

COULD THE GERMANS HAVE BOMBED NEW YORK IN WWI? 

AVIATION

H I S T O R Y

PEARL HARBOR B-17s

AFTER THE ATTACK,
EIGHT FLYING FORTS
BATTLED ACROSS
THE PACIFIC

WHEN
BIRDS
STRIKE
AIRCRAFT

SECRET MISSIONS TO RESCUE
ALLIED AIRCREWS FROM POLAND
CURTISS C-46 COMMANDO:
WORLD WAR II'S HEAVY HAULER

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CLASH OF TITANS

After surviving the Pearl Harbor attack, B-17E 41-2433 gets some payback against a Kawanishi H6K4 on October 23, 1942, in a Jack Fellows illustration.



PACIFIC TRAMPS

THE STORY OF THE B-17S THAT ARRIVED OVER HAWAII DURING THE JAPANESE ATTACK HAS BEEN TOLD MANY TIMES, **BUT WHAT HAPPENED TO THEM?** BY STEVE BIRDSALL

ON DECEMBER 7, 1941, 12 UNARMED B-17S ON THEIR WAY TO REINFORCE THE PHILIPPINES ARRIVED OVER OAHU TO FIND PEARL HARBOR AND HICKAM FIELD UNDER ATTACK.

Six, led by Major Truman Landon, were from the 19th Bomb Group's 38th Reconnaissance Squadron. Two of them, Landon's 41-2413 and 41-2408 piloted by Lieutenant Karl Barthelmess, were brand-new B-17Es. The other four were obsolescent B-17Cs that would never see combat again. Following were six B-17Es from the 88th Reconnaissance Squadron, 7th Bomb Group, led by Captain Richard Carmichael in 41-2429.

Carmichael decided to fly northeast, "just off the ground," and try Bellows Field. At Bellows he encountered more chaos, and at Kaneohe and Wheeler too. With little choice left he turned into the wind, lowered the landing gear and flaps and, in a near stall, dragged the Flying Fortress onto the runway of the short auxiliary strip at Haleiwa. Lieutenant Harold Chaffin had landed there five minutes earlier in 41-2430. Lieutenants Robert Thacker in 41-2432, Harry Brandon in 41-2433 and David Rawls in 41-2434 braved Japanese and friendly fire to

land at Hickam. Lieutenant Robert Ramsey, Brandon's copilot, recalled "getting shot at, muchly, by both countries." Lieutenant Frank Bostrom in 41-2416 landed on a golf course at Kahuku. One B-17C was destroyed on landing and another damaged beyond repair, but all eight B-17Es and two B-17Cs were safely down by the time the Navy issued orders to "cease firing on B-17s attempting to land at Hickam."

With every reason to expect that the Japanese would be back, probably with an invasion force, the movement to the Philippines was postponed indefinitely. All 10 bombers were commandeered by the Hawaiian Air Force and put to work patrolling the surrounding waters. As a further precaution, Brig. Gen. Jacob Rudolph issued an order on December 10 to overpaint the B-17s to "blend" with "the area in which they were dispersed." He later noted that "lack of proper colors prevents getting color desired," but provided no further explanation. The work was hastily carried out, presumably by or under the supervision of the Hawaiian Air Depot Refinishing Section. There was a basic pattern and all the overpainted planes were similar, but no two were identical. The colors, chosen purely to protect the planes on the ground, appear to have been shades of rust, sand, blue-gray, the earlier fast-fading olive drab and remnants of factory-applied dark olive drab. Data blocks were masked off and radio call numbers were added to the tails.

Brigadier General Clarence Tinker endorsed the camouflage program when he arrived to take command of the Hawaiian Air Force on December 18, but just three days later two relatively junior officers, Navy Lt. Cmdr.



ALOHA! B-17E 41-2408 (foreground) arrives at a scene of carnage at Hickam Field on December 7, 1941.



OPPOSITE: NATIONAL ARCHIVES; CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: LEFT: NATIONAL ARCHIVES; MARIK CORDELL COLLECTION/DAMIAN WATERS; AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL; U.S. AIR FORCE.

Frank O'Beirne of Patrol Wing Two and the Hawaiian Air Force's Major Ernest Moore, agreed to a compromise to aid aircraft identification. Red-centered roundels would be displayed on both port and starboard upper and lower wings as well as the fuselage sides, with 13 alternate red and white stripes painted on the rudders. It's not known to what degree the bolder, brighter markings contributed to the conclusion of the program, but by then the unique camouflage adorned at least 20 B-17Es, including the eight December 7 arrivals.

As the threat of attack receded, the B-17s routinely patrolled the ocean around Hawaii. On the afternoon of January 3, 1942, 23rd Bomb Squadron commander Major LaVerne Saunders, flying 429, bombed a pair of submerged submarines without result and lost contact after a 40-minute pursuit. The following day Lieutenant Ralph Wanderer in 433 reported an enemy submarine 600 miles out, but it escaped beneath the waves.

In the early morning of January 16, six B-17Es from the 5th and 11th Bomb groups took off from Hickam. Their mission was to provide long-range reconnaissance for the *Enterprise* task

force while pioneering a route through the South Pacific. Three were from the 23rd Squadron: Captain George Blakey in 429, Lieutenant Francis Seeburger in 432 and Wanderer in 433. During the two-week operation they experienced all the complications that would hinder units operating from advanced bases for months to come. After 433 developed a problem with the no. 3 engine that defied all efforts to repair it, the airplane and crew had to be left at Fiji when the others returned to Hawaii on January 30.

NOT ALL SURVIVED

Clockwise from top left: Strafed on approach, B-17C 40-2074 burns at Hickam; 41-2434 wears a patch over "one very large cannon hole" in its tail in July 1942; ground crewmen bomb up 41-2432 at Port Moresby in August 1942; dubbed *Miss Fit*, 41-2433 awaits its next mission on Guadalcanal in July 1943.



BLENDING IN Pearl Harbor survivor 41-2408 (right) and 41-2421, which took part in a daring raid from the Philippines in April 1942, wear new camouflage paint.

The Southern Bomber Command was born when the Navy “desired” a dozen B-17s to provide support for the carrier *Lexington* and Task Force 11 in the New Caledonia area. Six of the chosen crews had arrived in Hawaii on December 7, and five of the command pilots—Carmichael, Bostrom, Chaffin, Rawls and Thacker—reclaimed the aircraft they had flown from the mainland. The exception was Brandon, whose 433 was still sitting in Fiji. He took 408.

They left Hawaii on February 10 and were at Nandi, Fiji, by Valentine’s Day. On February 17, the six bombers proceeded to New Caledonia with the intention of flying on to Townsville, Australia, the next day. With foul weather predicted in that area, Carmichael elected to lead the Flying Fortresses to Brisbane, also on the Australian coast but well to the south.

His six B-17s landed safely on the grass airstrip at Archerfield, where misfortune, in the guise of a civilian DC-3, arrived that evening. The airliner lost traction on the wet landing strip and slammed into Chaffin’s bomber, damaging the starboard wing, fuselage and tail. Nobody was injured, but 430 was left at Archerfield when the others flew on to Amberley the next day, then to Townsville on February 20.

A planned mission to Rabaul, the big Japanese base on New Britain, was postponed, so the B-17s were flown 400 miles inland to Cloncurry as a precaution. They returned to Townsville on February 22, where things went awry again. Rawls taxied into 416 in the darkness, and its whirling no. 4 propeller chewed through 434’s port wingtip. Carmichael in 429 and Brandon in 408 were airborne around midnight and reached cloud-covered Rabaul in the early morning, but defending Zeros

were ready and gave Brandon a warm reception. His no. 3 engine caught fire, and two of his crewmen were wounded. Brandon made it back to Port Moresby, the advanced base on New Guinea, running out of fuel before he cleared the runway. Carmichael flew the two wounded men to Townsville for medical attention, and Brandon brought 408 and the rest of his crew back the next day.

Rawls’ 434 was repaired overnight with parts from 416. Chaffin’s 430, with a “new” outer wing section salvaged from a less-fortunate B-17, passed a test hop on March 3. Bostrom’s 416 remained at Townsville, where all hope of repairing it was abandoned two months later when parts of the bomber were shipped south to Melbourne. As the squadron historian drily noted: “If Melbourne can’t get parts what are we to do?”

The ships are unloaded there, not here.”

On March 14, Carmichael's command was officially designated the 40th Reconnaissance Squadron, 19th Bomb Group, and returned to Army control. A few days later Captain William Lewis in 429 and Chaffin in 408 played a part in the rescue of General Douglas MacArthur, his family and his staff from the Philippines.

The bold rudder stripes were already gone when the squadron historian noted on April 4 that the markings on the B-17s had been modified: “Now the symbol is a white star without the red dot... The Japs have changed our ideas about red.” On April 22, the 40th was redesignated the 435th Bombardment Squadron and Major William Lewis assumed command.

Throughout the May 4-8 Battle of the Coral Sea, the 435th's bombing was very disappointing, but its relentless reconnaissance proved invaluable. The crews were dog-tired, and a tragedy was only narrowly avoided on May 11 when Lieutenant James Gibb in 432 collided with another B-17 during a fruitless search for a crippled aircraft carrier. Both landed safely, Gibb's bomber with a mangled tail.

The 23rd Squadron's 433 had been in Fiji awaiting a new engine since January. It suffered further indignities in February when Carmichael's crewmen helped themselves to anything they needed, including five enlisted men from Wanderer's crew. Finally flown back to Hawaii on March 21, it resumed flying patrols and training missions until April 30, when Captain Richard Stepp landed short at Bellows Field, tearing off the tail gunner's section. Named *Miss Fit* (although it's not known whether the name was actually painted on the plane), it was considered a “jinx B-17” by some.

Lieutenant James Van Haur flew 413 to Midway with the 431st Squadron on May 31, but returned from a search mission the next day with engine problems. After all repair attempts failed, Van Haur flew back to Hawaii on three engines and took no further part in the Battle of Midway.

When the 11th Bomb Group moved south to the New Hebrides in July 1942 to support the Guadalcanal campaign, neither 413 nor *Miss Fit* went with them.

By the end of July 1942, now-Lt. Col. Carmichael had assumed command of the reorganized 19th Bomb Group, and the 28th, 30th and 93rd squadrons were established at Mareeba, Australia, about three hours by air from Port Moresby. The 435th remained at Townsville, though the squadron's oldest aircraft were transferred to the other units.

Over the previous months the old B-17s and crews had suffered many mishaps but no fatalities. That changed on August 7, when the 93rd Squadron's Captain Harl Pease Jr. was shot down by Zeros over Rabaul in 429. Pease and gunner Sergeant Chester Czechowski parachuted from the doomed B-17, but they were quickly captured and imprisoned, only to be executed two months later. Pease was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

On August 16, Major Dean Hoebet, 30th Squadron commander, was testing a new flare delivery method off the Australian coast in 434 when it caught fire and crashed. “The plane was near the beach, its tail end sticking out of the water,” Chaplain William Taggart recalled. “It was impossible to move the Flying Fortress so we could look for those who might be

LOBERG AND THURSTON PUT THE BOMBER THROUGH A SERIES OF MANEUVERS THAT HAD IT “SHAKING AND RIPPLING ALL OVER LIKE A SKIRT IN A GALE.”

imprisoned under the wreck.” Twelve men were aboard the Fortress, but only six bodies were recovered.

Rumors had been circulating that the 19th would be relieved, and new planes and crews had been arriving in Australia. In September 408 was assigned to the 21st Troop Carrier Squadron, and by October 430 and 432 were relegated to flying leave crews back and forth to Sydney.

As a result of the Allies' “Europefirst” policy and other factors, U.S. military planners decided that no new B-17s would be sent to the Pacific after October 1942. The plan was to ultimately replace them with B-24 Liberators, but in the meantime there was a gap to fill. So after the 19th went home, 408, 430 and 432 were overhauled and modified, returning to action with the

43rd Bomb Group. Along the way 430 was named *Naughty but Nice* and 432 became *The Last Straw*.

Naughty but Nice had a narrow escape during the Battle of the Bismarck Sea in March 1943, when Lieutenant James Easter was mortally wounded by a fighter attack. Fortunately his inexperienced copilot, Lieutenant Russell Emerick, was able to get the bomber safely back to the advanced base at Dobodura. The old B-17's luck finally ran out in the early morning hours of June 26 over Rabaul when a Nakajima J1N1-*Kai* “Irving,” an improvised night fighter, shot it down. Only the navigator, Lieutenant José Holguin, survived both the shootdown and his subsequent interrogation by the notorious *Kempei Tai*.

One way or another, the 11th Group had by this time lost more than a dozen Flying Fortresses since moving to the New Hebrides. As a result, on October 18, *Miss Fit* joined the group's 26th Squadron as a replacement.

Five days later a routine anti-submarine patrol erupted into a ferocious duel when 433 encountered a four-engine Kawanishi H6K4 “Mavis” flying boat attacking a PBY-5A Catalina. War correspondent Ira Wolfert was aboard (see sidebar, P. 27), and he reported that the pilots, Lieutenants Edwin Loberg and Bernays Thurston, put the old bomber through a series of maneuvers that had it



SOLDIERING ON Clockwise from top left: After the first Rabaul raid in February 1942, 41-2408 still sports tail stripes at Port Moresby; 41-2434 flew an Australian air force team to Ohakea, New Zealand, in July 1942; modified and repainted, 41-2408 served as an armed transport; *The Last Straw's* final mission with the 43rd Bomb Group was a raid on Lae on September 8, 1943.

"shaking and rippling all over like a skirt in a gale." During the running battle, navigator Lieutenant Robert Spitzer and bombardier Lieutenant Robert Mitchell were wounded. Finally, after 44 minutes of ear-shattering mayhem, the *Mavis* was down, floating in a pool of blazing fuel. Takeshi Shimoyamada and his crew perished.

Loberg got back to Espiritu Santo late that afternoon. Spitzer was only slightly wounded, but Mitchell seriously enough to be sent to New Zealand on USS *Solace*. *Miss Fit* was back in the air the next day with Lieutenant William Kyes and his crew.

On October 25, Loberg was flying 433 on a mission against Japanese warships when a 5-inch shell tore through an elevator without exploding. Loberg took *Miss Fit* to Efate the next day, had a new horizontal stabilizer and elevator installed, flew back to Espiritu Santo on October 27 and completed a search mission in the plane the following morning!

On December 10, the 31st Bomb Squadron borrowed 433 for a lone photo mission to Kahili on Bougainville. Zeros intercepted *Miss Fit*, and copilot Captain Carlyle Coleman was killed by a single bullet in the eye. The B-17's gunners shot down one of the attacking fighters.

Sometime during the weeks after the Midway battle, 413 had been badly damaged in an accident. The Hawaiian Air Depot's Colonel Ansel Dekle reported it was "destined for the

junk heap" until "the boys from HAD" assumed the repair task. Although it had sacrificed its vertical tail section to a new B-17F passing through Hawaii on the way to Australia in August, the job was finally completed, and the reborn B-17E joined the 42nd Bomb Squadron as a replacement on December 26.

Two days later 413 was one of a dozen 5th and 11th group B-17s sent to Port Moresby for coordinated strikes with the Fifth Air Force, returning to Guadalcanal on January 5, 1943. Captain Glenn Sorenson flew the bomber on missions to drop supplies to American troops fighting entrenched Japanese in the hills and ridges in the Matanikau River area of

FOUR-ENGINE BOMBERS DOGFIGHT

In his book *Battle for the Solomons*, war correspondent Ira Wolfert described what it was like aboard the B-17 *Miss Fit* (41-2433) when an anti-submarine mission turned into a duel with a four-engine H6K4 "Mavis" flying boat on October 23, 1942:

"We dove straight down so rapidly that my knees buckled under me....The bottom turret was working. The nose bucked with its chugging, like the handle on an electric riveting machine.... When we got on an even keel, I could stand up again and look out the window. We were in a squall.... Then we hurtled clear through the cloud and into blinding sunlight and there the Jap was, right alongside us, maybe fifty feet away....Every trigger on every gun on both planes was pressed at once and held. Thousands of bullets criss-crossed through the narrow spread of air....Our plane shuddered under the impact of bullet after bullet and teetered and buckled under the blasts of its own guns.... I could see a cannon firing at us, smoke blowing from its open mouth like frosted breath, and I could see our red tracer bullets pelt like darts into the Jap and ricochet off his armor and streak wailing straight up into the air....The Jap made a tight turn and we followed suit. It was a delicate maneuver, the Jap having a mortal sting in his tail. To keep away from his tail and give our nose and side guns a chance to work him over, we had to turn inside him.... Then the sun blotted out and the whole wild scene was blotted out by an even wilder one as a cloudburst fell upon us like a mountain of loose rocks....The Jap had dived into the cloudburst, either to lose us or to maneuver himself into a position to kill us. We lost him five times in the fight.... every time the Jap plunged into a cloud...we went racing after him and caught him just as he was breaking into the clear and hit him....The Jap kept very close to the water to make sure we wouldn't come in under him. He has no guns there and we could tear his belly open with our top turret. So the fight was so low in the air there would be no escape. A hit on the controls for either of us meant the end....This was kill or be killed all the way through, one of those arrangements known locally as 'git' or 'git got.'...Twice we passed right over the Jap, so close I could see the jagged bullet-holes we had torn in him....Then, at 1:01, exultantly Lieutenant Spitzer shouted, 'He's smoking! One of his motors is gone!' Then Lieutenant Spitzer, who was still working his guns, shouted, 'He's down.'...There was an aching silence in the nose of the plane. Anyway, it seemed like silence. We had all been deafened by the noises of thousands of explosions."



GOING DOWN An H6K4 Mavis erupts in flames after being hit by a PB4Y-1 on May 7, 1944.

Guadalcanal on January 14. When the 11th Bomb Group returned to Hawaii, the well-traveled veterans 413 and 433 were passed on to the 5th Bomb Group's 31st Squadron.

In the evening of March 20, a simple but audacious mission took shape when nine B-17s, including Captain William Kyes in *Miss Fit*, joined nine B-24s to attack Kahili airfield. Their mission was to attract the attention of the searchlights, anti-aircraft gunners and night fighters while TBF Avengers slipped in at 1,500 feet to mine nearby Shortland Harbor. The operation was precisely timed so each flight would be over Kahili for nine minutes, and it was extremely successful. The following night a "practically identical" mission was flown. Major Francis Brady, piloting 413, remarked, "The fact that we got 18 planes out of 18 off the ground with no spare is something that I dare say has not happened with new equipment let alone old piles of junk like we are using."

A week later Brady flew the squadron's other veteran, 433, to Espiritu Santo to have faulty bomb racks repaired. He wrote in his diary: "It's no wonder it doesn't work well. It's had over 1400 combat hours on it and has been shot up 12 times besides losing its tail on landing twice.... On the way home we lost the #3 engine about an hour out from Guadalcanal. Really a bag of bolts."

The old B-17s continued their reconnaissance and harassing missions during the following months. On June 15, all were transferred to the 23rd Squadron when the 31st converted to Liberators. At the end of August, 433 had been dropped from 23rd Squadron records, but 413 soldiered on. Its last known mission was a weather recon from Espiritu

Santo on September 12. The bomber returned to Hawaii in 1944 and was condemned there in 1945.

By November 1943, the 43rd Bomb Group's transition to the B-24 was complete, and 408 and *The Last Straw* were among 12 veteran B-17s modified for use as armed transports. With ball turrets removed and hinged steel bins fitted in the bomb bays, they played an important part in the Admiralties and Hollandia operations. On May 16, 1944, the 433rd Troop Carrier Group sent 432 to Townsville Air Depot for repair; *The Last Straw* never returned, disappearing from the records after being declared obsolete in January 1945. The 317th Troop Carrier Group shows no record of 408 after the middle of 1944, and it was condemned in Australia later that year.

And then there was one: *Miss Fit*, the supposedly jinxed bomber, returned to the U.S. in 1944 and served as a trainer, first in Florida and finally at the flexible gunnery school at Yuma, Ariz. The last survivor of the Pearl Harbor B-17Es, 433 was scrapped at Albuquerque, N.M., in 1945. †

Aviation historian Steve Birdsall writes from Sydney, Australia. His first book was The B-17 Flying Fortress, published in 1965, and his most recent is Pride of Seattle, the story of the first 300 B-17Fs. For insight into early operations from Australia and New Guinea, he recommends My Fighting Congregation, by William C. Taggart. For more on aircraft camouflage and markings, he suggests the three-volume Air Force Colors series by Dana Bell.