

# BITE OF THE B

## USAAF P-61

story by Warren E. Thompson

**Operating mainly by night, the Northrop P-61 Black Widow proved to be a fearsome weapon for the USAAF in the CBI (China-Burma-India) theater. Only two units flew it there, but the work they did in combating Japanese forces proved to be invaluable. First-hand accounts from Black Widow crew members help tell the fascinating tale**

**J**apanese industry needed to be put out of action if WW2 was to be won by the Allies, but before this could happen there had to be air bases built close enough to the intended targets that could accommodate long-range bombing missions by B-29 Superfortresses. The Mariana Islands (Saipan) would prove to be the largest of these, but it was bases in India and China that first helped launch the massive raids carried out by these heavy bombers. The airfields in China were the most vulnerable to Japanese air attack, especially at night. This brought another new, specialized aircraft into the picture, with the job of protecting these bases during the hours of darkness or inclement weather. This aircraft was the Northrop P-61 Black Widow.

Only two night fighter units were destined to operate in the entire CBI (China-Burma-India) theater, namely the 426th and 427th Night Fighter Squadrons. However, it would be the 426th that would range far into China with

detachments scattered all over the area. Its primary tasking was to cover the forward B-29 bases in the Chengtu area. No other specialized squadron in the USAAF was saddled with such a responsibility, which would encompass a significant portion of China's 3.69m square miles.

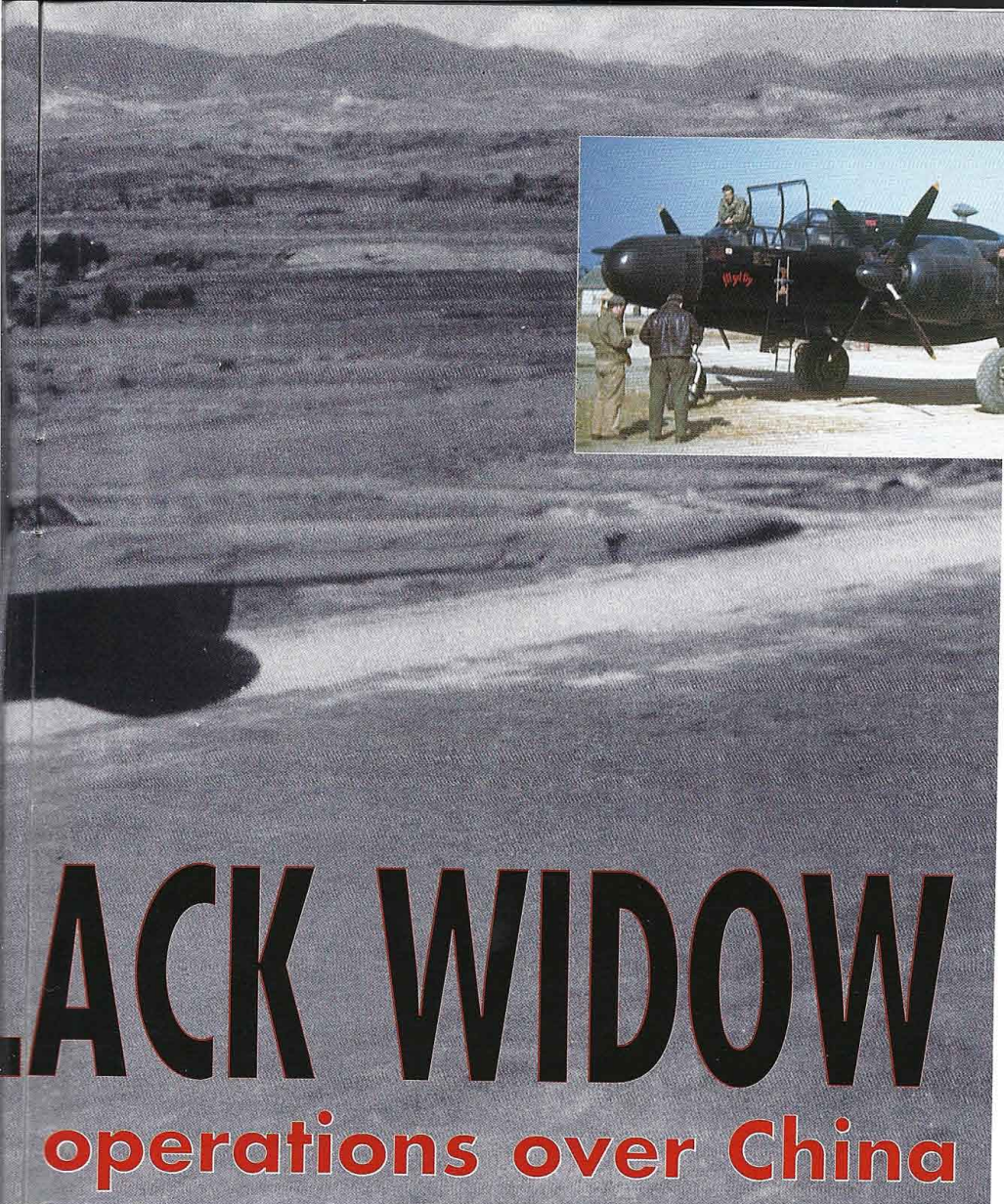
### The Black Widow arrives

The first battle plan for the newly-arrived 426th Night Fighter Squadron was to base six Black Widows at Chengtu and another six at Luichow. The squadron HQ would be located at Luiliang. The urgency of protecting the B-29s was never understated and had such priority that the 426th took 11 of the 427th Night Fighter Squadron's Black Widows to bring itself up to the strength it needed to carry out the mission. Due to the fact that these aircraft had to be fitted with the HF and radio compasses, there was a delay in getting them into the forward positions — until October 27, 1944. Gen Clare Chennault voiced his concern at this

delay because the Japanese took full advantage of this lapse in coverage.

Considering themselves almost immune from interference at night, the enemy sent waves of Kawasaki Ki-48 'Lily' light bombers over Allied positions, especially the forward airfields. Two days after arriving, the P-61s were up — one was directed in on an unsuspecting 'Lily', and with a short blast from its 20mm gun, the enemy bomber exploded. Three weeks later, the same aircrew got a 'probable' while another Black Widow, working a different sector on that same night, destroyed another one before it could reach its target. Within days of the first kill, word had got back to the enemy about an aircraft capable of nocturnal operations, which was making the bombing missions very dangerous. Within a few days, the raids diminished and many of the nightly patrols by the P-61s drew a blank on the radar screen.

Allied forces in China and Burma never underestimated the capabilities of Japanese intelligence. They probably had



above: **Capt John Wilfong and his radar operator Lt Glenn Ashley flew P-61 *I'll Get By*. They destroyed a 'Lily' bomber on the night of November 27, 1944 over China. This was taken at a forward base in early 1945. (Fred LeFever)**

left: **Road reconnaissance (night or day) was one of the missions of the P-61 squadrons. These two 426th Night Fighter Squadron Black Widows are practicing low-level recce close to their base in China. On most of their missions, they carried the external fuel tanks because of the distances they had to cover. This was taken in the spring of 1945. (Joseph Greenbaum)**

bottom: **Ground crews from the 426th NFS are seen making final checks of the radar on this new P-61 at a base in India. Shortly after this was taken, its aircrew flew it 'over the Hump' into China for combat operations. (Fred LeFever)**

# BLACK WIDOW

## operations over China

spies working at every one of the forward bases. This was suddenly brought to light by an incident that happened at one of the airfields used by a 426th detachment. One night in mid-December 1944, word was received from the chain of 'watchers' that an enemy aircraft was inbound towards the base. One of the crews scrambled out to a P-61, but

in the haste of getting airborne, the landing gear lock was accidentally released which collapsed the port gear, throwing a prop and bending the port tail boom. The next day, 'Tokyo Rose' gave the details of this incident in her radio broadcast. She even stated that the detachment was now down to only two operational night fighters. This hit home with all of the base personnel.



### Night fighter sortie — from the cockpit

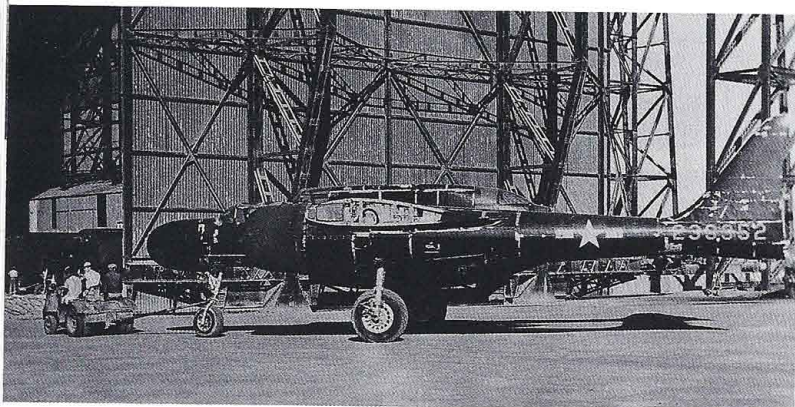
One of the top-scoring crews from the 426th Night Fighter Squadron comprised pilot Capt Carl Absmeier and his radar operator Lt James R. Smith. They were credited with destroying two Japanese 'Lilys' during their tour and participated in far too many night scrambles to remember. On the fourth night of their arrival at Lahoko (a forward air base in China), things began to heat up. This was a base operated by the 7th Composite American-Chinese Wing (CACW) that had requested night protection for its aircraft and personnel.

Lt Smith describes that night. 'The crude Chinese air raid warning had reached our base and we scrambled. As we fired the engines up and started to taxi, a string of bombs started exploding, in sequence, ahead of us and they walked right down the runway. Our engine noise drowned out the noise and it looked like a huge fireworks display. Capt Absmeier stated that we were going to get airborne no matter what! He went full throttle and headed off down the other strip which was much shorter with a hill at the far end. As we ran out of runway, he literally yanked the plane into the air and we immediately felt the sensation of a mushing stall!

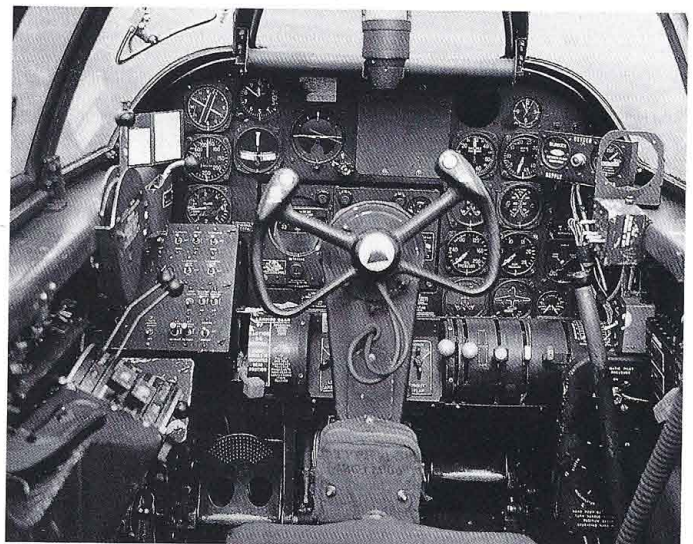
'We were not gaining altitude fast enough and Absmeier told me that he thought we were going in! I remember that I swiveled my chair so as to face backwards. I could see the moonlit rocks and bushes rushing past by just a few feet below us. I braced myself for a crash and then, all at once, we were gaining speed and climbing out of harm's way. At the



top: An abandoned dirigible hangar in Karachi, India was used to assemble new aircraft being shipped into the CBI. The new P-61s had been brought over from the USA on a small aircraft carrier — their final destination would be one of the two night fighter squadrons that would operate in the theater. Also visible here are P-47 Thunderbolts and P-51C Mustangs. (Garry Pape)



above: A new P-61 is towed into the old dirigible hangar at a base in India to finish assembling it for combat duty in China. It would eventually be assigned to either the 426th or 427th Night Fighter Squadron. (Garry Pape)



above right: A clear view of the P-61's instrument panel in the pilot's compartment. (John Wilfang)

time of our hasty take-off, Absmeier forgot to close the upper cowl flaps; these had been opened when we last landed to help cool the engine down. They were not meant to be opened in flight, as they acted like brakes and at the same time, they destroyed the lift over a large part of the wing area.'

The determination of the Japanese to disable or destroy any forward Allied

bases was pretty evident. Their strategy against this particular base at Lahoko was to follow the river up from the south-east, one bomber at a time with intervals of about 15 minutes. Capt 'Ab' Absmeier and Lt Smith knew if they could get airborne, that the chances of intercepting another 'Lily' coming in were good. The first bomber to come over had dropped the stick of bombs on the runway and sure

enough, the second one was soon detected on Smith's radar scope just a few minutes after they took off. The P-61 was coming from the north-west and the 'Lily' was on a head-on course with a significant closure rate between the two aircraft.

'It was a hazy moonlit night and we got up to an altitude of about 7,500ft. Once I picked up the second Jap bomber, we started the procedure of running an interception where we were heading straight for the incoming intruder. First contact was made at 25,000ft and it closed rapidly down to 10,000, 5,000 and finally 1,000ft. Then at 500ft, Ab made a hard



above: Once the 426th Night Fighter Squadron settled into its main base in China, one of the first items on the agenda was to get its Officers Club open. This photo was taken at a party held in early 1945 that included most of the squadron's pilots and radar operators. (Lewis Ober)



right: The only commanding officer that the 426th NFS had from its activation until the war ended was Maj William C. Hellriegel, shown here in the cockpit of his P-61A Tommie. He flew a B-25 from India, 'over the Hump' into China; leading the first four P-61s to enter Chinese airspace. (Robert Brendel)

180-degree turn that brought us in behind the bogey at a range of 2,200ft. We immediately started making adjustments to synchronize our speed with that of the 'Lily'. Within a minute or so, we had a visual which quickly led to a positive identification that it was indeed a hostile.'

At that point, Capt Absmeier eased in behind the unsuspecting bomber and closed to 250ft. The Black Widows that the 426th was flying did not have the dorsal turret with its .50 caliber guns, but its four 20mm cannon in the belly were more than enough to take out anything the Japanese had. These large rounds were set up to fire two incendiary, two armor-piercing and two high explosive shells rapidly, in sequence. Most of the enemy aircraft that were shot down by Black Widows in the Pacific and CBI theaters never knew what hit them.

'The first burst sprayed all over the 'Lily' and fire erupted in seconds followed by explosions all over the aircraft. Pieces of

the bomber flew back and hit us followed by a shower of oil sprayed back on the front of our plane, completely blanking out any forward vision through the windscreen. Suddenly, there was a distorted orange glow visible through the coated plexiglas and one second later it disappeared downward. The doomed 'Lily' had arched over into a perpendicular dive. We were watching out of the side of the cockpit and at our now low altitude, we could see the landscape brightly lit up with detail on the ground clearly defined. Then everything was instantly dark again when the bomber hit the ground and extinguished itself in a spray of white hot material that exploded away from the point of impact in every direction.'

The night was far from over, for now this aircrew had to face another dilemma; they had no forward vision, their airfield had been hit by the first bomber and there was no way to determine what shape the runway was in because all communications

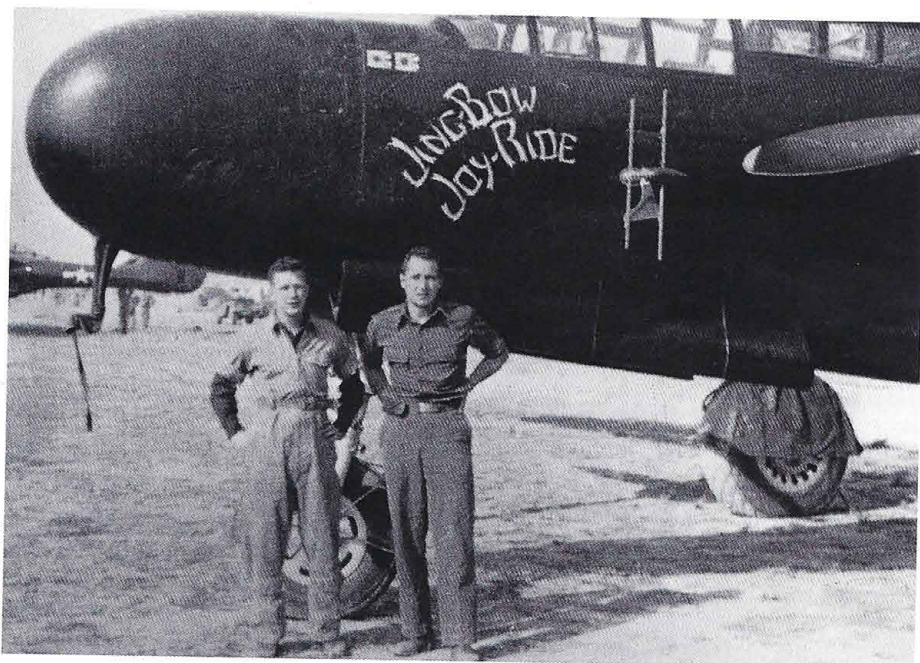
with the field were gone. The radio equipment on the ground had been abandoned by all of the Chinese who were manning it once the bombs started to hit and none of the American detachment knew how to run it. Also, Smith and Absmeier knew that another enemy bomber was probably inbound and not far off.

As they approached the field, they decided to come in slightly off center at about 100ft so they could see if the runway had been cratered. They figured if they could get on the ground, they could get the windscreen cleaned off in a couple of minutes and then get airborne again in time to catch the next inbound bomber. As they were making the pass for damage assessment, Lt Smith picked up another enemy bomber on his scope. It was at maximum range and was on a direct course to the base. They set up just like the first one with a head-on pass and at 500ft; they did a quick '180', moving in behind the unsuspecting intruder. Capt Absmeier set his speed to quickly close to within 250ft. That was when the difficulty began.

'This time there was no positive identification like before because of the oil on the windscreen. Using my radar, I was able to direct us within the distance it would take to establish a positive, but it was a no-go. We maneuvered off to the side and at that point, Ab was able to identify the aircraft as another 'Lily'. Now we had a real dilemma because our forward vision was blocked, which prevented us from lining up another sure kill. Trying a 'blind shot' seemed out because we were almost certain to miss, but our tracers would give us away and we didn't want to get into any



left: Ground crews celebrate the final assembly of a new Black Widow destined for combat in China. This was taken at the 426th Night Fighter Squadron's base at Madhaiganj, India, just before the squadron moved into China. (Lewis Ober)



left: Lt James R. Smith (radar operator) on the left and his pilot, Capt Carl J. Absmeier, a crew with the 426th NFS, pose by their P-61 *Jing-Bow Joy-Ride* soon after making their second 'Lily' kill. Their P-61 was named after the Chinese word for air raid, which was 'Jingbao'. This was taken in China in the spring of 1945. (Carl Absmeier)

below: Keeping the Black Widow's guns and radar working in the humid or bitterly cold weather was a time-consuming job for the armament personnel. In this picture, the 20mm guns are undergoing major maintenance at a forward base in China. (Frank Burlingham)

violent maneuvering and lose him. But, seconds later, the 'Lily' pilot made a sharp turn to line up for his bomb run and he saw us. He immediately did a wingover and dived away from us towards the ground. I kept him on radar as we dived behind him until he got lost in all the ground clutter. The only rewarding thought was that we had prevented him from carrying out his mission.'

The night was not yet over for Absmeier and Smith. They still had to land and clean off the windscreen and get airborne again as quickly as possible. They decided to make a very low pass (less than 100ft) and check the runway for holes. With flaps and wheels down and throttled back to about 100mph, they started their inspection pass. About 300ft down the strip, all hell broke loose. All of the Chinese anti-aircraft batteries opened up — it was like the Fourth of July fireworks. Fortunately for them, their very slow speed caused the Chinese gunners to aim far ahead of the P-61 and they didn't get hit a single time. They circled the field and flashed their landing lights, which let the guns on the ground know that they were friendly and trying to land.

'We tried putting our landing lights on, but the glare on our windscreen was blinding which would have caused us to lose our night vision. We landed without runway lights and landing lights, but with the moonlight available and Ab 'side-slipping' the aircraft, we made a perfect landing. We jumped out and got the windscreen wiped off. Then, we got back in the cockpit and took off again, figuring we only had a couple of minutes before the next Jap bomber showed up. Alas, there was no more activity that night, which meant that the 'Lily' that dived down and evaded us had warned the others of a night fighter airborne over the base. I guess the rest of them canceled their mission until another time.'

### Change of role

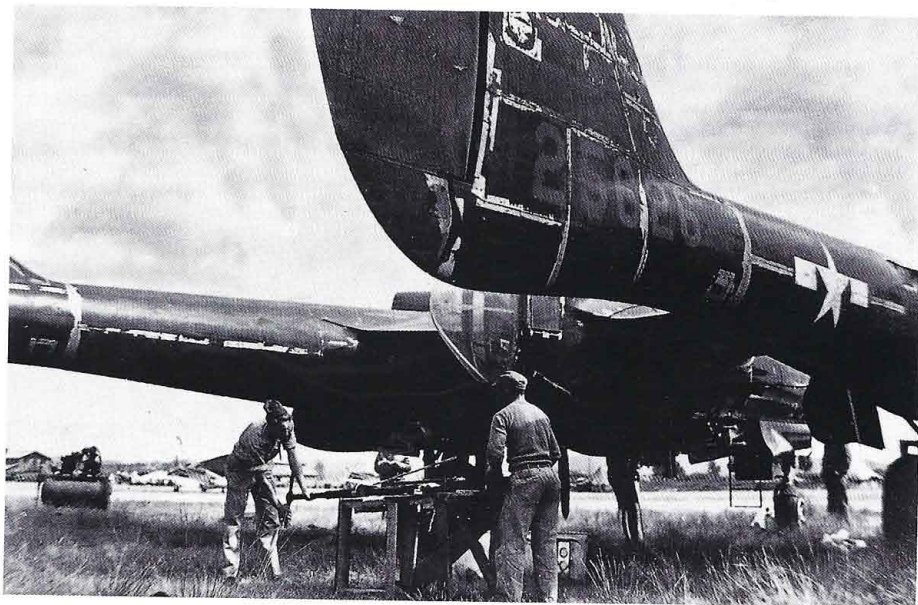
There were no aces in either P-61 night fighter squadron assigned to the CBI theater. The highest-scoring aircrew ended up being Capt Absmeier and Lt Smith with two kills. There were several 'probables' credited to the 426th, and the chances are that many of those aircraft never made it back to base. Once the number of enemy intruders dwindled to the point that there was very little to do, both Black Widow squadrons took on a new role and harassed Japanese movements effectively on the roads and rails every night.

Lt Glen Jackson, a pilot in the 426th Night Fighter Squadron, relates the routine when they were loaded with ordnance and the hunt was on for anything that moved. 'We were part of a detachment that went over to Ankang and we went after anything we found in a vast valley that was beyond the 10,000ft mountain range just east of the base. We would cross over and then start letting down as

the mountain tapered off. We were also very close to what were considered the 'front lines' and we worked well with forward ground controllers who would direct us onto selected targets. We adapted to this quickly because it was similar to what we had been doing against enemy aircraft, in that my radar observer was sitting behind me on the air-to-air missions and these ground guys were a few miles away.

'Usually a fire was built on the ground and it was used as an orientation point. The targets encountered most were bridges, truck convoys, trains and troop bivouac areas, which were located by the small charcoal fires. We had never seen the area in the daytime but it didn't take long to realize parts of the valley contained some fairly good-sized hills. We could not just get down to treetop level and hunt because of the sporadic elevations we encountered. Our favorite external load was a combination of napalm and cluster anti-personnel bombs. Of course, we also had our four 20mm cannon with 800 rounds of mostly high explosive head ammunition.'

The tactics used by these 426th NFS night intruders were the same as those employed six years later in the Korean War when B-26 Invaders were running the North Korean roads at night. When a truck convoy was sighted, they moved in and strafed the lead vehicle until it was disabled and blocking the passage of the rest. By the convoy having to travel with





above: **Two 426th NFS P-61s drop down into a valley, flying tight formation, during a rare daytime sortie. Many areas that they were required to patrol at night were mountainous.**

(Joseph Greenbaum)

below: **Two crew members of 'Satan 13' pose by their Black Widow. Note the 55-gallon drums in the background which contain aviation fuel. All of these were flown in by C-46s and C-47s coming in 'over the Hump' from India.** (George Bushaw)

lights out, when the lead truck stopped, there were usually several rear-end collisions which jammed up most of the column. At that point, the personnel manning the trucks usually bailed out and took refuge in a nearby ditch, which left the column vulnerable to multiple passes by the P-61s. The most effective weapon against trucks was the 500lb bomb, and the best against troop bivouac areas was napalm.

'Dropping down close to the ground in the valley was dangerous for several reasons', explains Lt Jackson. 'It was safer to find troop targets early in the mission because the napalm would light up the surrounding area, giving us better visibility. As stated before, this area had hills scattered all over and on a moonless night, they would not be visible. On several occasions, after dropping napalm and doing a fast '180', the flames from the napalm revealed jagged rocks close by and we could have easily hit them. Adding to the danger was the fact that the enemy troops could throw up mortar rounds with timed fuses as we passed overhead. It was a very eerie experience as the sky would light up with a bright flash, which then appeared to go back into the muzzle. We could sometimes feel the concussion of the shell burst!'

### Convoy hunting

During the latter months of the war, a large number of Japanese troops and aircraft had been moved back to Japan in anticipation of the Allied invasion, especially after the Allied capture of Okinawa. Dating back to early March 1945, both the 426th and 427th Night Fighter Squadrons had been forced to begin attacking targets on the ground because of the lack of enemy air activity during their patrols. Both squadrons proved to be very effective carrying rocket tubes, napalm and

500lb GP bombs. This combination, along with their four 20mm cannon, wiped out a lot of traffic on the roads, rails and rivers when the enemy felt relatively safe. 426th squadron records show that on some nights at least 60 trucks were destroyed. Rail lines which reflected the moon light proved to be a lucrative hunting ground and a number of locomotives were blown up by 20mm rounds penetrating their boilers.

The three main airfields used by the P-61s for these types of missions were Liangshan, Hsian and Ankang. A typical mission described and written up in the 426th squadron history involved a crew launching from Liangshan at 18.05hrs, which was relatively early. They had a long flight into the Siaokan and Shasi areas, which were known to be a beehive of enemy activity at night. They had to fly to the Yangtze River and then take up a heading of 80 degrees towards Siaokan. Numerous convoys were noticed, but they passed over them in order to save their ordnance for the target area. Once they arrived, the hunting was good. Five consecutive passes over a jammed road destroyed 19 trucks and damaged another 15.

The crew still had all of their 20mm rounds intact, so they continued on down the road, which was next to railroad tracks. Suddenly, three large single headlights from three locomotives appeared and each was about 200 yards apart. Dropping down to treetop level, the P-61 made a head-on pass, with all four 20mm guns firing, starting against the lead locomotive and going through to the last one. Luckily, they were able to get clear before a violent explosion encompassed the lead locomotive. Smaller ones followed on the

two that were trailing. They expended the rest of their ammo on smaller targets before heading back to Liangshan. They landed at 01.05hrs — it had been one of the longer missions.

### THE BAMBOO TELEGRAPH

At many of the forward airfields in China, the crudest of conditions prevailed. For some, there was a radio for air-to-ground communication, but there were no English-speaking operators. Usually, one of the squadron's personnel manned this station when one was available. The early warning system was referred to as the 'Bamboo Telegraph', for that is exactly what it was. Within a perimeter of about 100 miles around these airfields, there were Chinese watchers that could hear the sounds of enemy aircraft penetrating that perimeter at night. These rice paddy peasants would signal by rapping two sections of bamboo together. The sound on a still night would carry for miles until the next one of these watchers picked up on the alarm and passed it on. Usually, by the time the message got to the aircrew standing alert, there wasn't much time left to get airborne and make the intercept.

### War's end

As soon as the war ended, all of the 426th Night Fighter Squadron's detachments were pulled by to Kunming (by mid-September 1945). From there, all personnel were loaded onto transports for the flight back 'over the Hump' into India. They returned to the USA and the squadron was officially disbanded. The other squadron in theater (the 427th) also returned home quickly and met the same fate.

While the 427th had concentrated on enemy forces in Burma, both units had enjoyed the distinction of covering the largest land area of any US Army Air Force night fighter squadron in WW2. □

