

38th Bomb Group Raids Daglia

17-18 August 1943

Doolittle's Tokyo raid in April of 1942, the Battle of the Coral Sea, the Battle of Midway are special events that come to mind as significant turning points in World War II. The Tokyo raid was considered most important as a moral booster for sagging American spirits in the weeks after Pearl Harbor when everything seemed to be going against us.

From this writer's perspective, it actually was of greater importance in retrospect. It was a shock to the Japanese populace and their military leaders. It made it necessary to draw some aviation units back to the main islands for protection, leaving fewer on their expanding area of domination in the south and western Pacific.

The Battle of the Coral Sea in early May, 1942, has a noted place in history as the first naval battle in which the surface fleets of adversaries never saw nor fired on the opposing fleet. It was entirely an air battle. More than this, however, is the fact that two large Japanese fleet aircraft carriers suffered significant damage and spent several months in Japanese shipyards being repaired and



By David Gunn

38th Bomb Group

receiving new planes and crews to replace those lost in the battle. They were not available for the fleet when it suffered ignominious defeat at the Battle of Midway. That battle may well have had a very different outcome had these ships been at Midway, as the original plans were conceived.

But there are lesser known events that had a significant impact on the course of the war in the southwest Pacific. On August 17 and 18, 1943, the American Air Force attacks on the Japanese airdromes in the Wewak complex on the north coast of New Guinea had a major impact on the future of the war in that area.

General Kenney brought a strategy for war in the southwest Pacific that was unique. He had given consideration to low level bombing, particularly of ships, before reaching Australia in July of 1942. With his own engineering experience and the innovative skill of Paul "Pappy" Gunn, the A-20s of the 3rd Bomb Group were outfitted with four machine guns in the nose and additional gas tanks in the bomb bay. They became a potent weapon over the battle field at Gona and Buna on the north coast of

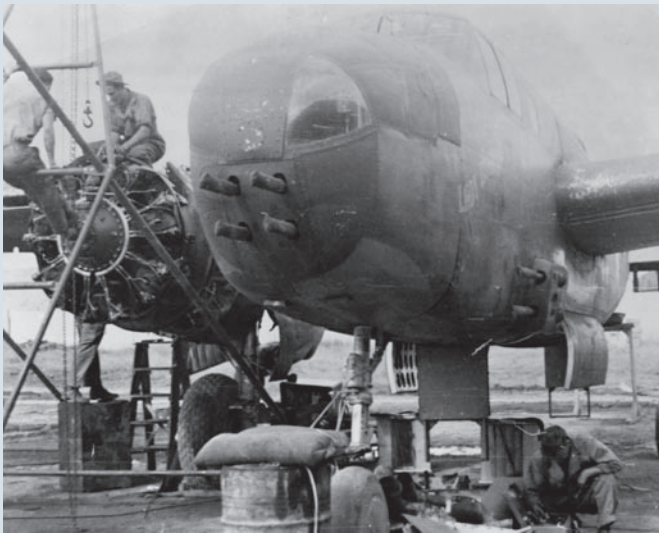


Photo Courtesy of Bil Crump and the CAF

New Guinea in the fall of 1942.

But Kenney wanted planes with more guns and more bombs to improve the score against shipping. The B-25 Mitchells were ideal for this concept. They were more maneuverable than the big bombers, had a greater load capacity and a greater operating range than the A-20. In early 1942, the 3rd Bomb Group arrived in Australia with no planes. Shortly, a shipment of A-20s arrived from the U.S. which were quickly assembled and assigned to the 3rd BG. Several B-25s had also arrived in Australia for delivery to the Dutch Air Force. The 3rd Bomb Group needed more planes and these new planes were transferred to that group.

“Pappy” Gunn set to work mounting four .50 caliber machine guns in the nose in what had been the bombardier’s compartment. He attached two more on each side of the nose in “blisters”. He also adapted a special rack he had designed for dropping 23-pound parachute fragmentation bombs individually, each with an instantaneous fuse. The flying shrapnel from these exploding bombs was very damaging to anything on the ground.



Maintenance performed on a 38th Bomb Group Mitchell. Photo Credit: National Archives Via Reddie Archives.

In January of 1943, these proved very effective and B-25 crews were trained in the special skills needed to make these “Commerce Destroyers” a most potent weapon. In the Battle of the Bismarck Sea on March 3rd and 4th, they demonstrated their unique capability as they participated in the annihilation of all seven transport and supply ships and four of the eight escorting destroyers destined for

the Japanese base at Lae, New Guinea. This Battle of the Bismarck Sea succeeded in isolating this base because it could no longer be supplied by sea shipping.

In April, work was started to modify the B-25s of the 38th Bomb Group. The 38th had only two squadrons because two squadrons had been diverted to the defense of New Caledonia and Fiji in June of 1942. Moreover, the combat losses experienced by the 38th in the Fall of 1942 had diminished the number of planes to about half the usual allocation. New planes to replace losses of all bombers and fighters in the theater were not being sent to the area because the war in Europe and North Africa had the highest priority.

It was late Spring before new B-25s began arriving for the 3rd and the 38th Bomb Groups. They were stripped of equipment not required for war in the southwestern Pacific and modified into the “Commerce Destroyer” configuration. In early August, further modifications were made to give these warriors added range. The lower turret was removed because the planes were being operated at very low altitudes and could not use them and they had never been considered an effective weapon in the theater. This mod was the addition of a 300-gallon auxiliary gas tank fitted in the plane where the lower turret had been located.

By this time, the crews had considerable experience in low level missions attacking ships and airfields. On the 17th of August, the crews of 26 planes were roused from their sleep and had an unusually early breakfast before the briefing for their mission of the day.

The modification for additional range had only been completed on the previous day and had not been tested. The tank was mounted in a metal framework and was disposable. The crews had been instructed in a procedure for jettisoning the tank once the plane had flown for a period of time and the fuel had been transferred into the wing tanks by electric pumps. This would do away with the problem of having a tank full of fumes which would ignite and explode if hit by enemy fire. In fact, the tank also had to be jettisoned before the top turret gunner could take his battle station. The crews were directed to abort the mission if they could not drop the tank.

The mission was for them to attack one of the four

Japanese airdromes near Wewak, about 500 miles west of Port Moresby and on the north coast of New Guinea. They were to have P-38 fighter cover. The enemy had been building up his air power at these strips since they had been denied reasonable operations from the Lae airdrome.

Following the briefing, the crews were trucked to their planes. The 405th Squadron was to lead the mission and the target was the airfield at Dagua about 18 miles west of Wewak. The 71st was directed to the airfield at But Aerodrome, about 10 miles further west. They were to rendezvous with their fighter cover in the lower Markham valley south of Lae. The B-25 squadron from the 3rd Bomb Group would also be at the rendezvous and would be attacking the two fields in the immediate Wewak area.

The 405th took off in the grayness of early dawn, joining up as the leaders circled over the foothills of the Owen Stanley Mountains. They climbed through a thin cloud layer as they took their places in their various flights above the clouds. It was soon obvious that the planes of the 71st were not climbing through the clouds to join them and they set out for their rendezvous, climbing to about 12,000 feet to clear the high mountain peaks before descending to join their fighter cover. The P-38 fighter cover was there but the 3rd Bomb Group B-25 squadron failed to show.

Together, the bombers and fighters flew west up the Markham valley along the foothills of the mountains that make up the central spine of New Guinea. They wanted to keep as far as possible from the north coast to avoid detection. As they were crossing the pass into the valley of the Sepik river, they started to jettison the auxiliary gas tanks, having already pumped the contents into their wing tanks. Something wasn't going according to the plans. The tanks were not dropping as they should. After repeated efforts, most of the tanks were still jammed in the metal cage.

Garrett Middlebrook was the leader of the second flight of four B-25s. When his turret gunner told him the tank would not drop out, the two developed a plan. Emminger snapped the parachute snaps of his harness to the spars of the plane about the tank. He was a chunky, broad shouldered, well built hunk of a man. With a little slack in the harness, he jumped up and down on the top of the tank. Suddenly it fell away and he climbed into his position in the top turret.

Middlebrook looked around at the rest of the formation

and was shocked to see them all turning around to return to base. The P-38s were turning with the main formation. It dawned on him that the other B-25s had experienced the same problem with the drop tank. But a flash below and in front of him disclosed one plane still headed straight for Wewak. After a few moments of reflection, he decided to see who was in that plane headed for the target.

Increasing his throttle setting and dropping his nose, he started closing in on the lone ranger. As he closed in, he noticed another plane closing in on the other wing of "the leader." He identified the "leader" as being Bill Gay. He had known Gay since the first day of flying school. They had shared many things together, often comparing notes and ideas and had a shared trust in one another beyond what most men experience.

He took note that the third plane was piloted by Berdines Lackness, one of those kind of guys who always carried a cheerful attitude and a good natured composure.

But what were just the three of them doing flying straight to a well defended target without fighter cover and the mutual protection that a larger formation provided? After further consideration, he determined to continue to go with Gay. He couldn't leave his friend to go alone. After a few moments he detected that his copilot and navigator were trusting him and fully committed to him and the mission. The navigator advised the men in the rear that they were continuing the mission. Everybody set about the final preparation for the attack and the certain confrontation with the defending Japanese fighters.

As they crossed to the west side of the Sepik River valley, they entered a small valley separated from the coast, Wewak, and their target by a low ridge of foothills. They stayed to the left against the foothills of the central mountain chain and lower than the coastal ridge. They were hoping to pass by Wewak without their presence being discovered. Five or six more minutes would bring them to the landmark for their turn to the Dagua air strip.

Suddenly, it was there and Bill Gay turned to his right to lead the formation up over the ridge and down to the target. It is at this moment that the adrenaline begins to really flow, one's alertness reaches a peak and the whole crew is focused on its various tasks.

As they topped the ridge and the target came into

view an astonishing sight greeted them. The air strip, lying parallel and just a short distance from the beach was lined with groups of planes, service vehicles, and personnel. They nosed down with full power toward the strip with 24 .50 caliber machine guns literally pouring lead at the targets before them as their speed built to over 300 miles per hour. They had accomplished total surprise and there was no defensive gunfire coming to meet them.

The tracers (every sixth round) were like lightning bolts telling the pilots just what they were hitting. Dust clouds rose along with smoke as fires were started. Planes and trucks were fully ablaze in moments. A gasoline dump at the east end of the strip erupted in rolling flames and smoke and exploding gas drums were hurled aloft. Middlebrook wrote later, "A zero sat facing the same direction I was flying. My fire power striking the wings and tail sections rolled it forward into another plane."



38th Bomb Group Mitchells Attacking Wewak Aerodrome. Photo Credit: National Archives Via Reddie Archives.

As they reached the area surrounding the strip, 23-pound parafrag bombs dropped from the three bomb bays. These small objects created awesome damage as they drifted down beneath their small parachutes and exploded instantly upon touching anything, hurling destructive shrapnel in every direction.

As they cleared the strip at tree top height, they were suddenly over water and the whole mission took on a different character. All minimum altitude bomber pilots soon learned, as Middlebrook wrote, "Now was the time for the great metamorphosis to take place. To this point,

we had been aggressive, daring, bold, courageous and determined. But when those bomb bay doors closed, by military tradition, by instinct, by the urge to survive and all that is holy, we became outrageous, unabashed cowards! It was now time to flee for our lives."

A few Japanese fighter planes already in the air closed in on the bombers. In turning in on the speeding formation from above, one fighter exposed his whole upper surfaces and an alert turret gunner sent him straight down to the water. Another adversary was pouring fire at the B-25s approaching and at the last second, Gay made an abrupt climb and leveled off at about 500 feet. The fighter passed by, unable to score the hit. Middlebrook, on Gay's wing, expected Gay to return to flight just above the water. When he didn't make that move, Middlebrook, noting that two fighters were approaching fast from below, broke the radio silence that had endured for the whole mission, and yelled into his microphone, "Gay, get down, get down! They are coming up underneath!" Gay made a steep diving turn into the approaching fighters and descended to fly just above the surface of the ocean. His move had nullified that attack because the enemy could not correct in time. By this time he had reduced the engine power just a bit but a speedy withdrawal was required.



Mitchells coming off target. Photo Credit: National Archives Via Reddie Archives.

In addition to the bombing and strafing advantages of minimum altitude attacks, there is a great defensive advantage. Much of the effective fighter plane range of maneuvering is taken away. At higher altitude, fighter planes can approach their objective from below where the

target is most vulnerable and least protected. From above, they can dive through a formation of bombers directing their fire at their targets as they flash past. By flying low, the space below is taken away and fighters cannot come from that direction and diving fighters cannot slash through the formation.

The usual fighter attacks on the low level bombers were from the sides. The retreating bombers were surrounded by several enemy fighters. Some made foolish passes that earned them some damaging fire before they withdrew to nurse their injured planes back to their burning base. Others tried harassing fire in an effort to disturb the retreating pilots, perhaps breaking up the formation and its mutually defensive firing capability.

The turrets on these B-25Ds were located a few feet behind the radio compartment at the trailing edge of the wings. Firing from this position, the guns had automatic interrupters that cut off any fire that might pass through the propeller arc on each wing. The twin vertical stabilizers and rudders were similarly protected. This presented four safer angles of attack by fighters – in front at the 1 o'clock and 11 o'clock angles, in the rear at the 5 o'clock and 7 o'clock angles. The enemy soon detected their advantage.

But a B-25 pilot had also learned that as a fighter turned in on those front angles, he could wait until the enemy's guns were almost bearing on his plane and then turn into the fighter, forcing him to tighten up his turn and then breaking back the other direction, thereby moving out of the firing zone. Because of the speed of closure of the two planes the attack would be broken up. Frequent minor directional changes (evasive action) could also hinder the attacks from the rear.

When the top turret guns were fully depressed, they were still unable to fire at planes making a level frontal attack. But the eight forward firing guns in the nose were a great discourager. If the pilot had not expended all his ammunition over the target. It was not uncommon for B-25 pilots to gun down an enemy fighter.

The Japanese fighters continued to dog the three B-25s as they headed east at over 250 MPH. Bill Gay took a course out to sea as they approached Wewak. He hoped to avoid attracting more fighter planes from the Wewak dromes.



38th Bomb Group Mitchell under attack by Japanese Ki-43. Photo Credit: National Archives Via Reddie Archives.

Flying very low over water placed a great strain on the pilots. It was very easy to lose one's depth perception in continuous flight over the glistening reflections. Many a plane wound up in an unintended high speed water landing. Constant eye movement helped to avoid the danger that could come from too much concentration. In such cases the pilots on the wing of the leader were also limited in what evasive action they could take because they had to keep track of the flight leader as well as the ocean a few feet below.

Once past Wewak, Gay brought the formation back to the coastland. The fighter attack increased, perhaps because the glare and reflection over the water had worked in the favor of the fleeing bombers. Once back over the jungle, Gay took advantage of every change in the contour of the land below, dropping down into little coves, up over the small hills, down into the gaps between the trees along a river course.

Because they were so close to the trees, the fighters could not indulge in fancy maneuvers. But they continued flying along side and making passes from time to time. The usual attack followed a time in which the fighters flew a parallel course out beyond gun range. With their higher speed they could draw ahead of the formation far enough to make a turn into the formation from the favorable angle.

Two of the fighters were of Nipon's best. They made courageous, determined attacks with singular skill. Two

were not quite in the same class; three or four others were of distinctly lesser skill and only fired threatening shots to unnerve the fleeing pilots. But the covey of enemy planes continued the harassment.

Perhaps more than in the moments of actual attack on the target, the pilots in the B-25s were sweating and fatigued with the high level of continuing nervous tension. There was no time to hand off the controls to the copilots and relax ones grip. The copilot was also constantly watching out on his side of the plane to keep an eye on the enemy and to note any damage on his side of the plane, particularly to the engine. He was also busy watching the panel of instruments, alert for readings that could mean trouble. Copilots also kept their hands near or cupped around the control column just in case the pilot might be injured. Their instant response was mandatory at this high speed low level of flight.

The race of bombers and fighters continued eastward far from the target and down the Markham valley. Gay's turret gunner reported that he had fired his last bullet. But he kept turning his turret and guns in simulation of firing to keep the enemy from taking advantage of the situation. The two other planes, noting the situation, moved in a bit closer to provide more protection. Some of the enemy planes had given up the pursuit but the two most dangerous continued their attacks from time to time. The long race at high power was sucking gas from the tanks at a prodigious rate.

Soon after the fleeing bombers reached the mouth of the Markham valley, the persistent fighters gave up the game and turned toward home. The running battle had lasted for 45 minutes at least.

Gay changed power to a slow climb to pass over the Owen Stanley Mountains and head for Port Moresby. At 14,000 feet they were running along side the clouds built up over the mountains, finally finding a break through which they flew to the south side of the range.

When they had landed, Emminger had only a ammo supply of about fifty rounds, just one short burst. They found that the ground crews were hardly ready to believe that these three planes had actually carried out the attack that the full squadron had been assigned to. But the Intelligence Officer was excited and hurried to dismount

the cameras from the planes so that pictures could tell the story. Lackness had no camera on his plane. The camera on Gay's plane had malfunctioned but the camera from Middlebrook's plane had great pictures of the damage inflicted on the Dagua strip.

Middlebrook's plane was found to have several holes in the rear control surfaces. After the crews had given their stories to the Intelligence Officer, they dropped by the mess hall for some of the usual "sorry" food and then returned to their tents for a well earned rest. But sleep did not come to most of them who were still trying to relax as they reflected on their recent experience and their survival against great odds. The mission had not gone as planned but they were still "here" in spite of it.

In a short time word was received that the 3rd Bomb Group had attacked its target at Wewak after a slightly delayed takeoff. Their attack on the Wewak and Boram strips had been devastating. They had caught the planes at Wewak lining up for takeoff, apparently on a mission to an Allied base. It was reported that they had destroyed 100 planes as they raced over the target.

Middlebrook reflected that had they known the 3rd was attacking Wewak at almost the same time they were fighting off their Japanese pursuers and passing Wewak out to sea, they could have joined the 3rd BG with its fighter cover as they left their target to return home. What a difference it would have made!

Later in the afternoon, Major Ralph Cheli (pronounced Kelly) had the three pilots join him in Bill Gay's tent. He conveyed, the Fifth Bomber Command's CO, General Whitehead, gratitude and appreciation for the effort the three crews had made to carry out the mission. Cheli had recently become the 38th BG CO after "Shanty" Oneil had been sent home. Cheli had commanded the 405th Bomb Squadron for several months and was a veteran of such combat experience.

Cheli was well liked by the men. He had time for talking things over with the men. He loved to fly and each mission was "fun" for him. But he did not seem to really take the Japanese flyers seriously. As CO, he had many duties and did not really have to fly many missions. But he resented being denied more opportunities to be part of the attack missions.

During this conversation he remarked at being left out of the “fun”. The three pilots told him it wasn’t “fun”. But he continued to express regret at having missed the “fun” and made jokes. This didn’t set well with the pilots and more hard words were said. Cheli left after stating he would lead on the next attack at Wewak.

After Cheli left, Bill Gay said, “Cheli has been very lucky on all his missions. I just hope his luck never runs out because if it does the fun runs out too.”

Bill Gay’s determination against all odds to carry out the mission had inspired Garrett Middlebrook and Berdines Lackness and he led them through a very successful, albeit a very harrowing, mission. They were credited with destroying 17 planes and damaging many others on the ground. Much essential support equipment and fuel supply was also destroyed. Had the camera in Bill’s plane also functioned properly, the confirmed results would undoubtedly have been greater. They were also credited with two kills on the pursuing fighters. All three pilots received commendation for their devotion to duty.

The next attack on Dagua was on the next day and Cheli did lead.

During the night, the ground crews had worked furiously to solve the problem of the droppable tanks. On the 18th of August, both the 71st and the 405th took off with Cheli leading the group in the 405th lead flight. Bill Gay was leading the second flight and Garrett Middlebrook led the third flight, each with four planes.

This time, all the drop tanks were successfully jettisoned as they neared Wewak. Passing Wewak, Cheli followed the same path as the planes on the previous day. Just as they approached the point of the turn toward the Dagua strip, the formation was attacked out of a low overcast by a large number of Nipon fighters. The attack was furious and determined.

Cheli turned the lead flight to cross the ridge and to dive toward the target. The second flight flew for a few more seconds to create the desired attack spacing of the flights and then turned to the target. Middlebrook allowed for the desired spacing before he made his attack turn.

As Cheli turned toward the target, Middlebrook observed smoke from Cheli’s right engine. As Cheli started his dive for his strafing run, fire was coming from the engine and wing.

He pressed on to the strafing run, still under intense attack by the fighters. Both his wingmen were also taking damaging fire from the fighters. After strafing and bombing the airstrip and as he headed out over the water, he signaled to his left wing man to take over the leadership of the Squadron.

A few hundred yards out over the water, he descended in a controlled water landing. Crews in the third flight over the target observed that four men exited the plane as it sat in the water for a few moments in a nose down attitude.

Just as the third flight settled into its final approach to the air strip, Middlebrook was informed by a crew member that their number three man had been hit by the enemy fighters and was lost to sight. They were all in a mild state of shock as they saw Cheli’s plane in the water and knowing they had just lost one of their own flight.

The following flights made their attacks and moved out over the sea, slipping into a bank of low storm clouds, thus evading the furious fighter attacks. They flew eastward for a few miles and then back toward the land. Upon clearing the cloudbank, they found their friendly P-38 fighter cover.

Several of the crews nursed their damaged planes back to their home base at 17-mile drome at Port Moresby. Upon landing, the word quickly spread that Cheli had crashed into the sea. Damage to several planes was observed and all the ground crews immediately perceived that it had been a costly mission. Gloom had a depressing affect as the men sluggishly went about their tasks of putting things in order and more fully assessing the damage to each of the planes.

Capt. Pittman, Cheli’s designated leader as he dropped out of the formation, had experienced considerable difficulty bringing his plane home. The Mitchel bomber was marked with many holes and a large number of spent enemy bullets rolled around in the fuselage. His left engine had been severely damaged by machine gun and 20 mm cannon fire and both props had holes in every blade.

In another revetment for the plane which had disappeared from Middlebrook’s flight, the ground crew sat in dejected silence. Several minutes passed by as the Intelligence Officer moved from revetment to revetment gathering his customary debriefing report from each crew.

Suddenly there was a wave of excitement as a message spread from group to group that Lt. Donovan had landed his plane at the crash strip beside the main strip at 7-mile

Drome. By various means a large group made their way quickly to the crash strip. Donovan had brought his plane in without landing gear or flaps. Indeed, he had flown the plane with most of his controls in a non-functioning condition. The tail control surfaces had, for the most part, been shredded. The hydraulic system was destroyed. The plane was full of holes.

Donovan had been hit before settling into the final approach to the target and had been forced to drop out of the formation. He had suffered shrapnel wounds to his right shoulder making it virtually impossible to use his right arm. His copilot and navigator had been seriously wounded and rendered incapable of moving. Donovan had managed to fly his plane into the off-shore cloud cover and to head for home. His turret gunner had been injured and fell from his position. The other gunner in the rear had suffered a leg wound.

After several minutes the gunner was able to crawl across the bomb bay to the front of the plane where he was able to help Donovan. In between moments helping Donovan, he rendered aid to the copilot and navigator. He was able to help control the plane until Donovan took over again as they approached home. Because the flaps were rendered useless, Donovan had landed the plane wheels up and at high speed but without further injuries to any of the crew.

They were all removed from the plane and rushed to the hospital. Even the doctors could not comprehend how Donovan had flown, let alone making such a successful landing of his heavily damaged plane using only one arm.

As for Cheli, little is known about what happened to his crew members, at least some of whom were known to have survived the ditching. Cheli was known to have been transported to the Japanese bastion at Rebaul where he languished in the prison camp for quite some time. The Japanese broadcast reports of his imprisonment on various occasions. Several months later, they reported that he had been transported by ship, destination Tokyo. But the report said that the ship had been sunk by American planes. As it turned out, this was a purely propaganda report. Following the war, Cheli's remains were identified among the thousands found at Rebaul. It is not known whether he died or was executed by the Japanese as was

often the case. The remains were removed and returned to the U.S. and interred at the Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery.

By all accounts, it is believed that Cheli had made a deliberate decision to do the most damage to the enemy in his final moments of flight. Maintaining his position at the head of the squadron was essential to the completion of the attack. To drop out of formation would cause disorder and greater risks to all those following. Death was an almost certain end. So, the man who loved flying and found such "fun" attacking the enemy, devoted himself to the completion of the mission.

Shortly after the mission, Cheli was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his heroic devotion to duty. His gravesite is marked with the special stone placed at the tombs of all recipients of our nation's highest award for service to our country.

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The final accounting for the two days of attack on the Wewak area airdromes credit the 3rd Bomb Group and the 38th Bomb Group with destroying over Japanese planes. The Allied fighter escorts made additional contributions to this total. Japanese sources indicate that they did not have this many planes in the Wewak area at the time. But Hiroyuki Shindo, an assistant professor in the Military History Department of the National Institute for Defense Studies, Tokyo, wrote of these two missions, "... the Fourth Air Army was reduced to an operational strength of just over 30 planes. The destruction of the Japanese air forces meant that the Allies could now conduct air operations more or less freely . . ."

David Gunn was a pilot in the 405th Bomb Squadron. He has developed this story from the record of the recollections of other former members and the official squadron reports of the 38th Bomb Group.