JULY 1996 VOLUME 32, NUMBER 7

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FIRST HEAVY BOMBER ATTACK ON JAPAN

THE FIERCE PRIDE OF THE DOOLITTLE RAID, THE SPECTACLE OF THE FIRE BOMBING OF TOKYO, THE INDELIBLE IMAGE OF MUSHROOM CLOUDS OVER HIROSHIMA AND NAGASAKI — THESE ARE THE SALIENT EVENTS BROUGHT TO MIND WHEN ONE VISUALIZES THE MAJOR EVENTS OF THE BOMBING CAMPAIGN, THE LAST, INDEED, BRINGING THE CURTAIN DOWN ON THE ENTIRE WAR. BUT ALL CAMPAIGNS HAVE A BEGINNING, AND SOMETIMES SMALL EVENTS CAN HAVE LASTING IMPORTANCE. THIS IS THE LEGACY OF THE FIRST HEAVY-BOMBER ATTACK ON JAPAN

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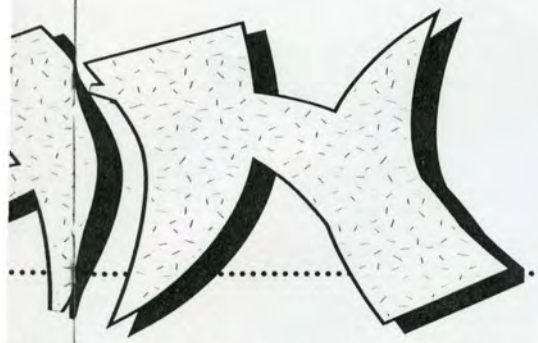
Early model Liberators served faithfully in the harshness of Alaska.



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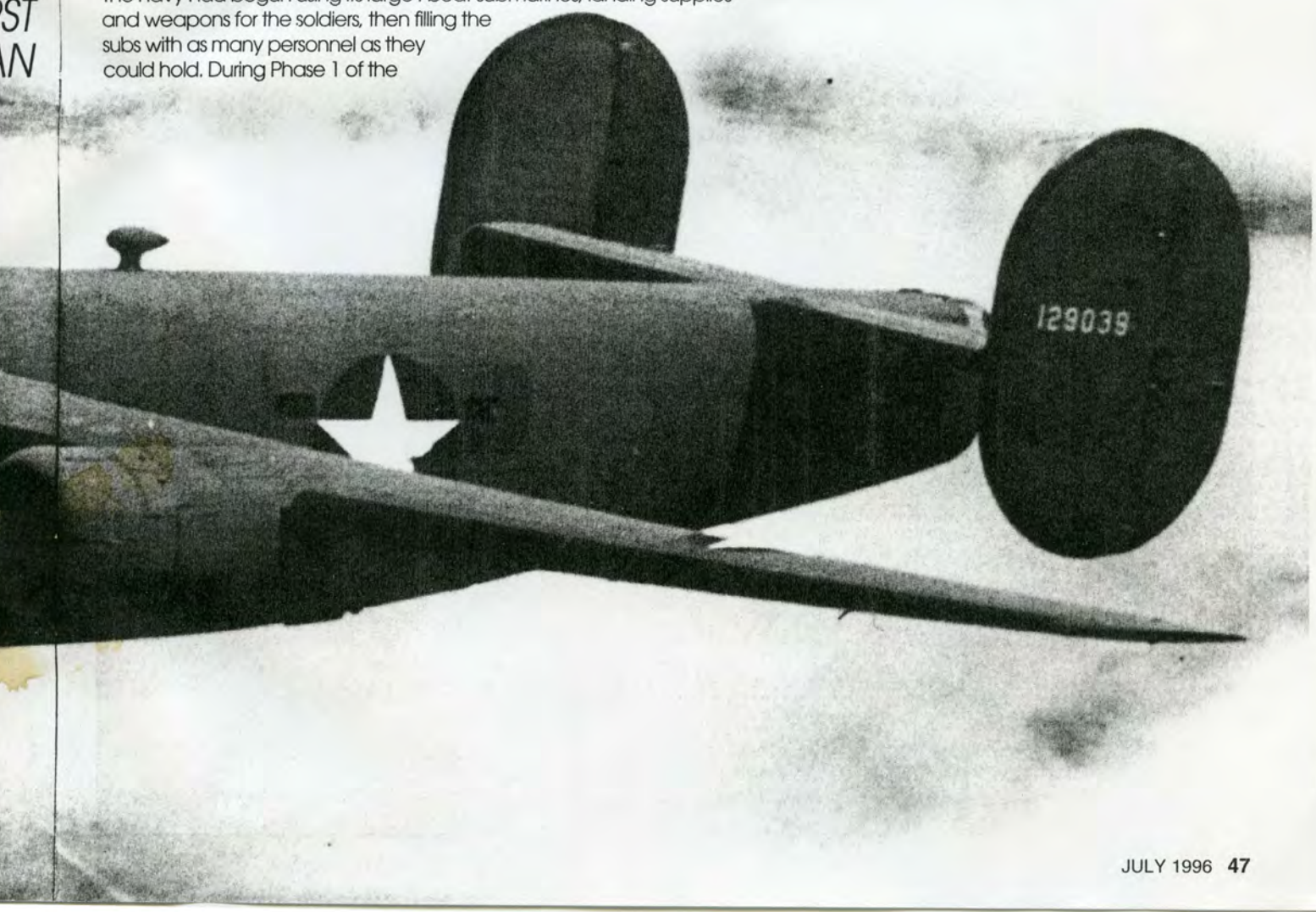
With the capture of Rendova Island on 2 July 1943 and the beginning of the Salamaua campaign, efforts by Allied forces in the South Pacific progressed forward. Troops pushed hard toward Munda, the main Japanese base on New Georgia, and would finally seize it 7 August. On the opposite side of the Pacific, in the far desolate north, the final act in events involving the first invasion of the US since 1812 were being played out. In the Aleutian Islands, which had been invaded by the Japanese 7 June 1942, the Japanese had been destroyed on the chain's westernmost island of Attu during the Battle of Attu. After desperate fighting, the island was declared secure 29 May. All that remained to finish the job in this isolated and forbidding theater was ejecting the Japanese from the American soil of Kiska Island.

With the annihilation of the forces on Attu, Imperial General Headquarters perceived the Kiska garrison's inevitable fate. They had been attempting to surreptitiously evacuate the large force remaining on the island since 30 May. The navy had begun using its large I-boat submarines, landing supplies and weapons for the soldiers, then filling the subs with as many personnel as they could hold. During Phase 1 of the

BY KEVIN DON HUTCHISON

PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE MICHAEL O'LEARY COLLECTION



rescue, or Operation Ke, the submarines had suffered heavy losses in the fog due to accident and hostile actions. The second phase began 2 July with Rear Adm. Masatoni Kimura attempting to rescue the garrison with two cruisers and eight destroyers. Two attempts had been made by 18 July.

Kimura was intimately familiar with the awesome effects of Allied air power. In the Battle of the Bismarck Sea, most of his command of eight transports and eight destroyers were wiped out by Maj. Gen. George Kenney's 5th Air Force. The three-day long attack was the most devastating air attack on ships in the Pacific war, other than the attack on Pearl Harbor. The only hope he saw in succeeding with this impossible mission was relying on heavy fog to conceal his force. His two attempts thus far were plagued by clear weather.

During the Battle of Attu, Japanese Betty bombers had feebly attacked American ships off the island, flying the 1300-mile round-trip from the northernmost Kurile Islands of Shimushu and Paramushiru. With Attu secure and the Kiska invasion imminent, the Americans could not rule out another attack. More importantly, the enemy's attack had demonstrated what the distance between the northern Kuriles and the westernmost Aleutian island now made possible. American heavy

"WITH OVER ONE THOUSAND HOURS OF COMBAT TIME, MAJ. ROBERT 'PAPPY' SPEER WOULD LEAD THE FIRST HEAVY BOMBER ATTACK AGAINST THE HOMELAND IN WWII"

Between bouts of boredom and terror, there were few recreational activities in the Aleutians. This P-40 pilot is enjoying a patrol flight in a USN Catalina.

Ground crews battle to retrieve a Catalina from an Aleutian snow storm. Weather was always a constant factor for the combat crews.

bombers could strike what had hitherto been the Japanese rear lines and impede any further attacks. What had been a safe area supporting the Japanese effort, had now become a target which would be struck repeatedly until the end of the war.

Little was known, however, about the islands of Paramushiru and Shimushu. Except for scattered information from documents found on the battlefield; POW, signals, and Soviet intelligence; submarine reports, and an old copy of the *Asiatic Pilot*, the islands remained a mystery. Most importantly, information vital to a safe and effective aerial mission was lacking. The altitude and location of terrain features, approach routes to targets, antiaircraft positions, enemy air strength — all of this information was lacking or in fragmented form. It took the foresight of a 35-year-old Reserve 2nd Lieutenant from Middletown, New York, to assemble the intelligence over the Kuriles. Due to boredom, 2nd Lt. Larry Reineke plotted the intelligence that was available on a map he obtained from Navy friends. By the time the 11th Air Force concluded that a Kurile mission should be flown, Reineke had the information prepared. Unfortunately, he had forgotten to inform his superiors.

The intelligence staff of the 11th Bombardment Command had told everyone that little information was available. When Reineke briefed the bomber crews of his fairly detailed intelligence assessment, his superiors were embarrassed. Due to his initiative, Reineke was punished. He soon found himself supervising the pulling of muskeg to prepare the advanced airfield at Shemya.

On 10 July, six Consolidated B-24s and eight North American B-25s prepared to make the first attempt to bomb Japan with heavy bombers, and the first strike on Japan since the Doolittle Raid. Just as the mission was to be launched, however, the B-24s were ordered to attack Japanese merchant ships that had been spotted well south of the Komandorski Islands. Due to fog, the eight B-25s made a time-distance approach from the Soviet Kapochetta Mountains dropping their 32 500-pound bombs on where they thought was the Kataoka Naval Base on Shimushu. While no results were noted nor opposition seen, this was the first land-based air attack against the Japanese Home islands in World War Two. Sharing the frustration of many missions to come, the crews returned to Attu Island and the speculation of the *New York Times*.

The first attempt to bomb Japan with heavy bombers was flown the next day. After flying to just north of Shimushu, six B-24s were forced back by a heavy cloud front existing from the sea's surface up to 6000 feet. The bombers became separated and mission leader Maj. Robert Speer flying B-24 *Mush* aborted the mission. With a strong desire to be the first combat crew to bomb Japan, Maj. Edward Lass and his men proceeded nearly to Shimushu's coastline. Then, in peasoup fog, they were forced back to Attu.

Operating conditions for the aircraft were hazardous on the ground as well as in the air. This heavily damaged Mitchell is seen being removed after tearing out its gear in a botched landing attempt.

The Japanese, though probably unaware of the American air attacks, were aware of mounting pressure on both Kiska and the Kurile Islands. Since 1 July, there had been four aerial bombings of Kiska, five US Navy bombardments (including a heavy 22-minute bombardment on 6 July), three merchant ships destroyed (two aerial victories, one submarine), and on 15 July the Kurile campaign was begun with the first bombardment of the chain by the fleet submarine *Narwhal*. the predominate Japanese concern, however, was the evacuation of Kiska. As if to emphasize this concern, at Kataoka R.Adm. Tasku Nakazawa, 5th Fleet Chief of Staff, and his staff officers severely criticized R.Adm. Kimura the day of the *Narwhal* bombardment. They challenged him for supposedly not considering the fuel shortage and pursuing an all-out rescue mission despite clear skies. The staff officers even alluded to possible cowardice on Kimura's part. It is not recorded if R.Adm. Kimura remonstrated, citing his experience in the South Pacific. His profound respect for air power, however, cannot be doubted.

Piloting an LB-30 bomber on 8 June 1942, Capt. Robert Speer and his copilot Lt. Frederick Ramputi had discovered that the Japanese had invaded Kiska Island. This report began the Aleutian aerial campaign. Three days later, accompanied by four B-24s, Speer and Ramputi participated in the first bombing mission to Kiska. Now, after 25 months in the theater and with over one thousand hours of combat time, Maj. Robert "Pappy" Speer would lead the first heavy bomber attack against the Homeland in WWII. Maj. Ramputi, commander of the 21st Bombardment Squadron, had been selected by Speer to lead B Flight. There would be six B-24s.

Staging through Alexai Field, Attu from Davis Field, Adak, the Liberators took off from Attu at 06:32. A and B flights consisting of three planes each proceeded in two groups on course 236 degrees flying at an

altitude of 3000 feet. Through haze which occasionally cleared to CAVU (ceiling and visibility unlimited) the bombers approached the Soviet Kamchatka peninsula. Then, with the sun on their left they turned south following the coastline, and began to climb to 12,000 feet.

Viewing the rugged Kamchatka peninsula to the right, the crew rubbed their eyes, seeing trees, many for the first time in a year. The temperature was a warm 68 degrees as all gun positions test fired their guns, then they passed over the Shimushu's Kokutan Cape, the northernmost tip of Japan. Sighting the cape's lighthouse and the western coast of Shimushu through "herringbone" fog, Speer led A Flight south over the island as Ramputi headed toward the southwestern coast of the island. Using Reineke's information they lined up on where they thought the targets would be. This was made all the more urgent by a fog bank to the southwest that already had obscured part of Paramushiru from observation.

The Aleutian flyers were most impressed by the size of the targets. Experienced with the pinpoint targets on Attu and Kisha, Kataoka Naval Base covered many acres with warehouses, barracks, oil storage tanks and canneries. American gunners watched the feather wakes of two float planes on Bettobu Lake just north of Kataoka as A flight dropped their bombs on the new runway and surrounding buildings northeast of the harbor.

Meanwhile, Maj. Ramputi and his B Flight turned south, then east, over the Paramushiru straits. Their target being shipping, Ramputi could only see the vessels in the straits by looking directly down through the cloud cover. By the time the Americans had observed potential targets, they had already passed them by. The height of the fishing season, below them were hundreds of small fishing boats, eight or nine transports and unknown to Ramputi, with R.Adm. Kimura's rescue force in the around the straits, a reinforced Japanese Fifth Fleet. No choice was left to them. There was no other option than to circle to the north, then west, and make their bombing run down the length of the Paramushiru straits.

Ramputi's crew, all volunteers and combat veterans, had severe trepidations over the course of this action. They were fearful that by now the ships and anti-aircraft positions would be alerted and perhaps the Japanese fighters would have a chance at them. On the first Kiska mission the mission leader had exploded directly in front of Speer and Ramputi. Only by quickly pulling off in a tight circle had they been saved from flak bursts immediately in their path. Now, W/O W.L. Lamberth, Ramputi's bombardier, along with another B-24, laid their bombs across seven merchant ships and smaller vessels in Kataoka Harbor.

The third bomber of B Flight (Maj. Richard Lavin) was unable to get its bombs away, facing the ignominy of carrying them all the way back to Alexai Point.

Taking the Japanese apparently by surprise, no enemy fighter opposition was to be seen and only a desultory four to five bursts of anti-aircraft fire were observed. Despite

"IN THE FAR DESOLATE NORTH, THE FINAL ACT IN EVENTS INVOLVING THE FIRST INVASION OF THE US SINCE 1812 WERE BEING PLAYED OUT"

Living conditions for American aircrews in the Aleutians were very grim.

Accidents were a daily occurance. This PV-1 went off the runway and exploded.

the target being large, Speer missed the barracks area, only the outer edge suffering damage. Though one rear gunner reported a hit by another plane on a transport, the best that was claimed for the anti-shipping mission was near misses. All crew members hoped the explosions were close enough to shatter ship boilers or blow their seams.

Lockheed PV-1 Venturas patrol over the harsh mountains of the Aleutian Chain.

While the bombs that were dropped caused little damage, the intelligence gathered from the crew debriefing and nearly 200 photographs taken was an intelligence bonanza. Nearly the entire western and southern coast of Shimushu, as well as the northeast coast of Paramushiru was filmed. Airfield construction on Shimushu and Paramushiru was noted, as well as much building activity at Kataoka Naval Base and the Kashiwabara Army Staging Area on Paramushiru.

Fundamentally, the mission, or the "reconnaissance in force," prepared the way for all the air missions to come. What had been theorized, had been proven correct — that the Japanese were involved in a major military buildup of the Northern Kurile Islands. The first heavy bomber mission against Japan launched a new offensive phase in the North Pacific that would continue to the war's end. While the theater would not become one of the primary routes to Japan, the Japanese were regularly threatened by the US until August 1945. They were forced to maintain vigilance and defend against the possibility of the Kuriles becoming "unsinkable aircraft carriers" or staging areas for the final offensive on the Homeland.

And the importance of this theater continues today for, indeed, it is the only WWII theater which is active. At the end of the war the Soviet Union seized the Kurile Islands beginning a conflict that has yet to be resolved. No peace treaty between Russia and Japan ending WWII has ever been signed. Challenges and armed threats have continued for 50 years, and as recently as 15 August 1994 one of the most serious episodes in the dispute occurred. Russian coast guard vessels fired on two Japanese fishing boats gravely wounding at least one fisherman. The hostilities that six B-24s initiated all those long years ago still flames up and festers.

On 1 August 1943, R.Adm. Kimura had entered the Paramushiru straits with the 5183 Kiska evacuees. Despite American aerial and sea searches, on 29 July his force had touched at Kiska Harbor while two destroyers guarded the mouth, and in 55 minutes loaded all the garrison onto his rescue vessels. This action ended the Aleutian campaign, a campaign which approximately 8500 Japanese troops had diverted 144,000 Americans and Canadians from more active theaters in the south. Against overwhelming odds he had accomplished one of the most daring rescue of WWII.

On 2 October 1992, "Pappy" Speer and Fred "Ramp" Ramputi were together again, this time to symbolically honor fallen comrades and remember past deeds. The occasion was the dedication of 13 bronze squadron plaques of the Eleventh Air Force at the United States Air Force Academy. Former commanders of two of the premier Aleutian heavy bomber squadrons, Col. Speer (36th Bombardment Squadron) and Col. Ramputi (21st Bombardment Squadron) took a quiet moment and thought of friends killed, experiences treasured, and close calls.

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