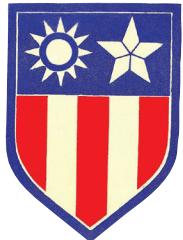


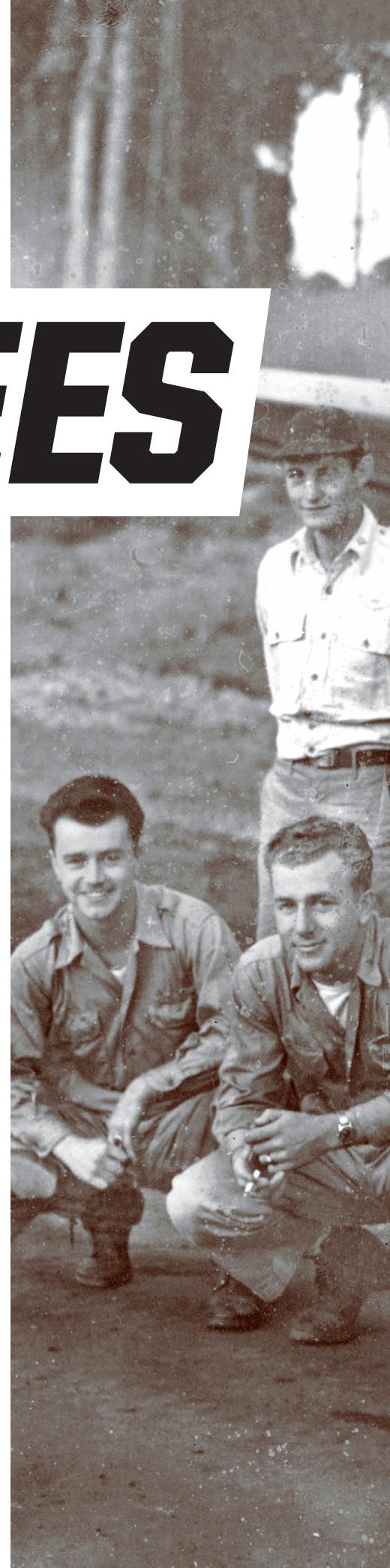
BURMA BANSHEES

THE 90TH FIGHTER SQUADRON IN THE CBI

BY GRÉGORY PONS



In the beginning of June 1944, while the 90th Fighter Squadron was based at Moran in India, the unit started to receive brand-new P-47s to replace its tired and obsolescent P-40Ns decorated with a painted skull on their hoods. On June 8, Lt. Col. Albert L. Evans Jr. (commanding officer of the 80th Fighter Group) led the first flight of 12 P-47s to come in from Karachi. Capts. Bulkeley and Daine; Lts. Cherry, Roane, and Pedersen; and six new pilots came in with the new planes. These P-47s were the first to be assigned to the squadron in this theater of operations. The planes were equipped with additional droppable wing tanks. Two days later, 10 new P-47s arrived from Karachi with five new pilots. During the following weeks, war markings were applied on the planes. Each P-47 of the 90th Squadron wore an individual fuselage number, from 70 to 99, and a blue ring around the hood. Black stripes were also applied on their tails for fast identification.



Lt. Stedman L. Howarth (top row, left) was credited for a Tojo destroyed in aerial combat on December 14, 1944. (Photo courtesy of the author)



TWO PARACHUTES HAD BEEN REPORTEDLY SEEN NORTH OF MYITKYINA, BUT A PATROL LED BY CAPT. ROBERTS, OVER THE ROUTE THE MISSING TRANSPORT WAS SUPPOSED TO TRAVEL, FOUND NOTHING. IT WAS FEARED THIS TRANSPORT PLANE, IN BAD WEATHER, HAD CRASHED INTO A MOUNTAIN.

In the afternoon of August 8, the squadron was informed that the men should be prepared for a move to Burma within a month. On August 26, the 90th Fighter Squadron started to leave India—direction Burma. The four squadrons of the 80th FG were split between different bases. The 90th FS was sent to Tingkawk Sakan in Burma, while the 88th and 89th FS were sent to Myitkyina; the 459th FS remained in India and kept its P-38s. But let's back up to the beginning of August.

Transfer in Burma

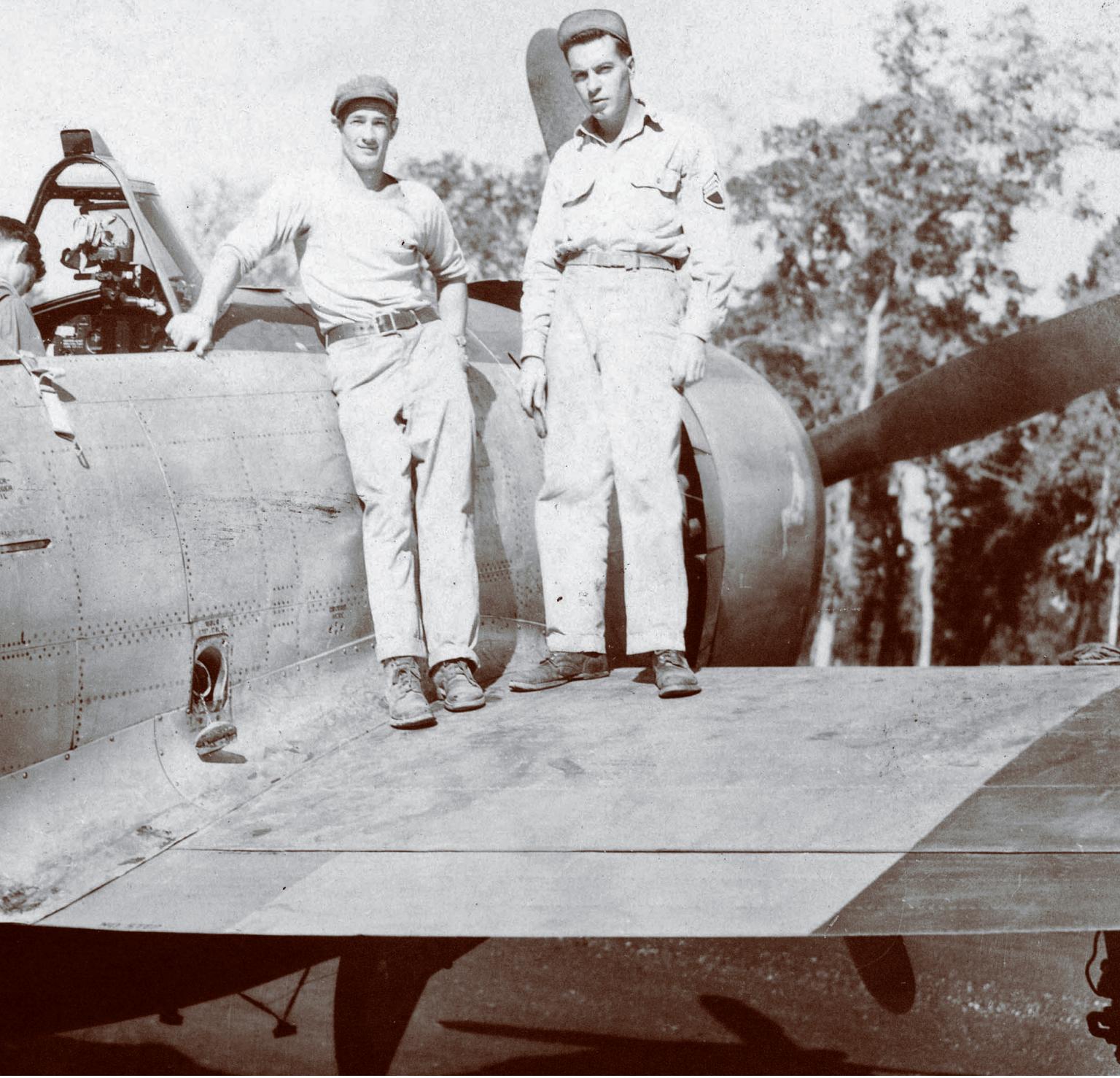
Gun-camera films taken by the pilots on strafing mission were shown before the regular cinema in the evening of August 9, 1944. They gave the ground personnel not only a treetop level view of enemy territory but also a good view of the type of destruction being done to Japanese installations by the Thunderbolts. Cpl. Domasaiwitz of the 90th won 25 rupees from the Red Cross in a contest for all the enlisted men on the field for the most appropriate name for the local Red Cross Club; his entry was "Hangaround." The men of the squadron were considerably shocked and saddened by the news that Lts. Burson and Turbeville had disappeared. They were aboard a transport plane

Lt. Col. Stanton Smith Jr. piloted a P-47D named "Kay P." with serial number 42-27447. Apparently, the ships showing the insignia of the 80th FG were assigned to the headquarters of the unit. (Photo courtesy of author)



for Myitkyina by way of Shingbwiyang that had been missing since the day before. Two parachutes had been reportedly seen north of Myitkyina, but a patrol led by Capt. Roberts, over the route the missing transport was supposed to travel, found nothing. It was feared this transport plane, in bad weather, had crashed into a mountain.

On Thursday, August 17, Capt. Robert Frey (ex C Flight leader) became the first pilot to receive



his orders to return to the States of those who came over with the squadron. His joy at going home was somewhat dampened by the fact that his wife was in Iceland with a USO troupe. Some pilots who were on leave came back to the base; they arrived with breathless descriptions of their stays in Kashmir. It was reported on August 20 that, instead of going to Myitkyina, the 90th FS would be at Tingkawk Sakan. With Pedersen en

route to Moran with a P-47 he was ferrying from Karachi, his plane caught fire landing at Jorhat. He was in the 24th Station Hospital there, recovering from burns. At 0055 the morning of August 21, the B Flight alert shack caught fire and burned. Lt. Wergin taxied two P-47s from the revetment amid exploding shells from the burning tent. It was believed that fire was started by a guard smoking in the tent.

Lt. Stone seated in the cockpit while Tommy (the cook) and S/Sgt Schaffer (crew chief) are standing on the wing of Miss Ann III, #78. We can observe there was also a pinup painted on the right side of the hood. (Photo courtesy of author)



Compared to its peer group, the cockpit of the Thunderbolt was huge. The bulletproof panel is between the fixed reticle gunsight and the windshield. (Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)

The day after, a P-47 caught fire as Lt. Allison was taxiing it into the revetment. In connection with an attempt to rescue bombs in the same revetment, a Group jeep burned after the P-47 swung around and pinioned it. Personnel in front of the plane all rapidly hit the dirt and slit trenches as shells whizzed by overhead. On August 24, the 90th FS was informed that Maj. Don Quigley, formerly squadron operations officer, who became squadron CO in China, had been shot down and was missing in action. "Quig" was one of the best and most popular pilots the 90th FS ever had.

"Doc" Zwerner and his assistants were happily shooting many inoculations into the arms of all personnel just before Capt. Jenkins flew Zwerner in a PT to Tingkawk Sakan to constitute an advanced detail. In the evening, the Red Cross gave a party for the 90th enlisted men.

On the morning of August 27, 23 officers and 110 enlisted men of the 90th arrived at Tingkawk Sakan by P-47 and C-47, and busily scurried about finding tents and generally getting settled. Condi-





By the time Razorback P-47s made it to Burma, ETO units were already upgraded to "bubble-top" Jugs. Their eight-gun pack and ability to carry thousands of pound of external ordnance made them a good ground pounder. (Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)



Note the size of the pilot compared to the airplane. Thunderbolts dwarfed Japanese fighters and could take much more punishment and still come home. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)

tions were considerably more rugged than they were in Moran, but the change was welcome, particularly if it led to more interesting and important operations.

The day after, on August 28, the first bombing mission was flown from Tingkawk. The formation was led by Lt. Morgan and the formation hit Bilumyo. Maj. Johnson, Air A-2 (Intelligence), gave the men of the 90th FS a survey of the situation in the area. This air put a zest in one's appetite. Even the K rations tasted good! The crowd waiting for Ann Sheridan and her troupe dispersed when word arrived that their arrival had to be delayed.

It was only in the afternoon of August 30 that the show was played. The glamorous Sheridan, funny Ben Blue, clever Jackie Miles (emcee), an attractive brunette accordionist (Ruth Denas), and a hula dancer in a grass skirt (Mary Landa) put on an entertaining one-hour show and were greeted by loud whistling and tumultuous applause.

It was five days in Burma with five days of rain. There was some variation in the weather: "raining hard" or "raining harder." Mud was conspicuous by its presence everywhere. This weather, all agreed, was conducive to good "sacking" and hearty eating but not for fighting a war. The arrival of the liquor ration helped brighten the situation considerably. The GIs sorrowfully watched Sheridan and her troupe depart the morning of August 31, after the sign-

ing of many autographs. One of the armament corporals had Sheridan autograph his shorts. He said they had seen their last laundering. The month of August ended full of changes and hopes for the men of the 90th Fighter Squadron.

Hammering the Nail

With the advance of Allied troops, the targets got progressively farther away. The Japanese had dispersed their supplies in jungle areas and near small villages. Twice in the month of December 1944, the P-47s escorted the B-25s of the 490th Bomb Squadron. They strafed antiaircraft positions near bridges on the Mandalay-Lashio railroad. The month had started with several support missions near Bhamo, but the fall of the city to the Chinese forces ended the necessity for close support in the area, except on December 20th, when a Chinese division was stopped by the Japanese forces. Incendiary clusters and napalm tanks were used successfully. Several other bridges were also destroyed, but many of them were repaired with wood or bamboo constructions, and they were knocked out another time. A bypass bridge at Hsenwi had been knocked out on December 4 by Cherry, but by the 28th, another had been constructed. This one had only the pilings, which were connected by a few crosspieces. The floor was probably put on it at night; since the pilings were cut off at the surface of the water, it was difficult

THE BIGGEST EVENT IN DECEMBER 1944, WITHOUT ANY COMPETITION, WAS THE AERIAL COMBAT DURING WHICH TWO P-47S OF THE 90TH FS FACED A FORMATION OF JAPANESE FIGHTERS.

to see. A direct hit at one end knocked some of the pilings. One mortal accident occurred during a bombing mission when Lt. Prinzler crashed in the vicinity of Kamaing; he failed to come through a big cloud. His body was rapidly found in the wreck of his plane by a search team.

By the end of the month, an important fighter sweep of Kunlon, Aungban, and Heho airfields involved the pilots of the 90th FS. The purpose of this attack was to intercept a maximum number of Japanese planes returning to other fields. Sixteen P-47s of the 90th FS took part, with additional planes of the 88th and 89th squadrons. For this operation, they were transferred to Myitkyina. The operation occurred on December 31. Eight planes of the 90th FS that hit Heho experienced the heaviest antiaircraft fire the squadron had ever met at low or high altitude, until they left the area. Lt. Hammer's plane was hit, knocking out his airspeed indicator and left aileron, but he succeeded in coming back to the base. Four other planes, which attacked Kunlon for 45 minutes, saw no Japanese planes, so they strafed the two separate strips. Two of them were hit by machine-

gun fire, damaging the landing-gear mechanism on one of them. This made it necessary for the pilot (Lt. Lyon) to crash-land. Fortunately, he was not injured, although his P-47 was totally destroyed. Despite several strafing passes, hits were scored on a number of Japanese planes, but there was no way of knowing if any enemy planes were damaged.

Master Stroke

The biggest event in December 1944, without any competition, was the aerial combat during which two P-47s of the 90th FS faced a formation of Japanese fighters. As Japanese aircraft had almost vanished from the skies of Burma soon after the arrival of the 90th FS, the aerial-combat opportunities were poor for the pilots, except for the day of December 14 during a patrol south of Bhamo, along the Irrawaddy. Here is the story of that interception:

"Two P-47s, having taken off Tingkawk Sakan at 1200 hours, were patrolling south of Bhamo at 1435 hours at 10,000 ft. at SO-0595, heading

Pilots of the 80th FG pose with a bomb decorated with a Christmas greeting at Tingkawk Sakan Airfield, Burma, on December 24, 1944. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)





Lt. Weston in the cockpit of his P-47 *Miss Ann III*. The name of the crew chief, S/Sgt J. L. Schaffer, was also stenciled near the name of the pilot. (Photo courtesy of author)

south. Flight Leader 1st Lt. Samuel E. Hammer and wingman 2nd Lt. Stedman L. Howarth Jr. simultaneously saw enemy fighters ("Tojos") attacking a C-47 at SO-1585 (approx) at treetop level about 5,000 feet below the altitude of the patrol."

Here is the narrative of Hammer, the pilot:

Lt. Samuel E. Hammer who was credited with three victories in aerial combat on December 14, 1944, is proudly posing with the actress Jinx Falkenburg, who visited Tingkawk Sakan. Their eyes seem to be full of admiration...or something. (Photo courtesy of author)



"When I first saw the enemy fighters, they were apparently strafing the parachutes, which had just been dropped by a C-47. I dove sharply to the attack, and by the time I had reached the point of attack, the Tojos were actively attacking the C-47. The lead Tojo of four (they were flying in two elements of two planes each) was firing into the C-47, and I could see smoke coming from the C-47. I started firing on the lead Tojo, at first observing my tracers to be passing under the enemy. The gunsight would not operate because of a faulty connection. When I commenced firing, the lead Tojo pulled up sharply, climbing 1,000 ft., heading north. I followed closely, firing all the time. At the end of the climb, the Tojo flipped over, dove to the ground, and crashed. The crash of this plane was confirmed by observation of the pilot of the C-47, and the wreckage is located on a small hill at SO-1587, to the east of the road. This Tojo is claimed destroyed.

"The two Tojos of the second element had followed this section (which covered a distance of about five miles), and by the time of the crash of the first Tojo, they were on my tail. I commenced evasive action, pulling up sharply in a vertical reverse. The enemy attempted to follow this maneuver but collided in midair when about 1,000 ft. above the ground. The planes fell to the ground, separating about 200 yds. apart in the fall. These two Tojos are claimed destroyed.

"Four Tojos then jumped me from above, at 1,000 ft., and I headed north along the road toward Bhamo, in level flight, indicating 310 mph and pulling 65 inches. Tojos were able to close to 200 yds. in spite of my efforts to outdistance them, and they continued to gain until I was clear of the mountains and approaching Bhamo, at which point I was able to put my plane in a slight dive, in which I outdistanced the enemy. The two Tojos broke off the action, and I turned back, climbing,

and attempted to resume the engagement. Climbing to 1,500 ft. to the southwest of Bhamo, I saw a formation of four Tojos in two elements of two planes each. I attacked these planes from an altitude advantage of 1,000 ft. in a slight dive. The two elements divided right and left, and turned to attack me from both sides. I commenced violent evasive action, and with two Tojos on my tail in a steep dive, my engine seemed to explode. I increased my angle of dive, evaded the enemy, and landed at Bhamo landing ground at approximately 1500 hours.

"Oil on the windshield and smoke in the cockpit severely hampered the landing, and visibility was extremely restricted. However, I was able to see the field boundary markers and made a successful landing, missing a slit trench by two feet. My landing was a signal for resumption of hostilities, and mortar shells landing nearby combined with snipers' bullets prevented a more thorough examination of my plane, but no bullet holes could be observed.

"I was not able to remove the cowl and examine the engine, and a bullet may have gone into the open cowl flap and exploded in the engine, but no traces of any bullets were visible on the outside of the plane. The engine may have failed because of extended use of the emergency power."

After this aerial fight full of action, Hammer was credited with three confirmed victories.

The combat report contains in its conclusion the following elements:

- The enemy planes were definitely Tojos. Although no more than four were seen at any one time by either pilot, the course of the action and frequency of observations indicate at least 12 Tojos were in the area and possibly more.
- The planes were camouflaged mottled blue green with a red prop spinner. They had no other identifying markings. The paint appeared to be shiny enamel, and the camouflage made them exceedingly difficult to see against the jungle foliage.
- The enemy was only using 20mm cannons. Neither pilot observed any machine-gun fire or tracers.
- The enemy pilots appeared to be of superior quality. They maintained the American formation,

HOWARTH'S COMBAT REPORT:

"I first noted violent evasive (action) on the part of the C-47, which had completed its dropping activities. At this moment, Lt. Hammer dove sharply, and I followed him down, dropping my wing tanks when I saw his fall. I blacked out for a moment in fast turn, and when I recovered consciousness, I saw one Tojo, which had turned into Lt. Hammer, coming toward me. We were then 1,000 ft. above the mountains. I succeeded in getting into the blind spot of this Tojo, and as he pulled up in a slight bank, I commenced firing and pressed the attack closely. Strikes were noted on the fuselage, large pieces flew off the cockpit of the Tojo, and the plane started in a steep dive on its back. I followed it down to 700 ft. above the ground. It was still on its back at slightly more than vertical, making no attempt to recover from the dive. I do not believe it would be possible for the plane to recover from a dive at this speed and at this altitude, and it is my opinion that the initial attack killed the pilot. This Tojo is claimed destroyed. Subsequent observation of the point to which this plane was diving disclosed a large fire.

I could not follow this plane to observe its crash because of an attack by two other Tojos. I turned toward them, and they broke away, avoiding my head-on attack. After these planes had broken away, I climbed to regain altitude, attacking two single Tojos during my climb but only getting snap shots at them. I was not able to observe any bullet strikes. I climbed to 17,000 ft. in an attempt to rejoin Lt. Hammer, but I was unable to locate him. Apart from the two single Tojos that I attacked in this climb, I also observed two Tojos in formation below me.

Finding myself clear of the enemy at 17,000 ft., I observed a fire on the ground at the spot where I had last seen the plane that I had attacked. I dove to investigate and found two fires, separated by 75 ft. of burned-out jungle, the smoke uniting to form a single column. This fire was at SO-1388, on the east side of a hill west of the road. I then flew over Bhamo landing ground, and when assured by gestures that Lt. Hammer was unhurt, I returned to base, landing first at Myitkyina because of gasoline shortage."

flying and fighting in a two-plane element. They were aggressive and showed excellent control of their planes.

- At deck altitude, the Tojo could apparently gain on P-47 in level flight in spite of emergency power. The P-47, however, quickly outdistanced the Tojo in a slight dive. The P-47 at high speed appeared able to turn inside the Tojo, but no engagement was pressed sufficiently to make this point certain.

During the month of January 1945, the 90th FS moved to Myitkyina, where the landing strip in the eastern area had just been finished and was able to be used by the squadron. On January 20, Evans took off from Tingkawk Sakan after the fog had dissipated, and 19 other P-47s followed him. The squadron operated from Myitkyina until May 1945, before being transferred to India until the end of the war. But that is another story. +

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