David and Goliath

Many extraordinary encounters took place in the skies of World War II but none more bizarre than this.

The Tenth Air Force in India was, throughout most of its life, the smallest of the AAF's combat air forces but with a large geographical area of responsibility and an important mission. It was responsible for helping to defend the supply line from India to China and for interdicting the Japanese supply net running from Rangoon, Burma, to the north of that country. Its heavy bomber force—consisting of a few B-24s—was the 7th Bomb Group, based at Pandaveswar, northwest of Calcutta, whence it flew very long missions to targets mostly in Burma.

On March 31, 1943, the 7th BG's 9th Bomb Squadron was dispatched to destroy a railroad bridge at Pyinmana, about halfway between Rangoon and Mandalay and near two active enemy fighter bases. The formation was led by Col. Conrad F. Necrason, 7th BG commander. The B-24 on his right wing was piloted by 1st Lt. Lloyd Jensen whose copilot was 2d Lt. Owen J. Baggett. On that mission, Baggett was to earn a distinction believed to be unique in Air Force history.

Before reaching the target, the B-24s were attacked by fighters. Colonel Necrason was severely wounded, and Jensen's aircraft was fatally damaged. Oxygen bottles were shattered, intensifying a fire in the rear of Jensen's bomber. Nineteen-year-old Sgt. Samuel Crostic slid out of his top turret, grabbed two fire extinguishers, and fought the fire in the rear of the aircraft while standing on a catwalk over the open bomb bay. The plane still was under attack by enemy fighters, taking many hits along its fuselage. To help defend the aircraft, copilot Baggett took over the top turret until Sergeant Crostic had emptied his fire extinguishers, giving the crew time to prepare for bailout.

Smoke and fumes filled the B-24. Jensen ordered the crew to bail out. With the intercom inoperative, Baggett hand-signal the gunners to hit the silk and, nearly overthrown by fumes, put his own chute on. He next remembers floating down with a good chute. He saw four more open canopies before the bomber exploded.

The Japanese pilots immediately began strafing the surviving crewmen, apparently killing some of them and grazing Lieutenant Baggett's arm. The pilot who had hit Baggett circled to finish him off or perhaps only to get a better look at his victim. Baggett pretended to be dead, hoping the Zero pilot would not fire again. In any event, the pilot opened his canopy and approached within feet of Baggett's chute, nose up and on the verge of a stall. Baggett, enraged by the strafing of his helpless crewmates, raised the .45 automatic concealed against his leg and fired four shots at the open cockpit. The Zero stalled and spun in.

After Baggett hit the ground, enemy pilots continued to strafe him, but he escaped by hiding behind a tree. Lieutenant Jensen and one of the gunners landed near him. All three were captured by the Burmese and turned over to the Japanese. Sergeant Crostic also survived the bailout. Baggett and Jensen were flown out of Burma in an enemy bomber and imprisoned near Singapore.

In the more than two years he was held prisoner, Owen Baggett's weight dropped from 180 pounds to ninety. He had ample time to think about his midair duel. He did not at first believe it possible that he could have shot down the enemy while swinging in his chute, but gradually pieces of the puzzle came together.

Shortly after he was imprisoned, Baggett, Jensen, and another officer were taken before a Japanese major general who was in charge of all POWs in the area and who subsequently was executed as a war criminal. Baggett appeared to be treated like a celebrity. He was offered the opportunity of and given instructions on how to do the "honorable thing"—commit hara-kiri, a proposal he declined.

A few months later, Col. Harry Melton, commander of the 311th Fighter Group who had been shot down, passed through the POW camp and told Baggett that a Japanese colonel had told the pilot Owen Baggett had fired at had been thrown clear of his plane when it crashed and burned. He was found dead of a single bullet in his head. Colonel Melton intended to make an official report of the incident but lost his life when the ship on which he was being taken to Japan was sunk.

Two other pieces of evidence support Baggett's account: First, no friendly fighters were in the area that could have downed the Zero pilot. Second, the incident took place at an altitude of 4,000 to 5,000 feet. The pilot could have recovered from an unintentional stall and spin.

Retired Colonel Baggett, now living in San Antonio, Tex., believes he shot down the Japanese pilot, but because that judgment is based on largely indirect and circumstantial evidence, he remains reluctant to talk much about it. We think the jury no longer is out. There appears to be no reasonable doubt that Owen Baggett performed a unique act of valor, unlikely to be repeated in the unfolding annals of air warfare.

Thanks to Colonel Baggett and to Charles V. Duncan, Jr., author of B-24 Over Burma.