

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

Brown Tucker

General MacArthur was making every effort in his campaign to take New Guinea. At no time in World War II was the air more vicious, more demanding.

Nobody expected a long campaign. "We'll knock the tar out of the Japs and be back in the States in eighteen months," both officers and men said confidently. But the weeks stretched into months. V-mail hadn't been perfected and letters arrived from home in batches, none too often. Our pilots were returning from missions in badly shot-up planes, and there were some who didn't return at all.

Warrant Officer Thomas, Aviation Engineering, felt that something was out of order in their efforts. On the surface it seemed they were doing all right, but somehow, "Mr. T," as he was called, felt unsure.

Mr. T was a proud member of the Fighter Command Fifth Air Force. He wanted to be on the flight line before the dawn patrol would return.

Scantily clad natives, sweating under a broiling New Guinea sun, had constructed this hut. It overlooked the landing strip for the fighter planes to the north and the tented area of the squadron to the west, and stood on the Eleven Mile Strip near Port Moresby. In this hut combat pilots relaxed, ate their meals, wrote home, talked of college football days and listened to a raspy record player grind out tunes.

Mr. T was enjoying his breakfast in the half-darkened stillness of the dawn, the quiet disturbed only by an occasional clanging of pots in the kitchen when a group of pilots shuffled in through the door and seated themselves a few tables away. Again the door opened and banged. Lieutenant Moyer, Squadrons Operations Officer, walked down the aisle between the rows of tables. Mr. T continued with his coffee, hardly aware that the Lieutenant was joining him until he seated himself by his aide.

The mess attendant poured a round of coffee, took the Lieutenant's order, and departed for the kitchen.

Lieutenant Moyer sipped a swallow or two, then said, "Mr. T, something's wrong up here."

"Yes?"

"Why is it that we don't have a flag flying about our camp?"

"No flag is provided by the Supply Tables for a military unit as small as ours when operating under a higher headquarters. The squadron at the other strip doesn't have one either. The only flag is at Group Headquarters three miles down the road."

"There should be some provision for a flag," insisted Lt. Moyer. "We've been stuck out here by ourselves fighting the enemy and haven't seen the flag for so long that I've almost forgotten what I'm fighting for."

"I share your feelings, Lieutenant, about what our flag stands for, what it means to us all, especially in war, far from home. But there are no flags available on the island. Requisitions go unheeded. But I'll promise that just as soon as something can be done about it, we'll have a flag, no matter what it takes."

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As Mr. T walked out the door of the hut the early morning flights, returning from a strike beyond the Owen Stanley Range, swept in over the ridge east of the camp. Pausing a moment, listening to the trotting engines, he knew all was well. The P-39s were ticking like clocks.

Waiting down on the flight line to receive them were the best trained ground crews in the South Pacific. Every man was at his station, efficient and loyal. Of all this, Mr. T was sure, because as much or more training and experience were at his command as had any engineering officers in New Guinea. Combat losses were low and serious mechanical failures of their planes were unheard of in the squadron. Living conditions in the camp were adequate and food was good. Still something was wrong; something was missing.

Gazing down toward the strip through an opening in the trees, he could see their pilots drifting into patterns for landing. He could hear whining propellers moving into low pitch and the lowering of the landing gears beating out a screeching, whistling tune. This was music that he loved ringing through the jungle air. To him, this part of the war was moving along in high gear.

Down the slope he walked to the small wall tent so conspicuously set apart for warrant officers between enlisted area and squadron headquarters. The little tent was home to Mr. T at this station. He tidied his quarters, sat down on the edge of his cot and lit a cigarette. Lieutenant Moyer's words, "Something's wrong up here," kept repeating themselves. Was he losing hope? Wasn't it possible that the mood of the Operations Officer was to some extent reaching every man in the organization? But he didn't have time for more thinking about the matter. It was time to act.

As he approached Squadron Headquarters, he thought about the day's work and the problems that could confront him before sunset. There were the Japanese ground troops racing toward the crest of the range in sight of the camp, and their air fleet was probably winging its way toward Eleven Mile Strip at the very moment.

He saw the First Sergeant standing lazily, grinning into the morning sunshine, one hand gripping the flagpole in front of the headquarters tent.

"Is the CO around?" Mr. T asked.

Transportation was scarce. Only missions with high priority were being approved. But, somehow, the approval came.

One morning, a day or two later, the squadron clerk drove in front of the engineering tent and told Mr. T that he was going back to Australia on a supply mission, and that he would take him to the plane the next day.

Early next morning they picked up the group supply officer, Captain Bell, and drove to Wards Drome, Headquarters of the Troop Carrier Wing. Already loaded and waiting by the operations hut was the familiar C-47. Two ambulance drivers were filing last minute passenger lists with the Operations Sergeant. With their names added to the flight list, the group officer clambered aboard.

"Where's the first stop, Horn Island or Townsville?" Mr. T queried the Sergeant.

"Neither. You're going straight across the Coral Sea to Brisbane," he replied.

"That's quite a hop for a C-47, isn't it?"

"Not too bad. Most pilots make it in eight hours. Some even make it in less time." The propellers began to turn. They went aboard.

Scattered along the cabin seats were a dozen or more infantrymen, with a pudgy-looking medical attendant in charge. Some had leg wounds, some with

bandaged heads, all barely ambulatory.

The plane lifted its nose up into the blue sky. By the time six-thousand feet was reached, New Guinea was slipping from view, a misty gray in the distance. Mr. T began to relax.

The cabin altimeter was registering sixty-five hundred feet, and the pilots began to trim the controls. Brisbane, Australia, was up to eight hours away and there was plenty of time for taking it easy.

The C-47 began to gain altitude once more. Peering ahead, clouds could be seen in the distance, a most welcome sight to the pilot of an unarmed plane on a mercy mission through the combat zone. Fifteen hundred feet more and the plane was on the top of the layer. The white clouds beneath glistened like Arctic snowfields in the sunshine; a beautiful sight to airmen in a world that seems to be their own. No more could the choppy waters of the seas be seen. Swiftly, steadily, the plane flew onward, its quiet running engines seemingly sensing the nature of the mission.

Six hours and thirty minutes passed. Mr. T began to clockwatch. The Australian coast should be showing up any moment and the clouds appeared to be getting lighter. In less than eight hours, the plane began to nose down. At twenty-five hundred feet, the plane came through the overcast and the tall buildings of Brisbane stood in the distance. A few minutes later it rolled to a stop on the airport runway.

They checked in through the local operations office. Transportation was arranged to the Base Section Office for the night's lodging.

Captain Bell discussed plans for the next day. At the top of the list was a stop at the base Quartermaster cunningly placed there by Mr. T. To him the most critical supply item was the American Flag.

The next morning Captain Bell and Mr. T drove to the supply depot in Brisbane.

Upon entry, Mr. T spotted a familiar face scanning over a pile of papers on his desk. By-passing the information clerk, he walked straight over to the officer with whom he had spent years on an air base in Michigan.

The plaque read: ASSISTANT BASE QUARTERMASTER.

"Good morning, Captain," Mr. T saluted.

"Thomas. What brings you here?" The Captain rose from his chair to shake hands. "Long time, no see!"

"I didn't know you were in the Pacific Theater, Captain. How long have you been here?"

"A few months, Thomas. A few months."

"Captain, I'm on a supply mission for my organization. As you know, we're fighting a war up in New Guinea, and the outfit is stuck out in an area three miles from anyone, and we haven't a flag to fly above our camp. The Supply Tables don't provide for an issue. If you ask me, it's a hell of a regulation. I came after a flag, even if I have to buy one."

The Captain frowned. "Thomas, there is no way for me to issue your organization a flag. Do you believe your outfit needs a flag?"

"Absolutely," Mr. T replied without any explanation.

"That's good enough for me," said the Captain.

Back through the tall rows of stock piles, Mr. T trailed after him. The Captain pointed to a neatly arranged rack of garrison flags.

Mr. T knew it would be a sort of shoplifting, but he gloried in it. His hands

trembled so he could scarcely hold the loot to fit inside the navigation kit he used as a briefcase. He couldn't describe the feeling that came over him as he and the Captain walked back toward the entrance of the building. Thanks to his friend, he had a flag for his men.

Back with his Supply Captain, he headed for the Base Air Depot Supply where he presented a bundle of requisitions and told of their supply problems. The Supply Officer listened and reassured them that everything was being done to speed up delivery of crucial items.

The next morning they flew northward to Townsville, Queensland, in an old DC-2, used by the Australian National Airways, then in a B-17 across the narrows of the Coral Sea. A few hours later they were landing on Seven Mile Strip, service stop for the bombing fleet in New Guinea, and by dusk they were back at Eleven Mile Strip for the evening meal.

Next morning the Stars and Stripes were flying over their camp.

Mr. T sensed the changed spirits of the officers and men as they went about their tasks. They could be seen stopping to look at the Flag fluttering in the bright sunshine, and to him that Flag shone more brilliantly than ever before.

One man remarked, "A good feeling. It seems like a new place."

When time came that evening to haul down the colors, all that could be were there, including the Operations Officer.

As the officers slowly walked up the hill to the hut for the evening meal, the Operations Officer joined Mr. T. He put his arm around his shoulders and remarked, "It looks like a different place, Mr. T. We know our backs are to the wall, but no matter what happens, we'll feel better about it all."

Mr. T, too, felt better about it all as he joined his fellow officers in the hut.

