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CHAPTER XI

LAE DROME BECOMES "MILK RUN"

The month of February started out rather slowly with no missions for the first two days of the month. During the course of the month a total of twenty-two missions were flown - nine attack, eight Reconnaissance, and five patrols. The first mission was to take place on the third day of the month, but at the last moment it fell through. On the fourth day of the month, however, the "Milk Run" was on the schedule - reports had been received that the revetments at Lae were being prepared to receive more Jap planes, and the object of the attack was to get the planes while they were on the ground. Eight planes of the 405th took off at dawn, but the weather encountered in trying to reach the target area was so terrific that all but one of the planes were forced to turn back. Lt. Ruark was the pilot to get through and over the target. He dropped seventy-two 23 pound parafrags along the strip and revetment area starting at least one fire. As he approached the target, he sighted what appeared to be a large grass fire about 300 feet off the inland end of Lae Strip. Heavy rain and thunderstorms prevented further observation of the bombing. A second mission of the day was another "Milk Run" over Lae Airdrome. Seven planes of the 405th Squadron took off from the Durand strip, and without fighter escort headed for the target area. Crossing the target in elements of three and four planes each, they dropped a total of seventy-two 23 pound parafrags and fifth 100 pound demos along the full length of the runway and in the dispersal area. Several heavy black smoke fires were started with other results being unobserved. During the attack, two planes of questionable serviceability were sighted in the revetment areas -- one was a single engine and the other a twin engine bomber. Tracers were seen to enter both planes during the strafing run but the damage inflicted was not ascertained. The ack ack fire encountered over the target was very heavy and intense but fortunately there was no damage inflicted on the Mitchells of the 405th.

Weather kept the planes of the 38th grounded on the 5th, but again on the 6th seven planes of the 71st squadron participated in an attack on the grounded planes at the Lae Drome. The attack was made from heights of 6500 to 6800 feet, and the bomb load consisted of forty-eight 300 pounders. The bombs were dropped along the entire length of the strip and in the revetment areas with one ack ack position at the south side of the runway being knocked out as well as a building destroyed as the result of a direct hit. For the second consecutive day, the crews reported seeing mirror reflections coming from an ack ack position on the south side of the strip.

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With the lack of combat missions for the next several days, the planes of the 405th were dispatched for the purpose of haul-fuel from Rorona to the home base at Durand. This went on until the 9th when a routine escort patrol of friendly shipping was carried out by two planes of the 71st. After the 9th, fuel hauling and practice bombing was the order of the day. Finally on the 14th, seven planes of the 71st were assigned to the "Milk Run". The attack was made with the planes coming over the target in two elements of three and four planes at heights from 5800 to 7800 feet. Fifty-six 300 pounders spread out over the airdrome area with direct hits being scored on two of the grounded airplanes and three buildings in the terrace being destroyed. Fires were started on the terrace which gave off huge columns of black smoke, indicating that perhaps fuel supplies had been hit. The ack ack encountered during the attack was fairly heavy, but inaccurate, and again, the enemy fighters failed to put in an appearance.

The tempo of the attacks by the 38th seemed to be picking up, for on the 15th another "Milk Run" was carried out by seven planes of the 405th - the target being the supply dumps in the Malahang area. Attacking at heights ranging from 1500 to 2900 feet, the squadron dropped a total of fifty 300 pounders in the target area and on the runway adjacent to the target. One large black smoke fire was started in the target area, but further results were unobserved. Four to five unidentified planes were sighted at the southeast end of the Malahang strip and one unidentified plane was sighted at the north end of the strip. The Nips must have been getting short on airplanes for all of the crews reported having seen dummy planes at the edge of the clearing northwest of the target area.

The next two days passed without any activity on the part of the Group, but on the 18th four planes of the 405th took part in a reconnaissance flight over the vicinity of the Markham Valley, Narakapor, Nadzab, and Sangam. The road from Narakapor to Nadzab was found to be in excellent condition with numerous burn't off areas at the side of the road. Native canoes were sighted on the north side of the Markham River about five miles south of Narakapor. The roads from the canoes to the side of the clearing were found to be well used. On the approach of the planes in this area, about twenty-five unidentified people were seen to run into the nearby foliage. During the course of the mission two buildings near Barak were strafed with unobserved results.

During the ensuing days, two escort missions took place, then on the 22nd six planes of the 71st and six planes from the 405th took part in a mission that was divided into two targets. The 71st was to attack Butibum while the 405th was to bomb Wagau. The planes of the 71st came over the Butibum target at heights of 3300 to 5300 feet, dropping twelve 1000 pound bombs well within a

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250 foot radius of the village. Broken strato-cumulus clouds were over the target area which prevented full observation of the effects of the bombing, however, several fires were seen to start up and several columns of smoke were seen to rise from the area. At the time of the bomb hits, debris could be seen to fly several hundred feet into the air. During the bombing run over the target heavy and accurate ack ack was encountered, but none of the planes of the squadron were damaged.

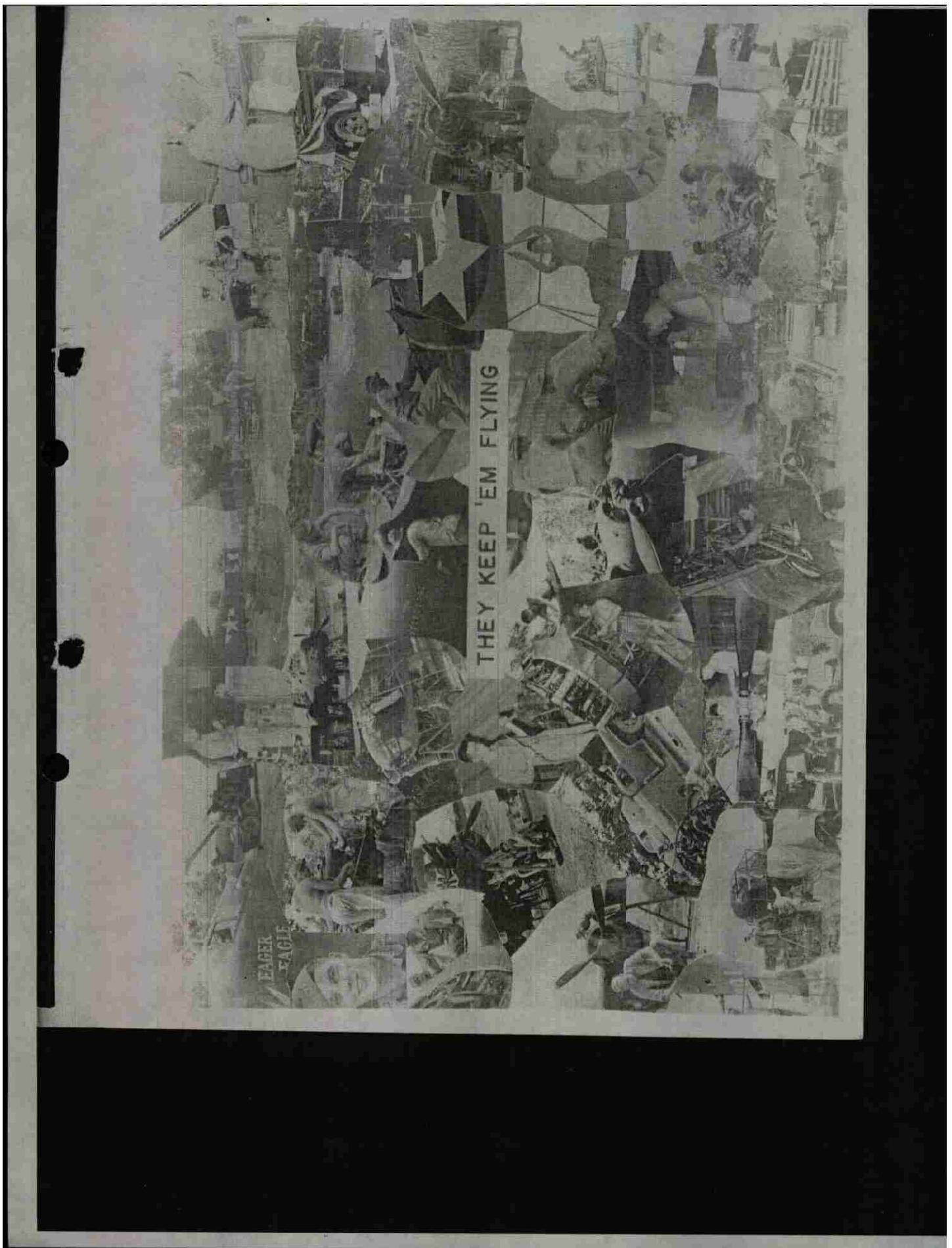
The six planes of the 405th were over the target and put thirty 500 pounders in the village area and within the vicinity of the village. As a result of the bombing, heavy black smoke fires were started and debris from the buildings was seen to rise approximately 100 feet into the air. There was no interception by enemy fighters and for a change, no ack ack was encountered. That night the Nips came over to pay a return visit and the search light batteries tried to pick them out of the sky, but the heavy overcast prevented their spotting the Jap planes. Four enemy raids were made that night and during the red alerts, someone was seen to be flashing signals to the enemy raiders from the vicinity of Ward's Drome.

On the 23rd, six planes of the 71st Squadron took off from Durand Strip to paste targets at Angari and Yonga. The attack was made from heights from 2200 to 7800 feet, with the bomb load of 500 pounders dropping well within the target area. Because of haze and dense clouds in the target area, none of the results were observed. Again on the 24th Yonga and Angari was the target for seven planes of the 405th. The lead plane dropped two 1000 pounders on the wrong target with the bombs falling in the police buildings at Lae causing tremendous fire and smoke to 600 feet. Four 1000 pound wire bombs were dropped just South of Angari with damage being unobserved. Fifteen 500 pound bombs were dropped in Yonga Village and an area 200 feet east of the Village. Three of the bombs were seen to fall in the village proper and fire and heavy smoke could still be seen by the crews when they were twenty miles away from the target. After the bombing, the planes went down to strafe Malahang strip and village. Again the enemy fighters failed to put in an appearance and all planes returned to base safely.

Thus, as far as combat operations were concerned, the month of February came to an end. The month was not too active but it did give the Group a chance to grow and increase in strength for the blows of the future. They were becoming more and more battle hardened veterans and the B-25's were beginning to leave a telling mark on the Japanese and their installations.

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CHAPTER XII

THE BATTLE OF THE BISMARCK SEA

If there was to be any judgement passed on missions for the past few days, and considering the gradual let-down in missions during the latter days of February, it could be concluded that operations for the next thirty days would be dull and monotonous. The first two missions of the month were a photo mission over the Morobe area and a submarine patrol mission for a friendly ship going to Port Moresby. Combat personnel began to prepare for an easy month. Rumors were flying fast and thick on the first day of the month that a large enemy convoy had been sighted headed in the direction of Lae and that if they continued on this course, this target would be within range of the B-25's of the 38th. On the second, this rumor was verified by a report from V Bomber Command that the planes of the 43rd Bomb Group had actually spotted the convoy in the Dampier Straits area, and that the B-17's of the Group had scored hits on several of the vessels. Personnel of the Group were informed to standby for further information on this convoy, but it really was not necessary to tell the men they should be in readiness for any eventuality, for the lack of suitable targets for the past two weeks and the report of such a juicy target had made them eager to participate in a mission of this sort and all stayed within the vicinity of Intelligence and Operations. Then that evening, the message that all had been waiting for came; on the morning of the 3rd, the convoy would be in range and the "Sun Setters" of the 38th were to participate in a mission against this convoy - the attack would be a coordinated attack with units of the 43rd Bombardment Group (H), the 3rd Bombardment Group (L), Beaufighters of the 9th Operational Unit, and the F-38's acting as fighter cover. Excitement reached an all time peak as the crews were briefed - the Mitchells of the 38th were to form the second and fifth elements of the mission.

The morning of the 3rd saw fourteen planes - seven from the 71st and seven from the 405th - take to the skies in what was to be one of the outstanding missions of 1943. Soaring through tropical blue skies interspersed in billowy cumulus clouds, the olive drab B-25's of the 38th made rendezvous with other elements of the mission over Cape Wari. From there the largest air armada many of the combat personnel had ever seen preceded to the target area. The first indications crews of the bombardment groups had that they were approaching the vicinity of the target, was when the belly gas-tanks from the F-38's above came hurtling down through the formation of Heavy, Medium and Attack bombers. Immediately everyone began scanning the water below for the sight of the convoy. After a few minutes of searching, and with a cooperative break in the clouds, the convoy was sighted.

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Traveling at a speed of approximately ten knots on a course of 270 degrees, the convoy consisted of eight cargo and transport vessels, spaced approximately 1000 yards apart in a route column formation, and flanked by five destroyers that were 1500 yards apart. The separation distance between these columns exceeded 4000 yards. The starboard flank was guarded by one lone destroyer on the stern quarter and it was approximately 2000 yards from the column of transports and cargo vessels. The Battle was on -- what happened during the next few minutes would be hard to describe even if I were there watching it, so from what records on hand this is the story as I see it. The planes were approaching on the port stern quarter when they were detected, causing the five destroyers to complete a 180 degree arc and attempt to intercept. By this time, the B-17's were bombing from high altitudes and had already scored direct hits on two of the cargo vessels. These B-17's were followed by planes of the 71st Squadron, bombing from 5300 feet. Thirty-five 500 pounders from the bellies of the B-25's were dropped on a group of cargo ships. One of the bombs scored a direct hit amidship on one of the vessels, but the balance of the results were unobserved.

As the convoy's attention was being absorbed by the larger formation of bombers, the water-skipping Mitchells of the 405th dove through a layer of clouds in an effort to reach the exposed flank before being detected. Five of the destroyers detected this maneuver however, and swung valiantly to port side to protect the cargo vessels from the low flying B-25's. They immediately began to fire at the planes and the batteries of the transports turned their attention toward the 405th. The fire, although it was intense but highly inaccurate, did manage to force the formation to split up as it approached the targets. Coming in at mast head height at speeds from two hundred and seventy miles to over three hundred miles per hour, the planes singled out the nearest ship - transport or destroyer - and dropped their bombs. Thirty 500 pounders were dropped with the following results: two direct hits on a 5000 ton transport ship, one on the port side, one on the stern, and four near misses. A tremendous fire was seen to shoot out of the side of the vessel with columns of black smoke rising to heights of 1000 feet. Another ship, one of the largest transports in the convoy, was singled out and hit amidship with one of the 500 pounders, causing the ship to rock violently and emit black smoke to great heights. A two hundred fifty foot 3000 ton cargo vessel also suffered a direct hit, and after the initial explosion caused by the 500 pound bomb, there was a secondary explosion, the blast of which rocked the attacking "Green Dragons" of the 405th. A nearby cargo vessel was nearly hit by a near miss that is believed to have buckled the plates of the ship. After this miss was scored on the ship, this craft too began to emit columns of black smoke. As the 405th

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came in for the attack, they strafed the decks of the transports, but the results of this strafing were unobserved. B-17's of the 43rd Bomb Group were seen to score direct hits on the leading destroyer and on a large transport vessel. Two cargo vessels that were burning furiously, in an effort to dodge further bomb hits, crashed into each other. Several Enemy planes were seen to crash into the water below, while many of the other Jap pilots not too eager to press home their attacks left the scene of the engagement. One P-38 pilot was seen to come down in a parachute and the planes of the 38th went over to give him what little help they could by dropping a life raft.

While the P-38's and enemy Zekes engaged in a spectacular mass of turning, twisting, dog-fights, the bombers were permitted an unmolested escape. The receding horizon was the crowning event for any crew member to ever hope to see; flames several hundred feet high, the sea a struggling mass of living and dying, debris scattered over several square miles of ocean, some of their ships beginning their journey to the bottom, others still under motion, and the sky full of beautiful P-38's.

That afternoon the planes of the "Sun Setters" returned to the scene of the morning's action and carried out their second attack of the day. Those ships that were still afloat were trying to pick up survivors of the sunken ships, and their resulting low speed furnished easy targets for the bombardiers. The destroyers were rather helpless in the face of this second attack, and the fact that they were able to move just a little faster than the cargo ships still floating furnished some interest in the task. Planes of the 71st scored three direct hits and six near misses as follows: three direct hits and six near misses on one destroyer which left the ship burning furiously. The flames caused secondary explosions which were believed to cause the sinking of the ship. The low-level Mitchells of the 405th followed the 71st in and scored the following results: three direct hits, one at water line and two amidship, and three near misses on one large destroyer causing a tremendous explosion with sheets of flame reaching heights of 200 feet. A second destroyer was attacked scoring four direct hits and four near misses. Again a tremendous explosion rocked the air and the destroyer appeared to disintegrate into thin air. The third ship to come under attack was a 9000 ton transport which was burning prior to the attack. Two near misses on this ship caused further damage.

During the course of the attack, planes of the 71st squadron were not subjected to any ack ack fire, but just prior to the bombing run, eight to fourteen Zekes made individual attacks on the formation, but the attacks were not pressed. Several of the survivors -- those few who had been fortunate enough to grab a

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raft or pieces of floating wreckage were thoroughly strafed. Those that were not taken care of by the strafing were probably killed by the concussion of the bombs.

On the following day planes of the 38th approached the scene of the battle to register a few hits on a cripple or two that either didn't know enough, or couldn't go home. Considerable strafing of the Nip troops gave the gunners of the planes a little practice at shooting at sitting ducks. It began to look like one of those ball games where it is impossible to get the home side out, with all of the boys taking a toff-hold as the fast ones come over the plate and parking it out of the lot. All of the pilots who failed to get a ship in the two day attack were permanently assign-ed to "KP".

The Bomber Groups of the Fifth Air Force had added another star to their crown. On the following day came these messages from the leaders of the American Forces in the Pacific:

TO: 38th Bomb Group (M)

PLEASE EXTEND TO ALL RANKS MY GRATITUDE AND FELICITATIONS ON THE MAGNIFICENT VICTORY WHICH HAS BEEN ACHIEVED. IT CANNOT FAIL TO GO DOWN IN HISTORY AS ONE OF THE MOST COMPLETE AND ANNIHILATING COMBATS OF ALL TIMES. MY PRIDE AND SATISFACTION IN YOU ALL IS BOUNDLESS.

Signed.

MAC ARTHUR

CONGRATULATIONS ON THE STUPENDOUS SUCCESS. AIR POWER HAS WRITTEN SOME IMPORTANT HISTORY IN THE PAST THREE DAYS. TELL THE WHOLE GANG THAT I AM SO PROUD OF THEM I AM ABOUT TO BLOW A FUSE.

Signed.

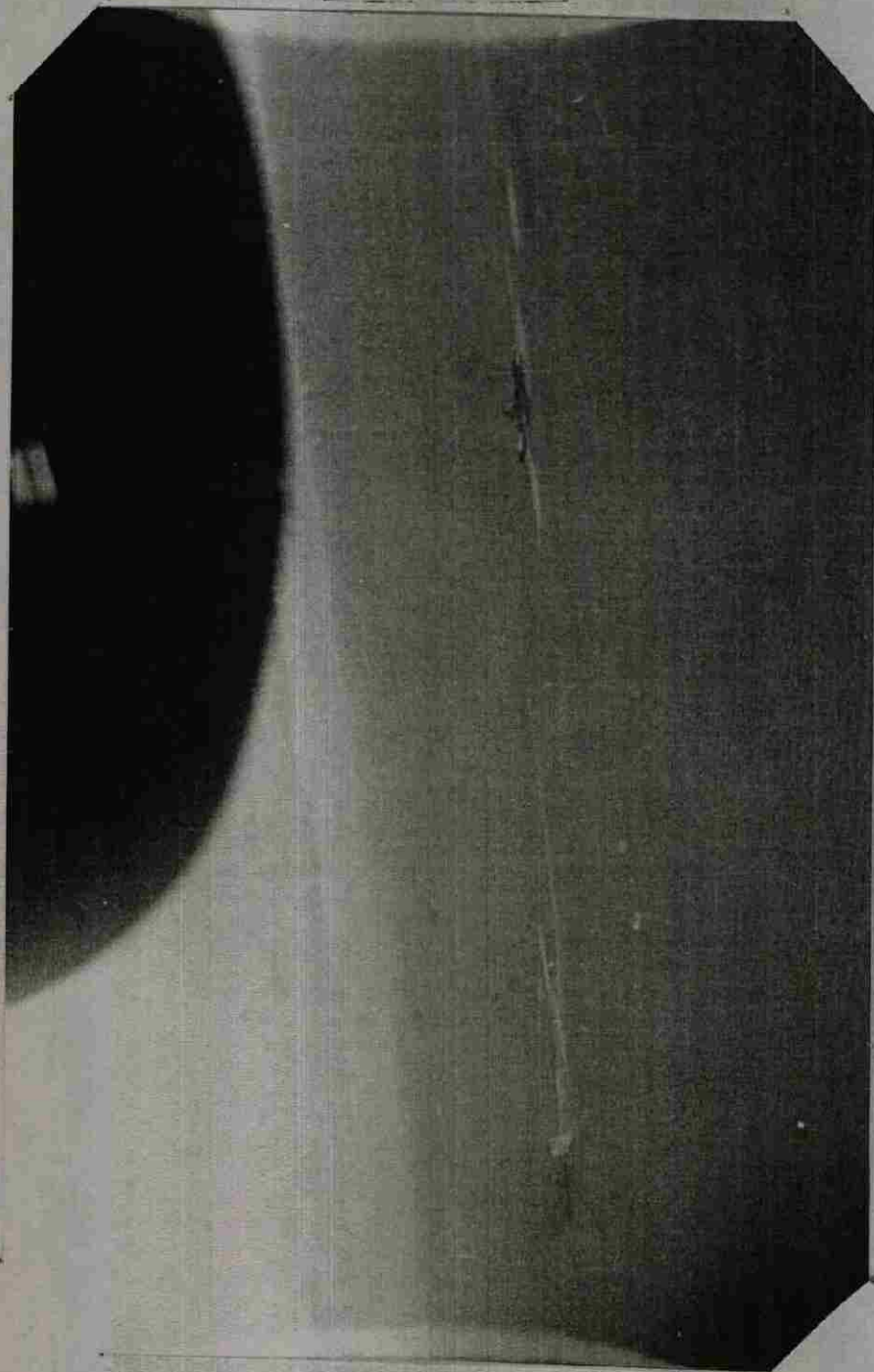
KENNEY

Those forty-eight hours had been hectic hours - exciting and filled with suspense - for the Japanese it was their third large defeat under the arms of the air power. Mere words can't tell what actually happened during the course of the battle nor can any one man give a complete verbal picture of the destruction, but pictures can and do show the results. Several of the outstanding pictures of the battle have been selected to show just what did happen to the Japanese convoy on the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th of March 1943. Those pictures are history themselves and are included on the following pages.

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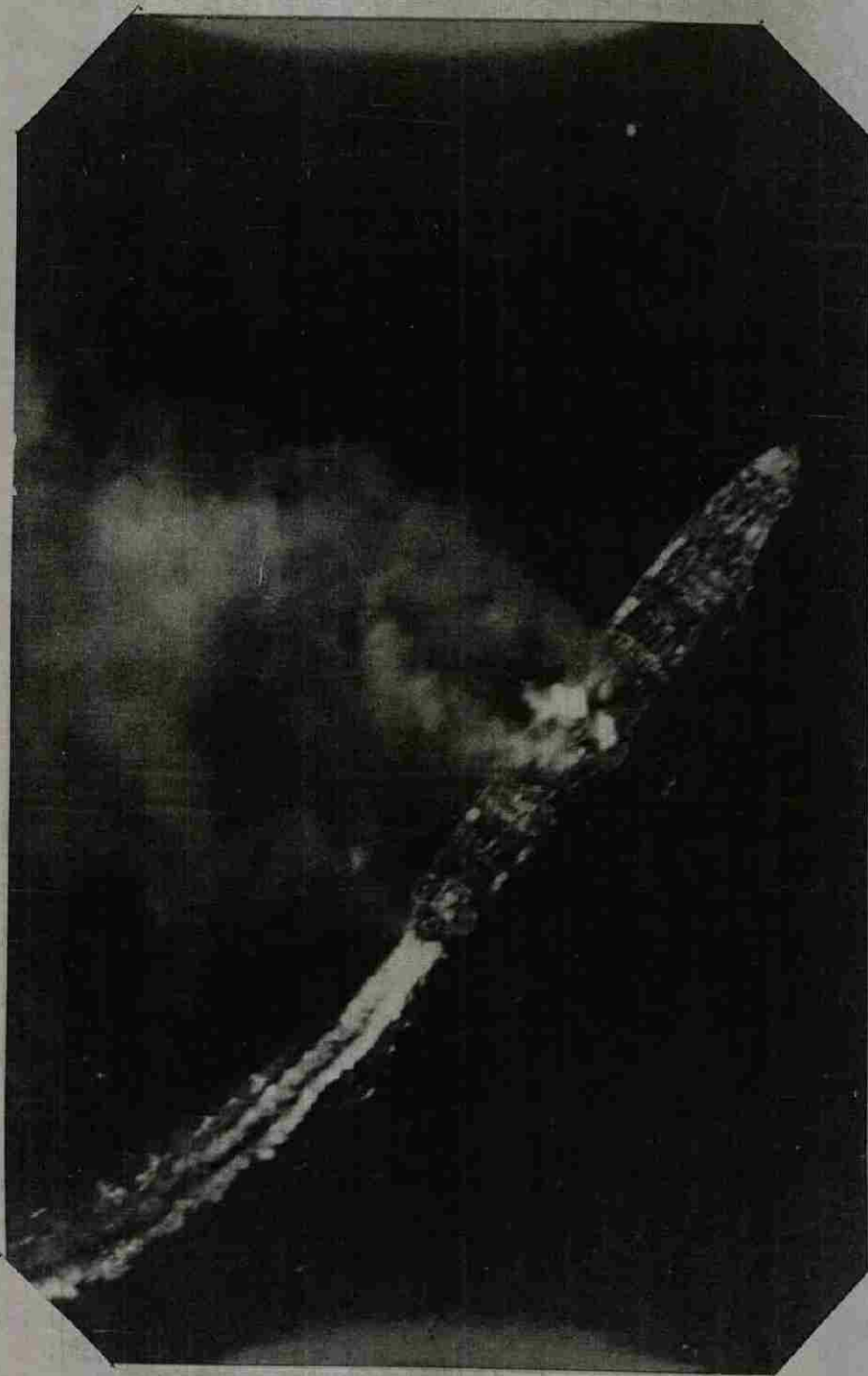
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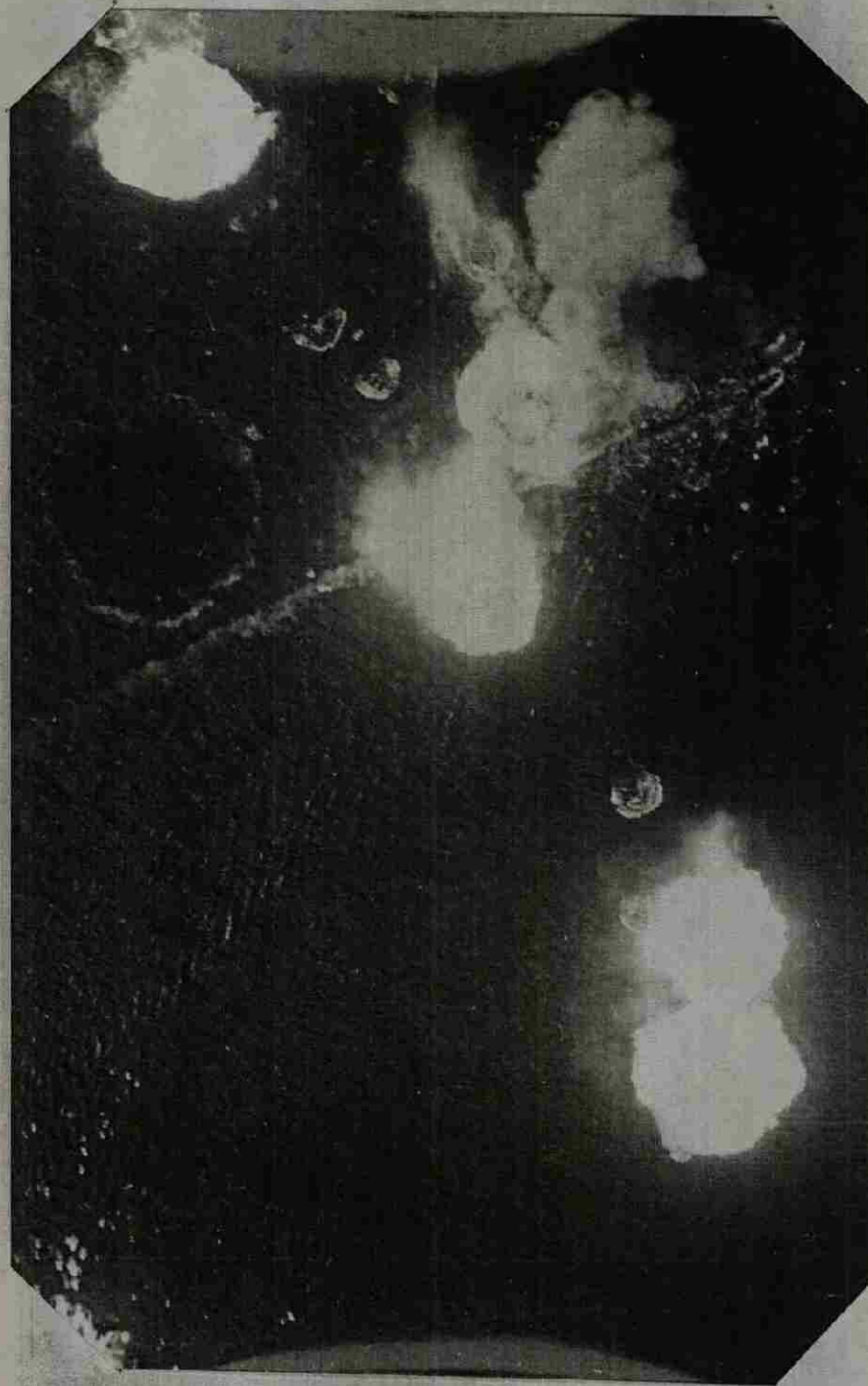
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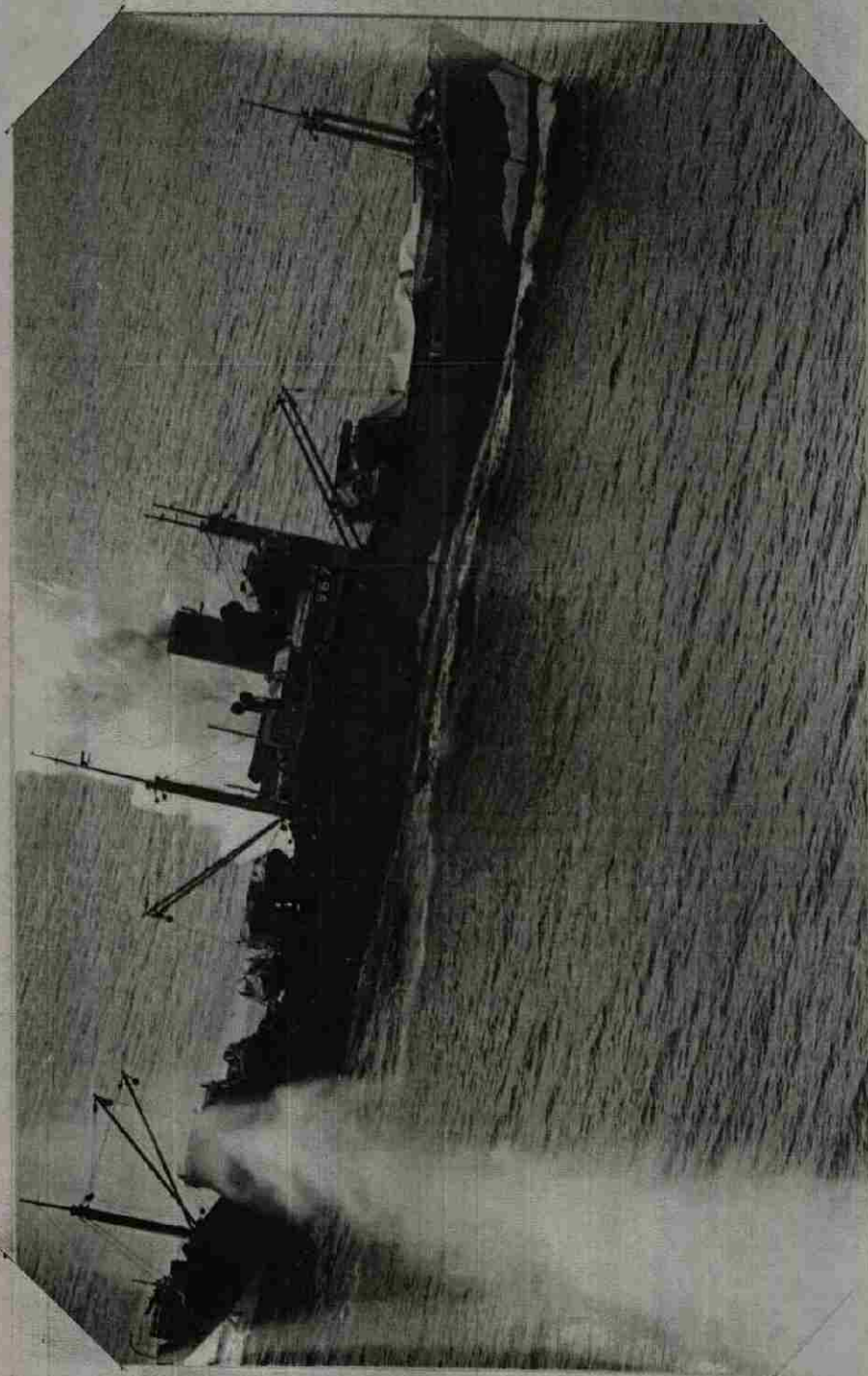
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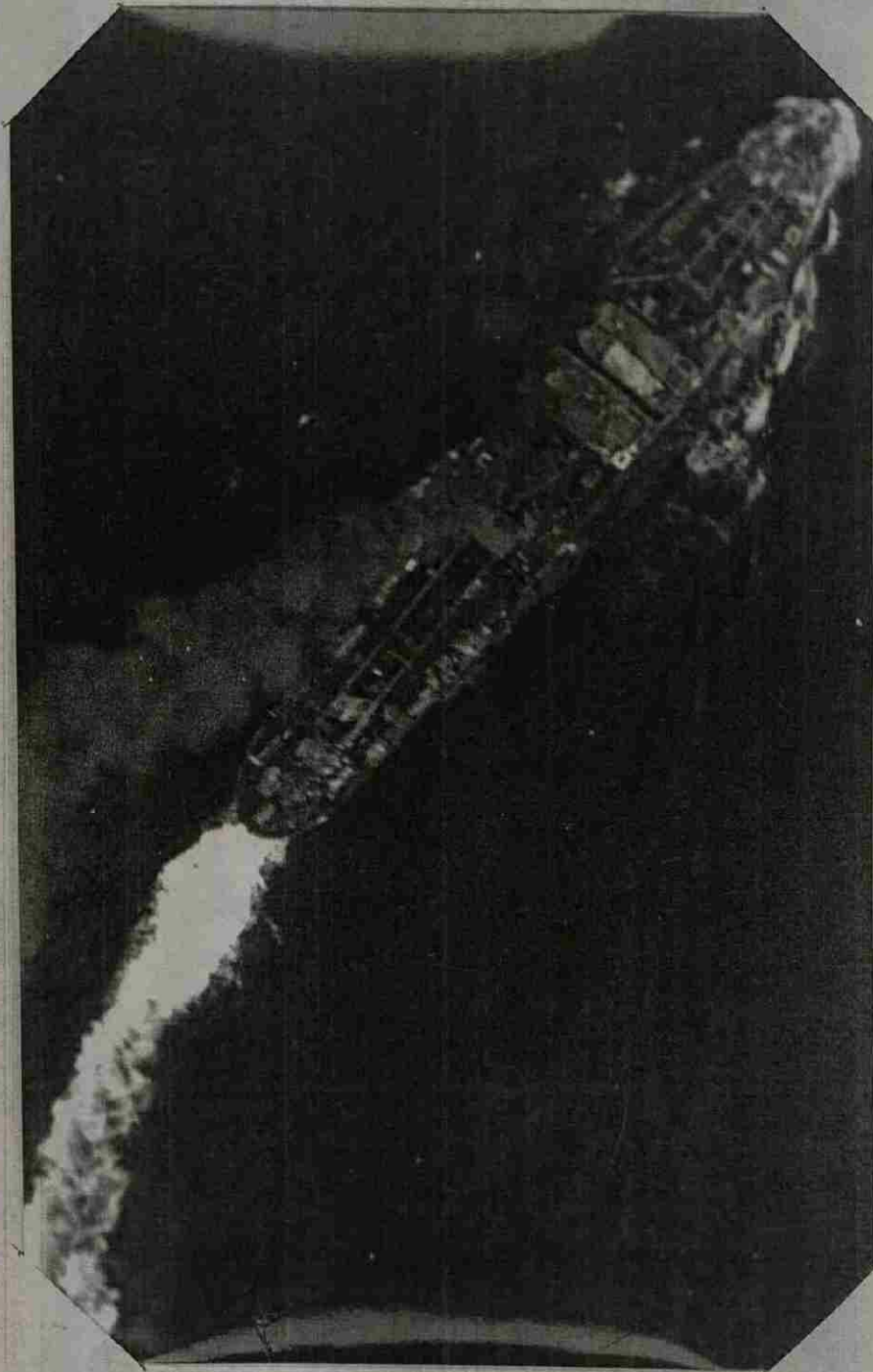
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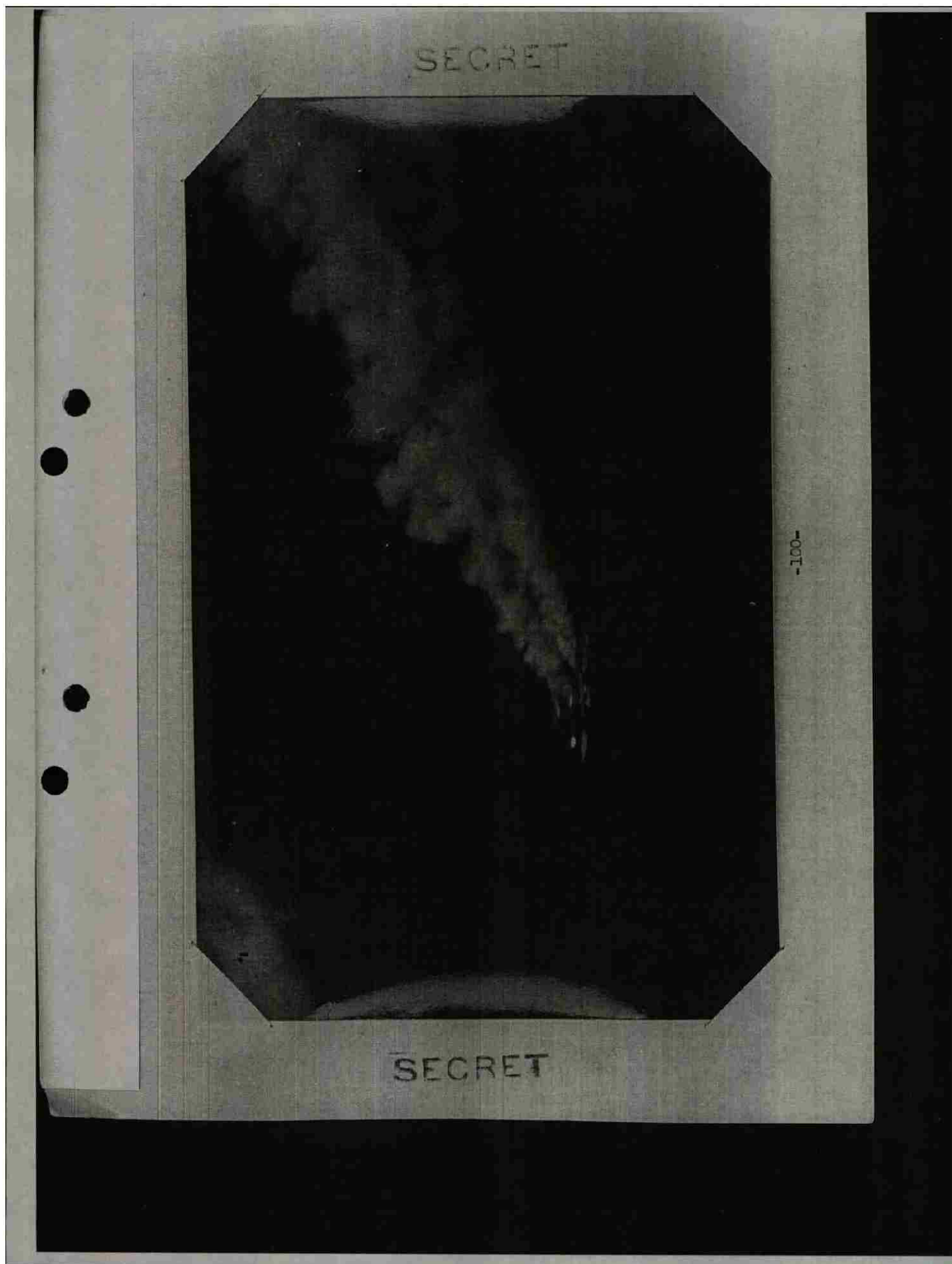
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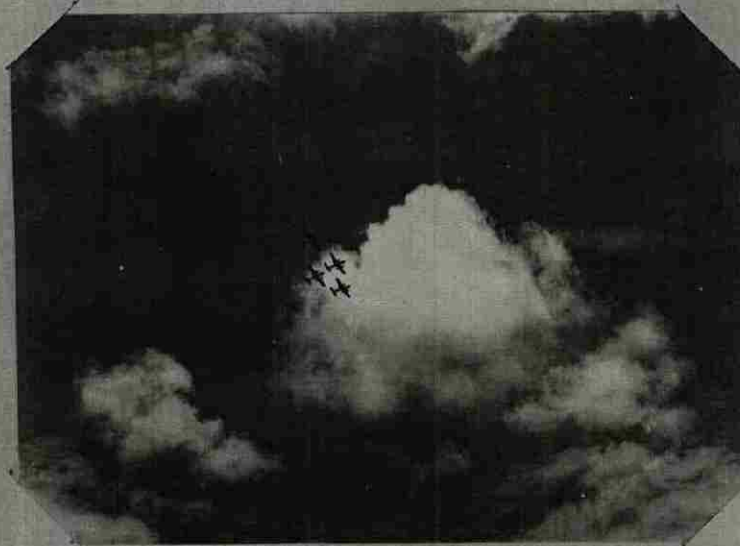
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"Victory through air power!!"

"Victory through air Power!!", one of the P-38 pilots sang out over his interphone every time he peeled off.

"The god-damndest thing I ever saw - every time I picked a target, the damn thing exploded", Bill Brandon, B-25 pilot, had trouble finding a whole ship left to hit, even from an altitude of fifty feet.

"I'd never seen a man in a parachute before", said Lt. Col., Brain "Shanty" O'Neill of New York, Group Commander of the 38th. "I didn't know he'd look so small."

Its the little thing like that which stand out in the memory of a great battle, not the official figures which will always be there, in the record, to look up. Often even the date is forgotten before long, and the victory is remembered in terms of the unimportant little things said and done by the men who won it, their unexpected reactions in the tide of battle.

That's the way it was then in the messes and officers' clubs of "Shanty" O'Neill's outfit and probably in the tents, too, far into the night. The 38th Bomb Group had only two squadrons, the 71st and the 405th, both equipped with North American B-25 medium bombers. They had been in combat constantly for six months and many of their planes were out of commission but nonetheless, "Shanty" managed to get 13 planes off in the morning and 14 in the afternoon.

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One of them had engine trouble in the morning and turned back from the rendezvous, and in the afternoon they ran into a thunderstorm which kept four of them from reaching the target. But the twenty-two which successfully hit the convoy, scored sixteen direct hits on ten ships, with twenty-five near misses.

The convoy was spotted on March 1st and on the 2nd the B-17's hit it up in the Dampier straits. There were twenty vessels in the convoy and escort then, but six either turned off or were sunk, for at dawn on the third there were only fourteen left. Beaufighters carrying torpedoes struck them at dawn, and in mid-morning came the first coordinated attack. As the story was told later by Captain W. S. Royalty, navigator in the tail ship of the 71st formation,



--- Capt. Royalty ---

in the air that morning.

that morning rendezvous was a great sight. "We were the first flight over the rendezvous point, which was some distance from the convoy's last reported position south of Finschafen. We circled around waiting for the rest of the planes in the coordinated attack." As we made out first circle, we could see, coming over the mountains an almost unbelievable number of planes. Eight B-17's were getting into formation slightly above us. Below, three separate flights of B-25's were already in formation and beginning to circle. Below them a great number of Beaufighters, A-20's, and P-38's, all more or less in formation. A few thousand feet above I counted 23 P-38's in formation of two's, three's and four's. It was the most concentrated flight of aircraft any of us had ever seen. There must have been 130 Allied planes

The 71st went in at a little over 5000 feet, just beneath the B-17's. Down below them the 405th was attacking on an official altitude of two hundred feet, an actual altitude of about fifty feet. The squadron commander, Major Ralph Cheli of New York, was pilot of the lead ship, carrying "Shanty" O'Neill as commander. They chose a transport and swung around at it from the side to avoid heavy anti-aircraft fire from a destroyer. Beaufighters ahead of them strafed the loaded decks of the transport and silenced some of the destroyer guns. As Major Cheli pulled up and banked left out of the battle, Col. O'Neill noticed the destroyer had been hit and was burning in the stern. They dipped down to strafe the deck of another ship heavily loaded with equipment and landing barges, and "Shanty" watched another of his boys off to the south come in a few feet above the water to score a direct hit on a transport. And all of its other bombs were close.

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On Major Cheli's wing was Lt. Bill Pavlich of Port Jarvis, New York. He chose a five thousand ton cargo ship and planned his run. "But this destroyer off to the south started giving us broadsides, and they were getting too close to the Beaufighters. Great waterspouts were shooting up beneath us as they got the range of the strafers we were following. Finally I dropped right down to mast height and strafed all the way in to give Jack (Lt. Jack E. Thomas, the bombardier from Fort Wayne, Indiana) a chance to get his stuff away. That kept the ack ack pretty quiet, and when we pulled up, the gunner, S Sgt. J. Morgan, saw the stick of five bombs fall, one direct hit and two very near misses, one on each side, just at the water line. They must have blown through the hull, for as we swung around I could see the ship keeling over. Suddenly, it lurched and there was a terrific explosion which threw men and deckload of cargo overboard. We started out of there strafing a small destroyer on the way; the last Morgan saw of our ship a strafing B-25 went over it and then there was another big internal explosion."

Pavlich got back into the formation with Major Cheli, and as they left the area, they watched a parachutist float down and into the sea. "Shanty" ordered them to circle him and after they had identified his yellow life vest and saw that he was a white man, they dropped him a life raft. It turned out later to be the pilot on one of the three P-38's which were shot down that day. As they headed back for the pass and home and lunch, they saw, against the already smoke-thick sky, three fine, thin streaks of smoke dive into the sea - Zeros out of the fight!

Later that evening, when the Fifth Air Force's General Whitehead stopped in to get the story of the fight at firsthand, "Shanty" mentioned his surprise at how small the man in the parachute had seemed. The General laughed, "Yes, a guy floating down that way looks pretty small, but when your floating down beside him, you don't notice it because you feel such a hell of a lot smaller."

For an hour that noon they shuffled crews around a bit and chewed mutton sandwiches and told their stories to the Intelligence officers while the ground crews checked over the planes and loaded them up again with bombs and gas and ammunition. By one-thirty they were ordered out again; the target: "Enemy convoy between Finchhafen and Lae: strike and destroy remaining vessels." That's all they knew. Things were happening so fast that there was no chance to be sure of what they'd done that Morning before they had to be off again.

This time "Shanty" rode with the 71st, up a bit higher where he could see what was going on. He was commanding from the ship flown by the operations officer, Captain Ezra Best of Los Angeles. Their bombardier, Lt. Bob Renneisen, told the story as vividly

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- Captain Best -

as anyone that night: "Mac gave us a heading, but no one needed a compass course over there. The sky was filled with airplanes. All you had to do was fall in line and keep out of each other's way.

"But everyone was pretty much on edge. Although the bombers hadn't been 'jumped' yet, we all knew the Zeros were up there somewhere. As lead bombardier I had to pick out our target and decide the course. I was busy on that and awfully glad to hear the navigator come in behind me to handle the guns - just in case. For quite a while I couldn't see a thing. Finally I decided that they might be hiding under two great white clouds which loomed up to the right.

We turned off to look at them. Suddenly I spotted a ship at the base of the cloud. I called EZY and he agreed. In a moment we saw another one at the base of the second cloud. They were two transports, eight or ten thousand tonners, and both were completely afire, belching the great columns of smoke we'd thought were clouds.

We were still a good thirty miles away, and as we got closer, two more ships were visible. They were both dead in the water and burning a good deal; one of them seemed to be a destroyer. Then we spotted a target, a destroyer about five miles off to the right, not moving but not burning either. We headed over for it, when I heard, 'Zeros at two o'clock' from the co-pilot and immediately, 'Zeros upstairs, at ten o'clock' from the gunner. Well, they really let us off easy. There were eight of them, but they only made a couple of passes, and they didn't even press them home. I was in the middle of my run without much time to watch. I nearly got bawled out once, though, when I saw a live destroyer and called the Colonel's attention to it. I couldn't hear what he said at first, for just then every gun in the ship cut loose, and I glanced up to see tracers chasing after a couple of greenbellied Zeros. But then I heard him yell, "Well, pick out something and let's get out of here. They're going to be all over us". I kept on my dead duck, and she was really dead. Even most of the ack ack was out. We got three direct hits in the flight, and almost simultaneously there were a couple of hits from the Fortresses above us.

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"On our way out, we learned that one of the ships had been hit by some fire from a Zero, but it wasn't serious and we all got safely back to a landing."

Downstairs that afternoon the 405th boys were pulling their skip-bombing stuff again - and loving it. Lt. Bill Brandon of Fort Worth, Texas was the busiest of the lot. Not with Zeros or even ack ack, but finding a target for himself. "We were flying on Major Cheli's wing, "Brandon told this story that night. "And he took the first target. The other wing man, Adkins, I think it was, went on down with him, and we pulled up to about 3500 feet to look over the place and pick us a target. Off to the right we saw three ships, two of them still under their own power. We picked the first one and just about as we turned in to plan an approach, someone else hit it - and really hit it. So we looked for another one. We hadn't lost much altitude, so we leveled off for a moment and then peeled off to try the second one. We got down to about 2000 feet and that blew up in our faces. It must have been the heavies that hit it because we couldn't see anyone around.

"Well, that only left one, and she was dead which wasn't much fun, so we looked around a bit. After a while, we spotted a lil' bitty ole destroyer about fifteen miles north, way up by Finschhafen. He was really a-hightailin' it out of there as fast as he could. We went after him, and when he saw us coming, he swung around and turned as near into us as he could to give us an ack ack working over. Well, it didn't work much, at least it was so wild I didn't even think he was shooting at us. I got three bombs away at him and Pitt (Lt. William F. Pittman of Wynne, Arkansas the wingman) got all five away. We swung around to get rid of my other two bombs and to strafe them a couple of times.

"As we went over her again, she was dead in the water, out of action and beginning to settle in. We went through the whole convoy right along the water, strafing. That isn't so much fun but you have to do it. They've done it too often to us. When we pulled up to find a formation and get out of there, I could see every ship in the place burning or sinking. It really felt good."

Major Cheli rode as observer in the afternoon with Captain George B. Marzolf of St. Paul, Minnesota as his pilot. They picked a destroyer for there attack which "blew up like a ball of fire" after their bombs hit home. "We must have hit right into the magazine", Captain Marzolf felt, "From the way that went up. It's the most impressive thing I've ever seen. A perfect, moving machine one minute, then just a mass of wreckage. I really knew something was happening in this war when I watched that thing go up."

Major Cheli, himself only 23, paid tribute to the "Wonderful

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young men" who are fighting this war. "So long as I live," he said that evening, "I'll never forget one thing I saw this afternoon, a B-17, badly shot up, flying back down the coast with its pilot lying against the window unconscious. When I got down I heard the story; that co-pilot who brought it in was flying a B-17 for the second time in his life, and the successful landing he made with one flat tire was the first one he'd ever made in a B-17."

One thing every man in the battle agreed on was that the RAAF Beaufighter pilots were the "fightnest" flyers they ever worked with. Throughout the heat of the battle they were constantly in on top of the ships; transports, destroyers, and even the deadly cruisers, strafing personnel and anti-aircraft posts and firing equipment. No ack ack was too hot to keep them out, and they never seemed to run out of ammunition. There aren't many men who were in the air over the Bismarck Sea that day who will forget "Blackjack" Walker, the justly famous Group Commander of the Beaufighters. Throughout the whole morning show, he sat up there directing things, and then when most of them were about finished and it was time to go home for lunch, he rolled over and down to the water as they picked him up on the interphone, "Okai, mates, now I'll have a go at them." And he did.

"Victory through air power" that was the battle cry of the day - a battle cry that continued throughout the war as the tiny Fifth Air Force grew in men and airplanes. Air Power stopped the Japanese - drove them back - kept pushing and hitting harder as the months passed by.

After this smashing attack on Japanese shipping in the Bismarck Sea, the missions for the month settled down once again to the routine patrol missions, courier flights, reconnaissance and photo missions, and when the planes were kept away from a target, they were up in the air learning the finer points of flying and bombing. On the 18th, in addition to the regular patrol mission, a search was conducted for the remnants of a crew of an A-20 that had been forced down in the Bay off Salamaua, but nothing could be seen of this plane or its crew. Not until the 28th did the planes again go on a mission. Seven planes of the 405th took to the skies for an attack on a submarine that was reported to be in the waters about Lae. Three of the planes failed to reach the assigned area because of mechanical failures and only one plane definitely reached the area for three others turned back because of the inclement weather - the sub was not sighted.

The final mission of the month was carried out by six planes of the 405th Squadron on the 30th in an attack on the jetty and supplies in the Finschafen area. Five hundred pound bombs were dropped in the assigned area but the results were generally unobserved.

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- Finschafen from the deck -

As the planes withdrew from the area, three heavy explosions emitting columns of black smoke were seen. These explosions were caused by the bombs hitting a large red building. One of the planes because of the adverse weather conditions was forced to turn back after a harrowing experience while being caught in a down-draft. Caught in the down draft, the plane went into a spin and after falling several thousand feet, was righted on a horizontal level. Two of the crew bailed out of the ship and were later reported to be safe after being picked up by Australian Troops. After this the plane went into a second spin, but it was brought under control. The crew members remaining in the ship elected to remain with it and it was flown safely back to the base.

March had come to an end - a month that would long be remembered - a month that would go down in history. However, the war would go on.

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CHAPTER XIII

THE GENERAL COMES AROUND

April was not an outstanding month for the Allies in the Pacific War, nor was it outstanding for the 38th. After the climatic destruction of the Japanese convoy, missions for the Group settled down to the routine destruction of Japanese installations, reconnaissance flights, and photo flights. Such, also, was the case of the Allied campaign in general -- the routine destruction of Jap personnel and supplies, for the bigger attacks to come.

The first two missions of the month were a sure indication of the missions to come for the remaining days of April. During April there were only two attack missions for the entire month. On the first, one plane of the 405th took off from the Durand strip for a photo mission of the Trobriana Islands. Over the islands there was an overcast layer of clouds at 1500 feet and there were rain showers immediately over the islands. As a result no photos were taken. The second mission of the month was one plane of the 405th escorting a friendly ship to Port Moresby. During the entire patrol there was neither naval nor aerial interference by the enemy. The third day of the month was a continuation of the patrol missions; then later in the day a patrol mission over the Trobriana Islands, and again no photos were taken because of overcast skies. A photo mission also took place over Dobodura with fair success, but there too, the clouds interfered with the operations. On the third about the most important event that took place was the arrival of new personnel from the United States -- all combat personnel. They were a welcome addition to the ranks of the air crews.

The fourth day of the month saw the group participate in its first attack mission of the month. Seven planes of the 405th participated in an attack against Heath's plantation at Lae. The first element of three planes dropped ten 500 pound demo bombs in the wooded area just north of Lanes Plantation with white smoke fires resulting. Strafing passes were made by this element on both Lane's and Heath's plantations. One large building was seen to have been hit. The second element of four planes dropped eighteen 500 pounders in the wooded area north of Heaths with black and white smoke fires resulting. A second run was made by this element, dropping two 500 pounders which fell in the same area and this time, four to six heavy explosions followed. Three single engine unidentified planes were seen at 4500 feet above Lae. The left wingman pulled out of the formation and was not seen again. Four unidentified planes were seen moving up the coast several miles east of Lae but neither of the formations sighted approached the formation. There was no ack ack encountered and the machine gun fire encountered from the edge of the

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north of Heath's plantation was highly inaccurate.

There were no missions on the 5th and a portion of the day was spent in close order drill of both squadrons in preparation for the presentation of awards. The base-ball diamond of a near by ack ack outfit was utilized for this purpose. On the 6th, seven planes of the 71st participated in an attack against enemy installations at Salamaua. The planes came over the target in two elements -- one of the four planes and other of three planes. Attacking from 3000 to 5800 feet, the two elements dropped fourteen 500 pound demo bombs in Salamaua Township from the customs house to the ack ack positions beyond the quarry. One ack ack position was silenced and in the center of the target area large fires were started giving off orange flames and black smoke. There was no interceptions by enemy aircraft and the ack ack encountered for the most part was inaccurate; but the fire encountered at Mac Donald's junction was quite accurate, for in that vicinity three planes were holed -- one in the tail section, one in the wing and fuselage, and the third had numerous hole in the elevators; however, all planes returned safely to base.

The next nine missions (7 April to 19 April) were routine patrol missions escorting friendly shipping. On every occasion except that of the 17th, the convoys were sighted and escorted to their final destination at Port Moresby. On the 17th, low hanging clouds and thunderstorms obscured vision. There was no interception by enemy aircraft, and all ships were seen to Port Moresby Harbor. During the days on which the Group did not participate in these missions, other escort missions were carried out by the 3rd Bomb Group. The spare time was occupied in the continuation of the airdrome defense tactics, the weekly meetings were held, and some time was utilized in swapping planes between the two squadrons. On the morning of the 12th a red alert was sounded at 0800/K -- no enemy planes were sighted and it was believed that a recco plane (enemy) was over the area and flying at a very high altitude. Later in the morning, however, there was another red alert and it was the real thing. Forty-two enemy bombers were sighted over head, and they made attacks on the 14 mile, 4 mile and 7 mile dromes. Several planes and two fuel dumps were hit by the enemy, and two men were killed. On the 14th, the red alerts sounded again. Fifteen minutes after the all clear, a second alert was sounded. After receiving a report that thirty-four enemy planes here headed in the general direction of the strips, fighters took off and intercepted the enemy bombers over a near-by mountain pass and in the ensuing air battle shot down eight planes the remainder to turn back.

On the 18th of the month, Lt General Kenney visited the

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" You've done a splendid job"

Group to present awards to those men who had earned them. After the ceremony the General gave a short talk to the men in which he praised them for the work they had done - he informed the men of the things that the Fifth Air Force would do in the future - he told them that soon the 38th Bomb Group would have an additional two squadrons. General Kenney had just made a trip to Washington and the information that he gave was the straight 'poop'.

A new phase of the Group's policy was inaugurated on the 20th day of the month. The Military Intelligence section held the first of a possible series of monthly meetings for the non-combat members of the squadrons for the dual purpose of enlightening the men on how the war was progressing and to relieve them of the feeling that they were the forgotten men to the Air Force. Up to this time they had been forced to rely on very late news papers, and an occasional news broadcast and a few circulating stories originally coming from the combat crews for their picture of the war. Lt. Lundquist and Lt. Dwire talked on the past history of the Group, the present and possible future movements of the enemy and the Allies. This talk was well attended, well received, and highly

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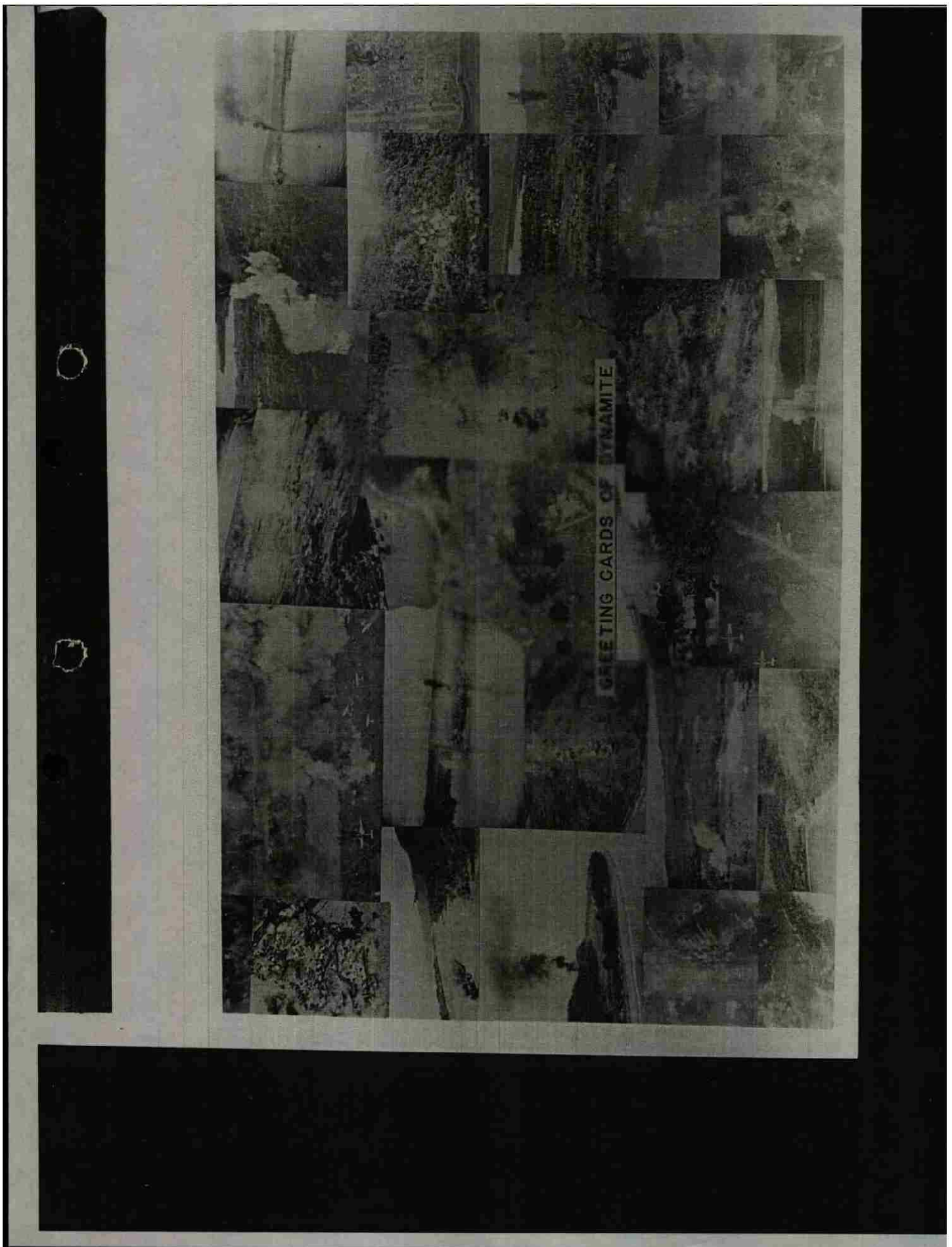
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appreciated by the men who up to this time had felt that they only mattered so long as they did the dirty work.

For the remainder of the month the crews and planes of the 71st engaged in weather reconnaissance and photo reconnaissance flights. The photo missions took place over the area from Dobodura to Ore Bay. The first mission of the Dobodura area was not complete because of the bad weather -- this was one of the greatest hinderences to these photo missions from the start. On the 23rd one plane of the 71st participated in a search mission for an Empire Flying Boat. The area in which the plane was reported to have been forced down was thoroughly searched, but there were no sightings. Then the remainder of the month saw the regular photo missions over the Dobodura Area. The month was indeed a slow one and old man weather held the top hand.

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CHAPTER XIV

LOW-LEVEL ATTACK BECOMES A SPECIALITY

Another month came into being, and again the blows of the 38th were not as strong as they had been in the past nor as strong as they were going to be in the future. Nevertheless, a welcome change came about when the routine patrol missions took a back seat and Attack missions were again the order of the day. During the month, 17 Attack Missions, 8 Reconnaissance Missions, and 8 Patrol missions made up the order of attack. Some of the attack missions did inflict on the enemy damaging blows and the previous Photo missions did much to make these a success. The over-all situation for the Allies followed much the same pattern as the previous month; steady progress was maintained on all fronts, but the fanatical resistance of the Sons of Nippon, plus the difficulties of fighting in the densest of jungles were that your opponent could not be seen even if he were five feet from you, held all gains to an absolute minimum.

There were several days of the month when no missions were scheduled and this time was utilized in the different types of bombing, formation flying, and strafing tactics. Practice formation flying enabled the Group to increase its efficiency and reduce



- Learning in a practical manner -

the casualties of the Group in the day-light raids on the enemy.

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Daylight bombings constituted the back-bone of the 38th Group's tactics, as well as those of the AAF in General. The Group practiced all types of formations to certain extents, but the North American Mitchells, through the test of combat, were found to be unusually rugged and sturdy ships, ideally constructed for heavy strafing attacks and low level bombings. The planes of the 405th Squadron with their eight guns in the nose specialized in strafing tactics while the 71st heretofore had stuck to Medium altitude work. The month of May saw the entire Group become specialist in this daring low-level work. It had been found in the compiling of bombing results that the low-level tactics produced superior results in the case of the B-25's. In this type of bombing the old personnel had had some experience from practice of previous months, but the new combat crews that had just arrived from the states, were familiarized with these tactics -- and other bombing tactics just as well. Thus new and old were molded into smooth working combat crews.

There was no mission scheduled on the first day of the month, but on the second there were two one plane missions. The first was the usual escort mission of friendly shipping to Port Moresby. The second was a flight to Dobodura made by Captain Legg for the purpose of taking General Whitehead and General Wood to the Dobodura drome. The days from the 3rd to the 8th were spent in rest and some bombing, strafing and formation flying. The old Moresby wreck was the target for these practice flights.

On the 9th came the first attack mission of the month - the target, Gasmata Airdrome and installations. Seven planes of the 405th took off from Durand Drome and were over the target at 1322 hours. Over the target area weather did not interfere, there was only a slight haze, but since the planes were bombing from 1800 feet, this did not interfere with the successful bombing of the specified target. The planes came over the runway from the east and strung out thirty-five 500 pound demos along the entire length of the runway and in the revetment areas. The bombing results were generally unobserved so the planes went down to strafe the entire area. Tracers were seen to enter several of the buildings at the west end of the strip. There was a suprisingly small amount of ack ack fire directed at the planes and the only thing the crews reported was light, inaccurate machine gun fire from the wooded areas on the south side of the strip. On the following day seven planes of the 71st Squadron participated in an attack against Cape Gloucester runways and ground installations. The ships arrived over the target at 1115/K and the weather was ideal to bomb from 1800 feet, but when the crewmen returned, they reported that they had dropped thirty-five 500 pounders in the target area with unobserved results. The Nips made no effort to ward off the attack and the boys went down to do a little strafing before coming home. Here too, the results of the strafing were unobserved.

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and right wing of one of our planes. It seemed as though Gasmata was really selected by V Bomber Command for a good working over for on the 15th the 405th went out again to visit the ill-fated air-drome. As was the usual tactics of the 405th, the planes came in at an official altitude of 700 feet but actually they were flying no more than fifty feet off the ground. The attack was made without interception by enemy aircraft, and only slight and inaccurate machine gun fire was encountered at the south end of the runway. Fifty-six frag clusters were dropped on the runway and along the northern side of the runway but the speed of the attack prevented the observation of results. Strafing passes were made on the machine gun positions and one unserviceable bomber on the drome, but again the results were unobserved.

On the same day while the 405th was working over the Gasmata drome, the 71st went out to look for shipping in the vicinity of Gasmata. Shortly after take off one of the planes was forced to turn back because of engine trouble. The others encountered extremely rough weather, and just over the target area found it impossible to go on, but just before return one ship was sighted. Beaufighters were seen to circle the ship and then continue their flight. After sighting the ship once it was impossible to sight it again. Enemy fighters were sighted but they were busily engaged by P-38's and one green and brown Zeke was seen to be shot from the skies by the B-17's. The 405th put four planes into the air to search for this reported convoy, but they too encountered bad weather and were forced to return to base. Just to give the Nips a taste of night bombing, the 405th sent four planes into the air during the night and worked over Lae Drome. The planes were over the target at 2200 hours and dropped twelve 500 pound bombs along the runway, the results of which could not be observed due to the glare of the search lights. This was too much for the Nips to take - Tojo was becoming annoyed with the repeated attacks of these low-flying, high-flying B-25's operating from Durand Drome. Over he came again and this time he did manage to inflict some damage. Some of the bombs dropped on the end of the runway while others scored near misses on the planes of the 71st Squadron. One tent of the Group containing all the bomb sights received a lucky hit and thousands of dollars worth of equipment was scattered in ruins all over the place.

Night-fighters claimed the destruction of one of the planes and the ack ack boys claimed still another. None of our boys saw either of the Jap planes go down but what they saw the following morning made them a little angry. For days, arguments went on all over the place as to whether or not it was good bombing on that nite or just luck on the part of the Japs - whatever the arguments came to, it all amounted to the same thing - there was one shack in the entire area - the bomb-sight maintenance shack containing all the bomb-sights - it just wasn't there when the sun came up.

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- The Bomb-sight shack -

For the 16th there was no mission, but again on the 17th the 71st squadron had another go at Gasmata Airdrome. Coming over the target at 1210/K at 1500 feet, the bombardiers dropped fifteen 500 pounders which fell on and parallel with the runway. One cluster of bombs dropped on a supply dump and it was seen to explode with debris flying hundreds of feet in the air and giving off extremely white smoke. Fifteen more bombs fell along the north side of the runway and through the dispersal area. Although there were no fires started, the runway was definitely unserviceable after the attack. Numerous unserviceable aircraft were scattered about the airdrome but as far as the crew members could tell, there were none in condition to fly.

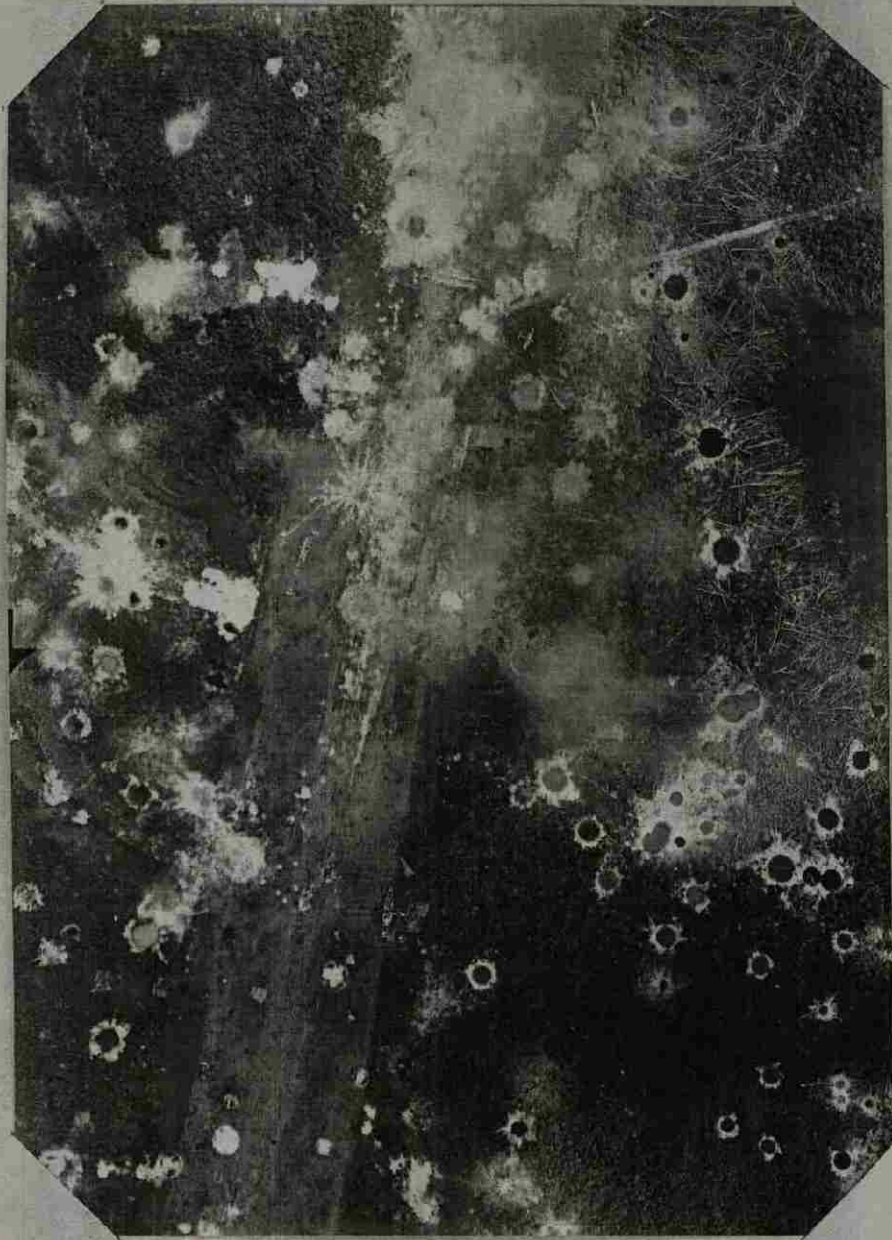
Evidently the Nips had made no efforts during the past few days to get the strip in condition for as our planes approached for the attack, the bomb craters on the runway were filled with water. There was not a great deal of anti-aircraft fire thrown up at the attacking planes, however, a machine gun position did manage to inflict serious damage on one plane.

The 17th was also a big day for the enlisted men of the 405th; it was the grand opening of their club. There was plenty of whiskey, gin, beer, and Coco Colas for all. The entertainment was furnished by a fourteen piece orchestra from the 158th Infantry and Private Mitchell Dyssel baffled the men with a few magicians tricks. This entertainment, as well as the "refreshments" was eagerly accepted and enjoyed all around. The night was O. K.,

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- Gasmata Airdrome as it appeared
on the 17th of May, 1943 -

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On the 18th the usual routine patrol mission by one plane of the 71st was carried out. In addition to this mission, two reccos were carried out by members of the 405th. The first consisted of four planes and was scheduled to observe the Salamaua area, but after one hours flight the planes were forced to turn back because of bad weather. The third and last mission of the day was an armed recco of the New Guinea coast line in search of barges in the Finschhafen area. One plane was forced back to base due to weather and the other planes were unable to sight anything. The 19th started out with a three plane patrol of friendly shipping to Port Moresby. This patrol, like all others, was uneventful. The 405th carried out the remaining two missions of the day - one a Recco from Hopoi to Saidor, and the other an attack on Salamaua. On the search mission in the Hopoi area, the planes strafed one grounded single engine aircraft on an island at the mouth of the river three miles west of Cape Gerhards. Fifteen to twenty natives were strafed when they were sighted carrying supplies to the north along a track two miles south of Muzen village. After this uneventful mission all planes returned safely to base, but in the landing operations of one of the planes, the right landing gear collapsed and in the resulting crash, the plane was damaged slightly. Fortunately, however, none of the personnel in the ship were seriously injured -- just a slight shaking up for all. In the second attack of the day, three planes participated in the mission. The mission was a continuation of the search and the area was to be from Hopoi to Madang. One plane dropped two 500 pounders in the area of MacDonalds Junction with unobserved results. The second plane sighted several barges off shore near Kasanga Village. Immediately upon being sighted, the barges made for the shore with the strafing B-25 right on their tail. Six strafing passes were made resulting in one explosion. There was slight ack ack fire from MacDonalds Junction and from an area just south of MacDonalds Junction but none of the fire registered hits on the B-25's.

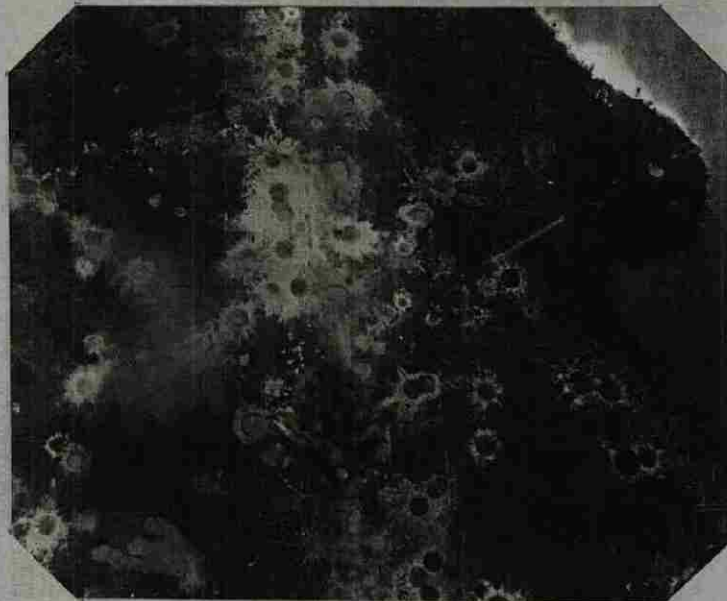
The 20th and 21st were the usual patrol missions, but on the 21st in addition to the patrols, eight planes of the 71st carried out an attack on the runway at Cape Gloucester. Coming over the target area at 1500 feet, the planes dropped five 500 pounders in train on the runway from the southeast to the northwest end. Twenty-two 500 pounders were dropped parallel to the runway on both sides of the strip - all with unobserved results. It was not until the 24th of the month that weather permitted the completion of another mission. On the 24th the 71st again sent seven planes into the skies to attack installations at Gasmata. Thirty 500 pounders were dropped on the runway and were dropped in the dispersal bays on the north side of the runway. The results of the bombing were generally unobserved but after the bombs were dropped, huge columns of grey smoke were seen -- this may have come from a underground storage dump on the north side of the strip. Other bombs could be seen hitting along the runway and there was no doubt as to the

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serviceability of the runway after the attack. The enemy planes were making it a habit of being out of the area when the B-25's came over - none were sighted on the mission and the small amount of machine gun fire thrown up from the ground proved very ineffective.



- As anyone can see - unserviceable -

On the 27th, Lee, the old "Milk Run" appeared on the schedule again. This time, both squadrons were assigned to work the drome over from minimum altitude (anything up to 50 feet - not over) and the bomb load would consist of 23 pound parafrag clusters. Coming over the target in a line abreast formation the planes of the 405th dropped two hundred and eighty five of the 23 pound clusters across the town area, the old hangar area, and the terrace area. Results of the bombing were reported unobserved, but photographs revealed that the bombs had made an excellent coverage of the assigned area. During the bombing run the entire area was strafed and it was reported that at least one machine gun position was knocked out of the fight. What little ack ack encountered was very inaccurate. Beaupfighters were making their second pass over the area as the strafers went to work and in order to avoid hitting them, the B-25's had to pull up from strafing before they had covered the entire area.

The 71st followed the 405th in but a change in the bomb loads forced the formation to stay up around 3400 feet to do their work. For the 71st, the target was divided into two parts - the first

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- Iae Drome as it is being plastered with 23 lb parafrags. Top picture is the Supply area while the bottom photo shows the old hangar area under attack.



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* Lae Drome under parafrag attack,
Top photo reveals Beaufighters in-
terferring with the strafing run.
Bottom photo shows parafrags string-
ing across the strip and terrace.



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was to be the area at Jacobson's while the second flight hit the Labu area. Forty six 100 pounders were dropped in the area at Jacobson's while twenty-two 300 pound wire-wrapped demo bombs were donated to the Labu area. Results of the bombing in both cases was unobserved.

The remaining three days of the month saw nothing but the usual patrol missions in the vicinity of Port Moresby. Although the month was not too eventful, it did serve its purpose inasmuch as the entire Group made low-level attacks the standard procedure for the Strafing B-25's.

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