Box Seat Over Hell
Volume II

To: VIETNAM ARCHIVE
TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY

by Bill Stratton
International Liaison Pilots and Aircraft Association
Battle Hymn of the Grasshopper
Robert McCormick

Over clouds, under wires
*T'hill with the landing gear and tires,
We're the eyes of the artillery
In and out through the trees
We're as hard to find as fleas,
We're the eyes of the artillery.

Chorus:
So then, it's fly, fly, see
For the field artillery.
Shout out your data loud and strong
RANGE CORRECT.
So we'll give the Axis fits
With our Maytag Messerschmits
We're the grasshopper artillery.
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Foreword —
by Bill Stratton

Fifteen years ago I co-authored Box Seat Over Hell, along with my dear friend the late Hardy Cannon. Since then I have continued to collect photos, information and true life stories about L-Birds and the pilots who flew and loved them. The result is approximately ten times the amount of facts, figures and descriptions used to compile the first book. Now, after continued requests from friends and fellow L-Bird enthusiasts to publish what I have collected, I am presenting Box Seat Over Hell II.

By the very fact that you are reading this, you are showing that you share my affection and care for the role this type of small aircraft played in our history. Arguably, the L-Bird was the single most significant tool of battle in World War II and all conflicts since. The L-Birds and the pilots who flew them deserve a special place in our hearts, for without them our position in today’s world would not be the same as we enjoy today.

This is the story of courageous men and their romance with the sky...of men who flew in combat armed only with a pistol, and who attacked the enemy in aircraft made of tubing, wires and fabric.

Over a period of 15 years or so, I acquired one sample of every American Liaison Aircraft (L-Bird) used in World War II (WWII), and with Hardy Cannon’s artistry and imagination, we restored each of the WWII L-Birds back to flying in their “WWII Combat Colors” therefore creating the only complete American WWII Liaison Aircraft Flying Museum in the World at that time, the Alamo Liaison Group (ALG).

Requests and suggestions from folks and various organizations from all over the world, brought about my founding and creating the INTERNATIONAL LIAISON PILOT AND AIRCRAFT ASSOCIATION (ILPA), and my writing, editing and producing the ILPA newsletter Liaison Spoken Here for the 1,700 or so ILPA members who have “signed-on” with me the past 15 or so years.

The common denominator of the members of the ILPA is their love of heritage and their desire to preserve and hold L-Bird history close to their hearts!

Bill Stratton

Bill Stratton sketch by Lindsay “Sam” Sammons
Chapter I

In the Beginning

The story of the liaison plane actually begins before the United States entered World War II. The small planes were considered a secret weapon in 1940 when the allies purchased 44 Stinson 105's (meaning it could cruise at 105 mph). These were so successful in their close support operations that the order went out to design the more powerful L-5's. The Stinson Corporation had merged with the Vultee Aircraft Corporation and together they perfected A. P. Fontain's design Model 76 (better known as the L-5). This plane was a safe, spin resistant and widely used utility plane. In June 1941 the Army Air Corps also contacted several other light plane manufacturers and asked them to supply a few planes, at no cost to the Army, for evaluation as observation planes. Aeronca, Piper, and Taylorcraft jumped at the opportunity.

If the test worked out positively, as hoped for, it would open up a whole new marketing area for their industry, which had been slower than most others to recover from the Depression. Twelve planes, pilots, and mechanics to maintain them reported to Camp Forrest, Tennessee, for Second Army maneuvers. The top brass was greatly impressed, and to further test the planes' abilities and usefulness, a contest was devised. A plane was to race against the radio. A crack Signal Corps radio team and a light plane were to receive a message at the same time. The message was to be relayed to a headquarters in the field fifty miles away. The Signal Corps team had to code the message, send it, decode it at the other end and hand it to the officers standing next to the radio.

The light plane had to take off, fly the fifty miles, land on a dirt road next to the headquarters and hand deliver the message to the same officers. The airplane won by almost fifteen minutes.

The planes proved so useful at the Camp Forrest exercises that the Army requested them later that summer for Third Army maneuvers at Ft. Bliss, Texas.

During this operation the planes earned their nickname, "Grasshoppers". The name "Grasshopper" has an unclear origin. One of the stories, as told by Dario Politella in his book "Operation Grasshopper", says the name started in November 1941 during Army maneuvers at Camp Forrest, Tennessee. In the midst of a mock battle, Major General Ennis P. Swift, commander of the 1st Cavalry Division, is said to have called for "those grasshoppers" in requesting spotting planes assigned to his Division.

Another story about the same maneuvers has a Henry Wann flying military messages as well as the morning papers, cigars and a 50 pound ham for the Major. As he landed his J-3 on a stretch of desert relatively clear of cactus and grass clumps, he bounced a few times. When he reported to General Swift, the general commented: "You look like a damn grasshopper when you landed that thing out there in those boondocks and bounced around."

During these maneuvers the planes took off from cow pastures, dirt roads and from plank strips laid in marshes. They landed anywhere and everywhere, including right in the advancing infantry's lap. General Walter Krueger of the Second Army watched them in action and exclaimed: "Why, they're regular grasshoppers!"

Whichever version is correct, the name stuck and so the little planes were named Grasshoppers. The civilian pilots painted pictures of grasshoppers on the fuselage of their planes and wore a grasshopper emblem in lieu of wings on their shirts.

The tests of the civilian operated and financed light planes convinced the Army of their value in military operations. Shortly after Pearl Harbor, the Army placed orders with all the manufacturers who had supplied planes to the maneuvers earlier that year. They placed additional orders with Stinson and the Interstate Company.

The first liaison squadron came into being in the summer of 1943. Until that time, the liaison planes were operated by a motley collection of units. To bring order from chaos, special squadrons were formed. The first liaison squadron was based at Laurel, Mississippi.
Its pilots came from several different areas of the Service, because at that time there was no special pilot training program for liaison pilots. Many had been washed out of regular military flying schools because of some minor physical ailment or because of a tendency to stunt their trainers when they should have been practicing other maneuvers. Others came from the Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP) which began shortly before World War II. They all became the “flying Sergeants” of the Army Air Force.

A gentleman by the name of Frank J. Bartlett from Sand Point, Idaho was put in command of the newly created Air Force Liaison Squadron. It was assigned, on paper at least, thirty-two aircraft, enough enlisted pilots to fly them, fifteen officers and 100 men to keep them flying, and all sorts of other equipment. The only thing lacking was a specific job title. They were not artillery observers, not evacuation planes for wounded - they were just “liaison”, a word which, in the Army lingo of the day, could mean practically anything.

Liaison pilots held enlisted rank because the Army Air Force had decided that the restricted type of aircraft they flew and the resultant limitations of their duties did not qualify them for commissions. The artillery pilots of Army Aviation were commissioned officers, but their commissions were based primarily upon their successful completion of a training course in organic air observations with the field artillery, rather than merely their ability to operate liaison aircraft.

Ltc. Paynee O. Lysne, Ret. wrote of the training he received in an article published in Army Aviation January 31, 1994.

“In February 1944, HQ Fifth Army published Special Order #33, which relieved 26 officers and enlisted men from duty in the Mediterranean theater of operations and assigned them to Ft. Sill (Oklahoma) for the purpose of undergoing further training with a view to being rated Liaison Pilots.

What a big deal - we were all combat qualified, had many hours of combat flying, artillery adjustment, fire control, reconnaissance, aerial resupply, float plane operations, and other types of missions. Many of us were up for promotion, but when these orders were published, all recommendations were stopped. I personally had acquired some 500 hours in Africa and Italy.

We were authorized to travel by belligerent vessel, commercial transport, Army transport, Navy vessel, and/or rail - in fact, any way we could get there was OK with DA.

Upon arrival at Ft. Sill, we were more or less put in a pool and looked upon as odd balls until the IPs from Pittsburg, KS were sent down to give us our check rides for out rating. My check ride consisted of taking off, climbing to 4,000 feet on a Southeasterly heading away from Post Field. At 4,000 feet, my IP eased back on the throttle and said in a loud voice, "FORCED LANDING!" I almost shouted back, "NO S—!" but instead asked if he wanted to land back at Post Field or in one of the fields below. He said one of the fields would be OK.

We glided and glided, checked for carb ice, and glided some more. I set up an approach to a large pasture, and on long final, the IP said, "OK, let's go back to Post Field." We did, I passed, and my orders rating me a Liaison Pilot were forthcoming. All the others that came back under the same circumstances suffered the same strenuous check ride.

This school was a one time affair, one class only. After this class, the school was closed. Upon graduation, each of us were issued an airplane, a roll of safety wire, a pair of needlenose wire cutters, and a pocket knife. The knife, we were told, was to carve a propeller in case we broke one.

Liaison flyers were the only U.S. pilots to serve out World War II as enlisted men. While many pilots in all branches of the Service had started out as enlisted men, they had all been promoted to commissioned officers by 1943.

Liaison pilots craved those commissions, if for no other reason than those precious “gold bars” would allow them entry into the mahogany bars of the officers’ club between missions. The fact that this seldom happened did not deter them from pursuing their jobs with the utmost dedication and enthusiasm.

The liaison pilots carried the letter "L" emblazoned on the crest of their wing insignia and were awarded to a number of airmen who were civilian rated pilots prior to the start of hostilities. A majority, however, had received some modicum of the Army Air Forces’ Cadet training program. The first three months of this training were compared to Officer Candidate School (a commission would not be considered despite the education and training provided). At some point during the flying curriculum these men had been “washed out”. Being offered the choice of retraining as bombadier/navigators or being permitted to fly as enlisted men, many chose the latter. One true statement governed all these men: more than anything in the world they
wanted to fly.

No task was too large or too small to be taken on by the little planes. They spotted targets for their big sisters, the fighters and bombers. Flying slowly, the Grasshoppers could see everything that was happening on the ground. Because of their ability to transport men and materials quickly they were used in many capacities. They were used as hospital planes. They acted so much like gliders, they were used to train glider pilots in dead-stick landings. They transported mail, delivered ground personnel, dropped smoke and high explosive bombs (albeit small ones), did photographic and visual reconnaissance, laid telephone wire, evacuated wounded, dropped pigeon messengers, dropped 450 to 600 pounds of supplies they carried inside the plane, and carried an additional seventy-five-pound food pack suspended in bomb racks under each wing. And they did their duty on wheels, skis and pontoons. They were fitted with spray equipment and sprayed DDT against flies and mosquitos. On their “off time” they also flew the officers on various trips - to see a girl, meet a brother or friend fifty miles down the road. A thirty minute plane ride would save an officers time, not to mention his backside, from a jarring all-day ride in a jeep. The taxi trips kept the sergeants busy and somewhat in command - of who got to ride in their “Grasshoppers”.

The little planes flew out of busy airfields, dusty dirt strips and jungle clearings barely long enough to allow them to take off; they flew off roads, city streets and parking lots where nothing else could get in or out. While they were doing this, they managed to dodge any enemy fighters they ran into.

A story by William L. Worden, in the May 26, 1945 issue of “The Saturday Evening Post” captures the spirit of the men and machines of the Grasshopper Squadrons. It was a first hand look by Mr. Worden of the incredible conditions and special spirit of the pilots.

“The sergeant said, ‘You the guy who wants to go over the mountains (at Leyte in the Philippines)? ... Get in, Mac”’ and raced the crackling motor. The little plane twitched its tail through mud and water and bumped along the steel matting. The sergeant kept to the runway by hanging his blond head out of the window by the pilot’s seat and staring down at the rough steel barely visible under six inches of water and ooze.

He said, ‘Better close your window. It might get wet.’

Ormoc’s ruins passed underneath. The pilot, now wearing a baseball cap with a long bill, craned his neck to see the mountains behind and looked around the propeller for a better inspection of those ahead. The two-seater began climbing straight toward the highest mountains from the meadow which was marked on maps of Leyte as Valencia airport.

Off to the right, there were occasional flashes from artillery, and smoke from the exploding shells rose ahead of the laboring little plane. One hilltop was entirely burned off, with fire still eating at its shoulders. The only sign of life anywhere in the mountains was a single patrol of Americans, working cautiously across an open spot between the mouths of two jungle tangled canyons.

The plane cleared a cliff by a few dozen feet, with a cloud directly above, then dropped into a narrow canyon, flying well below the tops of the bordering cliffs and only a couple of hundred feet from either wall. The canyon widened for a lake, but beyond it the jungle closed in solidly again in a series of knife-edged ravines. No sign of any movement anywhere. Yet this was the center of an area where patrols that morning had reported some 2000 Japanese, remnants of the defending armies of Leyte now trying to make their way to the northwestern coast. These troops were retreating slowly, in good order and with enough weapons, but in such terrible physical condition that they had resorted to cannibalism.

The sergeant with the close-cropped blond hair flew at such altitudes that it would have been no trick to hit the plane with a rock. When he finally crossed the top of the island hogback and could see the plains ahead leading to Tacloban spreading out to the east, he turned around and grinned widely.

“You know, he said, ‘that compass was right, after all. In the States, I never used to fly by compass and I didn’t believe this one. But it was right. I’d have sworn we were flying due north.’

Presently - after once making an extra circle just to get a good look at an attractive trout stream - the sergeant came down at Tacloban airport. A four-motored transport - C-54 - and a whole squadron of bombers - B-24’s - were circling the field, waiting for opportunities to land. The sergeant paid no attention to them. He came in at a neat seventy miles an hour, hit the edge of the runway and taxied up it without once glancing at the transport landing beside him simultaneously or the two bombers which, balancing delicately on their nose wheels, screeched to stops while the sergeant was finding a parking space and swinging the little plane.
He said, ‘O.K. Mac; this is it.’

I said, ‘By the way, sergeant, did you know there are a couple thousand Japs around that lake we just went over?’

The sergeant said, ‘No? Say, you should have told me. We could have gone lower and maybe seen some of them.’

He wandered off alone into a maze of whirling bomber propellers, beyond which were living tents for the personnel of that maelstrom of an airport.

The blond sergeant was Whitey Pease, one of the thirty-two fantastic pilots of the 25th Liaison Squadron...one of the flying sergeants, the lost men, the completely unrecorded men whose existence never was planned and whose survival is a constant source of surprise to the people who have to figure out large scale campaigns.”

Ltc Paynee O. Lysne, Ret. tells of arriving at Sidi-Bel-Abbes, Algeria, North Africa in February 1943. After reporting, he and two others were told, by a tough looking Sergeant, “Do you see that large box? Well, in that box is an airplane, which you will take out carefully. Assemble it by the book, and tomorrow, you’ll fly it. And that box will be your home for as long as you’re here in the school. Make yourselves comfortable, and get to work.”

A First Air Commando base deep inside Japanese territory in Burma was held by the Japanese at the west end of the field and by the Americans and British at the east end. Planes taking off were strongly advised to turn north as quickly as possible to avoid enemy ground fire. Planes that were landing were directed to come in to the west regardless of wind direction and to taxi to the east end of the field as fast as possible to avoid enemy riflemen.

Did these men love to fly? To say the liaison squadrons were made up of men who loved to fly would be gross understatement. It is probably true that most of the men who flew Grasshoppers would have liked to fly fighters, bombers or even transports, but for one reason or another they were denied the more glamorous assignments. Instead, they were assigned to the lowly Grasshoppers, and they succeeded in turning those tiny unarmed aircraft into one of the most useful but little remembered weapons of the war.

When someone or something had to be delivered and no one else could get in, the liaison planes were called on to do the job. They flew the truly tedious short hops: aviation that often consisted of hour upon hour of sheer boredom punctuated by the quicksilver moments of abject terror! Most often the planes were totally unarmed, unless you counted the .45 automatic each pilot carried in a shoulder holster or the carbine he had snitched and tucked under the seat. The planes did not have self-sealing gas tanks, and a well-placed tracer turned them into flaming fireballs.

Grasshopper pilots not only handled some of the most boring missions of the war, they also handled some of the most treacherous and hair raising. They flew in every theatre: from the desert where, in the super heated air, it was a real struggle to get airborne; in the Arctic, where they fought to stay on course through williwaws and boreal storms, and where if they got lost they were almost guaranteed a frigid death.

They flew over jungles with aircraft so overloaded they barely maintained altitude, with engines screaming, to clear the tree tops. These pilots were not the “glory boys” of the Air Corps. They were never given the recognition or the medals of the bomber pilots; they were never feted or promoted like the fighter pilots, not even the once-in-a-while recognition given the transport pilots. They were simply young men who loved flying enough to take what they could get. When the opportunity to fly the little Grasshoppers came, they jumped at it. After all, flying a teensy sitting duck made of tubing and wood and fabric was better than not flying at all. In the process, they succeeded in turning their flimsy crates into one of the most useful tools of the air war.

In an article from “”Flying Magazine” January 1947 entitled “Lessons from the Liaisons”, Wilfred Owen gave a heartfelt salute to the men and planes of the Liaisons.

“When lightplanes joined the Army shortly before Pearl Harbor they didn’t look very much like warriors. But they soon proved that you don’t have to be big and tough to win medals...”

When they got into the fighting war, the L-type aircraft achieved glory in operations far beyond the call of duty. In the airborne invasion of Burma they were the first to follow the gliders in; and before airstrips could

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be made ready they had carried out a thousand casualties with complete contempt for the nearby Japs. In Italy they flew all the important messages between Anzio and the 5th Army headquarters. In all parts of the world they dropped parapacks of food and supplies to isolated troops and maintained constant patrol over enemy lines in defiance of enemy fighters. Often, in fact, they were able to outwit their “superiors” in the air by reason of their remarkable maneuverability, leading enemy aircraft over ack-ack positions and then high-tailing for home while friendly guns shot up their adversaries.

It would be impossible to list all the jobs liaison planes did. For the most part they were flown by unshaven men in dirty, baggy mis-matched uniforms who were in desperate need of rest. No task was too tough for this ornery breed who climbed into their little Grasshoppers and headed over unfriendly territory, trusting in their skill, their all-too-frail craft and, many times, their prayers to carry them to their destinations.
In the Beginning

1 - Curtiss JN-4 "Jenny" — Bill Stratton
2 - WWII Taylorcraft L-2 L-Bird trainers — USAAC
3 - "Class-Before-One" L-4 L-Bird trainers 1942 Fort Sill, OK
In the Beginning

4 — Aeronca L-3s taxiing away from the factory at Middletown, OH — J. Houser
5 — Piper L-4s on flight line at Fort Sill, OK 1944 — Bill Stratton
Chapter 2 —

Spotter Pilot

Liaison planes and their pilots were an integral part of World War II. However, their beginnings can be traced all the way back to the 1800's.


"The first recorded use of aerial observation took place during the America Civil War, when both the Union and Confederate armies used balloons for aerial observation and artillery adjustment. During the Spanish-American War the United States Army again used observation balloons. Concomitant to the use of fixed-wing observation aircraft by the combatants during World War I was the use of observation balloons and dirigibles. On 19-20 January 1915 London was bombed by a German dirigible. It was not until 3 September 1916, however, that the first German dirigible (or "Zeppelin") was shot down by a British airplane.

The use of fixed-wing aircraft to destroy a dirigible was significant because it spelled the ostensible end to the use of airships and balloons as tactile weapons of war and, conversely, the emergence of the airplane as a weapons platform. It was during World War I that aircraft technology was developed to meet the tactical exigencies of the war. Machine guns and bombs were placed on airplanes, and this meant that death and destruction no longer emanated strictly as the result of hostile action on the ground. Ground commanders acquired the capability to use aircraft to bomb military and - at times - civilian targets. Warfare now took on an added dimension: that of indiscriminate and discriminate killing of innocent civilians. Pilots also acquired the means to engage one another in aerial combat in what became known as "dogfights". It was during World War I that the sobriquet "ace" had its inception. A pilot who destroyed five or more enemy airplanes was honored with such a title. Ironically, a degree of romanticism was associated with being a fighter pilot during World War I, and many historical and literary examples exist concerning the conviviality among pilots and between combatants.

Although fighter and bomber aircraft flew the majority of tactical sorties in World War I, observation aircraft nevertheless played a most significant role, especially for ground commanders. During that conflict aerial observation was at best crude. There were no radios - at least in most of the aircraft - and what aircraft radios existed had very limited transmitting and receiving capabilities. In lieu of radios, pilots, observers, and ground personnel used arm and hand signals, flags, and dropped messages to communicate. The result was ineffective and untimely tactical communications and, subsequently, a compromised mission. With the absence of any discernible doctrine during World War I concerning aerial observation, especially over the immediate battlefield (which was at times as narrow as fifty meters or as broad as several kilometers), it became imperative that something be done to fill this doctrinal vacuity.

It was not until December 1917 that an effort was made to address this problem. It was then that General Henri Phillipe Petain, French commander of the Allied armies in the north and northeast, sent a memo to the commander in chief of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) in France, General John J. Pershing, giving his opinion on how observation aircraft should be used. General Petain's statement, though not submitted "in camera", was not widely disseminated. His comments were incisive, however. He stipulated that observation aircraft should be used primarily for the adjustment of artillery fire, including counter-battery fire, and for liaison missions, but not for reconnaissance purposes. The question as to what constituted observation vis-a-vis reconnaissance caused a degree of polemic at the time, because a number of ground commanders believed that observation dealt with the immediate battlefield, while reconnaissance denoted long-range surveillance and scouting of the enemy behind the lines as far back as the corps or theater areas. Other commanders, however, believed observation and reconnaissance could and should be done by the same aircraft, thereby making better use of time and resources. The question evoked a degree of concern
among the Allied Powers during World War I as to who was responsible for the implementation of aerial observation over the battlefield. At times it seemed that the respective powers simply performed aerial observation over their own sectors with the Allies. General Petain attempted to ameliorate this problem by suggesting that the number of observation aircraft be proportional to the size of the ground units they were serving and that these aircraft have the opportunity of aerial observation and artillery fire adjustment in sectors other than their own. He also said that observation aircraft should come under the suzerainty of ground commanders. World War I ended before his suggestions could be implemented; however, the above concept was employed by the United States ground forces in World War II.

World War I ended on November 11, 1918 and the United States became "caught up in the winds of isolationism" in the 1920’s and 30’s. The armed forces were markedly reduced and military spending was cut during the period between the World Wars. The Army was fortunate enough to receive funding to develop and expand its fledgling air arm. It was initially known as the Army Air Corp and was stared in 1926. In 1941 it became the Army Air Force, and in 1947 the Air Force.

Mr. LePore continues: "Throughout the 1920s and 1930s the Army procured and tested a number of tactical aircraft; had bombing and gunnery ranges built, developed training and tactical doctrine; and finally, the Air Corps built a worldwide aircraft communications system that emphasized air-to-ground and ground-to-air capabilities. Although the Army Air Corps had mostly tactical aircraft in its inventory during the interwar years, it emphasized as part of its training and doctrine an everwidening role for aerial reconnaissance and observation.

Numerous arms agreements and peace pacts among nations during the 1920s and 1930s served as testimony that nations ostensibly believed they were capable of overcoming their innate nationalism and antipathy toward one another. How wrong they were. By the mid-1930s fascism was well entrenched in Germany and Italy; the Soviet Union and its concomitant Communist ideology caused concern in Europe; and on the other side of the world, Japan was flexing its military muscle as it moved ominously throughout peripheral areas of the Far East. During this time, the United States attempted to maintain its averred neutrality and isolationism. The months and days, however, were figuratively and literally numbered until the world was enveloped in the most destructive war in history-World War II.

During the 1930s and at the outbreak of hostilities the United States was anything but prepared for war. Its Army numbered approximately 190,000 men, including those in the Army Air Corps. Much of the Army's weaponry was outdated, and what modern weapons existed in its active inventory were too few to be of any consequence in the eventuality of war. This meant the War Department (later to be the Department of the Army) had the Herculean task of preparing the Army for the likelihood of war. One way to do this was by military maneuvers in 1941 and early 1942 to test extant and new battlefield tactics.

It was during these maneuvers that the Army decided to test the efficiency of using certain aircraft for aerial observation and artillery spotting. Once again, the Army Air Corps and the Army Ground Forces had countervailing opinion as to what aircraft should be used and why. The Army Ground Forces hierarchy favored a small, light aircraft, relatively inexpensive, and one that would serve as nothing more than a vertical extension of the artillery observation post. In essence, such an aircraft would not be required to penetrate enemy lines in depth - though in actuality, such aircraft subsequently flew on a routine basis over enemy territory. The Air Corps, of course, continued to promulgate the thesis that observation missions required modified combat aircraft because of the necessity to perform aerial reconnaissance with a modicum of risk from hostile fire, be it from the ground or air.

General Hap Arnold speaks of some of his issues on air power in his work "Global Mission". This excerpt is from page 190: "...there were naturally a thousand things as the war in Europe drew closer. One of the greatest was the failure of our own leaders in the War Department, despite our continued educational efforts, to understand that a mere budget for so-and-so airplanes was not air power. Far too many high-ranking officers in the War Department were more interested in supplying "thousands" of aircraft to be sent abroad and to provide protection for the South American coasts than in getting the B-17's essential to our own Air Force. As these B-17's cost a great deal more than other types, they were passed over in favor of just "a lot of planes" that cost less. Despite exasperating War Department cancellations, we did get a few B-17's though not near-
ly a satisfactory nucleus for an American strategic bombardment force. We were also able to order B-24's. These Liberators were not delivered to us until 1941.

To keep the quality factor alive, in terms of the real air power of B-17's, I had to resort to a bit of "hands-faster-than-the-eyes" technique. I presented, for the War Department approval, a list of aircraft that met the total number of planes called for, but in order to provide a reasonable number of B-17's and stay within the allotted budget, I had included a few "light aircraft" - in fact, quite a large number of those tiny, inexpensive Piper Cubs, etc., which Sunday afternoon pilots enjoy under the name of "puddle-jumpers". However, since the Army wanted them for liaison work, everybody was happy.

The following letter to Mr. Clayton Victor Nelson on October 8, 1942 from the office of the Civilian Pilot Training office at Hinds Junior College in Raymond, Mississippi was a typical L-Bird call to duty:

October 8, 1942
Mr. Clayton Victor Nelson
219 West 7th Street
Hattiesburg, Mississippi
Dear Mr. Nelson:
We have been advised by the Atlanta office that we must start our Liaison Pilot Training class October 15. If possible, I would like for you to meet me in Jackson on Tuesday afternoon, October 13, at 1 P. M., in order that we may have you inducted at that time. Meet me at the Civilian Pilot Training office in the City Auditorium.
Please bring your birth certificate, or sufficient proof of birth; two passport size pictures and a release from the draft board. I will have the other papers at the C.P.T. office. After you are inducted you may return to Hattiesburg and report to us by noon, October 15.
Sincerely yours,
H. E. Worley,
Coordinator,
Civilian Pilot Training

Mr. Stamford Robertson, of Plainville, Connecticut, wrote of his first-hand experience in learning light plane tactics. His colorful narrative follows.

"A Col. Adams, who had a Piper dealership in Panama thought up the tactics for a combat area. A group of 18 planes and pilots were used to form a group to try them out. The pilots came from various groups and our base of operations was the balloon field at Pope Field (near Ft Bragg, North Carolina). Mike Murphy was our C.O. and was a real good man for the job. I have seen him slow roll an L-5 at 50 ft and I had heard that he used to land a Cub upside down on wheels that he had fastened to the top of the wing.

One idea of using light planes was to have them act as a swarm of locusts and fly into enemy territory and land paratroopers who would destroy bridges and take over crossroads. We flew paratroopers in tests and the man I had told me that he had been up in a plane 9 times and this had been the first time that he had been in one when it had landed.

We also tried to get 18 planes into a field in the shortest possible time. The best that we had been able to do was a little over 3 minutes from the time that the first plane had been sighted to the time that the last plane had landed. This called for real close flying and exact timing as one plane would land in the same spot that another plane had just vacated. People who complain about near misses today don't have any idea of what close means.

Another test that we did was to have an observation plane fly over a known area and observe how many planes passed under them during a one hour period. Of the 18 planes, only two were seen flying at treetop level. We were allowed to fly with chutes and there was no inquiries if we damaged a plane. There were no serious accidents; one propeller was broken and one aileron (a hinged or pivoted flap on an airplane, usually part of a wing, for rolling the craft on it longitudinal axis) did hit a mailbox.

We eventually returned to out squadrons where we soon became fed up with the chicken manure that we had to contend with. When the opportunity came to volunteer for an unknown mission overseas, many of us jumped at the chance, as we felt that finally we would have a chance to do something worthwhile. My outfit also had two terrible cooks that I didn't mind leaving and, wouldn't you know it, but they eventually came overseas as replacements.
We received more training at Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina. We had more low flying and barrier landings which accounted for some planes being damaged. Once again, there was no accident report. We were also checked out in the L-1.

We flew to Karachi, India after we had bounced many higher ranks with lower priority men who wondered just what and who we were. We had our crated planes waiting for us and we assembled them in the huge balloon hangar just in time to get in flying time.

Small groups were sent to the interior to work with the British and show them what we could do. In New Delhi, we were told to pose as flight officers so we would be quartered so as to be readily available. We could get away with it as we wore flight suits. Before we left Karachi we were told to leave our money there as we wouldn’t need any money where we were going. We soon found out that as flight officers we were expected to pay for our meals and we were almost broke. I don’t remember how we managed but do know that I was looking for a place to pawn my watch. We received per diem when we got back which made someone comment that we were fighting the war on per diem.

Our group of 100 pilots was divided into four flights, and I was one of the flight leaders. One of our bases was 150 miles behind the Japanese lines and we used it to fly in supplies to the stronghold and carry out the wounded. It was a tight spot and we had to make a sharp turn on take off to stay clear of snipers. We also went into hastily prepared strips to bring out wounded. We soon learned to use all the length of the field so they would not make them any shorter. We could get in ok, but getting out was the problem. A short field landing was a hard one so the weight of the plane would be on the wheels for best braking. At times we would land with the brakes locked but would release them as the tail came off the ground.

Safe flying in a combat area required flying as low as possible. As time went on we would just raise one wing to clear a tree instead of jumping over it. I had installed a shoulder harness that came out of a Flying Tiger P-40, and soon after, all the planes had them. In a few instances the seat would break loose. When one of our planes was hit while climbing to get over a hill, I figured a way to get over it with being a silhouette. I would fly directly at the hill and at the last moment turn and go up it diagonally, across the top and then down it in the opposite direction. This kept me pretty much on course and seemed to work for me. I tried to use the gas up in the tank that was over the exit door so I would have less gas to get thru if I was shot down. I avoided, if possible, all open fields. We wore chutes, but since we seldom were high enough to use them, I just fastened enough of the straps so they would stay clear of the flap handle.

The L-1 was supposed to carry two (men) but I have often flown out with 5. Most of the propellers leaked oil so badly that we had to clean the windshield while we were loading the wounded. One man would sit on the shelf on the back of the pilot and hold on to the tubing. His feet would be amongst the prop and throttle controls and had to be moved to work them. We had built in stretchers in the back seat.

Maintenance was a problem and parts had to be improvised. I used one wrench handle for a landing gear part and even jammed a glider tube into an L-1 tire. It was several inches too large and thumped on take off. Gas came in barrels, and had to be strained. I heard of one man who used his bush hat for a chamois and he plugged up the grommets with chewing gum. When we were overworked and tired we did a walk around inspection which included the tires and oil and gas. I used to run the plane up on one tank and take off and when I was set for a forced landing would switch tanks so that if water came down I was ready to land - never had to but was ready.

The red ball alert was 3 rapid shots on the machine gun. We were told to listen to the radios while we were in the plane, but since they were very unreliable I preferred to watch outside. As soon as I saw someone run I was ready to join him. One day we had 18 alerts before we were bombed and strafed. Our radio messages for flights for picking up wounded for the following day were based on the moonrise code and if you didn’t know what time the moon came up you were out of luck. We often would pick up a man who had been wounded that day who would be in a base hospital that night. It was very rewarding to know that, of all the people in this world, we were the ones who could at this point help them the most.

We were very eager and hated to refuse a mission because the strip was too short. Our C.O. finally got us together and told us that we had the idea that we should die for our country while the right idea was to make the other man die for his. Shortly after he wrecked an L-1 trying to get out of a field where he had landed to look at a downed zero.

I was escort for the first rescue by helicopter in a combat area so saw history being made.

Box Seat Over Hell - II
We flew until the monsoons came, but one group who was on duty were forgotten and flew during part of the monsoon. It was a welcome rest. Out of 100 airplanes we came out with about 25.

The work of liaison squadrons attached to the various Army HQs was more diversified than those at Army Group level, although the usual courier runs and transportation of key personnel remained primary features. In addition, there was much reconnoitering of communication routes, and in the Seventh Army low altitude photo reconnaissance by L-5's of the 72nd LS fitted with K-20 cameras greatly facilitated bridge reconstruction by engineers.

In the Ninth Army the 125th LS carried out important low level photographic missions over the front line, using a K-22 camera which was installed in an L-5 entirely on the initiative of squadron personnel. The result was a supply of tactical intelligence material not available through any other source. Between 1st November 1944, and the end of the war, the 125th flew some fifty photo missions covering crossings of the Roer, Rhine, Weser and Elbe rivers, and the results were of great value to infantry, artillery and engineer units alike. Medical and other supply missions within the armies were also flown, although limitations on the space available in liaison aircraft restricted the size of items carried.

Returning to the article by Herbert P LePore, "the initial use of Army liaison aircraft in combat during World War II took place in North Africa. On 9 November, 1942 three L-4's under the command of Army Capt. Ford E. Allcorn took off from the deck of the aircraft carrier USS Ranger, positioned off the coast, to participate in the invasion of North Africa. The L-4 crews took off from the carrier without difficulty and were instructed to maintain radio silence until they arrived at their destination, a landing strip near the coast. They were airborne only a short time, however, before they suddenly came under antiaircraft fire from the ships of the invasion fleet, whose gun crew believed they were firing at German airplanes. Still maintaining radio silence, the L-4's took evasive action and proceeded toward the assigned landing strip. Upon reaching the coast of North Africa the three liaison aircraft had the misfortune of once again coming under fire, this time from units of the American 2nd Armored Division, who mistakenly believed the planes to be German. The pilots employed all their flying skills once again to evade withering fire. Captain Allcorn had his windshield and part of his cockpit shot away, but he managed to make a safe landing, only to be wounded by machine gun fire from Vichy French forces. Friendly civilians rescued him and took him to an American aid station.

In the spring of 1944 the L-5 Stinson observation aircraft was introduced into the Italian campaign. The Army Air Forces procured a large number of these aircraft for use as an adjunct of the close air support mission. Faster and more powerful than the L-4, the L-5 could take more effective evasive action against antiaircraft fire and other aircraft than the L-4 and had greater range. The L-5 also was equipped with a powerful radio that enhanced its air-to-ground and air-to-air communications capabilities.

Because of its above capabilities, the L-5 was cross-utilized by the Army Ground Forces and Army Air Forces in Italy. A number of L-5's were flown by Army Air Forces pilots with Army Ground Forces pilots as observers who would direct by radio American fighter-bombers (P-51s and P-47s) on strafing and bombing runs to designated ground targets. Conversely, these missions were also flown with Army liaison pilots at the controls and with Army Air Forces pilots as observers. These operations in Italy, known as "Horsefly" missions, were quite successful. The L-5 was also used in the Pacific during World War II.

The roles of liaison aircraft in combat in Europe was markedly expanded after the Normandy invasion of 6 June 1944. From that day to 8 May 1945, liaison airplanes proved their mettle in the Allied armies' drive across Central Europe. They performed 97 percent of all artillery adjustment missions in the European Theater of Operations (ETO). The aircraft were also responsible for a high percentage of battlefield observation missions - complemented in part by Army Air Force reconnaissance aircraft. Because of the open, rolling terrain of the European countryside, aerial observation and artillery spotting were fairly easy. German soldiers, therefore, whenever seeing or hearing an L-4 or L-5, would seek shelter as quickly as possible, knowing only too well it would not be long before a murderous artillery barrage would be upon them.

Liaison pilots found that fields and farm roads in the European terrain served well as makeshift landing strips. During the months of June and July 1944 the fluidity of the battlefield was such that liaison pilots, attempting to return to the landing strips from which they had earlier taken off, often found their original strips in the hands of the enemy. This meant that another field or road had to be found."

Joseph McCord Watson of San Antonio, Texas took his first training flight on March 5, 1929 in an OX-5 Curtis Robin monoplane.

Box Seat Over Hell - II
Eventually, he was granted pilot license #6619. After trying a variety of planes, he settled on the Taylor Cub which was very stable in the bumpy South Texas air, as well as fun to fly.

Ominous rumblings from Europe convinced Watson that before too many years the United States would once again be embroiled in war, so he and some of his friends enlisted in the National Guard, preferring to be officers rather than being drafted.

He took night courses at Ft. Sam Houston and was commissioned a second lieutenant in the field artillery in 1930. He was a private pilot, but he believed the highly maneuverable Cub was the perfect platform for the surgically precise placement of the artillery fire: from a light plane circling lazily at 55-60 mph at 1,000 feet the mysteries of the ground were laid bare—every fold, hollow, and dimple in the earth was open to observation.

He took his idea to the 36th Division artillery commander and got permission to try out his theory. Next Watson enlisted the aid of Capt. John K. Burr, commander of the brigade headquarters battery. During drills, the two would drive to San Antonio's Stinson Field, rent a Cub, wrestle a bulky SCR-178 or SCR-194 radio into the rear seat and take off to test their ability to control road movements, spot targets, and perform general reconnaissance form the air. At first, their radio experiments produced mostly static until they hit upon the idea of wiring the antenna lead to a length of chain, which was heavy enough to hang more or less perpendicularly in the Cub's 60-mph slipstream, thus solving the problem.

During tests at drill assemblies in Texas, Watson often landed his rented light plane in the open spaces beside the guns he was supporting. When his fuel ran low, he'd land on a convenient roadway, taxi to the nearest gas station and buy a dollar's worth from the open-mouthed attendant. If he was caught away from a highway, he would spiral down to a landing right in the maneuver area and sponge some gasoline from a passing truck or command car.

While Watson and Burr struggled in rented airplanes learning how to use light aviation above the battlefield, military journals began to carry essays calling for light aviation units organic to ground forces and outside Air Corps control.

Next to enter the lists on the side of organic light Army aviation was William T. Piper, the forceful president of Piper Aviation, which made the strong, inexpensive, yet easy to master J-3 Cub. Piper was convinced his Cub was America's ticket into the air, and he was eager to see his bright yellow little planes sporting olive drab paint and carrying out military missions.

Piper and Watson—the latter now a Captain—got together in 1940 after Watson won permission from his Division Artillery Commander Brig. Gen. Robert O. Whiteaker, to conduct a two-day test of the J-3 as a platform from which to adjust artillery fire.

"I had been flying Piper Cubs for some time," Watson explains, "and I was impressed with their steadiness in the air and their ability to land and take off almost from anywhere the tires could roll. They were the planes I wanted to use in the test."

Watson asked New Orleans Piper distributor Tom Case to fly a Cub to Brigade Headquarters in the field at Camp Beauregard, Louisiana. For two days, he or Case flew missions over the 36th Infantry Division's battery of 155-mm howitzers, while the observer seated behind called down fire commands and made adjustments. During the second day, Case and Watson flew along the brigade's lengthy line of march as it travelled the 93 miles from Camp Beauregard to its base camp near Cravens, La., guiding the move from the air.

In November 1940, the 36th Division was mobilized and stationed at Camp Bowie, near Brownwood, Texas. Watson was ordered to organize the artillery ranges.

Once firing ranges were established, Gen. Whiteaker, as division artillery commander, contacted William Piper at his company's Pennsylvania headquarters and asked if Piper wanted to provide some aircraft to train with the division for a couple of weeks to conduct more extensive testing of Watson's theories. This time, Watson would be charged with keeping meticulous records that would be sent to the War Department as documentation of his concept. Immediately, Piper dispatched three new Cubs to Camp Bowie.

Watson, Piper himself, and Tom Case flew missions for 14 days, carefully logging every gallon of gas, ever pint of oil, maintenance problems, and any other bits of data they could assemble. The tests, though serious, had their humorous moments. General Whiteaker asked us if they could spot his camouflaged head-
quarters. He suggested they put a pound or two of flour in a small paper bag that could be dropped on the headquarters if it could be located from the air.

Watson flew over the area and quickly spotted Whiteaker’s command license plates flashing in the sun. He zoomed over and let fly with the flour sack and hit the jeep dead center.

While the incident provoked glee among junior officers, its more serious impact registered clearly with the T-patchers: very little could be concealed from a trained eye in the sky.

After the exercise, Watson, Piper and Case huddled with the artillery staff and wrote their report. The facts supported what Piper and Watson had been preaching - organic light Army aviation worked.

By 1941, as Watson and the 36th Infantry Division looked toward overseas deployment, other divisions were being used as test beds for the light aviation concept too, and as the streams of test reports made their way through the War Department mills, a ground swell of support for organic light aviation gathered momentum. On June 6, 1942, the War Department approved assignment of light aircraft to the field artillery and set up a flight school at Ft. Sill, Oklahoma. Ironically, Watson did not find out until months later that his dream had become a reality.

In 1942, the 36th was ready to go to Europe, but without Watson. His encyclopedic knowledge of the ranges at Camp Bowie was needed to help train new field artillerymen for the expanding Army as the U.S. entered World War II.

One day, as he was sweating on maneuvers in Louisiana, Watson spotted a directive establishing the liaison pilot school at Ft. Sill. He rushed to volunteer and a week later found himself in the famous class P-1 at Ft. Sill. He almost washed out.

“My instructor was 2nd Lt. Steve Hatch and, quite frankly,” Watson admits, “I wasn’t used to flying like he wanted me to fly, even though I had flown over 300 hours in light planes by then. I was very nervous about the evaluations and the anxiety showed in my flying.”

“After a really bad day we landed. Steve told me I couldn’t fly, that I would never make an Army pilot, and that he should wash me out.” Watson grins and adds, “But he didn’t.”

The threat settled Watson down and he graduated with the other members of that historic pioneer class of liaison pilots.

In November 1942, Watson went to war as an air officer for the 34th Infantry Division in North Africa where he would soon have his first brush with disaster.

“I was flying at 4,000-5,000 feet soon after I arrived in Africa, searching for German targets, when Lt. Stanley Williamson, my ground controller, came on the radio and excitedly shouted ‘Mac! There’s a German plane diving at you!’ I didn’t even think. I just flipped that Cub into a spin and headed down. I recall seeing a stream of tracers flashing by my canopy, then I landed. I jumped out while the engine was still running and jumped into a nearby fox hole. I spent the next hour or so shaking in my boots, Watson laughs.”

Two of his P-1 classmates weren’t so lucky-Sgt. J. S. Rengers crashed into a North African hillside while trying to evade an attacking Messerschmitt Bf 109E, and Sgt. C. B. Allen was blown away when his Cub flew into the path of an artillery shell as he adjusted fire on a German target.

Watson recalls bouts with yellow jaundice and dysentery that shrunk him from a robust 150 pounds down to a skeletal 118, leaving him so weak he could hardly climb into his Cub. Then there was Hill 609, a massive knob of granite crawling with German guns, which blocked the path of the 34th into Bizerte. Watson flew continuous missions over 609-landing only long enough to refuel and grab a quick bite to eat. Then it was back into the air, droning back and forth over the target until darkness forced him down. His nights were spent in a bomb crater next to his airplane.

He remembers a particularly close call: he had spotted a horse-drawn German artillery battery and brought 155mm. shells crashing down on it. A short time later, as he circled over the hill seeking another target, Watson spotted a large flight of aircraft moving toward him.

“I thought they were Mustangs, but as they flew by me I saw the black crosses on their wings and fuselages. They waggled their wings at me as they flew by. I watched them peel off and dive on the same battalion of the 155’s that I had adjusted on that German battery. They hit a couple of the guns and killed some of our boys, but they never made a single pass at me.”

After North Africa, the action shifted to Italy. The 36th landed at Salerno, followed a day later by the 34th.
As the 34th bloodied its nose on the Gustav Line and ground its way inch by inch toward Rome, Watson's log book swelled with hours of flight—most of them in combat.

Written into that book are hours of fear, bravery and fatigue, and moments such as when he spotted a German infantry battalion careless about camouflage and blew it to pieces with salvos of 155mm high explosive, an action that won him the Silver Star.

That same log book also records the 90 minutes he spent trying to fly to the aid of his old outfit—the beleaguered 36th Division when it was being battered along the Rapido River. Watson thought that if he took off before dawn, the dim early light would hide his plane from enemy guns but let him see well enough to spot artillery for the T-patchers. An hour and a half before sunrise he stationed men with flashlights on each side of his strip. When he revved up his engine they switched on the flashlights, giving him twin rows of light to mark the edges of the runway. When he got to the Rapido crossing, the ground was still too dark for any targets to be spotted.

"As you could see from the air," he recalls, "were solid streams of red and white tracers and the constant flash of muzzle blasts. You couldn't tell friend from foe, and so I didn't dare adjust artillery fire for them."

Suddenly, orders came recalling Watson to Ft. Sill. He received his orders on Thanksgiving Day near Monte Cassino as German shells pounded the lines of the 34th Division Artillery staff.

Finally, Watson's log book—sweat stained and grimy with the sand of North Africa and the mud of Italy—was tucked away in his homeward-bound duffle bag. The hours he logged totalled over 3,000: 2,000 of them in combat. There would be no further combat hours in Watson's log book.

For the rest of the war, Watson worked at Ft. Sill writing manuals on tactical uses of light aviation, testing new aerial techniques, and helping to define the purpose and principles of the concept.

In 1979, Watson was invited to Cleveland, Ohio, to receive the National Guard Association's Distinguished Service Medal. His citation reads, in part..."Lt. Col. Watson's exceptionally distinguished service to the Nation and the Army National Guard reflects great credit upon himself and is in keeping with the highest standards and traditions of the Armed Forces of the United States."

The hours were long and the battles many for the Liaison pilots; however, not all the of the war was on the battlefields.

An article in the February 7, 1980 Washington Post tells the story of Charles M. Brown, the Army's first black aviator and one of its few black officers during the World War II. The following is an excerpt from that article:

"Tears welled in Charles M. Brown's eyes during the officers' graduation ceremony as he realized the terrible irony of being a black Army officer during the segregation shortly before World War II. Brown, a Dunbar High School graduate who later became the Army's first black aviator, was one of few black officers during the period.

It was during his graduation from officers' candidate school in Fort Sill, Oklahoma, that Brown realized rank would not eliminate the racial prejudice that prevailed in the 1940s.

'Five blacks out of about 480 graduated as second lieutenants in my class. When they pinned the bars on my shoulders I realized I could not go anywhere on the post, not even the officers club. As a black officer I stood on the stage during graduation and tears came to my eyes."

Brown simply learned to survive in the separate but often unequal world of the U.S. Army. He flew a cloth-covered single-engine plane. Flying only 500 feet over the battlefield, and sometimes over enemy lines, he flew the small unarmed plane, pinpointing targets and radioing their location back to long-range field artillery batteries that barraged troops, tanks and trains. He received five air medals and was recommended for the Distinguished Flying Cross.

His unit, the 351st Field Artillery Battalion, was sent into southern Germany near the Battle of the Bulge. He and the other black pilots were kept on the ground for a month because the commander believed their speech, or implied black dialect, over airplane radios would betray the position of the American troops. Because he and all the other black officers were assigned to all-black units, the commanding officer said their voices would provide the enemy with valuable information about the movement of black troops in the area.

Brown began his Army career when he was drafted into the Army as an enlisted man in March of 1941. I took my basic training at Fort Bragg, North Carolina in the Field Artillery Placement Training Center. From there I volunteered for Officer Candidate School in Fort Sill, Oklahoma and finished there in October 1942.
Then I was assigned to the 597th Field Artillery, 92nd Infantry Division.

He began his flight training in the L-4H, a civilian derivative of the Piper Cub aircraft, at the Army Air Force Flight Training Detachment in Pittsburg, Kansas in April of 1943.

The next hop from there was a long one. It took him all the way to France with the 351st Field Artillery. He was still flying L-4's, which had by now acquired the nickname, 'Grasshopper'.

'I worked at corps level so the missions I flew were few and far between. Most of the flying done in adjustment of artillery fire was done by the division level pilots as they were organic to their own (field artillery) units. I did fly about 30 hours though, mostly on courier missions and flying the 'brass' back and forth. There were times when corps artillery was in support of division artillery and we flew observation and artillery spotting missions.

I remember in particular, when we crossed the Rhine River. I guess the artillery had been firing from 15 to 18 hour constantly. Our planes were in the air continuously throughout the barrage adjusting fire on the other side.'

One of the dangers of being an observation pilot during this time was the ever-present possibility of being struck mid-air by 'friendly fire' artillery shells while circling above the battle area observing the artillery fire.

Brown said, 'Each time we took to the air we knew the direction and the placement of our artillery in relation to the target area. We made it a point not to fly along that flight path.'

An accidental strike by one of their own artillery shells was not the only "friendly fire" Brown had to content with. There were also the racial attitudes of some of the senior officers for whom he worked.

When the war in Europe ended, the 351st was on the outskirts of Lebeck, in northern Germany. Brown, because of his familiarity with the German language, was detached from his unit and reassigned to the Army's Criminal Investigation Division. His job was to rehabilitate and repatriate Polish and Czechoslovakian refugees who had been displaced or imprisoned by the Germans during the war. He soon found himself involved in another 'first', commanding the first displaced persons convoy en route to Pilsen, Czechoslovakia, and then to Cracow, Poland. There was an air of excitement as the convoy neared Cracow.

Brown described the events:

'Evidently they knew that we were bringing in their first convoy of Polish refugees into Cracow. When we got there we drove right into the town square and it looked like the whole of Cracow had turned out for us. They gave a dance that night to remember the enlisted men and the officers in my convoy. The had one of those big Polish folk dances right in the City Hall for us.'

The new-found feeling of freedom was experienced by soldiers and civilians alike. Brown said, 'I like the first thing we did was to share in their joy and happiness in being back home. I mean, in taking them back home we felt almost like we were going back home too. We went through that same little bit of joy with them.'

There was another race to that homecoming with Brown, who would confront the next morning as a military supervisor for the rehabilitation of the displaced civilians.

'The next day the mayor and some of his officials gathered us up and without telling us where we were going, drove outside of the town. We drove down to the end of a road where a big stop sign stood on top of two tall brick pillars. I looked up, and God Almighty, I knew where we were:it read 'Auschwitz'.

We were some of the first American military personnel to enter Auschwitz, this was right after the war. When I think of it, all I can say is, - my God!'

Brown continued with the resettling of the civilian populace until 1946 when he was discharged from the Army.

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1 The dominion, authority, or relation of a suzerain in respect of the subject person or state. Suzerain - a superior lord, to whom fealty is due; a feudal lord; overlord. In international law, a state that exercises political control over another state, in relation to which it is sovereign.
Spotter Pilot

1 - Piper L-4 equipped with K-20 aerial camera. Anzio, Italy 1943 — Ft. Rucker Museum
2 - Piper L-4 WWII typical "Nose Art" "Rotation Blues" — Ft. Rucker Museum
3 - U.S. Army Air Force Liaison Pilots. Meridian, MS 1942 — R. Durden
Chapter 3

Across the Blue Pacific

When the 25th Liaison Squadron was formed it was thought to be a catch-all group that could be called on to do just about anything. Their background was anything but dull, and Carl Guell tells the unique story of the 25th Liaison Squadron's beginnings in his "The Beginning of Liaison Aviation."

"As a member of Class 41B Kelly Field (San Antonio Texas) Gulf Coast Flying School, graduating class March 14, 1941, we were given the opportunity to request the type of duty we preferred. Because of my interest in aerial photography I was assigned to the 110th Observation Squadron at Adams Field in Little Rock Arkansas.

We soon learned we had joined a Squadron with a prestigious reputation, for the 110th was Lindbergh's Old Squadron which had been a National Guard Sq. from St. Louis. Many of the personnel knew "Lindy" personally and had served with him.

Along about February or March 1942, the 110th Squadron and the 82nd Squadron were joined to form the new 71st Observation Group. Shortly thereafter it was decided to form two new squadrons to fill out the 71st group. Cadres were taken from the 110th to form the 25th squadron and from the 82nd to form the 17th squadron. The group was commanded by the former commander of the 82nd, Lt. Col. William Sams, a West Point graduate who became a full colonel shortly thereafter.

In May of 1943 the 71st Obsn Group was redesignated as the 71st Reconn Group and the 110th Obsn Squadron was also changed to the 110th Reconn Squadron. The 25th Squadron became the 25th Liaison Squadron and was equipped with only L type aircraft - mostly L-4A's with a few L-5's. How the determination was made as to which type of aircraft each squadron would have is an interesting story. Since the commander of the 17th Squadron, Major Tienvile, had the most flying time in multi-engine planes, his squadron was assigned bombers. Since I had the most time in pursuit (fighter) aircraft my Squadron, the 110th, was given the P-39's, Capt Don Gordon CO of the 82nd was given P-39's and Capt. Frank Bartlett was given the Liaison aircraft, which ultimately achieved considerable distinction as the "New Guinea Shortline" while in the South Pacific. We sailed for Australia on the "Cape Mendecino", a C-1 cargo vessel smaller than a Liberty ship."

The 25th was the first "official" liaison squadron to be sent overseas. During the early autumn of 1943 they were assigned to the Fifth Air Force at a bomber base in northern Australia. To the consternation of its personnel and its higher headquarters, when the 25th was sent overseas the plan describing what a liaison squadron was supposed to do was not sent along. And the Fifth Air Force was completely disinterested at that time.

Consequently, when the 25th unloaded, set up camp and began assembling its planes, the men were treated with much coolness and sarcasm. Were they a "miniature bomb wing?" "Does liaison mean lays-on his bunk all day?" "Does the "L" on the wing stand for little or lost?" The enlisted status of the pilots was another excuse for poking fun. However, the men of the 25th dug in and accepted most of the taunts with good natured smiles and an occasional right to the jaw.

The fighters and bombers were too expensive to operate on short hauls or for routine work, so Fifth Air Force looked to the Grasshoppers to fill in. Soon the Grasshoppers were ferrying VIP's and providing short-haul taxi trips, as well as their war jobs as spotters and reconnaissance planes.

An article in the March 1985 issue of Marine Corps Gazette fills in some of the details concerning the operations and men who worked with Piper Cubs. Excerpts from the article entitled "The Dauntless Piper Cub at Cape Gloucester" give a close up view of the island named Goodenough and some of the Marines who were stationed there.

"It was a Piper Cub, of all things, on a remote South Pacific island with the unlike name of Goodenough, that brought together a veteran naval aviator and a young tank officer with a yen to be a Marine pilot.

In early summer of 1943, Capt. Theodore A. Petras, personal pilot for the commanding general, 1st Marine Division, suggested to his superiors an idea to form a light plane squadron within the division to han-
dle aerial reconnaissance and artillery spotting. At this time the Marine observation squadron (VMO) was barely off the drawing boards. Both Major General A.A. Vandegrift, the division commander, and Brigadier General W. H. Rupertus, his assistant division commander (ADC), were enthusiastic about having an air liaison detachment. Vandegrift got the necessary approval from General Douglas MacArthur, the theater commander, who also supplied the airplanes.

Petras recalled the acquisition: ‘After Guadalcanal we were deployed to Australia for reorganizing. Then we were sent to Goodenough Island off the New Guinea coast to stage and train for the next operation (Cape Gloucester). While there (Hq, 1st Marine Division) my crew and I noticed the Army had so many Piper Cubs. We talked to Lt Col. Ken Weir, the division air officer, who agreed it was a good idea to get a few for our use. General Vandegrift had me get the planes ready (a twin-engine Beechcraft) and we flew to Brisbane, MacArthur’s headquarters. His request was granted. We delivered eight Piper Cubs that were flyable and four in crates.’

When Rupertus took over the division prior to the New Britain operation, he gave Petras the job of finding and training the pilots to fly the L-4s and the mechanics to maintain them.

A division order requesting volunteers produced 22 applicants with flying experience and 40 more who had worked on small planes or who were qualified auto mechanics. One of the latter, PFC R.J. Remicks proved to be a real find. He had worked as a foreman in the Piper Cub plant before the war.

Of the flying applicants, Petras and his copilot, 2dLt Robert Murphy, picked eight pilots. These included Capt James Harris, an artillery officer; 1stLt Richard M. Hunt, a tank officer; PFC’s H.R. Dalzell and A.G. Hoffman, from special weapons battalion; and PFC W.C. Jennings, a rifleman. Later, two more enlisted men filled the pilot gap caused by the demands of artillery spotting and other flying chores. These were Paul Perkins, a seabee attached to Col Ike Fenton’s 17th Engineers and PFC W.W. Witherspoon, a former enlisted pilot (NAP) who had flown with Murphy.

Collectively, pilots and ground crewmen became known as the 1st Provisional Air Liaison Unit. Hunt, who had been a civilian pilot in Raleigh, NC, where he worked as a reporter and editor for the Associated Press, served as the executive officer and then as CO of the unit. He had become a tanker when the technicality of being married barred him from flight school. (Col Hunt finally made it to flight school on the personal recommendation of Major General Rupertus shortly after the New Britain Campaign. He started out in fighters and later transitioned to helicopters. He retired in 1969.)

When the 1st Marine Division sailed for New Britain and its landing at Cape Gloucester, the new air unit went along. Hunt recalls that the unit lost little time in getting into the air. Within six hours of the landing, a Cub was rigged onto floats and thus became available for limited missions. Floats were added to another Cub enabling the aviation unit to keep up with ever-advancing ground troops. Recalls Col Petra: ‘We carried BG Lem Shepherd (ADC) many times to visit the front by landing in rivers nearest the regimental headquarters. Gen Rupertus also was a frequent passenger. One Cub (named after his 10 year old son, Pat) was used only for him. Pilot and crew member carried hand grenades and mortar shells to bomb enemy positions...To the despair of his staff, Gen Rupertus utilized one of the Cubs to fly over the Talasea action and obtain an overall view of the landing. The general, who had made almost daily use of the small planes for personal reconnaissance and transportation, on this day decided to contribute to the fighting in more that a command capacity. He armed himself with a supply of hand grenades, and acting as a bombardier, directed his pilot over suspected enemy positions, while he carefully dropped his “bombs” on the unsuspecting foe.’

The Cubs on New Britain did much more than serve as taxis for the brass. The terrain around Cape Gloucester was heavy jungle, and the existing maps of the area were not very accurate. To solve the problem of target acquisition for his artillery battalion (57), LtCol e.N. Nees called on the Cubs. The pilots would take a position over designated map targets and likely enemy approaches selected from the air. When exactly on station, the aerial observers called “mark”, by radio and sighters on the ground made the necessary triangulation computations.

LtCol Lewis B. Puller was also blessed with the antics of the Cubs. When his 500-man patrol was hit by heavy rains, wiping out bridges and trails, the air liaison unit got the job of resupply. Col Hunt remembers that the maximum load for Cubs was two cartons of K-rations. As the patrol advanced, its Marines marked clearings in the jungles and the observer would toss out his packages as the plane made treetop passes. The pilots logged 10-12 hours in the air - landing, refueling, and taking off again in a regular pattern from dawn.
to dusk.

The beginning of the VMO’s brought an end to Piper Cub operations six weeks before Peleliu. VMO-3, regularly assigned VMO with naval aviators and brand new OY airplanes, maintained by school-trained mechanics, joined the division. Col Hun tells the rest of the story: When the unit was disbanded officially, almost a year after its formation, Gen Rupertus personally thanked and congratulated each member. Although none held flight orders, wore wings, or received flight pay, each pilot was recommended for and received the Air Medal.

“This is like disowning one's own child,” Gen Rupertus remarked, as he shook the hand of the last man in line at the unit’s farewell ceremony.”

After a few months in Australia, the 25th was transferred to New Guinea, where they operated out of front line strips carved from the jungle, flying wounded GIs to rear-area hospitals for surgery. They dropped supplies to small units and to infantry patrols cut off by Japanese forces, and affected rescues of the same units by dropping tools so landing strips could by hacked out of the jungle. Several dozen downed pilots and flight crews who bailed out or crashed behind enemy lines were rescued by the Grasshoppers. In one instance they saved over twenty Indian POW’s who had escaped from their Japanese captors and fled to the jungle.


“One day, a bomber was missing and an L-5 pilot volunteered to scout over the jungle at low altitude. He found the plane in a short time. Business for the sergeants turned immediately brisk. In the next year, the squadron flew at Cape Gloucester, Finschhafen, Saidor, Gusap, Hollandia, the Admiralties and the Philippines. Two or three planes were assigned to a combat unit and worked directly with its operations office in bringing back fliers who could not get back themselves. Seventy-five fliers were rescued outright, including four crews from behind enemy lines. Often, downed pilots were dropped tools in parachutes and told to build their own airports by widening roads or clearings. When the marooned man had his airfield chopped out, an L-5 landed and took him home. They also worked over water, locating men in jackets or on rafts when bigger, faster planes were unable to see them. Once a man was located, the L-5 would summon a seaplane for the actual rescue. Thus, they aided in 125 other rescues.

A typical operation was the one in which 5/Sgts James Henkle, Pomona, California; L. E. Gleason, Brushton New York, and John Shaver, of Idaho, participated. Capt. H. L. McMullen, a P-47 fighter pilot, had been forced down near Saidor, New Guinea. An attack bomber saw him and summoned an L-5. Sergeant Henkle cranked up at Saidor, refueled at Madang and flew up the bloody Ramu Valley, his motor popping like mad above the complaints of jungle birds below. But he could not find McMullen. On the way back to the airport, with his fuel running low, weather forced him far out to sea. He managed to find the coast by dead reckoning and got to his base with a few pints of gasoline left. That was May twenty-third. On May twenty-fourth, he tried again. Again weather forced him out of the valley after a brief search.

On May twenty-fifth, an intelligence report reached the squadron, telling of mysterious POW - prisoner of war - signs seen on the ground not far from Captain McMullen’s reported position. Everybody was afraid of a trap, as the spot was far behind the Japanese lines. That day, Gleason went along in a second plane, and a fighter squadron crisscrossed over the slow L-5’s as protection. Together, the sergeants located McMullen, who had been very busy chopping out a little airport for himself. No fool, this McMullen.

But the airport was not yet big enough, and the ground was very rough and very muddy. The planes dropped a message to McMullen, but could not land. A mile away, they circled over a spot where strange, gaunt figures danced and shouted in a clearing. These characters had constructed a message pickup - two poles holding aloft a line with a message attached to the line, so that a small-plane pilot could fly at extremely low altitude, hook the line and haul up the message. But the sergeants decided to have nothing to do with the line that day. It’s no fun to haul a primed grenade into an airplane on the end of a message line or to swoop on a message line and find it to be a taut cable.

Gleason flew back again the next day, with Shaver on his wing. They dropped bedding, a hammock and five gallons of water to McMullen and attempted a message pickup from the clearing, but the line broke. For two days thereafter, rain sloshed down the valley in sheets, and nothing could be done.

On May twenty-ninth, Henkle looked in on McMullen Airport again, and this time it looked big enough
for an artillery Cub to land. One did. McMullen was brought safely out.

Weather stopped the L-5’s the next day. But on June first, Henkle snatched the message from the pick-up rig. It identified the curious figures below as a group of Indians - Sikhs taken prisoner in the early days of the war and imported to New Guinea as slave labor by the Japanese. These starved, mistreated men had escaped and had spread out the POW signs when they saw repeated American aircraft passing above them. They had also kept their heads. The first message contained detailed information about Japanese strength in the Hansa Bay region - current Australian ground objective - the main escape routes being used by the Japanese, even the time of night when Japanese usually crossed the Ramu and Sepik rivers. This made bombing of the crossings much more profitable. The Indians also had sketched maps, indicating in what villages the Japanese slept during the daytime. The Japanese did not get much more sleep after the information reached headquarters.

The next day, Henkle dropped medical supplies to the Sikhs, who were trying to build an emergency landing field of their own, after failing to locate the one built by McMullen only a mile away. That’s how tough the jungle was. On June fourth, flying a borrowed L-4, and with an Australian medical sergeant, Henkle landed on McMullen Airport to help the Indians, but he could not get his plane into the air again. He and the Australian holed in beside the strip.

The Indians, in another message, had told the L-5 men that they were desperately short of food. On June seventh, an L-5 guided in a B-17, which dumped a complete truckload of food, weapons and ammunition for the stranded Sikhs, who by this time had found McMullen’s civic aviation center and the two sergeants.

On June ninth, Shaver landed at the field, but advised against further landing attempts because of its condition. The next day, however, Henkle did get his L-4 off the ground, skimming over the trees to bring out one nearly dead Sikh. The next day, Shaver got out and Henkle went in and out, and two more Indians were rescued. For the next seven days, the shuttle service ran steadily, with Henkle, Shaver, Whitey Pease and Sergeants Grice and Guyer doing the driving. In all, thirty-one escaped Sikhs had reached the area. Four died of hunger and exhaustion, but the twenty-seven others were flown out, one at a time."

There was another little deal at Wantoat, New Guinea. A spotting plane took a look at an old airport there and found Japanese - there were supposed to be none in the area - operating a wireless station. It was a long way to Wantoat from the nearest Allied base, and the country was impossible. So somebody called for the L-5’s. The squadron flew in five native policemen, fifty very rough Australian commandos with anti-Japanese leaning, their equipment, some 3-inch mortars and food for everybody. What the Australians did to the Japanese at Wantoat was distinctly not nice. Four who surrendered were so unnerved that the L-5 pilots were able to fly them out safely. Flying the prisoners was made somewhat safer by having each of them sit on the lap of an Australian, who kept the point of a razor-edged knife reposing cozily against the sitter’s neck.

But it was at Leyte that the 25th got its best licks. An advance echelon with eight planes landed October twenty-second, just two days behind assault troops, set up shop on the Bayug air strip. They worked steadily at all sorts of odd jobs until December sixth, when the unit almost went out of business. Japanese paratroopers attacked the strip, blowing up seven of the aircraft and mining the eighth.

When the paratroopers had been beaten off, the flying sergeants deninmed their one remaining plane and went back to work. For days, that single airplane was the only communication between the airfield and the rest of the American force. Roads had been washed out and radios were not working. During the period, the enemy also kept trying to get back on to the airfield again. Everybody, including the flying sergeants, handled rifles in the business of keeping them off. At times, the Japanese held one side of the strip while the squadron was servicing its single aircraft on the other side.

Fred F. Martin writes of his first-hand experiences on Leyte.

“I was an "L" pilot in the 1st Cavalry Division and was at the Valencia air strip. We had crossed the mountains into the Ormoc Valley around Nov 11 1944 and were working toward the coast. Our 1st Cavalry Division was composed of the 5th, 7th, 8th and 12th Cavalry regiments with the 112th Cav attached. The Artillery was the 61st, 82nd, 99th, and 271st with the 947th (155’s) attached.

I don’t remember the exact date of the first time I made a landing on the Valencia strip, but I do remember very well what happened. I was flying a dispatch from the 1st Cav Hq to the 77th and it was late in the evening when I departed. It was almost dark when I made the landing and could see some gun flashes; I
wasn't sure which side of the strip the 77th was on. I guessed right (side) and secured my L-5 because it was too dark to return to HQ that night. I started walking to find the CP and hadn't gone very far off the strip when I was challenged by a voice that I could not locate.

He said 'Black' several times; I didn't know the correct response so I said 'I'm Martin, 1st Cav, and I came in that L-5'. There was a GI in the fox hole right at my feet; he had seen me come in and advised me that the password for the night was 'Black Label'. I was challenged several more times that night and promptly replied 'Label'.

On December twelfth, the 11th Airborne Division reported that 200 men in a regimental command post were cut off and had not eaten in four days. Four L-5's - more planes had arrived - went out. Bigger planes were unsuitable because of the limited space in which ground troops could recover supplies parachuted to them and because of the danger of having supplies fall into enemy hands, if the drops were not bull's-eyes on the command post.

The operation grew. Between then and December thirty-first, fourteen of its planes dropped rations for a large part of 6000 troops isolated by infiltration or in areas that ground transport could not reach. In figures, the totals were impressive. An L-5 will carry about 600 pounds in its rear compartment, being limited more by the small space than by the lifting power of the plane. With a man weighing 150 pounds sitting there to handle them, supplies weighing 450 pounds could, therefore, be carried on one trip. The squadron flew 1250 missions, dropped 396,900 pounds of food and materiel.

It was during the New Guinea campaign that the 25th earned their nickname “Guinea Short Lines”, which they painted on the cowplings of their L-5's over the silhouette of a kangaroo. After a successful and impressive New Guinea campaign they were transferred to the Philippine Invasion Force.

Another view of the men and planes of the 25th was covered by Bob O'Hara in his article “Guinea Short Lines”. The following is his colorful narrative of those brave and hard-working men:

“Nose high, 2000 rpm and full flaps, just over the tops of the trees, Tech Sergeant Jim Nichols leaned forward in his seat to widen his field of vision. He nursed on a bit of carb heat as the nose and low clouds wisped by the windscreen. A glance at the air-speed and back outside again - this was no time to have your eyeballs in the cockpit - up ahead some where was the crude airstrip, hacked out of the jungle, rough, short, one way in and the same way back out.

Behind Jim sat an Australian footsoldier who was guiding Jim's L-5 to an outpost now under siege by a large Japanese force. The operation was to be the first airborne military delivery ever attempted by L-5's, but the 25th Liaison Squadron was well up to such an engagement.

It all started high up in the cloud shrouded peaks of Eastern New Guinea, in a wide spot in the trail named Wantoat. Its population was three Australian soldiers, who operated a radio relay and weather station. The information that this little outpost passed on each hour was vital to the allied planning staff. Suddenly, their radio went off the air, but not before a call for help reached Kaiaput, an Aussie airstrip about fifty miles away. The 25th Liaison Squadron was alerted: their mission - ferry forty men and four officers to Wantoat in five L-5's. Leader of this flea-sized flotilla was Master Sergeant Howard Mack, the 25th's veteran pilot, who by the summer of 1944 had amassed over 700 L-5 hours. This distance between Kaiaput and Wantoat is not great but the route passes over two rugged mountain ranges where the clouds always hang on the peaks, and rain cut visibility drastically. The first flight of five birds, each carrying one soldier, took off and threaded their way through the passes and between the peaks. One saddle in the crags was only open on an average of two hours a day and the whole plan depended on nature's time-table. Luckily, today, the pass would remain fairly clear of mist.

Up ahead of Jim Nichols was Tech Sergeant Allen Lockwood in the lead L-5; he was barely visible in the mist. As Al Lockwood approached the clearing he slowed the plane almost to a stall and put the wheels on the end of the strip then jammed on the brakes, no to arrest the planes' forward speed, but to keep it from rolling back down the hill. Both men jumped out, carbines ready, but all was quiet.

Lockwood directed the other ships as they came in and unloaded. The soldiers deployed around the strip and the L-5's went back for another load; their time they returned with two soldiers in each bird, lap-sitting.

Contact was made with the Jap patrol, right on final approach. The planes had to come in over the soldiers who were firing at them with rifles and machine guns. After off-loading the ten men, the L-5's hurried
back for another load. By eleven-thirty all of the Aussie troops had been landed. The L-5 task force spent the balance of the day resupplying the soldiers with ammunition, machine guns, and small artillery pieces that were dis-assembled for the trip. All this equipment was carried in the rear cockpits and loads averaged nearly eight hundred pounds per aircraft. (Crew weight for the L-5, incidently, is 400 lbs.)

The operation lasted until the end of the following day and was a complete success. As a last bit of work the L-5's carried out the wounded Aussies and some Jap prisoners, and prisoners going out on the laps of the soldiers, even though one of the former weighed two hundred and fifty pounds. Among the dead Japs found near the radio station, there was a brigadier general who was the area commander.

This was just one interesting mission that the 25th Liaison Squadron performed while it was part of the Far East Air Force (FEAF) in WW2. In 1944 the strength of the unit was thirty-five enlisted pilots and five officer-pilots. Major Frank J. (Burrhead) Bartlett commanded the 25th and Captain George Wilson Jr. was the operations officer. The 25th was the only Liaison Squadron in FEAF and it pioneered the use of light planes in support of tactical air forces in the field.

When the 25th arrived in Australia in November 1943 and reported to the Fifth Air Force for duty, the commanding general was hard pressed to find a job for then and the staff spent most of their time researching the meaning of "liaison" in its application to the war in the air. In the spring of 1944, the Solomons had been secured; the Caroline push had started, Rabaul had been neutralized, and the New Guinea coastal fight was getting underway. The 25th moved to Nadzab, New Guinea, at that time the Fifth Air Force center of operations for the campaign.

In order to prove the merit of the unit, it was decided that the squadron would be divided into four "Flights" and scattered about the operational area, the orders were to start "liaisoning".

The first big job handed to the 25th was to work out methods of picking up downed combat crews from the bush before the Jap patrols got to them or they were lost to the ravages of the dense and hostile jungle (not to mention the hostile natives - some of whom were head hunters or cannibals). Most of the forced landing areas picked by battle damaged bomber and fighter pilots were large expanses of Kunai grass. These grass areas were fine for belly landings, but the grass was eight to twelve feet high in places and it was well-nigh impossible to get an L-5 down in this environment. The first pilot to try a landing was Tech Sergeant William A (Wild Willie) Adair; this is his de-briefing report:

'I made a landing in the kunai grass,' he wrote, 'and rolled ten feet; then the grass wrapped around the wheels and the plane nosed over and broke its propeller. I was after an A-20 pilot and his gunner who were forced down about twenty-five miles north of Annanberg. They had bumed a little of the grass to try to make a strip, but it hadn't worked. The three of us then started to cut down the kunai grass to make a strip so I could take off. The pilot and gunner were weak to start with, and the sun was terrible. Finally we could work only in the mornings and afternoon ... An A-20 came along. They had flown over before, seen the trouble, and dropped a propeller to me. So I put the gunner in the plane and tried to take off but couldn't make it, running into the deep kunai grass at the end of where we had cut it. So we made the strip longer. The next try, we mushed off the ground a little, then hit the grass and nosed over and broke the new propeller.

When the A-20 pilot came over next we signalled him to bring another propeller and supplies. He brought the propeller and some water also some food by parachute. We worked on the strip for three days ... Once we went back in the jungle and saw signs of Japs, that made us work harder ... On the seventh day I decided to try a take-off with the gunner. We got off, just at the end of the strip, but before we were fifteen feet in the air, the woods were right in front of us. I hit the trees at forty-five miles an hour and banked my wing amid them. Then, without gaining altitude, made a one hundred and eighty degree turn in the trees and finally got above them. I took the gunner to Faita, gassed up, changed a tire, went back after the pilot and made a successful landing. I was worried because he weighed seventy-five pounds more that the gunner. On take-off we used up all the runway and could have used more but had to mush it off the ground anyway. We threaded between the same trees, much lower than the first time, but I knew where to go this time and wiggled through the trees, made my one hundred and eight degree turn, and was back out over the kunai grass.'

The kunai grass was always a hazard to the pilots of the 25th. Care was always taken to try and select a patch that was relatively free of tall grass, but it is very hard to judge the condition of the ground from the air and the downed men awaiting rescue were understandably anxious to be airlifted out.

The end result often was that the L-5 went over on its back, a total wash-out, leaving two stranded pilots
to await rescue from Jap patrols. Such a case was the effort made by Master Sergeant Eugene Salitnik to land near the wreckage of a P-40 flown by Capt Flack of the 8th Fighter Squadron, 49th Fighter Group.

Sergeant Salitnik found the P-40 and landed near the area in another grass clearing; the L-5 flipped in the grass and Salitnik hiked over to find Lt Flack, a distance of not more than a mile. It took an afternoon and all night to cover that distance in the dense jungle. But Salitnik could not locate the P-40 pilot and when he made his plight clear to a circling L-5 it was decided back at squadron headquarters that an Australian would be parachuted into the area in order to get the two men out.

The Aussie, Lt Henstridge, made his jump without incident and joined Salitnik in the search for Flack. When darkness fell they had given up hope of locating him and planned to look again the next day. That night as they were camped in the jungle, they heard a noise and thought a Jap patrol was nearby, but the noise turned out to be the lost P-40 pilot. It was then decided that they would try and find the L-5 and retrieve the supplies that were there, but after walking for several hours they ended up back at the P-40. They had been walking in a big circle.

The three men then went to work on a strip by cutting and stomping grass until they had a strip that looked good enough for a landing. Tech Sergeant Tom Stalone made it in but couldn't get off. The strip was too short, so more grass was packed and Stalone tried again; this time he pranged the airplane in his attempt. The landing gear was about to fall off and it was decided that the plane could fly out but not with a passenger, so more grass was stomped and Stalone flew out and Sergeant Nichols came in, but not without misfortune. Nichols' bird got into the tall grass and went over on its nose, breaking the carburetor and prop.

All this activity did not escape vigil of the Japanese who were still very active in this area and while the four men were working on the strip to increase its length and aircraft appeared. This time it wasn't the friendly silhouette of an L-5, it was an "Oscar". The men scattered for cover when the fighter dove on the clearing. It shot up the area and destroyed the L-5, including all the supplies. Lt Henstridge knew that patrols would be there shortly and their luck had run out. Thus an overland march was the only route left open to them. A month later these four men marched out of the jungle, ragged and hungry, but alive.

Through their trial and error efforts the 25th perfected an effective "land at the scene" rescue record saving many fighter and bomber crews. They also gained a tag, THE GUINEA SHORT LINES, or "the shortest distance between yourself and the base is an L-5 hop". These "Mr Keenes" of the bush had entered that rare atmosphere of indispensability; the little birds were now being used for all types of missions, from camera sorties to actual bombing runs.

A Marine general who borrowed the use of an L-5 and its pilot would go out at dawn with a bag of grenades and look for Japs; he always scored some hits according to Sergeant Schrepfer, his pilot, who flew these "recon" flights. The general became so gung-ho, in fact, that he used his assigned SNB for these bombing attacks when the 25th moved to another field. One day not long after the move, Sgt Schrepfer saw the general's shiny Beech making bombing runs on Jap positions at Cape Hopkins with some Aussie P-40's beating up the target along side him.

The 25th provided limited transport service for operational units throughout the Pacific campaigns with such unlikely equipment as Fairchild UC-61's, Cessna UC-78's, Beech C-45's and L-4's, CG-4A's, and. of course, the faithful C-47's. But the mainstay was always the L-5.

The crews of the 25th were so proud of their tag that they painted "Guinea Short Lines" on all their aircraft and applied silver paint to the birds along with red and white tail stripes. In fact, the silver paint job was just about the undoing of Sgt Nichols. Once, while searching for a downed airman off the coast, an Oscar spotted his silver bird and jumped his tiny machine from above. Jim's only warning was a hail of bullets. By pulling on full flaps he was able to turn the bird, but the fighter pilot was sharp and he wanted another crack at the L-5. He took the Oscar into a wide loop, and by slowing to a near stall at the top of the loop he was able to come straight down on the L-5 from above. Jim was looking up through the top glass into the guns of the Oscar. Luckily the Oscar pilot had to execute a pull-out to avoid hitting the water; no vital areas of the L-5 were hit and Jim was able to make it back to the base. The L-5's were jumped on numerous occasions, but were always able to out-turn their opponent or dive among the trees to escape.

During their tour of duty, several pilots were hospitalized or transferred back to the states with injuries, they lost several airplanes due to crashes and enemy fire, but during the whole Pacific Campaign the 25th lost only one man killed in action; this was a remarkable record for an outfit that was so susceptible to ground
fire and surprise air attack. The 25th Liaison Squadron flew on to finish the war and was active in many major clashes that history record as both decisive and courageous, but somehow the historians overlooked their less glamorous role with the AAF. Nevertheless, the record the 25th Liaison Squadron show that the “Big” Air Force couldn’t very well do without the “Bastard Officers” and their “Maytag Messerschmitts”.

The planes were so small that most of them were shipped into combat zones in large transport planes, assembled upon arrival and flown in combat a day or two later. As simple as the little craft was, the tasks it performed were both complex and vital. Many U.S. servicemen owe their lives to the Grasshoppers and their pilots. One Army officer who was wounded in the chest in New Guinea was rushed to a hospital in a newly assembled Grasshopper. The pilot had to reach behind his seat, where the officer lay on a stretcher, and operate a portable respirator while flying the plane. The fact that the wounded man survived is a tribute to the skill and dedication of that Grasshopper pilot and the plane he flew.

Lt. David Duncan, who later became a famous Life Magazine photographer, describes his trip to a Fiji outpost by Grasshopper L-4, according to photographs in the article in the January 1945 National Geographic:

“The dugout headquarters was cool under its massive roof of palm logs and sand bags. An orderly presented me to the officer behind the desk. He was Lt. Col. Geoffrey T. Upton, commanding the First Battalion of the Fiji Infantry Regiment on Bougainville in the Solomon Islands. ‘So you’re the U.S. Marine who wishes to enlist in the Fijian Army,’ he chuckled as we shook hands. ‘Now just what can we do for you?’

‘Colonel, as a photographer for the aviation division of the U.S. Marine Corps, I am making a picture of SCAT (South Pacific Combat Air Transport Command), and I have heard of the exploits of the Fijians in their behind-the-lines fighting with the Japs, parachute drops-many by SCAT planes-to supply their jungle outposts at Ibu in the heart of enemy country. I need pictures of those drops: they must be extremely colorful. I would like permission to join your men in the stronghold.

‘At dawn next morning I reported to the pilot’s shack of the Army Air Force Cub Command. Men of this group fly the frail two-men planes which so effectively spot artillery fire.

‘Here we are at Cape Taorkina, on Empress Augusta Bay,’ the Captain explains, pointing to a map. ‘There’s Ibu, the Fiji outpost, on the other side of the island-barely ten miles from the Japs at Numa Numa. To get there you’ll have to ride our Grasshopper up the canyon of the Laruma River, Then through the pass in the Crown Prince Ridge.

‘Thirty seconds after taking off, you’ll be over enemy country. In all those mountains and jungle—he waved his hand across the island—there’s only one little spot where you can safely land and that’s Ibu. You had better take another good look.’

‘Planes lost in this country are never seen again. The jungle or the Japs get them. One Fijian who crashed fought the jungle for 20 days before he reached friendly hands. The pilot gave up after the Fijian, who had carried him for four days, could no longer lift him. He was never seen again.’

‘At first light, as our tiny plane banked and climbed away from the bomber strip, I realized how small our toe hold is on Bougainville. We were already beyond our front lines! Down below was nothing but green jungle-Jap country. (Here I was flying to war in a plane so small the kids used to bounce them around in cow pastures back home.) I was a U.S. Marine being flown by an Army pilot, going to join in a campaign with Fiji islanders. Everyone in on it but the Navy, yet the Navy also was to play an important role before I next saw Empress Augusta Bay.

‘My reverie ended abruptly. Wind struck my face as the plane sideslipped into the pass. Veils of rain hid most of the peaks of the Crown Prince Range.

‘Another squall loomed dead ahead. Pouring on full throttle, the pilot slipped into the next canyon. Its walls reared higher than the plane. Diving barely over the tree tops, he followed the zigzagging course of the stream. Sunlight spilled from the clouds. We squirted out of the canyon just in front of the rain.

‘Twenty minutes after our take-off from Taorkina, we were over Ibu, the Fijian stronghold, with its miniature air field. While spiraling for the approach, I got my first good look at the field. It was really something. Enormous trees choked one end of the strip. The runway clung to the crest of a ridge and disappeared over the edge of a canyon. That strip was only 350 feet long. It looked like a melon patch. Coming in low over the trees we landed with only feet to spare. I unloaded my gear and equipment. The plane took off just as the rain began to come down. It disappeared into a squall and that was the last time I ever saw the plane or the pilot. He went down in the storm.”
In the Marianas campaign, liaison planes called down Marine Corps artillery fire on Japanese strong points. In one instance, the guns on Saipan liquidated a Japanese battery on the north end of Tinian seconds after a light plane radioed the coordinates. In time, Japanese artillery, like the Germans in Italy, learned to fall silent when a spotter plane was around.

The world remembers the historic raising of the American flag on Iwo Jima's Mount Suribachi because of Joe Rosenthal's famous photograph. But Horace A. Knowles remembers it for another reason. "I was a member of the Third Marine Division intelligence staff during the first part of the battle for Iwo, and my job was to keep a situation map of the island up to date. We were on shipboard, in reserve, and my information about the struggle ashore came from messages intercepted by our radio.

"Among the reports I constantly received were from an observer in a liaison plane circling above the battlefield. This man would report everything of significance, giving the target area on the map and a brief description of what was going on. He would say, for example, 'TA (target area) 182-L, two of our tanks firing into caves' or 'TA 183-H, six of our men crawling along a ridge.'

"About 10:45 on the morning of Feb 23, 1945, a radioman handed me a message. 'TA 132-P' I read, and automatically searched my map to locate the target area. It was Mount Suribachi. Turning back to finish the message, I read, 'One flag-red, white and blue.'

"That was the last message ever received from that liaison plane. Was he shot down or did he go back to base?"
Across the Blue Pacific

1 - Piper L-4 "crack up" Hollandia — Ed Geyer
2 - Aeronca L-3s on Negro Island in So. Pacific — John McCabe
3 - Marine L-Bird Capt. Pete Petras and his L-4 "Pat" — P. Petras
4 - L-4s at Sandburg Field, New Hebrides — Ft Rucker Museum
Across the Blue Pacific

1 — L-Bird pilot John Kriegsman and his L-4 “Pekin Bound” So. Pacific — J. Kriegsman
2 — Australian Air Force L-4 1943 — L. Kidby
3 — L-4s at Sandburg Field, New Hebrides 1944 — Ft. Rucker Muuem
4 — L-Bird pilot Don Moore and his L-4 in the So. Pacific — D. Moore

Box Seat Over Hell — II
Chapter 4 —

Asian Jungle War

Liaison pilots from all walks of life and their tiny planes played a major role in the China-Burma-India Theater, or CBI, during World War II. One of the more recognized names was actor Jackie Coogan. According to a press release from the US Army Air Force Headquarters in India, March 18 1944, "He was the first man to alight when the British forces were landed by air behind Japanese lines in Northern Burma more than a week ago. Coogan, flying the leading glider, leaped out as the craft stopped and fired a signal light for other approaching gliders. Until a higher officer arrived and took charge he directed the landing operations.

In the glider with him were a dozen Indian troops who brandished knives as they leaped from the craft. Before taking off Coogan said, 'I sure feel confidence riding with Indian troops as passengers, as he flashed his light on the grim looking men squatting on the glider's floor.'

General "Vinegar Joe" or "Uncle Joe" Stillwell was one of the most recognizable figures from the war. Perhaps his famous hat was as recognizable as he was! The following are two accounts from men who were there.

Mike Somerday writes "I had a number of memorable experiences flying the L-5, but perhaps the most famous one was flying Gen. Stillwell from Bisi point to Ie Shima for an inspection of the Army troops stationed at Ie Shima.

When the General leaned forward to talk with me, his illustrious campaign hat was whipped off his close cropped silver hair and spiraled down several hundred feet into the sea. He was distraught and ordered me to turn back to Bisi Point. He indicated that losing that hat was like losing his right arm. The famous hat went back to 1917 when he was in the Army and it looked like it!

Soon after the general left, one of our mechanics appeared riding in a jeep and wearing General Stillwell's hat. In questioning the mechanic, he told that while fishing off a reef a few yards away from the shore, lo and behold the hat flopped into the water and was retrieved. The mechanic looked up and saw an L-5 heading for Ie Shima.

Lt. Cobble, Operations Officer who had questioned the mechanic called 6th Army HQ and reported the recovery of the "Hat". I flew an L-5 to the 6th Army Hq. carrying the Corporal (now dressed in Class A's) for a meeting with Gen. Stillwell. A jeep took us to meet with the general at his headquarters. He was thrilled to recover his hat. He offered the Corporal a trip to Manila, but he declined, so we were then escorted back to our airplane with a supply of liquor. We returned to our base and that night, the Enlisted Men had a big party with the "reward".

To this day, I cannot remember the Corporal's name, and if anyone can refresh my memory, please let me know. I would like to get his name.

The unknown (at least to Mike Somerday) Corporal's story follows.

"Our strip was at Bisi Point on Okinawa" writes Edward P. Donohue, "and on 5 Aug 45, General "Uncle Joe" Stillwell paid us a visit on his way to Fifth Fighter Command Headquarters. Many of us spent our free time on the coral ledge that surrounded the strip, viewing the beautiful colored coral, tropical fish, sharks and barracuda. I was on the beach the day the General lost his hat and saw something falling from an L-5 and land in the water. When I returned to the strip, the General was back and word was that he was offering five bottles of whiskey to anyone returning his hat.

I returned to the beach, waded out to the area where I had seen the object fall and found the hat. I returned to my tent in a roundabout way, to keep others from knowing that I had indeed recovered the hat. Later an aide to the General returned to our strip and finding out that I had the hat, asked me to go back to headquarters to meet the General and personally return the hat. T/Sgt. Bockman, of the 157th flew me back in an L-5 to 10th Army Headquarters. From the strip I rode in the General's jeep to his headquarters. He seemed very pleased to get his hat back as the old campaign hat went back to his days as a buck private.
After a short conversation the General gave me five bottles of bourbon, indicating his supply of scotch was low. He smiled when I said his supply was much better than mine. I returned to Bise Point with my reward.

Along with General Stillwell, some of the other names synonymous with the war in Burma are Merrill’s Marauders, and the British Major General Orde Charles Wingate. General Wingate’s story and his connection with the L-planes is the stuff that legends are made of.

Wingate was born in 1903 in the Himalayas, the son of a puritanical Indian Army general. Schooled at Charterhouse and Woolwich Military Academy, born too late for World War I, he set out to join his unit in the Sudan by cycling across Europe and the Alps.

Wingate made his name in executing several daring operations. In 1937 he was given the job of catching the Arab marauders were regularly cutting the Haifa-Mosul oil lines. He mixed Jewish and British patrols and beat the Arabs at their own games of ambush. For this he earned the title “Lawrence of Judea” - which his cousin who fought for the Arabs might have resented. In 1941 in the British campaign against the Italians in Ethiopia he directed a strategy of bluff, propaganda and native revolt. With 1,000 Sudanese and 2,000 Ethiopians, he effectively snarled up some 40,000 Italians and won the title “Lawrence of Ethiopia”.

When Field Marshall Wavell wanted to harass the Japanese, he remembered Wingate, he remembered Ethiopia and sent for Wingate. He made him a Brigadier and gave him free hand to become the “Lawrence of Burma”.

The story of Wingate and his Raiders began in 1941 at the request of his British superiors, and the tie to the Liaison pilots came about during a meeting at the Quebec conference in 1943.

Brigadier General Orde Wingate was determined to drive the Japanese out of Burma; he had tried unsuccessfully to do this the previous year. The conference stalemated because some participants thought the second attempt would be even more disastrous than the first.

Wingate already had the men and mules to do the job. It wasn’t the enemy that had driven them out in 1942; it was lack of supplies and consequent low morale that had beaten them. If only the supply problem could be solved...there would be a different outcome.

Air Force Commander General H. H. “Hap” Arnold was at the conference and supplied the answer to most of the difficulties at once- “C-47’s” he said, “will deliver your needs, and we can use P-51’s to protect them. The C-47’s can also carry your wounded back to India.”

“The Dakota cannot land in that jungle,” replied General Wingate. “So its only part of the solution.”

Everyone was silent, thinking about the big hill to be scaled. “How about jeep trails,” said one. Another offered, “how about mules or elephants to bring the sick and wounded to the airports.”

There was again silence. A light bulb went off over “Hap” Arnold’s head. “Light planes,” he said, “that is the answer - light planes can do the job.” Everyone looked at him dubiously, quizzically, awaiting further explanation.

A few days later the CO of a stateside liaison squadron returned from Washington with the big news from Quebec and called a meeting of all his L-pilots. He tossed out a few crumbs of information and asked for volunteers for a six-month job overseas. He got an instant one hundred names. The outfit would fly over. Every pilot must be cross-trained as a mechanic, so pilots would go through a concentrated training program. The airplanes would be L-1’s and L-5’s.

The program started out with more questions than answers other than “you will find out in time.”

The concentrated training continued: hour after hour, day after day. Many hours each day over barriers, dropping in with a jolt. Sweeping low to pick up messages, low turns with flaps, short field take-offs. The pilots learned how to snag small two-place gliders with the L-1’s.

Personnel arrived in India by plane on November 23 and by December 24, boat loads of L-5’s, L-1’s and CG-4 gliders had been unloaded and the first serious work began. Eighteen hours a day plus were spent assembling the planes. For six days the crews worked, sweating and cussed, and then flew the planes the four hours slow time required on new engines.

By February 24, the outfit moved to Taro, its forward base. The Japanese had been driven out only a few days earlier. The group made a straight-in approach to a landing because there was no reason to advertise its presence by circling the strip. Hastily the planes were dispersed and the men sought shelter in the bush. From this jungle strip the outfit would supply the British troops and evacuate the sick and wounded.

The Japanese were reported to be less than three miles away and there were battle noises just over the ridge.
It was a dangerous place and more than a few of the men faced the hazards of the jungle and the enemy: some never did get back home. An article in the June 1983 issue of "U.S. Army Aviation Digest" written by Lt Gen Williams R Peers, Ret vividly describes the conditions in Northern Burma.

"Northern Burma is at the base of the Himalaya Mountains; some peaks in the country exceed 15,000 feet. Portions of the so-called hills reach even to 10,000 feet. Teak and other hardwood trees form a canopy 100 feet to 150 feet above the ground. Where the sunlight can filter through, the jungle is dense, almost impenetrable. During the 4-month period of the summer monsoon, the rainfall averages about 250 inches. These features, combined with the tigers, the cobras, the leeches and rampant diseases make northern Burma a most difficult area in which to conduct military operations."

T/Sgt Schnatzmeyer and Capt. Smith flew some saboteurs into enemy territory and never came back. S/Sgt Carroll scouted for them and sighted the two L-1's bogged down in a sand bar in the river. The stranded pilots were in for a long walk. Their crash site was about eighty air miles out and they carried only three days K-rations with them. Two weeks later they arrived: gaunt, tired, bleeding and bearded, but otherwise all right. They each left about thirty pounds of flesh along the way.

By the first of March, everything was in full operation. Daily flights carrying supplies in and wounded out, landing on sand bars in the river or small narrow strips cut out of the nearby jungle. The planes took a beating but continued to do the job well.

M/Sgt Kermit Torkelson from Austin, Minnesota, reported he had been fired on but escaped a Japanese Zero. He was on his way in with a wounded Britisher in an L-1, with M/Sgt Robert Chamber, Lawton, Oklahoma, as the second ship in the two-plane element. As Torkelson tells it: "I looked back, scanning the sky, as was our habit, when I saw a fighter. I thought it was a Hurricane until I realized it had a radial engine. As it drew nearer I could see that telltale rising sun on the wing. About that time he saw me and dove toward me. I saw yellow flashes from his wing guns and peeled for the tree tops. He missed me, pulled up, and circled for another pass. With quick weaving maneuvers on the valley floor I managed to elude him a second time, but those yellow flashes were still coming. He made a third pass and I hoped to lure him into a mountainside. He must have seen his danger because he didn't come back again. For that I was thankful and landed safely at Imphal. My patient breathed a sigh of relief and said - 'I thought that was it'.

After a week's rest at a nearby base we were issued new planes and headed back to our old base. Our new job was to evacuate Chinese and American wounded. We worked with them as they moved down the Irrawaddy River valley opening the way for the construction of the Ledo Road. We landed our L-5's and L-1's in strips cut out of the jungle, barely large enough to get a plane in or out. One spot measured 785 ft. long by 50 ft. wide and had tall trees on both ends. We practically bent the L-1's around those trees to get in and out. One particular day we ferried out 88 from that strip under threat of enemy fire. We lost two planes but saved eighty-eight lives. When the patients were removed from our light planes for further evaluation in C-47 hospital planes, and waved a weak goodbye with a "thanks Sarge," it gave us a feeling of satisfaction of having done a good job, of having saved a human life.

In the words of S/Sgt Leo J. Carroll of Bloomington, Illinois, "We worked out of small, unimproved air strips, mostly behind the Japanese lines, often landing in sight of and in sound of their gunfire. We carried the wounded to a larger C-47 strip where they would be taken back to India. We lost airplanes but only five pilots.

In ten months, we flew every day, often several trips a day, and evacuated hundreds of casualties. For our efforts, most of us were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal. We also got a great big 'thank you' from the British government."

It was General Wingate himself, in one of his last interviews who praised the cooperation of the Americans and said: "Without it we'd never have been able to accomplish so much.

Wingate was killed on the evening of March 24, 1944 when his fully loaded Mitchell bomber crashed some 30 minutes outside of Imphal in northeast India. His achievements, as well as larger than life persona, were eulogized in the CBI Roundup, April 6, 1944. An excerpt follows:

"...the "Wingate Tradition" will live for decades to come. He became the great British military hero in a static theater by the sheer force of his insistence that something be done against the enemy. The mere fact that he could sell an idea as militarily radical as his to Delhi, Quebec and Washington is proof enough of the force of his personal conviction and the dominance of his personality.
Two liaison pilots from the 1st Air Commandos were sent to find the downed plane which was carrying Gen. Wingate. The following is the story of this search, as told by one of the spotter pilots sent on that mission. In his own words, the journey of Lloyd I Samp:

"I was one of the 532 volunteers who made up the 1st Air Commandos. The majority of the personnel were pilots who flew our fighters, our B-25's, gliders, transports or spotter L-planes. Our mission was to give all-around air support for British General Orde Wingate's force known as the Chindits. Colonel Philip ("Flip") Cochran served as our senior commander, with Colonel John Allison as co-commander.

Many years have elapsed since General Wingate died in an airplane accident. The time of the tragedy was approximately two hours before midnight on March 24, 1944. This has been documented by the time it would have taken the plane, once it departed India's Imphal Valley, to arrive over the crash site in Burma. On board were the pilot, crew, two correspondants, Wingate and an aide - nine persons in all.

That first day, for me, March 25, 1944, had begun like any other, except for a thunderstorm during the night. My jeep drive to the airstrip that morning was refreshing, for the rain had cooled the air. I liked to see the weather this way but, unfortunately, there were few days like this. At Operations, our squadron commander announced a search mission. Due to the nature of the task, pilots with the light spotter L-1 aircraft were chosen because of the plane's great fuel capacity. The four of us selected were quickly briefed about the area to be searched - the Naga Hills, headhunter country! Fires reportedly had been seen along the ridge of these hills. Our job was to find out if a plane crash had been the cause of these fires. Each pilot was assigned a grid area that covered about 24 square miles. Each of us took along an observer because four eyes were better than two.

After about an hour's flight we arrived at the grid area and took up our search patterns. I chose to fly my area north and south - back and forth like you would plow corn. No set policy existed as to the proper search pattern. I just felt that this would be the best and most accurate method.

After approximately an hour, I sighted a blackened area. From that moment I was convinced that an airplane had indeed crashed there. And it had. We circled the sight several times at a low altitude. Not much remained of the plane, but from the one wing and strut that I could identify, the wreckage had to be a B-25. As we flew back to our base at Halikanda, I kept wondering why a B-25 would be out flying in the middle of the night.

Upon landing I immediately reported to our squadron commanders. When I explained to them what I had observed, they replied almost in unison that I had to be wrong because no B-25's had been in that area.

After closer questioning, they asked if I could find the wreckage again. I said yes. In no time we were back in the air heading for the crash site. This time I carried a high-ranking officer. A second plane piloted by my squadron CO included another such officer. We came out at the wreckage, circled several times and returned to base. After parking our planes we walked to headquarters, where I was thanked for a job well done.

Early on the morning of the 26th, when I reported to the CO's office, he told me that General Wingate had been on board a B-25 on the night of the 24th. When his plane did not arrive at its destination, the news had been declared top secret. Because of Wingate's position as commanding general of the Burma campaign, word of his disappearance had to be kept from the Japanese until her fate could be confirmed. My commander, after viewing the wreckage the previous day, was convinced that I had been right about it being a B-25. No other plane of that type had been out on the night of the 24th. The conclusion was obvious: Wingate's plane had been a B-25; the wreckage was that of a B-25; thus Wingate was undoubtedly dead.

My mission now would be to proceed to the crash site and pick up a message from the ground. A British unit had been ordered to walk in to investigate the remains of the crash. The nearest British were 26 miles from the wreckage. Their timetable for reaching the area and erecting a message pickup was mid-morning. We took off from the base to coincide with their schedule.

The procedure for retrieving a message required the ground personnel to erect two bamboo poles, stretch a cord from the top of one to the other and tie the message to the cord. During our pickup, the pilot in the back seat would let down a weight on a cord. When we passed over the bamboo poles, the weight would hit, wrap around the cross cord, and then wind the message up to the plane. Done at a very low altitude, the task required precise maneuvering. Instead of an L-1, the faster and more maneuverable L-5 was chosen for our mission.

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Fellow pilot Bill Walters and I arrived at the site at the designated time in our L-5. Because of the difficulty of the terrain, we fully expected the British party would be delayed. As ordered, we circled the area watching for its arrival. The fuel capacity of the L-5 allowed us about an hour and a half of circling time before we would have to return to base. After an hour, I told Walters I would continue for a few more minutes and if the British did not show up, we would return to base. Before I could complete this final maneuver, the plane began to lose power. Since it was not uncommon at an altitude of 5,000 feet to pick up some carburetor icing, I pulled full throttle, but the attempt did not improve the performance of the plane. At this point I knew that the only alternative was a forced landing.

With what little power was left, I put the aircraft in a glide to try to set down as close as possible to the B-25 crash scene. Unfortunately, I did not get as close as I had planned. The area was full of tall and heavy bamboo jungle. So I pulled full flaps and cut what little engine power I had left. The forward motion luckily slowed just enough to keep the plane from nosing into the side of the mountain. This was my first and last crash landing while in the service.

There is an old aviation saying: "Any landing that you can walk away from is a good landing." I am almost convinced of its truth. The crash left me dazed. My first thoughts were to get out of the plane because of the possibility of fire. Instead of going out of the door on my right, I climbed, without really thinking, out of the left window. Once safely out I rushed to the other door to check on my fellow pilot - Bill Walters. He was unconscious but came around in a few minutes. The first thing he said was that he thought that his leg was broken. While lifting him our of the plane I could see that his diagnosis was correct. I then popped a parachute and made a pallet on the ground under the wing of the aircraft.

After making him as comfortable as possible under the circumstances, I checked the radio. It was damaged beyond repair. With no means of communication, we followed the rule of thumb to stay with our plane after a crash. We were now in a waiting game.

Later that afternoon, I thought that I heard sounds coming from the B-25 wreckage, which was located approximately 300 yards from our plane through dense jungle. I told Walters that I was going to investigate. Although reluctant to be left alone because of his immobility, he consented. The steep climb showed me that I had sustained several cuts and bruises during our forced landing, but they were soon forgotten as I neared the ledge where the B-25 wreckage lay. I could make out voices.

I picked a hole in the cover to see who was making the noise. They were not British but natives called Nagas. I could see about 20 or 30 of them pillaging the wreckage. They would pick up an object, closely examine it, throw it down, and move to another item. After several minutes of hidden observation, I returned - much to Walter's relief.

The remainder of the 26th was miserable. At an altitude of 5,000 feet it can get very chilly. Added to that was a light rain which fell most of the night. We protected ourselves as best we could by wrapping up in our parachutes and seeking shelter under the plane's wing. Later we learned that our weather experience was typical for the region. The next day, also typical, would bring heat and humidity.

About midmorning the next day, we heard the sound of a plane engine. It had to be a search plane. It was imperative that I show myself. Because the growth was too heavy where we were located, I again had to make the steep climb to the open area - I made it up that incline in record time. Upon reaching the clearing, located near the B-25 wreckage, I found it "deserted". I walked out into the open. I had gone but a short distance when Naga heads began to pop up all around.

I continued on to the B-25 with Nagas following. I held my hand in a sign of friendship.

The search plane was now overhead, and I wasted no time in signaling it, Nagas or not. I informed the crew through manual signals that my fellow pilot was a stretch case. The plane continued to circle. A message soon dropped telling me to clear an area, since rescue by helicopter was planned. I knew that helicopters were experimental in nature and had not been used before. These new craft seemed perfectly designed to make rescues just like ours. Still, I had my doubts.

While there I decided to take a closer look at the B-25 wreckage. The Nagas stayed with me but never came any closer that about 20 feet.

Little was left of Wingate's plane. One wing and a strut were the only parts of any size. The site gave every indication of a very intense fire and a strong explosion. A short distance from the remains lay a pith helmet. The damage to it was minimal. Such a helmet in Burma was a rarity. I knew that it had to be Wingate's.
It was his trademark.

With the search plane headed back to base, I started looking for a suitable place for a helicopter to land. The burned-out area caused by the B-25’s crash seemed the best site. I immediately set to work expanding the area by clearing surrounding growth. Using a machete, I worked approximately two hours, until I had cleared what I thought was a satisfactory landing site. During my labors, the Nagas remained a respectable distance from me. None volunteered to help. The next day I found out that the Nagas’ primary tool was a rather narrow blade knife - about 20 inches in length with a square tip - called a da. With one swing, a Naga could cut a 4-inch-diameter bamboo apart. It took me and my machete about five minutes to do the same.

With the rescue site cleared, I started back to check on Walters. I had not gone far when out of nowhere two Nagas appeared and directly approached me. One was small in stature and was dressed differently from all the rest. Instead of a rag wraparound, he had on shorts and a gray, sweaterlike shirt. He walked right up to me and spoke: “I am a Christian. I went to missionary school at Silchar.”

To say that I was relieved to hear someone speak English is an understatement! Unfortunately, though, I had just heard nearly the full extent of his English. Repeatedly he asked me a question that I could not understand. Finally, after several hand gestures and a few words of crude English, it dawned on me that he wanted to know if the B-25 was my plane. It took some time for me to explain that my aircraft was farther down the mountain. By now the rest of the Naga were standing all around us. The little boy - I call him that because he was small and looked about 12 years old - started to converse with the group. Considerable lingo passed back and forth. Then he and several other Naga left. As they departed, I turned and make my way back to Walters. Although I felt somewhat apprehensive about the little boy leaving, I was not really scared. Walters was much relieved when I told him that the Naga seemed friendly and that a helicopter was being sent to rescue us.

Sometime after midday another plane returned and dropped a message. It had been decided that the high altitude precluded the use of a helicopter. Instead the British would walk in to get us. This change of plans really did not surprise me since I had doubted the prospects of a helicopter rescue anyway. Besides the message, a food-and-water drop was also made. But whatever was not damaged upon impact was lost in the dense jungle. There was nothing to do now but wait.

As I made my way back to Walters again, about 15 Nagas followed. Although I had no way of knowing, since we could not communicate, I presumed that the little boy had instructed them to look after us. Walters was rather shocked to see what I hoped were our protectors. Both of us had our side arm - a .45-caliber pistol. We also had one semiautomatic carbine, which was in the plane. Our only knowledge about the Nagas came from previous briefings given our outfit on the native peoples - sessions that led us to believe the Nagas were friendly. Nevertheless, Walters insisted that he should have the carbine. I agreed because he was helpless, due to his injury. We also agreed to stay awake all night just to be safe.

We fell asleep anyway. Exactly when I dozed off I could not recall. When I awoke at daybreak, I found the Nagas still with us. In fact, they were in the same squatting positions that they had assumed when they had first settled down around us. I wondered if they had even moved all night.

On March 28, as usual, it was a damp foggy morning. Although we had not eaten anything since the crash, our hunger had left us. I guess that when you do not eat for several days your appetite is not as great. Beside, we really had not had time to think about it. Our cigarettes, though, had almost run out. Between the two of us, we had only about a half pack. We were going to miss our cigarettes the most.

About midmorning we heard noises in the undergrowth. My first thought was that our British rescuers had arrived. The noise, however, turned out to be the little boy and about 10 fellow Nagas. The sight of the boy brought such a sigh of relief, for I felt that we were in good hands. He in fact approached and handed me an envelope. I hurriedly opened it and read an encouraging message-

To the Airmen at Thison:

I have just received news of your crash. I understand that only one plane had fallen and been burnt out. I am sending out the local doctor to you. Alternatives before you are these: either you come to Tamenlong and from here go to Imphal (a matter of about 60 miles), or go from Thilon straight to Oinamlong (on the Casher Road), where there are military outposts, and also, I understand, a European doctor. The march to Oinamlong is about 24 miles and at Oinamlong a jeep should be available.

If you decide to come to Tamenlong, you will be most welcome. But at the risk of seeming inhospitable,
I advise the other alternative, as the march this way is not only longer but less comfortable.

Excuse this hurried scrawl.

(Signed)

S.D.O., West.

P.S. I am sending you some cigarettes, tea, sugar, porridge, vegemite, “bully” and sausages. I am sorry there is nothing better to send you.

I did not think that the little boy could have read the contents; yet, as I read the letter, he began to instruct the others. Soon they were busy building a stretcher. It amazed me how quickly and efficiently they used their knives to cut bamboo. They cut two bamboo poles about 16 feet long and another two about 3 feet long that were used to hold the two longer poles together. While this activity was going on, another group cut strings of bamboo about a half-inch wide and approximately the length of the longer poles. These were to be used to secure the two short pieces of bamboo and to weave a pallet for the injured Walters. In one hour all this had been completed.

While the Nagas worked at their task, the boy attempted to explain to me what was going to transpire. With his few words of English and his sign language he gave me a fairly good idea of where we were headed. The closest village that we had observed while flying over the area were due north of our crash site. We were about five miles up the side of the mountain. There was no trail.

We started our journey, with the Nagas carrying Walter's stretcher. The rugged trip took about six hours. About the middle of the afternoon we arrived at the village of Thilon. Walters was placed under a roof that extended out from the front of a bamboo house. All the buildings were made in the same fashion - bamboo with a thatched roof. The boy disappeared as soon as we arrive, only to return with food. The meal consisted of boiled eggs and a drink that I think was made from bamboo juice. The eggs were about half the size of a regular hen egg. Upon peeling the shell, I found the egg to be green and black. It took a lot of courage but I managed to get a couple down. The drink, though, did help to quench our thirst. Its taste was bearable as long as you kept from looking at it.

Later in the evening the promised doctor arrived. He obviously wasn't European; I presumed he was a Naga. His speech was virtually unintelligible to me. He did warp Walters' leg, but he did not have any medicine for the pain. After he had departed, Walters pain became so intense that he asked me to take off the wrapping. Reluctantly, I complied. The pain seemed to ease considerably.

During our entire time at the village we had a large audience, which only grew larger as the evening wore on. The headman of the village even came and sat with us. I knew that he had to be a prominent figure due to his unique dress - sort of a wraparound frock. He was very talkative and tried to engage us in conversation. I could not understand a single word. Fortunately, the boy had stayed. The headman would address the little boy. It seemed that he wanted to know where our plane was, since we had given his tribe our parachutes. Near dark, the headman rose to leave. Repeatedly, he addressed a question to me. I looked at the little boy and he vehemently shook his head, “No”. So I shook mine, no. This exchange went on for quite some time. Finally the headman left. That night we slept with a canopy over our heads.

Early the next morning we awoke to the usual weather. Some rain had fallen during the night. The Nagas, though, were prepared to travel. I knew that if we headed south we were going to the British outpost at Oinamlong - approximately a 24-mile journey. And we did - with the 12 Nagas handling the stretcher, we proceeded south. The trail that we followed was along the very peak of the mountain range. The path was not a straight one. Instead, it wound its way up one peak and then down the other side. This made for a long 24 miles! The stretcher-bearers did not exactly walk. They assumed a gait that resembled a slow jog, all the while chanting to stay in step. I followed behind trying as best I could to keep pace. Although difficult, the only thing that would have held me back at this point would have been two broken legs. After a couple of hours we came upon another group of Nagas. After a few brief minutes of rest the new group took over the stretcher, and we were off again. This procedure of changing men continued all the way to Oinamlong.

About the middle of the day, when my legs were beginning to get pretty sore and a mile felt like two, we met two British soldiers who had been sent from Oinamlong to accompany us. What a relief to talk to somebody you could understand! They fixed a lunch consisting of canned sliced peaches. I never tasted anything better! We took a 30-minute break to drink what we called tea and the British called char. Only the British can make tea like that.
While we were resting, the British asked us about our stay in Thilon and our morning's journey. I told them that I had paid the first stretcher-bearers for their service. I wondered whether the amount had been appropriate. They informed me that I should not have paid them anything, because their officials had made arrangements to pay them. Anyway, my renumeration had been far too much. I also related my encounter with the village's headman. They laughed and remarked that the headman had been asking me to go inside his hut and stay the night with one of his daughters. My decision to say no had been a wise one, they said. According to Naga custom, if I had replied yes and had gone inside, the chances were that I would have lost my head! Thank goodness for the little boy.

This story led us into an interesting discussion of Naga customs. The British, “in control” of the Nagas, had a fairly sound grasp...they pointed out that they still permitted the Nagas to take the heads of some of their own people. If they took any British heads, however, they would be punished!

This prompted me to inquire about the numerous shrunken heads that we had seen mounted on poles as we passed villages that morning. The number of heads that a village displayed, it seemed, reflected the village’s status - the more heads, the more status. I also related that we had given the Nagas at Thilon our parachutes and that they had shown much appreciation for the gift. The British explained that cloth was a precious item due to its short supply. Salt was another. Later, one of our other pilots flew over the first village and dropped a bag of salt.

Our break over, we were off again. The Nagas continued to help, and having the two British along was indeed a comfort. About dark we arrived at the largest village we had seen yet. Twenty-five heads were displayed at the village entrance. The British asked if we felt like continuing or staying in the village. I wondered if the village was friendly. They replied that it was one of the more belligerent ones but they really did not think there would be any problem. I asked Walters what he thought. Although he had been jostled all day - for at least 10 hours - he was all for going on. During this time I had never heard one complaint from him, even though he was in severe pain. In fact, his main concern was that I had to walk.

As we started off for what would be the last six miles, it began to rain. The trail became very slippery. Going up an incline was not too bad, but going down was extremely difficult. My legs were so sore and stiff that I just sat and slid down the hills. At midnight we arrived at the British outpost of Oinamlng. They offered to fix tea for us but I said a pallet sounded better. A bamboo pallet may not seem ideal bedding, but it really did not matter because at this stage I could have slept on a pile of rocks.

Early the next morning, March 30, after a cup of tea, we loaded the stretcher on a jeep for the trip to Silchar. The stretcher was secured on a cross-support about two feet above the top of the jeep. This made the jeep top heavy, but I am sure that it had been used this way before. The British outpost at Oinamlng was located on the Cachar Road. This road began in the Imphal Valley in India and continued beyond Silchar. We were told several day later that the Japanese had penetrated to within a few miles of the British outpost at Oinamlng but had been cut off and forced back before reaching the outpost itself.

Our journey was a wild ride over what was generously called a road - “obstacle course” would be a more accurate description. But early in the afternoon we arrived at Silchar. An American plane waited for us. From here it was but a short flight to Hailikandi, where our main base was. There, an ambulance awaited our arrival. In Lowell Thomas’ book, Back to Mandalay, a picture on page 259 shows a stretcher case being loaded into an ambulance. Contrary to the book’s caption, the scene depicts Walters being put into the vehicle. I am the person in the undershirt with my back to the camera.

I went to the hospital with Walters. They gave me thorough checkup and bandaged a few cuts and bruises. Since they kept me overnight, I went to bed that night with a pillow and white sheets - I closed my eyes and thought I must be in heaven!

Before leaving the hospital the next day, I visited Walters for the last time. To me, he personified the American soldier. I found out later that the medical authorities sent him back to the States because they did not have the facilities to set his leg properly.

I returned to my quarters to get some clean clothes and then reported to Operations. I was ready for duty. A few days later, an inquiry was held at the base with both high-ranking British and American officers present. I spent a considerable time waiting for my turn. After about an hour of questioning relating to what I had seen at the crash site, they dismissed me.

A couple of days later, I was back to help evacuate the sick and wounded in Burma. There was simply
no time to think about the Wingate wreck of the Nagas. Now, of course, more than 40 years later, I do have the time to think about all that happened those few days in March of 1944. And what I have found is that those memories are still so vivid in my mind.

During World War II, the Army Air forces organized three special groups designated Air Commando Groups. Undoubtedly the most famous of these units was the 1st Air Commando Group (1st A.C.G.), which was organized on March 25, 1944 and activated at Hailakandi, Assanol, India where it was based until after the end of hostilities. The first commander was Col. Philip G. Cochran, who was picked by General Hap Arnold. Col. Cochran was the prototype for Flip Corkin, one of the heroes in Milton Caniff's "Terry and the Pirates" comic strips. The second commander was Col. Clinton B. Gaty from May 20, 1944 until Col. Robert W. Hall took over on April 7, 1945. The unit was attached to the Tenth Air Force on July 10, 1945. The unit was inactivated on November 3, 1945. It was later re-activated on April 18, 1962 as part of TAC (Tactical Air Command).

Squadrons of the 1st A.C.G. included the 5th Fighter Squadron, 6th Fighter Squadron, 164th Liaison Squadron, 165th Liaison Squadron, and the 319th Special Operations Squadron (airlift).

The unit was comprised of operational sections, rather than units until reorganized in September of 1944. Operational sections included 12 bombers (B-25's), 33 fighters (P-51's and P-47's), and 103 liaisons (L-1s and L-5s), transports (10 UC-64s and 13 C-47s), gliders (150 Cg-4As and 25 TG-5s), and 3 helicopters (YR-4s).

The group provided fighter cover, bomb striking power, and air transport for Wingate's Raiders and Merrill's Marauders, operation behind enemy lines in Burma.

Operations included airdrops and landing of troops, food and equipment, medical evacuations, and attacks against enemy airfields and lines of communications.

The Group markings were five white, diagonal, thin stripes on the fuselage. They had many firsts including the first military use of an American helicopter, the Sikorski YR-4 (only 30 were built).

The training gliders, because of their role, were for the most part confined to use within the continental United States. The exception was the use of 25 Aeronca TG-5's by the 1st Air Commando Group in Burma. Except for big European operations such as D-Day and Operation Market Garden in Holland, most combat glider activities took place in Burma.

The 1st A.C.G. provided air support for the invasion of Burma by British forces. Col. Cochran came up with the idea of flying British troops commanded by British Major General Orde C. Wingate in gliders deep into the heart of Burma. Previously Wingate and Merrill had gone into the bush by foot or raft along rivers. U.S. glider pilots were able to keep Japanese forces off balance, preventing them from invading India.

A story which ran in the Sunday June 4, 1944 issue of the Los Angeles Times demonstrated a first hand look at the support the L-planes were giving their British counterparts. Entitled "U.S. Air Commandos Aid British Army in Burma", the byline was from the Headquarters of the American Air Commando Force, India-Burma Border and dated March 22, 1944. The verbiage follows:

"Col. Philip G. Cochran's air commandos are throwing everything except their water buckets at the Japanese in support of British ground forces, attacking the main supply routes to the enemy's northern army.

Naval depth charges, land mines, oil and fire bombs have been dropped on Japanese strongholds in front of the British column pushing out front the Allied air invasion base in North-Central Burma, and commando bombers with 75-mm. guns have been giving these troops what amounts to artillery support from the air.

Fighters equipped with hook knives dangling from long cables under the planes have been cutting Japanese telephone and telegraph communication wires from the air.

Once when one of the hook knives broke loose, Fighter Pilot Maj. Robert Petit, Berkeley, Cal., holder of the Silver Star and Oak Leaf, released his cable and finished the job of cutting the telegraph wires with the wings of his plane.

When his crew chief saw the dents in his wings he nearly tore his hair out and calmed down only after an official order prohibited commando pilots from using their wings for such purposes.

More restriction orders followed when Bomber Pilot Walter V. Radovich of 912 E 87th St, Los Angeles, spotted a long Japanese supply convoy along a road, dived too low and released fragmented bombs which filled his own plane full of holes, slightly injuring one of his crew."
According to Radovich this had been a “routine flight” and he couldn’t understand why the “British gave me a Distinguished Flying Cross for it”. He also was promoted to Major; his version of the events as retold in a newspaper article follows:

“While flying with the daring air commandos under the late Gen Orde Wingate, Maj. Radovich generally piloted Mustang fighters or Mitchell medium bombers. But on this occasion he flew a Metage Helldiver, one of the tiny unarmed planes flown by sportsmen-pilots in the States.

Maj. Radovich wasn’t flying for fun. The fate of the whole American-British commando expedition in which Gen Wingate’s men landed miles behind Jap lines in Burma, depended on his flight.

The commandos, who were landed in gliders in a small jungle clearing, were supposed to scatter and beat off any Jap attacks while the landing strip was secured so cargo planes could come in the next day.

But something went wrong. Back at commando headquarters a dim, garbled radio message was received which seemed to indicate that the Japs were attacking and overwhelming the commandos. Then, silence.

If the cargo planes flew in as scheduled they might land in Jap territory. If they didn’t go in the commandos who might still be holding the clearing would be without supplies.

And the only plane that could fly in there and land in the unimproved jungle clearing - if it still was unimproved - was the little Metage Helldiver.

Maj. Radovich flew it in, not knowing who his receptionists were going to be. The plane was slow, carried no armament, and would be flying for 200 miles in daylight over Jap territory where Zero patrolled.

Hugging the top of the jungle, he flew without incident and set his Helldiver down in the clearing where engineers were working feverishly on an airstrip. In the night landing, the engineers told him, the glider carrying their radio equipment had been smashed. They quickly set up the transmitter Maj. Radovich had flown in.

It was just a routine flight, Maj. Radovich insists. He’d much rather talk about the day he shot up five Jap locomotives, three of them going at top speed.”

Harland K. Cook went to Burma with the 71st Liaison Squadron which was attached to the First Air Commandos in central Burma. “We started out of Miami Beach, Florida in a C54 going for Bermuda for eats and refuel but we did not make it after an engine went out. Back to Miami for the night and the next morning off again but the landing gear did not come up. But the third time we made it all the way to the Azores and then down to Africa and across to Abadan, Iran where another pilot lost his brakes an taxied into the rear of our plane. With a replacement we made it to Calcutta where we got off and rode a dirty old Indian train 120 miles inland to Asanol, India where we got a check out for the Burma front.

On May 5th we were on combat duty with the First Air Commandos at Magwee, Burma flying wounded off from 100 miles south along the Irrawade River until the Japs surrendered in Burma. Then back to India in our L-5’s getting caught in one of those bad India storms and riding out the storm sitting in the tied down airplanes till the storm blew out. We arrived back at our starting field at Asanol for reassignment which soon came and to the Hump jumping off base at Chabua, India where I became involved in flying the mail for the squadron for quite a time from Nagahulli, India to Chabua every day when it was flyable.

To get to this station I found myself appointed squadron leader to take 32 planes and pilots through some of the roughest territory I’ve ever seen and set the whole squadron down at the wrong field about 5 minutes time from the right one.

On July 19, 1945 orders sent us flying again for an over the famous Hump to China and with a take off at Mytilikina, Burma twice because of weather. The whole squadron made it. We learned by radio on the trip that the bomb was dropped and the Japs were ready to surrender. We almost did not make it across for we ran into a thunder storm in a deep canyon and were doing wing overs to circle round trying to find a way out. With a lot of prayers and caution a break in the storm appeared on top of the mountains and the whole flight went through to safety. Not a plane of pilot was lost but I’m sure none will ever forget the trip in the most rough country I have ever seen or probably will ever see.”

Many stories came out of the expediences in Burma and Howard L Smith tells of one of the more interesting in his narrative “The Forgotten Five”.

“This is the story of five 1st Air Commando Light (LIAISON) Plane Pilots who in 1944 were sent into the Naga Hills of Assam on the India-Burma border and were forgotten for three months. On March 27th, the
Glider invasion strip some one hundred and eighty miles behind the Japanese Army lines was under attack and all L-pilots who had lost their aircraft due to enemy action were ordered to evacuate. S/Sgt's Ray Rukas and Howard Smith were flown to Taro and then to the Light Plane Headquarters in Hialakandi. Major Rebori had been relieved of command and Major Boebel was now in command of the Light plane group; he had been part of the invasion force until the tow rope on his glider was broken so he and several others had walked out of the jungle and swam the Chinwin River and returned to base. Boebel asked Smith where he had been and if he wanted to go to a rest camp. Smith replied that he had been hustling gasoline drums since his L-5 was burned and he would appreciate some flying time.

Within the hour S/Sgt. Julian Chmil arrived with a high fever due to malaria and was sent to the hospital. Major Boebel then ordered Smith to take Chmil's L-5 and report to S/Sgt. Hugh Coll who was attached to the British 23rd Brigade, located somewhere near the Naga Hills area. This Brigade had trained with General Wingate's Chindits for operations behind the Japanese lines, but was reassigned when the Japanese 15th Army invaded India's Imphal Valley. The 23rd Brigade consisted of three columns, the 1st Essex, the 2nd Duke of Wellington's and the 4th Border Guards, some three thousand men in all under the command of Brigadier Lancelot L.C. Perowne. It was now under the command of General Stopfords 23rd Corps for the defense of India's Imphal Valley, gateway to India proper.

After a two day search, Smith found S/Sgt. Coll and the 23rd Brigade located on the narrow gauge railway near Marrani, some forty miles south of the Jorhat Air Transport Command Base where gasoline and supplies were being flown to China.

The 23rd Brigade had been ordered to repel Lt. General Sato's Japanese 31st Division who were moving through the Naga Hills toward the town of Kohima, which blocked the path to the large British supply base at Dimapur. S/Sgt. Coll had returned to the rear base due to a reoccurrence of malaria. Smith was to fly Brigadier Perowne into Imphal for a military critique. The city was now completely surrounded by Japanese forces.

Smith had been flying behind the Japanese lines when his L-5 was destroyed and now wanted to fly directly in, but the Brigadier wanted to fly around and enter Imphal from the west. What wasn't known at the time was that the Japanese 33rd Division had moved into that area through Bishenpur. 'We saw some troop movement but because they didn't shoot at us we thought they were on our side. When we arrived at Imphal it was under attack by Japanese fighters so we landed on a taxi strip and into a revetment. After looking at the situation maps the Brigadier didn't have an objection to flying directly back to base'.

The 23rd Brigade was now ready to move into action and a landing strip had been prepared some forty miles south at a village called Mokochung. The village had an altitude of some thirty seven hundred feet and had a school house on one end and a sheer drop off at the other end. It had been a former British football pitch. The Brigadier did not want a two day jeep ride and also wanted to be the first white man to land in the area. The first flight in with him was successful but on the second trip with the Brigadier Major as a passenger 'we hit a muddy spot and turned upside down'. The passenger was unhurt but Smith's head hit the compass and he had to be patched up by the British Medic.

This was the same village where Phillip Adams, the local British civil official, had sent out Naga native rescue parties to bring in the famous news man Eric Sevareid. Sevareid's party had to bail out of a transport over the area on their way to China in 1943.

After the L-5 crashup, Smith was sent with an armed escort for a two mile hike to a jeep track and a two day jeep ride back to the Polo Field. The jeep drivers were ex-tank jockeys who drove over the cutbacks like it was Saturday night in Jersey. A white knuckle trip for Smith all the way! Twenty four minutes flying time in and a two day jeep ride out.

In the meantime three L-5's flown by S/Sgts. Lem Davis, John McNammee and AL Lieto arrived along with an L-1 piloted by S/Sgt. Billy Bussells. after another trip to Hailakandi for a replacement L-5 the pilots were ready to operate again. 'With the monsoon season approaching we picked the Assam Tea Planters Club Polo Field as our air strip. It had drainage ditches on three sides to carry off the water and was almost two hundred yards long. The high trees made all takeoffs and landings one way. As the Brigade moved into the Naga Hills we were picking up more sick than wounded, some reconnaissance, message pickups, and equipment replacement'.

S/Sgt. Davis picked up a heavy object which turned out to be a new type of Japanese grenade; it had-
n't been disarmed. S/Sgt. McNammee was bringing in a rare Japanese prisoner who tried to choke Mac with his bare feet. The British were paying the Nagas, ex headhunters, one hundred silver rupees for each Japanese soldier's head delivered. As Smith was flying a British Captain into the hills a sudden storm struck. Smith was checking his crash shoulder harness 'when a quiet voice came from the rear set where the passenger did not have a parachute. 'I say, Sergeant, your not leaving the aircraft, are you?' We assured the Captain that we would not leave him. It was now so dark that we could not land at the Polo Field so we went to the Jorhat Air Base with their five thousand foot runways. As we circled the fields, we continued to get a red light from the tower. We were running low on fuel so red light or no red light we decided to land. We landed and turned off immediately just as a C-87, loaded with gasoline for China, was taking off toward us. If we had been thirty seconds later we would have made a very large boom. Of course the Airdrome Officer chewed us out again - he wasn't very happy with us'.

'It was now June and we still hadn't received any word from out base at Hailakandi so we requested the British to contact them for us. Word came back that they had moved out but nobody knew where they had gone to. Some rumors had them going as far as back to the United States! We looked at each other and decided that of were going to continue to eat we better continue to fly with for the 23rd Brigade.

'Smith had cracked up another L-5 on a night landing at the Polo Field so were short an airplane. We saw several L-5's on the flight line at the Jorhat Air Base and when we inquired were told that they were for the 73rd Liaison Squadron stationed at Ledo. One did belong to the 1st Air Commandoes - another group the Ferry Pilots couldn't find. We offered to take the L-5 off the hand of Major Lewis who was in charge of transient aircraft. He told us to send our ranking officer over to sign for the aircraft, but when he found out we were the five lost pilots from the 1st Air Commandoes, he permitted us to sign for the plane. When we finally returned to base our Engineering officer, Major Jenentt swore we stole their plane.

'We hadn't been in the building very long, a week or two at most, when an American full colonel, Colonel Pocock came in and said he was commander of the Jorhat Air Base. He wanted to see our officer in charge and when he found out that we were five Staff Sergeants with the only officer being a British Captain in charge of the troops guarding the landing strip he ordered us to remove ourselves immediately from the shower facility. We contacted Brigadier Perowne who contacted the local British Civil Affairs Officer who sent a representative over. This officer declared the Polo Field a tactical air field but locked up the Assam Tea Planters Club. Now we had a very irate Colonel Pocock who had told the members of the Club he would chase the pesky sergeants out of their shower facility. He threatened us with arrest by the MP's if we set foot on his air base.

'We were saved from this fate when two L-5's came flying in with Lt. Colonel Boebel and M/Sgt. Charles Clephas. At first they wouldn't admit that we had been forgotten but later admitted that we had been overlooked. This was very possible because the Air Commandoes had light planes scattered all over Burma along with all the British forces.'

Lt. Colonel Boebel wanted to talk to Brigadier Perowne whose headquarters was now some one hundred and thirty miles south in a village call Kusami. The natives had laid bamboo mats over the muddy spots on the landing strip. After some conversation between Perowne and Boebel it was decided the operations should cease due to the advancing monsoon rains. With the Japanese armies now retreating back across the Chinwin River on the India-Burma border, the campaign was completed.

'So we returned to our base in Assanol, India some one hundred miles west of Calcutta. We were greeted by our L-pilot friends who we hadn't seen for awhile; we were promoted and then rested a while. After this we made preparations for the next campaign with General Slim's 14th Army which recaptured Mandalay in March and pushed the Japanese out of Burma in 1945.'

Many of the pilots preferred the L-1 because it could carry a relatively larger and heavier load. But the airplane was a maintenance nightmare in the field. S/Sgt Carroll told of several of his missions while in Burma.

'I was dispatched in an L-1 to a mountain top landing strip on the border of India and Burma in the Nage headhunter's area," Carroll recalls. "Three servicemen were assigned to a weather and observation sta-
tion there and one of them was sick. I was there to pick him up. Before I reached the strip, the engine on the L-1 sputtered, popped, coughed and finally just quit. I stretched my glide trying to reach the strip, but I ran out of ideas and altitude at the same time. Luckily, I spotted an opening between two trees. The wings struck the trees at the same time and that took up most of the shock. I was held in my seat by the shoulder and lap belts. The fuselage finally slid to a halt, leaving me well shaken but unhurt. I scrambled out quickly, relieved that there were no signs of fire, and made my way up to the weather station where the men had waited in awe and shock after witnessing my 'landing'. It was the first plane crash they had ever seen and they fully expected to find my charred body.

"We radioed for replacement and while waiting for it, I was able to visit with some of the headhunters; a very strange people. Capt. Smith flew in and landed his L-1 safely and picked up me and the suffering observer. Whatever happened to my L-1? We salvaged part of it and the jungle got the rest.

Carroll tells how on another mission a doctor's know-how and suggestions solved a problem and saved the day and perhaps their lives.

"I was asked to fly a doctor into a jungle clearing to treat some British soldiers who had been wounded in a skirmish with a Japanese patrol. I circled the clearing and judged the place safe to land in. After landing, it wasn't until I started to turn that I realized my right wheel had hit a hole and bent the landing gear strut. We climbed out and found a landing gear that was about to collapse. Just then, some Burmese began to pour from the jungle. With some difficulty they explained to me in English that the British soldiers had left and taken their wounded with them. The British had learned that a Japanese patrol of much greater strength was nearby. The Burmese said they were about 15 minutes away from the clearing. The doctor and I were not about to try and outwit the Japanese patrol nor did we plan to spend the night. But what were we to do? After saying 'Our Father Who art in Heaven...' the doctor suggested a splint. Perhaps we could reinforce it so the strut wouldn't bend any further. We asked the Burmese to get us a large stalk of bamboo which we split for our splint. The doctor put the two pieces on each side of the bent strut and wrapped it tightly with nylon parachute cord. Using the water from my canteen, I wet the bamboo and cord so it would shrink taut. We held our breath and prayed that it would support the plane (the L-1's weight was about 3,000 pounds) for our take-off. As we cleared the trees we could look down and see the Japanese pouring into the clearing. In about 30 minutes we landed back at Aberdeen (home base). That was one landing that I made two point, tailwheel and left main gear. As we settled on the right gear we fully expected to feel it give way, but the splint held. I was glad I had the doctor with me. I can't remember if he was British or American, I think, though, he was British.

"The L-1 was a good airplane but one of the weak points was its landing gear," said Carroll. "I saw Jasper Thompson attempt to take off with a loaded L-1 at Taro. As he started his takeoff run the left landing gear just seemed to give way. I don't think he hit anything. He managed to get out safely when the plane quit sliding, but that L-1 was a miserable sight. After seeing that I decided to leave on the bamboo splint. I flew it that way for several weeks, and it made an excellent step for getting into the plane. And you never had to worry about bending it."

S/Sgt Carroll and several other pilots were the only contact for a base named "White City." "On my way to 'White City' from Aberdeen," he recalls, "a Japanese fighter made a pass at me, trying to get me in his gunsights. I was near the strip so I proceeded to land just as the British Anti-aircraft gunner made an end to my Japanese attacker. I was shaken up but safe. I think the Japanese plane came from a strip that was about 20 miles away."

"White City was really Mawly but they called it White City because of all the parachutes tangled in the surrounding trees. It was the scene of some of the fiercest and bloodiest fighting of the CBI campaign.

"Every time I flew in there I could hear guns and mortar shells. Sometimes I had to wait for a lull in the fighting to land or take off.

"On one flight into White City, my passenger was Brig. Calvert and my cargo was ammunition. The brigadier was lying on the ammunition boxes directing me to the airstrip. We couldn't undershoot because of some trees and a small creek. We couldn't overshoot because that end of the strip was still in Japanese hands. As we approached the strip I went to the left of the tracks and landed between the roadway and a small row of hills; that gave us at least some protection from the enemy.

"Every trip into White City meant a cargo of ammunition in and cargo of dead and wounded out. One
time, on the last flight of the day, I brought out four men besides myself. One of them was actually sitting on my shoulders."

All of the light plane groups in the CBI built up enviable records. Some, unfortunately, have been lost, but some are still available; one that is concerns the Light Plane section, First Air Commando Group APO 690.

That one outfit flew 7500 combat missions. There were times when a pilot would eat lunch in his plane while the fuel tanks were being filled so he could turn around more quickly. Seven or eight missions a day weren't uncommon, some longer than one hundred miles, a few less than ten.

The unit evacuated 2163 casualties, including wounded, malaria victims, fatigue casualties, and general sickness cases. Their identities included British, West African, Ghurka and Indian troops from the Arakan campaign, Chinese from General Stillwell's campaign, Americans from Merrill's Marauders and British, West Africans and Ghurkas from General Wingate's Chindits.

Food was always a problem. The light planes dropped more than 750 cases of K rations at column strips or by parachute from an altitude of one hundred feet or less. The food drops became necessary when a group became separated from the rest of its unit or when they were cut off and isolated by a Japanese Patrol.

Returning to action or bringing in fresh troops became part of the L-Bird work. The outfit flew in 174 replacements between 29 March and 22 April 1944 alone; the record preceding those dates were lost. The total number of replacements flown in probably exceeded two thousand.

Without arms and ammunition an Army is helpless, so the planes helped there, too, by flying 99 ammunition missions between 29 March and 22 April. Each flight could carry eight cases of mortar ammunition or the equivalent weight in other weapons or ammo.

Along with arms and supplies, the planes also flew in other essentials. The following article illustrates that the "other essentials" could make for quite an interesting flight. The article is entitled "Airborne Mule Got Drunk So They Had to Shoot Him" and is credited to "A Special Force Official Observer".

"How would you like to share a seat in a Dakota with a drunken mule while flipping thousands of feet above the Burmese Jungle?... You wouldn't?... Alec Roberts, a 27-year-old Australian Air Force F/Lt with the 3rd Div. would gladly have exchanged his seat with you a few months back when that weird experience befell him.

Just before the famous "fly-in" to "Broadway" one of the mules used for toting his wireless sets through the jungle fell sick. Not wanting to leave one of these valuable animals behind Roberts asked advice of a veterinary surgeon who said he had the necessary dope; and as the mule improved just before take-off time, he decided to take the risk.

But as soon as the Dakota became airborne, the mule, to use Roberts own words, "just went haywire". The vet's assistance was quickly sought but he explained that the effect of his dope would be similar to alcohol unless they were able to administer a full dose which would put the animal to sleep.

Roberts decided to use the dope as a last resort. Recalcitrant mule charging up and down finally broke his protecting barrier. Roberts had no option; he decided to give the dope. Just then the pilot announced that they must put out the lights as they were over Jap territory.

As Roberts remembers: "Finally he got out of his pen and ran completely amok in the body of the Dakota. Somehow we floored him and tried to get a bag over his head. He lashed out madly and one hoof went clean through the metal body of the plane. That was the last straw. We reluctantly had to shoot him; but our troubles were not over. His body all but blocked the door of the plane and we couldn't shift him because of his hoof".

Somehow or another they got the other animals out the plane but the officer in charge of the landing strip refused to take over a dead mule which he could not possibly dispose of. The pilot had no choice and very unwillingly agreed to fly back to base plus the dead mule as the only passenger. "It is not recorded," added Roberts, "whether one dead mule was offloaded the other end".

Roberts, who comes from Lismore, New South Wales, is still searching for that army vet. He wants to sample some of his dope.... in mild quantities and NOT repeat NOT before a Dakota flip.

Roberts told me: "I asked the pilot to give us ten minutes till we could get the mule fixed. He agreed but told us to make it snappy and Doc and I set about the job. But the mule being a bit 'barbary' the worst happened. We only managed the half dose which was fatal. It just put him on form. He lashed out wildly in his pen charging into the next mule, which replied by lashing out as only a mule can."
Searching out the enemy was a major job for the L-planes, and between 29 March and 22 April, 1944 eighteen reconnaissance missions were flown.

Eight POW's were evacuated, including a Burmese traitor, an Indian traitor and six captured Japanese soldiers.

Captured enemy documents and weapons were also flown back to the rear lines for evaluation and study in planning offensives.

The following true crash stories were recorded by M/Sgt Arnold C. Zahorsky, one of many veterans of the 1944 Burma campaign.

The ordeal suffered by T/Sgt Grant B. Putnam, was typical of some of the nightmares of jungle warfare. Every liaison pilot, as he looked at the endless jungle, prayed that what happened to Putnam would not happen to him. Putnam's accident occurred on 21 March 1944.

There were two ships in the flight that day, both L-1's. S/Sgt Burrell and Putnam had been sent on a mission to find a new strip south of Mawly.

"After takeoff we circled and headed in the general direction of the new strip," Putnam remembers. "I decided to go in first. I flew low over the fresh ground and from the air it looked all right. At each end of the area were trees 40 to 60 feet tall. To get in I had to fly down over a sort of valley and then put the ship into a violent slip. I came in tail high and too fast so with full throttle the engine roared and I went around again. The second time I came in even lower and made a violent slip. Just as the wheels touched down I realized I had too much speed for such a short strip. I stood on the brakes, pulled the mixture control, cut the switch just as I plunged into a rice paddy at the end of the strip. The landing gear folded as if it was made of paper."

"As I tumbled from my crashed plane my thoughts were to signal Sgt. Burrell not to try it. He was carrying a British doctor who was sorely needed in the British camp. He ignored my warning and after making four passes, finally made it in, but just as I had, he was rolling too fast. Trying not to hit my plane he put his into a violent ground loop. Again the L-1 landing gear just could not take the strain and it folded up just as mine had.

"Three more L-1's, scheduled to pick up wounded, came over and when they saw our crashed planes did not attempt to land. The strip was just too short and the trees at each end were too tall."

"Well, we knew we were in for a walk. There was a British camp only a half to three-quarters of a mile away and when we reached it we were told by an R.A.F. pilot that he had condemned the landing area, but Brig. Calvert had countermanded his order and gave orders to use it. On our first night there a British plane came over for a supply drop. We were given K rations, British field packs as well as British clothing and equipment."

"We were woke up early the next morning and were told to get ready for a long walk through the hills. The plan was to cross two roads and a railroad south of Mawly and continue on to Cochie. An advanced patrol went out looking for any Japanese in the area. None were found, so we set out.

"There were about 45 of us, with fifteen wounded and the rest in shaky health because of their long stay in the jungle. Our progress was very slow and we were poorly armed. Sgt. Burrell and I both had .45's with two extra clips each. In the rest of our party there were six Bren guns, two trench mortars, two boxes of mortar shells, and two boxes of hand grenades. We were certainly in no condition for a battle - hardly even a skirmish."

"As we approached the first road, the West Africans in our party and the column leader got across without any trouble. On the other side they spotted a Japanese patrol. The column leader instantly gave the signal and we began to dig in as deep and as fast as possible. The Japanese fired pistols and rifles, machine guns and mortars at us causing confusion and some near panic, so we decided to break up into two parties."

"We move the wounded back and out of the line of fire. The Japanese were using explosive bullets and it sounded like we were being flanked. We knew we had to move fast because they were closing in. So our group went north to the hills, where we had the protection of the jungle undergrowth. When we were out of danger, we reorganized and counted our wounded. Everyone had escaped but there were several more men with wounds.

"When morning came we knew we had to move, but we could only cover about four miles a day in the dense jungle. So we changed our destination toward Broadway and made about eight miles the next day."

"Of the injured, two were more severely wounded than the others and it was clear their strength was
ebbing away. We had to keep going, so there was nothing else to do but leave them. They were hidden as well as possible and food and water was left for them. We promised to return for them later and after we were rescued a West African Patrol was sent back, but there was no sign of them.

“Our trip across the mountains took us to a village named Lama, where we found a rice paddy that could be cleared for a landing strip; we began cutting trees by hand.

“On May 26, the first two of our L-1’s came in-five days after I had crashed. The wounded were taken our first and on May 27 three more L-1’s and a helicopter came for the rest of us.

“Later, we found out from the Burmese troops we had been followed by a Japanese patrol mounted on elephants.”

S/Sgt Edward F. Hladovcak tells M/Sgt Zahorsky about his crash in an L-1.

“On 21 May 1944, I took off in a flight of two ships with M/Sgt Gleaves leading to pick up wounded from a strip west of Aberdeen. We were able to land without too much difficulty. I picked up three walking wounded.

“M/Sgt Gleaves took off first and I followed in close pursuit. Shortly after takeoff, I realized my engine was not running properly. It simply seemed to rev down. I checked mixture controls, mags, fuel valves; nothing seemed to help. Just as I was flying over a rice paddy clearing the engine conked out completely. That dreaded moment had come. I picked the largest paddy I could find and sat her down. The paddy was too small, and when I hit the dike my landing gear washed out.

“Sgt. Gleaves saw my landing and as soon as he got back to Aberdeen he reported to Lt. Leheck, who checked the map and noticed the crash site was near a Japanese supply road. Gleaves knew my exact location so he immediately set out in an L-5, accompanied by 1st Sgt. Zahorsky. They passed over the crash site and dropped a small bundle containing two notes. One of them told me to destroy everything in my plane that I could without burning it because I was near a Japanese supply route, so I took a wrench and broke apart everything that I possibly could. The other said to go to the nearest mountain—which happened to be the highest-climb it and hide. Gleaves and Zahorsky went on in search of the British column where we had picked up our wounded. When they arrived the site was deserted, so they started flying a crisscross pattern trying to locate the column. Sgt. Zahorsky was the first to spot it, in a thickly wooded area. A message was dropped to the advising them to go to the mountain where we were hiding.

“As Gleaves and Zahorsky returned to base at Aberdeen, they both got sick-Gleaves too sick even to fly, so Sgt. Zahorsky was asked to return with a food drop that had been prepared for us. S/Sgt Samp flew the plane with the rear door removed, Sgt. Zahorsky carried the pack on his lap so he could throw it out to us. They circled the crash site several times but we had already started our climb up the mountain. Because of trees and dense undergrowth, they were unable to spot us and rather than drop supplies to the Japanese, they went back to base. That night, Sgts. Gleaves and Zahorsky were flown to the hospital at home base.

“After getting that note directing us to the highest mountain, we tore up my canvas parachute pack and fashioned a water container that held about two gallons. We gathered the few meager supplies from our L-1 and started out. One of my passengers was burning up with malaria, one had been shot up pretty bad and the third was less seriously injured. Just as we reached the base of the mountain, we found a small stream and were able to drink our fill, then fill the water bucket.

“The first day, we made our way about two-thirds up the mountain. We had been on this long hard climb for about five hours when the British soldiers could go no further, so we made camp and hid ourselves in the undergrowth as well as we could. The soldier with malaria was nearly out of his mind. As we lay in the underbrush we could hear the Japanese trucks going by on the nearby road. There was a trail about a hundred yards away and we watched as a Japanese search party went by.

“By the second day our water supply was running low and all the food we had was three packages of K rations. The second night of our ordeal was very tiring because I had to go down the mountain to the stream for more water and then back up to the sick and wounded. Descending and ascending in the rough undergrowth was very, very difficult.

“Next morning, we decided to stay in place so I could rest up from the past night’s ordeal. Mid-afternoon presented us with a sound that was so familiar. It was the sweet sound of our search planes. They managed to spot us this time and dropped food, water, and medical supplies, guns and ammunition. What a wonderful feeling it was to see our planes.
We stayed on the mountain top three more days and the British patrol did not show up. Thoughts raced through my mind and near panic when I thought of the two very sick men I had with me. At night we would watch the Japanese supply trucks on the road and the Japanese patrol on the trail below us. We were out of water so we stretched a parachute out at night to collect the dew, which gave us enough water to sustain life.

On the fourth day, we realized we could stay there no longer, so we began packing up when we heard the sweet droning sound of an L-1. We spread our parachute in a small clearing so we could be seen from the air. S/Sgt Fisk was flying the plane and when he spotted us he circled low and tossed out a note, which really was two notes wrapped together. The first told us to hold fast because a British column was on its way. The second note—would you believe it—was a three-day pass signed by Col. Boebel, the CO.

At noon, a plane dropped sixteen gallons of water and more supplies. About two hours later, another plane dropped a note to go to the bottom of the mountain and wait for the helicopter to pick us up.

Going down the mountain was even more difficult than the climb up had been. On one occasion I slipped and slid on the rocks, tearing off most of my clothes.

Another story demonstrates further the resourcefulness of L pilots in Burma. One Grasshopper was converted to a fighter plane to scare off a persistent Japanese pilot who had jumped several flights of liaison planes while they were working missions to supply a British Army force that had been cut off. The Japanese fighter was an antique Claude open cockpit job from the mid-thirties that could slow down almost to the same speed as the Grasshoppers. That they had been able to evade him in the past was a tribute to their skill as pilots. He did manage to shoot holes in several on previous occasion. Then, one enterprising Grasshopper cut a hole in the top of his greenhouse canopy and persuaded a friend who was a crack shot with the Browning automatic rifle, to act as his "tail gunner."

Flying in at tree top level, with two other Grasshoppers as bait, they tried to lure the Japanese pilot into a fight. Thinking that while they couldn't shoot him down they would at least put the fear of God (or the Emperor) into him and he would be less eager to attack the obviously not so helpless planes in the future.

On the third mission, with two real Grasshoppers wallowing along fully loaded, and the friendly "fighter" riding shotgun, the Claude made its appearance. A he turned in behind the formation of slow flying Grasshoppers to begin his firing pass, the two loaded planes, by previous arrangement, broke formation and made a hasty departure from the area. The "Metage Mustang," as it was later dubbed, flew along, fat, dumb, and happy, appearing to have not a care in the world. The gunner crouched, sweating, under the hole in the greenhouse, waiting for the right moment to jump up and spray his lethal load of slugs at the Japanese plane.

The Japanese pilot, sensing an easy kill, throttled back and slipped even close to the little plane continuing to avoid the stream of slugs spraying toward it. Just as he opened fire, the Grasshopper began twisting and turning over the trees to avoid the stream of slugs spraying toward it. The Japanese pilot slowed even more, trying to get in a fatal shot while the little plane continued to j uke and jump around. As the Claude pulled alongside the Grasshopper, the gunner popped up from his home-made turret with his BAR blazing. The Claude crashed into the jungle in a ball of flame. The elated Grasshopper pilot and his gunner flew on to their destination.

The little planes proved their value time and time again. When a British division was surrounded by advancing Japanese force in southeast India and no one could get in to evacuate the wounded, the Grasshoppers were called. Immediately, they went to work land on a road and a polo field, rescuing one and two at a time. In two weeks, they saved over 800 British and Indian troops. Since they were flying in empty, they began carrying small bombs under each wing, dropping them on the Japanese on the way in. Tactically, the results of the bombing were just fair, but their efforts in rescuing the wounded gave British morale a real shot in the arm.

L-planes and their pilots were involved in a hugely dangerous job in the northern part of Burma. The Burma Road connected Burma to China and was used to keep supplies moving between these two countries. In April of 1942 the Japanese captured the town of Lashio, Burma and gained control of the road. Supplies still had to be moved between the two areas and the only way was over "The Hump", a journey over the Naga Hills and peaks of the Himalayas.
John Costello, in his book “The Pacific War”, gives a frightening look at what that flight encompassed. “One of the most arduous flights in the world (over the Hump), it negotiated the 15,000 foot mountain range where planes flew near their performance ceiling and men needed oxygen. Turbulent winds tossed aircraft like leaves, thick clouds made navigation a hit-or-miss affair, and the rugged peaks and lurking Japanese fighters over Burma rendered each trip a test of nerve, courage and physical flying ability.”

From the Delaware Valley Advance (1944) comes the story of S/Sgt Robert J. McGovern of Langhorne, Pa. The text follows:

“One of the most startling stories to come out of South East Asia is that of the first mass flight of L-5’s over the hump to Kunming. Long regarded as dangerous for twin engine transport aircraft, the precipitous mountains which hem the Stillwell Road were recently vanquished by 30 tiny liaison planes.

Surprisingly, the nearest the L-5’s came to disaster was early in the trip when the first flight, struggling through a blinding rain, ran low on gas 12 miles short of their base. With a ripping of wing tips and snapping of telephone wire the 10 little planes landed on a muddy country road near an unknown Indian village. Reinforced with gas from other ships, 1st Lt. Donald T. Carter of 969 Lexington Avenue, New York City, took off between the trees and poles to get help from the base. Meanwhile Major Hawkins, in a commandeered truck rode to the nearest town where he located a civilian gas dump. Chagrin was a mild word for what he felt when the local police chief informed him that he could not have gas without ration coupons. Arriving back at the planes, the pilots were preparing to spend the night in the rain, when through the mud came the gas truck from the airfield. Inside of an hour the bedraggled L-5’s were safely out of the squadron and back at the base. The next day the wings of the damaged planes were patched and the first flight went on up the Assam Valley where new wings were installed. One of the worst parts of the trip was just ahead, the 240 mile run over the 9000 foot Naga Hills. The monsoon was drenching all of North Burma and the weather over the hills was something out of the world. There was only one way to get through - contact flying through dense jungle valleys a few feet above the ground. With one eye on the gas gauge and the other on the tree tops the “L” pilots twisted and turned, battling the relentless weather. Once over the ridges it closed in tight and Major Hawkins flight was forced to land on an abandoned spur of the Ledo Road. Here they were fortunate enough to run into a small engineer detachment and a “C” ration lunch. In the afternoon the weather cleared to 500’ visibility and the flight went on. All three flights arrived safely at another field and refueled for the flight over the Hump.

Among the 30 veteran pilots making this most hazardous light plane flight was S/Sgt. Robert J. McGovern of Langhorne. For combat in the India Burma Theater he holds the DFC and the Air Medal with cluster.

Early in the morning of June 16, Hawkins set off at the head of the grasshoppers on the final lap to Eastern China. The first flight was under Carter and the second 10 were under Lt. John F. Mevins, Corsicana, Texas. But the last flight under Lt. Benedict Lukas of Syracuse, N.Y., had a harder battle, tougher luck, and narrower escapes. Over the Naga Hills, the engine sputtered and started to miss on the plane piloted by S/Sgt. Robert McGovern. There was a terrible half hour while McGovern struggled to clear the last 9,000-foot ridge, as his flight mates sweated him out.

In Northern Burma, the flight’s troubles really started. The weather was getting worse every day and it hit the pilots with all its fury on the first leg from Burma to China. One hundred and fifty miles out over the Hump the planes became separated in a thunderstorm and seven made their way back. The other three were missing. The pilots were M-Sgt. Bill Ildaker of Chattanooga, Tenn., T-Sgt. John Raynak of Claridge, Pa., and S-Sgt. Lee East of Highland Park, Ill. Sergeant East radioed that he was out of control in heavy weather and was going to try and bail out. Then his radio went dead. Jungle Air Rescue units began an immediate search.

No word had been received of the missing pilots the next morning. On the 21st, the seven planes made their last, and this time successful, effort to clear the Hump. Fighting storms which whirled the tiny ships like autumn leave, Lukas and his men arrived in Kunming.

There the flight was amazed and relieved to find two of their missing pilots, M-Sgt. Oldaker and T-Sgt. Raynak, waiting for them. They had bored through successfully on the 18th after the rest of the flight had turned back. Then several days later east, who had been given up for lost, walked in. He had spun out of the clouds 200 feet above the ground and recovered sufficient control to make a crash landing. He walked 50 miles to safety.”

Box Seat Over Hell – II