

# Assam Dragon Rghter Squadron

By Ed Cunningham Reprinted from YANK Magazine

Lt. Ira M. Sussky, the 23-year-old operations officer from Little Rock, Ark., leaned against the porch of the tea-plantation bungalow with the other fighterpilots grouped around him. Over under the trees, the ground crew was warming up a grotesquely painted P-40 and Sussky had to raise his voice to be heard above the roar.

"There's a concentration of Jap troops in the jungle 500 yards north of the most northerly bungalow at Suprabum," he shouted. "We'll hit 10 minutes south of Suprabum, then strike out due north and come up the valley. Get in string, peel off and bomb from east to west. Drop your demolition bomb on the first run and your frags on the next one. Then strafe them twice and head for home."

Moving down the steps of the stilted bungalow which serves as their operations office, these American pilots of the Assam Dragon Fighter Squadron trotted t-ward their bomb-loaded P-40s, dispersed around the field that had once been a polo grounds for British tea planters. Lt. Ben McQuillen pronounced the customary pre-flight benediction in his deep Texas drawl:

"The Assam Dragon prowls again." Within 10 minutes, a flight of eight fighter-bombers raced down the asphalt runway and took off toward the mountain range in the east that separates India from Burma, the white painted dragon mouths on their noses glistening in the morning sun.

We went back to the operations office to await their return and talked with Sgt. Manuel Valerio of Newell, S. Dak., about this bunch of Yank fighter-pilots who have raised so much hell with the Japs in Burma.

Hanging on the wall over Sgt. Valerio's head was the Assam Dragon Squadron's battle insignia, designed by Lt. Robert McClung, who was a commercial artist in Denver before the war. It shows a dragon with an ear-to-ear smile. The boys in the squadron say he grins like that only when they feed him generous helpings of his favorite dish - dead Japs.

"These guys are driving the Japs nuts," Valerio said. "They run almost daily bombing and strafing missions against the Jap bases and supply routes in northern Burma. Then when the Japs come over here to hit back at them, the Dragons are already up there waiting for them."

The last time the Japs came to retaliate, the Dragons did an awful job on them. Forty~six enemy bombers, fighters and observation planes swooped out of the mountains in daylight to hit the u.s. base and only nine were seen returning to Burma.

The Dragons were always getting mixed up in incredible stunts. Like the time Lt. Melvin Kimball of Durham, N.H., from Chennault's 14th Air Force, made a belly landing in Burma after his engine conked off during a flight from China to India. Kimball thought he was in India. He walked innocently into the nearest town and right up to the military headquarters. But nobody happened to be around at the moment, not even the CQ.

So Kimball headed back to his plane and, as he reached it, soldiers hidden in the surrounding woods opened fire on him. He grabbed his .45 and fired back at them, still thinking he was in India and wondering what the hell all the shooting was about. Just then he noticed bomb craters around him and realized where he was - in the middle of a well-populated Japanese advance base.

While Kimball emptied his automatic, an Assam Dragon P-40 appeared overhead. It was Capt. Charles H. Colwell of Park River, N. Dak., coming home from a strafing mission with five bullets in his plane. Colwell dropped down and looked the situation over. Immediately he radioed the Dragon headquarters.

"Keep Japs away from grounded plane and pilot until reinforcements arrive," headquarters told him.

Four Dragons rushed to the spot and relieved Colwell, who was running out of gas. Then four more came up and joined the party. They took turns diving down on the Jap troops and beating them away from Kimball, who was helpless now with all his ammunition gone. The Japs poured 30 bullets into his plane but luckily they didn't hit him.

Meanwhile, back at the Assam Dragon base, Lt. Sussky volunteered to attempt a rescue in a PT-17 trainer. When he arrived at the scene, the other Dragons were still strafing the Japs and keeping them from closing in on Kimball. In the midst of this battle, which looked like Custer's Last Stand, Sussky brought his training ship down safely in a small clearing in the thick jungle, pitted with the mud holes of water buffalo and rutted with elephant tracks.

While the Japs still fired on them from ambush, Sussky and Kimball worked frantically to get the PT-17 off the ground. Eight times they tried a take-off and eight times they failed. After every attempt, they ran across the clearing, dodging bullets, and chopped down trees and stumps to make the runway longer.

By this time it was beginning to get dark. They knew that if they didn't hoist the ship into the air before dusk they were lost. The P-40s overhead were already having a hard job trying to see the Jap soldiers in the gathering shadows and, when darkness came, it would be easy for the enemy to close in and take them.

Finally, on the ninth attempt, the PT-17 arose clumsily into the air and soared away to safety across the tops of the jungle trees. The P-40s escorted her home and then returned and blasted Kimball's plane to bits so the Japs couldn't use it.

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