

Flying Tigers! Shark-nosed P-40s in combat with Japanese Zeroes. The odds in China in the early days of World War II were often 10 to 1 . . . in the enemy's favor. But General Chennault's flyers always gave a good account of themselves. One of the best was a young man named John Hampshire who, when he was killed, had recorded seventeen air victories—a total that ranks him in USAF's roster of all-time aces with the legendary Raoul Lufbery of an earlier war. Here is a personal reminiscence of the last days of John Hampshire . . .

DEATH OF A FIGHTER PILOT

By John R. Alison

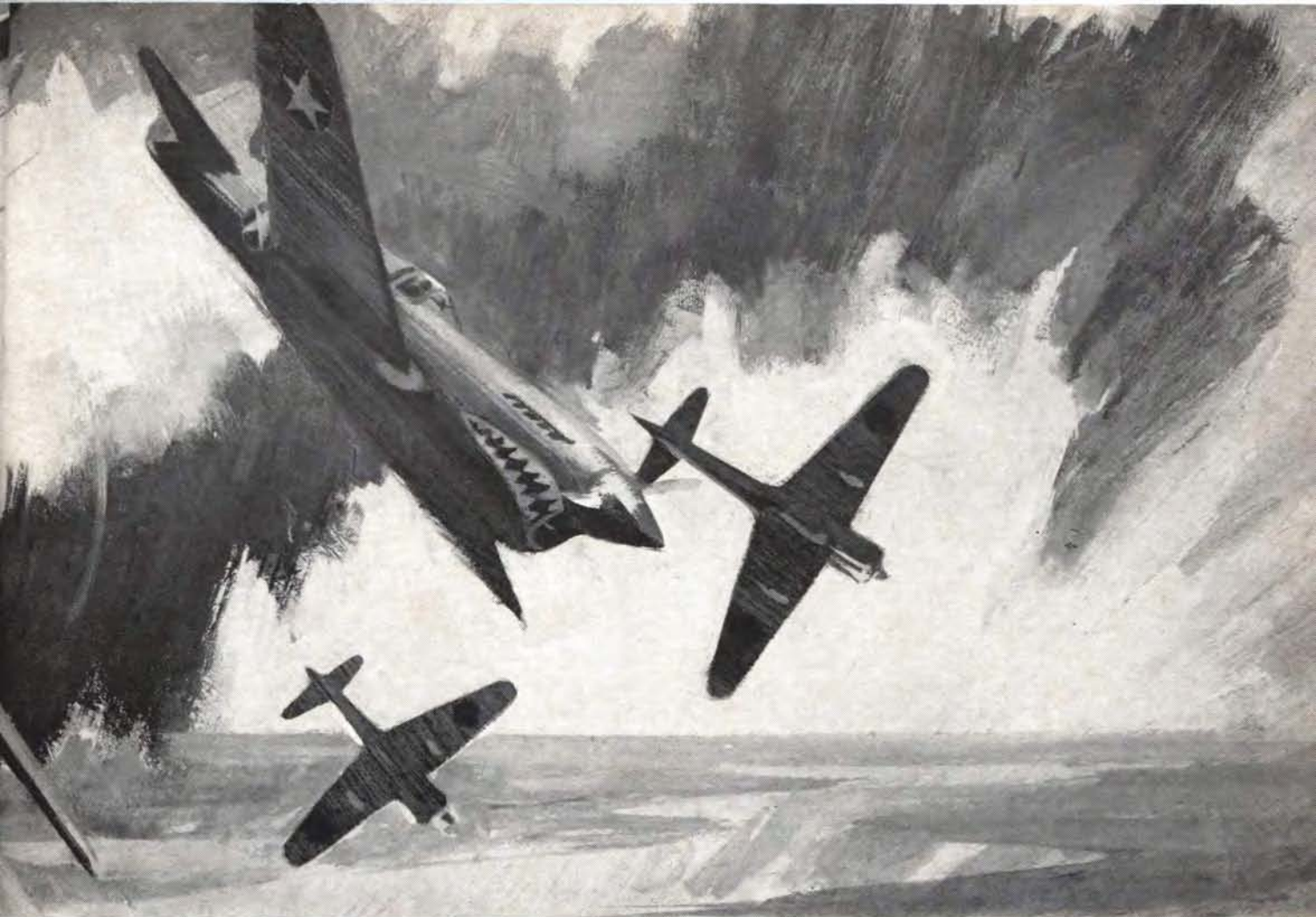
ILLUSTRATION BY LOU NOLAN



WHILE I was in China a young fellow from Grant's Pass, Ore., was perhaps the top pilot and potentially the greatest ace of the war. There is no question but that he intended to be the war's greatest ace. Unfortunately, this kind of determination makes one an easy target for fate, and his career ended early—but not before his determination had written a brilliant but brief chapter in the history of aerial warfare.

Capt. John Hampshire reported to the 23d Fighter Group's 75th Squadron in the fall of 1942, after General Chennault had made a special plea to General Arnold to send experienced reinforcements. John was with a group of P-40 pilots who had been flying patrol in the Caribbean out of Panama. They were all good and contributed materially to the strength of the young Fourteenth Air Force. John was an attractive boy, always laughing. He had a competitive spirit that made him want to win at everything.

When each new pilot reported to duty with the Squadron I personally took him up and tested his skill in formation flying and individual combat. Although individual combat with the Japanese was highly unprofitable and forbidden by Chennault because of the superior maneuverability of the Zero, simulated dog fighting between two P-40s gave me a good appraisal of the other pilot's skill. When I first flew with Hampshire his capability in formation was exceptional. Although it was relatively easy for me to best most of the pilots in individual combat because of my senior experience, this was not so with young Captain Hamp-



shire. On our first try it was all I could do to keep from being resoundingly defeated. I held my own and my honor, but I recognized that here was a pilot of unusual skill.

When we landed I congratulated him on an excellent job and then turned to his crew chief who had met us at the airplane. When I asked him what had been the condition of Captain Hampshire's fuel tanks before takeoff, Hampshire broke into loud laughter. The crew chief admitted that he had been forbidden to completely fuel the airplane on the orders of the Captain. In these contests I had a rule that each aircraft would be completely fueled as the weight of the fuel made a considerable difference in the performance of the aircraft. I joined in the laughter as it was obvious that this presumptuous newcomer had tried to pull a fast one on me; but I admired, and was pleased to have as a member of our Squadron, an officer with an overwhelming desire to win and lots of ability to back it up. I was sure this would come in handy in contests with the Japanese—and it certainly did.

Hampshire was a rare combination of expert pilot and gunner. On two occasions there were Japanese on my tail shooting, and I was a pleased witness to Hampshire's marksmanship as I watched them explode in the red ball of flame characteristic of the lightly built Japanese aircraft when hit by .50-caliber incendiary bullets. Seeing a Zero explode was always a breathtaking sight, but it is hard to find words to explain the exhilaration when that particular Zero was doing his best to shoot you out of the sky.

Another example of Hampshire's excellent marksmanship occurred one day over Lingling. I had been moved to the job of Deputy Group Commander, and the Squadron was now under the command of Maj. Ed Goss. He recounted this incident to me. The Japanese brought a reconnaissance bomber, heavily escorted by fighters, across the airfield at about ten thousand feet. The bomber released a shower of leaflets saying something to the effect that they admired us for coming so far from our home to fight in this hopeless struggle but that the Imperial Japanese Fighter Command was the greatest in the world and therefore they challenged us to a fair fight. These leaflets were no sooner out of the bomber than it exploded and the pieces tumbled all over our base.

Goss told me what had happened. Our fighters had gotten separated in trying to make contact with the enemy and Goss was overtaking the formation from the rear as they started on their run. He was closing in and had the bomber in his gunsight when, before he could pull the trigger, the bomber exploded. While Goss was coming up from the rear, Hampshire was approaching the enemy fighters from directly ahead and picked their bomber right out of the center of the protection of the Imperial Japanese Fighter Command. The world's finest fighter pilots also lost some zeroes that day, and, although we lost Lt. Burrell Barnum, it was a good scrap. I don't know if the Japanese considered it a fair fight, but they never tried another such leaflet raid.

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Flying Tiger fighter pilots of Chennault's 14th Air Force in China dash for their shark-painted Curtiss P-40 Warhawks.

About three weeks later, early in May 1943, I had a chance to spend a few days with the Squadron. Major Goss had a special assignment from General Chennault, and I was to replace him on a temporary basis, which gave me an opportunity to spend a few days with the troops of the 75th. When you fly and fight with men for almost a year, you develop strong attachments, and I looked forward to this visit.

I had been with the Squadron only a day or two when our telephone air-raid warning net reported forty-seven Zeroes approaching. During the previous few days we had been sitting around stretching the truth a little and telling each other how good we were. I'm sure we weren't nearly as good as we thought we were, but it is terribly important for a fighter pilot to feel that way about his business.

Hampshire had a great sense of humor and was always kidding. The Japanese employed a peculiar squirrel-cage kind of formation when they made a fighter attack on our airdromes, and on this occasion Hampshire told how he intended to join the enemy formation and not come out until he either broke it up or was shot down. He invited me to join him, and he bet I would chicken out before he did. He was kidding me about this as we walked out to our airplanes and took off. The warning net reported the forty-seven airplanes coming down from the north and about 100 miles away.

On this day the 75th had sixteen airplanes in commission, manned by seasoned pilots. Sixteen P-40s with expert pilots against only forty-seven Zeroes seemed to us to be kind of unfair to the Japanese, because in the earlier days of the war we had often been outnumbered as high as ten to one. On this day we were all in good spirits and anticipated giving the Japs a resounding beating.

I positioned the sixteen airplanes above and to one side of our airdrome at 18,000 feet. I don't know what happened to the Japanese formation, but only ten or fifteen Zeroes came forward on reconnaissance. They crossed the airdrome about 8,000 feet below us, and I thought it must be a trap. I waited for a few minutes until reports from the warning net indicated that the rest of the formation was not going to commit itself, and then we attacked. Either my aim was poor or the Japanese pilot I engaged was skillful because I failed to score after expending considerable ammunition. Everyone scattered in the melee, and then five of our pilots assembled on my wing, and I started north to take on the main body of the formation, which accord-

ing to reports was retreating toward Hangkow. In-flight reports told of about five or six Zeroes claimed in the action. Hampshire came up on my wing, reported one kill, and said I'd find the wreckage one mile off the north end of our runway. And there it was when we went out later to investigate. This was Hampshire's sixteenth victory. Although his life was to end a few short minutes later, I was able to confirm his seventeenth victory before a lucky or a skillful shot by a Japanese pilot put an end to his career.

As I led my small formation north there was lots of excitement and chatter on the radio. Hampshire was betting I'd never overtake the Japanese. About 100 miles north of our airfield we encountered a thunderstorm and let down to about 500 feet to pass underneath it. I saw three Zeroes hugging the earth ahead and making for home. As we bored in Hampshire went underneath and pulled up in front of me while I was firing, and we both missed the enemy leader. But his two wing men, who were tucked in tight, hit the ground simultaneously. It was a spectacular start, and I'd been so intent on the three sitting ducks that I missed seeing a larger formation of Japanese above us. They attacked, and there was adequate confusion until it was over a few short minutes later—six Zeroes were down, and we formed up again to return to base.

When we counted noses, Hampshire was missing. We'd been fighting over the edge of a broad river which emptied into a lake near the city of Changsha. One of our pilots said he'd seen a plane dive vertically into the lake; another one contradicted this and claimed an airplane that looked like a P-40 had landed in the water near the river bank. There was some confusion as the pilot who saw the aircraft go straight into the water insisted it was a Zero, while the pilot who saw the aircraft land in the water insisted it was a P-40. Some of the confusion was cleared up shortly after we landed at our own base. I received a message from the Chinese command post in the Changsha area which was brief and shocking. Brutally translated into English it said simply: AMERICAN PILOT LANDED IN RIVER. HIT IN STOMACH, GUTS RUNNING OUT. SEND DOCTOR QUICK.

I don't have the talent or the understanding to explain the feelings of John Hampshire's friends. One of his most devoted friends was our flight surgeon, Ray Spritzler, who announced that he was going to John's assistance. Someone suggested that we stuff the doctor in the baggage compartment of one of our fighters

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Last picture made of Capt. John Hampshire (standing, third from left) before his death shows him with Squadron members. At that time Hampshire was CBI's leading ace. Sitting on fuselage is Squadron Commander Maj. Edmund Goss. On wing are Lt. Col. John Alison of 23d Group and Lt. Roger Pryor. On ground, left to right, are Lt. Joe Griffin (who flew the daring rescue mission carrying Dr. Spritzler), Lt. Mack Mitchell, Hampshire, and Capt. Hollis Blackstone.

and let him jump out near where John went down. At this time, and under the stress of emotion, I didn't realize how hazardous such a venture might be. I consented, and we made the doctor as comfortable as possible in the cramped quarters of a fighter baggage compartment which was not designed to accommodate a human being. The door was removed and a signal arranged between the pilot, Lt. Joe Griffin, and Ray to indicate the time to jump. A signal such as wobbling the wings or shaking the aircraft had to be used to enable the pilot and doctor to communicate.

We saw them off and it was not until they departed into the northern sky where storms had begun to gather that I realized that this wasn't such a good idea, and I grew truly fearful when a few minutes after their departure we received a second message from the Chinese, saying that Hampshire had died. We tried to reach Griffin on the radio, but electrical disturbances caused by thunder squalls to the north made this impossible.

I spent an anxious hour or so waiting for them to return, and finally just at dark we got a report from our warning net that a lone airplane was approaching. At this time we didn't know it, but Griffin had run into severe weather and had been unable to reach Changsha. Griffin was trying to get home before dark, for after nightfall landmarks on the Chinese countryside vanish, and we had no radio navigation. Also in this

part of China there were no utility systems and, therefore, no electric lights. Our runway was outlined by a thin row of flare pots fueled with tung oil. Their feeble lights would give a pilot the outline of the runway for landing, but they couldn't be seen for more than a mile. We heard what we took to be Griffin's airplane in the distance droning through the dark, and although we tried to reach him on the radio and give him directions, the intensity of the static made this impossible.

Hours passed and no reports. I computed the time when they would run out of fuel, and then my heart really sank. I composed a radio message to Chennault reporting that I had lost Hampshire, but I didn't have the courage to tell him that I had lost another airplane too and possibly another good pilot and my doctor because of my own poor judgment. I decided to wait out the night, in hopes that before morning we would have a report as to where the airplane had crashed and that some miracle had preserved two good friends who were risking their lives for another good friend whom they couldn't save. That night I prayed for forgiveness for my stupidity, and I prayed for help which I knew in my heart couldn't come.

Morning came and still no word. Several hours after we had manned our aircraft down on the flight line I decided that I had no alternative but to let General Chennault know how stupid I had been. I was com-
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posing my report when someone shouted, "Here they come!", and a fighter airplane touched down on the airfield, taxied up to the flight line, swung around, and there was Ray Spritzler's smiling face peering out of the baggage compartment.

Their story was unbelievable. Completely lost and almost out of gas, Griffin decided to abandon the airplane. But just before giving the signal to jump he spotted a cluster of lights on the ground. Any lights probably meant a village, and Joe reasoned that there might be a telephone there and that, if he circled, this would be reported to the Chinese warning net and at least we would have a fix on the area where they had abandoned their aircraft.

As he circled the lights he noticed to his amazement a long stream of fire flare up nearby. He went over to investigate, and it was apparent to him from the pattern of the flames that the Chinese below had set fire to a field and expected him to land. He quickly lowered his landing gear because there was precious little fuel remaining, lined up with the flames, and put his airplane down, not knowing whether there were holes or rough spots or barriers, artificial or otherwise. To his amazement he hit in a smooth area and the airplane rolled to a stop without incident. When he dismounted, he found himself among friendly Chinese who were overjoyed to see him.

To be lost over wartime China in the black of night was to be really lost. Joe Griffin and our favorite doctor

had wandered to the edge of Japanese-held China and came down at a small village whose airstrip had long since been abandoned as a result of the Japanese advance. Apparently the telephones, if there ever had been any, were also abandoned, which accounted for our failure to get any report on the landing.

How the Chinese realized this was one of our aircraft I will never know, but they are a smart people and when they heard the airplane circling overhead they knew the pilot was in trouble. Quick-wittedly they opened a drum of aviation gasoline and rolled it down the center of the airstrip and then set fire to the spilled gas, forming a more than adequate night-lighting system for Griffin's approach. Ray Spritzler and Joe Griffin spent a thankful night with the Chinese and the next morning, after refueling from an emergency cache of gasoline, set out for home.

Looking back, I can distinguish between the foolish and the brave. It is of no use to dwell on how you would behave if you had to do it over because the chance will never come. I remember John Hampshire for the brave and wonderful man that he was. I remember the doctor who was perhaps even braver in a different way, and how Joe Griffin and the doctor made futile plans to help a good friend who was beyond help. I am proud of these men and their memories, and, in spite of our mistakes, I think if we ever had the chance to do it over again, we'd not do it any differently.—END

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The author, John R. Alison, is Vice President for Customer Relations of the Northrop Corporation and was President of the Air Force Association in 1954-55 and Board Chairman in 1955-56. Born and raised in Florida, Mr. Alison was commissioned in the USAAF in 1937. Early in World War II he was appointed adviser on Lend Lease to Great Britain and Russia. He was Assistant Military Attaché for Air to the Soviet Union in 1941-42, and in 1942 began service in China as a squadron commander under Maj. Gen. Claire Chennault. It was during this period that the incident described in this article occurred.

He became a fighter ace in that theater, and in 1943 was named Deputy Commander of the 1st Air Commando Group, which spearheaded the aerial invasion of Burma in 1944. From Burma, Mr. Alison was transferred to the Southwest Pacific, and he later became Operations Officer of Fifth Air Force, taking part in the landings in the Philippines and in air operations against Japan from Okinawa. He left the Air Force in 1946 with the rank of colonel and is now a major general in the Air Force Reserve. He joined Northrop in 1953 as Administrative Vice President.

Of the other people in Mr. Alison's article, Dr. Spritzler is now in practice in Los Angeles. Joe Griffin, in whose P-43 baggage compartment the doctor rode, is still in the Air Force and, as a colonel, is Deputy for Titan at AFSC's Ballistic Systems Division, Norton AFB, Calif. Three of the other pilots who flew formation with Alison the day Hampshire was downed are also still in service. They include Col. James W. Little, Commander of the 3575th Pilot Training Group, ATC, Vance AFB, Okla.; Col. Roger C. Pryor, now with the 3345th Maintenance and Supply Group, Chanute AFB, Ill.; and Col. Elmer W. Richardson, Deputy for Regular Operations, AF Missile Test Center, Patrick AFB, Fla. All three were CBI fighter aces. A fourth P-40 pilot of that mission, Lt. Charles Gordon, was killed in combat in China in 1943.