

By John L. Frisbee, Contributing Editor

## Bombers Over Burma

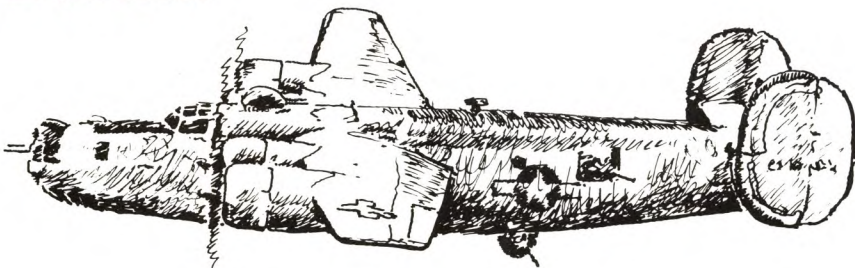
It was up to a gunner and the navigator to get the riddled B-24 to an emergency landing.

**B**EFORE the 7th Bomb Group arrived in India during March 1942, it had a long and distinguished record, extending back to World War I. During the early weeks of World War II, some of its members participated in the defense of Java against heavy attacks by Japanese air and naval forces. When the group arrived in India, it formed the nucleus of Tenth Air Force's heavy bomber capability, with the primary task of defending the supply line from India to China.

By mid-1942, the Japanese controlled most of Burma, had cut the Burma Road to China, and threatened the air supply line over the Hump. Japan's supply line was also vulnerable. The main port, Rangoon, in southern Burma, was a target of frequent attacks by 7th BG bombers. The distance from 7th BG bases, northwest of Calcutta, to Rangoon was comparable to that from London to Berlin. Rangoon was defended by Japanese fighters on many fields north of the port.

On the morning of November 11, 1943, a formation of B-24s, with 7th BG's 9th Bomb Squadron in the lead, took off for an unescorted strike on He-ho airfield north of Rangoon. The number three ship of the lead element was flown by Lt. Ben Graves and copilot Lt. Cyrus Kurth. Reconnaissance photos showed many enemy fighters at He-ho, but none attacked until "bombs away" from 16,000 feet, when a lone enemy fighter dove nearly straight down out of the sun. The first of several attacks set the left wing of Lieutenant Graves's B-24 ablaze and killed SSgt. William Burtch, the nose gunner.

As TSgt. Douglas Labat, flight engineer and top turret gunner, was firing at another Zero, the B-24 was hit again by cannon fire. A shell came through the windshield, exploding on the flight deck. Copilot Kurth was killed instantly, and pilot Graves was



wounded and stunned by the explosion. The plane banked sharply to the right, almost colliding with the B-24 flown by Lt. Charles V. Duncan, Jr., in number two position.

Labat climbed out of his turret and rushed to the flight deck where he found Kurth, nearly decapitated and lying over the control column, while the barely conscious Graves was attempting to pull the bomber out of its dive. Labat dragged Kurth's body out of the seat, slid in, and managed to get the bomber level and partially under control as it reached 8,000 feet. The wing fire blew out during their dive, but the two Zeros that followed the damaged B-24 riddled it with shells that miraculously spared the remaining crew members. The hydraulic system had been cut in several places, and the prop governor of the number three engine was frozen at 2,300 rpm.

A groggy Graves told Labat that he could hold the plane and that Labat should return to his turret. Navigator Lt. Grant Erwin then climbed up to the flight deck to investigate. He patched up Lieutenant Graves's head and neck wounds, then slipped into the copilot seat to relieve Graves. Two more attacks were driven off by the gunners. At last, the sky appeared to be clear of enemy fighters.

Labat again came down from his turret and relieved Erwin at the controls so the navigator could plot a course home or to the nearest friendly field. As Graves lapsed in and out of consciousness, Labat kept the plane on course. Two enemy fighters continued to follow them but turned away as the B-24 approached an airfield at Chittagong, near the Burma-India border, for an emergency landing.

As they neared the field, the crew told Sergeant Labat that the landing gear would not lock in the down position. So he could work on the problem, Labat again turned the controls over to navigator Erwin. Because the aircraft had power and was starting its final approach, he told Erwin not to attempt a landing or allow Graves to try until the gear was fully down and locked.

When the bomber was at about twenty feet over some sailing ships, the gear locked in place. Labat returned to the flight deck, standing between Graves and Erwin. Graves had recovered enough to attempt a landing, but ahead of them was a dike, too high to clear. In the nick of time, Labat shouted to Graves and Erwin to pull back on the controls. The wheels hit the dike, but Lieutenant Graves was able to recover and put the aircraft down on the runway.

All was not over yet. There were only 800 pounds of hydraulic pressure remaining. Labat knew the brakes could be used only once. He told Graves and Erwin not to let up on the brakes until the plane stopped rolling. As the B-24 came to a halt, Lieutenant Graves passed out completely.

Lieutenants Graves and Erwin and Sergeant Labat, who had saved the plane and the crew, were awarded Silver Stars for their heroic actions. They and the crew had hit their target successfully and were credited with destroying several enemy fighters. It had been a day of tragedy and triumph in a little-remembered corner of a great war. ■

*Thanks to Charles V. Duncan, Jr., of Modesto, Calif., who was a pilot on this mission.*