



At Port Moresby the war tempo was swift. On April 27, crews of the 530th and 531st squadrons reached Jackson Strip, and immediately were put to work by the 43rd and 90th Bomb Groups. Initial missions

were mostly daylight strikes

against New Britain and New Guinea airfields and the unvarying night attacks on Fortress Rabaul. This was the heyday of the Japanese fighter pilots and every mile of sky over enemy territory was likely to be contested. The 380th was to shake down in a blazing air where the bullets were real.

Fourteen aircrews and B-24's made the trip, accompanied by only eight ground men. Briefed for a week's stay, the crews lived on in wretched conditions until late June. The invariable dysentery grounded many fliers, and those who flew were often ill.

Of 14 strikes flown during the first three weeks, ten were night attacks on Rabaul, then the hottest target within range of Allied bombers in the Pacific. Four were grim daylight affairs which found the 380th matching gunfire with Nip fighters for the first time.

The most dramatic battle came on 21 May when six 380th B-24's made a strictly "Flying Circus" attack on the Nip airfield at Gasmata. The flight broke up for individual runs on the Japanese base, only to discover 15 Oscars lurking in the clouds just north of the drome. As bombs were away, the Nips attacked, pressing passes from all around the clock against each of the B-24's.

Singled out by the Nips was the Liberator flown by Lt. McDowell, who had been briefed to return for a photographic run after the bombing and who had followed instructions in spite of the opposition. A single Oscar dived in on the tail just before the photos were taken and was followed by a dozen who began to make "chow line" attacks.

The copilot pointed to cloud cover to the north and McDowell headed in that direction, then yelled, "Hell, that's too far away . . . we'll have to go southwest."

A burst of 20mm cannon exploded in the tail turret wounding the gunner, who called, "tail gun to pilot, tail gun to pilot . . . my gun is out, but I'll keep on tracking."

"Roger," answered McDowell, as another six o'clock pass started in.

"Get your tail down," came the cool voice of the top

turret over the intercom, "and I can get a shot at this bastard."

That became the pattern. The Nips soon realized that the tail gun was no longer firing, and passes were pressed into hand-shaking distance from that position. As each came in, the tail gunner, though wounded, called the pass, and McDowell lifted the big Liberator's nose to allow the top turret to train on the attacker. Weaving and bobbing, the crew slowly gained cloud cover.

Before the tail gun was put out of commission, the gunner had flamed one Oscar who crashed into the sea. In the ensuing melee, the top turret knocked down two for sure, and the nose gunner sent one down out of control and blazing, but since it was not seen to crash, it was listed as a probable.

Four crew members were wounded: the radio operator with his right leg fractured by a 20mm shell and his other leg creased by machine gun fire; the assistant engineer hit in his left arm; the cameraman burned by a tracer which nicked his body; and the tail gunner with shrapnel in his calf.

With a B-24 riddled by 100 holes; three engines and three propellers hit but all four fans still turning; the hydraulic system shot away; and gaping holes in wings and stabilizers, McDowell made Dobodura and landed, a nice easy landing by a young pilot who a month later would be missing in the vast deserted waters south of western New Guinea.

All members of the crew received Silver Stars, in addition to the four Purple Hearts.

But that wasn't all.

Madang, New Guinea, on 27 May, was the scene of another battle which crippled two B-24's, one with an engine shot out, as aircrews settled into the grim routine of Pacific combat.

During this period, the Circus learned firsthand that combat sometimes meant sudden death. P. G. Smith, operations officer of the 531st Squadron, took off from Jackson with a full crew on a routine night harassing job over Rabaul and was never heard from again, although searches were flown across the "Hump" and Vitiaz Strait for several days.

It wasn't all grim. There was the time that Flight Officer Thomas of the 531st spotted a large convoy off the coast of Guinea, largest since the battle of the Bismarck Sea. The radio waves fairly crackled as his report sped back to base. Virtually every flyable plane in the Fifth Air Force took to the air. The convoy turned out to be a rather well known island group.

Or the first of those lucky coincidents which helped to maintain the name "Flying Circus" and still play hell with the Japanese. Phillip Dornbuss piloted a B-24, with Harold S. Mulholland as copilot and a crew which included S/Sgt.



A 'Green House' nosed Liberator (Art Hampkers)

proceeded to Fenton Field. Meanwhile, the men sent to New Guinea, were the first Circus crews to actually be involved in combat.

## INITIAL AIR OPERATIONS, PORT MORESBY

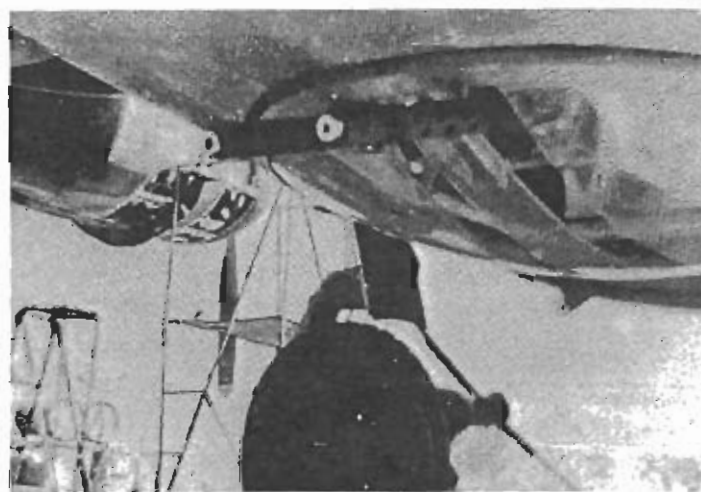
The 380th crews assigned to New Guinea were told they would receive a week's training under the tutelage of the veteran 43rd and 90th Bomb Groups. They would fly their missions with these groups from their bases at Jackson Strip, and Ward Drome. Maintenance and living quarters were to be provided by the host group. Such was not the case. Living quarters were not readily available for such a large influx of men. It would take time and much scrounging before the Circus crews could make a home for themselves. Likewise, maintenance was a nightmare. The 380th had only brought along eight mechanics, and few tools. The facilities available to them were already overworked and underequipped. The 43rd and 90th did not need a new group of men interfering with their operations. Maintenance of these transient airplanes would come only after the host group's ships had been serviced. Matters were further complicated by the aircraft changeover, in progress, at the 43rd Bomb Group. They were giving up their beloved B-17s for the ungainly LIBERATOR. They were unhappy, and certainly did not need the added responsibility of training and maintaining a new group. So it was, as the 380th made its combat debut. Challenging them would be two formidable opponents, the Japanese, and the treacherous tropical weather. Both would take their grim toll.

The usual procedure for orienting pilots was to have them fly as co-pilots with an experienced crew. After one or two missions, these "experienced" pilots would take their own crews through their tour of operations. Most early missions, for a group, would be led by a veteran organization. It worked best that way and there were fewer initial mistakes, with green crews gaining experience and confidence faster.

Early daylight targets, for the Circus, included many of the airdromes located in New Guinea and New Britain. Night missions were flown against the Japanese stronghold at Rabaul. This harbor bastion was always a hot spot, with heavy A/A, searchlights, and



The Townsville nose turret modification (Cliff Toepperwein)



Tunnel guns which were routinely used to replace the Sperry Ball turret (Dick Ebbeson)

fighters the rule, rather than the exception. Night attacks were used to minimize the possibility of fighter interception.

The combat shakedown did not include any "milk run" missions. Circus crews experienced the harsh realities of aerial combat immediately. Daylight missions were routinely challenged by Japanese fighters. These confrontations produced some dramatic shootouts. Such as the case of May 21, 1943. On that day, the 380th flew its first solo mission of the war. There were no veteran crews, from the other groups, to supervise or help them. The order called for a six airplane strike against the Japanese Army airfield at Gasmata, New Britain. Immediately after bombing the airstrip, the force was attacked by fifteen OSCAR type fighters. These defenders made passes at all the LIBERATORS, but soon turned their full attention to one flown by Lt. Francis McDowell. This 531st crew fought back with the desperate skill only combat can engender. Although repeated attacks had severely damaged the airplane, and wounded four of his crew, McDowell was able to return the crippled ship to Dobodura. The gunners on this crew were credited with three confirmed, and one probably destroyed fighter. The men were quickly proving the 380th could slug it out with the best opposition the Japanese had to offer. Night operations on the 21st also brought another fatality to the Group. Lt. Bob Heller, 529th, was lost while flying as an observer with the 43rd Bomb Group crew of Maj. Paul Williams. Their B-17E was shot down by a night fighter over New Britain.

Their other opponent, the weather, could be far more deadly. Successful encounters with it were equally dependent upon luck and good airmanship. Whenever bad weather was combined with combat damage, the outcome was usually the same: crew missing and presumed lost. Such a combination befell the 531st crew of Capt. Paul G. Smith. They disappeared without a trace while on a night mission to Rabaul, June 11th. There were no distress calls, and repeated searches found nothing. This grim event would occur with tragic regularity throughout the war.

June 11, 1943 was a black day for the 531st squadron. In addition to losing their Operations Officer, Capt. Paul Smith, they lost their commander, Capt. James Dienelt, while on a daylight mission to Koepang, Timor. After repeated fighter attacks, his airplane, #500, CARELESS, was seen blowing up over the target. There were no survivors.

This streak of bad luck continued. On June 15th, 531st pilot, Lt. Ben Parker was involved in a mid-air collision over Rigo Bay, Port Moresby. This tragic event occurred while returning from a daylight mission to Rabaul. Parker wanted to change flight positions in the formation. He decided to slide underneath a 530th ship flown by Lt. Phil Doornbos. The tail sheared off, and Parker's ship fell vertically into the sea. There were no survivors. Doornbos was more fortunate, he was able to ditch his crippled airplane. Two men were killed, and Doornbos suffered multiple fractures to his leg.

These initial air operations were soon finished. The planned one week stay had somehow been extended into a seven week test of endurance. The aircrews and the eight mechanics had completed their combat orientation. They were ordered to return to their bases in northern Australia, and left Port Moresby on June 25th. They left wiser men, having no illusions about the future. It would be a long, hard war.



Two pilots destined to be lost June 11, 1943. Left; Capt. Paul G. Smith, 531st Operations Officer. Right; Capt. James A. Dienelt, 531st Commanding Officer. (Charles Schroeder)

## INITIAL AIR OPERATIONS, FENTON FIELD

The Australian contingent of the 380th was somewhat slower getting into the war. The Group's eleven bombers left Charters Towers on May 4, 1943, bound for Fenton Field. During their pre-flight briefing, the Base Operations Officer surprised the new crews when he said he did not have a specific map location for Fenton. He could draw a picture of the runway and taxi areas, but only knew it was located about 100 miles south of Darwin, on the North-South road to Alice Springs. There were no radio facilities at Fenton, so it would be impossible to get any help from them once the flight was enroute. As could be expected, the crews had difficulty finding the elusive base. Only two crews were successful, one was the 528th crew of Jack Banks. Most ended up at Batchelor Field, an airstrip sixty miles south of Darwin, which based some Aussie fighters, and a few Dutch medium bombers. One 529th crew, Jack Kelly's, ended up at McDonald, a decoy field used to attract some of the Japanese bombers which regularly visited Fenton.

The conditions at Fenton were appalling. The resident 319th squadron of the 90th Bomb Group, was operating on a shoestring. They had no facilities, and resupply problems were almost insurmountable. There was one building on the field, the squadron mess hall, the men lived in tents. There was no radio equipment in the tower; all communications with the bombers had to be done with flashing colored lights. Maintenance facilities were of the open air variety. The arrival of the 380th only put demands upon non-existent supplies. In other words, this meant the crews would have to sleep in, or under their airplanes until tents and cots would be flown up from the south. Because of this, the 319th requested

## MAY - JUNE 1943

✱ Later that evening, Maj. Bob Collier flew a recon back to Koepang to photograph fires started by the raid's bombing.



Paul Smith  
Howard R. Williams  
Collection



Theron Dreier  
Howard R. Williams  
Collection



Ronald Orton-CP on  
Dreier crew.  
H. R. Williams Coll.



Clarence Hartman-  
BOMB on Dreier crew.  
H. R. Williams Coll.

✱ Capt. Paul G. Smith, the 531st Operations Officer, was unaware of Jim Dienelt's death as he climbed aboard 42-40527 *Lelia Belle* late in the evening of June 11th. The only thing on his mind was the impending recon he and 1/Lt. Theron Dreier's crew were going to fly to the Rabaul area. Had the news of Dienelt's death reached him on New Guinea, he would have assumed command of the squadron. This did not happen. Smith and Dreier left Dobodura after darkness fell and proceeded to New Britain. Several hours later at Lakunai airdrome, N.A.P. 1/c Shigetoshi Kudo was boarding his J1N1 *Irving* night fighter, prepared to spend most of the night hunting down American intruders.

The two planes met off the coast of New Britain near Gasmata in a brief encounter that had Kudo thinking he was attacking a B-17. He fired 92 rounds of 20mm ammunition at the unidentified target and scored many hits before it eluded him. Kudo was sure the American would not get back to New Guinea but did not see it catch fire or crash; he did claim it as

his third kill with the new fighter. Allied radar on New Guinea noticed a blip disappear off their screens near the coast of Gasmata and paid little attention to it, assuming it to be a Japanese plane landing at the nearby field. It wasn't until several days later that V Bomber Command correctly deduced that Smith's missing plane must have been that radar sighting. His had been the only Allied aircraft lost that night. Nothing was ever found, the men and plane simply disappeared without sending a distress call.<sup>29</sup>

### 14 JUNE 1943

✱ The *Steinmetz* stopped at Townsville to take on fresh food and water before going any further up the Great Barrier Reef. This natural wall of coral provided the ground echelon with their greatest protection against Japanese submarines experienced during the trip. Its closely patrolled accesses and shallow bottom denied subs a safe latitude of maneuverability; to enter this shipping lane would be tantamount to suicide for any sub seeking an easy kill. On board the ship, the men were fast becoming bored as time passed by slowly. 529th Intelligence Officer, Jim Fain, decided to address this problem and created a variety program that was aired over the ship's loudspeakers. The amateur talent broadcasted caused men to grin and momentarily forget their journey.

✱ Bill Miller took eight planes on the Group's first night operation staged from Fenton. Their target was the big airfield at Kendari used by the 19th Bomb Group during the dark days of early 1942.<sup>30</sup> When he arrived over the field, Miller dropped his bomb load and then proceeded to act as "the master of ceremonies". His commitment to the success of this mission brought him over the target eight times, dropping flares to illuminate the runways and buildings for each of the other raiders. Bill Miller gave his best and was not afraid to demonstrate the quality of leadership he expected from himself and everyone else under his command.

✱ Seven Circus plane hit the Lakunai airdrome at Rabaul, still unaware of the deadly J1N1 *Irving* stationed there. Everyone returned safely.

### 15 JUNE 1943

✱ At 2300 hrs June 15th, the *Steinmetz* raised anchor and departed Townsville alone to begin a high speed run around the Cape York peninsula and into the exposed Gulf of Carpentaria. This portion of the journey would place them well within range of Japanese aircraft based in New Guinea and on islands in the Arafura Sea. Timing and vigilance became the key ingredients for success as the