

The 17th P.R. Sqdn.

By KENN C. RUST

Lockheed "Lightning" F-5A-1-LO, S/n 42-12679, one of the original eight aircraft assigned to the 17th P.R. Sqdn. at Guadalcanal, 1943.



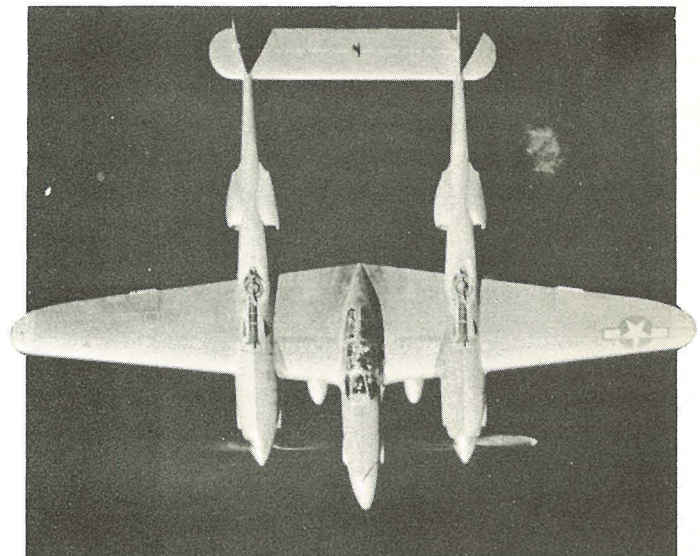
When you speak about unit histories, the mind quickly runs to thoughts of the bomber and fighter groups, of the medium and heavy and light bomb squadrons and of the "Spitfire" and "Mustang" fighters. These are the outfits which bore the brunt of the action for the Army Air Forces in World War II, and they are, therefore, the units about which most has been written and in whom considerable interest has been shown.

Just as important, however, are their lesser known brothers in arms--the night fighter squadrons, the combat cargo squadrons, the antisubmarine squadrons and the photo-reconnaissance squadrons. Their war record is of an entirely different type, a steady, plodding adherence to duty outside of the limelight of publicity. Yet they, too, had their moments of action, of service beyond the call of duty.

This is the story of one of those squadrons--the 17th Photo Reconnaissance Squadron, and right from the start it was different. When you speak of the history of a bomb or fighter squadron, you speak of its activation (a specific date), its training, its movement overseas and usually its establishment at a single combat base. However, the 17th P.R.S. didn't move in any such straight line; it had a great many growing pains.

The story begins on the 11th of May 1942 at Colorado Springs, Colorado. On that day the 11th Photo Reconnaissance Squadron was activated. Soon men began to arrive to fill its ranks, men from Sheppard, Keesler and Lowry Fields. The Army formed them into a unit, gave

them lectures and commando drills. In their spare time they hiked or drove to Pike's Peak, Cheyenne Canyon or the Garden of the Gods.



On 20 June 1942 the unit was redesignated the 12th Photo Reconnaissance Squadron. On 17 July they changed it again--to the 14th P.R.S. with Capt. John A. Folts as Commanding Officer. Two weeks later the squadron moved to the new Air Base which was located on the site of the old Colorado Springs Municipal Airport. (This field later became known as Peterson Field, in honor of Lt. Edward J. Peterson, the 14th's Operation Officer, who was the first pilot to be killed in a plane operating from the field.)

Before this, on 1 July 1942, the original 17th P.R.S. was activated and scheduled for overseas duty in the late fall. However, the personnel of that unit were not sufficiently trained by the target date, so on 18 October the 14th and 17th Squadrons were interchanged. Not being content with just changing names, the entire personnel of the 17th moved bag and baggage to the barracks lately occupied by the men of the 14th. The move at least satisfied the Army brass and apparently kept someone's war plans in order.

More important it did the main trick--on 24 October 1942 the 17th began its overseas movement as part of the 4th Reconnaissance Group. (1) Its new aircraft, Lockheed F-5-As were flown to the West Coast and loaded aboard a transport, and the men entrained into San Francisco. On 3 November, aboard the Dutch passenger and cargo vessel, KLIP FONTAINE, the men of the 17th sailed out of San Francisco Bay and headed across the Pacific--destination - "Cactus".

The 25th of November saw the 17th debarking from their ship at Noumea, New Caledonia. A short time later their F-5-As arrived, were removed from their ship, taken to the nearby Marine Air Base, Magenta Airstrip, and reassembly begun. By early January 1943 assembly was accomplished and the Lockheeds left for Tontouta Air Base, 26 miles inland from Noumea, where they were serviced, checked and prepared for combat. 12 January saw the men of the 17th P.R.S. once again at sea, aboard the U.S. Army Transport McCRAWLEY. Destination - "Cactus".

In the early morning hours of 16 January 1943 the McCRAWLEY slipped into Sealark Channel and felt its way along the north shore of Guadalcanal. This was "Cactus" and in short order the men went ashore by barge. The 17th P.R.S. set up camp in a coconut grove at the west end of Fighter Strip No. 2, two-and-one-half miles from the front lines. The all important Photo Lab was then located on the Lunga River near Henderson Field and built of airplane crates and any other lumber which could be "appropriated".

The first days on "Cactus" weren't so bad, once you got used to it, but the nights were a different sort of thing, something you had to grow into. Almost every night there came that now famous fellow, "Washing Machine Charlie" and his brothers. His bombs didn't create much damage but he interrupted a lot of sleep and kept the men digging deeper and better foxholes.

Radar usually picked up the raiders about 100 miles out but occasionally it missed and every man of the 17th developed a new and keener sense of hearing. Once a raid was identified everyone would bound for the nearest available foxhole. In daylight, some of the world's greatest post-war dash men were trained. Several of the men tried some Bronco Nagurski tactics on coconut trees which threatened to impede their line of flight, and one, "Chief" Herman H. Hoek, became very proficient at running off the end of an F-5-A wing without breaking stride.

All the men on the Island looked forward to that day when night fighters would be available to put an end to the Japanese disruption of their sleep. Many of them thought that day was at hand when, on 2 February 1943, a group of dark painted Lockheed "Lightnings" swooped onto Fighter 2, but their hope was short lived. Many a face fell as they learned these new arrivals were F-5s--photo reconnaissance planes which didn't even carry guns.

With the planes back, the 17th P.R.S. could at last

begin to function, and on 5 February the Commanding Officer, Capt. John E. Murray, flew the Squadron's first operational mission--a PR job to the southern tip of New Georgia. One week later Guadalcanal was announced "secure" as the last of the Jap forces headed away and northwest. Then on 14 February the Squadron suffered its first combat casualty. 2nd Lt. Ardell A. Nord, on a recon flight to the north Solomon Islands, did not return. He was never heard from again.

The nightly Japanese air raids continued through Easter at which time the Squadron moved from Fighter 2 to new quarters they set up on Lunga Beach. Four or five times a night sleep ended and the men hit the "holes", until mid-April when the first P-38 night fighters finally came up. A P-38 shot down two raiders in less than a minute one night, and the nightly air raids diminished both in number and in time spent over the island.

The 17th suffered its second combat loss on 22 April 1943 when 1st Lt. John A. Mancini failed to return from a recon flight over the Shortland Islands. On 9 May 2nd Lt. Charles B. Roberts did not return from a mission to Buka.

Those missions from Guadalcanal were never easy in 1943. There were still plenty of Japanese bases throughout the Solomon's area and "Zekes" were always around. The 17th's pilots were unarmed, and if they failed to keep a close lookout or became too engrossed in their photo run, danger was very close at hand. Some days the weather helped the enemy, and there were endless giant cloud formations up and down the Solomon chain from which a clever Jap pilot could pop out and hit and run. Add to that a goodly amount of flak over the targets which had to be covered, and the PR pilots never had an easy time of it.

"It's only 07:00, but it seems like hours since I took off." This is the way one pilot describes it. "Better be getting on that oxygen mask and the last minute check of the gauges before I get too high. Down ahead I can see two or three more small islands all exactly alike in their green tangled mass of tropical jungle. That farthest island ahead is the one to worry about.

"It's 07:45, I wonder if I will ever get there! Gosh, I'm getting cold! It's below zero and I've still got to go up and up. Better check the gauges again--can't be caught asleep if anything goes wrong. Better start looking around, more often these Japs don't play for fun. Well, I'm getting pretty close, better develop that old rubber-neck because I can expect company out of the sun any time now.

"Doesn't seem to be many new ships in the harbor, just a couple of transports riding at anchor and one under steam. The air strip seems to have been pretty well repaired since last night's working over. If it weren't so darn cold maybe I could write some of this dope down so I could read it when I get back. Oh, oh! There's five, no, six "Zekes" about five thousand feet below me; keep an eye on them. One last look around, then over the target for those everloving pictures. About time for the Ack-Ack to kick up--oh, oh! I talked too soon again, here it comes, but a little off the beam. So far, so good, it's all breaking upstairs. On with the cameras because brother I don't want to do this job over again. Everything's rolling OK, so just keep her straight down the alley, and we can soon head for home. Those guys with the Ack-Ack are too darn close for comfort now. Cut the cameras and let's be heading for the tall timbers. Wonder where those Zekes are by now? Gotta keep looking around because I'm not home yet, and it could be a very long swim before I'm through.

"Ten hundred and half way home going like the breeze. Gee, it's great to be alive."

Each mission was long and arduous, and if the ship was hit by flak or suffered a mechanical failure over that trackless South Pacific invested with Japanese

bases, the pilot pretty well had it and he knew it. Yet, day after day, they went out from Guadalcanal and did their job--and suffered their losses.

2nd Lt. Fred H. Baird was lost on a recon flight over the Solomons on 2 July 1943; 2nd Lt. Ray L. Peterson went missing on 17 August 1943 in the same area, as did 2nd Lt. James G. Reed on 6 December. 1st Lt. William E. Herzog failed to return from a recon over the Bismarck Archipelago on 18 April 1944, and finally 1st Lt. Stanley L. Alexander was lost on a test flight over the Solomons on 28 August 1944.

While Squadron headquarters remained at Guadalcanal several detachments were sent out from time to time to be closer to the battle action. The first of these went to Munda on New Georgia Island in July 1943. Preparations for the move were made in only a few hours and the detachment consisted of only enough men to keep three flyable planes ready at all times--regular inspections and engine changes would be accomplished at Guadalcanal.

Munda was an advanced base where fighters were constantly active patrolling the skies, and enemy planes were encountered frequently. The Munda airstrip was surrounded by bomb craters and there was scarcely a tree to be seen. Torrential rains came frequently, yet the mechanics kept the planes flyable and the pilots accomplished their missions.

On 9 December 1943 the 17th dispatched a Lab detachment to Bougainville. They were on the first C-47 flight to land on the newly constructed fighter strip at Empress Augusta Bay. Equipment arrived by LST two days later and operations and quarters were set up underground to escape some of the effects of constant air raids and alerts. On the last day of January 1944 the first 17th planes arrived.

Missions from Bougainville were begun on 1 February with a photo recon mission from the Piva North airstrip. The nightly air raids continued, and then in the fourth week of February the Japs started shelling the air strips from their hidden positions in the nearby mountains.

That first day's shelling kept any missions from being flown. The next day the aircraft were moved to the far end of the strip, and operations were resumed. Soon, however, the shelling became so bad the planes had to be flown out and back to Munda. From there they flew their missions and then landed at either Torokina or Piva strips on Bougainville to be serviced in quick order and flown back to Munda.

Finally ground forces cleared out the Japs and on 1 June fresh replacements were sent up to the 17th from Guadalcanal. The aircraft returned and pulled sorties over the former Jap strongholds of Kahili, Kieta, Buka and Bonis--the pilots now called these missions "milk runs". The Lab detachment remained on Bougainville until 22 January 1945, when all Solomons operations were turned over to the Australians, and the last Squadron members embarked on a Liberty ship for the Philippines.

The final detachment to go out from Guadalcanal was dispatched on 11 March 1944 for the Green Island Group, north of Buka and Bougainville. When the detachment arrived at its destination there was no immediate work for it to do and activities were held to setting up a camp site and working areas. But the whole operation was one of those first-rate G.I. foul-ups. After three months on Green Island it was decided the detachment was not needed and it returned to Guadalcanal.

Most of the war action was now far beyond the Solomon Island bases, and it was no surprise when orders came through and the 17th Photo Reconnaissance Squadron boarded the troopship U.S.A.T. SHAWNEE on 3 October 1944. A rear echelon of 19 enlisted men and 12 officers, including 11 pilots, was left behind. After the inevitable policing of the area this echelon began to move on 9 October.

By C-47 the groundmen flew to Kornasoren Airdrome, Noemfor by way of Dobodura and Wakde. Arrival was at

1830 hours, and at the crack of dawn the next morning the men were servicing the F-5-Es for their first missions from Noemfor. Two days later 4 aircraft with some ground personnel went up to Mar Field, Sansapor. From there, on consecutive days the planes and pilots were kept busy flying missions over territory in the Netherlands East Indies and Borneo.

The 23rd of October saw those men left behind at Noemfor moved forward and the detachment was reunited and more missions were flown--to Halmahera, the Celebes and Borneo again. Some of the missions were of 10 and 11 hour duration, requiring the pilots to stage out of Morotai. This became the Squadron's next base when, on 5 November 1944, all those on Sansapor moved up to join the majority of the Squadron.

Back on 3 November the main body of the 17th, after a month of stops and starts aboard the SHAWNEE, left that Army transport ship and flew by C-47 from Biak to Wama Field, Morotai. There, men immediately began setting up a mess hall, showers, communications and operations tents and the camera repair and photographic laboratory buildings. The aircraft arrived several days later and the Squadron was reunited and whole again.

That the 17th was still in the war became fully apparent on 22 November when the air raid warning sounded about 20:00. Fifteen Japanese aircraft got through that night and dropped fragmentation and demolition bombs on both air strips, destroying and damaging a large number of planes, including shrapnel damage to two of the Squadron's F-5s. It was Morotai's most serious raid and the damage was heavy, but not beyond repair. In a few days all was back to normal and functioning according to S.O.P.

The missions continued and the New Year came. The war was beginning to snowball toward a climax now, but the losses were not over. On 25 January 1945, 2nd Lt. Carl W. Bradshaw failed to return from a recon flight to the Netherlands East Indies. On 22 February the same fate befell 1st Lt. John R. Graf--the Squadron's last man to be lost in combat.

The 17th of April 1945 saw the Squadron receive orders to move to Leyte. On the 19th the first detachment of men moved out to prepare the 17th's new area. However, word was received on 30 April that the Squadron was going instead to Palawan Island, 350 miles west across the Zulu Sea. The detachment already on Leyte moved over there, and by 10 May 1945 the entire squadron was set-up on Palawan, Philippines.

The 17th secured its new base, V-E Day became history, and operations went on. Recon missions photographed the east, north and northwest sections of Borneo. Captain Leipski made one flight to Saigon, French Indo China. Later, a naval request for photo coverage of Singapore was fulfilled and became the longest mission in the Squadron's record, being made with a fuel stop on Labuan Island in Brunei Bay, Borneo.

About this time the Squadron bid goodbye to its oldest plane "Old 670", an F-5 which had come overseas with them, a plane which represented the Squadron perhaps better than anyone individual. When the plane left the 17th it seemed only right that someone should write an autobiography for it, and so....

"To most of you guys in the Seventeenth I was known as 'Old 670', but you see I feel just as much a part of the Squadron as any 'Old Boulder'...so I guess I'll just pull out my form 1A's and reminisce a bit.

"I was purchased from the Lockheed Corporation by Uncle Sam on 8 September 1942 and went from Burbank to Colorado Springs where they put me in the 14th Photo Reconnaissance Squadron. Gee, that first month was a tough one! Those kitchen mechanics of that outfit gave me a hard time, and the pilots just out of Flight School were 100 octane Junior Birdmen.

"Along about 18 October 1942 I was transferred to

(Continued on Page 215)

The 17th P.R. Sqdn.

(Continued from Page 182)

the good old Seventeenth and was on my way overseas. I made the trip okay and on 14 January 1943 I found my wheels on terra firma again in New Caledonia. I had my wings put on and I was ready for the Japs. On the second of February I came up to Guadalcanal for my first taste of combat.

"Chuck Hilton was my crew chief then and I really gave him plenty of trouble. In the daytime after staying up half the night dodging bombs one of the pilots would take me up to Munda, Buka or Kahili and I had to dodge flak. Well, a month or two of that stuff and I really got a case of war nerves. Every time they took me up to 30,000 feet I'd get wobbly on my pins...so they finally sent me back to the Depot in New Caledonia for a rest leave, rerigging and dual generators. As far as I know I'm one of the first Photo Joe's to have them, the first in the Pacific anyway.

"Just about the time 'Piggy-backs' became the rage, they decided to convert me so they removed my radios and I took up all comers. I really showed those mechanics and Paddle-feet what an F-5 would do. Ed Hanks got to rolling me pretty bad one day and pulled my nose wheel off the lock. It tore the devil out of my nose wheel door.

"Then the detachments started, and I went back into combat, first to Munda and later to Bougainville. I got a new Crew Chief at Bougainville, Jim Lively. By that time I was an old, battle scarred job, and Jim had just come overseas and was an eager-beaver. I had been painted a blue-grey and most of my paint was worn off, so old Jim decided to strip me down. He really gave me a going over. Removed all the paint, polished and gave me a coat of wax.

"I cleaned up that war down in the Solomons. Flew just about every target in the book, so I decided to move on toward Tokyo. I moved up to Morotai, but by that time I was considered pretty much out of date. You see I didn't have the range of the newer models with wing tanks, so I couldn't fly the long missions.

"Finally, I got a new Group Commanding Officer, Major Hershell E. Parsons of the 4th Photo Reconnaissance Group. He took one look at me, shining like 'a nigger's heel' and twice as streamlined, and, well, he grabbed me in a hurry for his personal ship. My old engines were in tough shape so Captain 'Dixie' Davis decided he'd soup me up. He used the more powerful 89

and 91 engine series, and I could really get up and go after that.

"Then it was time for another move, and this time right up to Leyte. When I came over I never thought I'd make it that far, but I guess that nobody else in the outfit did either. I flew a few combat missions up there just to show those F-5Es and Fs I still had the stuff. Then one day the 'Old Man' decided that I had done my part in this war, so I went down to the 'War Weary' pool at Biak and ended my combat tour.

"I guess I had the honor of serving more months overseas than any other P-38. When I finally reached Biak in August 1945 I proved to be quite a curiosity. The boys down there hadn't seen an F-5A-1-10 for many months. Incidentally, out of the eight original planes that came over with the Squadron, my serial number was the lowest, 42-12670. I started out as the old man of the outfit and outlived all the others by several months. No other F-5 in the Squadron ever reached the 1,000 hour mark, either. I've had over 300 flights, more than 200 combat missions, and 1,019 hours of flying time to my credit. Quite a record...I guess!"

With the passing of "Old 670" the 17th P.R.S. was about ready to go west itself. On 10 August 1945 it was advised to prepare for movement but the war ended five days later and the movement was cancelled. The Squadron remained on Palewan, and by November 1945 almost all of its men were on their way back home. The 17th Photo Reconnaissance Squadron had come to the end of World War II.

During 29 months of operations with the 13th Air Force, the Squadron had logged 12,859 pilot hours. Total mileage for those flights came to something like 2,893,275 miles or about 6 round trips to the moon. The F-5s had used up a sum of 1,157,310 gallons of aviation gasoline, while the photo lab had developed approximately 3,667 rolls of film and produced some 775,000 prints.

The Squadron, whose insignia bore the significant motto "Lone Wolves", had never fired a gun in anger, but it had done a job, a long, hard flying job. It prepared the way--the fighter boys, the bomber boys and the ground troops followed and did their job.

(1) 4th Reconnaissance Group - See "Air Force Combat Units of WWII", U. S. Gov't. Printing Office, 1960, P 37.