure!

On Wednesday July 12, 1944, Captain Jenkins led a four-ship flight to Tagwin. They did the best bombing to date with all bombs in the target area. The pilots were amazed by the power of the Thunderbolts' eight 50s. The airfield of Lashio became one of the main targets for the 80th Fighter Group as its destruction became the key of the neutralization of the aerial Japanese forces in Northern Burma. The day after, during an attack led by Captain Ward, the flight damaged on the ground two fighter planes believed to be serviceable that were camouflaged under branches. Five new pilots arrived, including Lieutenants Couder and Whitman. Lieutenants Bell and Turbeville left Moran for Panagarh. The Hopin area became another point of interest for the pilots of the 90th FS as it is located in the heart of a valley crossed by the railroad linking Rangoon to the north of the country. Lieutenant Staulcup led a formation that bombed and strafed reported Japanese positions in Hopin. One large fire with black smoke to 1,000 feet resulted. Attacks such as this, it is reported, not only destroyed the enemy's supplies and personnel, but caused them mental anguish as well.

In the afternoon, B-25s were prevented by weather from rendezvous with the fighters of the 90th FS. The P-47s kept circling until they reached their fuel limit and then

returned to Moran.

The following day was full of action, but was marked by the loss of Lt. Joseph "Bonaz" Patton who crashed during a training flight in the Naga Hills area. This was the first pilot killed in a non-combat flight since the unit left the United States. Captain Ward led a successful river sweep down the Irrawaddy (main river in Burma) and then a railroad sweep on the way back that resulted in the destruction of 10 riverboats, barges, a train, and several box cars. Lieutenant Ekins' bomb/strafing mission pounded another Jap position in the Mohnyin area.

The first 89th/90th FS joint bombing mission with Thunderbolts occurred on July 16 and was a successful operation to the Hopin area. Unfortunately, the following mission on the day after was disappointing due to difficulties with the bomb release mechanisms. Major Glenn, ex-90th "B" Flight Leader, transferred to the 459th FS on January 1, 1944, visited the 90th FS on July 23. With eight planes destroyed in the air and 10 on the ground, at the time he was the leading ace in this theater of operations. Captain Rowntree and his 88th flight took off for Shingbwiayang in their new P-47s on Sunday July 23. Lieutenants Bell and Turbeville returned from Panagarh with the A-24s for the Squadron. Several attack missions occurred in Burma before the end of the month, mainly in the Mohnyin and Hopin areas, with excellent results.

Transfer in Burma

On July 29, the 90th FS fighters ran patrols over the Myitkyina area from 0910 until 1825. The following day weather prevented all but one four-ship patrol getting through to Myitkyina and that returned late in the afternoon to land in the midst of a torrential downpour. Captain Ward led a four-ship patrol on August 1 to Naba. During the whole patrol he saw the ground only three fleeting times. During August 4-5, the 90th FS flew strafing missions in the Bhamo area, helping to prevent any Japanese escaping down the road to Kazu or reinforcement being brought up to Myitkyina.

One of the most successful missions occurred on August 6 while the P-47s of the 90th FS strafed the railroad from Onbauk

to Indaw, setting 30 box cars and 10 bashas afire. Lieutenants Cook, Wilson, Cratsley, McDonnell and Moseley returned to Moran with the P-47s they had ferried from Panagarh. The movement of the bomb line gave the men of the 90th FS the comforting feeling that the allied troops are making progress. Everybody believed the unit was going to be transferred to Myitkyina that had been liberated just few days before.

One evening, gun camera films taken by the 90th FS pilots on a strafing mission were shown before a regular cinema and gave the personnel not only a tree-top level view of enemy territory, but also of the type of destruction being done to Japanese installations by the Thunderbolts.

On August 10, all the members of the squadron were considerably shocked and saddened by the news that Lieutenants Burson and Turbeville were believed to be on a transport bound for Myitkyina by way of Shinbuiyang that has been missing since the morning before. Two parachutes had been reportedly seen north of Myitkyina, but a patrol led by Captain Roberts over the route the missing transport was supposed to have traveled found nothing. It is feared this transport, in bad weather, crashed into a mountain.

On August 17, Capt. Robert Frey (ex C Flight Leader) became the first pilot to receive his orders to return to the States of those who came over with the 90th FS. His joy at going home was somewhat dampened by the fact that his wife was in Iceland with a USO troop at the time.

By the end of the day on Sunday August 20, it was reported that instead of going to Myitkyina, the 90th Squadron would be transferred at Tingkaw Sakan in Burma, but this period is another story. ➔

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About the Author

Gregory Pons is a member of the AAHS. After obtaining a Master's Degree in Business Law at the University of Paris 1995, he worked as a Solicitor (lawyer) in Paris and in the south of France for 11 years. He is now a Property Appraiser and Surveyor. He has been collecting WWII U.S. aviation original photos for 25 years. He has contributed to several French WWII history magazines and to the American "Wings of Gold – The Voice of Naval Aviation", and written three books, *8th Air Force – American Heavy Bomber Units in England 1942-1945* published in 2006, *9th Air Force – American Tactical Aviation in the ETO 1942-1945* published in 2008, and more recently *USMC Aviators : Marine Corps Airmen in the Pacific 1941-1945* published in 2012.



China Burma India theater insignia.

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