

Journey to Java

Remnants of two bomb groups and a fighter squadron flew into Java in early 1942—their near-suicidal task, to check Tokyo's drive toward Australia.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE

THE AAF's brief Java campaign against Japanese naval forces and airfields is little remembered except by military historians and the few survivors. There was enough heroism in those two opening months of 1942 to fill a book, and that is what historian and novelist Walter Edmonds did at Hap Arnold's suggestion. *They Fought With What They Had*, published by Little Brown in 1951, tells the story of the Philippines disaster and the Java campaign through the eyes of more than 160 officers and NCOs who were interviewed during and immediately after the war. If you can find a copy, read it.

The campaign opened early in January when ten or eleven (depending on your source) obsolescent B-17Cs and -Ds of the 19th Bombardment Group that had been evacuated from the Philippines to Australia landed at a sod field in eastern Java. Those early Fortresses had no tail guns, top turrets, or ball turrets, and only the Ds were equipped with self-sealing fuel tanks. The bombers arrived in Java with one crew and two mechanics per plane and virtually no spare parts. Ahead of them lay 1,500-mile missions through violent tropical fronts with no fighter escort, no rescue service—only swarms of Japanese fighter planes flown by the cream of Japan's pilots who frequently displayed their marksmanship against parachuting American airmen.

The 19th Bomb Group had seen

combat in the Philippines. Not so the crews of 7th Bomb Group's B-17Es and LB-30s (a lightly armed version of the B-24, built for the RAF) that began arriving from the States on January 10. One LB-30 pilot had only a twenty-minute briefing on the plane before taking off from MacDill Field in Florida, and many crewmen of both B-17s and LB-30s had never before flown in a four-engine bomber. Nevertheless, the 7th, like the 19th, was a gung ho outfit. Its squadrons that reached Java were ready to fly missions in forty-eight hours.

Late in January, P-40s of the 17th Pursuit Squadron (Provisional) started arriving after a 3,000-mile ferry flight from Australia. Eventually, about forty pursuits were in place at Blimbing to defend Java, and later still a few A-24 dive bombers joined them. (*For the pursuit story, see "You Men on Java Are Not Forgotten," September '80 issue, p. 106.*) By that time, despite heroic efforts of the bomb groups and the few US Navy ships in the area, the Japanese had established bases in the East Indies from which they could bomb and strafe the four American airfields—none of which had anti-aircraft defenses—and cut off the meager flow of supplies from Australia.

By early February, it was obvious that the trickle of bombers from the States could no more than replace combat losses. It was a rare day when the two bomb groups could get a dozen planes in the air. But they continued to fight the losing battle, crews sometimes flying five eight- to ten-hour missions a week and helping with aircraft maintenance in between.

The mission of February 8 against the Japanese airfield at Kendari on Celebes Island, some 750 miles from Java, typified the conditions under which the airmen fought. Only nine B-17s, one of which aborted with engine trouble, could

be mustered for the mission. At 17,000 feet over the Java Sea, they were attacked by Zeros coming in head on, where they were vulnerable to only the .30-caliber gun in the nose of each bomber. The B-17s' bomb bay tanks were not self-sealing. Two bombers were downed almost immediately with blazing tanks, and a third jettisoned his to save the plane from blowing up.

By the time the remaining six B-17s reached cloud cover, all had suffered battle damage. The tail of the bomber flown by Lt. Paul Lindsey was so badly shot up that he couldn't hold down its nose, and it went into a flat spin. The copilot, navigator, and one gunner bailed out to an uncertain fate, but another gunner was severely wounded. Lindsey refused to abandon the spinning plane. Finally the bombardier struggled up to the cockpit. Using their feet against the control column, Lindsey and he forced down the nose and got out of the spin at 7,000 feet. Another crew member tied the column in a forward position with a piece of rope. Then, with his flight controls half gone, his compass shot out, and the navigator's maps lost, Lindsey brought the wounded bomber home through rapidly worsening weather to a safe landing—one of the three to make it. It was his first combat mission.

By March 1, when the Japanese landed in force on Java, the AAF had only nine P-40s and even fewer bombers operational. All the P-40s were lost that day, either in the air or to strafing. Bombers flew the handful of Air Force people to Australia from under the invaders' noses.

Those days of defeat and retreat during the early months of the Pacific war are often forgotten. They should not be, nor should the valor of the men who, with obsolete or untested equipment and little support, fought to the end against insurmountable odds. ■