

# Invasion:

The same day that Jack Donalson was facing insurmountable odds in the Philippines flying his newly assembled P-40E, his fellow fighter pilots in Pearl Harbor, a thousand miles away, and Clark Field, a few miles away, were doing the same thing in P-40B/Cs. (Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)



**2ND LT. JACK DONALSON, USAAC**  
**21st Pursuit Squadron, 24th Pursuit Group**  
**Manila Area—December 9, 1941**

I. B. Jack Donalson was born on July 6, 1915, in Kyle, Texas, and reared in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He majored in geology at Tulsa University, but when he took the Civilian Pilot Training course in 1940, he decided to pursue a career as a military aviator. Accepted for the U.S. Army Air Corps' Flying Cadet program, he began his training in January 1941 and graduated from Kelly Field, Texas, with Class 41-F on August 15, 1941.

Second Lt. Donalson was assigned to the 35th Pursuit Group's 21st Pursuit Squadron directly from flight school and served with it at Hamilton Field, California, until ordered to the Philippines.

# The Philippines

A LOSING BATTLE AGAINST A WELL-EQUIPPED FOE



BY ERIC HAMMEL

**W**hen we departed San Francisco on November 1, 1941, there was little doubt in any of our minds that we would soon be at war with the Japanese. Aboard the *SS Coolidge*, I was one of 14 pilots, together with members of the 21st Pursuit Squadron ground crew. The remainder of the squadron was expected to follow on the next convoy out of San Francisco.

The 21st Pursuit Squadron was under the command of a gent who we knew would turn out to be one of the great air commanders in the Pacific. He was 1st Lt. William “Ed” Dyess, a 6-foot, blond Texan who commanded respect by his outstanding leadership and flying ability, a man who would never ask anybody to do anything that he wouldn’t do himself. Ed was a natural pilot. He had first flown at the age of four with his father, also an aviation enthusiast, and from that time on, he wanted to be an aviator. When Ed issued orders, it might have been in a slow Southern drawl, but you only had to look

into his steel blue eyes if there was any doubt they would be carried out. Ed had all the characteristics one expects in a professional American military officer. He had married shortly before we sailed, and I am certain it was their mutual love that carried Ed through his darkest days during the Bataan Death March.

Also aboard the *Coolidge* was the 34th Pursuit Squadron, under 1st Lt. Samuel Marrett. We were to be part of the 24th Pursuit Group, which included two other

squadrons—the 3rd Pursuit Squadron, under 1st Lt. Henry Thorne, and the 17th, which was commanded by 1st Lt. Boyd “Buzz” Wagner, another outstanding leader who was to become a legend in the Pacific.

We arrived in Manila on November 20 and were assigned to Nichols Field, approximately six miles south, while the 34th was assigned to Del Carmen, 14 miles south of Clark Field. The 3rd Pursuit Squadron was already at Iba Field, well north of Subic Bay on the Zambales coast. The 24th Squadron headquarters, under 1st Lt. Walter Putnam, another of the great ones, and the 20th Pursuit Squadron, under 1st Lt. Joe Moore, fortunately of the same caliber, were also based at Clark. Headquarters, Far East Air Force (FEAF), was based at Nielson Field, south of Manila.

We were ready to go as soon as we disembarked, but much to our chagrin, instead of having our Curtiss P-40s, we were given tired, exhausted Seversky P-35As that had been built for the Swedish Air Force. Equipped with Swedish instrumentation, these airplanes came with no English version of any technical orders for our crewmen, and that contributed materially to their sad condition. The plane’s only satisfying quality was that it was more powerfully armed than the United States model, which carried only two synchronized .30-caliber machine guns. Our P-35s had two .50-caliber machine guns mounted on the cowl and a .30-caliber machine gun in each wing.

We were told that we could expect our P-40Es in early December. I am not exaggerating when I say that we were expecting war with Japan to begin any day, especially after the United States cut off American oil and froze Japanese credits in the United States. The next step would have been apparent to a high-school student.

Shortly after our arrival, the 24th Pursuit Group status report gave the following information about its squadrons: 3rd Pursuit Squadron at Iba, commanded by Lt. Hank Thorne, with 18 P-40Es in commission; 17th Pursuit Squadron at Nichols Field, commanded by Lt. Buzz Wagner, with 18 P-40Es in commission; 21st Pursuit Squadron at Nichols Field, commanded by Lt. Ed Dyess,



**Above:** 1st Lt. Boyd “Buzz” Wagner commanded the 17th Pursuit Squadron during the defense of the Philippines. Wagner became the first ace of the Army Air Forces and was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for heroism on December 17, 1942. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook) **Below:** Many of the available American fighters in the Philippines were obsolete Seversky P-35s. The P-40Es had arrived only a few days before the attacks began. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)



with eighteen P-35As in commission; 20th Pursuit Squadron, at Clark Field, commanded by Lt. Joe Moore, with 18 P-40Bs in commission; and 34th Pursuit Squadron at Del Carmen, commanded by Lt. Sam Marrett, with 18 P-35As in commission. That added up to 36 P-40Es, 18 P-40Bs, and 36 P-35s, an official total of 90 first-line, combat-worthy planes.

## We Were Overconfident and Not Prepared

As I mentioned, the 21st arrived in the Philippines 18 days before the war. I had just graduated from flying school and had managed to get about 13 hours in the P-40 before leaving for the Philippines. Once there, we got a few hours in the P-35s so that we could keep up what little proficiency we had.

Even though we had tired P-35s, we began standing alert on December 1, the day of the first appearance of Japanese aircraft over Luzon. Our morale was extremely high. We were told that the Japanese airplanes were mediocre and the pilots could be considered in the same category. The general impression was that if war came and we didn't win it right away, the necessary reinforcements would be forthcoming.

The first of our squadron's P-40Es arrived at Nichols on December 4, but they were a long way from being operational. Their guns were still in cosmoline and required extensive cleaning. Boiling that cosmoline off our guns was one of the filthiest jobs I have ever undertaken. For boresighting the guns, we were allocated only a very few of the available .50-caliber rounds in our ammunition lockers. Additional P-40s were subsequently delivered in the same condition. In fact, the last four of our 18 P-40s arrived after dark on December 7.

On December 6, our group commander, Col. Harold George—known as "Pursuit George" to distinguish him from the other Col. Harold "Bomber" George—assembled us at the base theater at Nichols and told us that war was imminent, possibly within hours but certainly within days. What we couldn't understand was why so second-rate an air power as we were told Japan would dare challenge the United States. We were led to believe that they didn't have any modern equipment, and that if they were foolish enough to hit us, we would pretty much have a picnic. It was just inconceivable that they would hit us. Naturally, it was a rude awakening to find out that the shoe was on the other foot, and it was the Americans who had the inferior equipment.

We were aware of the capability of the Imperial Navy's Mitsubishi G3M Nell medium bomber, whose civilian counterpart saw wide use before the war. One of the civilian models, named the "Nippon," made an around-the-world flight



P-40B Tomahawks of the 20th Pursuit Squadron are lined up at Clark Field, Luzon, Philippines in October 1941. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)

in 1939 and landed in Oakland, California—a tremendous feat for its day. But no one told us about the great Zero Navy fighter, which was to dominate the Pacific skies. Although it had made its combat debut in China in August 1940, more than a year earlier, the Zero and its superior performance came as a surprise to all Americans except Col. Claire Chennault, of the American Volunteer Group, the Flying Tigers.

Then there was the Imperial Navy Nakajima B5N torpedo bomber, later known as the "Kate," whose design reputedly was obtained from American companies. Kate pilots in action at Pearl Harbor claimed 50 percent hits with their torpedoes.

Even more impressive was the Nell's successor, the Imperial Navy's Mitsubishi G4M twin-engine "Betty," whose endurance and altitude at the time exceeded the B-17's. Bettys were to devastate Clark and Nichols fields, and their altitude capability made interception and destruction impossible with the equipment we had. It was a deplorable and disastrous situation.

From the intelligence standpoint, it was apparent that if and when Japan decided to strike, we

**The first of our squadron's P-40Es arrived at Nichols on December 4, but they were a long way from being operational.**

## **Betty bombers approached from the north, escorted by more Zeros, and commenced their devastating bombing runs.**

in the Philippines would be the targets. Japanese aircraft had flown slowly over the Philippines often, but they were definitely detected in the dark early morning hours of December 2, 4, and 5. When spotted by our only operational radar, at Iba, they were at an estimated 24,000 feet, flying over Luzon and our airfields.

This was really disconcerting, and it should have given us an inkling as to the aerial superiority the Japanese had. Even if it had been daylight and we could have seen them, we couldn't have gotten up to their altitude. Although the service ceiling of the P-40 was supposed to be 26,000 feet, we had no oxygen facilities, and flying above 15,000 feet, as we later learned, was not conducive to effective aerial combat or, I might add, longevity. It is my understanding that there was not an operating oxygen plant in the entire Philippines. There was no Prestone coolant for the P-40 engines, either. When we attempted to go beyond 18,000 feet, our engines would overheat to the danger point, forcing us to level out and descend to pick up speed and cool the laboring Allison engine. By the time we could get back into the safe temperature range, the target would be long gone. This situation prevailed after the initial attack on the Philippines on December 8. Much to our disgust, there were always many Japanese fighters above us, which meant that they could pick their time and place to engage. When they did, they would just come down and swarm all over us.

### **We Knew It Was Coming, but...**

On the nights of December 6 and 7, we kept all our planes down and had the anti-aircraft and searchlight batteries in position to counter the expected intruder, but he never showed. If he had, he probably would have been just as safe as on previous nights.

We had been given information, from what intelligence there was, that various Japanese airfields on Formosa were loaded with many types of aircraft. Now, because the Japanese fighter and bomber fields on Formosa were at least 500 miles distant, we expected bombers; we were certain that the Japanese had no fighters that would permit either a bomber escort or strafers during attacks on Luzon—that is, unless they used aircraft carriers.

By December 7, due to routine maintenance problems, we had just 88 operational first-line aircraft, of which 54 were pursuits and 35 were B-17s. There were also U.S. Navy PBY Catalina flying boats, which conducted long-range reconnaissance flights that encompassed the potential launching areas of any carrier aircraft that might

attempt to attack us.

On December 8 (we were on the other side of the International Date Line so it was the 7th in Hawaii), I was sitting on alert at Nichols Field when Ed Dyess, our commanding officer, received word about the Pearl Harbor attack. It was 0430 hours. We were all ordered to man what planes we had, and we even turned up those planes that were not slated to be sent aloft. Then we shut down and stood by our planes. It was confusing as all get-out. Here we were, many thousands of miles closer to Japan than Pearl Harbor, and we hadn't been touched.

It wasn't long in coming. Japanese aircraft bombed Baguio, about 150 miles north of Manila, from an altitude of 22,000 feet at 0930 hours. At the time, a couple of the 20th Pursuit Squadron P-40s that had taken off for a combat air patrol at 0800 hours were 17,000 feet over Rosales, 50 miles north of Clark Field. The P-40s managed to struggle up in an attempt to exchange shots with the bombers, but at that altitude they only managed to pick up a few rounds fired by Japanese gunners.

Buzz Wagner's 17th Pursuit was scrambled, but we were left standing by with piles of sandwiches and cold Cokes, wondering when our time would come. We just couldn't imagine the Japanese would bypass the Philippines and hit Pearl.

We were finally scrambled at about 1145 hours and assigned a combat air patrol over Manila Bay between Corregidor and the Cavite Navy base. It was strange to look down after being at war for hours and see the rows of B-17s lined up and not airborne. An old Douglas B-18 medium bomber had flown into Nichols earlier to pick up enough photographic equipment to permit the B-17s to carry out a photo reconnaissance mission over Formosa, so it was difficult for me to believe that the damn things were still lined up, wingtip to wingtip, on the ground.

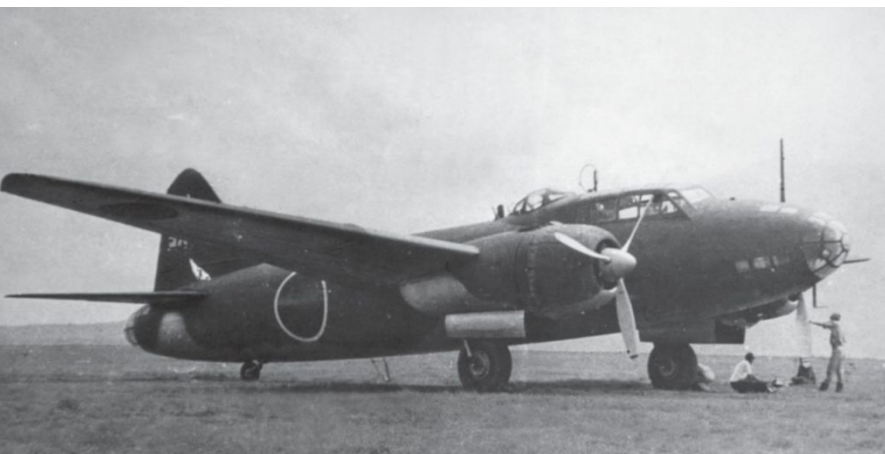
### **They're Here, but They're Fighters!**

We got the biggest surprise of our lives when Japanese fighters arrived over the Manila area many minutes before the bombers. We estimated their altitude at 22,000 feet. This was a most unbelievable sight—Formosa-based Japanese fighters at such an altitude, which meant they had to have a range of more than 1,000 miles.

We maintained our combat-air-patrol altitude of 15,000 feet. The actual operational ceiling of our aircraft at that time was between 18,000 and 19,000 feet. Shortly, about 27 twin-engine high-altitude Betty bombers approached from the north, escorted by more Zeros, and commenced their devastating bombing runs. The only chance



The fighter pilots in the Philippines were amazed to see Zeros overhead. The attacking fighters had flown more than 500 miles from Formosa and still had enough fuel to combat the defending American fighters, repeatedly strafe their fields, and return to Formosa. At that time, no other fighter in the world had that kind of range. (Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)



The Mitsubishi G4M bomber, later known as “Betty” to the Allies, was designed specifically for combat in the broad expanses of the Pacific. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

Although everyone knew war was on the way, no effort to disperse the aircraft on Clark Field was made. The Bettys simply laid their sticks of bombs right down the rows, and strafers had targets lined up for them. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)

we had to evade the Zeros was to get up to an altitude where we might do some good, but it was disconcerting as hell because of the altitude limitation of our fighters. The Japanese always had an advantage.

My flight of P-40s was over Manila when the first bombs fell on Clark Field. Their first strikes were against Clark and Iba. They knew what they were after at Iba—our only operational radar installation.

Later, I learned that, on the morning of December 8, Iba’s radar had picked up an inbound flight of high-altitude aircraft 75 miles off the coast, headed in the general direction of Corregidor. The time was a little after 0400 hours—before we knew anything about the Pearl Harbor attack. The 3rd Pursuit Squadron had been scrambled, but of

course we had no night-interception capability, though our orders were to shoot down anything within 20 miles of the shore. The two plots—the inbound flight and interception flight—merged, but then a very strange thing happened. The high-altitude flight made a 180-degree turn, and 3rd Squadron fighters returned to base without seeing anything. This occurred just about the time the actual attack on Pearl Harbor was taking place. As it turned out, Iba’s radar did not possess an altitude-finding capability.

While the Japanese bombers were hitting Clark and Iba, we were on station over Nichols, as ordered, but they failed to show there. We could hear all the excitement over the radio, as we flew unmolested over Nichols and Manila. All the while this was going on, I was still amazed that they would dare attack us; we were so confident that we could handle anything that they would throw at us. When they completed their attack, the bombers headed back toward Formosa, but about 10 minutes later, their fighters came back and proceeded to strafe Clark Field so thoroughly that when they had finished there was not a single flyable aircraft left on the base.

### “They’re Trying to Kill us!”

Second Lt. Sam Grashio, whose flight was a little farther north than mine, tangled with them near Clark. When Sam got back, he was really excited. He said, “They really mean it. They’re trying to kill us.” We really hadn’t believed that they would have the nerve to come down, and if they did, we had felt we could sweep them from the



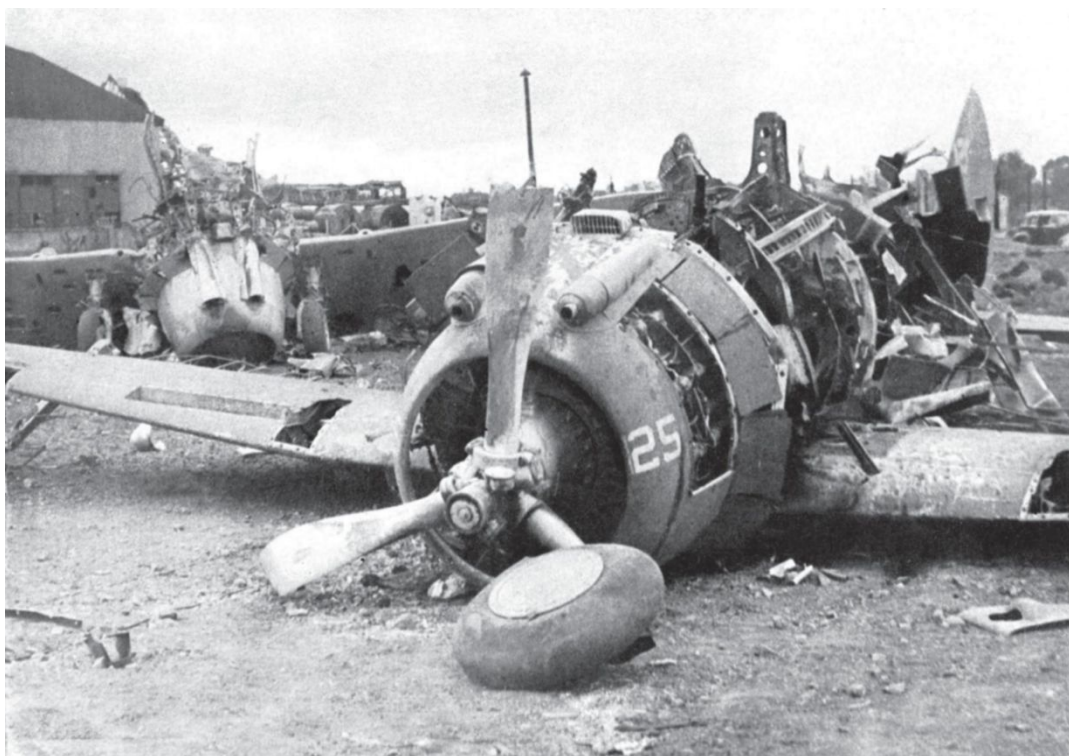
sky. It was now apparent that they owned the sky.

When we finally touched down at Nichols, everything was in a state of destruction and confusion. Communications had been knocked out, and there was pandemonium. Our squadron was ordered up to Clark Field. The runways there had been thoroughly bombed, so we had to use the auxiliary landing strip, which was so dusty that we could only land at intervals of several minutes. When we landed, it looked like a disaster area—burned airplanes, bomb craters, dead people, and human remains were all over the ground. There were still bodies in the cockpits of the burned aircraft.

We parked and walked toward what we assumed was the base operations office. Nobody was there, except a lone soldier who was walking around dazed among all the dead people. We asked him where the operations area was, and he finally pointed toward the jungle. Sure enough, there was a little command post a couple miles from the field, in the middle of the jungle. There we met with some of the survivors of the 20th Pursuit Squadron, which, as an operational unit, was considered wiped out. We had an opportunity to talk to some of the pilots who had been airborne and were fortunate enough to get back. Their stories about this new type of Japanese fighter that they had encountered were mighty grim.

The story of the attack on Clark was put together by pilots and crewmen. The damage commenced when the first flight of bombers came over in a 27-plane vee-of-vees formation at approximately 23,000 feet. Their bombs were exploding by the time the air-raid signals sounded. A second bomber formation followed, and it was equally devastating. Only three P-40s of the 20th Squadron managed to get into the air. Five were blasted by the bombardment while they were taxiing, and others were destroyed by bomb impacts or strafing. The strafing Japanese fighters raised complete hell with the remaining aircraft on the field. It was just unbelievable. The hangars, barracks, and storehouses were demolished by the bombers.

We learned that the 12 planes of the 3rd Squadron at Iba were just preparing to land from patrol over the South China Sea when the bombers struck. All but two of the 3rd Squadron's P-40s were lost. After a quick account of our airpower, we found that only 17 of the original 35 B-17s



remained and that 53 P-40s and three P-35s had been destroyed and 25 other aircraft were damaged, some of which would never fly again. This, against the loss of seven Japanese fighters, constituted another complete surprise victory for the Japanese many hours after the Pearl Harbor attack.

### Desperation Sets In

That night, after a meal of cold beans, cold coffee, bread, and jam, we all slept on the floor of a dugout. Before we turned in, we formulated our plans for the next day's operations, which was to begin with a takeoff before dawn in anticipation of an early Japanese attack. It was agreed that this would be no easy task as the field was still in a shambles and pocked with craters. Just a day earlier, a night mission in a P-40-type aircraft under normal conditions for pilots of our proficiency was unheard of. In fact, it was against existing Air Corps regulations.

That night at Clark is a horrible memory. As the time arrived, we prepared for our predawn takeoff. Ed Dyess was first off. Because of the dust on the field, when my flight commander, 2nd Lt. Robert Clark, attempted to get rolling, he lost directional control. Although Ed was warn-

Flying at 24,000 feet, the attacking Bettys and Zeroes were untouchable. The defending P-40s couldn't come close to reaching them. So the enemy could bomb and strafe the airfields at will. The destruction was almost complete, as the remains of these P-35s attest. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

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The P-40B/Cs were even more limited in altitude performance than the few P-40Es that were available during the attack. The earlier aircraft were standard equipment throughout the Pacific at the time. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

## **We latched onto four of the fighters, whose pilots did not see us. I made my attack from north to south, and I managed to shoot down two of the Japanese Zero fighters as they were diving and strafing Clark Field.**

ing him from above, apparently Bob wasn't reading him and crashed into a B-17, ending up in a ball of fire. Another of our pilots taxied into a bomb crater. It was very confusing; there were no lights, no ground control, nothing. I just cranked in about 10 degrees of flaps and didn't have the slightest idea where I would end up—into another B-17, a bomb crater, or what. I just firewalled it and made it aloft against some pretty big odds. Sam Grashio lost his engine at about 7,000 feet. Fortunately, after dodging the friendly but mighty trigger-happy antiaircraft batteries that surrounded the field, he managed to make it back. By the way, these were the same antiaircraft guns that, on December 8, had not been able to get a point of aim on the strafing Japanese aircraft because of their antiquated mounts.

Our 200th Coast Artillery (AA) Regiment, which consisted of a battalion each of 3-inch and 37mm weapons, was in just as frustrating a situation as we were. They had an awful time with their ammunition, the newest of which had been manufactured in 1932. Most of the fuses were badly corroded, and reportedly only one out of six rounds went off. And when they did go off, they didn't have the range and would explode at least half a mile below the bombers.

We had no definite operation. Pilots who could get in the air would join up and fly until they ran out of fuel or ammunition. It was impossible to get information as to what was going on where. For the most part, communications channels were completely jammed. It was more or less every man for himself, with no overall coordination. After our first launch, we landed at one of the many ground-support fields that we had around the area.

### **Finally—Pay Back!**

On our return to Clark, we had just entered into another circling combat air patrol when about 30 bombers and fighters made an appearance and began their attack. The weather was clear with a slight cirrus overcast. We latched onto four of the fighters, whose pilots did not see us. I made my attack from north to south, and I managed to shoot down two of the Japanese Zero fighters as they were diving and strafing Clark Field. Luckily, I had the altitude advantage as they completed their runs. Both of them crashed right on or adjacent to the field itself.

I landed and refueled, then I was ordered back to Nichols. As I approached the field, I could hear action going on all around, and I could see single-engine aircraft pulling out of their bombing or strafing runs. I hit one—another Zero—and he fell right on Nichols Field. The others started to chase me all over the place. I apparently had more fuel than they did, for they broke off the chase. Don't for a minute think that I wasn't sweating it out. They were good!

I got a total of three Japanese aircraft on the second day of the war, and that's the last time I ever got a crack at them in the Philippines. That day, five of our P-40s were shot down and three others crash-landed on nearby beaches. Then, the Philippines were lashed by some of the severest rainstorms that I have ever seen, and that apparently reduced a follow-up knockout punch by the Japanese.

### **EPILOGUE**

After the 24th Pursuit Group had flown itself out in the grossly uneven fight for the skies over Luzon, many pilots and ground crewmen were absorbed into ground units. Second Lt. Jack Donalson eventually became an infantryman, the leader of 10 other Air Corps men who fought the last-ditch battles on Bataan. Indeed, Jack Donalson was awarded the Army's second-highest award—the Distinguished Service Cross—for leading a deadly infantry raid behind Japanese lines. At the end, Donalson was ordered out of the Philippines aboard an overcrowded B-17, and he soon ended up in Australia.

Lt. Donalson eventually returned to combat as a P-40 pilot with the 49th Fighter Group's 9th Fighter Squadron. He downed a Mitsubishi A6M Zero fighter over Darwin, Australia, on June 14, 1942, and he achieved ace status when he downed a fifth Zero, also over Darwin, on July 30, 1942.

Late in the war, Maj. Donalson served in the European Theater with the 352nd Fighter Group's 487th Fighter Squadron, a combat tour he describes as "a walk in the park compared to Bataan and Darwin." He remained in the service after the war and spent most of his career in fighters. He retired as a colonel in 1968 and passed away in 2006. †