CHAPTER 14

We returned to the boredom of Tallahassee, FL. Fortunately, we had only about two weeks of waiting. In January 1944, we received our orders and clothing list to pack and entrain for an unknown destination. We had both summer and winter gear, and we were instructed to wear our winter gear. We boarded the train in the late evening, and departed Tallahassee. It soon became evident that we were headed south; so we knew it was to Miami. That still told us nothing as transport planes to England sometimes took the southerly route via South America, Acension Island, and Africa.

On the train to Miami we had an all-night poker game. I had been "taking" what were to this point expensive poker lessons from "Pappy" Jim Norwood of Amarillo, Texas. In the beginning, this night was an exception. Pappy and I both won. Usually it was only Pappy that walked away winner. The last hand was memorable. Pappy had a king up as the first card in a stud poker game and started betting heavily on it. I had an ace in the "hole" and stayed with him convinced he might have a pair of Kings. After the last card we were the only ones in the game. He bet the pot. Though I had nothing but the ace, I had a feeling about it and called him.

He said; "I'm king high."

"You lose, I got an ace."

Pappy said as he walked away broke; "That's the way I like to play poker." ME TOO!!!

While we were in Miami for several days, Paul Swetland invited

me to visit his parents who were in Miami (actually Cocoanut Grove). It was then that I discovered that Paul's parents were quite rich. They had a large estate on Biscayne Bay. Their guest house was bigger than any house in Grapevine, Texas. It was a very pleasant visit, and Paul took me sailing on the bay in one of their boats. The food they served was marvelous.

The fun was very short. We soon found ourselves on a DC-4, bound for Africa.

CHAPTER 15

We had brief re-fueling stops at San Juan, Puerto Rico, Georgetown, British Guina, and Belem, Brazil. The last stop was Natal, Brazil, where we had a stopover before jumping across the ocean. While there we all had to buy some of the famous Natal Boots which were simply short topped boots, but were a lot more comfortable than the big clod-hopper high-topped GI shoes. Sportier too.

By now we were back into summer uniforms as Natal is HOT! After a couple of days there, we climbed on our plane for the hop across the ocean. We landed for necessary refueling on Acension Island - a mere speck in the mid-Atlantic Ocean. Finally, we reached the African Gold Coast (now Nigeria) at the city of Accra. Here we were stuck (literally) with the tropical inoculations. The "word" was that our destination was India, not Europe. We were somewhat disappointed, but when the Army orders, it is not a request.

So we were off to the land of sacred cattle, and the Taj Mahal in the city of Agra. The Taj Mahal was built as a tomb for the wife of a Mogul [or ruler] of that section of India. We were not destined to see this Wonder of the World for a while though. Mostly we saw the cattle and the grinding poverty.

From Accra we flew to a fuel stop in French West Africa (now Chad), on the edge of the Sahara Desert. Thence to Anglo-Egyptian Sudan (now Sudan) and the famous city of Khartoum on the Upper Nile River. It was mid-February 1944, and the temperature was 110 degrees in the shade.

Our next stop was Aden, Arabia, on the southern end of the Red Sea. This is now one of the Yemens. We spent a couple of days here. I still remember it as a town we could smell from its foul odors before we could see the city. We came face-to-face with the art of intensive haggling over every purchase however small. We were totally unaccustomed to this practice, and, as a consequence, we bought articles for far more than their local value.

From Aden we were to fly to Karachi, India (now Pakistan) with a refueling stop at an island in the Arabian Sea. We took off at night and about 30 minutes out, one of the engines started to misfire, and finally had to be shutoff. We returned to Aden for a couple of more days so we had a chance to visit this ancient city some more. We found the British section which was up in the hills overlooking the city. It was like a different world up there. The British lived extremely well in this enclave. It was no different

in India.

CHAPTER 16

On the next try, we made it to Karachi airdrome in India. We had spent 60 hours of flying time over a period of 9 days to reach our destination. That's a lot of uncomfortable sitting - especially when someone else is flying. That poor pilot had a plane filled with complaining critics.

We were then transferred to a small air base well outside of Karachi. There we spent another four weeks flying with combat pilots from India and China who had completed their tour of duty, and were on their way back Stateside. Their mission was to train us in all the latest enemy tactics, and screen us for pilots who should not be sent on into combat.

The P-40s we flew were no longer fit for combat action. They were really junk, and were barely suitable for the kind of thing we were doing. They didn't always behave in a very stable manner.

The one that I drew wanted at high speed to keep cork-screwing instead of going straight down. When I taxied the plane back to the flight line, I informed the crew chief about the cork-screwing. He allowed as how the plane had one wing panel from a P-40E and the other was from a P-40N. No wonder it was crazy!!.

My first accident occurred on this field. It was scary as hell. However, things happened so fast I didn't get the shakes after it was all over.

The field was a single strip runway that ran North and South. Unfortunately, during February and March the prevailing wind was from the East. By late afternoon it blew hard. As a result most landings were dead cross-wind. To land cross-wind, the plane must be positioned in the air so it is going straight down the runway crabwise by side-slipping with the nose pointing into the wind. JUST before touchdown, I was required to level out and point the nose straight down the runway so the wheels are not stripped off sideways as I immediately touched down. It took good timing and a deft touch.

This particular time, the wind was particularly strong from the East [on my right] as I came in to land, and when I pushed left rudder to straighten out, the "downwind [left] wing" stalled and dropped, touching the ground. As I fought to hold it in line, the ship rocked over so that the upwind [right] wing tip touched; then in rapid order the downwind wing touched again before the plane finally straightened out. Both wingtips were turned up when I made it back to the flight line. However, the danger of a "cartwheel" with the usual inauspicious resulting crash had been averted. The crew chief was pissed off as he had never had one of "his" planes pranged before. I was pissed too, but in a different place.

PART THREE. COMBAT IN INDIA

CHAPTER 17

Around April 1, 1944, we emplaned in a DC-3 for our combat assignments. Paul Swetland ended up in the 530th Squadron, 311th Fighter Group, in Mohanbari, Assam Province, India. I was sent to the 528th Squadron of the same group, stationed at nearby Tinsukia.

The 528th Squadron was equipped with A-36's which were P-51A's fitted with dive brakes, and two 50-caliber machine guns firing through the propeller in addition to the four 50's mounted in the wings. It was basically the same airplane as the P-51A, fitted for dive bombing. As it turned out we seldom used the dive brakes as they slowed us up too much. The dive bombing tactics we used allowed for accurate bombing with higher speed, lessening exposure to enemy ground fire. Occasionally we did use the dive brakes. When they were used, they made an awful screaming noise in a high speed dive with great psychological effect.

We were quartered in a British tea planter's house which was very comfortable except that in early April the weather was hot and quite muggy. April was the end of the winter "dry season".

In the summer that followed it was the monsoon season. The temperature was 100 degrees with very high humidity between rainstorms. We were told that a station nearby had recorded 496 inches of rainfall the previous year. I could believe it.

I was very soon checked out in the A-36, and we were told to make only wheel landings as opposed to the so-called three point "stall" landing we had been taught from the beginning. The reason was that this aircraft with its liquid-cooled Allison engine had

the coolant and oil radiators on the bottom of the fuselage, behind the cockpit; and the weight in a stall landing would blow out the tail wheel tire.

To make a wheel landing, it was necessary to make a normal approach and flare-out; but then instead of holding it off until it stalled, we let it ease down until the main wheels touched, then we pushed the stick forward slightly to hold it on the ground. This made for a very smooth landing even though it was a faster touchdown than a stall landing. The tailwheel could then be lowered gently to the ground as the speed reduced.

On my first try, I seemed to do OK, but when I taxied up to the parking area, and stopped, my propeller had scuff marks on the tips. Obviously, I had caused the prop to grind on the runway when I pushed the stick forward on touchdown. Not good!!

I was embarrassed - to say the least. The crew chief had apparently seen it before, as he passed it off as no big deal. "We will just re-balance it," he said.

Despite that, I was considered ready to take my place in the combat team. My first mission was delayed by a bout with diarrhea such as I had never experienced before. The Flight Surgeon said it was dysentery, and prescribed sulfa-guanidine. I took 40 pills the first day, and that was the end of the dysentery, but I was grounded for three more days as the drug could affect my depth perception. While this was going on all my buddies were getting their first combat missions in flying dive-bombing and strafing

sorties over Northern Burma.

The Allies were trying to drive the Japanese out of Northern Burma to re-establish the Burma Road as a supply route to China. An American group known as Merrill's Marauders were trapped on top of a ridge in the Nphum Ga Mountains. They were just north of an abandoned airbase at a place called Mytkina (pronounced Mitchina), which they were trying to capture. All available aircraft were flying to support them. Behind all these troops, engineers were cutting the so-called Ledo Road south from Assam into Burma. Controlling Mytkina airbase was essential for future protection of Burma Road traffic to China, once the road was cut through.

CHAPTER 18

When at last I was cleared to fly my first combat mission, an Air Corps officer with Merrill was directing the mission from the ground. I was flying as "Tail-End Charlie" on a four-ship raid. The ground controller described a jungle clearing with its map coordinates. He told us to drop our bombs on the south side of that clearing.

From 10,000 feet we went straight down in formation. We dropped our bombs on signal from the flight leader, then pulled out of the dive still in formation. This was an accurate method of bombing, but we were very vulnerable to ground fire during the dive and through the low level part of the run. We did not use the dive brakes, so when the pull out from the dive commenced, our air speed

was up to 450 mph or so. Even at that speed we were rocked pretty good from the bomb explosions.

After dropping the two 500-pound "depth charges" which would explode in the trees above the heads of enemy troops, the ground controller gave us a trail-line in the forest to strafe from low altitude. After using about half our ammo, we returned to base and loaded up again. That ended my first combat mission. Piece of cake!!

After that we frequently flew two missions of about three hours each in a single day. By the end of April, Merrill was breaking out, and the pace fell off. Also, the torrential rains of the monsoon season caused cancellation or mid-flight aborting of a lot of missions.

CHAPTER 19

In early May, I was transferred to the famed 530th Squadron, 311th Fighter Group, 10th Air Force. The 530th was leaving for Southern India for a special campaign with their P-51A's. The 530th was developing a reputation as an aggressive combat unit, and was known to the Japs as the "Yellow Scorpions" because of the yellow noses and tails on their aircraft. The Operations Officer was Capt. J.J. England, who was already an ace. He had shot down five confirmed Japanese planes in aerial combat. I was thrilled to be joining them. The best part was that Paul Swetland and I were again in the same squadron.

The assignment took us to a grass strip in an area south of

Calcutta, India. This is now in the nation of Bangladesh. The nearest town was Chittagong which has since had several tragic hurricanes (or cyclones as they are called there) devastate the populace.

The Japanese had invaded India about 150 miles north of Calcutta. They surrounded a garrison of British and Indian troops at a place named Imphal. The Allied forces were being supplied with food and ammunition by air (DC-3's). The enemy, through its intelligence (there were many Japanese sympathizers within India), was picking up takeoffs and landings of the DC-3's, and sent Zeros over from central Burma to intercept. Of course the Zeros were making hash of the poor transport planes and their cargoes. The air supply to Imphal was in grave danger.

Once the 530th was set up at Chittagong, the early morning duty pilots were waiting for news that the Jap fighters were at Imphal. On May 11, 1944, the news came that the enemy was there. All 22 available planes of the 530th took off with wing tanks full, and flew to the area of Meiktela where there were three Japanese fighter bases.

When the Jap fighters returned low in gas and ammunition, they were joined by their reserve fighters that had remained behind as air cover for the bases. The 530th was ready for them at 20,000 feet. It was a "turkey shoot" with 13 enemy aircraft destroyed plus claims of probables and damaged. The action was repeated on May 12, 1944 with 8 destroyed.

On the 14th of May, the enemy was getting cagier, and sent only a token force to Imphal. When we arrived over their bases, they were up and ready. As a replacement pilot, I was not in the first two missions, much to my disappointment. I did go on this one, flying as Tiny Wilbourne's wingman.

When we sighted the Japs, we dropped our wing tanks which had supplied nearly all the fuel for the trip over. My engine quit almost immediately! In the excitement of the moment I had failed to switch the fuel selector from wing tanks to internal tanks, so the engine ran out of fuel. As soon as it quit I knew what I had done, so I quickly put the selector to the correct tank. The engine caught at once and I was safely back in formation.

We split up in twos, and Tiny and I went after an "Oscar" (a Nakajima Ki-43 which looked like a Mitsubishi Zero) from above and behind. It was almost as if he had a reverse gunsight. The moment Tiny fired, the Jap did a "Split S" underneath us and I was looking helplessly straight down on him about 500 feet below us.

We had been taught that they were very maneuverable, but this was ridiculous! He had done the "Split-S" maneuver and used half the altitude that a P-51 required. There was no way we could turn in a tighter circle than he did.

We started after him again, and I dropped down about 100 feet below Tiny to catch the Jap when he tried again. This time he did a sharp turn to the right, I pulled in on to him a let a short burst go. My tracers must have been 50 feet behind his tail.

Tiny stayed with him and we tried again. We would have to do something totally different this time. We fired a lot but to my knowledge we never touched him - at least not that I ever saw. Tiny believed he had hit him on the last pass, but unfortunately I could not confirm it. I must admit that I wasn't letting Tiny get too far away, so it is very possible that he did get him on that last pass. We headed for the home base. So much for my first air to air shooting.

During these three days of fighter sweeps, Capt. England added three more aerial victories to his credit. He became the leading Ace in Burma. He was "The Man."

Of further interest is the official report of these days of air combat which may be found in APPENDIX B.

CHAPTER 20

This was a most successful group of missions, but not without cost as one of our pilots wrecked his plane on returning from the May 12th mission. It was Lt Johnny Greene who was obviously already suffering from combat nerves of the first order. When Johnny was scheduled to fly the next combat mission, he had the shakes so bad that, though only 19 years old, he could barely touch the end of a cigarette with a match.

Johnny had been in the second sweep, and had shot down an enemy plane. However, when he returned to base, his landing approach was terrible. He levelled off, cut the throttle and

tried to land the plane some 20 feet in the air. When he saw he was not going to make it he jammed the throttle forward. The power of the engine going suddenly to the prop of the almost stalled plane caused it to roll over and slide into the ground upside down.

Miraculously it did not catch on fire. Johnny, though unhurt, couldn't get out as the canopy was burrowed into the ground. When we reached the plane, Johnny, in his disgust, was hanging from his safety belt with a cigarette in his mouth. There was gasoline literally all about. The guys yelled; "For God's sake Johnny don't light that thing." He would have been an instant cinder had he struck a match.

Johnny disappeared from the squadron after that. We heard he was later flying co-pilot on an Air Transport Command aircraft.

During our stay at Dohazari, we encountered famine for the first time in our young lives. This province of India was having a terrible famine. As soon as we had settled in; we discovered women and children outside our mess halls waiting with tin cans to catch the scraping off our plates. There was no garbage pail, they were taking everything edible however gross it might seem. Each of us began to fill our plates, eat a bit and give the rest to all these women and kids. It only served to increase the number that appeared at each meal.

Each of us had a "bearer" who would make the beds, wash our clothes, run errands, and do all sorts of chores for a pittance in Indian rupees (each worth 30 cents American). Three of us shared as

a bearer a 12-year old boy who looked no more than eight. He was quite bright, spoke fair English, and was most accommodating. He had a distended belly that we did not understand. We took him to our Flight Surgeon, who told us the boy had chronic malaria for which nothing could be done. He further said the lad had a small chance of reaching adulthood. It was for many of us the first sad experience with the hopelessness of many peoples in the world at that time.

We knew we were very expendable, so we could empathize with this young boy. When we departed soon thereafter, we left him what was (to him) a princely sum of money for whatever good it might do.

PART 4 BURMA

CHAPTER 21

While we were in the South, the Allied troops had recaptured the airfield at Mytkina. We were then able operate from inside Burma. We then helped further the campaign to re-open the Burma Road to China.

The engineers had built an air strip in Northern Burma at a place called Tinkawk Sakan. It was underlaid with logs from the forest cut to make room for the field, and filled with sand and gravel from a nearby river bed. It was levelled on top with mostly packed sand; but this was monsoon season and the rains were regular and heavy. The result was that the field was usable, but took a particularly hairy method of takeoff, particularly with a bomb load.