

Four Engine Fighter Pilot

Submitted by Stan Hutchins 824 Sq.

Thanks to Gen. Bruce K. Holloway, USAF (Ret.), and Maj. John T. Foster, USAF (Ret.), of Keene, N. H., a veteran of the 308th Bomb Group.

Fourteenth Air Force B-24s flew many different missions, but dogfighting with enemy heavies was not part of their usual repertoire.

Most of us think of Maj. Gen. Claire L. Chennault's Fourteenth Air Force as a fighter outfit with short-nosed P-40s and P-51s. Less well remembered are the Flying Tiger bombers. In January 1944, Chennault had about forty B-25s and fewer than fifty four engine B-24 strategic bombers, the latter belonging to the 308th Bomb Group. There were no strategic targets in China comparable to the great industrial centers of Germany, and those in Japan were beyond the range of the B-24s.

How, then, were the B-24s used? Japan depended on external sources of raw materials, and Japanese armies in China were dependent on the home islands for military supplies. The "strategic" 308th therefore operated largely against interdiction targets: port facilities from Rangoon to Formosa, military depots in China, and traffic on the open seas and the Yangtze River. Many of these targets were beyond the range of Fourteenth Air Force fighters. Those missions were flown deep in enemy territory without escort.

Rarely was the 308th able to put up more than twenty B-24s for a mission. This was not entirely a result of combat attrition. The group also had another demanding mission: flying in its own fuel and other supplies over the Hump from India.

In its first eight months of operations beginning in April 1943, the 308th flew 1,331 round trips over the Hump. The extreme altitude required to cross the Himalayas, lack of navigation aids, unpredictable violent weather, and the relative inexperience of many crews all took their toll. By August 1944, 550 aircraft— transports and bombers—had gone down between Chabua, India, and Kunming, China. Each Hump trip counted as a combat mission—with good reason.

During the early months of bombing operations, the 308th generally attacked from an altitude of 16,000 feet or higher. With some exceptions, results were not good. In January 1944, the group's first priority shifted to low level sea searches to find and destroy Japanese ships. Some of these searches extended as far away as the Philippines.

One of the most unusual coastal searches was flown by Lt. Glenn McConnell, who arrived in China in the fall of 1943. Assigned to the 308th Group, he flew twenty three Hump missions. He liked the excitement and challenge of those flights. By March 1944, he had logged 250 combat hours.

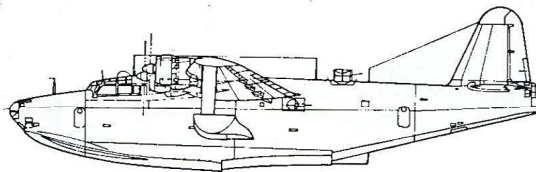
Now an experienced and highly competent pilot, he was given command of a B-24 named Sweepy Time Gal, locally modified for low altitude attacks on shipping. The bomber's lower turret had been removed. Two fixed .50 caliber nose guns were added, fired by a trigger on the control column. A new position

for a radar operator was installed on the flight deck. For surprise and bombing accuracy, sea sweeps typically were flown at 200 feet.

On a March 19 sweep, the crew of this modified B-24 sighted a four engine "Mavis" flying boat. McConnell turned in to the Mavis and opened up with all his forward firing guns. The enemy pilot, no doubt shaken by this display of awesome and accurate fire, ducked into an overcast trailing smoke and may or may not have made it home.

An hour later, a second Mavis appeared, headed directly for Sweepy Time Gal. The enemy plane went into a violent turn. McConnell followed under its left wing. All guns that could bear on the Mavis fired, scoring many hits at close range. The enemy gunners, firing back, wounded McConnell—who would have been

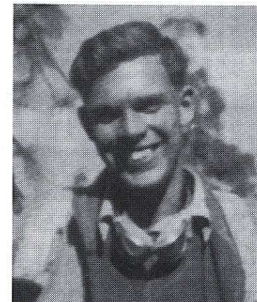
killed had he not been leaning forward for a better view of the action—and two other crew members before the flying boat caught fire and plunged into the sea. Thus ended the only known dogfight between four engine aircraft. With no hydraulic pressure for gear or brakes, the wounded McConnell landed his B-24 safely at Kweilin with photo-



graphs of the downed Mavis.

A month later, McConnell's B-24 was critically damaged by three "Oscars" while 100 feet above the water. The B-24, its two right engines on fire with both props refusing to feather, went in, cart wheeled, and broke up. Several crew members got out of the wreckage, only to be strafed by the enemy fighters. All but two were killed in the water. McConnell escaped by shedding his Mae West and diving under the waves each time the Oscars began firing. He and wounded radio operator S/Sgt. Tony Spadafora were picked up by a Japanese ship and spent the rest of the war as POWs in several prisons, the last in Tokyo. They survived U.S. fire bombing of that city.

Glenn McConnell stayed in the Air Force after the war, flying B-29s, B-47s, and B-52s in Strategic Air Command. He retired as a colonel, probably the only four engine "fighter pilot" of World War II, or any other war, to shoot down an enemy heavy in a dogfight.



Lt Glenn McConnell