

When 1st Lt. Besby Holmes scrambled onboard the Curtiss P-36A to face the Japanese attackers, it was only his second time in a “real” fighter, and he had to have the crew chief show him how to charge the guns and start the engine. Essentially a round-motored P-40, the airplane was loved by those who flew it, but the P-40 was a better airplane against the Zero. Only one P-36A is still airworthy. (Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)



Of Pop Guns and Peashooters

A GREENHORN AT PEARL HARBOR

BY LT. COL. BESBY FRANK HOLMES, USAAF, RETIRED, AS TOLD TO AND WRITTEN BY JAMES P. BUSHA

EDITOR'S NOTE

Besby Frank Holmes was possibly the newest, lowest-time pilot in Hawaii at the time he scrambled into a P-36 to face the Japanese. He had little success there but played a pivotal role in one of the most legendary missions in the war a year and a half later.



Earning My Wings

Back in the mid-1930s, when I was a teenager in California, I used to spend a lot of time fishing off the municipal pier at Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco. I was standing on the pier one day when a flight of 16 to 20 Boeing P-26s came roaring by fast and low in tight formation. I will never forget the look of the pilots, with their heads sticking out of the cockpit and their white silk scarves billowing behind them, all looking like Eddie Rickenbacker. I remember seeing them painted in shiny, University of California blue and gold colors and thinking out loud, "I've got to fly one of those!" About that same time, the flamboyant-looking formation flew right into the center of a flock of seagulls. As it rained dismembered seagulls and

the P-26s passed by, I was awestruck and impressed in a very strange manner. Little did I know that, in due time, I would be flying one of these Peashooters in simulated combat almost seven years later.

After earning my wings in mid-November 1941, I was sent to Hawaii, where I joined the 47th Pursuit Squadron, 15th Pursuit Group, as a green second lieutenant.

The biggest and fastest airplane that I had ever flown in my short 200-hour pilot career was the AT-6, but all that was about to change when I moved up to a frontline fighter. It was called the Curtiss Model 75/P-36 Hawk. Good god, here was an air-

plane with retractable gear, a cockpit that opened and closed, and—best of all—machine guns that fired through the nose! A real fighter plane in the eyes of a naive second lieutenant!

The P-36 was a quantum leap from the training planes I had flown, but it was still underpowered compared to the P-40, the other fighter in our squadron. But on December 6, I was told to perform three touch-and-gos in a P-36A.

Our 47th Pursuit Squadron was posted at Haleiwa Field, which was a 3,500-foot-long grass strip. We had been on alert, and when it was finally decided that there was no threat that day, I was allowed to take a P-36 up as I promised to bring it

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back in one piece. If something happened to me, I could be replaced as there was a pool of pilots to choose from, but the fighters were a bit scarce and were treated as such. I was on “cloud 19” as I roared down the grass strip into the air. After three touch-and-gos, I taxied back to the hangar and put the Hawk to bed. At last, I was “real” fighter pilot.

It's a Mess Out There!

Because the alert was canceled, most of us went into town to celebrate. Little did we know that it would be the last time in a long time that any of us would have a reason to celebrate. The next day, December 7, I awoke early with the most god-awful hangover, brought on by sweet rum drinks. I went to Sunday mass dressed in my favorite pinstripe suit, in hopes that I could pray my headache away. As I sat in church, the explosions in my head suddenly mirrored the sounds outside; bombs were falling all around! I ran outside to see Army 6X6 trucks racing down the street and Japanese airplanes in the sky.

After hijacking a civilian car and driving like a crazy person, I made it back to Haleiwa Airfield, where I was handed a cloth helmet, a .45-caliber

pistol, and a parachute. A waiting P-36 sitting off in the distance was pointed out as mine, and as I made my way to the fighter, a Japanese dive-bomber came down and started firing at the P-36. I got kind of mad at that guy, so I unloaded my pistol on him, never knowing if I hit him or not. We were now at war, and I was not about to be left out on the sidelines!

I was still wearing my pinstripe suit when I jumped into a P-36 for the second time in my short fighter-pilot life. I even had to have the crew chief show me how to start the engine and charge the guns, as I had never fired them before. I roared off into the unknown and flew over Wheeler Field, where I saw the charred remains of P-40s still smoldering on the ramp. I flew on to Ford Island and Pearl Harbor, where I saw nine or 10 battleships on fire; some were still sinking, while others were sitting on the bottom in the mud. Everywhere around them was death and destruction.

Flying over the island of Oahu, I noted the devastation of our aircraft on the ground at Hickam, Ewa, and Wheeler airfields and the destruction of our fleet at Pearl Harbor. The Japanese were long gone by the time I flew overhead, but the soldiers



From left, 1st Lts. Fred Purnell, Besby Holmes, and Wally Dinn of the 347th FG at Fighter Two Airstrip on Guadalcanal on January 4, 1943. The next day, Dinn was killed in action flying a P-38F and received the Distinguished Service Cross posthumously. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)



Above: Although under replacement at the time of Pearl Harbor, a number of P-26s were still operational at Wheeler Field, six of which were destroyed during the attack. The survivors continued to operate in home defense, now in olive drab camouflage, until replaced by P-40s. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)



Below: With “modern” fighters, P-36s and P-40s, in short supply, junior pilots like Besby Holmes kept sharp flying the leftover Boeing P-26s. They were glad they didn't have to fight Zeroes in them. (Photo by Budd Davisson/airbum.com)

and sailors on the ground thought otherwise, as I attracted every man who carried a rifle; my P-36 acted like a magnet picking up the rounds being fired at me. The world would never be the same as we were now at war and committed to fight it with outdated airplanes. I realized quickly that it was time to get the hell out of there! I decided that this was no place for me, and I went back to Haleiwa. When I got out of the P-36, some soldiers gathered around the airplane. All I could say, standing there in my nonfighter-pilot-looking pinstripe suit was, "Hey, fellas. It's a mess out there!" The world, as we knew it, had changed forever.

A New Day in an Old Airplane

Most of our P-40s, the frontline fighters at the time, were destroyed during the attack. We had to change a lot of aerial tactics around very quickly as we prepared to defend the Hawaiian Islands with P-36s, a handful of P-40Bs, and the stubby and leftover slow Boeing P-26 Peashooters. Right before the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Army Air Force (AAF) set up a rudimentary air-defense system using radar, but the manpower assigned to it was lacking in knowledge on how the thing worked. The fear for many of us was that the Japanese would return for a knockout blow to take

care of what was left of our fleet and airpower. For the next four months, all we did as a squadron was practice intercepts with the use of radar, as everyone stationed on Hawaii was trained to be on the same page so that we wouldn't have a repeat of the disaster at Pearl Harbor—at least that was how it worked on paper.

The P-26 was a fun airplane to fly, but it was joke as a combat aircraft, especially against a Japanese Zero. The Peashooter had fixed landing gear, an open cockpit, and wires going every which way that kept the wings from folding down during a negative G maneuver and from folding up during a positive G pullout. The Peashooter not only looked primitive, it was primitive!

Our squadron flew both the A and B models of the Peashooter, and you could always tell who was flying the A model when the squadron performed barrel rolls. The P-26A didn't have a fuel pump capable of sustaining inverted flight, so you had to keep positive G all the way around to complete the maneuver successfully. If you didn't keep positive G in the A model, the fuel would stop flowing, the engine would quit, and the poor fellow in the Peashooter would fall out of the formation. As primitive as it was, though, I found that the Peashooter could still turn inside a relentless attacking P-40.

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In May 1941, five shiny new Curtiss P-36A Mohawks of the 6th Pursuit Squadron sit in front of Hanger 4 at Wheeler Field in Hawaii, along with two worn P-26 Peashooters. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)

Playing with the Big Guys

During my assignment with the 47th Pursuit Squadron, I was fortunate to be assigned to a flight with some combat veterans. My flight leader was 1st Lt. George Welch, and also in his flight was 2nd Lt. Ken Taylor. Both Welch and Taylor not only got airborne in their P-40s during the attack on Pearl Harbor but also shot down six enemy airplanes that day, with Taylor getting two and Welch scoring four victories. Needless to say, they taught me a lot of tricks and tactics during my training. But on one occasion, I was able to show them what I had learned.

I had been out one day fooling around in the P-26, boring holes in the sky learning how to fly the airplane. I was at 12,000 feet when I looked up and saw a P-40 above me at around 18,000 feet. I saw the P-40 push his nose down and roll over as he dove down onto me. I pretended that I didn't see him howling down on top of me until the very last second, when I quickly turned the Peashooter into him. The P-40 was moving too fast and he couldn't turn into me as I turned underneath him and got inside of his turn.

I got my nose and guns on him right away during my first pass as the P-40 pulled out and climbed back up for altitude. I couldn't even begin to stay with him in the climb, so I just pattered along at altitude, watching and waiting for him. Again and again, he came down onto me, and each time was like the last, as the slower moving P-26 outturned the

faster P-40. After four passes and four defeats, the P-40 and its frustrated pilot dove for home.

When I returned to the airfield and landed, I walked back toward one of the hangars and found Taylor berating Welch something awful. I listened as Taylor said, "George, you shouldn't ought to have beat me in a P-26 and me in a P-40! You shouldn't ought to do that—it's just not fair! How the heck could you do it, George?" Welch continued listening to Taylor run his mouth. Welch stood there, and I could see a small smile in the corner of his mouth.

Welch finally said, "Ya know, Kenny, I wasn't up there in that P-26; it was Frank over here," as Welch pointed toward me.

Taylor, who hadn't noticed me standing behind him, turned around and looked at me with sheer disbelief. Taylor then said, "You were in that P-26? And you fought against a P-40?!"

All I could say was, "I'm afraid it was I."

Taylor was much chagrined, and although we didn't come to blows, he was mad as all get out at me. As fighter pilots, we needed the hell out of one another on the ground, but in the air, we depended on each other for our lives—a fact that became a daily occurrence for me as the war progressed in the South Pacific, where I flew P-38 Lightnings.

Epilogue

Pilots who were already in the service at the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor formed the basis for the development

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Top: Holmes became an ace flying the P-38, a far cry from the P-26/P-36 he had flown 16 months earlier. (Photo by Budd Davisson/airbum.com)

Above: On Fighter Two airfield, 1st Lt. Besby Holmes receives the Air Medal from Brig. Gen. Dean Strother, CO, XII Fighter Command, as Lt. Col. George McNeese, CO, 347th FG, looks on. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)

of America's armed aerial force. To a man, they rapidly advanced and learned their craft. Besby Holmes, a green, inexperienced pilot on that Sunday morning, quickly advanced through all of the AAF's frontline fighters to alight in the P-38 at a very opportune time.

It was a major intelligence coup when U.S. Navy experts cracked the Japanese communication codes. In so doing, they learned that Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto would be traveling to Bougainville Island and was scheduled to arrive at 0930 on April 18, 1943 (the one-year anniversary of the Doolittle Raid). Accordingly, a daring intercept mission was mounted, and

Besby Holmes was involved in its planning and execution. In the 16 months since his very first flight in a "real" fighter, he had definitely become a fighter pilot.

The intercept point was 400 miles from their base on Guadalcanal, but with extra tanks, the Lightnings could make it; however, their navigation over mostly open seas and their timing had to be exact. And it was. The two Mitsubishi Betty bombers, escorted by six Zeros, were exactly where they were expected. Holmes and Lt. Rex Barber were assigned to attack the second Betty, which they did. In the ensuing fight with the Zeros, Holmes was credited with one. It was his final combat mission, and he was awarded the Navy Cross for his contributions. He ended the war with 5.5 victories to his credit.

Holmes remained in the U.S. Air Force, serving in Korea and Vietnam, and he retired as a lieutenant colonel in 1968. He passed away on July 23, 2006, at 88 years of age. ✚

Note: Revised USAF victory credits for the Yamamoto mission are Bettys by Barber/Capt. Thomas G. Lanphier and Barber/Holmes, plus Zeroes for Lanphier and Holmes. Holmes' recognized score is 5.5 (1.5 on April 18, 1943), while Barber's is 5.0 (2 shared on April 18) and Lanphier's is 5.5 (1.5 on April 18).