

Death by P-38

Aviation History

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A P-38G Lightning of the 339th Squadron, 347th Fighter Group, shoots down a G4M1 bomber carrying Pearl Harbor mastermind Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto on April 18, 1943. (c. Jack Fellows, ASAA)

That Saturday afternoon the "Opium Den"—the smoky, sweltering, ramshackle command bunker at Henderson Field, on Guadalcanal—was packed with Navy and Marine brass hats. Lowly flyboys Captain Thomas Lanphier Jr. and Major John W. Mitchell, commanding officer of the U.S. Army Air Forces' 339th Fighter Squadron, arrived last, but were treated like guests of honor. Mitchell was handed a teletyped radio message marked "Top Secret": a flight schedule for an inspection tour by Japanese Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto.

"Who's Yamamoto?" Mitchell asked.

Lanphier just said, "Pearl Harbor."

Admiral Yamamoto, commander of the Imperial Japanese Navy's Combined Fleet, was the Harvard-educated, poker-playing mastermind of the December 7, 1941, attack. Navy code-breakers had intercepted Japanese radio traffic indicating that the admiral, known for his fanatical punctuality, would fly over Bougainville Island early the next morning, April 18, 1943—coincidentally the first anniversary of the Doolittle Raid. The newly appointed air commander in the Solomons, Rear Adm. Marc A. Mitscher, who had captained the carrier Hornet on the Doolittle mission, now saw the chance for another long-range surprise attack, this time with the 339th's Lockheed P-38G Lightning fighters.

"We're going to get this bird," the Navy planners told Mitchell and Lanphier. "We mean for you to nail him if you have to ram him in the air. But he'll be taking off more than 635 miles away from here, and only good long-range flying will intercept him. Major Mitchell, that means Lightnings."

At almost that very moment, Yamamoto was dining with Lt. Gen. Hotoshi Imamura, Japanese army commander at Rabaul. Imamura had narrowly escaped being shot down over Bougainville two months earlier, and he and others urged Yamamoto to cancel his tour. But the admiral's chief of staff, Vice Adm. Matome Ugaki, who would join Yamamoto on the trip, deemed it crucial for morale. Having already announced his plans, Yamamoto said, "Even if it were dangerous, I could not turn back now."

The Americans were depending on it. "Yamamoto's supposed to be coming to Bougainville tomorrow morning," Mitchell briefed his pilots. "We figure he'll land at 9:45. We're going to jump him there, to the west, 10 minutes before that." It meant circling more than 400 miles around the Solomons in radio silence to avoid enemy contact, navigating by dead reckoning over the ocean and flying at sea level to duck radar. Even with extra-capacity drop tanks, the Lightnings would have only five to 10 minutes in the target zone. Mitchell privately figured their chances of even seeing Yamamoto were about 1,000-to-1, and that was before Kahili, the Japanese base on Bougainville, potentially launched its 75 Zeros at the Americans. With just a dozen or so Lightnings to fly cover, it seemed like a suicide mission.

At 0710 hours Mitchell led the cover flight takeoff in Mitch's Squitch. Lanphier—brash, ambitious and, with several victories, a Silver Star and a Distinguished Flying Cross, one of the 339th's hottest pilots—led the shooter flight in Phoebe. His wingman, soft-spoken Oregonian Lieutenant Rex Barber, had earned his own Silver Star for penetrating a screen of Zeros to down a bomber in their midst. Since Barber's usual mount, Diablo, was out of commission, he instead was piloting Miss Virginia. Flying backup were 1st Lts. Besby Holmes, a Pearl Harbor veteran who'd moved up to Henderson even before Mitchell, and Ray Hine, an experienced pilot who was on his first combat mission in a P-38. Neither had flown with Lanphier or Barber before. Holmes couldn't believe his luck.

At Rabaul, Yamamoto was for once almost late for takeoff. Accompanied by several aides, and wearing a plain green service uniform as a show of unity with the troops, the admiral boarded a Mitsubishi G4M1 "Betty," No. 323 of the 705th Air Group. Ugaki and his staff boarded No. 326, so rapidly that the two admirals had no time for farewells. Taking off on schedule at 0600 Tokyo time, by which the Japanese military operated (0800 at Henderson), the bombers climbed to 6,500 feet. Zeros of the 204th Air Group flew escort, 1,500 feet above and behind, in two formations of three planes each. Among the escort pilots were Petty Officers 1st Class (Aviation) Shoichi Sugita, who would become one of Japan's top aces, and Kenji Yanagiya, a 100-mission veteran who felt deeply honored to be taking part. Bearing southeast, the bombers flew in echelon, with Yamamoto's slightly ahead on the right. Ugaki, who was recovering from a bout of dengue fever, soon dozed off.

Meanwhile, in the sunny greenhouse cockpit of Mitch's Squitch, lulled by the engine drone and the glassy-smooth sea speeding just beneath the plane's nose, Mitchell was trying not to doze. Constantly checking his GI wristwatch and specially mounted Navy compass, at 0820 he fixed their position at slightly more than 180 miles west of Henderson. He then waved his wings to signal a turn. Twenty-seven minutes on course 290 degrees. Thirty-eight minutes on course 305 degrees. At 0925, less than 20 miles off Bougainville, they made their final turn to the northeast, under cover of a low-level haze.

High to the northwest, the Japanese had clear skies. "We could see transport ships with escort destroyers steaming on the blue water below," Yanagiya recalled. "On ahead of us, we could see [Kahili] air base...at the southeast end of Bougainville Island." The formation began to descend on approach.

As the Americans neared the island, they had begun to climb. At 2,000 feet they cleared the translucent mist to see the 7,500-foot peaks of Bougainville's Crown Prince Range and the crescent of Empress Augusta Bay—but no aircraft. Mitchell checked his watch: 0934. They were a minute ahead of schedule. Yamamoto ought to be about three miles to their port quarter...

At that moment cover-flight section leader Lieutenant Doug Canning, reputed to have the sharpest eyes in the squadron, called out, "Bogeys! Eleven o'clock high!"

Mitchell hadn't expected two bombers; the shooters would have to get both. Leading the cover flight upward, he radioed Lanphier: "All right, Tom. Go get him. He's your meat."

"It was obvious that we were late to spot [the Americans]," Yanagiya later recalled. "The P-38s had dropped their extra fuel tanks and were already zooming up to engage our two bombers." To save weight, the Zeros carried no radios, but when his flight leader wagged his wings and dived to the attack, Yanagiya said, "we wingmen all accelerated and swooped into the first group of P-38s."

Holmes' drop tanks had hung up. Trying to shake them off, he pulled away to the west, and his wingman Hine went with him. Only Lanphier peeled up into Yanagiya's flight—3-to-1, head-on—spraying the Zeros with fire and breaking up their attack. Separated, Yanagiya later reported, "We repelled the first group of P-38s, while another P-38 engaged aft of the bombers."

That was Rex Barber. Unlike Hine, he hadn't stuck with his flight leader. Using the seconds Lanphier had given him, he went after the bombers, which had dived for the deck. As they passed across his nose, he banked hard starboard to get behind them, and for a few seconds his upraised left wing blocked the enemy planes from his view.

Ugaki's crew had seen the Lightnings split up. He later reported, "We made a quick turn of over 90 degrees to evade them," seaward, through their attack. Miss Virginia flashed overhead. When Barber rolled out of his bank, he had one bomber in front of him. He started working it over with his nose-mounted 20mm cannon and four .50-caliber machine guns.

Phoebe had reached the top of its half-loop. Hanging inverted, Lanphier saw to his right the second three Zeros chasing Barber's Lightning, and, out in front of them all, a lone Betty fleeing across the treetops. From there he reported diving back down and banking around for one desperate, extreme-range, almost right-angle burst. Even he was surprised to see the Betty's right engine light up.

Ugaki's plane had made two more evasive turns before he spotted Yamamoto's G4M, already ablaze and sinking. He would recall thinking, "Oh! Everything was over now!"

Firing all the while, Miss Virginia had closed to less than 100 feet as debris, smoke and finally flames streamed off the bomber. Then the Betty abruptly snap-rolled left and down. Barber dodged its upraised right wing and, looking back, saw smoke billowing up from the jungle. Lanphier also saw the Betty's wing go up—he would report it had torn off—and a gout of flame as the bomber went in. Shaking Zeros off his tail, he radioed: "I got a bomber. Verify him for me, Mitch. He's burning." Barber, characteristically, didn't say a word during the whole fight.

Holmes had shed his drop tanks in time to see the stricken Betty go down. Clearing each other's tails of Zeros, he, Hine and Barber chased the remaining G4M out over the water. Grieving to see nothing but smoke where Yamamoto's aircraft had been, Ugaki could only hold on as the Lightnings raked his plane with gunfire. The Betty struck the sea off Moila Point at full speed. Only Ugaki and two crewmen survived.

"Mission accomplished," Mitchell called. "Everybody, get your ass home." The P-38s headed for Guadalcanal in ones and twos. Barber, Holmes and Hine lost each other. Escorted by Canning, Holmes made it to a forward base in the Russell Islands with just four gallons of gas to spare. Last seen trailing vapor from his right engine, Ray Hine never returned. Lanphier and Barber put down at Henderson before noon, Phoebe with two bullet holes in its tail, Miss Virginia with more than 100 scattered over its airframe.

Lanphier laid immediate claim to Yamamoto, touching off a dispute with Barber that would tear their friendship apart and last almost to this day. [For more on this debate, read the companion story "Who Got Yamamoto?" in our May 2013 issue.] For the time being, however, all was forgotten. Mitscher radioed headquarters, "April 18th seems to be our day," and the pilots launched into a bender that continued into the night, uninterrupted even by a bombing attack. A correspondent hunched in a nearby foxhole wrote, "This is the noisiest raid I know, not so much from the bombs and ack-ack but from officers who started singing early in the evening and are still out in the moonlight singing like a bunch of high school kids after a ball game."

Though the Americans claimed four Zeros downed, all six Japanese fighters returned to Rabaul, claiming at least three P-38 kills. Sugita had put a burst into a wingman covering a leader with unshed tanks: Hine. And Yanagiya, following the Americans, shot up a vapor-streaming, straggling Lightning (also Hine), but didn't see it go down.

Yanagiya was sent home in June, after F4F Wildcats shot off his right hand over the Russell Islands. He would survive the war, credited with eight victories. The other Zero pilots,

including Sugita, all died in combat. Hours after Emperor Hirohito announced the final Japanese surrender in 1945, Ugaki strapped on a sword given him by Yamamoto and disappeared on a kamikaze flight.

The Bougainville jungle was so thick, and Yamamoto's crash site so remote, that Japanese search planes could only circle overhead, vainly seeking any sign of survivors. A rescue party finally hacked through to the downed Betty the next day. The admiral's body was found near the wreckage, belted upright in his seat and still holding his sword, leading some to believe he survived the crash and might have been saved. More likely his body was arranged by another dying victim, in a demonstration of the reverence his countrymen felt toward him. Tokyo did not admit his loss until May 21. Yamamoto was awarded the Order of the Chrysanthemum (1st Class), the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves and Swords by Germany and, in June, was given a state funeral.

Medals of Honor for Mitchell and the four shooters were downgraded to Navy Crosses when the press got wind of their story, threatening to reveal the secret of the broken Japanese code. That in no way diminishes their feat of planning, navigation, timing and sheer audacity.

In all of American history, the only equivalent is the operation that killed al Qaeda mastermind Osama bin Laden. Yamamoto was no different from any officer caught in a sniper's crosshairs—in uniform, on a combat mission, a legitimate military target. Today, when the enemy rarely wears a uniform, the debate centers on targeting terrorist leaders with remote-controlled drones. Few remember that the precedent was set 70 years ago, over the jungles of Bougainville.