

THE AUTHOR RECOUNTS A HARROWING MISSION
AGAINST THE JAPANESE THAT SAW HIME STRUGGLING TO
GET HOME WITH HALF HIS MITCHELL'S TAIL MISSING

STRAFER MISSION

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As a strafing pilot with the 17th Tactical Recon Squadron, a hot-shot outfit which had been almost totally wiped out on 26 December 1944 while trying to stop a Japanese task force, the briefing we had just finished left all of us with that rock-in-the-stomach feeling when you know the target is going to be another very tough one.

Our assigned target for tomorrow was the Samah Airdrome on Hainan Island off the China coast, which had been a major Japanese staging airfield for attacks all over the South China Sea.

Having been in Japanese hands for a number of years, we knew it to be most heavily armed. We were attached to the 38th Bomb Group, a low-level outfit that was up on Luzon to add more strafers against the target. The fact that we had photographs of the

However, to do this job right, a group of B-24 Liberators from somewhere — we never did know exactly where — was scheduled to precede our attack time by five minutes and bomb the target from high altitude, a tactic which breaks up a field pretty well.

We would then scoot through at ground level, shoot up everything and skip-bomb with napalm, which normally was a very efficient method of messing up an airfield.

When planning our attack, the target run was figured for the best attacking direction — using any hills, trees, and buildings as cover — so that our approach was a surprise until we broke out into the open. Any run was made as low as we could get, preferably getting our propeller tips green from cutting grass (which isn't as much of a lie as it sounds) because the defender had a big problem hitting a target moving at about 300-mph at very low-level as his gun was usually blocked by some kind of obstruction as you went by him.

strip taken the day before from a Lockheed F-5 Lightning was not a hell of a lot of comfort, as it showed dozens of fighters sitting in revetments and parked on the ramp plus numerous extremely heavy ack-ack air positions.

We were equipped with the B-25J-32 model strafing plane with twelve forward firing .50-cal guns, which were depressed 6-deg and vortexed 600-ft ahead, each gun firing 750 rounds a minute. With this kind of firepower, we could knock down a building, sink a ship, and just create merry hell on the ground ahead of us. We always considered that two B-25J-32s flying wingtip-to-wingtip strafing and skipbombing was an even bet against a destroyer.

Most airfield defense was done by having all defenders trained to go under cover, aim the barrel of all guns straight up and hold the trigger open. The effect was like trying to fly through a fire hose aimed straight up without getting wet.

As the saying goes, "There ain't no way." We got holes but mostly in non-vital places. Very exciting, but not conducive to a healthy old age.

We took off in our dozen B-25s from our dirt strip on Mindoro Island in the Philippines



The strafers would not only blast the Japs with .50-cal machine gun fire but would also devastate their airfields, facilities, and harbors with parafrags, bombs, and napalm — making the Mitchell crews extremely unpopular with the enemy. In this view, parafrags are just about ready to turn a line of fighters into scrap metal.

about three o'clock in the afternoon to fly up to Lingayen strip, a steel mat runway put on the beach on Luzon and the home of the 38th Bomb Group.

After checking in and drawing a cot and a blanket, which I set up as my sleeping quarters for the night, I went looking for a poker game. As normal, I found an open spot at a high stakes table and had a good run, picked up several hundred dollars plus a lot of jungle juice and, at about 2 am, decided to go sack out.

Got back to where I had set up my cot only to find some bastard had swiped it. After much scrounging around in the dark, I found a cot with no end bars. Not good, but at least I was off the ground, which had an amazing array of crawling creatures. We were awakened at 5:00 am to a breakfast of field kitchen pancakes, which, due to the number of crew members to be fed and the few field stoves, were burned to a charred black on the outside and when cut, the inside ran out raw.

Now being completely bright-eyed, bushy-tailed, rested and well fed as all pilots are when leaving on a combat mission (any service manual will tell you this) we climbed into our planes as ready as we would ever be.

Our takeoff was uneventful and we formed a very loose formation, climbed to 6000-ft for the four-hour flight to target. This was to be a very long flight for B-25s, estimated at almost 8.5-hours, which is absolute extreme. When we were about 50-miles out from Hainan, we dropped down to about 50-ft to be below radar pickup.

When we finally sighted Hainan it was obvious that the Liberators had not been there yet. No smoke — nothing. Also, to make matters a whole lot worse, a Jap task force of cruisers and destroyers had moved in since the recon photos and were berthed right alongside the airfield!

If there ever was anything we didn't need, it was all that additional firepower against us.

The group leader then did the most foolish thing that could

The strafing Mitchells fought a no-holds barred war against the Japanese. If captured, the crews were assured of brutal treatment or execution. In this photo, B-25J-32-NC 44-29667 is seen with everything down as it returns from a combat mission. The need for the gun-nose Mitchells was so extreme that the planes often went into combat on the day they were delivered and minus any form of squadron or personal marking. (Robert Hegge)