

## 2D EMERGENCY RESCUE SQUADRON

### "Mission Improbable" by Colonel Bill Helmantoler

In 1944 the Pacific War was moving west and north toward the Philippines and Japan. As an operations officer in 13th Air Force headquarters I was about to become involved in the most significant bombing missions I would ever personally touch.

The targets were the oil refineries in a place called Balikpapan on the faraway island of Borneo. The Japanese armed forces depended greatly on those refineries to fuel their ships and airplanes. Nobody I knew doubted the strategic importance of the targets; almost everybody I knew doubted that our B-24's could reach the targets and return to base. The missions would be hundreds of miles longer than we had ever flown before.

I knew many of the pilots and operations officers who would make the flights. I watched those brave, skilled air-warriors plan the missions that several of them believed would be their last. Some of them were clearly scared. I felt for them. Their hope for success rested almost entirely on recommendations put forth by Charles A. Lindbergh, once the most famous pilot in the world. In 1944 he was flying missions with some of the fighter groups in the Pacific. My friend and classmate Dick Lake told me how Lindbergh had shown his group how to extend the range of their P-47s.

Lindbergh's idea was to lean the fuel mixture as much as possible. "Just give the engine another drop of gasoline whenever it threatens to quit," he was quoted as saying. Pilots who had tried it called the setting "automatic rough."

The procedure reduced engine power and aircraft speed in addition to causing the engines to operate at exceedingly

high temperatures. The high temperatures caused excessive wear and tear and frequent engine failure. The procedure departed significantly from the way the pilots had been taught to fly; but it, at least, gave them some hope of making it to Balikpapan and back.

After several days of preparation and testing, the first of some fifty B-24s began its take-off run from Noemfoor Island at two o'clock in the morning. Those lumbering four-engine bombers were "loaded to the gills" with fuel and bombs. I watched with my heart in my throat as the first airplane failed to get airborne and rolled off the end of the runway into the ocean. Crash trucks and boats went into action to save the crew.

The second B-24 in line also failed to get off, but it stopped short of the water. I stood on the tarmac with the generals and colonels and wondered what the pilot of the third airplane was thinking and feeling.

Regardless of what he was thinking and feeling, he applied full power and released his brakes. Cheers of victory went up from the on-lookers as that forlorn bomber lifted off and climbed slowly into the dark sky. The darkness of the night hid the tears of joy on our cheeks.

Several hours later when the bombers reached Balikpapan, they found the targets obscured by broken clouds. The leader courageously made a wide circle, waiting for a hole to open over the target area.

This maneuver increased the time they were exposed to heavy anti-aircraft fire. Many of the airplanes were hit, and some went down. Losses were heavy, but those brave aircrews delivered their bombs on the refineries and oil wells below. Some of the airplanes were in the air for an incredible 17 hours from take-off to landing. Some ditched at sea. Some crash-landed on an unfinished airstrip on

Morotai Island.

After a few days of intensive recovery efforts another strike was scheduled. Fear-induced illnesses hit some of the aircrews. Some turned in their wings because they didn't believe they could function. Pilots and navigators who normally filled staff positions were pressed into combat roles. Losses again were heavy as the B-24s fought through fierce flak to deliver their bombs.

Before a third strike could be mounted, our reconnaissance aircraft reported a newly scraped-off airfield with 350 Japanese fighter aircraft on it. Not only would the B-24s have to fly too far, too long, and through devastating anti-aircraft fire; but now they would also be attacked by hundreds of fighters. Morale plummeted into the pits.

Lt. Col. Charles Pierce led the third mission. The first burst of flak seen that day exploded inside his open bomb bay. His wingman told me how the airplane disintegrated. I was one of Charlie Pierce's chief admirers. I felt bad that I hadn't flown on his "mission improbable."