

Col Donald Hall

'I joined the 89th Squadron of the 3rd Attack Group in 1941. During this period we received our first Douglas A-20s. At that time our armament consisted of only two .30 calibre machine guns in the nose. Of course, at that time we considered ourselves as bombers, not strafers, so we paid no attention to this. Our primary achievement during this period was learning to fly the A-20 at low altitude in formation and to place our quarter pound flour sack bombs on ground targets. We gained much experience in this type of operation during the Louisiana manoeuvres and other tactical exercises. We became quite adept at hitting our targets and learned to keep the pilot's head on the horizon in low-level formation flying.

'My squadron sailed from the United States for the Pacific Theatre of Operations in January 1942, and we arrived at Brisbane, Australia on 25 February 1942. At this time I was given command of the 89th Squadron which consisted of a relatively small contingent of men and no aeroplanes. I took my

new command up to Townsville at this time, but with no aircraft there was little we could do. Our maintenance men assisted in patching up some of the B-17-Es of the 19th Bombardment Group that were straggling in from the defeat in Java. It was here that I met Paul I. "Pappy" Gunn, who was to become the "Father" of the A-20 gunship. Gunn was a captain at that time and he flew into Townsville piloting a B-17 on three engines. Little did I know then how closely we would work for such a long period of time.

'The 89th never did get any aircraft while we were at Townsville, but I did manage to get in one mission in a B-17 before taking my outfit up to join the rest of the 3rd Group at Charters Towers, Australia, in March 1942.

'At this time the 13th and 90th Squadrons of the 3rd Group began to receive some B-25s that had originally been built for the Dutch. These aircraft had arrived too late for the Java campaign and were shortly put to good use by our sister squadrons. We began to receive a few A-20s, believe it or not, that we

had previously flown in the States. The aircraft as reassembled were equipped with four forward-firing .30 calibre machine guns which was still a light load for combat operations. However, the primary drawback at this stage was the lack of range of the A-20. This was vastly improved with the installation of a 450gal fuel tank in the forward bomb bay. To offset the loss in bomb load that the fuel tank installation brought about, "Pappy" Gunn undertook to make the A-20 a real straffer. He installed four .50 calibre machine guns in the nose where the bombardier would normally sit. This made the aircraft a bit nose heavy but installation of some weight in the rear took care of this.

'To increase further our effectiveness work was being done to convert the standard 23lb fragmentation bombs to parafrags. This innovation consisted of installation of an instantaneous fuse and small parachutes attached to the tail fins of the bombs. This would allow us to drop a bevy of these missiles on enemy targets at extremely low altitude and still have time to clear the area before the bombs began exploding.

'We did a lot of hard work while we were at Charters Towers. Day after day we practised formation flying, bombing and strafing. We also knew that with the lack of fighter aircraft in the theatre to give us escort we would have to fly a lot of missions at night. Before we left Charters Towers we became very proficient at flying formation and navigating at night.

'When we moved up to Kila Kila (Three-Mile Drome) outside of Port Moresby, New Guinea, in August 1942 we were ready for combat. At the time of our arrival the Japanese had occupied Buna on the north side of New Guinea and their ground forces were advancing up the Kokoda Trail across the Owen Stanley Mountains towards Port Moresby. At the same time, another Japanese column was advancing down the northern coast of New Guinea towards Milne Bay located on the southern tip of New Guinea. By the end of August, Australian troops had stalled the advance on Milne Bay, but the fight along the Kokoda Trail still raged and the fate of Port Moresby hung in the balance.

'Although they were not all in commission, we managed to assemble 13 A-20s at Port Moresby by the end of August 1942. On 31 August we got our first combat mission underway. I was to lead six A-20s which would strafe the Lae airfield after Martin B-26s had bombed it. Our formation arrived at the target in time to see the B-26s releasing their fragmentation bombs from an altitude of 10,000ft.

'Then we went in on the deck to strafe the airfield. We caught the Japanese completely by surprise. The concentrated firepower that we had in the nose really worked well against their aircraft and anti-aircraft installations. We were so low that we could see the surprised expressions on the faces of the men as we swept over them. There were a few enemy

fighters in the air, but none of our aircraft were damaged to any extent and all returned home safely.

'The mission initiated a tactic that we would use successfully many times. Sometimes we would precede the medium bombers with our strafing and at other times we would follow them in. It kept the enemy guessing and kept his anti-aircraft gunners with their heads down because they were always looking for a second wave and didn't know what altitude the attack would come from.

'At this time we were also kept quite busy attacking the Japanese advancing along the Kokoda Trail. It was very difficult to locate the enemy under the jungle curtain as we flew up and down the mountain canyons. Some of the roughest missions I ever flew were those on which we attempted to find and attack the enemy at night along the trail. Sighting a pinpoint of light and keeping away from the canyon walls was quite an ordeal.

'On 5 September 1942 I led 16 A-20s which were escorted by 26 Bell P-400s to Buna. The weather was quite bad and we had to dodge in and out of cloud formations all the way. This time there was no surprise. The anti-aircraft boys were waiting for us. However, we dropped down to low level and did our strafing bit which destroyed a number of aircraft. We did observe that a number of the enemy aircraft that had been reported on the ground turned out to be dummies made of wood and fabric. That was another advan-

tage of low-level work. There was no way to fool us with camouflage.

'I led a formation of 15 A-20s back to Buna on the afternoon of 11 September. Once more, we had to skirt bad weather en route to the target, but this time when we arrived we caught them by surprise. This time we flew a coordinated strafing pattern, with Capt Christian Pietre leading one formation and I led the other.

'On my first pass I caught a truckload of Japanese troops on the runway and caught them with a full burst from the nose guns. As I came back on the second pass I caught a Zero that had just taken-off in a tight turn. I didn't know that I could catch him but I pulled my nose around, gave him a burst from the eight nose guns and he immediately cartwheeled into the ground.

'After we had expended our ammunition we set course for home, skirting bad weather all the way. All of the A-20s, save one, returned to base safely. The missing aircraft managed to crash land about 30 miles from base and the crew was saved.

'On 12 September we flew our first parafrag missions that were to prove so successful against ground targets. My nine A-20s were to fly low and drop their parafrags and the Martin B-26s would follow us in. The weather was bad, as usual, and we came in through the rain. We let down over the sea and attacked at an altitude of 60-70ft. Just as we came in over the airfield I sighted two

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Zeroes taking-off. They commenced to break, but I put a burst into one of them and put him into the trees. We proceeded to drop our bombs and make continued strafing passes. On the third pass we had just about everything burning.

'As I came off the target I received a call on the radio that informed me that I had one engine smoking badly. I knew that I would never get over the Owen Stanelys with a bad engine so I had to swing far to the south and proceed home from there. Regardless, we had a most successful mission and were credited with the destruction of 17 enemy aircraft.

'Another big show for us took place on 1 November. The plan called for the B-25s to strike the airfield at Lae first. They were to be followed by B-26s and we were to come in about half an hour later to get at the Japanese fighters coming in to land after intercepting the earlier strikes at medium altitude.

'We took off with 14 A-20s with a half dozen P-40s to act as escort. There were a lot of clouds and we became separated from the P-40s en route to the target. Upon arrival at the rendezvous, we waited but the B-26s never put in an appearance. We flew on up the coast of New Guinea and let down for our bombing and strafing runs. Capt Pietre was to lead six A-20s making their runs from south to north while I was to lead eight aircraft making runs from north to south. As we came in on the target we spotted 20 Japanese fighters overhead. They saw us about the

same time and dived down to attack us on our runs. I had a long run and I could hear the machine guns of our rear gunners blazing away as the Zeroes attacked from the rear. They made their pass at us and pulled up into Immelmans to come back at us.

'At this time I saw the P-40s engaging some of the Japanese fighters off to my right, but then I sighted a Zero coming back at me head-on. I hit the gun tit and watched my slugs tear into him. One of his wings seemed to tear off and he went by streaming flames.

'A number of our A-20s had been hit in the attack and we all headed for cloud cover to escape the enemy fighters. One of our aircraft had to land at 7-Mile Airdrome due to his damage, but the rest of us made it home safely.

'We had learned on these early missions that we couldn't knock out the Japanese airfields by bombing them for they were all dirt runways and it only took a short while to fill the craters in. However, we had learned that the strafing and parafrag attacks were very effective in knocking out the enemy's aircraft on the ground. The gun nose of the A-20 was quite lethal and other field modifications were used with great effect. One of these was the installation of steel armour plating under the seats for further protection of the crew while on the low-level strikes.

'All in all the A-20 was a very effective weapon in the South-West Pacific and it remained so throughout the war.'
