

CHAPTER 6 – COMBAT BEGINS

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The McLauchlen crew was now on site and ready to enter combat. The tension could be seen in their faces.



Taken November 20, 1943 at Panagarh Air Base in India

(Note: John Knox Norman was reassigned to another crew)

Back Row L-R:

- John Gordon MacDonald – Pilot
- John Eldridge McLauchlen – Co-Pilot
- Carlyle Richard Ashburn – Navigator
- Gilbert A. Rauh – Bombardier
- Saul Sacher – Engineer

Front Row L-R:

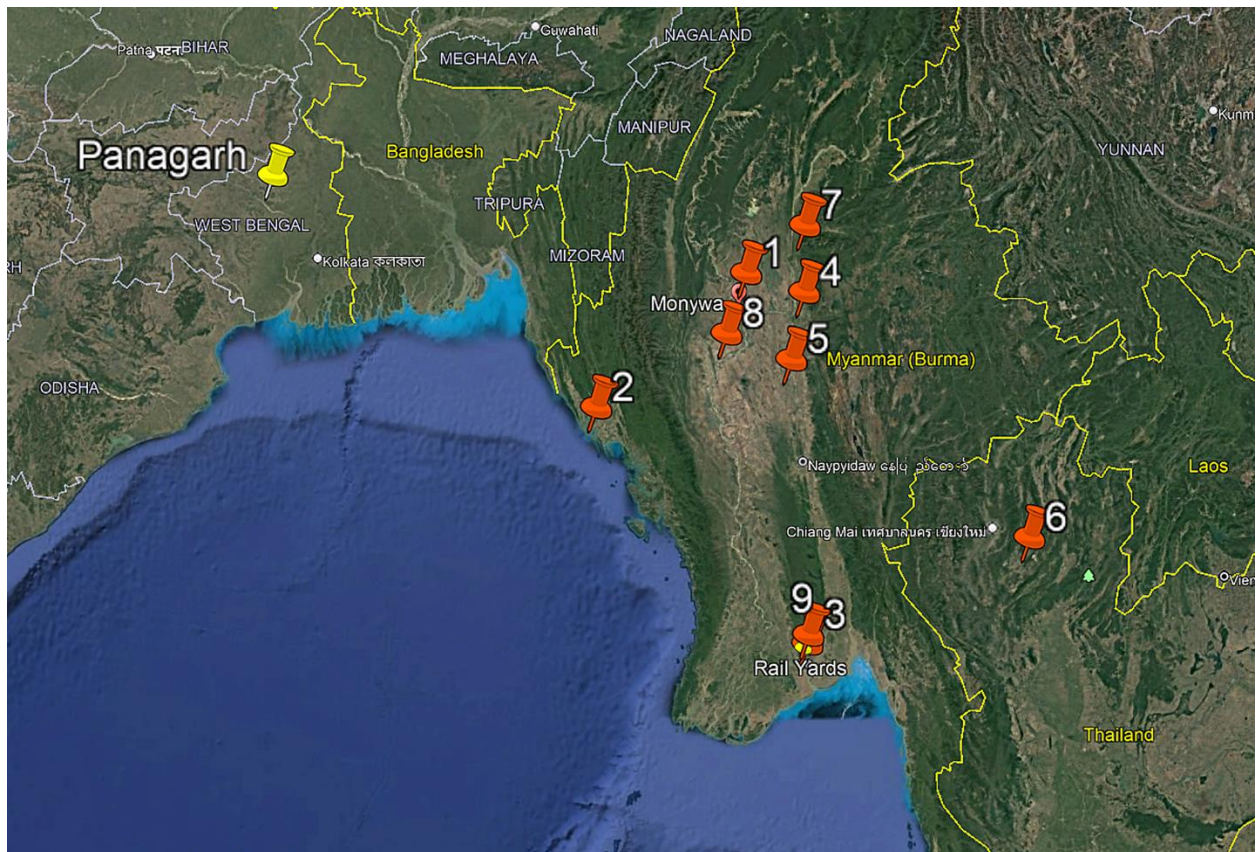
- Harold Louis. Seifreid - Gunner
- David Wade Hancock – Gunner
- Robert C. Gallagher – Gunner
- Robert Seth Simmons – Gunner
- Bernard A. Baumgartner – Gunner

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The tables on the following pages summarize 2nd Lt. Gilbert Rauh's mission participation for his first nine combat missions from Panagarh Air Base as recorded by the 436th historian in records taken from declassified 436th historic files. His first combat action occurred on November 2nd and continued unabated roughly every three days, following the same routine – Day 1 – Mission and Return, Day 2 – Aircraft Maintenance and Damage Repair, Day 3 – Fueling Bomb and Armament Loading. When maintenance and repairs were not needed, aircrews and aircraft could fly every other day.

For bomber crews in the CBI, the typical standard combat assignment was 300 combat hours rather than a fixed number of missions. The CBI Theater was unique because of its harsh flying conditions, logistical challenges, and the long distances required to reach targets. Crews faced mountainous terrain, the unpredictability of the monsoon season, and limited infrastructure. Depending on the length and nature of the missions flown, this could translate to anywhere from 50 to 70 sorties for heavy bombers.

Most of the combat missions were clustered in north/central Burma with two in the highly populated and defended area of Rangoon and one deep inside of Thailand.



As you can see, MacDonald/McLauchlen flew several missions as a Pilot/Co-Pilot. All crew roles were interchangeable due to the standard training and competence of the individuals.

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DATE	TIME	TARGET	COMBAT MISSION	AIRCRAFT	PILOT	CO-PILOT	CREW	RESULTS
Oct-43							Rauh, 2nd Lt.	Reported for Duty at Panagarh, India
2-Nov-43		Nonywa	1528 #1	61	MacDonald	MacLauchlin	Ashburn Rauh Sacher Seifried Baumgartner Waller Gonzales Hancock	Target was last resort. Second element did not drop due to weather. Weather prevented observation of results from first element bombs. No casualties
5-Nov-43		Akyab Government Building	1538 #2	61	MacDonald	MacLauchlin	Ashburn Rauh Sacher Seifried Baumgartner Gallagher Simmons Hancock	Formation attacked Akyab Government Building with incendiary clusters. Excellent bombing reported. Intense ack-ack but no fighter interception. No casualties.
9-Nov-43	Night	Mingaladon Airdrome at Rangoon	#3	69	Schleier	Titus	Ashburn Rauh Jeffcoat Maino Malkoff Soren Hostein Baumgartner	Excellent results reported by individual crews. 2 ships intercepted by night fighters. 3 members of Lt. Hutchinson crew slightly wounded.
13-Nov-43	0740	Mytinge Work Shop	#4	66	MacDonald	MacLauchlin	McCabe Rauh Sacher Seifried Gallagher Hancock Baumgartner Simmons	Excellent hits were observed in the target area. P-51's provided top cover for the formation and no enemy air opposition was encountered. Plane number 61 was given a 50 minute test flight
16-Nov-43	0740	Meiketila cantamount	#5	63	MacDonald	MacLauchlin	McCormick Rauh Sacher Seifried Gallagher Hancock Baumgartner Simmons	Bombs blanketed target and incendiaries started many fires visible for 80 miles. P-51 escort shot down two enemy fighters.

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20-Nov-43	1020	Lampang Airdrome	#6	65	Schleier	Titus	Effel Rauh Jeffcoat Manwarren Myers Morley Holstein Sullivan	Target was well hit. Bomb bursts were seen on runway and dispersal area.
25-Nov-43	0500	Zayatkwint Airdrome	#7	63	MacDonald	MacLauchlin	McCabe Rauh Sacher Seifried Simmons Gallagher Roberts	Due to weather an alternate Airdrome at Minhla was bombed with good results. Only 11 of the 28 planes reached the target, 7 of ours and 4 of the 492nd. One enemy fighter attacked the formation and was shot down by our gunners.
27-Nov-43	0750	Workshop at Dirsein	#8	63	MacDonald	Carter	Ashburn Rauh Sacher Seifried Simmons Gallagher Sasser Baumgartner	Very good results were obtained. Enemy air opposition was encountered and our gunners and the escorts shot down several of the bandits. All of our planes returned safely.
28-Nov-43	0715	Batanitang Wharves in Rangoon (a.k.a. - Botataung Docks)	#9	63	MacDonald	MacLauchlin	Ashburn Rauh Sacher Seifried Simmons Gallagher DeAugustine Baumgartner	The bomb hit were good and heavy Ack-Ack and enemy fighter opposition was encountered. The control cables of Lt. Agee's ship were shot and his plane was out of control for some time, all of our ships returned safely, Lt. Agee landing in Chitagang.

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The Japanese Air Force had decided to send reinforcements to Burma to support the 50th and 64th Sentais (squadrons). During October 1943 the 33rd Sentai began arriving at bases in southern and northern Burma, while in November the 204th Sentai was sent to Mingaladon to beef up fighter defenses around Rangoon. New aircraft arrived in the form of eight Nakajima Ki-44 Shoki (Tojo) fighters. The 64th Sentai pilots who had withdrawn to Singapore during the monsoon were well trained from practice runs against a captured B-17 and were now ready for the B-24's. The Japanese pilots were eager and their attacks were more frequent, more determined and, unfortunately for the 7th Bombardment Group, more damaging.

Thus, November proved to be an extremely tough month for the 7th BG as the Japanese continued to concentrate their efforts against the B-24s. The Tenth Air Force launched its heaviest raids to date against Rangoon, as Maj Gen Stratemeyer wanted to destroy several of the most important installations around the city that had heretofore been merely damaged. He proposed to Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Peirse that the Tenth and the RAF cooperate in a series of day and night bombing missions, to which Peirse agreed. To add strength to the Tenth Air Force, Stratemeyer asked Maj Gen Claire Chennault to lend him the 308th BG from the Fourteenth Air Force for these missions.

Targets were chosen with care and the locomotive works at Insein stood out as probably the most



41 Nov. 11, 1943: A supply ship, one of two that the Japanese were able to work through U.S. Air attacks, explodes in Rangoon Harbor (center) after a direct hit by a bomb from a Tenth U.S. Air Force Plane. Hits also were scored on port facilities, seen smoking (top center). Note numerous small craft moored at docks and offshore, (right). (AP Photo) Photo by Add this to feed

remunerative target in the region and was given top priority. Strafing and bombing along the railways had done considerable damage to locomotives, placing a strain on workshops, and Insein was the only place

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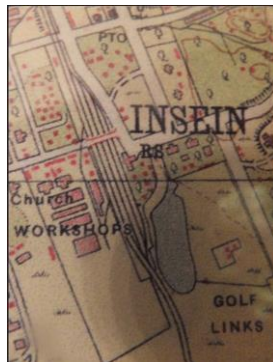
in Burma having necessary machinery for repairs to railway engines. The second priority target was the Botataung docks on the Rangoon River. Royal Air Force Wellingtons and Liberators would bomb the Mahlwagon marshalling yards by night.

For the first time in the campaign, the B-24s would have fighter escorts all the way to the target. The 459th Fighter Squadron had arrived in-theatre with P-38 Lightnings, while the 311th Fighter Bomber Group lent its P-51A-equipped 530th Fighter Squadron. Stratemeyer planned to begin the missions on 25 November, with the offensive lasting one week. In the run up to the Rangoon offensive the 7th BG undertook several large-scale attacks on the Japanese airfields at Mingaladon and Heho.



The series of missions to Rangoon began on 25 November as planned, but the day went badly. 9th BS aircraft were the first to take off from Pandaveswar at 0500 hrs and tragedy struck when two of the unit's B-24Js crashed moments after departure, killing the crews. The two squadrons from the 308th BG that were temporarily sharing the field with the 9th and 493rd BSs conducted their mission briefing with the depressing sound of explosions in the background.

Bad weather around the Rangoon area covered the primary targets, which were the Insein locomotive workshops and the airfields at Mingaladon and Zayatkwin, so the two B-24 groups headed for their secondary target at Akyab instead, but not before flak had damaged an aircraft from the 493rd BS, which failed to make it back to base. Two P-51As from the 530th FS were also shot down in clashes with the 64th Sentai. By day's end three bombers had been lost with little to show for the effort. Worst of all, the element of surprise was gone.



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The weather cleared sufficiently on 27 November for both bomb groups to target the Insein locomotive workshops once again. The combined formation sent aloft numbered 56 B-24s — the largest bombing mission to date in the CBI Theatre. Escorted by Lightnings and Mustangs, it made an impressive sight for the crews involved. The 3rd Chutai of the 64th Sentai rose to intercept the formation, committing eight Ki-43-IIs and one Ki-44. Four Ki-45s from the 21st Sentai also achieved excellent results, with an estimated 70 per cent of the Insein facility destroyed or severely damaged.

In the air battle that followed the 308th BG had two B-24s shot down. In the 493rd BS's formation one aircraft had two engines knocked out, but it still managed to make a successful crash-landing off the Indian coast. The bombers and the fighter escort claimed 13 enemy fighters destroyed, with more probably destroyed or damaged, but the Japanese actually lost a Ki-43-II, the sole Ki-44 and a Ki-45.

The two groups returned to Rangoon the next day to target the Botataung dock area (a.k.a. - Batanitung Wharves), making their bomb run from 19,000 ft and again doing considerable damage. Six Ki-43-IIs from the 64th Sentai and four Ki-45s from the 21st Sentai intercepted the formation, but they only succeeded in inflicting minor damage despite continuously attacking the B-24s for more than an hour. These poor results were testament to how difficult it was for the 'Oscar' to shoot down a Liberator. The bombers claimed several fighters destroyed and damaged, but none were lost. It was a long mission, with the bombers taking off at 0700 hrs and returning at 1800 hrs.

This mission was a confidence builder for the crews. Mission #10 three days later on December 1, 1943, would be a repeat performance given the target was only a few miles short of the Botataung docks. However, something was quietly brewing and this next mission would unexpectedly take them into the teeth of a slaughter.

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Where are they? - The boys often thought of one another but, in time of war, communication was strictly guarded. All they could do was ask those back home if anyone heard anything of Gibby, Mike or George. The answer was usually the same – “no!”

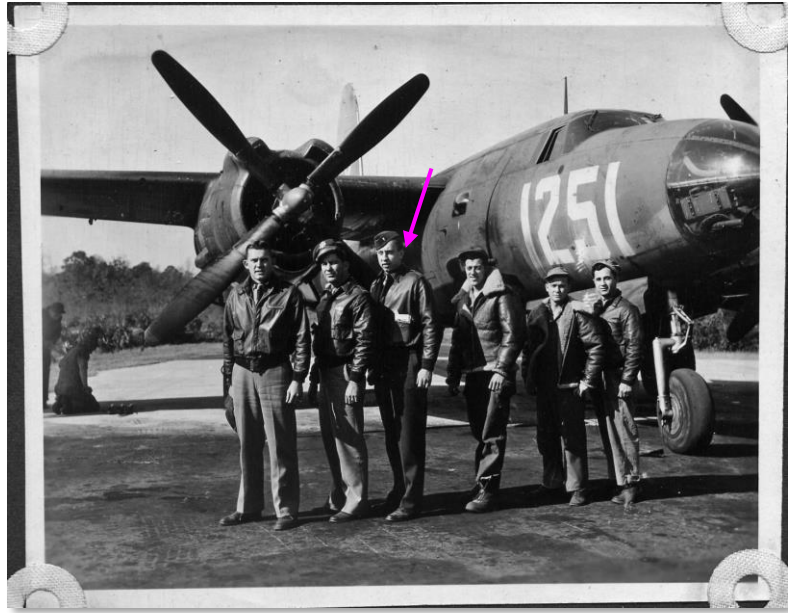
As Gibby entered combat in November of 1943, Mike was finishing stateside training and much to his surprise, he was also assigned to the 10th Air Force, 7th Bombardment Group and 436th Bombardment Squadron – he would be joining Gibby on assignment in India.

Excited? Yes! It was astonishing that he would be seeing, and possibly even flying with one of his best friends. Mike was expecting to arrive in mid to late December. His home base would be the same Panagarh Air Base in eastern India. However, due to unexpected circumstances, by January 1943, he would be reassigned to a short 23 miles northwest to Pandaveswar Air Base.



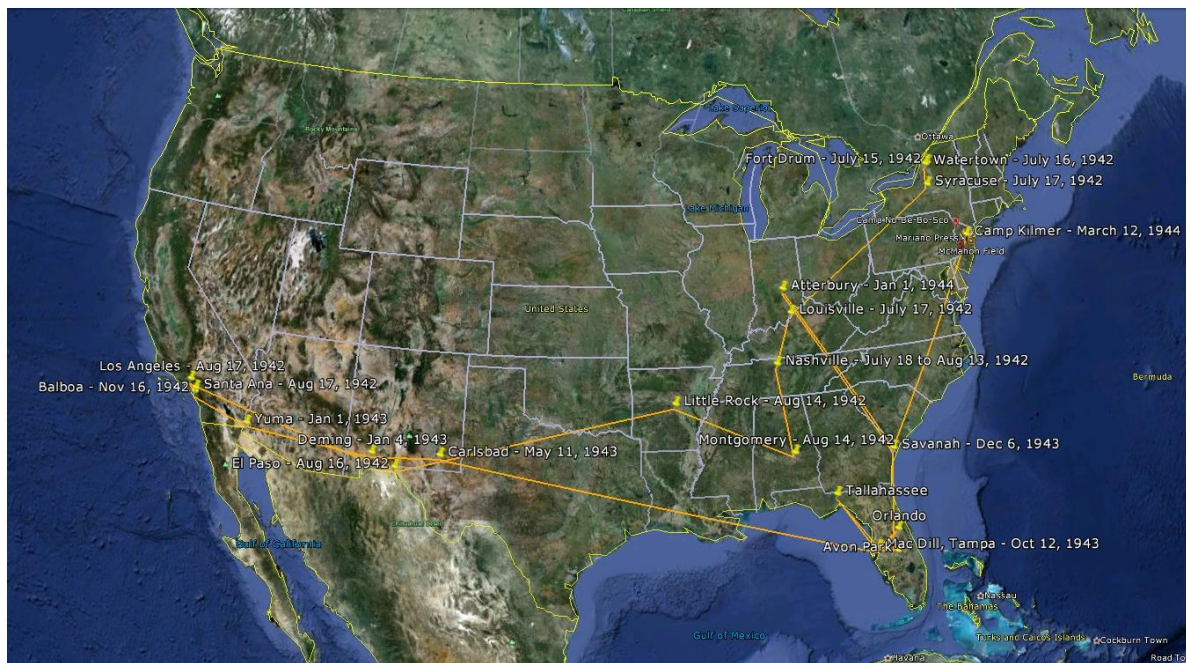
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George was still deeply immersed in B-26 combat training at MacDill Field in Tampa, Florida, until October 12, 1943, when they moved to Avon Park Bombing Range, Avon Park, Florida, for six weeks of top-secret training. By November, their Squadron left Avon Park, Bombing Range for Hunter Field, Savannah, Georgia, a permanent change of station. As SECRET reports through November of 1943 indicated, there was much preparation to do and, consequently, not much time expected for the upcoming holidays.



During the month of December, George's Squadron continued its regular tactical training program with many flights scheduled, the balance of the time being used by attending ground school courses particularly relative to B-26 operations and activities in combat zones. From December 15th through 25th a series of missions organized by the Wing and coordinated with other Groups were flown, and his Squadron participated in all of these missions in addition to the regular scheduled flying.

The apparent chaos of six-months of training is best observed by looking at it on a map and postage cancellation marks on letters home.



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The training was intense and the pace extraordinary and, no doubt, exactly what Gibby and Mike had already experienced. It might have appeared chaotic but its purpose would be on display in the early summer of 1944 during the largest amphibious invasion in the history of warfare, Operation Overlord – D-Day. These B-26 aircraft and crews would destroy the German war machine infrastructure in northern France in anticipation of that event. They would also provide cover for the invading Allied troops.

The war was entering its third year. Anxiety was ever present but, so far, so good. However, no one at home was ready for the sequence of bad news that began arriving in early December, 1943, while George was training in Savannah, Georgia, and Mike was enroute to his combat assignment and to meet up with Gibby in India.