

## First at Balikpapan

In August 1943, crews of the 380th Bomb Group flew three of the most daring missions of World War II.

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**T**HE October 1987 "Valor" story "Top Gun" credited Fifth Air Force fighter pilots with escorting the first AAF bombing attack on oil refineries at Balikpapan, Borneo. It was the first strike accompanied by fighters, but honors for the very first attack on Balikpapan belong to the 380th Bombardment Group, "The Flying Circus," assigned to Fifth Air Force but operating in considerable obscurity with the Royal Australian Air Force.

The 380th, commanded by Lt. Col. William A. Miller, arrived at bases near Darwin in northern Australia during the spring of 1943. Within a few weeks, the scant intelligence available indicated that the refineries at Balikpapan, which had been disabled by the retreating Dutch, were back in full swing, reportedly producing more than half of Japan's aviation fuel and lubricating oils. It was a fat target, but there were problems, described in the Presidential Unit Citation later awarded to the Group.

The seventeen-hour mission would cover 2,700 miles, longer than "any strike previously attempted in the Southwest Pacific." Most of the route was over water and past Japanese air bases of undetermined strength. Target data was meager, and weather forecasts were of dubious accuracy.

Colonel Miller and his staff were confident that their B-24s could do the job. A twelve-plane mission was laid on for August 13, 1943. Each bomber would carry an overload of fuel and six 500-pound bombs. They were to take off from Darwin at five-



*B-24 pilot Capt. Gus Connery, right, and Lt. Jim Wright, bombardier, were among the first to strike Balikpapan.*

minute intervals, beginning at 1700 hours in order to reach hopefully moonlit targets shortly after midnight. Crews would navigate to the area independently, where half the force would bomb refineries, and the other half would bomb shipping in the harbor from minimum altitude. The bombers had to penetrate three severe tropical fronts. Because of weather, mechanical problems, and fuel shortages, only nine reached Balikpapan.

First over the target at 0020 hours was Capt. Gus Connery's B-24. The Japanese, believing they were beyond the range of American bombers, were taken by surprise. The city and harbor were brightly lighted. Connery's bombardier, Lt. Jim Wright, better known today as Speaker of the House of Representatives, dropped his bombs on one of the refineries. The lights immediately went out, and succeeding B-24s were met by a barrage of flak.

The last B-24, flown by Lt. Douglas Craig, cleared the area at 0200 hours. Then for all of them, many with battle damage, it was eight long hours back through those vicious fronts. All made it except Craig's crew, which was attacked by fighters near Timor. Evasive action burned so much fuel that they had to land on a salt flat in north Australia.

How much damage had Balikpapan suffered? The next day, Au-

gust 15, two B-24s flown by Lts. Jack Banks and Howard Hahn were dispatched on a daylight photo mission to find out. Both got excellent photos, dropped their three bombs, and were attacked by fighters. Banks ended up in an hour-long engagement during which his crew shot down four Zeros, while Hahn's crew was credited with one kill.

After seeing the photos, the Group was eager for another go at a target they knew would be on alert and probably reinforced. On August 17, eleven B-24s launched into very bad weather for a second night strike. Again, only nine reached Balikpapan. Hits on Lt. Jim Soderberg's plane set a fire that finally was put out. Three of Capt. Bill Shek's crew were wounded.

Cannon fire got Lt. Bob Fleming's bombardier, Lt. Elvin Mellinger, and started a fire in the nose compartment. The bleeding bombardier dropped his bombs on a tanker and put out the fire before submitting to first aid. The attack also knocked out Fleming's No. 1 engine. Near Timor, No. 2 quit. The crew nursed their limping bomber 400 miles to a safe landing.

From the start, no one thought the 380th's few B-24s could put Balikpapan permanently out of action. Nevertheless, in twenty sorties the Group had temporarily shut down the refineries, destroyed many tons of stored fuel, sunk 30,000 tons of shipping, and forced the Japanese to redeploy elements of their defense forces from New Guinea to Borneo. Not a bad show.

The 380th, while still in Australia, earned a second Unit Citation before moving to the Philippines in the spring of 1945. There, they operated against targets on Taiwan and the Asian mainland. But for the men of the 380th Bombardment Group, the high point of its long and distinguished combat record will always be those first long, pioneering missions to Balikpapan, the Ploesti of the Pacific. ■