

LOST BASTARDS OF THE PACIFIC,

the 69th & 70th Squadrons

Introduction

During the very early days of 1942, a few weeks after Pearl Harbor, there developed a curious anomaly — a situation born of necessity — to send units of squadron strength, without their group headquarters, to overseas locations for faster occupation coverage, to spread out thinly, those units available, to small airfields which had just been cleared for landing — cleared jungle areas in the Pacific Island chains — to be used as stepping stones across the broad Pacific.

Two of these “orphaned” or separated squadrons form the story and saga of the 69th and 70th Bombardment Squadrons (Medium) equipped with their new Martin B-26 Marauder bomber, and peopled with as many Air Corps pilots, some of whom were just out of flying school, as could be scraped together for the immediate task of forming a “front line” of defense against the rapidly expanding and overrunning Japanese forces.

Activation

Originally activated on 15 January 1941, as a part of the 38th Bomb Group (medium) at Langley Field, VA., both the 69th & 70th Bomb Squadrons began their lives as military organizations during the quiet period of Air Corps history. The 70th Squadron consisted of one officer, Lt. Leroy I. Stefonowicz and 19 enlisted men. The 69th Squadron had been activated on the same day as the 70th, but the early history and achievements of both units were, unfortunately, not documented and recorded in detail. Between the fact that these two units were moved around the world so rapidly and hectically in the pell-mell rush that followed Pearl Harbor, and the inevitable loss of shipments and boxes, many of which contained the only

documentary proof of their exploits and deeds, the records at our disposal leave much to be desired in accuracy.

As of 1 June 1941, both squadrons had been transferred to Jackson AAB, Mississippi, where flight training was carried on with two B-18s. During July both squadrons began receiving personnel filling up their personnel slots with selective service men predominating and had started routine training. The 38th Bomb Group was now manned with Lt. Col. Bob Knapp as Commander, Maj. William Lee was assigned as 69th Squadron Commander, and Maj. Flint Garrison assigned as 70th Squadron Commander.

About mid-October both squadrons received a large number of both flying officers and navigators, plus some enlisted ranks. Then in November when the B-26s started arriving, training began in earnest with these new planes.

Wartime

Then came Pearl Harbor. Immediately both squadrons assumed full military status and activities were conducted with a new wartime grimness. On 8 December, the planes and crews of the 70th Squadron were ordered to Savannah, Georgia, where they performed sub patrols along the Atlantic coast for a week. Then, the threat over, they were ordered to prepare for overseas shipment. The two squadrons were now reorganized with Lt. Stefonowicz again in command of the 70th and Lt. John Burhus commanding the 69th.

The ground Echelon of the 38th Bomb Group (M) boarded the Army Transport BLISS at San Francisco on 29 January 1942 and arrived in Brisbane, Australia, on 25 February 1942. The

69th Ground Echelon arrived at Tontouta, New Caledonia, on 20 May 1942. They remained at Tontouta until 23 June, when they went to Plaines des Gaiacs after joining the Air Echelon and forming the complete 69th Bomb Squadron (M) for the first time. By this time the 69th was completely detached from the 38th Bomb Group, for during their stay in New Caledonia, they were operating under the direction of Colonel Rich, Air Commander of New Caledonia, who, in turn, received instructions directly from ComAirSoPac, an abbreviation denoting the Naval Commander of Air for the South Pacific.

Meanwhile, the 70th Squadron Ground Echelon had sailed across the Pacific with the rest of the 38th Bomb Group (M), and had finally ended up completely detached on Fiji at Lautoka, where they were taken to Nandi Air Base, their first permanent base in the Combat Zone.

March 1942: Meanwhile, the Air Echelon of the 38th Bomb Group (M) had received orders at Ft. McDowell, California, to report to Patterson Field, Ohio, for further training in B-26s. During this training phase at Patterson, two B-26s of the 70th Squadron had accidents, which were fatal to most of the crew members involved.

By May 42, the air echelon of the 38th Bomb Group (M) was equipped with B-26-Bs. On 19 May, the 69th Squadron received orders to proceed overseas and the first flight of three planes piloted by Captain Collins, Lt. Long and Lt. Watson, left for Hamilton Field, California and Hawaii. These three were the first medium bombers ever to make the 2200 mile flight non-stop.

Meanwhile, the 70th Squadron had become a separate organization because of the breaking up of the 38th Group. On 7 May 1942, with Captain Stefanowicz in command, with Captains Sharp, Eddy and Callahan in command of A, B & C Flights, respectively, the 70th Squadron prepared to leave for overseas. On 8 May, the Air Echelon flew from Baer Field, Ft. Wayne, Indiana (where they had gone the night before from Patterson) to McClelland Field, California, on the first leg of their journey to the Fiji Islands. In Sacramento, ten days were spent in preparing the planes for the long overwater hop to Hickam

Field, Hawaii. When the planes were finally ready, they proceeded in flights to Hamilton Field, for final refueling and briefing on the 2200 mile flight.

On the 4 June, the entire 70th Squadron ferried their 13 medium bombers from California to Hickam Field without mishap.

At this time, the Battle of Midway was in progress, and although none of the 70th Squadron took part in the battle, they were kept on alert with 500 pound bombs at Kipapa Gulch in Hawaii.

The 69th Squadron followed to Hawaii from Hamilton Field a couple of days later, also without mishap.

On 13 June 42, the 69th received orders to proceed to New Caledonia and the first flight of four planes piloted by Capt. Collins, Capt. Behling, Lt. Waddleton and Lt. Field, left Hickam at 0700 on 15 June. The other two flights departed on 16 and 18 June. The planes went to Christmas Island, thence to Canton Island, Fiji and Tontouta, New Caledonia.

The second flight, for observation purposes, passed over Jarvis Island, enroute from Christmas to Canton. On 20 June, the rest of the Air Echelon, except Lt. Rosar and a few enlisted men, took off in an LB-30. Lt. Long and crew were left behind awaiting another plane to replace their damaged B-26.

By 23 June 42, all the Air Echelon of the 69th Squadron except Lt. Long and his crew, had joined the Ground Echelon at Tontouta. On that day, a mass movement by air and truck convoy was made to Plaines des Gaiacs, 130 miles north of Noumea, on the west coast of New Caledonia.

It was here that the saga of the 69th really began. The 69th at New Caledonia, was the first medium bombardment outfit in the South Pacific, along with the 70th which arrived at FIJI about a week later. They were the sole air striking force available for use against the Japanese fleet in the South Pacific during those crucial months before we had taken Guadalcanal and entrenched ourselves there. The flying officers were hailed by the Ground Forces on New Caledonia and Fiji as saviors and miracles were expected of these two squadrons at a time when the Jap fleet was loose in

this part of the Pacific and when a landing attack was expected daily.

The 69th was the first to arrive at Plaines des Gaiacs. Only one runway had been completed. No housing. It was necessary to establish a camp under the most adverse conditions and quickly as the Squadron was called up to perform its first mission only two days later. On 26 June, Lt. Howbert and co-pilot Lt. White patrolled, circling the island of New Caledonia and the Isle of Pines.

At this time, Capt. Burhus was Commander; Lt. Waddleton, Operations; Lt. Nichols, Adjutant; Capt. Cuppola, Flight Surgeon; Lt. Howard was Engineering Officer; Lt. Rosar, Armament Officer, and A, B & C Flight Leaders were Lt. Johnson, Capt. Collins, and Lt. Ligamfelter, respectively.

The squadron had by this time lost all contact with the 38th Group, and operated under ComAirSoPac through the Island Commander, Col. Rich. On 26 June 42, there were attached to the 69th Squadron 80 officers and men from the aircraft carrier U.S.S. LEXINGTON. These survivors of the torpedoed flat-top remained at Plaines de Gaiacs with the 69th until the middle of August 1942

During late June and early July 42, the 70th Squadron completed its lengthy trip to the Fiji Islands. In spite of one B-26 crash enroute, killing two crew members and injuring two others, the flight proceeded on successive days from Hickam to Christmas Island, Canton Island and finally Nandi Air Base. The last of the planes arrived on 9 July.

Here the Air Echelon and Ground Echelon were united for the first time. During the later part of the month the squadron changed campsites again. This time they moved into a renovated village, which proved to be an ideal location for Squadron activities (Sambato Village). On 3 July, 19 torpedo maintenance men from the ill fated carrier LEXINGTON were attached to the squadron until they could be picked up by the Navy.

Combat Air Operations

This brings us to the start of the Combat Air Operation portion of our saga on these two MS- 1714

separate bombardment squadrons, which operated under ComAirSoPac, through the Island Air Commander, Col. Rich for the 69th and Col. Usher on Fiji for the 70th.

Although the 69th and 70th Squadrons were originally a part of the 38th Bomb Group from November 1940 - May 1942, all of their combat history was spent as single, separate, unattached squadrons, operating under the control of the Navy/Marine Air Wing on Guadalcanal, and later, under the orders of the Hqs. 13th Air Force in the South Pacific area.

Actually, the separate squadron status of these two bombardment units started on 7 May 1942, the day they left Patterson Field, Ohio. From that day on, they took orders from every command they passed through enroute to their South Pacific bases from where they operated.

August 1942: Both squadrons, having finally become oriented at their permanent bases in the Pacific, proceeded to carry on training by conducting transition flights for co-pilots, making torpedo runs, and practicing skip bombing. In addition, the 70th Squadron coordinated missions carried out in conjunction with the Royal New Zealand Air Force and through Col. Usher, Island Commander.

The 69th Squadron conferred with Col. Rich and Admiral McCain aboard the Seaplane Tender U.S.S. CURTISS in Noumea Harbor on Navy procedures in patrolling sectors that were to be assigned to the 69th. It was necessary at that time to arrange for weather service, code agreements and methods of communication.

For a week in August, the 69th sent four B-26s out daily to patrol a sector that covered 167,000 square miles. Their missions were air cover for an 'important task force' headed for the Solomon Islands. Later that month, and for about six weeks, the 69th sent six B-26s on a daily anti-sub patrol south and west of Noumea. During this month, a new patrol of 3 planes daily toward the Solomons area was started.

On 29 August, Capt. Stefonowicz, still the C.O. of the 70th was promoted to Major.

September 42: During this month, Generals Harmon and Patch, representing AAF forces with ComSoPac (Commander South Pacific) with

Col. Rich came to Plaines des Gaiacs to present Capt. Collins and his crew with Distinguished Service Crosses for their part in the Battle of Midway.

On 15th, nine planes of the 69th carrying torpedoes left for Efate on alert. The Jap fleet was again reported headed southward toward New Caledonia. These nine planes returned on the 21st, the alert called off, as the Japs had failed to appear.

On 22nd, the 69th was supposed to leave for Guadalcanal, but the runway at Henderson was not long enough to accommodate the B-26. On the 24th, the 69th learned for the first time that it was to get B-25s. On 30 September, the squadron continued practicing torpedo runs.

The 70th continued its training of combat crews throughout the month, with several time-outs to maintain alerts and fly patrols because of enemy threats.

October 1942: On the 9th, Capt. Lingamfelter escorted a squadron of P-39s to Efate and Espiritu Santo. On the 11th, the 69th started giving navigation instruction for air transport men in New Caledonia and in the next nine days several 69th officers navigated C-47s to Guadalcanal, Fiji and Espiritu Santo.

It was at this time that General H. H. Arnold, Chief of the AAF, stopped at Plaines des Gaiacs where he personally commended the men of the 69th Squadron for their unstinting labor, excellent morale and hard work. Specifically, he praised the ingenuity of the C. O., Captain Collins and the Armament Officer, Lt. Rosar, for the construction of the improvised forward gun installation made of welded sections of oil drums.

During the last of October, Capt. Collins was promoted to Major, and on the 28th, the first two B-25s were assigned to the Squadron. By 10 November, there were three more.

During October, on Friday, 13th, a P-39 collided in mid-air with a B-26 (#90), killing all members of the crews. This left 10 planes in the 70th Squadron.

General Arnold visited the 70th Squadron in Fiji on 15 October, and commended the personnel for holding the line, but he was surprised that they were still there! It was at this time that the

members of the 70th Squadron learned from these visitors that they were known as “The Lost Bastards of the Pacific.”

November 42: This month marked the start of the 69th and 70th Squadrons in actual combat maneuvers.

On 10 November, the 69th Air Echelon went to Espiritu Santo and four B-26s made a round-trip flight to Guadalcanal, returning the next day. Again there was no place for the 69th on Guadalcanal, for at that time gasoline was so scarce that it was being ferried in by plane.

On 13 November, ComAirSoPac ordered the 70th Squadron planes to Espiritu Santo. The next day, loaded with torpedoes, they took off in flight order and arrived without incident. At Santo, the torpedoes of four planes were replaced with 1000-lb bombs. At 1600 hours, the planes all took off for Guadalcanal, arriving there at dusk. The night was spent near various fox-holes, while a furious naval battle raged off the coast. The 70th was now under ComAirSols which is Navy parlance for: “Commander, Air, Solomons.”

Sharp Says: “The entire 70th Squadron of 10 planes flew into Guadalcanal with torpedoes at dusk on 14 November. By nightfall, the naval battle was raging off the coast with bright flashes and booming sounds all night.

By daylight,” Sharp continues, “the dive bombers could be seen attacking the troop transports a half-mile from Henderson Field. The Navy had taken all the 70th’s torpedoes and the squadron was ordered to re-arm with bombs: 1000-lb; 500-lb; and 100-lb. to attack the four beached Jap transport ships and the Jap troops already unloading on the beach.

Six B-26s were assigned to bomb these transports — all four were beached and fairly close together. All bombs were effective in this situation, and three direct hits were made: Griffith in #50; Callaham in #58; and one other not identified.” Capt Sharp was assigned with a couple other crews to bomb the troops invading the beach. As there were not enough bomb racks in Sharp’s B-26 (#62), he sent his bombardier, Al Wilensky, to a wrecked B-17 to raid its bomb bay. He returned with an arm load. So in the attack, Capt.

Sharp laid a string of twenty 100-pounders down the beach, in front of the transports, swarming with Japs. Other B-26s followed with more 100 pounders and this action essentially wiped out all enemy personnel there.

That afternoon, 15 November, the 70th was ordered back to its base. There was not enough gasoline on Guadalcanal to fuel the planes any more that day.

After the B-26s of the 70th came through a tropical front, Capt. Callaham started calling on his radio that his props were "surging." He then said that he could not control his props and was going to ditch at sea. This was near the coast of San Cristobal Island. It was later realized that his props were surging because his engines were failing. Callaham and all his crew were lost at sea. However, the 70th crews knew that they had contributed a lot to saving Guadalcanal that day because it had been "touch-and-go" until noon.

On the 17th, just two days later, the 70th Squadron was again ordered to 'Canal to prepare for a raid on Bougainville Island in coordination with B-17s and P-39s. Unfortunately, only three B-26s were able to return to the "Canal. However, four planes did take off on this raid, the primary target being a Jap tanker located in Friendship Harbor. Capt. Eddy's plane joined in for this raid; he had remained at Guadalcanal the two days previous with a flat tire.

December 42: The 70th Squadron had an accident on Christmas Eve when a B-26 upon landing, had a collapsed landing gear, and the plane caught fire and burned. The crew escaped, but that brought the squadron's plane total to eight.

On 25 December, three planes were ordered to report to the 'Canal on TDY with the 69th Squadron. Capt. Eddy volunteered to take his flight. On 31 December Flight "B" arrived at Guadalcanal and ran their first bombing mission over Munda Point."

When the 69th Squadron proceeded to Guadalcanal on 31 December, Capt. Behling, "B" Flight Leader, was acting C.O. of the 69th due to the absence of Major Collins in Australia. Less than two hours later, they were off to bomb Munda. Upon returning from this raid in late

afternoon, they were assigned a poor campsite, down in a hollow, where a garbage pit had been in use. The 69th crews crawled in under salvaged Marine tents, with the stench of garbage in their noses. Thus, the men and officers spent their first night on Guadalcanal.

The next day bombs were dropped on Rekata Bay from 7000 feet and contact was made with nine enemy float planes. During the next week, five more raids were made on Munda, Rekata Bay and the Jap positions on Guadalcanal.

January 43: On the 7th, Capt. Behling and his crew of the 69th were shot down over Rekata Bay while leading a flight of six planes. From 300 feet, 100-lb. fragmentation bombs were dropped on Jap bivouac area, but converging AA fire scored direct hits of Capt. Behling's plane. The squadron made eleven strikes during this tour of Guadalcanal.

On 12 January, the Flying personnel rejoined the Ground Echelon at Efate. Here sickness and disease caught up with the 69th Squadron, and many men were hospitalized with malaria, dysentery, dengue and a few with psychoneuroses. Four lieutenants were sent back to the States.

During the last two weeks of January, there were only six navigators for 12 ships and they did their own jobs as well as that of the bombardiers; occasionally, they even rode as copilots.

For three days, from 27 - 30 January, the 69th searched for the downed B-17 which had carried General Twinning and Col. Jamison from Guadalcanal to Espiritu Santo. General Twinning was CG of the newly activated 13th AF, while Jamison (later BG) Commanded the XIII Bomber Command. They spent six days afloat in their rubber rafts before being rescued.

"B" Flight of the 70th Squadron began the New Year by bombing Munda Point again. On 2 January, while leading a six-plane formation over Munda, Capt. Eddy's plane was set on fire by a burst of AA in the right engine. The pilot headed his burning plane over Rendova Island, and after an attempt to extinguish the fire, held his plane in a glide while his crew bailed out. Capt. Eddy left

his plane at a very low altitude and luckily parachuted to safety. All members of the crew reached the Jap-infested Rendova with the exception of Lt. Hendrick, who was presumably killed in jumping. These survivors hid out on Rendova for three days. Supplies were dropped by Lockheed Hudsons on the second day. On the third night, a U.S. raiding submarine surfaced and took the men on board. The sub was on its way to a 2-week raid on Jap shipping in Friendship Harbor. The crew accompanied the sub on its foray and weeks later, was finally put ashore at the subs home port in Australia.

At Henderson Field, the remaining two 70th Squadron planes under Lt. Martin carried out bombing attacks with the 69th Squadron.

On 9 January, Major Stefonowicz, Capt. Sharp, Lt. Morrison and Lt. Miller, took off in planes #47, 62, 76, and 69, respectively for Guadalcanal. Upon their arrival, they made their first raid on Munda Point.

On 20 January, Major Stefonowicz and Lt. Smith initiated a new tactic, raiding Jap shipping at night off Bougainville. During full moon, these tactics proved highly successful. On one of these strikes, the Major's crew attacked and sank a Jap destroyer off Bougainville. These raids continued as long as the weather and the moon permitted. Bombing raids were carried out one or two times daily for the rest of the month without casualty.

February 43: In the 69th, Major Collins returned from Australia, but almost immediately was transferred to Hqs. 13 AF. Lt. Col. Francis L. Revard was made new C.O. of the 69th.

On 2 February, four planes of the 70th Squadron were ordered to search north of Guadalcanal. While on this search, Capt. Sharp's B-26 encountered a Jap MAVIS, four-engined flying boat, type KAWANISHI 97. By expert combat maneuvering he succeeded in effecting the destruction of the KAWANISHI 97, but in the skirmish, the B-26 was hit in the leading edge of the right wing by a 20-millimeter cannon shell from the enemy's tail gun. The explosion blew out about two square feet of the wing, causing a dangerous stalling condition and a severe wing flutter. By flying at a greatly reduced speed and

using one-quarter flaps to increase the lift of the wings, he skillfully flew the damaged airplane and its entire crew back safely to the home base. (DFC citation) Capt. Sharp left the Jap plane with one engine burning and one shot out. A coast watcher later reported the Jap plane had crashed off Santa Isabell Island.

On 4 February, orders came for the 70th to return to Fiji. Only two planes were fit for combat. On the 6th the 70th Squadron landed at Fiji.

While the Air Echelon was on Guadalcanal, the Ground crews moved the 70th's camp area to Nandi AB.

On 9 February, the 69th bombed Vila for the first time, and three days later made another attack on the same target.

On 19 February, Captain Waddleton was ordered back to the States, as were Capt. Wright, Lt. Chambers and Lt. Barton, after sojourn in the hospital. On the same day, Capt. Lingenfelter was made C.O. and the 69th Air Echelon left for Nandi Fiji. The Ground Echelon remained on Guadalcanal.

On 27th February, all the B-26s of the 69th Squadron were transferred to the 70th Squadron; and new B-25s with crews began to arrive in March for the 69th Squadron.

March 1943: On 22 March, by order of the 13th AF, the 69th and 70th Bomb Squadrons (M) were assigned to the 42nd Bomb Group (M) then commanded by Col. Harry F. Wilson. At this time, B-25s were being modified at Eagle Farms, Australia and at the 13th Air Depot at Tontouta, near New Caledonia, with eight fixed forward-firing .50 caliber machine guns. The squadrons began a three month training program of strafing and low level bombing.

With the formation of the new group, the 70th's tactics were again centered on low-level bombing and strafing. New schooling was instituted by the Group, stepping up schedules to a nine hour day.

April 1943: On 11 April, Capt. John F. Sharp, of the 70th Squadron was appointed as new Commanding Officer of the 69th by Col. Wilson. During April and May, the 69th received more replacements to compensate for its losses from

sickness, men lost in action and others who were relieved.

With these replacements, and the few veterans remaining, Capt. Sharp began shaping up the 69th into a fighting unit again. Five weeks of intensive low-level training and the morale was Gung Ho!

In late May 43, the new 69th got orders back to Guadalcanal in their new B-25s. Sharp took twenty cases of cold beer to ground crews still at Guadalcanal as a gift from the officers of the Air Echelon.

By the end of July, the 69th had been cited for "spearheading" the air campaign against Munda. Major Sharp was awarded the DFC for leading 25 strikes against airfields and shipping. Then he had 8 more missions, mostly as night intruder and skip bombing against shipping. The squadron lost two aircraft and only one crew during this tour, and was relieved in August. Munda had been taken. Squadron Morale was high.

Note: As for what happened to the B-26s that had all ended up in the 70th Bomb Squadron, my guess is that they were all flown to Australia to Eagle Farm Depot near Brisbane to be scrapped out. This is what happened to the B-26s that were all collected in the 19th Bomb Squadron of the 22nd Bomb Group (M). On 11 January 1944, those remaining few were flown to Eagle Farm Depot. From 1 July - 30 September 1943, the 19th Bomb Squadron was the only unit in the 22nd to be flying B-26s

The 70th Bomb Squadron had all its B-26s replaced by B-25s in August 1943, so their excess B-26s were probably all disposed of in Australia by early 1944. Earlier, B-26s were sent back to Garbutt Depot, near Townsville, Australia, for rebuilding or reconditioning. No replacement B-26s had been sent to the Pacific and combat attrition had reduced their numbers to just equip one squadron. This is where the "Silver Fleet" designation came from, when these B-26s were stripped of camouflage.

The last mission flown by B-26s in the South Pacific was on 9 January 1944, by the 19th Bomb Squadron of the 22nd Bomb Group, which was later redesignated as a heavy Bomb Unit and equipped with B-24s.

Reference: Havener, "The Martin B-26 Marauder"

Researched: R. F. Schirmer, Historian,
Class 40-A Association
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