



Wings & Things Guest Lecture Series

Every Day a Nightmare

Award-winning author William H. Bartsch discusses his latest book, "Every Day a Nightmare: American Pursuit Pilots in the Defense of Java, 1941-42."

Good evening. It's a pleasure to be back here at the Air Force Museum after almost six years. It seemed more like two or three years, but it's been six years. Time indeed flies.

Tonight I will be talking to you about the experiences of a small group of very young Army Air Force pilots thrust into the defense of the Dutch East Indies in the early period of World War II. It's a subject of a new book that I've written. It's currently being considered by a publisher, but unfortunately no decision has been made as of this evening who the publisher is going to be. It's a story that's been missing in the literature of World War II all these years and I have to tell you, it's not a happy story.

Let's go back in time 67 years, almost exactly to the dark days of February 1942. In the Far East, every where the Japanese were rampaging southwards towards their ultimate goal of the Dutch East Indies and its oil well needed to fuel their war machine. The situation for the Allies, being the Americans, the British, the Dutch and the Australians, was grim. Malaya and Singapore had fallen, MacArthur's men in the Philippines were bottled up on Bataan, and Australia feared it was next on the Japanese's time table of conquest.

Now to orient you, I would like to refer you to the map of the area that is on the screen. Now let's see if I can get this to work properly, let's see. Malaya and Singapore over here on the left, of course, have fallen to the Japanese. The Philippines are in light purple up here, and the northern tip of Australia shows in light purple at the lower right hand corner, right here, we had to really squeeze these places to show them on the map. By February 20, the Japanese had seized all the islands of the Dutch East Indies, pointed out to you, which are actually shown in yellow. This is the Dutch East Indies down here, except for Java, which was considered the jewel in the crown. Java, you know, is the long island over here, so that one was still held by the Dutch.

At a tiny secret highly camouflaged field on East Java, a handful of American pursuit pilots were engaged in a desperate aerial campaign. Most of them were only months out of flying school with few hours experience in their ships, which was the Curtis P-40E, when they arrived in Java weeks earlier. They were being ordered everyday to intercept the formations of Japanese Zeros

and twin-engine Mitsubishi Betty bombers headed for the key naval and air base of Soerabaya, which is 75 miles to the northwest of the field where they were based, and the American B-17 bomber field at Singosari, south of Soerabaya. Their opponents were seasoned veterans of the Japanese naval air force. The Betty bombers were fast, they flew very high and very hard to catch, catch up with, and the Zeros were running circles around their P-40s. Every day the numbers of the valiant Americans were dwindling with no possibility of reinforcements from Australia. "Every day a nightmare," 2nd Lt. Spence Johnson wrote in his diary on February 26, after having survived yet another day of aerial combat alive. Unwittingly this young Mormon from Mesa, Arizona, who had graduated from flying school only six months earlier had given me the name of my book, *Everyday a Nightmare*, which I mentioned earlier, or Wes did. Morale had hit rock bottom, they understood that they were being used as pawns in a hopeless effort to delay the seizure of the Dutch island by the vastly superior Japanese land, naval and air forces.

The experiences of another one of these young men is the subject of a painting by the acclaimed aviation artist Paul Eckley that I've used for the cover of my book. (Dan is going to show it.) This is the painting of the book that I am proposing to have published. This pilot had just had his first combat experience against the Zero, his P-40 was shot up, he was trying to get back to his base, and he was lost. Where was that secret field? Then he spotted a B-17 flying very low and returning to its home base – that's a B-17 where you can see it up in the corner) – returning to its base at Singosari and decided to follow it in. At least that would be a safe place to land, he figured. And just as he touched down on the field and began to climb out of the cockpit, his nerves gave way. He threw up all over the cockpit in front of the B-17 crews who had come out to meet him. 2nd Lt. Paul Eckley, who was a co-pilot for one of the bombers at the field, had watched the P-40 coming in and recalled it, recalled the scene all these years, and that's why he chose this painting. They all understood the P-40 pilot's state of mind. Who wouldn't have? Would you have understood it? I mean I would have understood it if I were in his situation myself.

As you have probably surmised by now, I am emphasizing the human element in this story, but let's back up a bit to put the story in broader context and start off with a situation in the Philippines to the North in mid-December '41. MacArthur had lost most of his Far East Air Force of B-17s and P-40s on the first day of war, December 8, 1941, for them. His few surviving B-17s were being sent to Australia to fly from there to bomb the Japanese and the Southern Philippines. His remaining P-40s were being ordered to fly reconnaissance missions only. He desperately wanted more bombers and fighters sent from the U.S. to reequip his air force. Earlier, even one month before the war broke out, 46 P-40 pilots and 18 P-40s in crates were on board a transport on their way to the Philippines to reinforce his Far East Air Force. And then in mid-December '41, 55 more pilots and their 55 P-40s were being sent by another transport to MacArthur via Australia. From Australia, the plan was that both groups would be ferried up to the Philippines through the islands of the Dutch East Indies, where the short range P-40s would

be refueled at stepping stone bases on the way. (We'll keep that on a second.) However, before the P-40s could be assembled in Australia and moved up to Darwin, the jumping off point, the northern fueling fields of Makassar and Tarakan (this map relates to what I am saying now) fell to the Japanese, breaking the ferry route to the Philippines. They were supposed to go from here, up to Makassar and Tarakan up here, -- where is Tarakan? – and over to Mindanao in the Philippines. That was the plan to reinforce MacArthur. But as I mentioned, Makassar and Tarakan were seized. And as I said, this map shows the ferry route from the Darwin up to Makassar, to the southern Philippines, via Copan first – actually that's Copan at the bottom. Darwin to Copan to Makassar to Tarakan to Mindanao as marked in red.

Since the P-40s could no longer reach the Philippines, the War Department in Washington changed the strategy and decided to send them to the southern islands of the Dutch East Indies instead, over here, just keep them here instead, which were still, the southern islands were still in the hands of the Dutch at that time. The Dutch desperately needed the relatively modern P-40s to augment their obsolete ships; they had the Curtis P-36s and the Curtis-Wright 21s to defend Japan and its key enable and air base at Soerabaya from Japanese aerial attacks. By late January '42, the crate of 73 P-40s that had reached Australia – Brisbane, Australia actually – on the east central coast of Australia, had been assembled. Now here, this is a picture of the first assembled American P-40E in Australia, destined to go up to the Dutch East Indies. It's outside the hangar at Amberley Field in Brisbane.

Now with the availability of 17 of the first 18 P-40s that were shipped on the earlier transport I mentioned, the American army command in Australia now began ordering the formation of so-called provisional pursuit squadrons to fly up to Java by a Copan on Timor. The first squadron designated the 17th Pursuit Provisional was heavily made up of Philippines veterans who had been down sent to Australia from the Philippines to pick up the P-40s from MacArthur and to fly them back. Fourteen of its 17 were such veterans, including the commanding officer, Capt. Buzz Sprague. But right from the beginning, there was a big problem. To get from Brisbane, on Australia's east coast, up to this jumping off point of Darwin, on the northern tip of Australia, meant flying their single-engine ships 2,000 miles over forbidding territory, stopping at bush airfields for refueling along the way. This task would be daunting for the Philippines veterans but even more so for the recent flying school graduates, with few or no hours in the P-40, that would be picked for the other Provisional Squadrons.

This is an image showing the route of the 17th Pursuit from Darwin up to Copan. First they started in Brisbane – well, it probably doesn't show it very clearly – and they stopped in Rockhampton, went to Townsville, Cloncurry, Daly Waters, then Darwin, which was the jumping off spot to go up to the Dutch East Indies. On January 16, Buzz Sprague left Brisbane at the head of his pilots of the 17th Pursuit Squadron and managed to arrive at Darwin two days later. He lost only two of the deadliest planes to accidents on the arduous trip up there via

Rockhampton – the places I have shown, Townsville, Cloncurry and Daly Waters. It was at Darwin that they got the word from Maj. Gen. Lewis Brereton, who was the commander at the Far East Air Force that they would not be going to the Philippines after all, but rather to Java. They were told that the Japanese had seized the refueling bases in the Northern Dutch East Indies on the planned route to the Philippines. I mentioned that earlier. The news came as a great disappointment to the Philippines veterans, worried as they were about their fellow pilots still fighting on Bataan in the Philippines. Nevertheless, on January 23, they took off from Darwin across the forbidding Timor Sea in Copan, their first stop on the way up to the Indies. On the following day, they reached Soerabaya where they would spend a week waiting for the completion of their secret field, 75 miles to the west of their new base. This field was built by the Dutch years before, but was now being cleverly camouflaged to keep Japanese marauders from spotting it. The Dutch called it Janbang but it was actually located outside the village of Angora just to the south of Janbang.

And this is a map of Java that will point out these places. You can see the location of Soerabaya (I think it probably shows it pretty clearly) up there. Janbang was, where are we here – is that Janbang? – that's Janbang, and Angora was just to the south of it. Now, I have also circled Mahlang because this is where the B-17s were based just outside Singosari field, and also I wanted to show Bali, where Bali is located here because that is coming up later in the story. And Jogjakarta, very important over here to the west is Jogjakarta. So these are the places in Java that are important for my story.

Meanwhile the second squadron had been formed at Brisbane, designated the 20th Pursuit Squadron (Provisional). Two-thirds of these 25 pilots assigned to it were just months out of flying school with little time in the P-40. Miraculously, all but one of them managed to cross the Australian outback by Charlettesville, Cloncurry, Daly Waters to reach Darwin in two days. They went a slightly different route than the 17th, as you can see here, they did not go over to Townsville, but they went across over here to Charlettesville instead – Charlettesville, Cloncurry, Daly Waters and Darwin. This is a long stretch of outback in Australia. I don't know if anyone has been to Australia, but that area is pretty primitive. Then due to torrential rains, they would remain at Darwin for four days before being able to jump off to the Dutch East Indies. It was monsoon time, just mud everywhere, they couldn't take off. Finally one day after having left Darwin, when they finally did take off, and refueled in Copan, the first group of 14 pilots of the 20th Pursuit were at Bali – I mentioned Bali earlier, you saw it on the other map – Bali on the early morning of February 5, preparing for the hop over to Java, preparing for the hop over to Soerabaya then onto their secret field. Suddenly – a few of them were already airborne but the rest were still on the ground refueling – suddenly, the seven in the air were jumped by nine Zeros. Quickly, two of the Americans were shot down, including one them fatally in this crash and the other badly injured when he bailed out, and on the ground, all the other seven P-40s were shot up though no one was killed, fortunately. Their commanding officer who was in the aerial

combat with the Zeros escaped and made it to Java, along with few of the other. However, he was so traumatized from his experience that henceforth, he avoided flying combat. The remaining 10 pilots of the squadron left Darwin the following day. Two of them ran out of gas and crash-landed on Longbuck Island, which I've shown here – most of you probably never heard of this place. This is Longbuck Island, short of Bali, they were coming again the same route but they crash landed on Longbuck, out of gas and they never rejoined their mates in the Java campaign. Again, I'm going to show the ferry route to Java marked in red – I've already done that. Longbuck is to the southeast of Bali. Now with the ineffective commanding officer and many of its pilots stranded on Bali and Longbuck, the 20th Pursuit lost its identity, being absorbed into Sprague's 17th Pursuit instead.

The third squadron formed – the 3rd Pursuit Squadron (Provisional) also reached Angora base in pitiful numbers. It was led by the renowned Philippines veteran Grant Mahoney, whom I mentioned in some of my earlier writings, and arrived in Darwin from Brisbane with only 18 of its original number of 25 pilots, due to accidents on the way up to Darwin. Here is – I like this picture very much—this is one of the few P-40Es of the third pursuit squadron that did make it to Darwin, and it was given to me by the pilot. It's a beautiful shot of Darwin, that's why I wanted to use it. The first group of nine of the 3rd Pursuit pilots took off for Darwin, from Copan on February the 9th, but one immediately turned back due engine trouble. The other eight continued on, guided by an LB-30 Liberator bomber – that was the export version of the B-24 – but ran into a heavy storm short of its destination. Six of the pilots crash-landed their planes on Timor, all sustaining injuries, while the other two bailed out, one of the two fatally.

Now here's a picture I got from one the pilots who crash-landed his plane. Four of his comrades, 1-2-3 and 4, along with three native boys, 1-2 and 3 native boys who were going to help them get out – these four linked up, all bandaged up, and that's a very rare photograph. It would take a full 10 days before they were able get back to Darwin. But then the other nine led by Mahoney, they did make it safely up from Darwin to Copan and Soerabaya, but short of their base in Angora, in central, further to the west, two of the pilots wrecked their P-40s in landing on a muddy field. So of the 25 that started out, only seven of those made it all the way up to the secret field in Angora.

Now at this point, with such a dismal record of ferrying P-40s to Java, the American command in Australia now decided that no more would be going to Java by air, finished with the ferry routes. They would go by sea instead. Thus, when a fourth squadron was formed, the 33rd Pursuit (Provisional), it was ordered to fly 1,000 miles south to Melbourne, then west across southern Australia, 2,700 miles to Perth. At the port of Perth, the pilots and their P-40s would be loaded onto the ancient *USS Langley* and taken to Java by sea. The *Langley* was our first aircraft carrier launched in 1922 and now converted to a seaplane tender. And this is a map of the route they were to take, to Brisbane, south to Richmond outside of Sydney, and to Melbourne, then up to –

it's not marked on the original map but I put Port Perry. Then they went west, kept going west to Forest they were to, then to Perth here, the port of Perth.

But when the commanding officer, Capt. Floyd Pell, who was a Philippines veteran had reached Port Perry, the one I wrote on the map there, about halfway, a new order came in. Pell was now to take 15 of those 25 of his squadron and head due north to Darwin to provide cover for a convoy of ships heading for Timor to bolster defenses on that island. And this map shows the route that those 15 were to take. They aborted their trip at Port Perry, went up Alice Springs and Daly Waters and Darwin. This is really outback country in the central part of Australia. But with the inevitable accidents on the way over this virtually featureless outback, only 11 of those 15 actually made it to Darwin on February the 15th. And when they reached Darwin, they found out they were to remain on Java after their convoy duty, contrary to the earlier decision to not send P-40s by air to Java anymore. I mean, one wonders what's going on in the command structure in Australia. In the meantime, the other 10 pilots of the 25 were to continue from Port Perry and head west for their rendezvous with the *Langley*.

Now here I've got a photo, a very rare photo, that I recently got, taken evidently by some Australian at the field of some of those pilots of the P-40 refueling at the forest. It's the only known picture showing the trip going west from Port Perry, and I will tell you the fate of those pilots later on. The photographer was probably an Australian at the field, though we're not sure; it's certainly not an official photo. The idea was that the *Langley* was to take 32 P-40s and 32 pilots, but now the 33rd Pursuit Squadron would only have 10 left to board the *Langley*, heading west. So where were the other 22 additional pilots going to come from? To fill the gap, a fifth squadron was formed designated the 13th Pursuit Squadron (Provisional). Setting up this squadron was really, what you might call, scraping the bottom of the barrel for pilots. Fourteen of the pilots selected were 1941-H graduates, only three months out of flying school and another 11 were '41-Gs, who had only graduated one month earlier than the '41-H pilots. Watching these raw pilots with virtually no time in a P-40 taking off from Perth from Brisbane going all the way around the southern Australia, Carl Giese, who was one of the Philippine veterans, was appalled. "Someone is crazy. This is murder," he wrote in his diary that evening. Fortunately, I was able to get a copy of this diary to know exactly how he felt.

Now we have another photo here. This is a shot of the first group of pilots of the 13th Pursuit Squadron (Provisional) when they were refueling at Richmond Field outside of Sydney. It's a very sharp picture, unbelievably sharp. It's the only known photo that exists of the 13th Pursuit Squadron in Australia and would have been lost to history if a sharp-eyed Australian friend of mine had not spotted it for sale on eBay and successfully bid for it, with a slight contribution from yours truly. And actually we found out later on that the three who were bidding on it were buddies [*laughter*] and they were bidding against each other. So he paid a fortune and his wife was even thinking of divorcing him. That's when I decided to chip in a hundred bucks myself

and get him off the hook. Anyway, the point is, it is a fabulous photo with all the numbers and everything, and I am using it obviously in my new book.

In the meantime, at the secret field in Angora in Java, things were not going well for the pilots, you know the ones that made it to Angora. Massive Japanese aerial attacks on Soerabaya and the B-17 field at Singosari had begun on February 3rd, and the 17th Pursuit Squadron was proving ineffective. On that first day on February 3, the pilots were ordered by the Dutch air defense command at Soerabaya to take off and intercept a Japanese bomber formation that spotters had picked up heading for Soerabaya, but by the time the seven P-40 pilots had climbed and reached Soerabaya, 75 miles to the northeast, the two V-shaped formations of 17 twin-engine Bettys were heading back north after already having bombed Soerabaya's port and airfield. The Dutch had not given the slow-coming P-40s enough warning time to intercept the fast-flying bombers before the Japanese reached their target. Here is a dramatic shot of 10 of the Betty bombers of the same unit, the Kanoya Air Group, that was bombing Soerabaya virtually every day, heading to, or I'm not sure, returning from the mission against east Java. Very remarkable photograph. After climbing 4,000 feet to reach these Bettys on their homeward flight, and getting within firing range over the Java Sea, the P-40s began using their 650-caliber guns on them but without downing any. Then three of the pilots spotted more bombers just south of Soerabaya, 19 of the old Type 96 Nell bombers, the predecessor to the Bettys. They were returning north after having bombed the B-17 base at Singosari. But as the pursuers approached, they were jumped by six Zeros that were escorting the bombers that they hadn't noticed and a wild Nelly began. One of the P-40 pilots was shot down and killed, the first combat fatality of the 17th Pursuit Squadron. But Philippines veteran Walt Coss avenged his mate's death when he dived on another group of six Zeros and exploded one in the air.

Now, another photo, this is very rare of the Zeros on the ground at their field at Kendari in the Sulawesi to the northeast. They are the third air group that regularly attacked Java and mixed it up with the P-40s during this whole story I am telling you. This photo was taken by the commanding officer of the unit, and it was sent to me by him some 25 years ago and I safely kept it.

Now another photo, here is an in-flight photo of two Zeros of the same unit just after having attacked Copan on Timor. It's the only photo of actually Zeros of that unit in the air in the Java campaign. During the next days, the 17th was regularly ordered to intercept more Japanese bombers and fighters, reported almost daily heading for Soerabaya. Invariably, either the warning time was inadequate or the Japanese turned out to be friendly B-17 bombers returning to their base at Singosari. Pretty frustrating to go up there and find it's their own planes. So the commanding officer of the 17th, Buzz Sprague, and his pilots were furious of the in ineptitude of the Dutch warning service unable to provide enough warning for the 17th Pursuit Squadron's P-40s to reach altitude and position themselves to await the Japanese as they came over to bomb

Soerabaya and Singosari, and unable to distinguish friend from foe. There was no radar to guide the air defense command, just native spotters in the outer islands calling in.

Now here, another photo coming up. This is an extremely rare photo of the group of the 17th Pursuit Squadron at their alert shack at Angora awaiting on a phone call from behind them for takeoff to intercept. They're waiting for a phone call here. This one is actually eating some coconut, he's a very good friend of mine, he's still alive in California, about 89 years old. The photo was taken by the squadron's radio man and given to me when I interviewed him for the book some years ago.

So no more reinforcements were now coming in after Mahoney's group of seven landed on February the 11. These additions brought the total number of P-40s at the Angora up to 30, which was a high point during the whole campaign, and these numbers were dwindling as the squadrons' crew chiefs were reduced to cannibalizing out-of-commission P-40s to keep the others flying. There were no parts; no spare parts were available to repair the planes that were out of commission.

So here another photo from the actual field itself. This is a flight of P-40s of the 17th lined up on the field; you can see this alert shack in the background, so these guys are waiting to take off. This photo was taken by the Philippines veteran Joe Crusal, one of the pilots.

Another photo, here's a good shot of Joe Crusal – that's him in the middle with his crew chief and armor and his P-40 at Angora. This dragon was a really unusual thing to have painted on his plane, in color of course, it would be fantastic, but that is a dragon he had painted on his plane. Joe Crusal was a great help on this story.

Okay, on February 14 in spite to the frustration of ineffective interceptions came in a form of an order to mount a special mission. Far East headquarters in Bandung on West Java had called Bud Sprague and ordered his squadron to mount a fighter-bomber attack on Japanese that had landed that day on Palembang on the island of Sumatra to the west. Immediately, the morale of the pilots shot up. Sprague was to leave nine of the P-40s, fit them at the Dutch field at Mataou with 20-kila bombs under their wings and head west for Batavia, which was Java's capital, which today is – we show the actual place, this is Mataou and here's Batavia, and that's where they are going to have to go up to Palembang at Sumatra. Sprague picked his eight most experienced pilots; all but two of them were fellow Philippine veterans and took off. Bad weather delayed them one day after they arrived in Batavia, but the next day they took off – next morning for Palembang, which was 250 miles to the north from Batavia or Jakarta. But as they approached the airfield outside Palembang, they spotted eight fixed-landing gear fighters heading directly for them. These were not Zeros, but Japanese army Type 97 Nate fighters, veterans of the China War but now considered obsolete – we've got a good shot of them here. That's what they looked

like, these were not exactly Zeros. Four of the pilots dropped their belly tanks and bombs to engage the Nates, but it was a frustrating experience to nail these Japanese as they were highly maneuverable. So during the brief combat, the Americans only managed to shoot down one, but at least none of their own ships were lost. Then the other P-40s – the four P-40s joined the other ones that were still carrying bombs went down to strafe and bomb Japanese troops in a small craft in the river below, causing panic among the troops on board. One pilot wrote in his diary, “I was thoroughly enjoying myself.” That really gives you the feeling of how they felt on this attack. It was a welcome change from the thankless interception duties at Angora.

But two days after this successful mission, on February 19, the situation turned black for the Provisional pursuit pilots, both in the Indies and also in Australia. That morning, the Japanese landed on Bali, just 200 miles to the southeast of Soerabaya and seized the airfield there. Now the Zeros were just an hour’s flight away from reaching the naval base at Soerabaya and could attack at most any time of the day and get back by nightfall. Now, to the south at Darwin, the news was even grimmer that day. That morning 188 Zeros, Val dive bombers and Kate level bombers, flying off of carriers, the *Akagi*, *Kaga*, *Soryu* and *Hiryu*, four of the six that were the ones that attacked Pearl Harbor. They came in from the sea and demolished the RAF field, the port, the shipping and buildings were just in shambles. The disastrous attack on Darwin was subsequently referred to as Australia’s Pearl Harbor. Incidentally, the Darwin attack is grossly misrepresented in the new film *Australia* that some of you may have recently seen. It was showing here in Dayton, right, the film *Australia*. I know some of you have seen it. But it was a terrible distortion of history of the attack.

Now shortly before the arrival of the Japanese over at Darwin, the 33rd Pursuit Squadron had taken off from Darwin’s RAF field with 10 P-40s to escort that convoy to Timor as they had been ordered to do. But due to bad weather on the route, its commander, Floyd Pell, was advised to abort the flight and return to the field. With Pell and five others now back at Darwin, and the other four providing top cover, Zeros suddenly and without warning appeared over the field. Three of the four pilots still in the air over Darwin were shot down, one fatally. All six of the P-40s caught taking off were shot down also, and the commanding officer Pell and two others were killed. Of those who survived, five were badly wounded, but one escaped the melee completely and landed safely after the combat under unusual circumstances. That’s the photo that’s up here now. This is a dramatic photo of what was left of Bill Walker’s P-40 after he managed to get down on the field during the middle of the attack before his ship was shot to ribbons by the Zeros; that was what was left after he got out.

And then here, another photo. This is a photo of what remained of Pell’s P-40. I don’t know if you can tell that is a P-40, Pell’s P-40, that he had left behind at the hangar with engine trouble after the Zeros finished with it. He went up with another pilot’s plane; he did not fly that thing, it was in the hangar.

From February 20, the Japanese were landing more troops on Bali and building up their air force there – their air base, not air force. Now here's another unusual picture I recently got. This is a Japanese photo of two of the navy pilots on Bali inspecting the repair work that was being done on one of the 20th Pursuit Squadrons P-40's that had been shot up on February the 5th. There's no identification of the photo, but it had to be that; that's the only place that this picture could have taken place. I am sure it is Bali.

From this day and on, the actual fighting over Java was becoming more and more intense. That morning, Bud Sprague led 16 P-40s and escorting seven A-24 dive bombers, flying from the Singosari field to attack Japanese shipping off of Bali. The results were nothing short of disastrous. Sprague was shot down and killed when he and the others ran into 14 Zeros. Two others were also shot down but managed to bail out safely. A fourth man ran out of gas and crash-landed on a beach in eastern Java. And a fifth, his P-40 badly shot up, managed to make it all the way back to Angora only to crash on landing, almost killing himself. Everybody was sure he was dead, but he survived. Only one Zero was shot down by the P-40s during this February 20 battle, but who got it is still lost to history. I have not been able to determine who did it. No Japanese ships were sunk by the A-24s, which was the first American dive bombing attack of World War II. The Army did it before the Navy. But two of the A-24s were shot down, and the crew of one was killed. The following day, two more of the pursuers were shot down and killed when jumped by 12 Zeros, escorting Betty bombers yet another attack on Soerabaya. With the loss of their beloved commanding officer, Bud Sprague, and two more squadron mates, and the destruction of seven more of their dwindling P-40s, plus the increased tempo of the Japanese attack, morale began really sinking. "We are desperate. How can we operate against such odds?" one of the pilots wrote in his diary that night. They were now down to 18 P-40s, and they knew that no more were coming.

Maj. Gen. Lewis Brereton, the American Air Force commander at Bandung felt the same as the diarist. He had decided to throw in a towel and evacuate his Far East Air Force from Java. On February 19, three of his B-17Es that had made it halfway around the world from MacDill Air Field, all the way across Africa and Atlantic into Bandung, landed abandoned on that day, and immediately they were destroyed by Japanese fighters and bombers. I mean, they barely arrived and their planes were destroyed after flying halfway around the world for almost a month, it took them to get that far. And his bomber base at Singosari was now under constant attack, leaving the B-17s with no safe field on Java from which to operate. The operations themselves were proving unsatisfactory. The bomber pilots frequently had to abort the missions due to the terrible weather at that time of year or engine trouble, or they had to fight off swarms of P-40s with often very fatal consequences. But for the Americans to disengage from Java, operations would not be a simple matter. The Dutch commanders were resisting any attempts to withdrawal American fighters and bombers from their beleaguered homeland colony. But the order still went out from

the American side, begin flying out excess P-40 pilots and mechanics. On February 23, 10 pilots and two crew chiefs and armorers got the word to evacuate to Jakarta, that I showed earlier, for evacuation. Brereton himself flew out to India on February 24 to assume a new command.

From that day, Zeros were flying daily from the next door Denpasar field on Bali in attacks on the bomber field of Singosari and to escort Betty bombers to Soerabaya. And the Betty bombers were now flying at 26,000 feet on their missions. As one pilot said, "Much too high for us." The pilots acknowledged, all of them agree, the Allison engines on their P-40s were wearing out after such prolonged use, and there were no engine changes possible. Often half of their 650-caliber guns were not working due to overuse and 50-caliber ammunition at any rate was running out. Morale was dropping rapidly among the remaining pilots at Angora. A bitter pilot wrote in his diary, February 25, "We are left here holding the bag." He and the others knew also that the Japanese would soon discover their camouflaged field and wipe it out.

That same day, their new commanding officer, the popular Philippines veteran Jerry McCallum was shot down and killed, reportedly in his parachute. He was leading the remaining 12 P-40s in commission in a failed interception of 20 Bettys and six Zeros. Here, I have a picture of Jerry, a very nice picture with a gun on the back of his Jeep. He was a very popular person, for one of the most outspoken.

The next day's raid by 26 Bettys and eight Zeros – the Bettys again flying too high for the P-40s – was about all they could stand, all he could stand, I'm talking about only one pilot now. That day Spence Johnson let his feelings out as he wrote in his diary, and I quoted earlier, "Everyday a nightmare." He added, "More Japs, never-ceasing air raids, half are outfit left or killed, and no planes coming." And to pour more salt in their wounds, Col. Eugene Eubank, now the ranking U.S. air officer on Java after Brereton left, issued an order to the 17th Pursuit: "Fight till the last plane." This, despite the vow of their now-diseased commanding officer Bud Sprague, when the squadron arrived at Angora on February the 1st, quote, "You will be evacuated if the situation should become hopeless."

But the Dutch were clinging to straws. Their air commander had transferred six of his Brewsters to Buffalo fighters and six Hawker Hurricanes to Angora to bolster what remained of the American interceptor force there. And six of the American pilots had driven to the south coast of central Java to meet the *USS Langley* as it docked at Chilachap Port at south central Java with 32 P-40s on board, at least they thought that. The plan was that they and the other pilots on board would fly the ships up to Angora and thus double the number of P-40s there to impose the Japanese. But on arriving at Chilachap on February 27, those pilots were shocked to learn that the *Langley* had been sunk short of its destination earlier that day by Betty bombers. All the 33 pilots on board as well as the 32 P-40s were apparently lost.

Now here's a photo, some you may have seen it, of the *Langley* sinking. This is the carrier *Langley* with P-40s on board. This is the ship that was resting, the *USS Edsall*, and this is the *Whipple*, the other destroyer where they were taking the picture. It would be years before the full story came out of this disaster. After taking on the 33 pilots, the *Edsall*, behind there, was ordered to proceed to Chilachap instead of to Australia and offload the pilots there. Evidently the plane-less pilots were to augment the pursuit force at Angora, but at a time when the other pilots there were being evacuated. The *Edsall* would never make it to Chilachap. It was sunk two days later by a Japanese task force off of south Java. A Japanese cruiser picked up some of the survivors, including a few of the P-40 pilots and offloaded them at the Japanese POW camp at Macassar at the Sulawesi. After the war, no traces of them were ever found. They apparently had been executed at the camp, probably in 1943. Now a friend of mine has recently published his book called *A Blue Sea of Blood* that tells a tragic story of the *Edsall* and these pilots in carefully researched detail. It's a wonderful book. If anyone wants to read it, I highly recommend it.

When the six pilots returned to Angora, with the disastrous news of the sinking of the *Langley*, morale among the remaining pilots sank to a new low. And now they were being ordered to provide aerial support for Dutch Admiral Doorman's combined striking force of cruisers and destroyers. Doorman's Dutch-British-American-Australian naval force was planning an attack on Japanese invasion transports reporting, headed for the north coast of Java. On that day, on February 27, the P-40 pilots were ordered to fly escort for the A-24s that were to attack the 43 transports sailing to the north coast under the protection of cruisers and destroyers. When the pilots of the 10 P-40s reached the coast, they were relieved to find that there were no Zeros guarding the Japanese force, but the anti-aircraft fire thrown up by the warship was very heavy. Now looking down on this Japanese armada, one of the pilots was appalled at the folly of war. "Thousands of men gone completely mad," Les Johnson recorded in his diary on returning from the mission I think that really must have summarized the feeling of all of them. And what could they do against such a force? Another of the pilots expressed his feelings at the lack of results, "Our puny force didn't amount to anything," he wrote in his diary. The subsequent naval battle between the Allies' combined striking force and the Japanese – the famous Battle of the Java Sea – ended in total victory for the Japanese.

The way was now clear for a virtually unopposed Japanese landing of three points on northern Java. But the Dutch were nothing if not stubborn. They were now in charge of all the Java operations after the disillusion of the joint American-British-Dutch-Australian command days earlier, when the time when Brereton left. On Dutch orders, diverting it from its original India destination, the Americans freighter *Sea Witch* arrived at Chilachap from Australia on the morning of the next day. On board were 27 P-40s, the object of the Dutch interest in the freighter. That day they were unloaded onto barges and offloaded at the Chilachap's train station to be transported to assembly points in central Java. But with so few Americans now left in Angora, who was going to fly them? Perhaps the Dutch intended that the 32 pilots off the

Langley could fly them. But that assumed that the pilots would reach Chilachap safely on the *Edsall* after being taken off from the *Langley*, and as I mentioned the *Edsall* never made it. But even before such plans could be made there was a more basic question to be considered: could the crated P-40s be assembled in time before the Japanese invasion force reached central Java? The Japanese would begin to landing on the east coast early the next morning. The Dutch air commander Lt. Gen. Van Oyen believed that they could be assembled in time. It was now decided that his own remaining pursuit pilots, most of whom had been in Angora at the moment with the Americans, should now travel back to the Dutch air headquarters at Bandung and take over the P-40s once they were assembled. This despite the fact that not one of those Dutch pilots had ever flown a P-40 in his life. *[laughing]* You talk about really what a situation. In the meantime, Col. Eubank's staff was entreating him to allow the remaining American pilots in Angora to evacuate Java. Now after a call to Van Oyen, it was agreed that they should be allowed to leave provided that they flew one last mission, this one against Japanese invasion forces off of north Java.

Thus on the morning – 5:30 in the morning on Sunday, March the 1st, the pilots of the last nine P-40s in commission took off from Angora on the final mission of the 17th Pursuit Squadron in the Java campaign. And joining them were the seven Dutch Hurricanes and five Dutch Brewster Buffalos. Flying at deck level in the face of devastating anti-aircraft fire, they strafed the landing boats. They paid a heavy price for this meaningless mission. Three of the P-40s were shot down by anti-aircraft fire. One of the pilots was killed. Another crash-landed and became a POW for the rest of the war, and a third one was shot up but escaped capture, miraculously, you could say. He bailed out of his ship, he landed just off the beach, he went on the beach, he grabbed a bicycle from a passing native, and he peddled away, avoiding capture by the nearby Japanese landing forces. This has got to be one of the great escapes of the Pacific War. After the pilots of the six surviving, albeit badly shot up P-40s made it back to Angora, they turned their P-40s over to the Dutch pilots there and left for Jogjakarta for evacuation flights to Australia, as had been promised they could do.

Now here's another photo one of the pilots. This is a, I think, disoriented is the way to describe it, disoriented Jack Dale awaiting evacuation at Jogjakarta airfield that evening after it had been bombed by the Japanese earlier in the day, you can see all the smoke and such around him. It's a good shot of the poor kid, at least he survived. At midnight, five B-17s and two LB-30s took off from Jogjakarta with the remaining pilots and enlisted men of the 17th Pursuit and headed for Broome, to the northwest coast of Australia. That's another story, unfortunately I won't have time to get into that, but it's another tragic story.

Two days earlier, if we back up a little bit, the other enlisted men of the squadron and four of the squadron's wounded pilots boarded the Dutch freighter *Albacore* at Chilachap. Along with the Far East Air Force staff, the remaining personnel of the bombers units, and British and Dutch

military evacuees, the *Albacore* had pulled out of Chilachap on the afternoon of February 27, bound for Fremantle on the west coast of Australia. Miraculously, it arrived there on March 4, eluding the fate of so many of the other vessels that left that port that were sunk on their way to Australia.

Now back at Angora, earlier on March 1, just after returning from their mission, the remaining Dutch pilots had received an order from the Ed Kaiser, who was now the acting 17th Pursuit commanding officer and asked to join us in the evacuation. The pilots checked with the agitator of Van Oyen, their commander and asked if they could have permission. Refused. Instead, they were ordered to drive to Bandung to take over those P-40s that were being uncrated and assembled that I mentioned earlier. And they were warned that anyone that refused to follow orders would be considered a deserter. Just before the Dutch left the field, the Japanese Zeros appeared over it and completely shot up the remaining damaged P-40s. They had finally managed to locate and destroy the troublesome American base. The following afternoon, the Dutch pilots, exhausted after driving all night to get to Bandung, West Java, reported in the Dutch air force headquarters. Outside they saw the P-40s they were to fly; they were still being uncrated, not yet assembled or yet flyable. The Dutch pilots were enraged. They knew that in days, the Japanese would reach Bandung before the P-40s could be assembled and all these hapless Dutch pilots were destined to become POWs on the night of March 7-8 when the Dutch forces surrendered.

Now here's a photo, a Japanese photo, of one of the captured *Sea Witch* P-40s. The engine has not been mounted yet, you can see it's missing, and the Dutch tri-color painting – they had already managed to overpaint the American insignia here. It was a rectangular design and the Dutch East Indies air force. As one historian described it, the Java campaign proved to be nothing short of a total humiliating disaster. As to the fate of the 17th Pursuit officers and men, all of the surviving personnel made it to Australia, either as passengers on those B-17s and LB-30s or on the *Albacore* which had escaped attack. Despite their heroic attempts to hold a doomed colony for the Dutch, their last commanding officer of the American Air Force on Java was subjected to a surprising accusation by the Dutch air commander. Lt. Gen. Van Oyen transmitted a message directly to Chief of Staff Marshall in Washington. He maintained that Col. Eubank's departure with his B-17 and P-40 planes and pilots was nothing less than a desertion – he liked that word, I must say. Deeply upset by the charge, Marshall investigated the matter, and subsequently informed Van Oyen that Eubank was following orders of his superior Maj. Gen. Brereton. Eubank had been ordered not to fight on if his forces were no longer capable of operations in Java, as was indeed the case. Van Oyen's unfounded complaint was regarded as a sad finale to the American efforts to hold off the Japanese.

Now, with the fall of Java, a curtain of censorship fell over the whole disastrous campaign. A total ban was introduced on all war correspondents that knew what the circumstances of the loss

were. Only later on, when the ban was lifted, Gen. MacArthur who had just evacuated from the Philippines to command Allied air and ground forces in the southwest Pacific area. He tried to put a favorable face on what had happened in air campaign. According to one of his quote communiqués, the 17th Pursuit shot down 39 Japanese bombers and fighters against, quote, “very light” losses of their own. However, my calculations on the result of every combat mission paints a different picture. Based on known losses of the five provisional squadrons and detailed Japanese records, only two Bettys, three Zeros, one Nate were shot down – one Nell and one Nate were shot down, plus a navy flying boat north of Darwin, for a grand total of eight aircraft shot down. This against American losses of eight P-40 pilots killed in action over Java and Bali, plus one killed in bailing out over Timor, but in addition to those losses of life in the Indies itself, four were killed as I mentioned in Darwin on February 19 – they were in the 33rd Pursuit – and another one north of Darwin three days earlier, and 31 were lost in the sinkings of the *Langley* and the *Edsall*. This gives us a total of 45 fatalities for the 124 pilots assigned to those five provisional squadrons, 36 percent of their total number. And in terms of aircraft, of the 129 P-40s that had been assigned to the squadrons, 110 were lost either in accidents, due to the sinking of the *Langley* or in combat. I wonder what MacArthur would have announced in his communiqué had he been presented with the true figures; then he would have kept quiet about it at least.

How can we explain this disastrous results in the Java campaign, not only for the American airmen, but for all the other Americans, the Dutch, the Australians and the British in the air, on the land and in the sea? It was a lost cause from day one. There was absolutely no stopping the Japanese and their relentless southern advance in the first months of the Pacific War. But sending inexperienced American youth in unfamiliar P-40s all the way to Australia and ordering them to stem the vaunted Japanese naval air force in their raids on Java seems to me to be a particularly egregious decision. Worse yet was giving in to the Dutch pressure and trying to keep them there when the outcome was no longer in doubt. “What goofy brass hat was responsible for sending these inexperienced boys over for such a grim duty?” That was quoted in a diary by an air officer on board one of the transports that carried them to Australia in November 1941.

Of the 124 pilots assigned to the five provisional pursuit squadrons, three-fourths of them were five months or less out of flying school with few or no hours in a P-40. Now, later on Gen. Marshall would later argue that, quote, “urgent circumstances” had obliged him to dispatch, quote, “some bomber and fighter squadrons to the southwest Pacific area without sufficient operational training.” The desperate need for pursuit pilots on Java was clearly on Marshall’s mind, but his statement still doesn’t explain why more experienced pilots, rather than complete squadrons that he mentioned, were not picked and sent over from U.S.-based squadrons. Why didn’t he pick out experienced ones from the squadrons in the U.S. rather than say we didn’t have the squadrons overall?

Now after listening to me presenting this story, you may wonder how did I happen to get involved with this subject. Well, I was inspired to do so after reading a 1944 account in three parts in an obscure military journal. It was written by a Chicago daily news correspondent who was in Java at the time and who interviewed several the pilots but who never visited Angora field. No reporter was allowed to visit that highly secret field, and for that reason the 17th Pursuit Squadron never got the publicity that the Flying Tigers got with all those reporters swarming around them in China. Later this reporter, George Weller, pieced together as best he could from interviews and two diaries plus an unofficial operations diary of the squadron, what the squadron experienced daily during its five weeks in Java. But he acknowledged and regretted that his account was incomplete. It was indeed incomplete, even the operations in Java alone were fragmentarily covered, and pre-Java Australian experiences left out – he didn't know about them. Weller did not know of the operations of the other provisional squadrons that never made it up to Java, where they were intended to go, this 33rd and the 13th Pursuit. As I mentioned earlier, most of these pilots of these two squadrons – the 33rd and 13th – went down when the *Langley* and *Edsall* sunk, or shot down over Darwin on February 19, or suffered accidents in Australia. Furthermore, Weller had no access to Japanese naval air force operation reports for each day's missions. With such records, he would have been able to cross-check with American records to reduce the 17th's inflated victory claims. In his introduction to his three-part article, Weller wrote that, quote, "This story is unfinished and awaiting the hands of another writer." It seems that Weller's wish has fallen to me. I hope my book, derived mainly from 19 personal diaries I was able to obtain from the surviving pilots or from their families in the case they were deceased, will meet Weller's expectations. But Weller died in Rome, Italy, in 2002 at the age of 95 and my book is dedicated to his memory.

Concluding this presentation, I might add a little personal footnote. In July 1983 I was in a World Bank mission to Indonesia, then Waldwert, then Soerabaya – that was in my other life when I was a development economist. Why not try to find the 17th Pursuit's secret field in Angora while I am here, I asked myself. I knew that the village in Angora was not far from Soerabaya, and I would be able to borrow a Ministry of Labor vehicle and driver for the search. So it was on that on the morning of Friday, July 6, 1983, Friday being the weekly day off for Indonesian government anyway, that I set out with another World Bank consultant equally interested from Soerabaya. Soon we reached the town of Jonbang, which I knew was only some 20 miles north from Angora and a nearby village – Blinbee village where the pilots stayed during the evening. They could not sleep at the air field; there were no facilities. Reaching Blinbee first, I succeeded in communicating my wishes to the middle-aged village headman with my limited Bahasa Indonesia language ability. He recalled the Americans being in the village during the war and took us to the ruins of the old purplish structures at the side of the old sugar mill. These must be the houses where the pilots and enlisted men lived at the time, I excitedly concluded. This sight fit the description as recorded in several of the pilots' diaries. And here we have the ruins.

It was an old sugar mill and they lived in these buildings, I don't know, 20 or 30 in each building.

Then the headman took us to what he maintained was the site of the old air field at nearby Angora. It was hard to tell if an air field had occupied the site before since it was planted in sugar cane but with some open areas as you can see here, going around, and there were some over here, but in the center it was sugar cane. And then "Ya-Ya," "Ya-Ya" the village headman confirmed to me, this is where the American pilots flew during the war. Exploring the open areas of high standing cane on the sides and the connecting pathways that day, I came across the concrete foundation of a small building. This must be what remains of the operation shack of the 17th Pursuit, I presumed. Now it seemed that I had physical proof that it was true that a small group of valiant American pilots for a fleeting moment in early 1942 had operated from a secret Japanese field near the villages of Angora and Blinbee. I was now more determined than ever to fulfill Weller's ardent 1944 wish for the unheralded men of the 17th. Someone must speak for them. Thank you.