

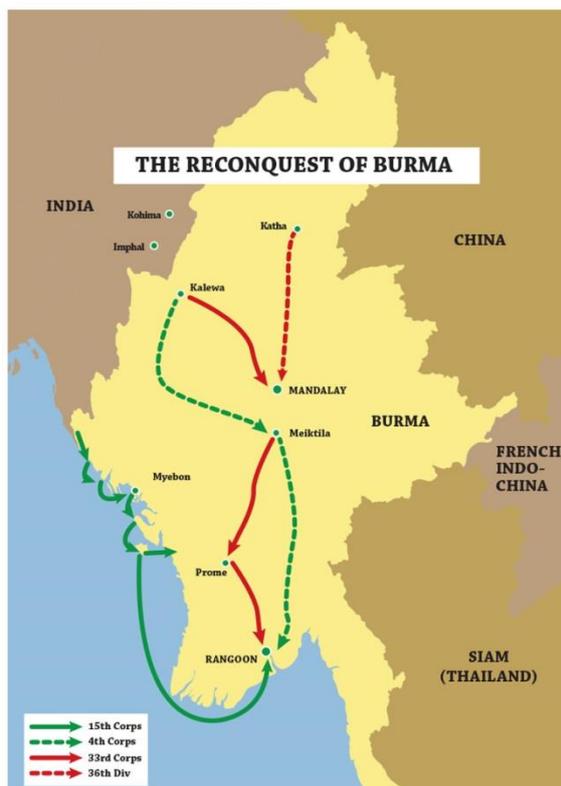
PIP'S WAR & THE FORGOTTEN EXPLOITS OF A BURMA SPITFIRE SQUADRON

Version 10

The Piper brothers, Chris and Philip, are researching and writing the story of their father, Pip Piper, and particularly his wartime service as an RAF Spitfire pilot with 273 Squadron in Ceylon, India and Burma. The book covers the period from March 1944 to August 1945, when this Ceylon based squadron was re-equipped with Spitfire Mk VIII¹, and reassigned to fight with the British Fourteenth Army against the Japanese along the Arakan coastline of Burma. 273 Squadron was part of 224 Group of the Third Tactical Air Force (TAF), which in turn was supporting of XV Corps, one of the four main components of the British Fourteenth Army.



During its 14 months of active service in India and Burma², the squadron flew out of a number of air strips, these including those Chittagong, Cox's Bazaar, Maunghnama, and Ramree Island. Then in early May 1945, it was the first operational squadron to land and operate out of Mingaladon airfield, just outside of Rangoon. XV Corps was composed of



British Commonwealth troops, these including West African regiments, and 273 Squadron was equally cosmopolitan. Whilst the majority of pilots were British, there was strong representation from Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa and elsewhere. Indeed in August 1945, a young Burmese pilot³ who flew with the squadron later went on to later become the first Commander-in-Chief and Chief of Air Staff of the Burmese Air Force. During this Burma campaign the RAF flew alongside both Indian Air Force and USAAF squadrons, and for aircraft enthusiasts, the story provides details about a wealth of aircraft types, both Allied and Japanese.

The history of 273 Squadron is drawn from four main sources. These include Pip's flying

¹ Upgrading them from the Hurricane Mk IIs which they were flying before

² ie from July 1944 to August 1945

³ Saw Shi Sho

logbook from this period, together with some written memoirs which he recorded in the mid 1980's. There are then the Squadron's Operational Record Books (ORBs) covering the period March 1944 – August 1945. Perhaps most intriguingly and unusual of all is an 89 page Squadron Secret Diary (SSD), which squadron members secretly compiled over the period November 1944 through to August 1945. The details recorded here are at times distinctly unofficial, irreverent, and hilarious.

From the outset of their wartime campaign the squadron's main role was to support the British XIV Army in attacking Japanese troops, and also disrupt their supply depots, and communications lines. It also had a secondary role in being an air defence unit against Japanese aircraft, and providing convoy patrols for Allied shipping. The squadron had their first victory against a reconnaissance 'Dinah' aircraft in late 1944, and in December was involved with a major dogfight *melée* with Japanese 'Oscars'. As the squadron moved down the Burmese coast, it attacked Japanese troops and their transport with a combination of cannon fire, and 250 and 500 pound bombs. From late June up until mid July, some of the most intensive fighting and flying took place, where Allied forces successfully operated against Japanese troops, which were attempting to retreat back across the River Sittang into Siam (Thailand)

The ORBs and SSD together describe the emotions of everyday readiness, flying and fighting. These included the lulls in combat activity, and it mentions the sense of deep frustration when pilots were killed on missions against seemingly relatively minor targets. It then describes the growing sense of satisfaction as improved skills at recognising Japanese camouflage led to increasingly successful strikes against them; and it concludes with the intensity of that final brutal campaign around the River Sittang area.

Throughout their campaign, the squadron lost 14 or 15 pilots killed in combat or accidents, and in addition to this, there were multiple other crashes, or 'prangs' as they were described at the time. It includes adventurous escapades, where one pilot crash landed his plane on the beach at St Martins Island, and was subsequently rescued by the RAF Regiment coming ashore by launch. Another Spitfire later ditched in the River Sittang, which at the time was in full monsoon spate. The pilot escaped from the sinking plane, but then was swept downstream in his dingy. It was only after increasingly desperate searching by his squadron colleagues, that he was eventually located in the water, and subsequently rescued by a Walrus aircraft some 15 miles away. The squadron also had a reputation for being more than generous in its hospitality. At Ramree Island, a couple of USAAF P-51 Mustang pilots suddenly landed, and commandeered a light aircraft to return to look for two of their two colleagues who had just been shot down near Rangoon. One of these pilots was subsequently found and rescued, and the subsequent celebrations by 273 for their American aviator guests went down in local folklore history.

The story is more than just a combination of operations and adventure. We begin to learn about some of the characters of the squadron, and their particular idiosyncrasies. The pilots

mentioned, many on multiple occasions, include Flight Lieutenant (Flt Lt) 'Spy' Groves; Flying Officer (F/O) 'Stinkin' End' McWatt; F/O 'Toot' de Horne; F/O (and later Flt Lt) 'Aggy' Agnes; and of course, Pip, himself.

As already hinted, the SDD includes the social side of 273, and indeed it is somewhat fitting that the Squadron's sporting team in Ceylon was called 'the Villains', as this describes them perfectly. From the time the advance party arrived in Calcutta, and commandeered a city tram at revolver point, the squadron members were determined to live life to the full. Much of their exuberance revolved around the drinking of alcohol, and subsequent partying. Indeed, wherever their location, the Squadron's Harvard aircraft was continually shuttling backwards and forwards, in and out of, Calcutta, ferrying in this most important of resources. A large number of off-duty exploits are mentioned, and these well and truly come into their own at Mingaladon. Following the day's combat sorties, the pilots would raid their fellow squadrons' messes, and rituals such as the autographing of mess ceilings; 'debagging' the opposition; and consumption of the opposition's alcohol, were regularly carried out. Items were enthusiastically 'borrowed' from elsewhere to adorn the Officer's Mess, one of noteworthy (it even made the newspaper) being the BBC's Grand Piano from downtown Rangoon. Another ritual regularly carried out, was the taking apart and reassembling of a Crimean War artillery piece. These out-of-hours shenanigans generally did not affect the ability of the pilots to fly the following morning (although some notable exceptions are recorded), and indeed one of the last most successful combat operations after such an event was the bombing and destruction of an important bridge over the River Kawai (Kwai ?).

Whilst the events recorded primarily are focussed on the lives and the adventures of the pilots, Pip, in his memoirs makes the telling point. He wished that had taken time to better get to know the wonderful ground crew members, as it was these people who kept the planes operating from all types of airstrips, and flying in all kinds of weather.

By the beginning of August 1945, most of the main characters had by then left the squadron, and the entries for that month (the last of the Diary) become somewhat more desultory. As for the squadron itself, following the surrender of the Japanese, it was reassigned, first to Siam, and then later to French Indo-China, where it flew some missions against the communist Viet Minh. Like many of its counterparts, 273 was subsequently disbanded in early 1946, and could then have sunk back in to historical oblivion. There was an event and a character however, which together combined to result in this squadron's memory not being entirely lost to posterity.

The event in question was the fact that the 273 did not have an official squadron crest. True to their sporting name, squadron members decided to create their own design in November 1944. This comprised a black widow spider superimposed on a Burmese fylfot. Now a fylfot is an ancient Asian modification of a swastika, and the Air Ministry, not unsurprisingly, rejected this submission out of hand. The second piece of the puzzle was Jane Pelling. She

was the sister of one of the pilots, who over the following 50 years virtually 'adopted' the squadron; arranged reunions for them; and also fought to have the squadron crest recognised. The latter issue was eventually debated in the House of Lords in the mid 1990's, with the result that a squadron shield (less the fylfot!) was eventually recognised and adopted. This can now proudly be seen in the RAF Church at St Clement Danes in the Strand, where it is embedded on the church floor next to No 1 Squadron (as there was nowhere else for it to go !). This book is therefore dedicated to the memory of Jane, who unfortunately passed away in early 2015.

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