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1. The snapshot that started it all. B-24L 44-41465 Red Headed Woman, as photographed by Navy Dr. Charles Rea Longenecker, on Samar Island, P.I. First Lieutenant Blair points out that the four digit serial number and full complement of mission markers indicate the photo was taken some time after his departure in early May 1944.

Prologue

Initially, finding the Red Headed Woman was to be a very short story about how curiosity and the Internet managed to identify the B-24 in a small black and white snapshot. Rather than the expected dearth of information on the aircraft, a wealth was found, along with a personal friendship (albeit electronic). The photo story soon became only a lead-in to a far more interesting, historic snapshot of an American airman.

First Lieutenant Bill Blair was not a storied hero in World War II. He did survive forty combat missions in the Pacific and he received appropriate medals for that service. His family name is still familiar in his home town, but not on the level of a Kennedy or Carnegie name. He didn't gain a place in history for personal achievement or setting records, although he witnessed or participated in, sometimes unknowingly, events that are now notable parts of history.

The Bill Blair of today, like many others who share his background, strives to keep his generation's history alive by teaching today's generations. Bill visits schools, tells his story and shows his functioning Norden bombsight demonstrator. Most important, he has been a mentor and inspiration to many, including one outstanding high school girl who made Bill the subject of a living history documentary video for her senior project. For these reasons, Bill Blair is a hero.

The Snapshot

It may have been a slow day in sick bay. Or, perhaps, some medical supplies were due to be air-freighted into Guiuan Army Air Base, on Samar Island in the Philippines. Whatever his reason for being at the airstrip, Navy Doctor Charles Rea Longenecker was carrying his camera. As early as February 22, 1943, he had used it to record the capture and sinking of the U-606, near Argentia, Newfoundland, while stationed aboard the Destroyer Tender AD-15 Prairie. The camera later documented sailing under the Golden Gate Bridge, enroute to his current assignment as medical officer for the 142nd Naval Construction Battalion.

On that day (or those days) at Guiuan, sometime between March and October 1945, Dr. Longenecker found the nose art on three B-24s interesting enough to photograph. Red headed Woman, Flaming Amie and Top O’ the Mark were snapped, developed, stuck away in a locally made souvenir photo album and forgotten for fifty-five years. Dr. Longenecker made a
career of the Navy and retired as a captain in 1969. He said little to his family about his war experience and nothing at all about the photo album. It wasn’t until his passing in 1995 that the album surfaced in his personal effects.

Jump to 2003 - Captain Longenecker’s nephew, Charlie Henry, has passed the album around to family members and is now trying to locate a “home” for it and other artifacts that held no sentimental value. The Seabee Museum, in Port Hueneme, California, took the 142nd Naval Construction Battalion materials, but had no interest in the B-24 photos. An interest in World War II aviation history kept Henry from tossing out the photos and his curiosity about the three aircraft may indicate the photo was taken after the end of the war.

Surprisingly, the search was simple and quick; and successful. The initial query for "Army Air Force Samar" came up with the 13th AAF and the 5th Bomb Group. The next query, "13th AAF 5th Bomb Group," led right to the 5th Bomb Group, The Bomber Barons, and their Web site www.5thbomberbarons.com. The very first picture on the site’s photo page was that of the Red Headed Woman! Within less than ten minutes, the lady without a past had a pedigree and a home. Not only that, she had family.

The 5th Bomb Group Web site is nicely designed and well organized. Each squadron has its own page, listing personnel links, photos, histories, etc. Since the Web site photo page had identified Red Headed Woman as belonging to the 72nd squadron, the search immediately went to their page. Imagine the surprise in seeing a link entitled "Bill Blair - the Red Headed Woman" in the photo section. Next, imagine the satisfaction in opening the link and reading "This is the publicity photo that was sent back home, although we only flew one mission in Sky Tramp and the rest of our missions in Red Headed Woman - Bill Blair." Finally, try to imagine both the surprise and satisfaction in learning that Bill Blair, the once-upon-a-time co-pilot of Red Headed Woman, was alive and well. The fifty-five year journey of a casual snap shot had just come full circle from a Navy doctor to an Army Air Force copilot.

The Man

Born November 10, 1922, in Tonopah, Nevada, Ernest W. (Bill) Blair started on his path to the right hand seat of a B-24 at age five. Charles Lindberg stopped in Reno, shortly after his epic flight, and Bill’s parents made sure the little tyke was there to see the famous aviator. That specific incident triggered Bill’s interest in flying and the occasion is still vivid in his mind, seventy-six years later.

The Blair family moved to Fallon in 1924 and purchased an eighty-acre ranch. The elder Blair was employed in the local bank, which kept the unprofitable ranch going. But the Great Depression eliminated the bank job in 1932, and the family turned to raising turkeys on the ranch for their livelihood. Even in those days, any airplane was a rarity in that remote area. So, when a barnstorming Travelair arrived at the dirt airstrip, a quarter mile from the Blair’s spread, just about the whole town turned out. In spite of the hard times, the turkeys were profitable enough to provide a dollar to fund Bill’s first airplane ride in the Travelair. Later, Bill and his pals discovered that an offer to guard a barnstormer’s plane overnight, by sleeping under the wing, usually resulted in a free ride and even an occasional chance to handle the controls.

During high school, the bulk of Bill’s after-school time was spent earning college money as the projectionist for the local Fallon theatre. He would rush home from school, eat an early supper and then pedal his bike a mile into town. What little time he had left after the theater was taken up by airplane magazines, building radios from kits and, in his senior year, a lovely lady named Margaret Crehore. Following Bill’s graduation in 1941, he and Margaret made plans to attend college together, beginning in 1942, at the University of Nevada, Reno. Since Margaret was two years behind Bill, she would take summer courses and extra courses during her junior year to catch up. Bill would continue in the projection booth, nights and weekends, and work for an electrical contractor during the day. In the summer of 1942, Bill also worked as a rod man with a U.S. Government survey team. Their assignment, from the Civil Aviation Administration and the Army Air Corps, was to lay out what the team assumed would be an auxiliary airfield southeast of Fallon. In reality, it was intended to be one of four Western Defense Program fully developed fields (Winneemucca, Minden, Lovelock and Fallon) in the Nevada desert to help repel an expected Japanese attack on the west coast. However, the Navy soon took over the base for weapons and tactics training. It has been in almost continuous use since, by the Navy and Air Force. Now, as Naval Air Station Fallon, it is the new home of the Navy’s Top Gun School.

Margaret’s hard work with her books paid off. She and Bill entered the University of Nevada, Reno, as freshmen in 1942. By the end of his first semester, Bill had attained a 3.83 grade
point average and earned a Rotary Club scholarship. But the draft board was interested in him and he was still interested in flying. Realizing that the two interests were probably mutually exclusive, Bill headed for Mather Field, near Sacramento, to enlist in the Army Air Corps. He passed his tests, was accepted for Air Corps training and told to go back to school and wait for a call. Very early into his second semester, the call came. Bill put down his books, gave Margaret an engagement ring and kissed her goodbye.

Becoming A Co-Pilot

The first step in Blair's military career was a month long stay at the Lincoln Army Air Field mechanic training school in Lincoln, Nebraska. Like many facilities early in the war, Lincoln Field was not quite ready for its students. It had been built in seventeen weeks, at a cost of thirty-five million dollars, and would go on to train twenty-five thousand aircraft mechanics. Later it would become a separation center for returning aircrews and it still serves as Lincoln's municipal airport.

At Lincoln Field, the cadets had to wait two weeks for uniforms and winter clothing. Their meager civilian clothes provided little protection from the cold winter winds off the plains. Blair recalls that "Most of us came down with all sorts of illnesses. I think there were two or three deaths during the month." The only training received at Lincoln was close order drill, calisthenics, chemical warfare and training films, including the classic on the horrors of VD. Blair has always harbored a suspicion that the only reason for going to Lincoln was because the Air Corps needed someplace to house its flood of inductees.

From Lincoln Field, Blair and a group of trainees were shipped to Montana State College in Bozeman, Montana, to finish their College Training Detachment duty. The training there was supposed to last five months, but the need for combat personnel dictated some short cuts. The men were divided into groups, according to their general intelligence test scores. The highest scoring group, which included Blair, would only stay one month, the next highest two months and so on down. The curriculum consisted of math, weather, map reading, calisthenics, close order drill and some brief flying instruction in Taylorcraft, Piper, Porterfield and other light planes.

Blair's first stop in the Western Training Command's Class 44C was Orange County's Santa Ana Army Air Base. Opened in 1942, the base was the nation's largest preflight training center for World War II fliers. Cadets were given batteries of motor aptitude, written and psychological tests to determine their classification as pilots, navigators or bombardiers prior to transferring to other bases for advanced training. Aviation Cadet Blair then moved to Ryan Field, a government contract, a civilian school in Hemet, for Primary Flight Training in PT-22s. After sixty-two hours in the PTs, Blair was sent to Gardner Field, a small Army Air Forces facility in Taft, California, for basic training in Vultee BT-13s. Here the cadets experienced night, formation and instrument flying and also made their request for single or multi-engine aircraft assignments. Blair's request for multi-engine was granted and he shipped off for advanced training in Cessna AT-17s at Fort Sumner Army Airfield, Fort Sumner, New Mexico. Advanced Training went smoothly and Blair received his wings and commission as a 2nd Lieutenant in March 1944.

In April 1944, Blair met his full crew at Hammer Field, in Fresno. SecondLt. Terry Spivey would pilot the plane, with 2nd Lt. Blair as co-pilot. 2nd Lt. Stan Palmer would navigate while 2nd Lt. Tom Golenia aimed the bombs. Cpl. Larry Flood manned the radio and top turret, Cpl. Doug Myers the ball turret, Cpl. Bob Latham the nose turret and Cpl. John Sharkey the tail gun. Cpl. Bob Langlois and Cpl. Carl Fraley swung the waist guns with Langlois filling in as the flight engineer. Once acquainted, the crew boarded a train to Muroc Army Air Base in the Mojave Desert. There they flew about 170 hours of gunnery, bombing, formation and navigation training flights in a variety of B-24 models. As with most crews, the men quickly learned to work as a team and to trust and look out for one another. They shared a major concern when Langlois found he was subject to severe airsickness and was desperately afraid the ailment would wash him out. The crew was able to cover for Langlois until his own determination got the problem under control.

At the end of June 1944, Blair and his shipmates were transferred to Hamilton Field, near San Francisco, to pick up a new B-24, s/n 44-40962. Their assignment was to shuttle the aircraft to Townsville, Queensland, on the northeast coast of Australia. On July 6th, they spent five hours on a shakedown flight up and down the San Joaquin and Sacramento valleys. In addition to looking for squawks usually found in a new aircraft, the crew used the flight to practice transferring fuel from two auxiliary tanks, in the forward bomb bay, to the main wing tanks. Managing this crucial job fell to Langlois, who had previously suffered so from air sickness, but now was symptom free. Two days later, on July 8, 1944, the crew was briefed on their trans-Pacific flight.

The Vacation Flight To Australia

Their point of departure was Fairfield-Suisun Army Air Base, known now as Travis Air Force Base. The first leg was a fourteen hour flight to Hickam Field, Hawaii, where they enjoyed a two day layover while a faulty prop governor was replaced. The crew's contribution to the repair was to stay out of the mechanic's way by going to Waikiki Beach. They performed this job admirably, with the exception of getting some top notch sunburns. Following this impromptu R & R, they took off on a ten hour and forty minute flight, the aircraft well stocked with sunscreen lotion, to Canton Island.

Although the largest and northernmost of the Phoenix Island group, Canton fit the "postage stamp" island category, only four and half miles by nine miles and dominated by a large lagoon. It had been a stop on the Pan Am Clipper Noumea-to-San Francisco route, with minimal facilities. By mid-1944, it was a bustling "service plaza" for refueling intransit aircraft, both land and sea. Jack Benny's USO troupe was also refueling at Canton, when Blair's crew arrived. Although the troupe didn't put on a show, they spent much of their overnight time in the officer's club, much to Blair's delight. So far, the crew's first military mission was more like a vacation flight. After another ten hour flight to Guadalcanal, then six hours to Townsville, the shuttle mission ended and the B-24J was turned over to a pool of new airplanes.

Into The Combat Zone

From Townsville, the crew embarked on an Australian ship for Port Moresby, New Guinea. On the two day voyage, they became reacquainted with twelve other crews with whom they had trained, compared notes on their shuttle flights and collectively worried over being torpedoed. During their two week stay in a Port Moresby transient camp, Blair and his crewmates killed time by exploring the local jungle, playing cards and, one memorable day, watching an unattended truck roll down a hill, mowing down tent after tent. Only one man was injured and he was sent home. Ironically, three months later his remaining crew members died in an early morning mission.
take-off crash on Noemfoor Island.

Blair and his crew were assigned to the 13th Army Air Force's 5th Bomb Group. 72nd Squadron and shipped off to Mokerang Air Field, on Los Negros Island, in the Admiralties. The 5th had been operating from Los Negros for several months - long over-water and unescorted strikes against Truk. Yap and Woleai in the Carolinas. Blair arrived as these missions were winding down and the entire group was preparing for a move to a forward base. That meant only more time for the new arrivals to kill. The only interruptions in the marathon card games were around thirty hours of shuttle and "slow time" shake-down flying time. It wasn't long before they again packed up and moved to Wakde Island, off the northern coast of New Guinea.

Prior to flying their first combat mission, Blair's crew made several supply and transport flights to rear bases for familiarization. One trip was to ferry a group of navigators to Nadzab for a Loran school. During the flight, two P-38s hooked up with the B-24 and spent about twenty minutes making mock attack runs. Everyone enjoyed the "playtime" and the ship's gunners benefited from tracking the "enemy." However, no one noticed the stiff cross wind blowing them over the Owen Stanley Mountains, to the south side of New Guinea. The P-38s apparently knew the territory and flew off before the B-24 crew realized they were lost. It took the collective genius of all the navigators on board to figure out the plane's position. By then, the Liberator's fuel was so low they had to land and refuel in Port Moresby before climbing back over the Owen Stanleys to Nadzab.

First Combat and Beyond

The stress of being inactive in an active combat zone was finally relieved on September 1, 1944, when the crew flew their first mission. That run to Palau was quickly followed by another Palau mission, this time on September 4th, in B-24J 44-73143 Sky Tramp.6 Only two more missions, to Halmahera and Ceram, were flown from Wakde before the unit moved to Kornasore Airfield, on Noemfoor. There, Blair and his crew were reunited with Sky Tramp to take the traditional publicity photo for their hometown newspapers. Noemfoor was the launch site for the 2,610 mile, sixteen hour round trip missions - the longest flown by B-24s up until then - to Balikpapan, Borneo.

There have been estimates that thirty-five percent of Japan's petroleum was supplied by the former Dutch colonial oilfields and refineries at Balikpapan. The importance of Balikpapan, as a target, was obvious. But it wasn't until early August 1943 that B-24s were able to strike. Even then, attacks were carried out by as few as two aircraft, as it was felt too much fuel would be consumed while larger groups formed up. By September 1944, engineers had come up with strict regimens designed to get the bombers into formation, to the target, and back with minimum fuel and maximum bomb loads. Planes were stripped of non-essential equipment and crew members instructed to move to different positions at specific times to maintain the Liberator's critical center of gravity for maximum cruise efficiency.8

Blair's first Balikpapan mission ended early, when engine failure forced them to turn back. His only complete mission to the Balikpapan oil complex occurred on October 14. Ninety-eight B-24s, from the Fifth and Thirteenth Air Forces flew an unescorted raid that day. It began in the early morning darkness. Four anti-aircraft search lights were stationed at each corner of the field, pointing straight up to mark the beginning and end of the runway. The bombers, loaded to more than 68,000 pounds, used every bit of the one and a half mile runway to gain airspeed. The Thirteenth put up forty-nine ships from its 5th, The Bomber Barons, and 307th, The Long Rangers, bomb groups, each loaded with five hundred pound bombs. After a nine hour flight, they arrived at their lubricating oil and paraffin works target as aircraft from the Fifth AAF were completing their run over the Edelwein refinery. The combined accuracy of both Air Force groups left towering columns of thick smoke behind. Blair's crew, and the other crews, had a feeling of accomplishment and pride. This particular mission turned out to be the pinnacle of the five Balikpapan raids and earned a commendation from Generals MacArthur and Arnold.10

Through the remainder of October his crew flew anti-shipping missions, a twelve hour bombing mission to Cebu, in the
7. Ten five-hundred pound general purpose bombs on their way to Talisay Airdrome on Negros Island, November 26th, 1977.

8. The first explosions on Talisay. Note craters from prior attacks.

9. More explosions on Talisay.

10. Bomb runs on runways were made at a slight angle, for maximum assurance that damage would be done. The Japanese kept dump trucks loaded with dirt, for just such occasions, and began filling the craters as soon as the attack was over. For this reason, The Bomber Barons returned to Talisay day after day.

11. One of the Alicante Airdrome missions. Smoke can be seen rising from the runway strikes.
12. Blair modeling the latest in night-time air raid fashion in his crew’s bunker on Morotai.

Philippines, and an unsuccessful search flight for Lt. Albert, who disappeared with his crew on a 1,200 mile one-way reconnaissance mission. Much later, Blair learned that the men had all been captured and executed by the Japanese. In late October, the 72nd and 23rd Squadrons moved to Morotai, in the Halmahera Islands, for a five month stay. Blair describes Morotai, and the situation there, as "a polliwog shaped island and we held only the tail of the polliwog.13 The Japanese troops, on the body of the polliwog, were kept at bay by American artillery and infantry. PT boats shot up Japanese reinforcements, coming from a force of some 25,000 on the main island of Halmahera, preventing many of them from landing. In turn, the Japanese harassed the American air base nearly every night.

The first mission out of Morotai, for Blair and his crew, took place on November 1st. Their squadron, the 72nd, along with the 23rd, was assigned to bomb the Alicante Airdrome on the Philippine island of Negros. Normally, such a mission would be flown by four to six-plane squadrons formed up in two echelons of three planes each. However, the group’s other two squadrons, the 31st and 394th, were still back on Noemfoor. To partially compensate, a seventh plane was added to each squadron, in the slot position of the second echelon, which flew behind and slightly lower than the first.

The flight to Negros was routine. But, over the target area, cloud cover obscured the airdrome and the group missed it completely. When that became apparent, permission was requested to make a second pass. On that run, the target was acquired and the bombs dropped. By then, though, enemy fighters had scrambled and were waiting. They raced ahead of the bombers, on a parallel course just beyond the range of the .50 caliber Brownings. Once in front of the formation, the Japanese would wheel around and attack head-on between ten o’clock and two o’clock level. The 72nd managed to hold a tight formation, which enabled the squadron’s guns to throw up overlapping fields of armor piercing, incendiary and tracer rounds. This firepower discouraged the attackers from flying through the formation and at least one Japanese plane was believed to have been shot down. Only a few of the Liberators, including Blair’s, suffered minor damage.

The 23rd was not so fortunate. Its formation became stretched out when some planes fell behind the leader. Four of the seven planes were lost, including that of Lt. Howard Sanders. Their B-24 was rammed, either deliberately by a Kamikaze or coincidentally by a stricken plane and/or pilot. Two gunners were the only ones who managed to bail out. They were picked up and helped by friendly Filipinos. Sanders and Blair’s pilot, Terry Spivey, had been boyhood pals and trained together all the way from cadets to B-24 transition training at Kirtland Army Air Base in Albuquerque. Both crews had become good friends, making the loss even harder.

This mission to Alicante is described, in detail, by a crew member from another of the lost B-24s. His account, Last Flight of Lil Jo Toddy, can be found on the 5th Bomber Barons’ Web site.14 Negros Island and its many coastal airdromes continued to be targets for the 5th. The objective was to render the runways unusable and thus prevent enemy air operations from interfering with MacArthur’s Philippine campaign. The addition of P-38 and P-47 fighter escorts, prompted by the losses of the first mission, improved the lot of the bombers. Blair was always glad to see the escorts, but he came to prefer the P-38s. The escorts left their bases long after the slower bombers and followed the same course to catch up. Good weather could turn bad and bad weather could worsen in the interval between the two groups. Blair’s preference for the P-38s was based on his perception that, while both fighters were equally effective in combating Japanese planes, the P-38s seemed less affected by weather. They would make it through bad weather, to the rendezvous point, more often than the P-47s.15

15. Nichols Airdrome, Luzon, January 1945. Nichols is on the southern outskirts (top) of Manila. Manila Bay is on the right. Careful examination of the photo reveals bomb bursts on field.

17. One of the February 1945 Corregidor missions.

18. January 31, 1945, napalm attack on Cavite. Note the extensive devastation since the January 24th raid. The only building left intact is the seaplane hanger at the right center of the island, near the water bursts. Three days later, the Red Headed Woman would lead a mission to eliminate it.
On November 16th, the group was briefed for a mission to Brunei Bay, on the west coast of Borneo. Intelligence had reported a Japanese naval vessel, either a battleship or aircraft carrier, at anchor there. The 5th and 307th Bomb Groups put up twenty-four bombers each, with P-38 escorts. Fourteen miles from the target, huge puffs of smoke began popping out of ships that covered the bay's surface. Blair's initial thought was "they can't be shooting at us, we're too high and far away." That thought was blown away a second later, when an enormous flak burst knocked down two Liberators at the head of the formation. The single ship reported by intelligence turned out to be a flotilla of survivors of the Japanese fleet that had engaged the U.S. Navy in the Philippine Sea. The puffs of smoke were coming from the large deck guns of battleships, heavy and light cruisers and destroyers and, at 9,500 feet and fourteen miles, the bombers were in ideal range. One of the two planes first hit was the group leader. His loss disrupted the whole formation and B-24s became scattered all over the sky.

The flak continued to chase the bombers with bursts of red, orange, mustard and silver. The concussions buffeted and bounced the planes so severely that Blair wryly likened the experience to "flying through the grand finale of a Fourth of July fireworks show." That thought also disappeared in a burst of flak, this time directly in front of the windshield. Several pieces of thermite-filled pipes tore through the airframe. One 2-1/2" by 5/8" piece came through the left side instrument panel and struck the pilot, Lt. Spivey, in the stomach. Shocked by his apparently lifeless pilot, Blair stayed composed and maintained control of the ship. Surprisingly, Spivey gasped for air several times and calmly asked Blair to take the controls while he caught his breath and put out a smoldering ember in his flak jacket. The jacket had done exactly what it was designed to do - save a life. Spivey took a lethal piece of shrapnel in the stomach with only the wind being knocked out of him.

Nearly every ship on the mission was damaged. Several were shot down and some were lost to latent damage or fuel loss on the way home. One crew was over the Borneo jungle when they had to bail out. Had they been captured by the Japanese, beheading would most likely have been their fate. Fortunately, they were "captured" by a native headhunter tribe, who were hunting Japanese heads at this stage of the war. The crew lived with the tribe, who protected them from the Japanese, for several months until Borneo was liberated by Australian troops. The effects of the raid on Brunei Bay were mixed. Naval vessels taking frantic evasive maneuvers are hard to hit and Blair recalls "mostly near misses." One B-24 in Blair's squadron experienced a malfunction in the bomb selector and couldn't release its bombs in train. The bombardier quickly hit the salvo lever and released all the bombs at once. An unfortunate cruiser below took five simultaneous direct hits and reportedly sank.

While the 5th worked over Japanese bases during the day, their own 90mm anti-aircraft guns, whistling back to earth, was more dangerous than the Japanese bomb attacks, which were directed at the runways.

**An Affair With A Red Headed Woman**

First Lieutenant Bill Blair didn't know where she came from. She just appeared on his Form 5 one day in November. If there was a story behind her name, he can't remember it. She didn't smoke and she could hold her motor oil against the best of them. She was easy to handle and her autopilot was smooth and responsive to the Norden bombsight's subtle commands. Her name was Red Headed Woman and Blair knew it was the beginning of a beautiful friendship (apologies to Humphrey Bogart). They would be together for thirty missions.

B-24L S/N 44-41645 became Red Headed Woman at the hands of Sergeant V.P. Allan, to whom the aircraft really belonged (ask any crew chief). Blair recalls that Allan was chief for at least one more ship in the squadron and painted several works of nose art, such as 44-40467 Tail Wind, 44-40546 Two Time and 44-40543 Streamliner.

By mid-December, after only a few dates with the Red Headed Woman, Blair and his crew had accumulated over twenty missions and were sent on rest leave to Sydney, Australia. As with any leave from a combat zone, it was a highly anticipated event. The steady diet of C rations had taken a toll on their taste buds. Steak and fresh eggs would be the first priority upon reaching the Red Cross hotel in the Kings Cross section of Sydney. Blair's personal goal was to acquire a radio to help break the boredom between missions.

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Blair looked up the Ministry and filled out an application. In the "Reason why these parts are needed" field, he entered the "Reason why these parts are needed" field, he entered...
First Lieutenant Bill Blair and the Red Headed Woman on Morotai Island in the Halmaheras Group. The artwork was painted on only one side of the ship. Blair believes that one of the mechanics in this picture is Sgt. V.P. Allan, creator of the Red Headed Woman and other squadron nose art.

"To entertain troops in a combat zone." The clerk seemed to take his job quite seriously. He studied the application, looked at Blair, looked back at the application, then said with a poker face, "Well, Yank, I think I can approve this if you can get me a couple cartons of cigarettes." Blair didn't smoke, but he had access to plenty of cigarettes. With the application stamped "Approved," he soon had all the components and a complete radio that worked the first time.

The leave was up just after Christmas and the crew checked in for transportation back to Morotai. In a repeat of their cross-Pacific shuttle flight luck, they found themselves stranded in Sydney for several days, due to a lack of aircraft. Troops were landing at Luzon and all available planes were supporting that action. Finally arriving back at their base, they didn't even have time to say, "Boy, did you miss the fun!" before that exact phrase was told to them. A Japanese Colonel had been smuggled onto the island to lead remnants of the 211th Infantry Regiment against the air base. The Golden Cross 33rd Infantry Division's 136th Regiment was charged with eliminating the Japanese threat.

The nearly impenetrable jungle severely hindered mobility, particularly for men carrying heavy weapons. Visibility at ground level was restricted to less than twenty feet and troop positions had to be determined by liaison aircraft. The forest canopy prevented the liaison pilot and troops from seeing one another. A ground unit radio operator would direct the unseen plane until its engine sound was directly overhead. The pilot then radioed coordinates back to the unseen operator. At the height of the battle, most of the combat aircraft were flown to other bases for safety. The jungle battle lasted twenty days, with the base finally being secured on January 14, 1945.19

With American troops in Luzon, the capture of Manila and surrounding strategic areas became the priority. Japanese troop concentrations, Nichols and Nielson Airdromes and Cavite Naval Base were the targets of eleven to twelve hour missions. The experience and proficiency of Blair's crew, in the Red Headed Woman, earned them the responsibility of squadron and group lead. Corregidor was bombed on several occasions, to soften it up for the upcoming paratrooper landings. These missions were particularly gratifying to Blair. The brother of his fiance, Margaret, had been captured there, early in the war, and forced to suffer through the Bataan Death March. Blair had no way of knowing that his brother-in-law-to-be had been imprisoned in Luzon for two years, then shipped to the Japanese home islands to do forced labor in coal mines until being liberated at war's end.

Around the first of April 1945, Blair and his Red Headed Woman were moved further north, to be closer to the action. Their new base was Guian Air Field, on Samar Island, in the Philippines. From Guian, they would harass Japanese shipping and support U.S. troop movements by bombing targets marked with artillery smoke shells. It took only until the middle of April for Blair and many other crews to be grounded for their pending return to the States. Blair's pilot, Terry Spivey, decided to extend his stay and fly a little longer. He was assigned as the Assistant Operations Officer for the 72nd Squadron. One of Spivey's flights was a dangerous reconnaissance mission over Saigon, in what was then French Indochina. That mission earned him the Distinguished Flying Cross.

**Going Home**

Blair had to wait for transportation until early May. He used the time to unwind and gather his thoughts. The number one thought on his mind was Margaret, the fiance he left behind. She played two parts in the war effort. First, she supported her man in combat by writing letters and sending photographs. Second, she supported all the men in combat by becoming a "Rosie the Riveter" for Douglas Aircraft, near Los Angeles. Blair could hardly wait to get home. Once again, the luck of his trip to the combat zone came into play with his flight home. He was given responsibility for delivering secret documents to Hawaii. As a courier officer, he was told, no one, not even General MacArthur, could bump him off the Air Transport Command C-54. With only a slight twinge over leaving a Red Headed Woman behind on Samar, Blair hopped aboard the C-54th and headed home to the only woman who mattered.
22. Bill Blair and Margaret Crehole in December 1942, just before Bill left for the Army Air Force.

23. Mr. and Mrs. Bill Blair on their wedding day, May 19, 1945.


25. 1st Lieutenant Bill Blair, 13th Army Air Force, 5th Bomb Group, 72nd Squadron (Ret.) and his self-designed and built Norden bomb sight demonstrator. The sight has been recalibrated to six feet and the endless scroll, with its painted targets, moves at a speed simulating the airspeed of a bomb laden B-24. When the intervalometer is clicked, a computer chip calls out “Bombardier to pilot. Bombs away!” Twenty seconds later, a laser pointer illuminates the bomb hits and another computer chip generates the sounds of explosions. This device will be the subject of a future article.
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