



# REBUILDING HAVOC

Matt Nightingale and Garren Swager with the two Havoc fuselages at Chino.

**RECONSTRUCTION OF ONE OF AMERICA'S MOST SIGNIFICANT WWII COMBAT AIRCRAFT HAS BEGUN  
BY MICHAEL O'LEARY**

The date was 22 April 1944, and American troops hunkered low inside the hulls of their landing craft as the ungainly vessels sloshed their way towards Blue Beach, hoping that the thin metal construction would afford a modicum of protection against gunfire from the Japanese troops ashore. As part of Operation *Reckless*, the men of the US Army's 163rd Infantry Regiment, 41st Infantry Division ("The Jungleers"), had been tasked with taking the beach on the island of Tadjil in New Guinea and then advancing to the two runways that constituted what was known as the

Tadjil Dromes, site of the enemy's aerial activities.

Prior to the Japanese occupation, a small grass airfield at that location was utilized for civil operations. After the Japanese took the area, the airfield was expanded into two parallel runways that would be surfaced with coral dredged and removed from the beach areas and then crushed to form the basis of the runways. Bombers were placed on the south strip, fighters on the north. In action against the Allies, the two strips were used as satellite fields for Wewak and Hollandia by aircraft of the Japanese Army Air Force.

After the initial landings, the Americans pressed forward to their objective while under the cover of strong aerial support. By the next day, troops were now at the bomber strip while men and equipment of the 5th Mobile Works Squadron, Royal Australian Air Force, moved onto the fighter strip and began repairing the runway, which had been savaged by Allied air attacks. The Nakajima Ki 43-II Oscars of the 248th *Hiko Sentai* had been using the field but they had been pretty well destroyed by the time of the landings and surviving aircraft had flown to other bases.



Another view of 43-21627. The Airacobra in the foreground would be restored to flying condition as *Brooklyn Bum*. (D. Tallichet)



Fire trucks surround the crash-landed Havoc.



This rather amazing photo shows the abandoned aircraft at Tadjil with Havoc 43-21627 at the rear. (D. Tallichet)

As soon as the fighter runway was declared operational, two Lockheed P-38J Lightnings roared overhead and entered the downwind to land. One was flown by Brig. Gen. Paul B. Wurtsmith, commanding officer of 5th Fighter Command, while the other was piloted by Col. Robert L. Morrissey, CO of the 49th Fighter Group. They were soon followed by Curtiss P-40N Kittyhawks from 76 Squadron, RAAF. Aerial operations against the enemy began the same day.

American and Allied air forces were constantly moving towards the Home Islands of Japan — "one damned island after another" — and into this fight came the Douglas A-20 Havocs of the 312th Bomb Group. This unit consisted of the 386th, 387th 388th, and 389th Bomb Squadrons (Light). Overlooked today, the rugged Havocs flew daily missions against the enemy — attacking ships, airfields, ports, and cargo depots. They would often

fight against the Zeros and Oscars sent up to intercept them. It was not an easy war and losses were high from factors that included Japanese fighters, anti-aircraft fire, and weather that could change from clear skies to thunderstorms in the matter of moments.

Douglas A-20G-40-DO Havoc USAAF 43-21627 had, after acceptance by the USAAF, been disassembled and then taken by ship to Australia where it was unloaded, assembled, and flight-tested by the 4th Air Depot at Garbutt Field in Townsville. This was a major base for the USAAF and RAAF and when the threat of Japanese invasion of Australia was very real, it was a combat field for strikes against advancing enemy targets. As possibility of invasion eased, the field became a focal point for combat aircraft being ferried north to New Guinea. Along with being used for practice combat training missions, Garbutt also became a

very major air depot for the assembly and repair of Allied aircraft.

After USAAF 43-21627 was flight-tested during June 1944, the Havoc was assigned to the 387th Bomb Squadron (Light) and flown via Cairns Airfield to 7 Mile Drome near Port Moresby. The Havoc was serviced and then flown across New Guinea to Nadzab Airfield where it joined the other Havocs of the 387th. The aircraft immediately went into action — flying low-level strikes against the enemy. However, danger came from other sources besides the Japanese. On 4 July 1944, the 387th was operating out of Nadzab Airfield and aircraft were being readied for the next mission. A-20G 43-9391 was having its bomb bay fitted with four 500-lb high explosive bombs and that is when something went very wrong.

A later investigation pointed to the aircraft's battery sparking and starting a bomb bay fire. The maintenance crew



Some of the original paint still visible on the Tadjil Havoc.



Battle damage and original markings on the Tadjil aircraft along with the mysterious black circle that was on a number of the unit's Havocs.