

China Bomber

What were the odds against a single B-24 surviving repeated attacks on an enemy naval force? Maj. "Stump" Carswell didn't ask.

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SAY "Fourteenth Air Force," and for most of us that conjures up visions of Maj. Gen. Claire Chennault's shark-nosed fighters battling vastly superior numbers of Japanese aircraft in the skies over China. Often forgotten is Chennault's small force of bombers, mostly B-25s with a single group of heavies, the 308th Bombardment Group.

The 308th brought its B-24 Liberators to China during the spring of 1943, flying its first mission on May 4. Chennault used his few heavies to support Chinese ground forces, bomb harbors, knock down bridges, and attack shipping in the enemy-dominated South China Sea—the latter often single-plane missions. Lacking accurate weather forecasts, adequate maps and navigational aids, fighter escort on their longer missions, and the mutually supporting firepower of large formations, losses were heavy. According to one source, ninety-three B-24s served in China, and sixty-two were lost in combat or to other causes. When not flying combat, the Liberators hauled supplies over the Hump to China—the terminus of the war's longest and most difficult supply route.

A year after the 308th became operational, Maj. Horace S. "Stump" Carswell reported at Kunming for duty with the Group. In the three years since completing pilot training, Carswell had served as an in-

structor, operations officer, and group commander with three B-24 operational training groups in the States. All he needed to fill the squares on his chart was combat experience, which he began acquiring immediately. After a short time at Group headquarters, he was named operations officer of the 374th Squadron.

On October 15, 1944, five months after joining the Group, Carswell won his first major distinction. Late that afternoon, he took off from an advance base at Liuchow on a solo sweep over the South China Sea. About 150 miles east of Hong Kong, he found a formation of six naval vessels. In a first attack through the concentrated fire of those heavily armed warships, Carswell's crew got two direct hits on a cruiser, blowing it up. Using his remaining bombs, Major Carswell made three runs on a destroyer, scoring one direct hit and two near misses that put the ship out of action.

Eleven days later, Carswell and his crew flew a night mission against a Japanese convoy of twelve armed cargo ships escorted by at least two destroyers. Taking the enemy by surprise, he made a run at 600 feet on one of the destroyers, damaging it with a near miss and drawing no

fire from the convoy. He then set up for a second low-level attack, knowing that the element of surprise was gone. The crew got two direct hits on a large tanker, but their B-24 was raked repeatedly by antiaircraft fire. Two engines were knocked out, a third and the hydraulic system damaged, and the copilot wounded.

Carswell regained control of the stricken bomber a few feet above the water and began a slow climb toward the China coast, hoping the damaged engine would hold out until they reached dry land where the crew could bail out, albeit over enemy territory. Then the bombardier discovered that his parachute had been shredded by flak. Carswell would have to nurse the bomber, with one good and one damaged engine, over the mountains to the west of the coast, perhaps to one of the Fourteenth Air Force fields in eastern China, but at least to an area where a successful crash landing might be made.

The crew knew that if anyone could coax a few more feet of altitude out of the struggling B-24, it was Stump Carswell. With every passing minute, the odds on making it improved. Then, before they had crossed the mountains, the third engine quit. Carswell ordered the crew to bail out. Eight men followed each other into the darkness, but Major Carswell chose to stay with the wounded copilot and his bombardier and attempt a crash landing.

It was not to be. The bomber hit a mountainside and exploded.

Two posthumous awards went to Maj. Horace Carswell: the Distinguished Service Cross for his October 15 mission and the Medal of Honor for self-sacrifice on that last flight. He was the only member of Fourteenth Air Force to be so honored. Today, Carswell AFB at Fort Worth, Tex., stands as a memorial to this man who valued duty and honor above life itself—a heroic airman who became part of the Air Force tradition of valor. ■



The only member of the wartime Fourteenth Air Force to win the Medal of Honor was Maj. Horace "Stump" Carswell.