

Medals For Josephine

By Oscar J. Friend

To the brass hats Josephine was just a unit and a number in an American air squadron cooperating with the R.A.F. in the Burma campaign. But to her crew she was a gallant old girl of the air who had been through many hazardous flying hours with her four boyfriends.

JUNGLE, mountain, hillside clearing, and more jungle. Josephine roared along sweetly at her cruising speed of 327 m.p.h. In the bomb bay amidships one of the transparent belly panels had been removed, and in the aperture a high-speed intricate camera was clicking away, taking innumerable pictures of the Burmese terrain below under the expert hand of Sandy Stone.

Sandy was an ex-cowboy from Texas, an A-1 bombardier, an expert aerial photographer—and an incorrigible individualist. Josephine was a Lockheed Hudson medium bomber. To the brass hats she was a unit and a number in an American air squadron cooperating with the R.A.F. in the Burma campaign. But to her crew she was—Josephine, a gallant old girl of the air who had been through many hazardous flying hours with her four boyfriends.

A voice sounded in Sandy's headset. The pilot, Lieutenant Bill Duffy, from Maine. A better skipper never flew a ship.

"Sandy, d'you really think those nasty little squirts are using poison gas in the area?"

"I don't know. Bill, but I wouldn't put anything past the dirty little zeros. We'll know when we get back to base and have these negatives developed."

Down below, Sandy could barely make out activity on the part of the invading brown troops. In between sections of jungle and upland country there were occasional lines of trucks, temporary ammunition dumps, spots where there were accumulations of what could be gas shells and bombs, concealed gunnery—things which would come out in better relief on photographs which would he studied painstakingly.

For Josephine was not on a bombing mission. Her bomb bay had been unloaded and camera equipment had been installed in her capacious belly for photo reconnaissance duty. Unattended and alone, unarmed, save for "Hot Dog" Weimer,

the forward gunner and "Sugar Babe" Munroe, rear gunner from Missouri, Josephine was prowling the Burmese skies.

Hot Dog Weimer, former tailor from Brooklyn, was peering ahead. He saw nothing suspicious through his plexiglas greenhouse. Only the dimly seen activity of the ground forces far below.

It was the lanky Missourian who gave the alarm.

"Better get high behind, Bill," he called through the intercom as he rose to his feet in his rear power turret and scanned the horizon behind them. "We done flushed us a covey of Mitsubishis. They're coming up on our tail. How come you didn't see 'em, Sandy?"

"Musta took off of that brown field we passed a ways back," said Sandy. "I thought that looked like a camouflaged airfield."

"How many?" asked Duffy crisply as he fed more soup to his pair of Cyclone engines.

"I count ten," reported Sugar Babe Munroe. "And I think they're Nakajimas instead of Mitsubishis. Come on, you yellow rats, and get a taste of Josephine's stinger!"

"We can't ditch them," said Bill Duffy grimly. "They've got at least a twenty-mile edge on us. Don't let 'em get under us, Sugar Babe. We're vulnerable there. Hang on tight, gang, I'm going to drop some altitude in a dive."

"What?" cried Sandy into his mike. "And get full of ack-ack? Don't mind me, but think of all this film I've shot."

"I am thinking of it," said Duffy. "We've got to get it back to base. You heard the colonel's orders—and you know how the old boy gets when he isn't obeyed. We got to try to run for it. If those Nakajimas are A.N. Ones, they'll blast us out of the sky."

"Not Josephine," contradicted Sandy. "She's brought us through worse than ten Japs. Remember that time north of Corregidor—"

“But not in one lump,” said Duffy curtly, tersely. “Shut up, Sandy. Your job is to take pictures. My job is to get Josephine back to base all in one piece.”

“Aw, Skipper,” growled Sandy. “Turn and give Hot Dog one shot at ‘em.”

“He’ll get it,” said Sugar Babe, firing a warming burst from his turret gun. “They’re between us and home.”

“Hot dog!” exclaimed the forward gunner. “Swing us around. Bill, and I’ll stitch them Japs to the sky.”

Josephine tilted her nose downward under the pilot’s steady hands and roared into a power dive for gaining speed. Gradually she veered on right rudder to arc around in a beautiful swing toward the west. The flight of Nakajimas came into view for both pilot and forward gunner. Down in the bomb bay Sandy was cursing and mumbling helplessly to himself.

All he could see was jungle below him. All he could hear was the roaring of the Cyclones. He was definitely out of this fight save in the possible role of a clay pigeon. His three buddies were having all the fun, and it irked him.

Then both rear and forward guns went into action as Hot Dog and Sugar Babe got enemy planes in their ring-sights. All creation seemed to break loose for a minute, and an ominous staccato rattled along one wing and crawled up the fuselage toward the bomb bay until a dexterous maneuver of Bill Duffy’s caused Josephine to veer out of danger.

Sandy glared at the neat row of holes which had stopped appearing just a couple of feet away from his position and his precious camera. Then he saw a flash of red, and bits of a Nakajima suddenly littered the sky to one side and began raining groundward as one honorable Japanese boy went to meet his ancestors.

“Right on the nose!” cried Sugar Babe. “That’s one horsefly that won’t nip Josephine on the flank.”

“Hot dog!” shouted Gunner Weimer through the intercom. “Look what’s coming, Bill. A squadron of P-Forties out of the south, or I never learned my silhouette manual.”

“Looks like Major Frost’s squadron returning from a mission,” clipped out Bill Duffy. “Now watch these Nakas air out.”

“Green cows!” groaned Sandy Stone. “I can’t even see my own rescue. Why’d I ever study to be a bombardier in the first place?”

He heard Duffy communicating with Major Frost and then felt the big ship swerve and dip to clear out of the melee. The flight of P-40s droned by to engage the Jap fighters like a swarm of angry hornets.

“Okay, Sandy?” checked Lieutenant Duffy as he straightened out on his course.

“Yeah, Skipper,” growled the Texan.

“Come in, Sugar Babe,” went on the pilot.

“Snug as a bug in a rug,” answered the Missourian.

“How about you, Hot Dog? You look all right from here.”

“Never worked up a sweat, Skipper,” reported Weimer. “Didn’t even have a chance to get my guns hot.”

“You birds oughta been down here with me,” grouched Sandy. “My shoes are full of sweat and my collar’s still smoking.”

Lieutenant Duffy set Josephine down lightly on the field at Bundraang. This was the area under the control of Colonel Bigby, wing commander of the American Air Force cooperating with the British Army and R.A.F. in Burma. British and Indian jungle fighters were in the second week of assault on three temple-studded hilltop positions from which the Japanese were defending Rathedaung, the strategic village on the Mayi River some twenty-five miles north of Akyab.

The action was on a small scale because of the inability of either side to bring in large forces for jungle fighting or more armament because of the terrain. Supply lines, mostly by sampan, were slow and uncertain. Only expert cooperation by the air arms made progress at all possible.

“Home again, gang,” said the pilot. “All right, Sandy, hop over to the photography shack with those films while I report to Colonel Bigby.”

Colonel Bigby was not a martinet or a dyspeptic, but he was under considerable anxiety and strain over the present campaign—not to mention the heat and the annoying insects and the difficulties of reconciling Allied commands. He listened to Lieutenant Duffy’s report and then snorted.

“Very well, Lieutenant,” he said crisply. “But you should not have attempted to engage those

enemy fighters. Your mission was photo reconnaissance only. Get those pictures here as quickly as possible. A big movement is in the making. Confound Major Frost. Why didn't he escort you in?"

An hour later the squadron of P-40's came roaring in. Major Frost hastened to report to the colonel. His report tallied essentially with that of Bill Duffy.

"We chased the Nakajimas, sir, well back over the Jap lines, shooting down two of them. Then they flew into a low-hanging cloudbank, and we sought altitude to catch the Nips on the other side. But they never came out of that cloud, sir. We lost them somehow, Colonel Bigby."

"I see," snapped Colonel Bigby. "They disappeared—disintegrated—went up in smoke."

Major Frost reddened behind his ears. He glanced at Lieutenant Duffy. Then: "I didn't say that, sir. But I don't understand how my whole flight could lose them so completely"

"Did it occur to you, Major Frost, that you might have lost your whole flight, chasing into enemy territory after a few Nakajima fighters? That might have been a trap—and you were returning from a special and important mission."

"Yes, sir, I know, sir," answered the major. "But I found Lieutenant Duffy under attack, and—"

"You should have driven off the enemy and escorted Lieutenant Duffy's plane back to base instead of chasing off to leave him wide-open to another possible attack. Of all the men at this base you are the one man who should realize the importance of your mission and that of Lieutenant Duffy."

"Yes, sir," agreed the major, saluting and biting his lips.

Lieutenant Duffy looked from one to the other of his superior officers without making the slightest sound. He felt like crawling away, but he couldn't escape. The colonel went on irascibly.

"So those Jap planes simply disappeared in a cloudbank, eh? Major, your squadron just let a group of little yellow men out fly them, and you jeopardized your mission by pursuing enemy planes so far afield."

"Colonel Bigby," burst out Bill Duffy, "if you please, sir, it was my fault. I communicated with Major Frost by radio and asked for his assist—"

"That will do, Lieutenant," the colonel cut him off shortly. "You have already made your report. Major Frost was perfectly right in coming to your aid, but he exceeded himself when he chased those Jap planes behind their own lines. One more violation of this sort or disobedience of exact orders by any man in this wing and I'll ground him and have him transferred. Is that clear, gentlemen?"

"Why not have him court-martialed?" Bill Duffy added silently to himself as he saluted in unison with Major Frost.

Sandy Stone broke up the séance at this moment by breaking in with a handful of damp pictures. He saluted quickly and held out the prints.

"The rest of those shots of that area photographed today, Colonel," he said.

"Good," said the colonel a bit more mildly. "Take them into the other room where Captain Grayson is making the map. Come along, Frost. You, too, Duffy."

In the next room Captain Grayson was busily pinning photographic sections of a huge relief map to the top of a big table. He took the damp pictures from Sandy Stone, rifled through them quickly and with an expert eye, made some measurements, did some trimming with a pair of shears, and began fitting the new pictures into his map.

The other men looked on in silent interest. The map was a creditable relief map of the surrounding area, reaching from some ten miles north of Rathedaung almost to Mandalay. Major Frost's eyes widened slightly as he noted where the newest pictures were being fitted into the map. Bill Duffy and Sandy Stone merely ogled. They knew what they had been photographing, but they hadn't the slightest idea what it was all about.

"Gather closer, gentlemen," ordered Colonel Bigby briskly. "Have a look at this map. Maybe you will begin to understand the importance of what I am about to tell you. Here,"—he pointed with a blunt finger—"is Maymyo, about thirty-five miles northeast of Mandalay. It is at present a strong Japanese supply base. The railroad yards, shops, mainline trackage and rolling stock are all in Jap service.

"While the British and Indian troops are concentrating up here at Rathedaung, our job is to

make a heavy bombing raid on Maymyo and cripple supply and communication lines. Major Frost, your squadron has been doing reconnaissance and photography work southward as far as Mandalay, while Lieutenant Duffy has been photographing the terrain between here and Maymyo. The point is, gentlemen, we cannot locate any strong Jap airfield or bases—nothing to explain or account for the amount of ships the enemy gets into the air. Our purpose is to bomb Maymyo at daybreak tomorrow morning, but we don't want to be surprised by a lot of Mitchemys and Nakajimas coming up from anywhere this side of Mandalay. That, in short, is what you gentlemen have been doing for the past two weeks—hunting for airfields which can accommodate big flights of enemy planes.

"Since you have failed to discover anything of this nature, we can only deduct and presume that any heavy aerial umbrella the Japs can bring to bear must come from Mandalay or points south. As soon as Captain Grayson studies this map and these newest pictures, if he finds nothing to contradict this assumption, I will give you official orders for a raid at daybreak on Maymyo. Blast these gnats and jungle junebugs!" And the colonel slapped viciously at the tiny swarm of winged pests reconnoitering his nose.

"A raid on Maymyo?" repeated Bill Duffy. "Colonel, have I permission to put—Josephine—er—my bomber back into fighting condition to take part in this raid?"

The colonel's sharp gray eyes bored into Duffy's blue ones.

"You not only have permission, Lieutenant, you have my explicit orders to do so. You have finished your photography mission, and I want every possible ship to take part in this all-out raid on the Jap supply center."

"But wait a minute, Colonel Bigby," objected Sandy Stone. "I'm not satisfied with our photography. There's a section we flew over today that I want to get more pictures on. I think that's the spot where those Nakajimas got on our tail—about fifteen miles north of Maymyo. I think—"

"I fancy your skipper and Major Frost have heard enough of that area," Colonel Bigby cut the sergeant bombardier off curtly. "You have pictures of that area, Captain Grayson?"

"Yes, sir," answered the cartographer. "Lieutenant Duffy's flight today brought them in. Here they are."

"That's what I'm talking about," burst out Sandy. "There's a big brown field, half-field and half-jungle, that I want to photograph more thoroughly. I think those Nakas may have come up from—"

"That will do, Sergeant Stone," said the colonel shortly. "You will dismantle your camera equipment and get ready for a bombing raid. And, Lieutenant Duffy, you had better notify your crew as to my instructions about obeying orders explicitly. Major Frost will be in command of the flight. Grayson, where the devil is that oil of citronella—or something to keep these blasted bugs at bay?"

"Yes, sir," said Duffy, saluting stiffly.

"That will be all, Sergeant Stone," said Major Frost, eyeing the angry Texan significantly.

Duffy indicated that his bombardier was to follow him out, and withdrew.

"What gives with the major?" Sandy demanded as the pair trudged toward the makeshift hangar where Josephine was getting a quick overhauling.

But Duffy searched himself for a cigarette and briefly explained.

"That didn't give Colonel Bigby a reason for dressing everybody down," protested Sandy. "Anyway, Major Frost only did what anybody else would have done. And, Bill, it's about that very area that—"

"Forget it," advised Duffy. "You heard our orders. We're flying a bombing raid to Maymyo. And we're broken men if we don't follow orders. Major Frost will see to that. Now, get busy and fix Josephine up for carrying bombs."

Grudgingly Sandy Stone obeyed. But, as he worked, he kept shaking his head and mumbling to himself. Major Frost's story about Jap planes disappearing in a cloudbank didn't sound as much like nonsense as it did an unexplained mystery which had a logical solution somewhere—somehow.

After mess Sandy made his way to Headquarters shack where he found Captain Grayson sweating over the big map.

"Mind if I come in, Captain, and have a last look at the pictures?" the bombardier asked.

"Not at all, Stone," said Grayson.

For nearly an hour Bombardier Stone poured over the big relief map with a magnifying glass. He paid particular attention to the area over which he had been flying this afternoon. The spot which fascinated him the most was a point about two-thirds of the distance from Bundraang to Maymyo, the place where the Nakajimas had appeared so mysteriously and then had disappeared just as suddenly when Major Frost's squadron had driven them off from the attack on the fleeing Josephine.

"There was a low-lying cloudbank over eastward, as I remember," muttered Sandy to himself. "It could have masked this area from Major Frost's squadron."

He continued to examine the map, regretting that his photograph of the spot in question had not been made at a closer elevation, that he didn't have a number of other shots of the same spot for comparison. Nevertheless, his keen eyes studied and weighed things until gradually a difference in depth and perspective began to show.

And, suddenly, he had it. The actual truth leaped out at him all at once—like an optical illusion wherein where one stares for a long time at a drawing of something concave which, in the blink of an eye, magically becomes something convex.

It was the angle of the shadows of the trees that gave the secret away. Different photographs in various parts of the big map, taken at different times of the day, naturally showed shadows at various angles and in various stages of foreshortening. But the spot that was half-field and half-jungle threw shadows that didn't jibe with the shadows of other photographs made this same afternoon.

Bill had been flying Josephine southward. That put the afternoon sun on their right hand, throwing ground shadows to the left. The suspected area had foreshortened shadows which indicated that the sun should have been almost directly overhead. The jungle stuff was nothing but a painted canvas—camouflage! The real trees and objects that actually stood out here and there threw their correct shadows to the left. But one tiny section was false. That could only mean the screened entrance to an underground hangar. Hundreds of planes might be safely stored there,

coming out through the masked entrance and using the field for taking off and landing.

Sandy dropped the magnifying glass and rushed it to Major Frost's quarters. But the major didn't even give him a chance to talk. Doubtless his neck was still smoking from contact with the colonel.

"I don't want to hear any more about that area. Sergeant," he said curtly.

"But it is about ten miles behind the Jap lines," protested Sandy. "It's fully fifteen miles this side of Maymyo, and if we have all our ships concentrating on Maymyo—"

"Which we will," said Major Frost crisply. "You heard the colonel's orders, and I will not tolerate the slightest breach of flying discipline. Any more out of you, and I'll ask Lieutenant Duffy to ground you and use another bombardier."

"Leave me out of one of Josephine's flights?" gaped Sandy incredulously. "No sir. I—very good, sir. Goodnight."

He saluted and quickly withdrew. They weren't going to deal him out of a night flight and a bombing raid. No, sir—not if he had to sew up his lips. But the colonel was stubborn, and the major was crafty. Why, if all of the American bombers with their rather inadequate protection of fighters were concentrating on bombing Maymyo, and a heavy flight of Jap fighters came from nowhere in their rear and took them by surprise—well many would come through, but the slaughter would be terrific.

Sandy set his lips in a grim line. He knew what he had to do. And he knew that if he was wrong—and there wasn't the least possible chance for verification—he was headed for a court-martial and disgrace.

Two hours before daylight flight after flight took off from the field at Bundraang, circled for altitude, fell into battle formation, and headed south to wreak Allied vengeance on the Jap base at Maymyo. Josephine, fortunately, was in the left flight of a bomber squadron. High above, Major Frost led his squadron of protective P-40S, combat eagles which would blast down any Jap fighters that come up and come down to do battle with the raiding bombers.

But no thought had been given to a possible attack from the rear. And Sandy Stone crouched

in the bomb bay of Josephine and grimly scanned the starlit terrain below through a pair of night glasses. He knew what he had to do. He hadn't dared talk before. And he groaned slightly as he speculated on whether or not Bill Duffy would listen to him, would heed him now.

"Skipper," he spoke hoarsely into the intercom. "Bill?"

"What's the matter, Sandy?" came back Duffy's crisp voice. "You sound peculiar."

"Are Sugar Babe and Hot Dog cut in?" asked Sandy.

"Of course," said Bill cheerfully. "Don't we all four fly this old girl as one?"

"Well, listen, gang," said Sandy rapidly. "I couldn't make the brass hats listen to me. I studied that relief map last night—those pictures we shot yesterday. I discovered the secret of those Nakajimas that jumped up on our tail. Frost was right about them disappearing. Here's how it is."

Rapidly he told the whole story.

"Good glory!" groaned Bill. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

"You heard the colonel's orders. I wasn't going to let them ground me."

"Maybe you're wrong," said Hot Dog. "You didn't get a chance to recheck."

"That's possible," admitted Sandy, "but I'll bet every cow in Texas that I ain't. Anyway, it's take a chance that I'm right and save the entire flight, or gamble wrong and get the four of us and Josephine in dutch."

"How?" demanded Sugar Babe. "What can we do now?"

Sandy drew a deep breath. Then:

"We can leave this flight mission and bomb the devil out of that camouflaged underground entrance! We can bottle all those Jap planes up down there like rats. We'll protect the flight at any rate."

"And suppose there are no Jap planes in an underground base there?" asked Bill Duffy calmly.

"Curtains for us and Josephine," admitted Sandy succinctly.

Another pause. Then:

"I can't make such a decision," said Duffy. "It wouldn't be fair to the rest of you fellows."

"Say, who commands this plane when we are coming on target?" drawled Sugar Babe.

"The bombardier, of course," answered Duffy.

"We haven't got a special navigator," went on Sugar Babe significantly. "If Sandy says we're coming on target and instructs you how to fly, you have to obey, the way I see it. I'm voting to ride it out with Sandy."

"Make it two of us," declared Hot Dog Weimer. "I want to put a tuck in the seat of their pants."

"Okay," said Duffy coolly. "You guys asked for it. Take over, Sandy."

A sob of thankfulness choked the Texan. He had to be right now.

"Coming on target," he said huskily. "Bear six points left, Skipper."

Five minutes later Josephine was skimming smoothly over the suspected area. Following Sandy's terse directions, Duffy put the ship into a dive. Like an exultant eagle Josephine roared down out of the dawn.

Sandy, the bomb bay open and ready, tripped his releases, and a stream of finned torpedoes and bombs rained down to blast the camouflaged area to bits. As the bomber pulled up and zoomed out of the dive there was a brief period in which all the world seemed to stand breathless, chilled, frozen—and afraid.

And then a harsh rose, a crater of fiendish red and yellow blossomed on the ground below them, a Satanic flower which was instantly masked by billowing clouds of white and black smoke.

"You were right, Sandy! You were right!" shrieked Hot Dog Weimer. "They must have had detectors down there. Look, Skipper, half a dozen fighter planes already got out of the rat-hole and they're taking off on our tail."

"Turn Josephine around, Bill!" yelled Sugar Babe Munroe. "Let's go back and polish off them gnats for the colonel."

"Hot dog!" exulted the forward gunner. "Look out, you Japs. Here comes Brooklyn."

"Here comes the United States," corrected Bill as he maneuvered Josephine in the fastest reverse the gallant ship had ever looped.

And then the roaring of angry hornets droned in the sky, and Flight A of Major Frost's P-40s came diving out of the southern heavens.

After that it was pandemonium, a madhouse, for a time. The Jap planes taking off had no more chance than a handful of buzzards in a blizzard.

Only one P-40 was knocked down, the pilot bailing out.

Then the radio communications began to crackle.

“You idiots get back into the Maymyo flight formation!” roared the angry voice of Major Frost. “What do you mean by this insubordination?”

“We’re out of bombing ammunition, Skipper,” called Sandy.

Duffy relayed this information.

“Then head back to Bundraang,” ordered the major. “I’m grounding you until I get back to report to the colonel.” And then he added: “My apologies for not listening to Sergeant Stone last night. After you’re court-martialed, I’ll cite all four of you for medals.”

The flight of P-40S went roaring away. Duffy ruddered his ship around to head for base, and the four of them lifted their voices in a barber-shop quartet:

“Come, Josephine, you’re a flying machine, going up, or coming down....”