

Philip R. Adair, 2nd Lt AC  
 89th Ftr Sqdn, 80th Ftr Gp  
 Nagaghuli Airfield, Assam  
 December 13, 1943

Daybreak on the 13th of December 1943 was crisp and cool, and no clouds in the sky, but a high level haze cut the visibility down appreciably. The 89th squadron was assigned patrol duty for the "Hump Route" that day, and some interdiction missions as well. One of the other squadrons in the 80th group was assigned air defense for the valley, and the other squadron was on forward interdiction missions.

Although I was still a 2nd Lt at the time, I was commander of D flight, and with 42 combat missions at the time, was ahead of the other pilots, as far as completed missions was concerned. I drew the lot for first combat patrol over the Hump for that day, and was off in my plane, "Lulubelle", leading a flight of four P-40s, with Lt Mayas my element leader. The previous week



Lulu Belle

had brought encounters with Japanese fighters in the patrol area, by other members of the 89th squadron, and we had been warned to be particularly alert, as the intelligence section had been told to expect more raids. In spite of this, mission 43 proved uneventful, and three hours later, found us back at Nagaghuli, where all the other serviceable aircraft were off on missions.

I was also assistant engineering officer, and Carol Peake, my crew chief and I, took a lot of pride in making Lulubelle the best plane in the squadron. I had scrounged an electric starter to replace the hand cranked one some eager Curtiss-Wright engineer had put in to save weight. I had brought a can of whitewall tire paint from the US, and as far as I know Lulubelle was the only combat P-40 with whitewall tires. .

Immediately after landing from the 43rd mission, I got Peake started on servicing, and told him not to stop until it was finished.

I then went to the alert tent, waiting for the rest of the flight to come in. I had just started to relax when the red alert warning was sounded, and took off on the run for my plane, which was about 100 feet away. Peake had just finished servicing, and was in the cockpit, filling out the forms, when the alert sounded. He immediately hit the electric start switch, and had the engine running by the time I reached the plane. He jumped out the right side, and I jumped in from the left, and hit the throttle, without bothering with the chute, or safety belt, and went by the ops building-airborne in less than a minute.



P40 with Wide White Wall tires

There had been no chance to debrief, but we had a standing SOP that on Red Alert, we would all scramble, and rendezvous over the field at 20,000 feet, maintaining radio silence to avoid warning possible intruders. After becoming airborne, I buckled up, and started climbing over the field, watching for the other flight members to get off and join up. By the time I had reached 12,000 feet over the field, none were off yet, but I could see what looked like a flight of four aircraft in the distance, but couldn't identify them. However, on the next circle it became apparent that what I was seeing was not a flight of four, but something considerably larger. At this point, I called Control, and reported sighting unknown aircraft, and asked if there were any friends in the area. Control came back with a negative, but said they had a report of unknowns about 40 miles to the east, from ground observer stations. I responded back that the unknowns were much closer; about 15 miles or so east of the base complex, and appeared to be on a north-west heading, giving the approximate grid location. Control came back, and said NO--the unknowns were much farther east as reported by the ground observers. I then informed Control that their report was way off, and that I was leaving

the rendezvous point to investigate, as none of my flight were airborne yet, and no friendlies in the area.

Shortly after leaving my spot above the field, and getting much closer to the unknowns, I could see that instead of four aircraft, there were four flights. I kept climbing, and took up



LT Adair at the Alert Shack at Nagaghuli

a course to bring me behind and above the formation, and could see that each flight was composed of two Vs of three each, and the four flights were in a V, with the fourth in an echelon to the right, which in the distance, and haze had initially appeared to be four aircraft, but was actually a large formation of 24 bombers, and from their heading, it seemed that they were heading north of the base complex, so they could make a 180, and line up their bomb run so they would be outbound after they had dropped their bombs,. I so informed Control, and was really angry when they came back with a "Negative-Negative", they had reliable reports from ground stations that the unknowns were far to the east, and as far as I could tell, any fighters they had airborne were being sent there The other squadrons were on a different frequency, and I did not

know what was going on.

By this time, I was about 18,000 feet, and above the bombers, and closing from behind, so that I could monitor their progress. Watching the bombers, and with the haze that cut visibility, I had not seen the Japanese fighters yet, but soon discovered that they were all over the place, and flying individually, instead of in pairs, or other arrangements. I had actually climbed up almost in the middle of the trailing fighters, and they had not seen me, probably for the same reason that I had not seen them. I figured that if I kept my course, I would soon be on top of everything, which I did, and as far as I could tell, the enemy was completely unaware of my presence. I

simply trailed the formation, and as I thought, they went north far enough to make their turn to come back over the target complex. When they started their turn, the sun struck them at a different angle, and the whole gaggle came into much sharper focus. There were so many fighters, and so scattered that the only way I could begin to count, was to divide them into quarters, and count what was in the quarters, as they were moving around all the time. It appeared that each quarter would average about ten fighters, for a total of forty, making sixty four enemy aircraft in all--the biggest formation of planes I had ever seen, including any of ours.

When they rolled out of their turn, and took up a course, it was clear that I had guessed right about their intentions, and I called Control, and gave them the bad news, and an ETA for the enemy force, and asked if our fighters were near enough to help. I got a negative on that also, and there I sat, on top by myself. I had a decision to make, and it was one I didn't particularly like to think about.

About 20 miles was my home base, on the outskirts of Mohanbari, the Air Depot Group HQ. Nagaghuli was also 80th Ftr Group HQ, and the Chabua/Dinjan complex was 10th Air Force HQ, the Hospital, Rail Terminal, and various other targets. I didn't have much hope of being able to do anything by myself that was likely to affect the course of the attack, but decided that I simply had to do my best to hinder the attack in any way that I could. It would have been simple to pick off a fighter or two--maybe more before being discovered; but the fighters were not the threat at that time. They were just defending the bomber force, and were not likely to leave them. The bombers were the threat and I knew that if I took one shot at a fighter, I would lose the advantage of surprise; so my attack if there was any hope of success, had to be against the bombers. Defense against bombers was what I had trained for, and that was what was important at the time. I



Adair in front of the Group  
Commander's Plane

simply could not sit up there with a birds eye view, and watch the Japanese bomb the primary target complex for our area, and my home base, without doing everything possible to prevent it.

So at this point, I called Control, and advised them of my estimate of bomb release time, and that I was going to attack the formation, and try to disrupt their bombing run.

I carefully positioned myself above the fighters, and the bomber formation, so that I could hit the bombers just before I thought they would reach their bomb release point. I decided on an attack from high above on the left, trying to get some shots into the lead flight at maximum range, dropping back to the left echelon flight, then swing around behind to shoot at the third & fourth flights on the right echelon. This was a pretty wild scheme, and I knew there wasn't much chance of any real damage, but I hoped to get enough tracers across their bow, to mess things up enough to affect their bombing accuracy. I also figured that if I could start undetected, I had a good chance of getting around behind the last flight before they had a chance to recover from their surprise, and it worked out pretty well. I could see some bouncing around in the formation, but things went so quickly, I was around behind the last flight without being able to see what damage if any, I was doing. I concentrated on the last bomber in the fourth flight, zeroing in on his left engine, and could see hits on the fuselage and the engine, and some flashes as my overtake forced me to go under and past him. I started a break to the right, but as soon as I cleared the bombers, I saw several zeros coming at me, and I immediately went into my planned escape maneuver, which was stick full forward in the left corner, and into a negative G, out-side roll, and into a high speed dive. I stayed in the dive until I figured I had gone far enough to shake the fighters; pulled out and looked around and saw I was by myself. The zeros were going back to the bomber formation.



This Bomber was confirmed shot down but was claimed by May

As soon as I could see that I was not being followed, I climbed back on top, and behind the formation again. I don't



This Zero's engine caught fire but was not confirmed. Listed as probable

know if they didn't see me in the haze, but nobody made a move to cut me off, so I started another pass on the bombers, but before I could get near them, it looked like every zero in the sky was turning into me. It was obvious that I wasn't going to get a shot at the bombers, but there were plenty of zeros, and with a good speed advantage from my dive, I just went through them, taking deflection shots at whatever I could get my sights on. I could see that I was getting some good hits in, and the engine on one of the zeros I hit, looked like it was on fire, but being by myself, I could not afford to dwell on what happened to the ones I was shooting at, and had to concentrate on what

was ahead of me, rather

than what was behind, believing that my overtake speed would get me out of range quickly.

After going through my escape maneuver again, I climbed back on top, and by this time, figured that if I stayed out of range of the bomber formation, I could work around the edges, against the zeros, without being pursued. I had to admire their determination in protecting the bombers, but since they had already dropped their bombs, it didn't make much difference whether I worked on the zeros or the bombers. Because of this, it seemed like a good time to try for a zero. Going back in for the bombers was just like going into the hornets nest, but picking off a zero from the top looked like a good possibility. Picking the one at the



This is the Zero followed to the ground and claimed confirmed

top rear, I started a pass, but he knew I was there, and turned so there was no possibility of hitting him, so I just picked the next one. He started a turn also, but not before I could get a shot at him. His gear started to drop; pulling back on the throttle, and getting firmly behind him, I could see that he seemed to lose control, and fell off into a spiral dive, and following him down, and moving off to one side to watch, saw him crash in the jungle, in the NAGA Hills.

As soon as the zero crashed, a climb was started back towards the formation, which was already over the NAGA Hills, on their way home, and approaching their own lines. Managing to get into position for another attack, I decided to go for broke with another whack at the bomber formation. This turned out to be a mistake as by then, the fighters apparently knew what I was trying to do, and before getting in range of the bombers, there were several zeros turning into me from the right, and shooting at me. Starting a break to the left, to escape, I found zeros coming from that direction too, and decided it was time to get out, and went into my escape maneuver. This must have been anticipated, because as soon as I rolled over, there were zeros coming straight up from underneath, shooting at me with what looked like a good lead angle. This gave me a very uncomfortable feeling, and full stick forward did not seem to be getting me out of the line of fire, so grabbing the elevator trim crank, wound full nose down trim in. About this time, tracers were whizzing by, and there were several strikes on Lulubelle, and a big explosion behind the cockpit. Fire came shooting forward around both sides of the armorplate, but it was just a flash, and went out right away.

Well into a high speed dive by this time, I just held it there until the ground was coming up pretty fast. When I tried to pullout, the response to stick pressure was very sluggish, and remembering that full nose down trim had been applied, I grabbed



A third Zero damaged and the landing gear dropping was not confirmed

the elevator trim crank, and started cranking. It turned freely, with no effect, so yanking back on the throttle, and with both hands on the stick, was finally able to get the nose out of the jungle, and up into the sky. With a big sigh of relief, and thanking God for watching over my shoulder, pointed Lulubelle for home, about 125 miles away.



Me and Lulu Belle after the first encounter with the Japs

It quickly became apparent that my troubles were not over, even though Lulubelle was purring like a kitten. The nose was so heavy that it took both hands on the stick, to hold the nose above the horizon. Also, I was not sure whether I was over friendly territory or not. To make

matters worse, after a few minutes on course towards home, another aircraft appeared ahead of me, and headed in my direction. It was somewhat higher, and on a course that would take it about a quarter mile to my left. Not knowing what it was, and in my situation, was not a comfortable feeling. Very shortly, I could see that it was a zero, but it appeared to be smoking badly, and losing altitude. Keeping a sharp eyeball on it, showed no move in my direction. As he went by on my left, and appearing to be in worse straits than me, it seemed to be too good an opportunity to pass up. Checking my gun switches, and making a turn in behind him, and with throttle full on again, came screaming up behind. Even with both hands on the stick, it was hard to hold a good bead on, but at about 100 yards, and with the sight on dead center, a squeeze on the trigger brought nothing but a horrible silence. There was not even one round left, and with my overtake, it took a hard yank on the stick to keep from ramming him. It was very hard to turn, and shortly after going by, I could see some tracers off my left



wing, but none hit, and that was the last I saw of the enemy that day. I have no idea whether that one made it home or not. I figured I was about 90 miles from home and had plenty of troubles of my own.

My arms were so tired by this time, that I could barely hold the nose above the horizon. As the adrenalin wore off, matters only became worse. Trying to get the seatbelt around the stick to hold it back was useless as it was too short. Not being able to get anything around the stick to help hold it back, it looked like I was going to have to bailout, or crash in the jungle.

Finally the thought flashed through my mind that with the nose so heavy, all I had to do was rollover, and Lulubelle would go into an inverted climb. It worked. The engine would run for what seemed like a couple of minutes before it loaded up so bad that it wanted to quit. A roll to right side up, would clear it up, after a few seconds, and this gave us back some altitude. I don't know how many times we flipped, but eventually, I found myself about a half mile from Nagaghuli, and about a thousand feet of altitude. Turning in to approach the runway straight in from the south, and inverted, I came back on the power to bring me down to the runway, and at the last possible moment flipped the gear handle down, and squeezed the pump switch, and saw a down & locked; rolled Lulubelle over, hit the flap switch, and cut the throttle. It wasn't my usual three pointer, and in the wrong direction, but I could have cared less; we were down, and in one piece.



Adair and LuluBelle at Naga Hills

The Red Alert was still on, and the place looked deserted when I landed, but very quickly, my ground crew was there to help me out of the aircraft. They told me that the Anti-Aircraft crew almost fired on me, since I was coming in from the wrong direction, and

nobody seemed to recognize an inverted P-40, and especially one with the wheels on top.

On debriefing, I found out that the bomb pattern had fallen short of the target area, and was off a little to the side of the target complex, and not much damage was done. The main target complex had been missed, and although some thought my attack may have contributed to the poor bombing, I doubted that I had made much of an impact--the odds were just too great. In any case, I was glad that we did not suffer much damage.

The other three flight members had gotten off eventually, but Lt May, the element leader was the only other pilot in the group to make contact with the enemy. He got in a good pass on the bombers, and shot one down, but in turn they shot the engine completely out of his aircraft, and he had to bailout. He suffered some burns on his face, but made it back OK.

For me, mission number 44 was my most exciting. I don't know if I could stand that much excitement again, but after that, I was convinced that number 44 was my lucky number, as it was also the number painted on the side of Lulubelle. It took about three days to patch up Lulubelle, and about that much time for me to recover from sore muscles, and my arms to shrink back to their normal length. It was amazing that with so much upside down running, and a lot of time at war emergency power, no metal was found in the Cuno Filter from inside the engine. The P-40 was a reliable old bird a little slow maybe, but it is

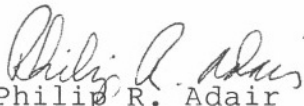


LT Adair who who challenged 64 Japs  
10 AF received the Silver Star for this action

surprising how fast a scared P-40 can go.

The original engine went till the Squadron Commander made me pull it after the max overtime at 440 hours, and it was still better than the rebuilt one I got to replace it. Between Lulubelle I, and II, we made 113 combat missions before converting to P-47s, and the old WARHAWK never failed to bring me back.

Credit for the mission was one zero destroyed, and one zero, and one bomber probably destroyed. Gun camera film, which had to be sent to Calcutta for processing was of poor quality, because of prolonged exposure to heat and moisture. It did however show fire streaming out behind the left engine on the bomber, and from the engine of the zero claimed as a probable. I was awarded the Silver Star for this effort.

  
Philip R. Adair  
Colonel USAF/Ret.