



These rare World War II images offer a portrait of dedicated airmen in an all-but-forgotten corner of the world.

C.B.I. China



Photo National Archives via Warren Thompson

Members of the 51st Fighter Group share a lighter moment somewhere in China circa 1943, posing on the wing of a P-40. Not every P-40 was adorned with the famous shark mouth insignia.

With the support of the locals, airfields in the China-Burma-India Theater were built out of nearly nothing. At left, a team rolls a "paving" stone to crush gravel and tamp down a runway surface. Such austere airfields saw extensive use by aircraft such as the C-47, below, which flew over the "Hump" of the Himalayas.

These color photos provide a glimpse of life and work in this unique theater of operations.

Burma India



Photo George McKay via Warren Thompson

In World War II, the China-Burma-India Theater was literally at the far end of the world for US troops. They had to adapt not only to an exotic place and local customs but also to being on the tail end of a very long supply line. Nearly everything used—parts, ammunition, fuel, medicine—had to come by air over the Himalayas from India. Since supplies were tight, improvising with what was at hand became an art form.



Photos Cal Bannon via Warren Thompson



The CBI offered many cases of airpower meeting the world of low-tech. Once off-loaded, supplies often made the trip to their final destination on four legs. Above, Chinese load up a trio of mules.

At left, troops board a C-47 on their way to the "front." Flights over the Hump were often white-knuckle experiences. Some passengers swore they could have grabbed a handful of snow as the aircraft barely cleared the mountaintops.

The P-51 which crash-landed (at right) probably would have been a write-off in Europe, but, in the CBI, a ground crew works to restore the precious airframe to service. This airfield, like most in the CBI, had no hangars.

Japanese soldiers working in the background are POWs.



Photo George McKay via Warren Thompson



Photo George McKay via Warren Thompson

At top, one sees an impressive lineup of C-46 Commandos, which, along with the C-47 Skytrain and the later C-54 Skymaster, at right, comprised the lifeline of airborne supply from Allied bases in India to American outposts in western China.

The C-46 and C-47 operated at the very edge of their altitude specs as they traversed the "Roof of the World" to keep the Chinese front supplied. The arrival of the four-engined C-54 brought bigger loads and improved safety margins, as well as increased chances of aircrew survival.



Photo Fred Poats via Warren Thompson



Photos Cal Bannon via Warren Thompson



At far left, a gleaming new C-54 bounces over the gravel of an improvised airstrip.

At left, a C-47 flight crew briefs the next mission under the wing as cargo is loaded onto a truck.

The great icon of the CBI was the shark mouthed P-40 of the Flying Tigers. Originally called the American Volunteer Group—and comprised of civilians flying against the Japanese before Pearl Harbor—the outfit was absorbed by the Army Air Forces in July 1942. The shark-mouth art was retained as a tradition. Here, 76th Fighter Squadron pilot Lt. Ben Thompson poses proudly with his airplane. The external wing tanks, installed backwards, may have been used as napalm-like ordnance.



Photo Ben Thompson via Warren Thompson

Photo National Archives via Warren Thompson



As CBI units inherited more modern equipment, early P-51s started showing up bearing the shark mouth design. Pilots often flew combat in the “newer” aircraft with only a few hours of instruction or after a short ferry ride from an Indian base. Present-day A-10s of the 23rd Fighter Group, to which this P-51 was assigned, continue the Flying Tigers tradition of a painted shark mouth on the aircraft fuselage.

Toward the end of the war, CBI units began getting top-of-the-line gear, such as these “black tail” P-51D Mustangs of the 75th Fighter Squadron, lined up for their next mission in Hangchow, China.



Photo George McKay via Warren Thompson

Seen at right is some of the scenery that greeted CBI troops. It was easy to run afoul of local customs, but the Americans and the Chinese worked well together fighting off the Japanese forces.

Although last in line for supplies, CBI boasted many "firsts." The first B-29 combat missions were flown from India to targets in Indonesia and Thailand. Below, Blood 'n Guts, a P-61 Black Widow night fighter, seems to have had some success wrecking Japanese ground movements; note the truck silhouettes under the canopy rail.



Photo Duane E. Bileman via Robert F. Dorr

Photo Fred Johnson via Warren Thompson



via Robert F. Dorr

Another aviation innovation adapted for the CBI was the helicopter. Above is one of a handful of YR-4 helicopters deployed in the theater. A YR-4 in Burma participated in the first-ever AAF helicopter rescue operation.

Flying over enemy-held territory on a regular basis meant that proficiency with a sidearm could quickly become the difference between life and death.

At right, two pilots keep sharp with their .45s, while a third practices with an M-1 carbine. Some pilots carried rifles in their aircraft in case of close encounters with the enemy.



Photo Cal Bannan via Warren Thompson

Captured Japanese aircraft were pressed into service. This Ki-55 "Ida," repainted with the roundel of the Chinese Nationalist forces, is shown at a base in Hangchow in October 1945. Below, captured and repainted Ki-48 "Lilys" line an airstrip in Nanking. Such captured aircraft formed the backbone of the new Chinese Air Force.



Photos George McKay via Warren Thompson



US aircraft joined the fledgling Chinese Air Force, as well. Above, a Republic P-43—precursor to the famed P-47 Thunderbolt—awaits a mission. Chinese P-43s shared airstrips with American aircraft throughout the war; this version was used as a trainer.

In April 1945—100 days before the close of the war in the Pacific—this P-47 from the 91st Fighter Squadron sits at Hsian, China, ready for action.





Photo Carroll Barmwell via Warren Thompson

At top, Chinese nationals tour past a B-25 of the 491st Bomb Squadron.

The CBI air war featured more than fighters and transports. Just as the C-46 and C-47 were the workhorse transports, the B-25 Mitchell and the B-24 Liberator were the workhorse bombers. Relatively small and able to operate from short, austere strips, B-25s took on many missions.



Photo Edward Branning via Warren Thompson

Photo Alex Adair via Warren Thompson



Above, an uncommon aerial shot of B-25s over Burma. Above right, a bellied-in B-25 of the 490th Bomb Squadron brought its crew back from an obviously rough mission over Burma. This one is a special “gun-ship” version with a 75 mm howitzer in the nose.

Photo George McKay via Warren Thompson



These B-25s show the wear from more than their share of flying. ■