

Crusade in the Pacific

For a gung-ho fighter pilot named Grant Mahony, there was no such thing as combat fatigue.

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IN November 1940, Lt. Grattan "Grant" Mahony and eleven other members of Flying School Class 40-A arrived in the Philippines to fly obsolescent early model P-40s and obsolete P-35s and P-26s for the 4th Composite Group—later the 24th Pursuit Group. Only three of the young pilots would survive the war that began thirteen months later when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and the Philippines. The story of these men and the 207 other members of 40-A is told in Col. Frank Schirmer's remarkable history of his class.

If Colonel Schirmer's book can be said to have a central character for the World War II years, it is Grant Mahony, who, with two brief interludes in the States, spent three years fighting the Japanese Air Force over Luzon, Java, China, and Burma before his return to the Philippines in late 1944.

A classmate, retired Col. Walter Coss, who shared a house with him before the shooting started, says Grant Mahony then was a normal, gung-ho fighter jock, easy to live with and an excellent pilot. Then came the attack on the Philippines, and the Pacific war became for Grant Mahony a personal crusade that could end only with victory or death.

In ten days of air combat before the handful of AAF planes based around Manila was destroyed by

swarms of enemy bombers and fighters, Mahony shot down one Zero, flew an extraordinary P-40 night reconnaissance mission in bad weather to pinpoint Japanese landings on Luzon, dive-bombed and strafed Japanese troops, and was one of the first AAF pilots to be awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. Another classmate, retired Col. William A. Sheppard, said, "Of all the fighter pilots present [including 'Buzz' Wagner], Grant was the best combat pilot and flight leader . . . daring, easy to follow, using good judgment," and never looking for personal glory.

In mid-December 1941, Mahony and other pilots were evacuated to Australia, where Grant spent six weeks training new fighter pilots. He then led a flight of twelve fighters to Java, where thirty-nine P-40s fought desperately against massive formations of Japanese aircraft until the last Warhawk was lost. Mahony shot down three enemy planes in four days and became commander of the 17th Pursuit Squadron (Provisional) before being "drafted" by Maj. Gen. Lewis Brereton, who was en route to India to set up the Tenth Air Force.

Mahony suffered through several months as a staff officer and instructor of newly arrived fighter pilots before he managed to get himself assigned to Claire Chennault's China Air Task Force, successor to the American Volunteer Group and forerunner of Fourteenth Air Force. Retired Maj. Gen. John Alison, one of Chennault's aces and a former president of AFA, says Grant Mahony was an "inspired, aggressive squadron commander" who "held the theater record for steam locomotives destroyed."

Ten months of combat in China earned Mahony an unsought two months in the States. He then volunteered to join Johnny Alison and

Phil Cochran as a P-51 squadron commander in the 1st Air Commando Group, which was supporting Maj. Gen. Orde Wingate's guerrillas in Burma. According to Alison, "Grant didn't believe there was such a thing as combat fatigue." He led the long, tough missions and even tried to persuade Alison to go with him on a two-way P-51 strike from Burma across Thailand and the South China Sea to strafe Japanese bombers on Clark Field in the Philippines. General Alison's "computer didn't work the same as his" in figuring fuel consumption.

Following ten months of combat in Burma, Mahony languished in a Stateside assignment from June to November 1944, when he volunteered for a third tour, this one flying P-38s in the Southwest Pacific as deputy commander of the 8th Fighter Group. On January 3, 1945, he led a formation of P-38s that escorted bombers to an enemy airfield at Puerta Princesa on the Philippine island of Palawan. As they left the target, Mahony spotted a seaplane anchored offshore. He ordered the group to stay up while he went down to get the seaplane in an area well covered by enemy anti-aircraft guns.

Like so many other veteran fighter pilots who had survived countless air-to-air engagements, Mahony was shot down by flak, ending the long combat career of a man whom Fourteenth Air Force ace Gen. Bruce Holloway called "the finest combat squadron commander I have ever known."

At the time of his death, Lt. Col. Grant Mahony is believed to have flown more combat hours than any other AAF fighter pilot, the majority of those hours as a volunteer. Tragically, his personal crusade ended short of final victory, but no fighter pilot contributed more valiantly to that victory than did Grant Mahony. ■