



The concept of a beast like this coming down hill firing like as many as 10 Browning fifties (with side packs) would be bad enough, but to have a 75mm round in the mix might make someone want to change sides. (Photo by Budd Davisson/airbum.com)

# Mitchells

IN THE  
**MED**

## Wavetop warfare: Skip-bombing and Big Guns

BY MARK CARLSON

When the North American NA-62, officially dubbed B-25, first flew in August of 1940, it was less than a roaring success. The UK and France had just chosen the smaller Douglas DB-7 Boston (A-20 Havoc) attack bomber over the North American design. However, in the years leading up to the war, NAA couldn't know that the airplane they urged the U.S. Army Air Corps to adopt would become a legend among the Allies and a curse to the Axis. Nor could they even begin to imagine the incredibly wide range of roles it would play on history's aerial stage. In fact, the most memorable image of the B-25 was also the first. Even today, virtually anyone can readily identify the grainy photo of the B-25 in its most unexpected role of carrier-based bomber as Jimmy Doolittle lifts off of the *Hornet's* deck en route to Tokyo. Other iconic B-25 images show it skimming across the water, guns hammering Axis ships ahead, leaving a trail of carnage in its wake. Where ever there was need of a highly maneuverable, bomb-laying, gun-toting, versatile multi-engine airplane, the B-25s were there. A plane that handled like a teddy bear and fought like a tiger.

### Mediterranean Mitchells

General John K. Cannon's 12th Tactical Air Force Mitchells played a crucial role in every major campaign in the Mediterranean from March 1942 to August 1944. The bombers flew from Tobruk, Benghazi, and Corsica, the birthplace of Napoleon. The versatile B-25s were the scourge of German forces in Tunisia, Crete, Greece, Yugoslavia, Sicily, Italy and southern France.

Captain Truman Coble, a retired Sears & Roebucks salesman living in Escondido, California, flew 56 missions with the 379th Bomb Squadron, 310th Bomb Group in the Mediterranean Theater. While flying from Tobruk, Libya, and Ghisonaccia, Corsica, Coble and his crew sank three German ships, destroyed dozens of bridges and railroads, and contributed to the eventual Allied victory in Italy and southern France.

"It was always my ambition to fly in the Air Corps," said the 91-year old former Pennsylvania farm boy, who goes by the name "Bud." "There was this airfield near our farm near New Cumberland and every day around 3:30, a big plane, I think it was a DC-3, would fly in right over us, maybe 500 feet up. I said, 'Man, that's for me.'

I wrangled my way into the Civilian Pilot Training (CPT) program and learned to fly the Piper J-3

Cub. I had about 40 hours in the Cub."

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, Coble joined the Air Corps and was sent to Santa Ana, California, for basic training. In Oxnard he went through Basic Flight Training flying Vultee BT-13 Valiants. Advanced training took place in Laslow, New Mexico, where Coble was in Class 43-D and learned to fly the B-25 and earned his wings in early 1943.

In Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, Coble was made an instructor, a job he, like most instructors, tolerated with reluctance.

### Skip-bombing 101

In the Southwest Pacific, Colonel Paul Irvin "Pappy" Gunn, head of the 5th Air Force Service Command, had proven the radical technique of skip-bombing to sink ships. As seen at Midway in June 1942, dropping bombs on moving ships from high altitude nearly always resulted in wasted bombs and unnecessary risk.

Gunn theorized that a medium bomber carrying conventional high-explosive bombs could approach a ship at 265mph at low altitude, that is less than 100 feet, and drop the bombs 500 yards from the target. The bombs "skipped" along the water like a thrown stone and hit the ship's side.

It wasn't always necessary to achieve a direct hit. Even a near miss from a 500-pound bomb would cause a "water hammer" effect, crushing hull plates.

"I was something of a 'hotshot,'" Coble smiled. "The Air Force thought I'd be good at teaching the new pilots to skip-bomb. We instructors flew around 50 feet off the water. But those students were nuts! They had to be better and flew 30, 25, even 15 feet. It was scary as hell and some planes were lost when they were struck by their own bombs. I went to my C.O. and said, 'Send me into combat. I want to live!'"

At Greenville, South Carolina, in October 1943, Coble was assigned a brand-new B-25G, tail number 830. "It was painted desert pink and had a big 75mm cannon in the nose."

"My copilot was Lt. James Jones. He was a good pilot but a bit of a goof-off. He liked to hit the bars as soon as the engines stopped," Coble chuckled. "But he did his job."

"My bombardier was Lt. Chuck Girvin. I had a navigator, a flight engineer, and two other gunners as well."

The proud owners of #830 flew it to Savannah, Georgia, where the combat equipment was fitted. "They put the flexible guns and fixed guns in, armor plate, all that stuff." The new plane was christened *Pisonya*, a name chosen by the crew.

Coble and Jones flew the new bomber north to Presque Isle, Maine, then on to Goose Bay, Labrador, across the Atlantic to Greenland, finally reaching Prestwick, Scotland. After resting, they flew south around the French and Spanish coasts and east into the Mediterranean Sea. They and the other new crews joined the 379th Squadron of the 310th Bomb Group (Medium) of the soon-to-be disbanded 9th Air Force, based in Libya.

### From the Carolinas to Casablanca

The 310th Group had been formed in March 1942 and consisted of four squadrons. The 379th, 380th, 381st, and 428th, each owned six B-25s. The group had already supported the campaigns in North Africa and Sicily by the time Coble's crew arrived in late October 1943. "We first landed in Casablanca," Coble said. "We had some time to get used to the place. We went to the movies. Just a small theater and guess what was playing there? *Casablanca!*" he laughed.

"The 379th was based at Tobruk in Libya. It was hot and miserable," Coble commented. "The temperature went up to 120 degrees in the day. We slept in tents that never got cool until well after nightfall. Then it went down to near freezing. Bugs and sand in your food, water, hair and clothes. Staging out of Tobruk, the B-25s patrolled the eastern Mediterranean and Aegean Seas. They concentrated on German ships and patrol craft trying to support Axis forces on Crete.

"We worked with the RAF who flew Beaufighters out of Tunisia to hit ships," Coble explained.



Four .50 caliber machine guns and the 75mm M4 cannon are visible in this photo. Note the mild steel fairing around the cannon muzzle. (Photo courtesy of author)

"Some missions took off from Philippeville, Algeria as well."

"Our armorers had fitted extra guns on the nose." Eight Browning .50 caliber machine guns gave the B-25 immense firepower. The Mitchell's excellent forward visibility made it easy to aim, according to Coble. "It looked like an upside-down Niagara Falls when we triggered all the guns while strafing boats on the water. That plane vibrated like you wouldn't believe."

### Flying artillery

As mentioned, *Pisonya* carried the granddaddy of all aircraft guns, the powerful 75mm cannon, a derivative of the trusty French 75 of World War One. The American version was also used on the M4 Sherman tank.

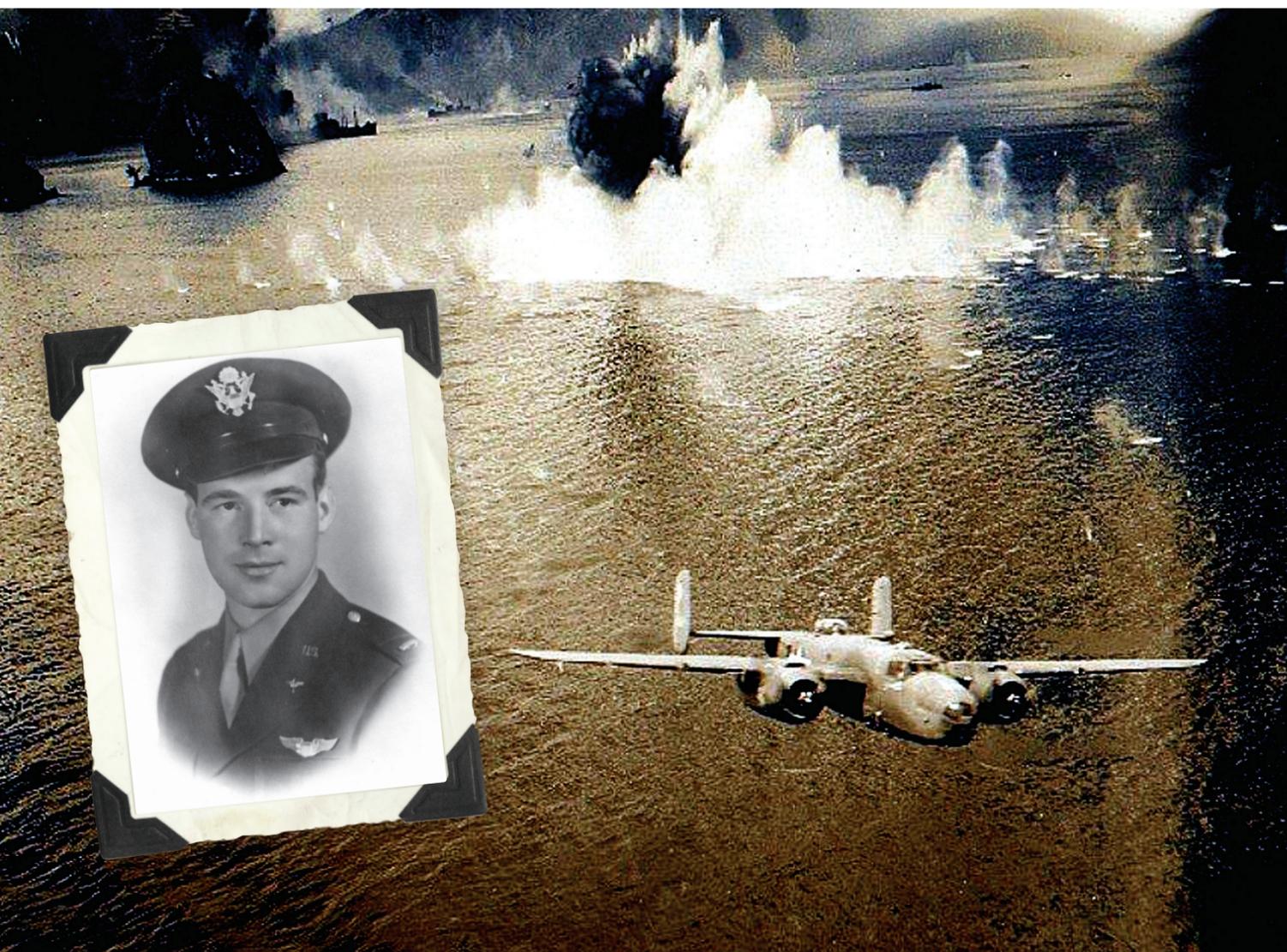
Few aspects of the B-25 variants garner more interest than the big gun.

A lighter version of the standard M4 with a thinner barrel and modified recoil system was developed for testing in the B-25. It was fitted into the port forward fuselage on the left side of the tunnel into the nose. The muzzle projected from a mild steel fairing.

A February 1944 *Popular Science* Magazine article entitled "Flying Big Gun" stated that North American test pilot Roger Rudd tested the first cannon-armed B-25 off the California coast in November 1942.

After several firings, Rudd said it produced a "good healthy jolt." Further tests led North American to conclude that "[the B-25] can take that and plenty more."

Below: A dramatic photo of a B-25 skip-bombing off the coast of New Guinea. (Photo courtesy of author)  
Inset: Lt. Truman "Bud" Coble, USAAF during his service in the 310th Bomb Group. (Photo courtesy of Truman Coble)



The article goes on to say the first use of the gun in combat “destroyed a Nip transport as it was unloading, ending the earthly worries of fifteen Japs.”

Five well-placed shots from another B-25 slammed into a Japanese destroyer, causing great damage. A second run on the ship set off internal explosions.

There was no doubt that with high-explosive shells and a muzzle velocity of nearly 2,000 feet per second, the 75 was capable of doing great damage to enemy vessels or ground installations.

Firing the gun did have an effect on the airframe, however. Research at the San Diego Air & Space Museum revealed accounts that the airspeed dropped by as much as 20 knots from the recoil. Some airmen swore the plane actually stopped for an instant, but this was a physical impossibility.

The cannon was bore-sighted and fired by the pilot with the N-6A gunsight (in the case of the ‘G’ and ‘H’ models) mounted on the top of the instrument panel. It was also common practice to use the .50 caliber tracers to “aim” the plane at the target. When the bullets were striking the target, the big gun was triggered.

B-25 pilots had to maintain a very straight and steady course in order to achieve a hit at 2,000 yards.

The rate of fire depended on how rapidly the loader could open the breech, load the 10-pound shell and close it.

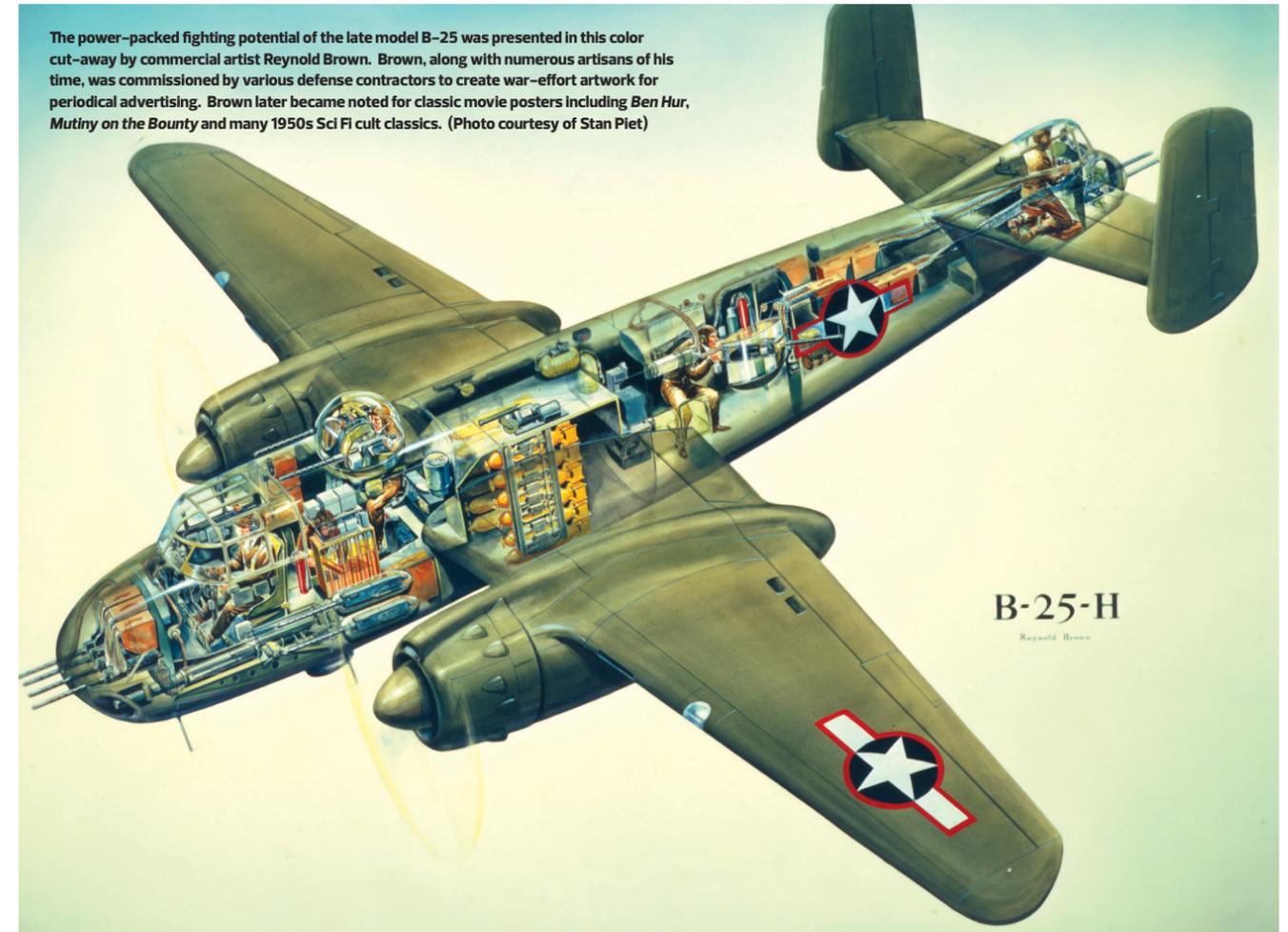
Some pilots liked the heavy hitting 75, while others preferred having several machine guns instead. “I think we carried about 11 or 12 shells, Coble remembered. “Garvin, my bombardier loaded them. When it went off, the whole plane just bucked and we heard a big ‘WHUMP!’”

German forces in the Aegean Sea were scattered over scores of small and large islands. Damaging them in daily raids was a job for the 379th’s big guns. “The Krauts had a lot of fighter strips on those islands,” Coble continued. “On most missions we flew low enough to avoid their radar. We’d be over their island bases to drop 23-pound parachute fragmentation bombs. They did a lot of damage, wrecking planes, but left the airfields intact. Then we’d fire a couple of shells at whatever looked good.”

Coble had one memorable experience with the cannon. “On 18 February, we found a German patrol boat about five miles off the Turkish coast. It was about 50 feet long. I squeezed one off and the shell went in the stern of the boat. It blew apart like kindling. One crewman jumped clear. All these years later I can still see him.”

The man who’d instructed pilots in the art of skip-bombing had his chance to use it on German ships.

“When we saw a Kraut ship I flew about fifty feet altitude at 25 mph. That was plenty low,” Coble smiled. “At that speed, the target came up very fast. I adjusted my course as they tried



The power-packed fighting potential of the late model B-25 was presented in this color cut-away by commercial artist Reynold Brown. Brown, along with numerous artisans of his time, was commissioned by various defense contractors to create war-effort artwork for periodical advertising. Brown later became noted for classic movie posters including *Ben Hur*, *Mutiny on the Bounty* and many 1950s Sci Fi cult classics. (Photo courtesy of Stan Plet)

## INSIDE THE B-25 MITCHELL



Note the slight staggering of the waist gun positions to reduce the choreography required of the gunners. Each was equipped with one of John Browning’s brilliant, and long-lasting, contributions to America’s fight for freedom.



The two jump seats seen here are not original WW II items, however the 75 mm gun visible here, lower left (an exact aluminum replica) was standard equipment in a 25H.



The B-25 cockpit was a nice place to conduct business in that it was just the “right” size for the pilots. On the gun models there would have been a gunsight in front of the pilot. (Photos by Budd Davison/airbum.com)



The full firepower of a B-25H is dramatically shown in this photo. (Photo courtesy of author)

to evade. When we were about 500 yards out, I toggled off the bombs and pulled up. Those 500-pounders skipped a couple of times and slammed into the ship. The trick was to not be right over it when they exploded. Usually my tail gunner told us if we got a hit. We sank three German ships off Crete," Coble said with pride. By the beginning of 1944, German ships tried to reach port at night, unload and depart before dawn to avoid the deadly B-25s. Less than 50% returned to their home ports.

"On 22 February, 1944 we sank a small cargo ship and then these Kraut fighters got on our tail and ran our ass the whole way around the eastern end of the island."

*Pisomyia's* gunners were credited with shooting down an Me-109 and a Ju-88 over the Aegean.

### USS Corsica

When the Ninth Air Force was disbanded the 310th transferred to Corsica, where they were given new B-25Js. The 'J' model had the greenhouse nose. Bombardier Girvin finally had the



The crew of *Worth Fighting For*—310th Bomb Group, 428th Bomb Squadron, on Corsica. (Photo courtesy of the 57th Bomb Wing Association)

chance to use a bombsight, rather than load cannon shells.

The 12th TAF, under General John Cannon had close to 2,500 fighters, attack bombers and medium bombers based on eight airfields. The rocky but idyllic island was so perfectly suited for

basing American tactical aircraft for operations in Italy, southern France and Austria it gained the affectionate nickname of "USS *Corsica*."

"I liked Cannon," affirmed Coble. "He was qui-

et, very friendly. Not your usual general. I flew him to the officer's resort at Il Rousse, on the northwest corner of Corsica."

On the eastern coast were the three airbases of the new 57th Bomb Wing, massing nearly 300 medium and attack bombers.

"Our base was in Ghisonaccia, Corsica. That was a nice place, compared to Libya. I loved that island. The people were so friendly. When we were grounded for bad weather some of us went into town to a small restaurant. The food and wine were terrific."

However, the 379th Squadron's airmen at Ghisonaccia had the distinction of being treated to a breakfast to remember. "Our mess cooks had these young Corsican boys helping out,"

said Coble. "Well, one morning this one kid made a mistake and put air slaked lime in the batter instead of pancake flour. We all got so sick, vomiting, diarrhea, just terrible. Lasted for about three days."

That little incident was related in Joseph Heller's bestselling novel *Catch-22*, which was about a B-25 group on the fictional island of Pianosa. Heller was a veteran of 60 missions as a bombardier with the 488th Bomb Squadron, 340th Bomb Group.

Bad food notwithstanding, the 310th Bomb Group flew high- and low-altitude bombing missions against land targets in Italy. "Ghisonaccia was so close to Italy that if we flew straight east, we'd be there in fifteen minutes. Why the Germans never just came out and bombed us, I'll never know."

*Operation Shingle*, the code name for the Anzio landings in January 1944, had bogged down on the beachhead for three months while relentless German counterattacks hammered the American and British positions.

In the spring of 1944, Coble's crew, with the rest of the 57th Wing, joined in *Operation Strangle* which had begun on March 25, 1943. *Strangle* was a systematic effort to destroy all German communication links and supply lines during the Italian campaign. Fighter-bombers and medium bombers attacked German assets such as shipping, railroads, marshalling yards, truck yards, fuel storage tanks, supply dumps, tunnels and bridges. Bombardiers and gunners were told to hit switches, repair yards, locomotives and other targets that could not be easily repaired or replaced.

"We hit railroad bridges and tunnels from Rome north. That also included a raid on Monte Cassino on 15 March," Coble said, referring to the sixth-century monastery overlooking Rome which was suspected of being used as a German observation post for the Gustav Line. The destruction of the ancient abbey was considered one of the worst cultural losses of the war.

### The Bridge Busters

Coble's own crew and some of the 379th gained a reputation for bombing bridges.

"You can approach a bridge by flying along the road or down the valley. But we just flew right down at them from a high angle. We were called 'The Bridge Busters,'" he smiles.

*Strangle* was succeeded by *Diadem*, an attack directly aimed at breaking a hole in the German lines to allow the 70,000 Allied troops to break free of the beaches and march inland.

*Diadem*, begun on May 15, 1944, wreaked such havoc with the Germans they were only able to transport about 500 tons for the fourteen divisions engaged. Without railroads, the German Army was forced to use trucks at night. This too proved costly, as Douglas A-20 Havoc attack bombers carrying parachute flares illuminated the supply lines and destroyed them in place.

On 25 May 1944 the German 10th and 14th Armies began withdrawing from the Anzio region, pursued by 12th TAF's fighter-bombers. 100,000 American troops, preceded by heavy artillery fire, broke free of the beachhead and marched toward Rome.

In the air that day was Coble and his crew. "We flew in from the coast. The sky over the beach and roads were just full of smoke and tracers, explosions and fire. The troops were a mass of men moving inland. It was a sight to behold."

One mission stands out for Coble. "On 10 June, I led six ships on a mission to hit a railroad bridge at Calaforia, Italy. The 88mm flak was terrible. It shot down the third element leader, Ernie Kulik. His plane took a direct hit. We saw four chutes come out, but three were on fire. My copilot was hit in the head. The main gas line in the right carburetor was badly hit but that engine kept running. We landed with 145 holes in the plane."

That mission earned Lt. Truman Coble the Distinguished Flying Cross. The citation reads: "For extraordinary achievement while participating in aerial flight as a pilot of a B-25. On 10 June 1944, Lt. Coble led a six-plane flight in an attack upon a railroad bridge at Calaforia, Italy. Despite intense anti-aircraft fire which heavily damaged his airplane upon the approach to the target, Lt. Coble, displaying great courage and superior flying ability, maintained his crippled plane on course, thereby enabling his bombers to release their bombs with devastating effect upon this vital link in enemy communication lines. On more than 55 combat mission his outstanding



Above: Two bridges over the Po River, Italy are bombed by 57th Bomb Wing B-25s in August 1944. (Photo courtesy of author)  
Left: B-25J Mitchells of the 448th BS, 310th BG dropping their payload of four 1,000-pound bombs onto their target in Northern Italy during the summer of 1944. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)



proficiency and steadfast devotion to duty have reflected great credit upon himself

and the Armed Forces of the United States."

Bud Coble finished his tour with the 310th and was sent home in late June after flying 56 combat missions. The 310th Bomb Group, as part of the 57th Wing, participated in more campaigns, including the build-up to *Operation Dragoon*, the invasion of southern France in August 1944.

The group earned two Distinguished Unit Citations for action in the MTO. It reached 500 missions sooner than any other group in the Mediterranean Theater. In 989 missions, the fliers were credited with shooting down 121 enemy aircraft, including a captured Curtiss P-40. Skip-bombing and cannon attacks on German shipping resulted in the sinking of 206 vessels. Over 23,900 tons of bombs were dropped while the B-25Gs fired 1,998 75mm cannon shells.

Bud Coble took a job at Sears, where he worked for 43 years. "I had met Winifred, my future wife, in Cairo while I was recuperating from an illness," he explained. "She was an Army nurse, a Second Lieutenant. We were married two years later. I technically outrank her, but she's my wife so her orders stand."

Coble is typical of the decidedly atypical airmen who flew B-25s in the Mediterranean Theater. At dangerously low altitude and face-to-face with German flak, they slowly and effectively ground down the Axis' ability to fight. North Africa, Sicily, Palermo, Rome, Naples, Anzio, the Po Valley, and into southern France, the Mitchells were there. †