

Staff Sergeant James C. Stephens Jr.

11th Bombardment Group, 42nd Squadron



Story of the picture contained on the cover:

James C. Stephens Jr. was killed in action on February 1, 1943 while on a bombing mission over the Northern Solomon Islands. In November 1942, he had been on leave with the rest of his crew in Auckland, New Zealand where he had the picture taken in a photographer's studio. James had written home about having the picture taken.

After his father James C. Stephens Sr. received word that his son was missing in action, he wrote to the mayor of Auckland telling him that his son had been reported missing in action and that his son had had his picture taken in a studio somewhere in the city, but the pictures had never been mailed to James's home address.

The mayor of Auckland had recently lost his own son in combat and had such empathy for James Sr. that he sent people out to all of the studios in the city to locate the picture. Fortunately the picture was found and quickly sent home to James's family.

A Short Biography of
Staff Sergeant James C. Stephens Jr.

FOREWORD

It has been a long journey, but finally our family may have some closure on the disappearance of our brother James C. Stephens Jr.

My father knew that his son was a crew member on a B-17 and that he had been a survivor of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, but as the war progressed he knew little of the missions that Jimmie was involved in or even where he was stationed.

When our father received word that his oldest son, James C. Stephens Jr., had been declared missing in action, he would have received the news through a telegram from the War Department. It is devastating for a parent to lose a son or daughter under any circumstances. During war time a parent has to constantly think about the possibility that they may never see their loved one again, but that kind of expectation does not necessarily reduce the shock when the notification comes:

“The Secretary of War requires me to express his deep regret

It is unlikely that there were many details in the telegram. There may have been some words to the effect that his son was missing in action, but little else.

Like all parents, the sense of loss always stayed with him. As a child of about six or seven I stood beside my father one night as we gazed up at the stars on a bright summer evening. As my father looked off to the west where the evening star appears he said, more to himself than to me; “Maybe that is where Jimmie is now.” The military had never given details about the disappearance of Jimmie’s aircraft and our father wondered about the fate of his son until the day he died. The rest of our family has continued until the present to speculate about the events surrounding Jimmie’s disappearance. Unfortunately, all of Jimmie’s records were lost over the years.

Sometime around about the summer of 1943 a military aircraft arrived at the small dirt landing strip that served as our community’s airport in Paonia, Colorado. Military officers deplaned from the aircraft and presented our father with some of Jimmie’s decorations. It was a very short ceremony, and it must have been depressing for our father. He was left with a few medals, but very little information about the disappearance of his son.

Our father very carefully put all of Jimmie’s military records that he had collected into a single book to retain them in one place, but both parents died in the 1960’s and the location of that book is unknown. All of the siblings were scattered over the continental US and far away from home so there was no one watching over those records when our parents passed away. To complicate things Jimmie’s official military records were burned up in a fire at the government storage facility in St. Louis.

Our family begins to accumulate new information 2006:

Recently my oldest son, Jimmie's nephew, Matt Stephens and Matt's wife Cindy began an internet search for records that might shed some light on Jimmie's military career. Little by little they began to put together a few pieces. They found through the American Battle Monuments Commission web site that Jimmie is memorialized in the Tablets of the Missing at the Manila American Cemetery. Jimmie's rank, service number, squadron/group and his awards were also contained in that information.

In December 2006, my wife Margaret and I journeyed from St. Augustine, Florida down to Key West to visit with Matt, Cindy and their boys who were there for a short vacation. When we arrived Matt handed me a copy of a book entitled 11th Bomber Group (H). We had been able to identify that group as the one that Jimmie had been attached to in WWII.

I hardly had time to look at the front of the book when Matt said, "I have the phone number of someone that you need to talk to about Jimmie's war records". With that short introduction he pulled out his cell phone, dialed a number and handed me the phone and said to me, "ask for Phil". I was near the stammering point when the person at the other end answered. I had no idea who I was talking to and the person at the other end had no idea who I was. I had a foggy idea that he has something to do with the 11th Bomber Group and probably had something to do with the book, but beyond that bit of meager information, I didn't have a clue.

It turned out that Matt had gotten the name of the secretary/treasurer of the 11th Bomber Group, Phil Gudenschwager. Phil had been associated with the group for many years because his brother was a B-17 crew member. I started my conversation with Phil by giving my name and telling him that I was looking for information about my brother who was in the 11th Bomber Group, and my son had gotten Phil's phone number while doing research on that air group. After I told him that my brother had been declared missing in action while on a mission in a B-17 somewhere in the Solomon Islands on February 1, 1943, Phil immediately began to warm to the conversation. He said, "Yes I can tell you something about that mission" and this is the story that he related to me.

Phil's brother, Lester, was in the 11th Bomber Group, 42nd Squadron, the same squadron to which Jimmie had been assigned. Phil began to research his brother's disappearance in the 1990's when he found a reference to a flight of B-17's that were on a bombing mission on February 1, 1943. At the time of this mission there were numerous Japanese transports in the vicinity of Bougainville, an island that lay about 500 or 600 kilometers to the northwest of Guadalcanal. It was assumed that the Japanese were sending more troops in an attempt to push the American forces off the island. According to Phil, just the opposite was true, and the Japanese had given up on Guadalcanal and were in the process of removing their starving troops from the island.

On February 1st a group of nine B-17's was sent on a mission to bomb the Japanese troop transports at Shortland Harbor in the northern end of the Solomon Islands. Four of the B-17's were from the 42nd squadron. Five were from a different squadron. The B-17's were given explicit instructions in which they were told which way to turn after making their bombing runs so that they would meet their fighter cover. The first five airplanes made their bombing run and turned toward their fighter cover. The bombers from the 42nd

squadron inexplicably aborted their run and turned into the harbor at Bougainville, opposite the direction which would have taken them toward their fighter cover. They not only began to take fire from shore batteries, but were attacked by three squadrons of Japanese Zero's. The B-17 "Flying Fortress" had quite a reputation for survival ability. They were heavily armored and their construction and aerodynamics were such that they could literally be riddled with enemy machine gun fire and still return to base. On the other hand, the Zero's had no armor, and very little ability for survival if hit by a blast from one of the 50 caliber machine guns on the B-17. (Jimmie was the radioman on his B-17. During air combat he would have taken a position at one of the 50 caliber machine gun stations.) Normally the Zero's avoided any sort of sustained combat with the B-17's. In the case of the combat on February 1st, the overwhelming ratio of over twelve to one was in the favor of those fifty Zero's.

After making their bombing run, the four B-17's made a turn in the direction toward their base of operations, and got as far as the coast line of Choiseul Island where the air battle was observed by an Australian Coast Watcher. The coast watcher reported that the B-17's were holding their own when they passed over his observation point. Phil told me that from what he has been able to piece together that battle was very likely the most intense air battle of the entire war. Only one of the four planes, the plane piloted by a Captain Thomas, returned to base. The other three planes did not make it back, and it appeared that none of the surviving members of the returning crew observed any of other three planes going down.

One bit of information that I would like to relate in this story is how Matt came to get Phil's name. Matt had been doing some research on the 11th Bomber Group on the internet when he came across the minutes of the last meeting of that group. Phil's name was attached to the meeting information, but there was no contact number. Matt called the hotel where the meeting had taken place and asked if he could get Phil's number or any contact number for persons involved with the meeting. After being passed through several levels of management he finally reached an employee who said they would try to help. Apparently that person was so impressed with his story of trying to find information on his uncle who had died in the Pacific War over sixty years ago that they felt obligated to help out. The next day Matt got a phone message from a contact at an air force base near Washington, DC. The 11th Bomber Group is now a retired group, but the retired groups are all attached to some active base. The contact at the Air Force base gave Matt Phil's phone number.

Phil suggested that I purchase a copy of *Gray Geese Calling*, which was a history of the 11th Bombardment Group, and a copy of *Guadalcanal*, which is thought by some to be the definitive account of that battle. Both books have a short description of the Feb. 1, 1943 B-17 attack on Shortland Harbor. I received a great deal more information from Phil than we had in the past, and I felt that it was very important because it began to fill in the story of our brother's disappearance. The books that Phil had suggested supported his information, but did not give any more details of the downing of the bombers, and I decided to keep looking for more information. I felt that somewhere there must be an eye witness report from the crew of the single bomber that made it back to base or from the shore watcher or interviews with island natives.

After reading *Guadalcanal* I attempted to contact the author through the books publisher. The author had listed three references for his description of that mission and I wanted to get more information on those references. My attempt to contact the author was unsuccessful, but in the mean time I contacted the National Archives where the Marine War Diaries are kept. The archives provided me with copy of the referenced Marine War Diary entry and further informed me that the material in the second reference did not appear to relate to the attack on Shortland Harbor. The third reference was taken from the Japanese Defense Agency War History series. I have since written to the National Diet Library in Japan to see if I can get any pertinent information through that source, but as of this writing have not received a response.

A request was sent to the Air Force Historical Research Agency for copies of the Missing Air Crew Reports. Those reports did not contain much new information, and some of the information was misleading since it indicated that the destination of the mission was Munda Point and that was the last know location of the aircraft. There was a list of the crew names and their serial numbers as well as the name and address of the next of kin. At this point I had little new information other than what had been passed on to me through my conversation with Phil.

Annual Meeting of the 11th Bombardment Group; December 2007

Phil encouraged our family to attend the annual reunion of the 11th Bombardment Group which was to be held in Hawaii in December of 2007. On December 5th I left from Florida and met Matt and his wife Cindy later that day in Portland, Oregon for the flight to Hawaii

After an all night flight to Oahu we established our base of operations at the Resort Quest Hotel which is located across the shoreline boulevard from Waikiki Beach where we joined the veterans and family members of the 11th Bombardment group. Among those in attendance at the meeting were about ten of the bomber group's veterans. We did our best to identify the positions of each member and their approximate time of service in the group. Among the attendees were four Pearl Harbor survivors. None were from Jimmie's 42nd Squadron and most entered the theatre of war in a time period from late 1943 until almost the end of the war in 1945.

On the morning of our first day on Oahu, December 6th, we made a group tour of the Punch Bowl National Military Cemetery where the Pearl Harbor survivors laid a wreath at the foot of the beautiful monument that has been constructed there to honor those who have fallen in their country's defense in the Northern Pacific portion of WWII, Korean, Viet Nam and Desert Storm wars. At the top of the 77 stairs, which lead up to a terracotta tiled picture display of the theatres of military action in WWII, stands the large figure of a woman who lost five sons in the Civil War. Under that figure is carved the words that Abraham Lincoln wrote to the bereaved mother of those sons: "The solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom". Our day continued with a tour of Honolulu and ended with a tour of the Army, Navy Museum at Battery Randolph, a former artillery installation that served as a coastal defense from the later part of the 19th century until after WWII.

At 6:15 AM December 7th, we were off for Hickam AFB (Hickam Field in the days of Pearl Harbor) for flag raising, wreath presentation and a breakfast banquet at the officer's quarters. Torrential rains came down during the ceremony. The color guard, bugler and those charged with carrying wreaths were drenched during the downpour. Luckily we were under cover so we didn't suffer from the elements. Matt and I walked out into the court yard where the ceremony had been held. The court yard was in the center of what had been the original Air Corps barracks and now served as the headquarters of the Pacific Air Force Command. Pock marks from the Japanese machine gun and cannon bullets are still clearly visible on the walls of the court yard. They have been left there as a reminder of the situation that our country was suddenly forced into on December 7, 1941.

After the ceremony we were taken to the officer's club where we were treated to breakfast. Among those in attendance were active Air Force personnel who were interspersed among the tables. After breakfast, one of officer's wives gave a brief talk about the history of Hickam AFB. She was deeply involved in preserving the history of that base, and was particularly interested in the 11th Bombardment Group history preservation. She had been instrumental in establishing the Heritage Room located on the base to house all of the historical documents and memorabilia relating to that group. After her talk, she presented each veteran with a lei. Another of the officer's wives, who was a native Hawaiian, had carefully made the lei with a design which would signify each of the wearer's status. The four Pearl Harbor survivors were at the top of the order with a dark color lei with orange interspersed. The other veterans were presented with bright yellow lei and the widows of group members yet another design.

After breakfast we proceeded to the Heritage Room where we were given about an hour to view the displayed material. Between the three family members we found a picture of Jimmie's 42nd Squadron taken just after the Pearl Harbor attack and two flight reports from December 1942 in which he was listed as a crew member. Although Jimmie was listed as being in the squadron picture we could not identify him as there were just too many faces to scan.

Over the next two days the reunion group toured the Pacific Aviation Museum on Ford Island, the Arizona Memorial and the Battleship Missouri. The Arizona Memorial occupies some of our Country's most hallowed ground and always inspires a sense of reverence for all those who enter upon that structure. Many wreaths from foreign countries, Daughters of the American Revolution and many veterans' organizations from around the country were still on display from the December 7th memorial service.

There were many in the group who were children of the original members. Phil Gudenschwager and I both had brothers who were members of the 11th Bombardment Group. Ed Lavin, who is a lawyer from San Antonio, Texas, was there looking for information about his uncle who was declared MIA near Choiseul Island; in the same area that Jimmy was lost. He and his wife were going on to the Philippines where the memorial markers are located for both Jimmy and his uncle at the American Military Cemetery in Manila. Ed volunteered to lay a wreath there to honor all of our fallen family members.

On the last evening we returned to Hickam for a farewell dinner at the officers club. That evening airmen from the base were dispersed at various tables to act as hosts. They were great young people, men and women. They had also acted as hosts for our earlier breakfast at the base. We were fortunate to have three talented individuals at our table. One was a linguist who would be a Chinese interpreter; two were Air Controllers who would be imbedded into army units and direct Air Force aircraft cover during action against enemy forces. One had already served a term in Iraq. Our grandson Dillon, can rightfully be proud to serve with these young people. They are the cream of the crop.

Time and again military persons and civilians would walk up to the veterans, shake their hands and tell them how much they appreciated their sacrifices. I'm sure it brought tears to their eyes. I know it did to mine. At the last dinner I remarked to one of the veterans that he must have shaken more hands and signed more autographs than he ever had before in his life.



11th Bombardment Group Reunion picture taken December 2007 at Hickam AFB -
Front row seated L>R: Dick David, 26th Sqd., Neal Siebenbruner 431st Sqd., Ellsworth Jung, 26th Sqd., Robert W. MacPhail, 431st Sqd., Phil Schwartzman 98th Sqd., Back standing L>R: John Weller 26th Sqd., Doyle V. Ebel, 26th Sqd., Colin N. Jones, 26th Sqd., James D. Cuzzolina, 98th Sqd., Walter E. Dillman, 42nd Sqd., Melvin A. Engeman, 98th Sqd., John E. Coyle, 431st Sqd., David D. Luce, 98th Sqd., Leonard D. Ellis 26th Sqd., Ralph E. Nasland, 72nd Sqd., Henry J. Temme 431st Sqd. Jung and Naslund were B-17 crew members the others were B-24 crewmen.

Finally, the information we were looking for:

The reunion was a very fulfilling event for the three of our family who attended, and yet we had been unable to gain any contacts or information that would shed more light on the B-17 crew members who were lost on Feb. 1, 1943. Fortunately, however, after returning from the reunion I received an email from one of the other reunion attendees, Bob Douel. His father was a member of that group and Bob has developed a keen interest in the group and functions as its president for the 2008 year. In his email Bob informed me that he had seen a posting on the ArmyAirForce.com web site looking for family members of crews from the three lost B-17's.

Through that posting I was able to make contact with Arnold Guerrero, grand nephew of 1st Lieutenant Joaquin Castro who was the co-pilot on Jimmie's B-17. During several email exchanges Arnold sent to me his great Uncle's mission logs and entries from his diary in December 1942. Arnold also had been in contact with Hal Hall whose brother, Captain Earl O. Hall, was the pilot of the aircraft.

Hal Hall and his family have been collecting the history of his brother Earl over several years and Hal has deposited this collection in the Cushing Memorial Library, Texas A&M University. Like most families of the lost crew members they have been on a long search for more information about the disappearance of their loved ones. In the late 1990's Earl's sister Vela asked that the family continue the search to determine where her brother had died and what had happened on February 1, 1943. After much diligent work over a period of several years Hal came across an A-2 Report which appeared to contain information about the loss of three bombers. Hal sent a request to Air Force Historical Research Agency at Maxwell AFB for a copy of the A-2 report and in August of 2007 he received the requested copy.

There finally in that A-2 report was the information that described the mission, air battle, flight path and approximate area where all three of the bombers were shot down. The information was taken from the eyewitness accounts of the one surviving bomber pilot and crew.

It has been a long journey, but now with the discovery of the information in the A-2 Report our family will have some sense of closure. The story of Jimmie's last mission is contained in that short report and we have found his final resting place.

With Hal's permission I have placed a copy of Earl O. Hall's biography in the Heritage Room at Hickam AFB along with this short biography of James C. Stephens. I have included a transcription of the A-2 Report in the following biography of Staff Sargent James C. Stephens Jr., as well as a map constructed by Hal Hall from the information in the A-2 reports that shows the flight path of the B-17 bombers on February 1, 1943 and the approximate location where Captain Hall's aircraft went down.

Paul S. Stephens
Saint Augustine, Florida
April 2008

James C. Stephens Jr.

James was referred to as James C. Stephens Jr. in his military records; however he was actually James C. Stephens III. His grandfather, James C. Stephens, was a Civil War veteran, and a member of the Indiana 20th Volunteer Regiment. He was a survivor of most of the major battles in the Eastern Campaign including: The Peninsula Campaign, Second Manassas, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg and The Wilderness. He was wounded at Spotsylvania Courthouse and sent home after his three year enlistment. James's nephew, Matt, often remarks about the coincidence of a Gettysburg survivor having a grandson who was a Pear Harbor survivor.

Jimmie, as he has always fondly been referred to by family members was born on December 18, 1916 in Boulder, Colorado. Jimmie was the oldest of four children. May was born in 1918, Frank in 1920 and a third boy Lyle, named for his mother, born in 1925. Jimmie would have been eight years old when his mother, Lyle, died during the birth of her fourth child. It must have been a miserable time for him. At that point the family was living in Ralston, a small town near Omaha, Nebraska a location that was remote from other family members. Lyle's obituary mentioned that her husband, James C. Stephens Sr., was the Industrial Secretary for the YMCA.



Jimmie's mother Lyle Johnston at about the age of 18

Around 1926, James C. Stephens Sr., returned to Paonia, Colorado to be closer to the children's grandparents, William and May Johnston. Shortly thereafter, James Sr. became acquainted with Eloise Dawes, a resident of Paonia. James Sr. was never one to waste too much time on sentimentality and according to Eloise, after they had a short courtship he said to her; "The children need a mother, would you marry me?" She accepted the offer and in January 1927 they were married. George A. (Art) was born to the second marriage in 1930 and Paul (author of this biography) in 1940.

Based upon conversations with Frank and Art it appears that Mother Eloise found it difficult to handle Jimmie. He had a rebellious streak and there were many confrontations between the two of them. According to Frank, James Sr. eventually found a place for Jimmie to live and work as a farm hand in his later teenage years because of the conflicts that occurred between him and Mother Eloise. Frank remembers that Jimmie left the farm job before high school graduation and just disappeared for a time. That would have been about 1935, during the first half of the depression. He attended a world's fair or exposition while wondering around the country. There were several world fairs and expositions that occurred during that part of the decade. There is no record of which fair Jimmie attended.

1935 - San Diego International Exposition

1936 - Cleveland Great Lakes Exposition; Dallas Texas Centennial Central Exposition

1937 - Cleveland Great Lakes Exposition; Dallas Texas Centennial Central Exposition;
Miami Pan American Fair

1939 - New York World Fair



James C. Stephens Jr. (Jimmie)

The previous photograph appears to be one that Jimmie would have had taken before graduation from high school. Normally those pictures are taken during the early part of the senior year so that they can be put into the yearbook. If Jimmie left his farm job before graduation it was likely sometime during his senior year. Before joining the Army Air Corps he attended the University of Colorado for a short time. If he did not have a high school diploma he must have been able to persuade the university that he had adequate education to study for a bachelor's degree.

According to his brother Art, Jimmie was an avid outdoorsman, and he was an accomplished rock climber. In the early 1920's a local resident, Charlie Phillips, had started homesteading the land near what today is known as the West Elk Wilderness in Western Colorado. Jimmie and Ledo Phillips, Charlie's son, along with some other friends would snowshoe or ski into the old homestead in the winter months. That would have been quite a trek back in those days and it is likely that they would have camped out in the homesteader's cabin that still stands today on the Phillip's homestead.

I was born after Jimmie left home to join the service. All of the information that I recorded above came from conversations with family members. Some of those conversations were with Mother Eloise; others were with brothers Frank and Art.



James C. Stephens Jr. back right; siblings Frank back left, Lyle center, May and Arthur front, James C. Stephens Sr. and Mother Eloise Stephens

The previous photograph was likely taken during Jimmie's last visit home, circa 1938 or 1939. His Certificate of Military Service says that he joined the Air Corps in November 1939. Mother Eloise related the story about Jimmie and Frank being in a lighthearted mood, they clowned around a lot, and made everyone laugh. That was the last time that any of the family saw Jimmie. Sometime later he sent word that he had joined the Army Air Corps.

The location where Jimmie took basic training is unknown. After basic training he was sent to Hickam Field near Honolulu, Hawaii. A monthly payroll roster for February 29, 1940 found in the records in the Heritage Room at Hickam AFB, lists James C. Stephens as a PFC. It would appear that he was sent to Hickam Field immediately after his basic training. According to Art, Jimmie had gone out early on the morning of December 7, 1941 to do some mountain climbing. It was probably fortunate that he was away from the airfield at the time of the Japanese attacks on the naval ships and Hickam Field.

History of the 11th Bombardment Group

The following information comes from a couple of published sources: *Grey Geese Calling* is a history of the 11th Bombardment Group Heavy in the Pacific from 1940 to 1945 and *Guadalcanal* by Richard B. Frank which provides a history of the assault on that island.

The 11th Bomb Group was activated on February 1, 1940 at Hickam Field. Initially the group's aircraft were made up of smaller and older B-18 bombers. In early 1941, the first B-17 Flying Fortresses arrived. The new organization was composed of Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron, 14th, 26th, 42nd Bombardment Squadrons and the 50th Reconnaissance Squadron. On December 7, 1941 the Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron suffered most heavily from the Japanese attack. Of 350 men in the organization there were 243 casualties. Sixteen of these men were killed and 50 totally disabled.

Jimmie was assigned to the 42nd Squadron. The original unit was made up of men contributed by other squadrons. Since the country was not on a war time footing at that point most of the men of the squadron had enlisted over a period of many years and were making a career of the army. Some of those in the unit probably had military careers that went back to the First World War. The US military had languished since that war and it seems obvious that the Roosevelt Administration was not troubled by the events in the Far East, and had made no attempts to improve the armed forces.

The squadron was designated as a "heavy bombardment group" after the arrival of the B17's. The men of the 42nd had not seen the aircraft before its arrival at Hickam and the aircraft Tech Orders (Tech Orders among other things contain the maintenance manuals.) did not arrive until after the Forts were assigned. Squad members were awed by the new

additions and spent most of their time becoming acquainted with their new charges, which they affectionately referred to as “Boeing Bitches”.

Nine men were killed and twenty wounded in the 42nd Squadron during the attack on December 7th. The Japanese apparently knew exactly where each plane was located because empty hangers were untouched. One B-17 and one B-18 was all that could be salvaged and put together from the remains of the shattered aircraft. All of the military units had to start the process of regrouping and rebuilding. On February 5th those Air Corps units in the Hawaiian Islands, primarily of the 11th and 5th Bombardment Groups, were designated the Seventh Air Force.



11th Bombardment Group, 42nd Squadron - According to information found in the Heritage Room at Hickam AFB, this photo was taken a few days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and Hickam Field. (Photo supplied by Greg Heilman whose father, Raymond Heilman, is in the second row, second from left.)

The Battle of Midway took place between the 3rd and 6th of June. It was believed that the Japanese, after attacking and taking that island, planned to attack and take the Hawaiian Islands. Stopping the Japanese at Midway was, therefore crucial. The available planes of the 42nd Squadron flew to Midway to lend support. No details of the squadron's activities there were ever written down.

While the aircraft were off at Midway the squadron's base was moved from Hickam to Kaneohe Point on the east coast of Oahu. The reference material suggests that the move was made to allow the unit to assume a camouflaged existence, making it difficult for enemy forces to locate their position. Unlike Hickam Field, the facilities there were very Spartan, and consisted mainly of wooden shacks.

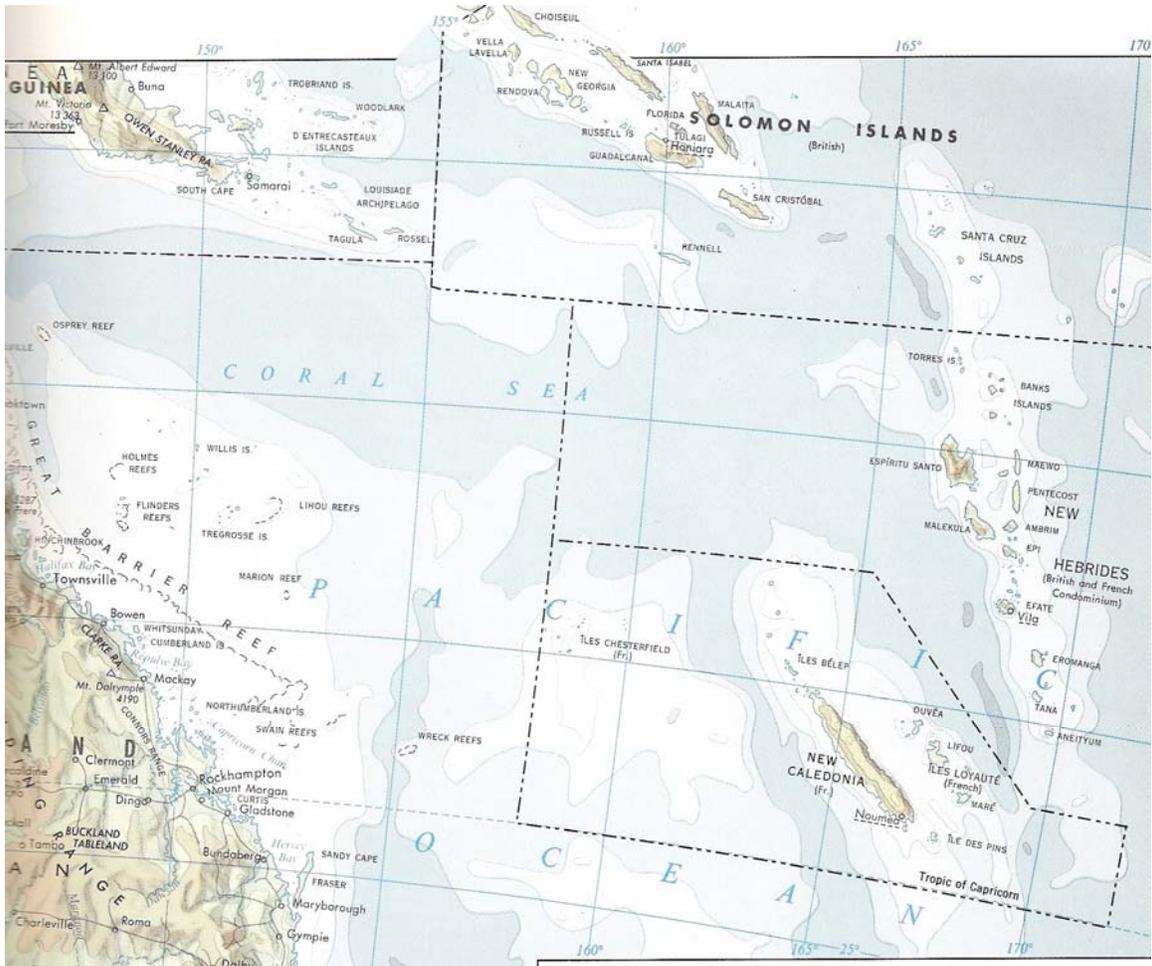
Shortly after July 11th, the squadron's aircraft left Hawaii and arrived at their forward positions on July 22nd. (More details of that transfer will be provided later.) Those forward bases were scattered over hundreds of miles in the South Pacific. Their headquarters was established near Plaines des Gaiacs on the western side of New Caledonia. Other elements were stationed at Efate, about 300 miles to the north east of New Caledonia and Nandi in the Fiji Islands which was another 400 miles east of Efate (see map next page).

The war had, to that point, primarily been a defensive one, but it was quickly being turned over to an offensive one. The US began by attacking the southern end of the Solomon Islands to prevent Japanese attacks on Australia. By August 11th the squadron had flown 71 sorties consisting of bombing, search, patrol and photo reconnaissance missions. The Marines had landed on Guadalcanal in early August and with that assault the tempo of bombing missions continued to increase. During September an increase in Japanese naval strength was noted and many strikes were directed at ships. Ships were a particularly difficult target for bombers because of their maneuverability. According to *Grey Geese Calling*, a giant four-engine flying boat had also been shot down.

By October, missions were being flown out of Efate and Espiritu Santo and were reaching into the northern parts of the Solomon Islands. Within a short period of time the entire unit was moved north to Espiritu Santo to shorten their bombing runs. The B-17's could fly to Henderson Field, captured from the Japanese on Guadalcanal, and refuel to reach a maximum distance into the Japanese installations and naval facilities.

While life for the airmen on Santo was not as miserable as it was for the Marines on Guadalcanal, it was no picnic. Conditions were primitive. there was constant rain, which produced ankle deep mud. Dengue fever and malaria were common. It was estimated that eighty percent contracted malaria and nearly all dengue fever.

On November 13, the Group sent seventeen planes to strike the damaged battleship *Hiei*. One direct hit and five probable hits were scored and several days after, the ship sank. The next day, November 14, the 42nd participated in a strike against a large task force north of New Georgia (see map). Along with SBD Dauntless dive bombers and TBF Avenger torpedo bombers from Henderson Field they struck a Japanese fleet and left eight of the vessels sunk or severely damaged. The following morning



Operational Theatre for the 11th Bombardment Group During the Battle for the Solomon Islands

Using Australia as a reference, lower left corner, New Caledonia is located about 1000 miles to the east. The airbase at Plaines des Gaiacs was about the mid point on the western side of the island. Efate lies about 300 miles to the east of New Caledonia and Espiritu Santo about 250 north of Efate. From Espiritu Santo north to Guadalcanal, in the Solomon Islands, is a distance in excess of 600. The southern tip of Bougainville is visible to the west of Choiseul Island at the northern end of the Solomon Islands. Air crews spent much of their time shuttling between the various airbases on Efate, Espiritu Santo and Guadalcanal. Most of the military communications referred to these locations as follows: Efate – Roses; Espiritu Santo – Buttons; Henderson – Cactus; PdG – Poppy.

two American battleships took up the attack and sank one battleship, two cruisers and several smaller ships.

National Geographic produced a brief history of the WW II battle for Guadalcanal. The following information was included:

On November 14, 1942 both the Marines and the Japanese soldiers were fighting under desperate conditions. Neither side was capable of properly supplying their troops ashore. The Japanese attempted to move into an area off Guadalcanal, now referred to as Iron Bottom Sound to bombard the Marines and land troops and supplies. American naval forces confronted them directly in an old fashioned ship to ship battle at night. During the melee, it was not possible to immediately identify friend from foe. Japanese ships fired on their own as did the Americans. When the sun rose, the battle had resulted in a stand off. Neither side could declare a decisive victory. It was the bombers of the 11th Bomb Group that tipped the battle in favor of the Americans. They had sunk seven Japanese troop transports, which prevented the Japanese from landing additional troops on the island. Without additional reinforcements the Japanese were forced to sneak into the waters off Guadalcanal at night and evacuate 11,000 starving Japanese remnants. The victory at Guadalcanal marked a turning point in the war. Prior to Guadalcanal the Japanese were advancing in the Pacific. Guadalcanal marked that event at which the Japanese began their gradual retreat toward their home island.

The first time that the B-17's were escorted was on December 10 when they were accompanied by P-38 Thunderbolts on a raid at Munda Point. Among the casualties listed in *Grey Geese* for December 28 was Sergeant James C. Stephens. Later research revealed that he was actually wounded on December 16, and that the wounded man on the mission of the 28th had been misidentified.

Missions of Captain Earl Hall and his crew:

It is assumed that Jimmie left Hawaii in August 1942 as part of Captain Hall's crew. All of the assembled information tends to support this conclusion. Crews were likely tightly bonded units and stayed together unless a crew member was wounded or otherwise unable to serve. In making this assumption it is possible to trace Jimmie's missions during the latter half of 1942 up until his aircraft was shot down on February 1, 1942 through the Mission Reports that Hal Hall was able to retrieve from the Air Force Historical Association and from the flight logs of co-pilot Lieutenant Joaquin Castro, both included in Captain Earl Hall's biography.

According to Lieutenant Castro's logs, Captain Hall's crew flew to Midway on June 13, 1942. This would have been six days after the Battle of Midway ended on June 7th. They performed search missions until the 25th and then returned to Hawaii on June 26th.

On July 18, 1942 the 42nd Squadron made up of nine B-17 aircraft took off from Xahuku, Oahu at 0800 and landed at Christmas Island at 1700.

1st Flite:

Ship #221, Capt. Manierre
Ship #071 Capt. Richards
Ship # 420, Capt. Norton

2nd Flite:

Ship #218, Capt. Messerschmitt (based on later entries this is likely #216)
Ship #443, Capt. Puerta (based on later entries this is likely #445)
Ship # 151, Capt. Wuertele

3rd Flite:

Ship #155, Capt. Stone
Ship #213 Capt. Hall
Ship #442, Capt. Eberenz

On successive days between July 19th and the 22nd they island hopped: Christmas Island to Canton Island, Canton Island to Nandi, Fiji, Nandi, Fiji to Planes des Gaiacs, New Caledonia.

As the Mission Report goes on through the months it becomes more difficult to track the aircraft numbers and crews because more aircraft and crews are added to the report as the year progresses. In addition some of the pilots are alternatively referred to as Captain and Lieutenant. Additionally the Mission Report has considerable errors in miss labeling various aircraft numbers and crews often flew in different aircraft. For these reasons no attempt is made to track crews other than Captain Hall's. There is an attempt, however, to list the fate of the original nine aircraft and crews.

July was taken up with search and patrol missions. Lieutenant Castro's log shows a total flying time of 60 hours. In August Castro's logs show two bombing runs to Gizo, New Georgia Islands on the 18th and the 25th. Other missions for that month are listed as search, patrol, photo and escort.

The August missions originated in New Caladonia, Efate, and Espiritu Santo. The Mission Report on August 23rd lists Manierre, now promoted to Major, and Hall in aircraft #213 leading a mission against a carrier force. Pictures from the attack did not confirm any hits. They returned after dark to base and a lieutenant was killed when a plane crashed into a palm tree on landing. It would appear from the report that #213 was the aircraft which crashed. That aircraft was listed as back in service by the 28th of August if in fact it was the one that crashed.

On August 3rd original aircraft #155 cracked up on the runway and on August 6th aircraft #221 made a crash landing in the water after a bombing run on Lunga Point, North East coast of Guadalcanal. The crash site was off of the north coast of Espiritu Santo. The plane was reported to have sunk in 45 seconds. The crew of ten managed to escape on a rubber raft and paddle to an island (Shark Bay) where they were rescued. Captain Hall's crew was decorated for extra ordinary service on August 25th when they shot down a

Giant Japanese flying boat. The Mission Report statement about that event is as follows: "Engaged 4 engine flying boat 50 mi. NW Gizo Island. Elevators shot away and boat believed destroyed. Was circling what appeared to be wreckage when engaged by one Zero. No visible damage to Zero. Two holes shot in own ship. No injuries." Captain Hall was awarded the Silver Star for this action. Jimmie was awarded the Distinguish Service Cross as was, I believe, all of the remaining crew.

During September, Castro's logs show three bombing missions on the 13th, 19th and 21st. Other missions for the month were for search or transfer between islands. On September 8th, Captain Richards and his crew went out on a search mission and failed to return. It was later reported that the aircraft #071 was shot down by a Japanese flying boat. By the end of September three of the original aircraft had been lost along with one crew. On September 2nd, Captain Hensley, one of the three pilots lost on February 1, 1943 is listed in the Mission Report for the first time. Hensley was listed as lieutenant in the register of officers for the 42nd Squadron.

Castro's logs show eight missions in October. Only one bombing run is listed on October 14th. The rest of the missions were for search or transfer between islands. At this point they were flying mainly out of Henderson Field on Guadalcanal, Espiritu Santo or Planes des Gaicas in New Caladonia. On October 25th the Mission Report says that Captain Wuertele was shot down. There is a scrapbook in the Heritage Room that contains the details of Captain Wuertele's career. He was sent back to the mainland for recovery from his wounds. The mission report lists him as being in ship #445, however, that aircraft is listed in service after that date and Captain Wuertele's original aircraft #151 is listed on October 23rd as going to "Roses" for repairs. By the end of October only four of the original aircraft were operational; #216, #445, #213 and #442.

Hall's crew left on November 4th for a rest in Auckland, N.Z.. There are only four missions listed in that month; two for cargo transfer and two for search missions. Hall's crew therefore did not participate in the November attack on Japanese Naval forces that resulted in the sinking of seven transports. They returned from New Zealand and flew their next mission on November 25th. On November 18th the first reference is made to bombing missions to Buin at the southern end of Bougainville. The Mission Report for that day says that the mission was to bomb a large aircraft carrier. Ship #216, Captain Sprawls, ship #442, Captain Hyland and ship #213 Major Manierre from the 42nd were among those included in the mission. They were attacked by 15-20 Zeros which made frontal and side attacks on the B-17's. The pilot of the lead aircraft, Major Sewart and his co-pilot were killed. (This aircraft was from another squadron.) The commander of the 11th Bombardment Group, Colonel Saunders, took over control of the aircraft and made a water landing near Inga island. Colonel Saunders and the rest of his crew survived and were later picked up. On November 13th one of the original aircraft, #445 was ferried to "Roses", probably for repair.

Hall's crew certainly needed the rest that they got in New Zealand. In the month of December they completed eleven missions plus three transfer flights between islands. By the end of December they had completed 36 missions, not including island to island flights, since arriving at Plaines des Gaiacs on July 28th. A majority of the missions were to bomb the Japanese airfield at Munda Point. On December 10th, Captain Hall led a five ship formation, two from the 42nd Squadron, on a bombing mission to attack a large

tanker in Tenolei Harbor. Hall's crew scored one direct hit on the stern of the tanker. The single hit was responsible for sinking the tanker and the crew was awarded the Air Medal. Coincidentally, this was the first mission in which the B-17's had a fighter escort made up of four P-38's which brought down the only attacking Zero.

December 16th was a particularly fateful day. On that day six aircraft of the 42nd Squadron took off from the base identified as "Buttons" in the mission report, which likely was the designation for Espirito Santo. The target was Munda Point airfield. One aircraft lost the formation. A total of 99, 100 lb. bombs were dropped by the remaining five aircraft with all bombs hitting in the middle of the target. After dropping their bombs the B-17's were attacked by twelve Zeros. Three of the aircraft were damaged and a fourth was shot down. Captain Hall's aircraft was hit with a 20 mm round in the left wing and a 7.7 in the bomb bay oxygen system. Jimmie was wounded in the left shoulder by a 7.7 round but continued to operate the radio. Captains Hall's crew was decorated for the second time in one month with the Air Medal Oak Leaf Cluster for protecting one of the disabled planes. One of the B-17's claimed to have downed three Zeros.

After landing at Henderson Field, Hall's crew moved to a second aircraft and along with three additional aircraft departed for the second bombing mission of the day to hit a supply dump and bivouac area to the NE of the Munda Point runway. The Mission Report notes that the bombers had a fighter escort of eight P-38's during the second bomb run of the day. The next day Captain Hyland who had piloted the downed aircraft the previous day returned to "Cactus" an abbreviation for Henderson Field. Several of his crew, along with Jimmie, were sent to the hospital for treatment.

Captain Hyland made the following report on the downing of his aircraft: "Took off from Buttons at 0645. Six planes of which I was #3 of the first element led by Capt. Hall. Arrived over target at 1158 and sighted Zeros who did not attack until we had dropped our bombs. All our bombs hit in the target area. Then after turning the formation into the enemies attack we were flying straight for a second. A Zero leveled off ahead of us and come straight for me, firing as he came. He hit my #1 and #2 eng. #1 engine began to wind up about 3000 RPM and #2 was hit in the oil tanks. I couldn't feather either of the engines. On subsequent attacks our ball turret was hit in three places & a whole line of hits appeared in the nose. I decided to prepare to bail out as ship was vibration terribly. However, this soon ceased and we continued our decent with Capt. Hensley covering us. The vibrations started again and we began to lose control and so we landed in the water. The ship stayed afloat for about one minute and 15 seconds. We all paddled to the nearest shoreline and awaited rescue. A PHY picked us up at 1713 and we landed at Cactus at 1845. Minor cuts and bruises to all members of the crew. No serious injuries".

On December 17th, 18th and 19th Captain Hall and crew, sans Jimmie, made bombing runs on Munda Point airfield. Interestingly, Captain Levy's crew reported on December 19th that they dropped 20, 100 lb. bombs and two cases of empty beer bottles on the target. There is an entry in *Gray Geese Calling*, which says that Lieutenant Harp and his entire crew were lost on December 28th. A section of the Mission Report has been lost and the account of the downing of that aircraft may have been included in the lost section.

Hall's crew departed from Henderson Field on December 29th and flew to Port Moresby in New Guinea. From Moresby they made bombing runs on the Japanese base at Rabaul,

which is at the eastern end of the island of New Britain. According to Lieutenant Castro's flight logs the weather was bad and the missions may not have been very successful. On January 5th they returned to Guadalcanal.

By the end of January, only three of the original aircraft, #213, #442 and #151 were in service. The latter of these aircraft had apparently just returned from repairs on January 29th. Of the nine original pilots, only Hall and Puerta remained. During January, the command of the 42nd Squadron had passed from Major Manierre to Captain Hall who apparently had been promoted to the rank of major. Captain Messerschmitt had flown aircraft #213 to Hawaii on December 12th and was not listed as being active after that date. The first mention of Lt. Houx, pilot of one of the three aircraft that were shot down on February 1, 1943 was in the Mission Report on December 21st. It was recorded that "Lt. Houx and crew flew to Cactus as passengers and will pickup a ship on arrival".

Other than the bombing missions from Port Moresby, Castro's flight logs show six more missions for the month of January 1943. His last entry was on January 27th. The Mission Report lists one additional crossing from "Buttons" to "Cactus" on January 29th. According to his brother Art, Jimmie had checked himself out of the hospital and had returned to his crew late in January. He may have been with his crew on January 29th when they flew back to Henderson Field.

Jimmie's younger brother Frank had joined the Marine Corps just after the attack on Pearl Harbor and took basic training at Camp Pendleton. He was assigned to the 3rd Defense Battalion of the 1st Marine Division and was among the first troops that came ashore on Guadalcanal in early August of 1942. With all of the flights that the 42nd Squadron made in and out of Henderson Field the two brothers must have been within a few hundred yards of one another. The 1st Marine Division departed Guadalcanal, replaced by the 2nd Division in the early part of January 1943. The two brothers were never aware of each others presence on the island.

The Last Mission of Captain Hall and His Crew; February 1, 1943

There are multiple accounts of the February 1, 1943 mission. The description below is contained in *Grey Geese Calling*:

"February was a fateful month for the Squadron. At the beginning of the month the strength was four planes and crews, but this total was suddenly reduced to one – in the following manner: Three planes left base to pull a strike against Bougainville, far to the north. These planes were piloted by Capt. Hall, Capt, Harold P. Hensley and Capt. Frank L. Houx. Although no official word from any of them ever came through, reports from natives of the islands near the target eventually brought out the story. According to these natives, Capt. Houx' plane was hit in the bomb bay by flak, causing the plane to disintegrate in the air. Shortly thereafter the two remaining planes were jumped by a large number of enemy fighters, and Capt. Hensley's plane was hit, necessitating a water landing. The Japs kept boring in on the Forts and shot both of them down. No survivors were seen to get out of the wreckage.

This was a severe blow to the Squadron, as its striking power was now limited by the unexpected losses. The solitary plane remaining, piloted by Captain Louis M. Sowers, pulled two patrol-reconnaissance, one bombing and one search sortie during the balance of the month”.

Following is the account of those events contained in *Guadalcanal*:

“February 1, the first day of the “KE” Operation, began with an exchange of blows by air. Five B-17s with fighter escort rained bombs at Shortland at 0845, with small success. They fended off five Zeros, but four Flying Fortresses, sans escort, that appeared a few minutes later plunged into the aroused defenses, including forty-three more Zeros. Three of the four-engine bombers fell with no return benefit in damage or delay to the “KE” Operation”.

Hall Hal found the following account, in *Fortress Against the Sun*, by Gene E. Salecker of the last mission:

“On February 1, nine B-17s set out to bomb enemy around Bougainville. Breaking into two elements, the first element, consisting of five planes from the 72nd BS, set fire to a large cargo ship with two or three direct hits and several near misses. Following close behind, the second element, made up of one plane from the 72nd BS and three from the 42nd BS/ 11th BG, flew through heavy antiaircraft fire to bomb another supply vessel. Midway through the bomb run B-17E (41-9122, *Eager Beavers*), piloted by Capt. Frank L. Houx (42nd BS), was hit in the bomb bay by an antiaircraft shell and disintegrated in midair.

After scoring two hits on the enemy ship, the three remaining planes turned back towards Henderson Field but were intercepted by some 20 Zeros. In the ensuing air battle, B-17E (41-2442, *Yokohama Express*), flown by Capt. Harold P. Hensley, was attacked repeatedly and seriously damaged, necessitating a water landing. Capt. Hensley and his crew were never seen again. The two remaining planes, flown by Capt. Earl O. Hall, CO of the 42nd BS, and a Capt. Thomas, continued to fight off the persistent attackers, shooting down four planes before Capt. Hall's B-17E (41-9151) was shot out of the sky.

All by himself now, Capt. Thomas continued to try and fend off the attackers. The Zeros chased the Flying Fortress for almost 200 miles, seriously wounding the radio operator and bombardier, and knocking out the tail guns, and the ball turret and top turret guns. Two engines were damaged, one main tire was flattened, and all of the ammunition for the nose and radio compartment guns was expended but the B-17 would not go down. After three more Zeros were shot down, the Japanese finally gave up and Capt. Thomas was able to make a successful crash landing on Guadalcanal. Having had a total of only four planes assigned to the 42nd BS, the loss of all four planes and three entire crews effectively eliminated the 42nd BS from any further operations in the South Pacific.”

Hal's comments continue as follows: "This report is somewhat correct, but seems in error in some details, as we will see in the A-2 Intelligence Report, the most definitive report available.

Salecker identifies Earl Hall's B-17 as a "B-17E" number 41-9151. The one photo the Hall family has that shows a plane number shows number 19213 on the rudder assembly. Bomber crews frequently used whatever aircraft was operationally ready for their missions."

A-2 Periodic Report

Through the continuous efforts of Hal Hall the definitive report on the mission was finally located in an A-2 Periodic Report for the period of January 31, 1943 to February 28, 1943. It is noted in the body of the report that the nine B-17's were to be escorted by five P-40's and 4 P-38's.

The complete description of that mission is contained in Appendix E of the report. An accompanying map of flight path and approximate downing location is on the following page. The map was created by Hal Hall and is based upon the information contained in the following report.

"The nine ship formation, composed of two elements, the first a five ship Vee, and the second a four ship Vee, took off from GUADALCANAL shortly after 0630 love for a bombing mission on enemy shipping in the SHORTLAND – BUIN area.

The pre-arranged plan was to bomb the transports in the SHORTLAND Harbor area, because it was know that a large force of destroyers and cruisers was just off the BUIN-KAHILI coast line. The first element was to take the transport to the right, and the second element was the transport to the left.

Upon arrival at the target area the first element took up a bombing run on the transport to the right of the course of the formation. The second element started a bombing run on the left-hand transport, with bomb-bay doors open, but just before reaching the point of dropping the bombs made a right turn and laid a course directly toward the warships lying directly offshore from BOUGAINVILLE ISLAND.

At this time the warships, as well as the shore batteries opened up with anti-aircraft fire, the intensity of which was illustrated by the statement of the formation leader of the first element that the second element could not be seen because of the thickness of the box barrage that the anti-aircraft batteries were throwing up.

Despite the anti-aircraft, bombs were released, and the ball-turret gunner on Captain THOMAS's ship observed three hits on a transport.

The first element turned away to the left, after its run, and the second element turned away to the right. The pursuit escort of for P-38's and six P-40's stayed with the first element of five ships.

Over EAST POINT, on BOUGAINVILLE ISLAND, the four ship formation was attacked by 20 -30 type 2 Zero fighters, and the formation leader, Captain HALL, started towards WEST CAPE, CHOISEUL ISLAND, losing altitude.

Near CAPE ALEXANDER, Captain HOUX was seen falling behind, and was never seen again.

The remaining three planes, which had by now dropped down to an altitude of between a thousand and fifteen hundred feet, tried to take advantage of cloud protection, but the sky at this altitude was no more than 1/20th covered with small cumulous clouds, and offered practically no protection. It proved almost a hinderence, in as much as Captain HALL was making violent turns to right and left to take advantage of each cloud, which necessitated, on the part of Captain THOMAS, putting one foot on the rudder bar to obtain enough leverage to make the turns and stay in the formation.

Captain THOMAS crossed over to the left, making a three ship echelon.

A few minutes later, on emerging from one of the larger clouds, Captain HALL's ship was not in the formation, and was nowhere in sight. This left Capt. THOMAS flying on Captain HENSLEY's wing.

All during this time, the large number of the Zero fighters were pressing their attacks, enabling them to come in from as many as four directions at once, making fire control very difficult.

Off RINGANA, on CHOISEUL ISLAND, Captain HENSLEY's plane was observed to be on fire, flames coming out of the radio compartment, perhaps the result of hits by incendiaries in the radio tank. His plane hit the water, exploded, and was burning when last observed. Two of the Zeros broke off and circled the wreckage.

This left Captain THOMAS's plane alone to keep up a running fight from RINGANA Point to the middle of SANTA ISABEL ISLAND, a distance of 210 statute miles, at which point the Zeros finally gave up the attack.

The ship and crew had sustained a continuous attack of over fifty minutes, and was the only ship of the four in the element to return.

The bombardier, Lieut. HOWAT, firing one of the nose guns, was hit in the leg, but when an attack was called off as coming in at his position he dragged himself back to his gun to fire the nine rounds of ammunition he had left, accounting for the Zero, and receiving hits himself in his shoulder, elbow and hand.

The radio operator, Corporal P.J. MURPHY, manning one of the waist guns, was hit badly in the leg, but lay down on his back and kept passing up ammunition to the gunners until he was hit again in the same leg, resulting in a compound fracture of the left femur.

The tail gunner, Sgt. B.J. CULLINABE, had a stoppage on one of his guns, and then had the remaining gun stopped by a burst of fire from a Zero fighter which entered his side window, narrowly escaping his head, and causing minor abrasions from flying glass. He kept to his post for twenty minutes, pointing the useless guns at attacking zeros, so as not to give away the vulnerability of his station. When Corporal MURPHY received his second hit, Sgt. CULLINABE came back and took over the second waist gun.

The ball-turret gunner, Sgt. T.L. WOLFE, had one gun jam, and immediately after-wards received a burst through the ball-turret that put the hydraulic control and the entire lower turret out of commission. He then left the ball-turret, after receiving wounds from the

bursting shells in his hands, went forward, and manned the radio guns, until he ran out of ammunition.

Major W.E. McCARROLL, flight surgeon for the 44th fighter squadron, was also on the flight, and, despite the heavy fire going on, made his way around the airplane, giving medical aid to Lieut. HOWAT in nose position, and putting a traction splint on Corporal MURPHY in waist position.

With the tail and ball-turret guns out of commission, and the nose and radio guns out of ammunition, the only defensive measures left to the pilot were turns into the attacking airplanes, and full throttle operation to try and out-run them.

About 1/3rd of the zeros were fighting with belly tanks still attached, which meant that they were prepared to follow for some distance.

Handling the airplane was made more difficult by the fact that all of the trim tab control wires had been shot off, and the only way the nose could be kept down for level flight was by placing both knees or a foot on the steering column. Number one and two engines had already been hit, and were dangerously close to complete failure.

The co-pilot, Lieut. INMAN, was hit by flying glass when shells struck the glass three inches behind the pilot's head.

After leaving the zeros at SANTA ISABEL ISLAND, these two engines had to be favored, but Captain TJOMAS didn't try to feather either one, despite the drag, for fear that a third might give out.

Over HENDERSON FIELD, GUADALCANAL, number one engine was smoking badly, and the propeller on number two engine had run away.

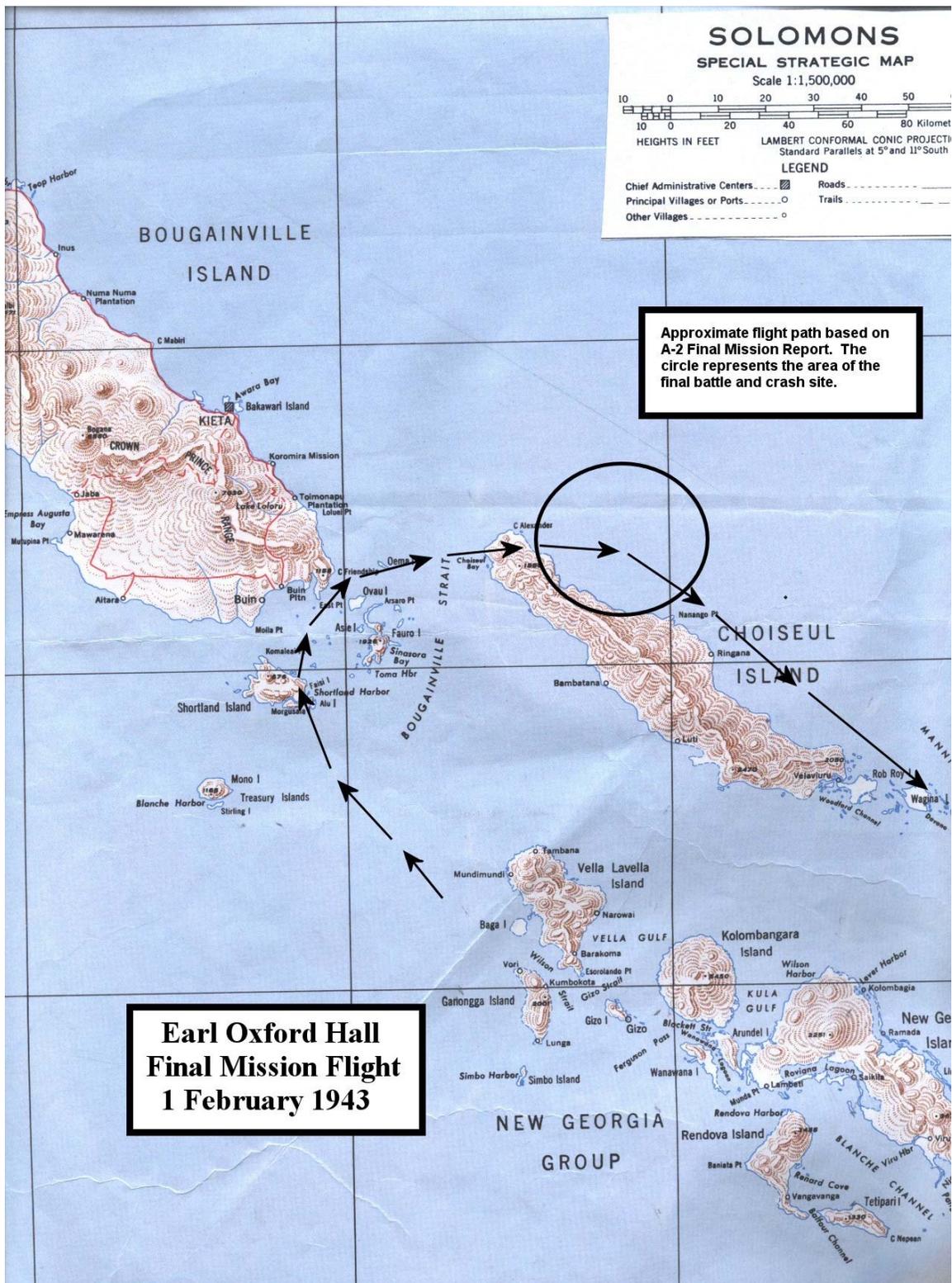
Landing was made on one flat tire, which was found to contain four or five Japanese shells, but the ship did not go off the runway.

The ship and crew had sustained a continuous attack of over fifty minutes, and was the only ship of the four in the element to return.

Four Zeros were observed by a coast watcher on CHOISEUL, to have been shot down while the four ships of the B-17 formation were still together."

During the time Captain THOMAS's ship was sustaining the attack alone, his crew accounted for three zeros and saw them crash into the water Lieut. HOWAT is credited for the first, Sgt. WOLFE for the second, and Cpl. C. W. WAR, the other waist gunner, for the third.

The report was signed:
CORCORAN THOM Jr.
1st Lt. Air Corps
S-2 Officer, CACTUS



The flight path of the last mission of February 1, 1943 was constructed by Hal Hall from data contained in the A-2 Periodic Report.

This is the most accurate and complete information thus far located, and defined the action area very clearly. Based on this report, B-17 41-9151, piloted by Captain Hall, was most likely shot down east of Choiseul Island, between the north end of the island and Ringana, on Choiseul Island. No islands are east of Choiseul, where water depths range from 1,500 to 6,000 feet. Unless the plane was able to reach Choiseul Island, it is unlikely to ever be located. The mission flight path and probable crash site as described in the A-2 Periodic Report is shown on the attached map. The Pacific Wrecks website does not show any known aircraft on northeast Choiseul Island.

AFTERWORD

With the discovery of the A-2 Report, we can now feel a sense of closure. There will always be those questions concerning what happened between the times that Captain Hall's aircraft was in visual contact with the crew of Captain Thomas's crew, and when Hall's aircraft hit the water. There will always be questions about whether any of the crew survived the water landing, and the fate of the survivors. All of those men knew that a water landing at a spot distant from their base meant that there was little chance of rescue. We can only hope that what ever happened in those last few minutes that their deaths were mercifully quick.

We look upon our brother Jimmie's accomplishments and sacrifices with a sense of pride and honor. He, as well as all of the crew members on those aircraft, was a true American hero.

Jimmie came so close to surviving the war. If he had been delayed by a day or two in returning after being wounded, he would not have made that last flight. He must have felt an obligation to be back with his crew, and that sense of obligation drove him to check himself out of the hospital before he was fully recovered from his wounds. The official order relieving the 11th Bomber Group from duty was dated 7 February 1943. On the 28th of March the remaining men of the group boarded a troop transport to return to the mainland, seven months after their arrival in the forward area. Jimmie had come so close to making it back home and probably spending the rest of the war in training new recruits for war duty.

Knowing that his buddies depended upon him, and possibly not wanting a new recruit to take his place, Jimmie checked himself out of the hospital to rejoin his crew. That last flight, may well have been the most dangerous that the crew had faced up to that point. It's a story of bravery that was repeated over and over again during the war. It's the sort of story that makes one ask; What is it in human nature that spurs a person to such heroic deeds in the face of possible death? Jim apparently was always a risk taker and likely the most important thing to him at the time was to support his buddies.

Jimmie apparently showed a great deal of interest in many things including the betterment of his education. He would likely have had a bright future. Among his personal possessions that were sent back from Hawaii were several books which he had used for self education. I still have one of those books in my possession, *Get It Right*; a book on English grammar and punctuation. For many years, his shaving kit was kept in our bathroom. Among the contents were his shaving articles and several tobacco pipes. I think Dad just didn't have the heart to get rid of those items and they just became part of the bathroom decor.

It might be fitting in closing Jimmie's short biography to quote the poem written by John Gillespie McGee, a pilot with the Royal Canadian Air Force who flew in a Spitfire squadron. He was killed in 1941 at the age of 19 during a training exercise. The poem was included on the back of a letter that he had written home to his parents:

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed and joined the tumbling mirth of sun-split
clouds, – and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless falls of air...
Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace
Where never lark, nor eer eagle flew –
And, while with silent lifting mind I've trod
The high, untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand and touched the face of God.

APPENDIX

The Battle for New Guinea and the Solomon Islands

■ ALLIED OPERATIONS IN NEW GUINEA AND THE SOLOMONS 1942–APRIL 1944



Land operations

- 1 August 7, 1942, US forces land at Guadalcanal; Japanese withdraw on February 7, 1943.
- 2 August 25–September 6 1942, Japanese landing at Milne Bay is defeated by Australians.
- 3 August 26–November 2, 1942, Japanese advance over the Kokoda Trail to within 35 miles (60 km) of Port Moresby and then are driven back to Kokoda by the Australians.
- 4 November 16, 1942–January 22, 1943. US and Australian troops defeat Japanese at Buna, Gona and Sanananda.
- 5 January 28–September 11 1943, Japanese attack Wau and are driven back to Salamaua by Australians.
- 6 June 30, 1943, Americans land on New Georgia.
- 7 June 30, 1943, Americans land at Nassau Bay.
- 8 August 15, 1943, Americans land on Vella Lavella.
- 9 September 4, 1943, Americans land at Lae.
- 10 September 5, 1943, Australians land at Nadzab and later advance up Markham Valley.
- 11 September 22, 1943, Australians land at Finschhafen.
- 12 November 1, 1943, Americans land on Bougainville.
- 13 December 15 and 26, 1943, Americans land on New Britain.

- 14 February 15, 1944, New Zealanders land at Green Island.
- 15 January 2, 1944, Americans land at Saidor.
- 16 February 29, 1944, Americans land on Los Negros.
- 17 March 20, 1944, Americans land at Emirau.
- 18 April, 22, 1944, Americans land at Hollandia and Aitape.
- 19 April 24, 1944, Australians enter Madang.

Naval battles

- A Savo Island, August 9, 1942
- Cape Esperance, October 11, 1942
- Guadalcanal, November 12–15, 1942
- Tassafongga, November 30, 1942
- B Eastern Solomons, August 24, 1942
- C Santa Cruz Island, October 26, 1942
- D Bismarck Sea, March 2–4, 1943
- E Kula Gulf, July 5–6, 1943
- F Kolombangara, July 12–13 1943
- G Vella Gulf, August 6–7, 1943
- H Vella Lavella, October 6–7, 1943
- I Empress Augusta Bay, November 2, 1943