

What happened at Clark Field

Walter D Edmonds

The Atlantic (1932-1971); Jul 1951; 188, 000001; ProQuest Direct Complete

pg. 19



In 1945 WALTER D. EDMONDS, the author of Rome Haul and Drums Along the Mohawk, received the assignment to write the radiant story of the American Air Force in the Philippines in the first year of the war. He interviewed some eighty of the pilots and ground officers who survived; he visited Manila in the spring of '45. He checked his source material against the official records, and his chronicle They Fought with What They Had, the first volume of which will be published in September, is an inspiring story of American courage. From it, we have selected the most crucial single episode, the first Japanese attack on the airfields north of Manila.

WHAT HAPPENED AT CLARK FIELD

by WALTER D. EDMONDS

WAR did not come to the Philippines on Sunday, December 7, as it did to Pearl Harbor. The arbitrary date-line, by means of which man seeks to count his days, requires that the sun that rises over the Hawaiian Islands on December 7 rise over the Philippines on December 8. So, ironically, it was through a man-made contrivance that Sunday in the Philippines remained a day of grace. Actually when war broke out, the man in Manila saw the same sunrise as the man in Honolulu, though it had taken five and a half hours of the earth's slow turning to bring it over Luzon's Sierra Madres.

The Japanese dive bombers, heading in on our Pacific fleet, were first sighted at 7.55 Pearl Harbor time. At that moment clocks in Manila registered 2.25 A.M. Thirty-five minutes later, a Naval operator in Manila picked up a radio flash from Pearl. Although official confirmation did not come through till about 5.00, all but two of our Air Corps units had been alerted by 4.30 and the fighter pilots were in or standing by their planes.

It was not the first time they had been alerted. Beginning on December 2 an unidentified plane had flown on four successive nights over Clark Field, north of Manila, and on three occasions squadron search missions had been flown to intercept it. On the night of December 5-6, the commanding

officer of the 3rd Pursuit Squadron, stationed at the lonely airstrip at Iba, on the west coast of Luzon, had made a lone attempt to find a flight of planes reported off the coast, and even as the word of Pearl Harbor came into Manila the 3rd Pursuit Squadron was unsuccessfully attempting interception of another such formation of strange planes.

These experiences had robbed the pursuit pilots, at least, of any illusions about our impregnable defenses, such as lulled so many people at Pearl Harbor. They knew that their own installations would be the first Japanese objective. Now on the morning of the 8th, they were to have eight full hours in which to get set for the arrival of the enemy. Yet when the main Japanese effort materialized at 12.40 P.M., it proved as successful as the sneak attack against Pearl Harbor. Our units failed to make contact or were swept aside.

We decide to defend the Philippines

The decision that the Philippines could, and should, be defended was not reached in Washington till August, 1941. For years the Islands had been regarded more or less as an unprotected pawn; no attempt was to be made to defend Manila in case of invasion; and whatever forces we had on Luzon would withdraw immediately to Bataan where, with the harbor forts to back them, they would endeavor to hold on till help arrived from this coun-

Copyright 1951, by The Atlantic Monthly Company, Boston 16, Mass. All rights reserved.

try. The change in strategy was largely due to the optimistic reports of General MacArthur, who on July 26, 1941, had been recalled to active service in the U.S. Army and under whom our forces of the old Philippine Department and the Philippine Army were combined as United States Armed Forces in the Far East (USAFFE). MacArthur believed that with the growing strength of the Philippine Army, which had been training under his command since 1935, any invading force could be met and defeated on the beaches.

It was plain that an open campaign of the sort he envisaged would depend heavily on control of the air; but when the former Philippine Department Air Force came under his command, it contained only one medium bombardment squadron, equipped with slow, vulnerable, and obsolete B-18s, and three pursuit squadrons, two of which were flying obsolescent P-35As and the third P-40Bs that had just reached the Philippines. This little force would have been no more than a blown feather in the face of any real air attack, yet it represented a considerable increase in efficiency and strength since the arrival in May of its Commanding Officer, Brigadier General Henry Clagett, and his Chief of Staff, Colonel Harold H. George.

From the first, George had been deeply concerned by our weakness in the air and almost at once had begun work on a plan for the air defense of the Philippines. His plan was essentially offensive in design and consequently called for planes, men, and matériel in totals that to some air officers on Luzon seemed utterly fantastic, and General Clagett feared that it would produce explosive effects in Washington. For a time the plan was allowed to hang fire, but in working out details George had had frequent conferences with General MacArthur's Chief of Staff, Lieutenant Colonel Sutherland.

Sutherland, who was soon to be promoted Brigadier General, had been impressed by George's ideas. When the little Department Air Force became Air Force, USAFFE, he asked to have George's plan submitted to Headquarters. A slightly watered-down version was at first sent in, but Sutherland wanted the original. It was endorsed by MacArthur and, subject to certain changes, became the basis for expansion of USAFFE's air force.

The reinforcement program was implemented rapidly but, as events proved, not rapidly enough. An objective date of April, 1942, was set, and the War Department, which now firmly backed the program for a real build-up of our Pacific air power, planned to allocate four heavy bombardment groups and two additional pursuit groups to the Philippines. But the planes were still building, the crews for them had not yet been trained, and the rush of events would not stay. It became obvious that if we wanted first-line combat air power in the Philippines as a deterrent to the southward aggression of Japan we had better scrape together what

we could from our very slender resources and get them out there.

In September, 1941, therefore, a provisional heavy bombardment squadron, the 14th, under Major Emmett O'Donnell, Jr., took off from Hickam Field in Hawaii with 9 B-17Cs, to pioneer a new transpacific route to the Philippines. It was not considered safe to land on Guam, so from Wake Island the planes flew southwest to Port Moresby in New Guinea. This leg took them over the Jap-held Carolines, but they flew at altitude and by night, and no incidents occurred. From Port Moresby they went to Darwin and then flew north across the Indies to Luzon, landing at Clark Field in the heel of a typhoon and damaging one of their planes. Early in October two combat squadrons of the 19th Bombardment Group, the 30th and 93rd, followed with their Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron in 26 B-17Ds and set up operations at Clark Field under their Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Eugene L. Eubank, as the 19th Group, absorbing both the 14th Squadron and the old 28th Squadron, which was to receive eight of the B-17s for their own use.

Meanwhile enough P-40Es were sent out in October to equip the 3rd and 17th Pursuit Squadrons, and in November two large convoys were scheduled to leave the States with two more pursuit squadrons and one light bombardment group. The pursuit squadrons, the 21st and 34th, were at half pilot strength but had their full complement of ground troops. They reached Manila on November 20 and were immediately absorbed by the 24th Pursuit Group, which had been organized with the three existing pursuit squadrons late in September. The pilots of the 21st and 34th Squadrons had expected to find P-40s waiting for them, but the planes had only just arrived and still had to be uncrated. So they took over the P-35s while they waited.

At that they were more fortunate than the pilots of the 27th Bombardment Group. The 27th had arrived on the same convoy, but their planes had been loaded on the second convoy, which did not leave Hawaii till just before December 8. The ships were caught at sea by the outbreak of hostilities and diverted to Australia; so except for a handful of pilots who were later evacuated from Luzon, the 27th Group fought their war on the ground. They took no part in the air action of December 8.

The airfields

To command this rapidly expanding air force, the War Department now sent out Major General Lewis H. Brereton. He arrived on November 7 and, after a tour of inspection, set up his Headquarters at Nielson Field, on the southeast edge of Manila. On November 16 the air units were redesignated the Far East Air Force (FEAF) with three subsidiary commands: the Far East Air Service Command, under Colonel Lawrence S. Churchill; the 5th

Bomber Command, under Lieutenant Colonel Eubank; and the 5th Interceptor Command, under Brigadier General Clagett.

Colonel George was made A-4 (Supply) in the new Headquarters and by December 8 was advanced to Chief of Staff of the Interceptor Command. At the outset the erection of new airfields claimed all his energies. In May there had been only four airfields on Luzon considered fit for military aircraft. Of these, Clark was the only first-class field and, though turf-surfaced, the only one thought capable of taking B-17s. The surrounding ground was too soft to bear the weight of a heavy bomber, however, so the Fortresses had to be parked out on the field itself without any possibility of camouflage. All attempts to win appropriations to drain the surrounding land had met defeat.

Nielson, at which FEAF Headquarters was located, was classed as a fighter field but had few facilities and was little used. Iba, on the Zambales coast well north of Subic Bay, had been a training camp for the Philippine Constabulary. Its little strip bordered the beach for half its length and offered no opportunities for camouflage.

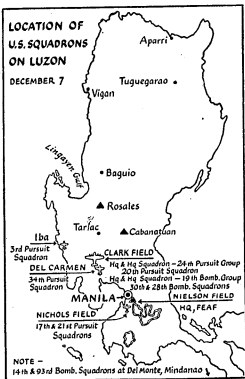
The principal fighter field was Nichols, which, like Nielson, lay on the outskirts of Manila. It was half surrounded by the Paranaque River, and the only approach to it was over a two-lane bridge. The field boasted the only hard-surfaced strip in the Islands but it had been laid out on a series of rice fields and during the rainy season reverted to its former swampy status.

During the summer months work had been started on two auxiliary fighter fields at Del Carmen, 14 miles south of Clark Field, and Rosales, 50 miles north. They were nothing but raw dirt strips, without facilities of any kind, but Del Carmen was to be used as the 34th Pursuit Squadron's field, and Rosales proved a brief haven for a few of our pursuits on December 8. Now, in November, work was begun on four more strips on Luzon, but only one, San Marcelino, 8 miles above the head of Subic Bay, was ever used, except by an occasional stray plane.

Meanwhile the 5th Air Base Group, which had come out on the November 20 convoy, was sent down to Mindanao to open a base for the expected 7th Bombardment Group at Del Monte. They found that the upland sod would easily carry a Fortress, and in a few days they had cut out a strip. It was a fortunate circumstance, for by December 5 the continuing appearance of the lone plane over Clark Field had made the position of the B-17s there increasingly hazardous. On the night of December 5-6, 16 B-17s of the 14th and 93rd Squadrons were sent down to Del Monte. Except for that we should probably have lost all our Fortresses on the first day of war.

By the beginning of December, the first radar set had gone into operation at Iba. Six other sets had arrived at the end of November, but there was

time to erect only one other, just outside Manila, by December 8. Almost from the first night of operation, the radar at Iba began to pick up the tracks of strange formations of airplanes over the sea. On the night of the 5th, Lieutenant Henry G. Thorne, flying alone, attempted to intercept them but failed to find the planes. He and his men were eager to try a squadron interception and requested permission to do so. Colonel George took the request directly to MacArthur's Headquarters. They were given permission to make the attempt, though



it was re-emphasized that they must act defensively unless the planes came in close enough to violate the territorial integrity of the Philippines. In that case they could go to it.

But the night of December 6-7 was quiet at Iba, as it was everywhere in the Philippines; no tracks showed on the radar screen; and as far as is known there was no plane that night in all the Luzon sky.

The first-line planes

On December 6, Colonel George had called most of his pursuit pilots into the theater at Nichols Field and told them that in his opinion war was only a matter of days, possibly only hours, away. He pointed out that they would have about 70 first-line planes to throw against the huge Jap air fleet, but he believed that they would turn in a good performance.

In using this figure, he was betting on time enough

to equip the 21st Squadron with P-40s that were even then coming out of the Air Depot. There must be time to slow-time the engines (a process similar to breaking in the motor of a car), and to install and bore-sight the guns. The acute shortage of .50 caliber ammunition made the last operation difficult, for only a few rounds were available for test purposes. Practically all gunnery training was carried on in the P-35s using .30 caliber guns.

That was Saturday. Work did not stop with darkness, for the Air Corps was now working the clock around in its effort to be ready. Sunday made no difference either, at Nichols Field, and men were still at work when the sun went down. At that time the squadrons of the 24th Pursuit Group turned in the following status report, giving location and combat strength of its tactical squadrons:—

1. 3rd Pursuit Squadron, *Iba*, commanded by Lt. H. G. Thorne, 18 P-40Es in commission.
2. 17th Pursuit Squadron, *Nichols Field*, commanded by Lt. Boyd D. Wagner, 18 P-40Es in commission.
3. 20th Pursuit Squadron, *Clark Field*, commanded by Lt. J. H. Moore, 18 P-40Bs in commission.
4. 21st Pursuit Squadron, *Nichols Field*, commanded by Lt. W. E. Dyess, 18 P-40Es in commission.
5. 34th Pursuit Squadron, *Del Carmen*, commanded by Lt. S. H. Marrett, 18 P-35As in commission.

It added up to 54 P-40Es, 18 P-40Bs, and 18 P-35As, an official total of 90 first-line, combat-worthy planes.

In actual fact the Group's strength did not approach that figure. The P-35s had been used by all the different squadrons as work horses before being turned over to the 34th. They carried only two .50 caliber wing guns besides the .30 caliber guns on the fuselage, and the last were worn out from steady use in gunnery training. All of them had done over 500 hours and needed an engine change, a condition which was seriously aggravated by the heavy dust on Del Carmen Field.

The 21st Squadron at Nichols Field had received the last four planes of its 18 that same day, the eighteenth being delivered after dark. None of these four had been in the air before being taken up into combat; and the squadron had not been able to finish slow-timing the other planes. In fact none of the planes had had more than three hours in the air.

There were therefore but three pursuit squadrons in the Philippines on December 7 with first-line planes actually fit for combat. This force of 54 pursuit planes, coupled with the 34 B-17s in commission, made a total of 88 first-line aircraft in which our men were asked to face the Japanese air force. They fought their brand-new P-40s and worn-out P-35s down to the last ship. The pilots, however, had still to learn the limitations of the P-40s; and they had to learn them under actual battle conditions against odds that were seldom less than ten to one and sometimes nearer twenty.

Nor was their B-17 the Flying Fortress that ended the war over Germany, with its power turrets, heavier armor, and tail guns. These B-17Cs and Ds could only protect themselves adequately in full squadron formation in level flight, but the way the men had to fight them during the first days—one, two, or three ships over the target—they might as well, as Major (later General) O'Donnell said, have been flying spotted ponies.

The pursuit pilots lacked oxygen and oxygen equipment, a shortage which limited the effective ceiling of our pursuit planes to 12,000 or 15,000 feet or to the individual pilot's reaction to altitude. The air-warning service proved next to useless in the pinch; the ship-to-ground communications worked only sporadically; and the planes were based on four fields—all of which were known to the enemy through espionage and air reconnaissance. On these fields there were, of course, the other planes that added up to paper totals which made our air strength in the Philippines sound fairly impressive: O-46s and worthless O-52s of the Observation Squadron, all shot down in the first three days of war; 12 B-18s, two of them at Del Monte, which were used to run supplies to Mindanao with as great hazard to their crews from the weather as from the Japanese; 8 A-27s, two of which could fly; and miscellaneous trainers, observation planes, and broken-down bombers.

Finally, of course, there was the 27th Bombardment Group, whose planes had never come. On the evening of December 7 the officers gave a dinner for General Brereton at the Manila Hotel. It was quite an occasion and it is probable that none of the participating 27th noticed the General slipping out on them, first to confer with Admiral Purnell and a little later with General Sutherland. From them he learned that in the opinion of the War and Navy Departments war might break out at any time. Brereton called his staff together and had Colonel Brady warn all airfields to go on combat alert. At the same time plans for field exercises, which were to have recalled the B-17s from Mindanao to Clark Field, were canceled.

Meanwhile the 27th's party at the Manila Hotel continued on its course, breaking up finally at 2 o'clock on December 8. Manila was quiet as the men found their way back to Fort McKinley through the blackout. Only the sound of their jeeps or, after they had gone, the quick clapping feet of a little Filipino horse taking home a *calesa* full of Sunday stragglers could be heard in the streets.

Iba's radar picks up the Japs

Less than an hour later, the men watching the radar screen in the half-buried hut at Iba saw the tracks of the first big flight of Japanese bombers coming down from Formosa through the still darkness over the South China Sea.

There was no question of the flight's identity.

They had to be the Japanese, for all planes on Luzon except the 3rd Pursuit Squadron's were grounded. The men thought that this was war at last — both the men in the cockpits of the planes and the others standing by to see them off. No time was wasted, no words were needed. The interception had been carefully planned and every pilot knew his place in the formation they were to fly. The engines thundered as they were run up; then came a moment of comparative quiet before Lieutenant Thorne's plane moved out from the rest, roared briefly down the strip, and almost in the instant of becoming airborne turned away over the sea. One by one the others followed, the blast of their propellers driving clouds of dust back through the darkness. Then they were gone. The beat of their engines grew fainter than the soft wash of the sea along the beach. Only the men inside the sunken hut, their eyes intent upon the radar screen, could follow them.

The pilots knew their heading but they did not know at what altitude the Japanese were flying, for the radar set at Iba had no means of estimating altitude. So they themselves were at staggered altitudes to afford the greatest possible chance of interception. Their orders of the night before still held: if they found the Japanese within 20 miles of shore, they were to shoot on sight. But they saw nothing at all, though they searched far beyond their 20-mile limit in wide casts across the sea. It was only when they returned to the field that they learned that interception of a sort had occurred.

According to the radar presentation, contact had been made at 40 miles. The men watching the screen had seen what the pilots could not. The two lines representing the Japanese and the P-40 flights had faithfully converged; then suddenly, at the very point of meeting, the Japanese formation had turned back. Without oxygen, the 3rd Squadron had been limited more or less to 15,000 feet and undoubtedly the Japanese had been above them.

The Japanese flight seemed pointless, and the returning pilots of the 3rd Squadron must have scratched their heads over it. It was both frustrating and mysterious. If the Japanese had had any serious intention of bombing, they could have sailed right on over the P-40s; for they knew already that our squadrons could not offer effective night interception. But instead they had turned back at the first indication that their presence off the coast was known.

Our planes were regassed and the stand-by crews took over. The rest of the squadron returned to the barracks which men and officers shared alike; and the report of the completed mission was sent on its way to Headquarters at Nielson Field. They did not have long to sleep. At about 6.30 one of the men on the first breakfast shift snapped on the mess-hall radio to pick up Don Bell's news broadcast. There seemed to be a great deal of

radio interference that morning. But after a moment Bell's voice came through. He was talking about Pearl Harbor.

That was their first news of the war.

The first fighter patrols

At 2.30 the 21st and 17th Squadrons at Nichols Field were ordered to stations. It was the sixth successive morning this had happened, but there was the same feeling of tenseness in the emergency operations tent as the men assembled by the dim glow of the blacked-out gas lantern. The night was hushed. The leaves on the trees round the Air Depot barely stirred in the breath of the new south wind. Beyond the open tent fly, the men could see their planes on the line, ghostly in the starlight.

There was little talk among the 21st's pilots. They were a very young outfit; except for their Commanding Officer, Lieutenant W. E. (Ed) Dyess, all of them were second lieutenants and most but a few months out of flying school. Colonel George's talk of two days before was fresh in their minds, and like the 3rd Squadron they were sure that this was it. But after ten minutes' waiting they were told the immediate emergency was over, and those who had been routed out of sleep by the alert officer now returned to their quarters. It began to seem as if this had been just another night of Japanese reconnaissance maneuvers.

About 4.30 the telephone in the tent rang and Dyess, answering, received the first fragmentary news of the attack on Pearl Harbor. The Navy had had the news since 3.00 a.m., and most of their installations were alerted by 3.30. A radio operator had picked up a message in the clear, in Morse. It was twice repeated, and he recognized the sending technique of the operator at Pearl Harbor. This message was sent to Admiral Hart and to General MacArthur's Headquarters. Apparently it reached General MacArthur about 4.00, and within a few minutes Air Headquarters also had been notified. Confirmation did not come through, at least to the 24th Pursuit Group, till about 5.00. At 5.30 General Headquarters issued an official statement that Pearl Harbor had been heavily attacked by Japanese submarines and planes and that a state of war existed between the United States and Japan.

By this time the pilots at Nichols Field who had returned to their quarters after the first alert were all back at stations. The pilots of the 21st Squadron were ordered into their planes and told to start their engines. Shortly afterwards, however, Lieutenant Dyess told them to cut their engines. They climbed out of the planes but stayed with them, sitting on the ground in the shade of the wing. As they talked back and forth, they must have found the news confusing, for the idea had been thoroughly drilled into them that Japan was bound to strike first at the Philippines. Yet here the Japs were, attacking Pearl Harbor, 5000 miles

to the east, and leaving them alone. It was hard to understand.

But, though no word came through to them, Japanese planes were at that moment bombing the Philippine radio station at Aparri. And just at dawn a force of Japanese dive bombers, heading in from the Pacific, caught two of the Navy's PBVs sitting on the water at Davao Gulf and sank them out of hand. Only by adroit maneuvering did the tender *William B. Preston* succeed in dodging the bombs and a little later evade four Japanese destroyers entering the Gulf in obvious search of her.

The day was clear and the south wind blew gently in a sun-filled sky. To the pilots of the 17th and 21st Squadrons restlessly waiting by their planes or at the telephone in the operations tents, it was incongruous. They were at war, but that was all they knew about it. It looked as if they were expected just to sit it out.

But at about 8.00, while one shift of the flight crews were eating breakfast, the 17th Squadron received orders to cover Clark Field. A heavy fleet of Japanese bombers was reported north of Luzon, heading down Lingayen Gulf.

The 17th took off and drilled straight north up the shore of Manila Bay. They took up their patrol line near Tarlac, east and west across the central plain. Still farther north, on a line crossing Rosales, the 20th Squadron was flying another patrol. At Clark Field itself the B-17s were taking the air as a precautionary move in case the Japanese bombers broke through the two fighter patrol lines. Their orders were to stand by on control tower frequency, which meant that they could not get very far from the field.

The members of the 21st Squadron watched the 17th's planes take off, but there were no orders for them. They were tense with frustration, and as time passed tension mounted. Olives and sandwiches were brought out to the operations tent and a tub full of Coca-Cola. They drank the Cokes but were too excited to do much eating. They went back to their planes to wait.

The 34th Squadron at Del Carmen did not learn there was a war on till 8 o'clock. Then Headquarters got through to them on the radio, which was their sole means of communication, ordering them on immediate alert, with pilots in their planes.

At about 8.30, therefore, the interceptor situation showed the 20th and 17th Squadrons flying two defensive patrols east and west across the plain at Rosales and Tarlac, while the 3rd was at Iba, the 34th at Del Carmen, and the 21st at Nichols, with all operational planes manned and waiting further instructions.

The bombers alerted

Some time after 4 o'clock that morning, while it was still dark, the telephone rang in Eubank's quarters at Clark Field, and Major Kennard, the

Air Surgeon, one of the four men who shared them with him, answered it. He was told that it was a special message for Colonel Eubank — Manila calling. Eubank came over and listened for a minute, spoke briefly himself, and then put the telephone down and said, "Well, boys, here it is. It's what we've been waiting for."

The message was from General Brereton, announcing the attack on Pearl Harbor. Eubank immediately called in his staff and gave them the news. Brereton's instructions were to be ready for a mission. There was no need to designate the target. Everyone knew it was Formosa. The mission had been planned in detail, with the shipping in Takao Harbor the target. Reconnaissance flights carried to the tip of Formosa by the B-17s had also served as dry runs from which gasoline and bomb loads had been worked out.

However, when Brereton prescribed the bomb load, Eubank suggested that it would be better to have the bombs stand by. Then if there were a change of loads at the last minute for a special target, they would not have to be taken off. And in case of a sudden attack on the field, it would be better not to have the planes standing loaded. The planes could be bombed up with no loss of time while the crews were being briefed. Brereton agreed and the bombs were ordered to stand by.

The guards on the planes were warned at once to be on the alert against sabotage, but the news of war was slow in filtering through to most of the lower echelons. About 5.30, Operations ordered all Commanding Officers to report to Group Headquarters. Day was just breaking as they came across the field. They were instructed to get their men together and tell them that hostilities had started and that Hickam Field had been attacked. Three pilots had been scheduled to go out on patrol that morning; two of the patrols were now canceled in order to reserve as many planes as possible for any strike against the enemy. The third, Lieutenant Hewitt T. Wheelless, was sent up alone.

After Don Bell's news broadcast, practically everyone at Clark Field knew of the attack on Pearl Harbor. The combat crews had collected at Headquarters for briefing, the bombs were ready near their planes. The Group only needed orders to load and take off.

The orders would have to come from Manila.

Shortly after Eubank had talked with his staff officers, a second call came through from General Brereton, summoning Eubank and his Operations Officer, Major Birrell Walsh, to Air Headquarters at Nielson Field. It was about daylight when they took off in a B-18, leaving Major David R. Gibbs in charge of the Group.

The discussion at Headquarters

At best Nielson Field is a bare place, lying clear of Manila and well out in the open plain. There is

no natural cover anywhere around it, and on that morning, under an almost cloudless sky, it must have seemed particularly exposed. The black and yellow squares of peacetime still marked the hangar roof, and gangs of men were banking the walls of the new operations building that now housed Air Headquarters with sandbags.

The FEAF (Far East Air Force) staff began gathering at 6.00 and when Eubank and Walsh arrived they were all there except Brereton, who had gone into Manila to confer with MacArthur. He was still at USAFFE, but the rest met in his office — Colonel Brady, the Chief of Staff; Colonel Campbell, Air Warning; Colonel Caldwell, FEAF Operations; General Clagett and Colonel George; Lieutenant Colonel Sprague, 5th Interceptor Command Operations; Major Lamb, Signal Officer; Captain Eads, Engineer Officer of FEAF — with others going in and out. There was a good deal of discussion and some argument, but it was the unanimous opinion of those present that the B-17s should be sent at once against Formosa. Takao Harbor had been designated as their target since December 6; all they needed was the word to go.

Objective folders on Formosa had been prepared by Captain Allison Ind, Intelligence Officer of the Interceptor Command. Though considerable effort had gone into these folders, the information they contained was pretty rudimentary. There had been neither time nor means to secure data necessary for calibrated bomb targets and approach routes. Naturally, since our reconnaissance planes had been under stringent orders not to cross over Formosa, there were no air photographs.

It was a little before 8.00 when General Brereton returned to Air Headquarters. As he entered his office he asked what decision the staff had reached, but on being told said, "No. We can't attack till we're fired on," and explained that he had been directed to prepare the B-17s for action but was not to undertake offensive action till ordered.

There is no question that this statement came as a shock to most of the men in the room. All were puzzled and incredulous. They could not understand why the attack on Pearl Harbor, which was certainly an overt act of war, did not automatically release them and United States forces everywhere from a purely defensive attitude. Moreover, not to strike now meant throwing away the best chance they were likely to have of hitting the enemy on his own ground.

The staff therefore found themselves back where they had been two hours before. After a good deal of arguing it was decided that all they could do under the circumstances was to complete plans for the operation against Takao Harbor and in the meantime to send up two or three planes on photo-reconnaissance. Brereton then gave Eubank his orders, specifying that the first objective of the attack would be Jap naval ships and transports and

that three planes should undertake the photo mission, with emphasis on Japanese airfields.

This discussion consumed the best part of an hour. Now, as Eubank went to the telephone to call Clark Field and set up the photo mission, Colonel George pointed out the danger in leaving the B-17s parked on the field. The path of the Japanese bombers that had been reported heading in from Lingayen Gulf was already being plotted in the Air Warning room. Ind's account quotes Eubank as replying that the B-17s could not be taken off for every alarm, they had to be serviced, and the crews had to eat. Whether this was an accurate quotation or not, tension was plainly mounting as the period of inaction lengthened. But in any case, at Clark Field Major Gibbs, in response to a warning from the base commander, had ordered the B-17s into the air.

Back at Nielson Field, Air Warning's staff and facilities were now being taxed to the limit to handle the warnings, messages, and rumors that began pouring in. Then, just after 9.20, two reports close together announced that Baguio, the summer capital, and Tuguegarao, a town still further north of Manila, had been bombed. On sighting the patrolling 20th Squadron, the Japanese had turned about, with the 20th in pursuit; but the Japs were over 22,000 feet and, with the 20th Squadron at 17,000 at the time they made visual contact, only two of the P-40s were able to draw up to the bombers in time to trade shots and get a few bullet holes for their pains. But the encounter settled all doubts, and the Japs by bombing Baguio had provided an overt act for the Philippines.

Brereton immediately put in a call to MacArthur's Headquarters and spoke personally to Sutherland, informing him of the two attacks and again requesting authority to undertake offensive action. He then warned Sutherland, in Eubank's recollection of his exact words, that "if Clark Field is attacked, we won't be able to operate on it," and turning to Colonel Brady, who was listening in on another line, Brereton instructed him to make a note of the conversation. But apparently the request to take offensive action was still refused.

Almost immediately after this, Eubank and Walsh, who had been at Air Headquarters for over an hour and a half, left for Clark Field with instructions to prepare for both the reconnaissance and the attack missions on Formosa. Whether authorization for the photo mission had come through from General Headquarters before their departure is a matter of some doubt. Both Brereton and the daily *Summary of Activities of the Headquarters, Far East Air Force* (hereafter referred to as *FEAF Diary*), the validity of whose December entries is, however, open to some question, state that a call from General Sutherland authorizing the reconnaissance came through just before Eubank's departure. But as Eubank recalls, he did

not receive orders to dispatch this mission till after his arrival at Clark Field — an insignificant point in the light of the next two hours, but indicative of the confusion that existed in all quarters that morning.

It was after 10.30 when Eubank and Walsh returned to Clark Field. By then Gibbs had recalled the B-17s, and the big planes were coming back in. There were a few broken clouds building up south of the field, and a slight haze already touched the upper slopes of Mount Arayat; but to the north and northwest the sky was a clear blue with visibility unlimited. As the last B-17 rolled over the grass to its revetment, the P-40s of the 20th Squadron, which had been flying cover for the landing bombers, buzzed the field and came in to land, joining the 17th Squadron, which had landed earlier, so that by 11.00 both fighter squadrons were on the ground. They had been flying patrol for nearly two and a half hours and needed to refuel. While the planes were being serviced, the men went after food, but as soon as they had eaten they returned to their planes and went on the alert. The 17th Squadron, which had refueled first, was ready to go shortly after 11.00.

At that time, therefore, all the pursuit were on the ground and, except for the 17th, in their accustomed stations; and all were ready for action except the 20th, which was in process of refueling. All but two of the B-17s based at Clark were on the ground. These two were flying reconnaissance; one somewhere near Formosa, and the other, unable to take off at the 8.30 alert, now patrolling up the east coast of Luzon.

Then, about 11.30, a message from Iba reported a large formation of planes heading in across the China Sea, presumably for Manila. The 17th Pursuit Squadron was immediately ordered into the air by Major Grover to patrol over Bataan and the entrance to Manila Bay and intercept whatever the Japanese tried to send through. At the same time, the 3rd Squadron was ordered to intercept the hostile formation as it came in from the China Sea, and the 34th, still on the ground at Del Carmen, was told to fly cover over Clark Field; but, as will be seen, the orders finally received by the 3rd were to fly standing patrol over Iba, and the 34th received no message at all. In the meantime, the 21st Squadron at Nichols Field finally got orders when the call of "Tally-ho, Clark Field!" came in over the squadron radio. Two flights instantly took off behind Dyess and headed straight for Clark Field, and as they gained altitude Dyess radioed Air Headquarters that they were on their way. The twelve planes had just reached the northern borders of the city when they were called back and told to fly standing patrol between Corregidor and Cavite. The third flight of the 21st Squadron had had trouble with their brand-new P-40s and did not get off the ground for a good five minutes after the others had left.

They made the prescribed circle down over Laguna de Bay to check their guns over water but, in doing so, lost contact with the first two flights and set out for Clark Field by themselves, having presumably swung out of radio range when the orders to fly standing patrol had come through.

This left the 20th Squadron to cover Clark Field. The 19th Group was then holding a staff meeting; for, just before noon, orders had finally come through from Air Headquarters to dispatch both squadrons on an attack mission against known air-dromes in Formosa. The attack was to be delivered with 100- and 300-pound bombs at the last possible daylight hour. Apparently orders for the photographic mission were yet in force, for the crews of at least two of the three scheduled planes were still preparing for it; yet it seems curious that they had not taken off on their mission before noon. The only explanation given is that when the planes were scheduled it was found that there were not enough cameras to go round, and a B-18 had to be sent to Nichols Field for them. This plane, according to Captain William E. McDonald, returned to Clark Field shortly before 12.30.

Back at Nielson, in Air Headquarters, George had been "begging and begging" to have the Fortresses put in the air; it would be two or three hours before they could take off; and meanwhile, through indecision, delays in transmitting orders, and broken-down and sabotaged communications, the sole fighter cover for Clark Field in the next twenty minutes amounted to as many of the 20th Squadron's planes as might get off the ground in that time; the six brand-new P-40s of the 21st Pursuit Squadron coming up from Nichols Field, of which, due to their condition, only three would be able to fly the distance; and a single flight of the 3rd Squadron which, as will be seen, quite fortuitously found themselves over Clark Field for a few short moments before the enemy appeared.

If this had been the goal of Japanese maneuvering, it would hardly have worked out more aptly for them; and their own pilots, sighting the glitter of the B-17s parked on the green field below, must have found it hard to accept the evidence of their own eyes.

Iba is hit

At Iba, the Commanding Officer of the 3rd Squadron, Lieutenant Thorne, had called Air Headquarters for instructions as soon as the commercial radio broadcast had come through. He was told to stand by for instructions. The eighteen ranking pilots were assigned to the operational planes and went out on the line and climbed into the cockpits. They sat there all morning. Their breakfasts were brought out to them, sandwiches and coffee. No instructions came through from Headquarters. They had no idea of what might be happening in the rest of Luzon. There was

nothing for them to do but sit in their planes with the mountains at their backs and the sea in front of them, bright in the windy sunlight.

About 11.00 the telephone and telegraph at Iba both suddenly went dead. From then on the only means of communicating with the rest of Luzon was the radio, and the unusual amount of interference made that increasingly uncertain. No instructions had come through from Headquarters since Lieutenant Thorne's original request for orders about 7 o'clock, and the 3rd Squadron's 18 planes were still on the ground.

The shadows of the mountains had receded as the day drew on, and the airfield with its little cluster of buildings and palm trees now shimmered in the full heat of the sun. Talk had worn thin. The men sitting in their planes listened to fragmentary reports that Baguio and Aparri had been bombed. They didn't know whether to believe them. Mostly their eyes kept watching the empty sky above the empty sea.

About 11.30 the radar picked up a large formation of bombers, nearly 100 miles out. Thorne immediately had the men start their engines; but instead of coming straight in, the Japanese started milling back and forth, apparently to kill time, far out over the ocean. The 3rd Squadron remained on the ground with their engines running and using up gas. But shortly after, orders came through from Group Headquarters to take off and climb to 15,000 feet and fly standing patrol over Iba.

They were in three flights of six planes each under Lieutenant Thorne, 2nd Lieutenant E. R. Woolery, and Lieutenant H. S. Ellis, but they never got together as a squadron. The pressure under which they had had to take off may have been partly accountable, but mainly it was due to poor communications. The air was in horrible shape by then, with contradictory orders coming in from every direction and everyone shouting, and at times it was almost impossible to talk even between planes flying wing to wing. In the confusion, "B" flight lost the others — Woolery's radio had gone out of commission — so they headed at top speed for Manila, hoping to pick up orders from Headquarters once they were near enough.

They circled over Nichols and Nielson for a few minutes, but nothing happened. They couldn't get anything definite over the radio, but suddenly the "Tally-ho!" call came through and someone started shouting what sounded like "Bandits over Clark!" and they flew wide-open up to Clark Field.

When they got up, seeing that everything looked normal, they decided it had been a false alarm. By then their gas had begun to run low, for they had made wide-open flights from Iba to Manila and from Manila to Clark, so they headed back to Iba to gas up and try to get some further orders.

As the flight came out over the coast and began to draw near their home field, they saw a freighter and

a PT boat a little offshore. The PT boat was zig-zagging like mad, and they could see from her smoke and the long white feather of wake on the blue sea that the freighter was traveling at full speed. It looked queer. But they could get no orders. They couldn't get anything at all. Their radios had apparently been jammed. So Woolery decided to go on in. He started his approach with four of the planes following him down while the fifth, piloted by 2d Lieutenant A. E. Krieger, stayed up to cover their landing.

Krieger, circling, saw Woolery's plane touch wheels and start to roll. The others were on their approach with their wheels down. And then the field went off in a single blinding flash that carried from the northwest corner clear through the length of the air strip.

Krieger never saw what happened to the other planes of "B" flight. He gave his own ship everything it could take and started back up. Then he saw the bombers, directly over the field, proceeding serenely on their course at something above 28,000 feet. He could never have come up with them even if he had had oxygen.

He was going up so fast that he had to level off around 10,000 feet to let his engine cool. He looked down and saw what appeared to be a squadron of P-35s circling the field, and for an instant he thought they must be trying to land and wondered how they could help seeing that the field had been bombed. Then it occurred to him that they might be Japanese and he started down for a closer look. They were. They were flying a beautiful Lufberry circle around the field and strafing everything in sight. They were beautiful planes, all white, with big red spots on their wings. When they came out of the smoke and the sun glanced on their backs, he could see them clear. It was his first sight of the Zero.

He started to call "All pursuit to Iba," but just then the Clark tower came in with "All pursuit to Clark," and looking in that direction he saw a great column of smoke leaning in the sky.

He knew that pretty soon all available planes would be going there, so he called "All 3rd Pursuit to Iba," and laid his plane over and went down after the Japanese planes. He could not get his sights on them. They were flying so low it was impossible to get under them. He had never had any briefing on the Zero; he knew nothing of its potentialities. The only way he could think of to get at them was to join their Lufberry circle, which he did, shooting at the plane ahead. It dropped away and suddenly he realized that there was tracer coming past him. Looking back, he found three Zeros on his tail.

Somehow he managed to pull away from them, and about then he realized that he was down to his last 25 gallons of gas. He called for instructions and like a clear miracle Lieutenant Thorne's voice came in telling him to try for Rosales. He headed for it and made it safely, but his gas ran out as he was

taxiing back up the strip. Thorne was waiting there with about four other members of the squadron.

The two flights with him had patrolled over Iba as ordered till summoned to Clark; but, seeing no attacking planes and picking up Krieger's call, they flew all-out back to Iba, where some of them got into the fight before it broke off. Then, with tanks running low, Thorne led the way to Rosales, though a few, missing his call, returned to Clark in time to get into action there.

Before long they were joined by two others. Then a lone B-18, shot full of holes, flew in from Clark Field with a pilot who had never handled a B-18 before and a radio sergeant for co-pilot. These men told them a little about the attack there. They had to wait till gas and ammunition could be trucked up to them, and that night they were ordered down to Nichols Field, where they found other members of the squadron, who had been scattered like leaves over Luzon.

Iba was completely destroyed. For a place of its size the Japanese had poured in an extraordinary weight of bombs, and they had accomplished what must have been one of their prime objectives, the destruction of the radar unit.

At the time of the attack the radar-crew had been plotting the incoming flight and trying to get their plots through to Headquarters. They were killed at their posts, as were the two officers and two enlisted men in the control tower, who were trying to warn "B" flight of the bomber formation over their heads. All the other buildings were razed, and even the little grove of palm trees. No one survived who was not in a foxhole when the bombs struck. The men were completely dazed when they finally crawled out of the wreckage and began picking up the wounded. They had no way of communicating with the rest of Luzon now, not even radio. There was nothing left at all, except a few trucks. There were no drugs for the wounded. The dispensary had been completely wiped out.

"Bandits over Clark"

Of the six brand-new P-40s that started out for Clark Field after checking their guns over Laguna de Bay, two almost immediately had to turn back when their engines, which had not been slow-timed, started throwing oil. The oil plastered the wind screens, and the pilots — barely able to see — had no choice but to return to base. The four remaining pilots, all second lieutenants, continued to Clark; S. C. Grashio flying with A. P. Williams on his wing, and J. P. Cole with J. L. McGown. Everything seemed peaceful as they came over the field. There wasn't a sign of hostile aircraft, but away off in the west above the mountains they could see a flight of planes heading towards the China Sea, and presuming that they must be the rest of their own squadron, the four instinctively took out after them. This left the air above Clark Field entirely unde-

fended; for the 34th Squadron at Del Carmen had not received the orders to fly cover and was still at standing alert on the field. So, until the 20th Squadron, which had just finished gassing up at 12.15, should get into the air, the fate of Clark Field depended entirely on the efficiency of the air-warning system.

A test before the war had shown how uncertain this was likely to be. Native observers, but few of whom had been trained in plane identification, had to send their reports in over the lines of the Philippine Telephone System to Headquarters at Nielson, where the reported flights were plotted and the data relayed to Clark Field, from which in turn orders were issued to the various squadrons. In this cumbersome arrangement delays were frequent and inevitable. Direct communication between Clark, Nielson, and Nichols Fields was by a teletype circuit, which was supplemented by the telephone line and radio. Each of the three fields had an SCR 297 set which was used for both point-to-point and ground-to-air communication. That morning there had been continual difficulty with the radio set, so when the wires went dead, Clark Field was virtually isolated. No further messages, of course, had come in from Iba; but there had been reports fifteen minutes before noon of an unidentified flight of planes out over Lingayen Gulf. This failed to materialize. Around the field, the B-17s were in process of bombing up. Some of the air crews were at mess, and others were just about to go after their food. The engines of the first flight of P-40s were being turned over.

At 12.30 the staff meeting of the 19th Group, planning the raid on Formosa, was still in session. Near the end of the field the first flight of the 20th Squadron's P-40s were lined up to take off. The ordnance crews were busy with the B-17s and already had several of the big planes loaded. At 12.35, Lieutenant Fred T. Crimmins Jr.'s ship was ready and he sent his crew off to get lunch. They had just time to make the third shift in the 30th Squadron mess. The radio was turned on there for the news, and to their astonishment Don Bell was just coming in with "an unconfirmed report that they're bombing Clark Field." Crimmins himself walked across the field towards the hangars with one of the plane's waist guns, which needed a new buffer screw. Everything seemed routine. There was a B-17 in the hangar for a camouflage paint job, but at the moment no one was working on it, and Crimmins passed under its wing on his way to the shop at the rear. He had just handed the machine gun over to the sergeant there when the base fire alarm started its grunting, and both he and the sergeant ran back to the front of the hangar. A P-40 was taking off and another was beginning its run across the field. The insistent, hoarse bleating of the klaxon continued, and instinctively both men looked downwind to the north.

High over the green points of the mountains they saw the planes. The sky there was a clear and cloudless blue, and the bombers came on steadily out of the northwest in two huge shallow V's, one behind the other, their wings glistening in the sunlight. They were flying above 18,000 feet, but the unfamiliar and unorthodox droning of their engines was audible through the uproar of the P-40s taking off. There were 54 of them, and they held their formation with absolute precision, as though they were on review.

There had been no warning of their immediate approach, and the first wave was almost at the release line when they were sighted. Lieutenant W. E. Strathern, the field's Operations Officer, sounded the alarm and ordered the 20th Squadron off the ground; but there was time left for only four of them to get into the air. The next five, which were in process of taking off, and five others still off the line were caught in the bomb pattern and were all destroyed.

The bombs were dropped in train diagonally across the field. They began falling on the northwest corner, in the row of Officers' Quarters, and proceeded through the parked P-40s, the Headquarters Building, and the shop and hangar area. The bombs from the second wave followed almost immediately. Like the formation that had attacked Iba, the Japanese planes never deviated from their course but continued straight on to the southeast until they disappeared in the haze and clouds.

Behind them they left the field blazing. Most of the buildings had been hit, and many were afire. The men could do little to save them, for there was no fire apparatus. Another casualty had been the communications center and as a result, after its initial call for pursuit, Clark Field was unable to ask for help. With all wires cut, the base was entirely isolated. It was difficult to see what had happened, for besides the pall of dust, mushrooming clouds of black oil smoke from a blazing oil dump behind the hangars came rolling across the field. The smoke grew so heavy that the sun was shut out; it was hard to see more than 50 or 60 feet.

As the crash of the bombing ceased and the uneven beat of the Japanese planes faded away, men began to lift themselves out of the slit trenches. The cries of wounded sounded through the smoke from all over the field. Almost all the casualties were people who had kept on running for cover after the bombs began to fall; most of those who dropped flat on the ground escaped injury. But many had been caught completely unaware. The officers' mess, which at the time was serving fifty or more, and the 20th Pursuit Squadron's mess tent, right beside the hangars, both received direct hits, as did the kitchens, in which many of the Filipino help were killed. The Field Infirmary had been wiped out but the men were treated on the lawn in front of it and more were handled at the 19th Group's Dispensary, and from

there they were driven up to Fort Stotsenburg Hospital.

The strafers come in

The work had hardly begun, however, before the roar of airplane engines sounded over the field and Japanese pursuits broke through the smoke. The strafers made their runs from the open east end of the field, coming in only a few feet above the ground and using their machine gun tracer to sight on the parked Fortresses and then letting go with their 20-mm cannon. Only a few B-17s were destroyed by the high-altitude bombing at 12:40; and as Eubank made the round of his Group immediately afterwards, he had felt pretty much encouraged by the small amount of damage. But the strafers destroyed all but two or three of the B-17s and damaged those. They also attacked buildings, gun emplacements, and personnel at will. There was little to prevent them.

The only pursuit opposition at first was that offered by the four P-40s Lieutenant Moore had led into the air. These had not yet gained combat altitude when they tangled with the first incoming Zeros; but 2nd Lieutenant R. D. Keator shot down one of them almost at once and Lieutenant Moore, a little later, brought down two others. The P-40s, however, were too heavily outnumbered to accomplish much.

A few minutes later, three planes of the 21st Squadron arrived at Clark Field. Four had taken off over the Zambales Mountains but had not gone far before they heard the call for "All pursuits to Clark Field. All pursuits to Clark. Enemy bombers overhead" coming in on their radios. They could hear the mounting excitement in the man's voice; it became almost hysterical; and then they heard the bombs bursting in their headsets. As they turned back to Clark, they saw a tree of black smoke standing on the plain; and it kept rising as they neared it; and when they got close they could see the fires at its roots. Cole's engine started shooting oil about then, and he had to turn back, so only the three were left. Then McGown disappeared and there were just Grashio and Williams.

Down below they could see the enemy planes darting in and out of the smoke close above the fires. The two P-40 pilots circled up on top, trying to nerve themselves to go down after the enemy. Then they saw one of the planes break into the clear only three or four thousand feet below them and they dove for it, and got it. Just then, as they saw the Jap start down, they discovered that there were two Zeros on their own tails, and they split, diving into the smoke cloud. One of the Zeros came in after Grashio and put a cannon shell through his wing; but he got away and returned to Nichols Field.

Fourteen miles south, at Del Carmen, the pilots of the 34th Pursuit Squadron had been waiting in their well-worn P-35s when they saw great clouds of

smoke and dust climbing in the northern sky. Lieutenant Marrett immediately took the squadron up to intercept without orders. There was a 6000-foot ceiling at Del Carmen, and as the lead flight reached the base of the clouds they were jumped by two Zeros. These were driven off by the arrival of the other two flights; but Marrett's guns had failed to operate and he was compelled to return to base, leaving the squadron under the command of Lieutenant Ben S. Brown.

Heading towards Clark, the 34th got into their own private war with several Zeros. The Japanese were very cocky and came right into the American formation, and the ensuing fight spilled itself all across the sky. The American pilots soon discovered that the Japanese planes could outmaneuver theirs in every respect except maximum diving speed, and owing to their own inexperience and the worn-out condition of their guns, the fight went on for some time in a seesaw fashion, with no confirmed kills being registered, though planes on both sides were hit. By the time the fight was broken off, the Japanese strafers and dive bombers had finished their work on Clark Field, and the 34th returned to Del Carmen.

The only other American pursuit to get into the fight that day were the six planes of "C" flight of the 3rd Squadron. Apparently they came over Clark at the beginning of the strafing attack and became tangled up with a bunch of Zeros almost at once. They were very low on gas by then; at least one of the planes ran dry in combat and its pilot, 2nd Lieutenant G. O. Ellstrom, was strafed in his chute. Two more P-40s were lost in this action. The first crashed with its pilot, 2nd Lieutenant V. R. Ireland, into the side of Mount Arayat. Lieutenant H. S. Ellis had to bail out of his. He was cutting round a cloud, looking for a Zero he had just chased into it, when he discovered that his own ship was not only on fire but its tail surfaces were practically burned off. It was impossible to pull up to kill his speed, so he jumped anyhow and made it safely to the ground, except for a crack on the head from his own plane that kept him from flying from then on. "C" flight was not able to prevent the Japanese from strafing the field, but they had at least drawn blood, and Ellis alone was officially credited with three Zeros.

The lone Fortress from Del Monte

Meanwhile a B-17 coming up from Mindanao to have a wing repaired had arrived over Clark Field at the exact moment of the Japanese high-altitude attack. Because of a report relayed from Del Monte that the field had been under attack, the crew had approached cautiously, keeping within the cloud bank over Arayat and searching with field glasses through the holes in the overcast. But at 12.35 Clark Field lay peacefully on the plain, the unpainted B-17s and P-40s shining in the open sunlight. They let down through the overcast, broke

clear of it, and then, crossing the field at 500 feet, let down their wheels. At that instant the first bombs struck the row of quarters and the incredulous men at the windows of the big plane watched the string of explosions run out across the field. The pilot, Lieutenant E. R. Tash, reacted instantly, ordered wheels up, and headed back and up under full throttle towards the overcast. As the ship banked, the navigator had a glimpse of the bombers, gleaming in the sunlight and still in perfect formation, entering the same clouds far above them.

They went up to 4000 feet and then, on the far side of Mount Arayat, they circled among the clouds and tried to figure out what they ought to do. Hasty calculations showed that they had enough gas to get back to Del Monte, with twenty-five minutes' extra flying time. They decided therefore to stay where they were until they had used up this margin and then to take another look at Clark. If the field looked all right, they would go in; otherwise they would return to Mindanao.

Once in their circling they saw another B-17 in the distance. They flew towards it, hoping to get into formation with it; but the other pilot took off for cloud cover. This plane had been up the east coast of Luzon on reconnaissance and had been recalled at noon. The pilot had seen Tash's plane but had not been able to identify it as friendly.

At the end of their allotted time, Tash started back for Clark. The air was clear of planes as they neared Arayat, but as they came closer to the field with its towering pillar of smoke, they could see planes flashing in and out of the smoke above the shattered buildings and the burning aircraft. At first Tash and his crew mistook these for friendly pursuits flying the regular traffic pattern before going in to land, and they themselves went jubilantly ahead, letting down their wheels once more, and firing two red flares, the signal of the day. About 4 miles out, however, just as they were turning into the base leg, a pursuit plane hurtled out of the clouds in front of them in a long vertical dive that carried it straight into the ground. At the same instant the co-pilot reported anti-aircraft fire and Tash decided that Clark Field was no place for them. As he banked away, Sergeant J. U. Sowa in the top dome reported three planes diving on them from 2000 feet above.

Tash took the B-17 down under full power to the treetops; and as they leveled off, the fighter planes closed in. They peeled off their original formation and came in singly from the rear and banked away to the left as they finished their run. Sergeant M. Bibin, the bombardier, who had volunteered to handle one of the waist guns, was struck in the chest by the opening burst from the leading Japanese plane. He was knocked to the floor but did not lose consciousness. The Jap pilot came in so close on the B-17's tail that the tracer from his wing guns was converging out in front of Tash and his co-pilot, 2d

Lieutenant D. H. Kellar. The aileron cables were half cut through; so were the flap cables; and one of the propellers was hit. After that Tash had to fly the ship dead level for fear of spinning in.

As the first Zero finished its run, the second took its place on the B-17's tail, where the side and top gunners couldn't get at it; but as the third Jap peeled off, Pfc. A. E. Norgaard, manning the top radio guns, caught the Zero in his sights, and his tracer chewed right down the length of its belly from the prop spinner to the tail wheel. The Japanese did not go down, but he was flopping pretty badly the last time they saw him. The other two Zeros left them alone after that and they went on through the deepening overcast, still at low altitude, so that they had to feel their way between the Southern Luzon mountains. They had one more bad moment when they picked up the high Del Monté tableland in the clear ahead of them and saw smoke rising from the area in which the airfields lay. They hadn't enough gas left to do anything but go on in. But the smoke proved to be merely a brush fire, and they made a safe landing at a little after 5 o'clock.

On the ground

The pursuit action and the diversion, if it could be called that, created by the passage of Lieutenant Tash's plane had no material effect on the strafing of Clark Field. The Japanese worked over the burning Fortresses, the hangars, and the shops with no more direct opposition than the anti-aircraft could produce. That was little enough. The planes broke so sharply out of the smoke, they came in so low, and the 37-mm guns were so slow at traversing, that the gunners could not follow the planes across the field, though one crew did get the plane attacking them when it was observed that the Japanese pilot kept repeating the exact line of his run. They pointed their gun to pick up his exit, waited till he came again, took him going away.

The attack had broken so suddenly and unexpectedly after the departure of the high-altitude bombers that many of the air crews who had run out on the field as soon as the last bombs fell were caught in or beside their planes, and the strafing was carried out with such savage persistence that most of the men on the base were pinned down in their slit trenches until it was over. The heat of the fires, the choking clouds of smoke, the roar of airplane engines, and the gunfire made any organized resistance impossible; but both Eubank and Gibbs continued to move among the dispersed planes, encouraging the men and directing their efforts in defending the aircraft and fighting fires. Some of the enlisted men had gone to the B-17s without orders and were firing the machine guns in the grounded planes against the enemy. Others filled in among the anti-aircraft gun crews as casualties occurred. The two B-17s that had been laid

up for paint jobs were taxied out of the burning hangars, but both were destroyed almost immediately after coming under enemy fire. In spite of the strafing and through all the confusion, the task of evacuating the wounded went on without interruption. There were more to pick up than the ambulances and stretcher crews could handle, and both officers and enlisted men took reconnaissance cars and trucks out on the field to aid them.

When after forty-five minutes the Japanese at last withdrew, they had done a thorough job. Clark Field as a tactical base was virtually destroyed. The casualties were very high, about 250 wounded — besides civilians — and 100 dead. There was not a single flyable plane on the base. Two or three of the B-17s were pieced out with parts of completely ruined planes sufficiently to be flown down to Mindanao within the next few days, but they were never in good tactical commission. All other planes on Clark Field were wiped out. Though most of these were observation types or outdated or obsolete bombers like the B-18s, B-10s, and A-27s, they also included the P-40s of the 20th Pursuit Squadron. The field was pockmarked with bomb craters. The hangars and shops were gutted, and though the first fury of the fires had begun to die down, smoke still rose high and black above the base, like mourning for the dead, and the trucks and ambulances still crawled ceaselessly across the field and funneled into the road to Fort Stotsenburg.

Numerically the striking force of B-17s had been cut in half. But in efficiency their loss was infinitely greater, for from now on all B-17s would have to be based on Mindanao and use Clark Field merely as a staging area. The wear and tear on engines and air crews alike would be far more than doubled, and so would the time spent in reaching targets.

Who was to blame?

The handling of our bomber force that morning has become the subject of a controversy which time has done little to dispel, for no record of the day's events exists that is wholly satisfactory to the historian. The key undoubtedly lies in Brereton's first conference with Sutherland, of which there are two fundamentally opposed accounts. Brereton's, summarized from his published Diaries, states: —

That he reported to General Headquarters about 5 A.M., that he did not see MacArthur but conferred with Sutherland and told the latter that he wished to mount the B-17s for an attack against Formosa. Sutherland agreed, and when Brereton left he was under orders to get the bombers ready but not to undertake offensive action till ordered. . . .

These orders, according to Brereton, did not come through till 11.00 A.M., though the *FEAF Diary* implies that permission was received in a telephone call from MacArthur at 10.14, that Brereton issued or-

ders for the two Fortress squadrons at Clark Field to attack known airdromes on Formosa "at the latest daylight hour that visibility will permit," substantiating Brereton's account except in the matter of timing.

Opposed is Sutherland's account of the same conference, here condensed from my notes of an interview in Manila on June 4, 1945:—

Sutherland began by saying that all the B-17s had been ordered to Del Monte some days before. On a check it was found that only half had been sent . . . GHQ wanted the planes where they would be safe from initial Jap attacks. This direct order had *not been obeyed*. . . . As Sutherland recalls, there was some plan to bomb Formosa, but Brereton said that he had to have photos first. There was no sense in going up there to bomb without knowing what they were after. *Holding the bombers at Clark Field the first day was entirely due to Brereton.* [Italics mine.]

Over a year later, General MacArthur emphatically confirmed Sutherland's statement in a newspaper interview and stated that any serious proposal to bomb Formosa should have been brought personally to him by Brereton. There is no reason to suppose that MacArthur would necessarily have opposed the bombing mission, for in a letter to Admiral Hart, on November 7, he had stated that one of the four missions of the Army was to

(b) Conduct air raids against enemy forces and installations within tactical operating radius of available bases.

However, in the hectic early hours of December 8, MacArthur may not have felt free to authorize offensive action until he had received direct confirmation from Washington that we were officially at war. Sutherland's statement lends color to this view:—

The last War Department directive received at GHQ before the war was to the effect that hostilities might start at any time. We here in the Philippines could not do anything to provoke hostilities, but we could take any defensive action. This directive arrived . . . about five days before the outbreak of war. During those five days Col. George made reports on the radar station's having reported early Japanese flights. George wanted to intercept and came to ask permission. We told him he could effect it, but that he must act defensively, but if the Japs came in close enough he could go to it. . . . The boys had to operate purely defensively. There was no question of that; and with the War Department directive, no choice on the part of GHQ.

One must surmise, therefore, that there was uncertainty in both Headquarters till shortly after 10.00 (if we accept the *FEAF Diary*), or till nearly 11.00 (if Brereton is accurate). But there seem to have been additional uncertainties in Air Headquarters. For one thing, the matter of prior photo reconnaissance undoubtedly had weighed very much on Brereton's mind, and as early as December 1 he had

asked (but not received) permission to conduct high-altitude reconnaissance over Formosa.

There was also another ramifying element underlying the conference between Sutherland and Brereton, for reading between the lines it becomes evident that contact between Air and General Headquarters had at some points become difficult. Two evidences of this exist. First in the dispute as to which Headquarters was responsible for sending the B-17s to Del Monte. Brereton's Headquarters have consistently maintained that the proposal originated with them and that Sutherland was reluctant to give permission for the transfer and only agreed on the understanding that they be brought back either to Cebu or Luzon as soon as dispersal fields were available, on the ground that no infantry protection could be provided Mindanao.

Sutherland's categorical statement that General Headquarters ordered all B-17s sent south is therefore made to seem inconsistent; but actually there is no reason why it should not be so, and General Headquarters in the last days before hostilities may well have ordered all the planes to Mindanao. However, since all such orders were transmitted orally, for the most part by telephone, this point also must remain conjectural. Yet, again reading between the lines, one is aware that Air Headquarters also was reluctant to send the B-17s to Del Monte. The expected arrival of a second group is hardly a valid reason for not sending all the planes down; more convincing would have been the interruption to group training. Brereton himself points out that the planes were to be recalled temporarily and that he countermanded their return only on the night of December 7-8.

The second evidence, as it seems to me, of difficult relations is the fact that Colonel George went directly to MacArthur's Headquarters to ask permission to attempt interception of Jap planes before the war. Whether George did this because he could gain no credence in Air Headquarters for his belief that the night-flying planes were Japanese, I do not know; nor do I know whether he went with General Brereton's approval, perhaps because it was felt that his word would carry more weight with General MacArthur. In any case it was an unusual procedure—so unusual that some air officers refuse to believe he did go. But that he did is indisputable.

In the absence of contemporary records, the reader must draw his own conclusions about the acts and omissions of December 8. Shortly after his December 25 departure from the Philippines, Brereton is known to have made a report to General Arnold, but this has never been made available even to the official historian. Arnold in his *Global Mission* does not mention it; he only says that he has never been able to get the real story of what happened. He neither considered Brereton's Diaries a complete and accurate account, nor felt that Sutherland's statement furnished a full explanation.

The official history lends more weight to the

FEAF Diary as a contemporary source than I am inclined to. The document itself bears signs of later editing, both physical and in its context. For instance, pursuit activity in its pages conforms to that given in the 24th Pursuit Group Diary, which could not have been consulted till months after the events at issue. It does not conform as closely as does General Brereton's account to the experiences of the men I interviewed.

In any case the picture that emerges is one of confusion and indecision. The FEAF staff seem to me to have become so preoccupied with their planned attack on Takao Harbor that, when it was temporarily denied them, they were left at loose ends. Yet, when authorization finally came through, this raid was abandoned in favor of the one to be made on airfields at last daylight. This decision, particularly if the photo mission should bear fruit, was undoubtedly sound, yet it would probably have kept the bombers on the ground and vulnerable for two hours more, and there is little evidence that great concern was felt for their situation except in Ead's account of George's begging and begging that they be put in the air.

The whole discussion is, after all, one of purely academic interest and here, as in the case of Lee at Gettysburg, there is but one sound explanation: in the Philippines the personnel of our armed forces, almost without exception, like all of us here at home, failed to assess accurately the weight, speed, and efficiency of the Japanese air force.

The odds against us

In one day our Air Corps in the Philippines lost half their combat planes and from that day they ceased to function as an effective air force. How can one account for their failure?

The answer is simple enough. They were overwhelmed. They did not have the numbers, the equipment, or the training to stand off a first-class air power. The Japanese, with an air force of 2700 first-line combat planes, had about 480 based on Formosa. Of these they threw 192 over Luzon (108 bombers, 84 fighters) on December 8. Against that force our Air Corps could put into the air 88 first-line combat planes in real combat condition.

It is necessary to keep that fact in mind if one is to understand what happened in the Philippines. Seldom in any war have men been asked to stand against greater odds. In the Battle of Britain, British fighter pilots were flying the finest pursuit ship in the world. They had a good system of airfields, good communications, adequate air warning, and aircraft replacements at least up to a point. But there were no replacements for our men in the Philippines; they had to fight with what they had; there was no more. Their communications were inadequate. So was the air-warning system. There were not enough fields to permit effective dispersal of their planes. Only one field had anything like real

antiaircraft defenses, and the antiaircraft ammunition in the Philippines was of the obsolete powder-fuse type that could not reach above 20,000 feet.

As I have said, there was a shortage of oxygen and oxygen equipment which limited the effective ceiling of their pursuit planes to 12,000 or 15,000 feet. Again and still more damaging was the shortage of .50 caliber ammunition which even before the war was so acute that at least one squadron was unable to test and boresight the guns in their P-40s. This ammunition shortage meant that practically all gunnery training was carried on in P-35s, using the .30 caliber guns mounted on the fuselage. The first time most of our pilots fired the guns in their P-40s at a target was when they encountered their first Jap adversary.

In the rush of preparing for war there had been neither time nor opportunity for the five pursuit squadrons to train as a group. Coordinated defensive effort on their part depended entirely on maintaining contact with Group Headquarters at Clark Field or with Interceptor Headquarters at Nielson Field, just outside Manila. In one instance, as we have seen, orders from these two sources conflicted, but aside from that they were handicapped by the fact that the reception range of P-40 radios at that time was only about 20 miles.

These weaknesses were, of course, paralleled by similar deficiencies in the Army ground forces and Navy, but neither was to play important roles in the action of the opening day of war on Luzon. The Japanese air thrusts were entirely preoccupied with wiping out our air power. It was purely an air encounter in which the Japanese had also the invaluable advantage of battle experience.

In the light of these odds it is pointless to blame the Philippine defeat on failures in judgment of any one or more of our Commanding Officers. Mistakes were made; there was undoubtedly confusion and indecision in the various Headquarters; but there was little opportunity for any exercise of strategy in the air. The Japanese were able to throw a blanket of airplanes over Luzon. The best chance a small air force has of hurting a much more powerful opponent is to strike offensively out of secret bases and, if possible, to strike first.

Our Air Force was denied this chance because as a people we subscribed to principles of national honor and specifically because the last War Department directive received at General Headquarters in Manila, though warning that an attack might be expected at any time, stated explicitly that if hostilities proved unavoidable, the United States wanted to be sure that Japan committed the first overt act. Until the Japanese struck, therefore, our outnumbered squadrons were limited, one could almost say condemned, to purely defensive operations from fields well known to the enemy. Even with better luck on December 8, their defeat was inevitable.