Raid on Rabaul

Maj. Raymond Wilkins led his squadron on the difficult missions—and this was to be the toughest of them all.

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AT THE end of October 1941, 2d Lt. Raymond Wilkins pinned on his wings and gold bars and departed San Antonio for San Francisco, where he boarded a transport bound for the Philippines. In midpassage, the Japanese attacked Manila. The transport was diverted to Australia, and there Wilkins joined the 3d Bombardment Group late in December. The group was equipped with obsolete A-24 dive bombers, A-20s, and B-25s.

It was two months before the 3d could move its squadrons up to New Guinea and enter combat. Wilkins flew his first mission in an A-24. The slow, vulnerable dive bomber couldn't survive in a land war and soon was abandoned. Of seven A-24s sent on one mission, Ray Wilkins's was the only one to come back. At the end of a year, he had logged more than fifty combat missions (most of them in B-25 Mitchells), been promoted to captain, and earned the Silver Star. He was eligible for rotation, but elected to stay with the group and was given command of the 8th Bombardment Squadron.

After Wilkins became a squadron commander, he continued to lead all the tough missions. Among the most dangerous were attacks on enemy ships. B-25 tactics were to go in at masthead height, strafing all the way, and skip their bombs into the target. Wilkins led many of these missions during the summer of 1943.

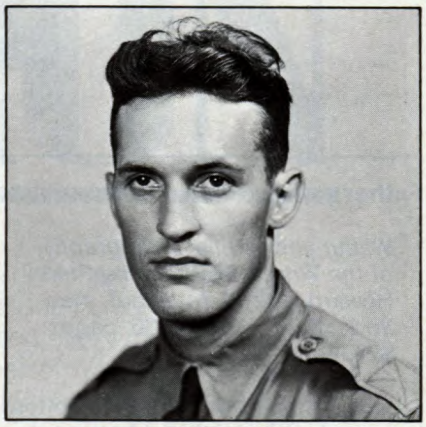
The toughest target in the Fifth Air Force area was Rabaul, on the northeast tip of New Britain Island. With its great harbor, docks, and warehouses, it was the anchor of the Japanese position in the Southwest Pacific, defended by more than 300 antiaircraft guns and fighters on five airfields.

In the fall of 1943, Fifth Air Force commander Gen. George Kenney planned to take out Rabaul with a sustained campaign. Beginning on October 12, his bombers, escorted by P-38s, hit Rabaul every day the weather was right. By October 29, there were believed to be no more than fifty or sixty defending fighters left, but on October 30, unknown to the Americans, the Japanese had moved in more than 100 fighters. Kenney's force, on the other hand, had been whittled down considerably by combat attrition and battle damage.

On November 2, nine squadrons of B-25s, all at about half strength, and their escort of P-38s went against the strengthened defenses of Rabaul. Four squadrons of Mitchells hit AA positions on shore and laid a smokescreen to protect the other B-25s, led by Lt. Col. Jock Henebry (later a major general and President of AFA), in their attack on ships in the harbor.

The 8th Squadron was led by Maj. Ray Wilkins, who had deployed his bombers, the last to enter the harbor, so that his was in the position of greatest danger. Smoke from earlier strikes forced him to change his approach at the last minute, which meant going through the heaviest fire from enemy fighters and more than thirty ships ranging from heavy cruisers and destroyers to armed transports, all concentrated in a radius of less than a mile.

Wilkins was hit almost immediately, with damage to the B-25's controls. He opened up with his guns on a group of small vessels and then, attacking a destroyer, put a 1,000-pound bomb squarely into its side. Fire from the destroyer demolished part of his left vertical stabilizer, increasing the difficulty of controlling the B-25. Under the circumstances, Wilkins would have been justified in pulling out of the fight and, with luck, limping back to New Guinea. But he had one bomb left. Skimming the water, he sent it into a large transport that erupted in flames.



Maj. Ray Wilkins: heroic acts at Rabaul on November 2, 1943.

Now Wilkins signaled his B-25s to withdraw. To protect them, he attacked a heavy cruiser that lay in their path, sweeping its decks with machine-gun fire. Shells from the cruiser took off the remainder of his damaged stabilizer. To avoid crashing into the other bombers, Wilkins rolled his B-25 over, exposing its belly and wing surfaces to a stream of fire that tore off the left wing and sent the plane plunging into the sea. The remaining Mitchells of his squadron made it safely out of the harbor.

Initially (enemy shipping losses later were revised) it was believed that thirty of thirty-eight ships had been sunk or damaged, eighty-five Japanese planes destroyed, and many tons of supplies sent up in flames at a cost of eight B-25s and nine P-38s. Some of the crews that crashed or ditched on the way home—Henebry's among them—were recovered. It was the most bitter fight of the war up to that point—a day filled with valor.

For his series of heroic acts on this, his eighty-seventh combat mission, Maj. Raymond Wilkins was awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously. He was the last member of the original 3d Bombardment Group that had formed in Australia almost two years earlier. ■