

## Air and Space this Week

### Item of the Week

# DOGFIGHTS OF NOTE: CBI VERSION

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**KEY WORDS:** Dogfight CBI Burma Flying Tiger Melton Hinoki R.T.

*World War II is replete with many epic aerial dogfights. All air forces involved had at least some excellent pilots, the outcomes depended in large part on equipment and, frankly, a bit of luck. One excellent example is the contest between "Pug" Southerland and Saburo Sakai, who clashed over Guadalcanal on August 7, 1942. Other PTO examples abound, because the Japanese Navy had a tradition of severe training to excellence of much-too-few pilots, like Sakai. The unanticipated rate of attrition, and the growing superiority of American planes, doomed them. Very few Japanese pilots survived lengthy combat tours and the Kamikaze Corps.*

*The Japanese Army did not coordinate their effort well with their naval counterparts, nor did they share equipment, including aircraft. We don't hear very much about their combat exploits, especially those who fought in secondary areas of action, such as the China-Burma-India (CBI) Theater. So I thought I'd tell the tale of a group of them.*

*Thanksgiving isn't Memorial Day, but please take a moment this Thursday to think thankful thoughts about the many families whose Service Person is away on duty, or gone forever in the service of us all.*

## THE PLAYERS

### ROBERT THARP "R.T." SMITH

R.T. Smith was born in York, Nebraska, on February 23, 1918. He did well enough in high school to get to the University of Nebraska. Rather than complete his degree, he decided to enlist in the Army Air Corps in the middle of his senior year. Primary flight training in mid-1939 was at Santa Maria, CA, basic flight training followed at Randolph Field, TX, and advanced training was at Brooks Field, TX. He was then commissioned as a 2Lt and assigned back to Randolph as an instructor. Somewhere along the way, he acquired the nickname, "Tadpole."

War clouds were on the horizon, and the same drive that motivated R.T. to chuck college and fly AAC caused him to resign his commission in order to fly as a civilian with the American Volunteer Group (AVG), which would soon become known as the "Flying Tigers." He was assigned to the Third Pursuit Squadron, the "Hell's Angels," and his performance quickly brought him more responsibility. He was credited with 8.7 victories as a Tiger (8.7 is right,

Victories meant bounty money, since the AVG was not an official military, so pilots wanted every fractional claim they could get). He was decorated by the Chinese Government twice.

He returned to the U.S., and since he was a private citizen, the Army draft soon made him a private private, at the end of 1942. Because of his combat record and the need for experienced pilots, he was quickly re-commissioned as a 2Lt. His successful air combat leadership record caused the AAC to promote him to Major a month later, giving him the rank necessary to command larger fighter groups. After the promotion, he was named CO of the 337 Fighter Squadron, a unit equipped with an early version of the P-38, and the 338<sup>th</sup> was used as a training unit.

MAJ Smith was again driven to duty, and volunteered to serve in the China-Burma-India (CBI) Theater, to command the B-25 bomber squadron of the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Commando Group. Successes there led to his promotion to Lieutenant Colonel in March, 1944. In total, he flew 55 combat missions over Burma, and was awarded a DFC and a Silver Star. He rotated back to the ZI in late spring 1944 and became the Director of Flight Training with the 441<sup>st</sup> Army Air Base Unit in Van Nuys, CA, where quality new P-38 pilots were produced in abundance.

After the War, he flew for TWA, wrote for the [Hopalong Cassidy Western Adventure Show](#), wrote for [Lum and Abner](#), wrote for the [Clyde Beatty Show](#), was co-owner of a toy manufacturing company, held numerous positions at Lockheed, and was VP for the [Flying Tiger Line](#) (a commercial air cargo company founded by AVG veterans). He also wrote a book about his time in the AVG, *Tale of a Tiger*, and also several articles for *Air Classics Magazine*.

## **2LT ROBERT FRANK MULHOLLEM**

I couldn't find out much about Mulhollem's early years, other than his home town was listed as Chicago. He was born on October 10, 1920 and passed away in August, 1982. He was a member of the Tenth Air Force's 311<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group's 530<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron, flying a P-51 Mustang. On November 27, 1944, he was involved in serious fighting, downing one Oscar and damaging two others, for which he earned an Air Medal. He would become an Ace on May 12.

## **COL HARRY RIPLEY "RIP" MELTON JR.**

Harry Melton was born in 1911 in Ballard County, Kentucky, a place surrounded by the Ohio, Tennessee, and Mississippi Rivers. His father, a senior officer in the Army Medical Corps, was married to Ann Rothroth in July, 1909; they had a son, Harry Ripley Melton, Jr., in 1911. Harry graduated from West Point in 1936. He initially was with the cavalry, but soon opted for the AAC and flight training. He married Lavonia Smith soon thereafter, had a daughter, got divorced, got custody, got married again (to Natalie Jean Wilson), all by June, 1941.

By November, 1942, now-COL Melton was the CO of the 311<sup>th</sup> Fighter-Bomber Group, where he flew the A-36 Apache, then the early P-51A Mustang. He took this unit to India via Australia in July, 1943, from where they would conduct operations in the CBI Theater. His pilots all regarded him with fond respect.

COL Melton's fighters escorted the Group's B-25 bombers on missions against a variety of targets in Burma. On November 25, the 311<sup>th</sup> made two attacks, losing one plane and downing two in the first. COL Melton led the second attack personally.

### **MAJ YOHEI HINOKI**

Hinoki was born in 1919, received his flight commission in June, 1941, after which he joined the elite Japanese Army's 64<sup>th</sup> Sentai. His flying skill attracted the attention of CAPT Iwori Sakai, who had scored nine victories early in the War. Sakai gave young Hinoki a number of valuable pointers about aerial combat, along with a custom-made flight helmet Hinoki would use for the duration.

The 64<sup>th</sup> Sentai's first combat of note came on December 8, 1941, when they supported an attack on the British and Commonwealth forces over Malaya, which led to the rapid capture of Singapore. The Sentai commander, MAJ Tateo Kato, must have been impressed by Hinoki's piloting, too, because he soon claimed him as his wingman. The Sentai's next attack was against Kuala Lumpur on December 22, 1941, where the group claimed eleven Brewster Buffaloes, a fighter totally outclassed by the Sentai's Ki-43 Hyabusa fighters, Allied codename: Oscar. Young Hinoki claimed two of the Buffaloes himself.

The Japanese tendency to create fighters capable of outflying opposing fighters was carried to the extreme. The Navy did so with the Zero, the Army did even more so with the Oscar. Weight was kept to an absolute minimum by the Oscar having only two light machine guns, no pilot armor, no self-sealing fuel tanks, and a lightweight airframe. It was the only fighter in WWII that, in the hands of a capable pilot, could perform a double-Immelmann Turn (to the later horror of [Al Stewart](#)) from level flight (a pull up into a half-loop, followed by a half-roll upright, immediately followed by a second half-loop, resulting in the aircraft flying level in the same direction, but much higher, than it was at the start of the maneuver.

### **ACT ONE: HINOKI MEETS THE FLYING TIGERS**

The 64<sup>th</sup> Sentai was sent to attack an AVG airfield at Loiwing, China, just across the border with Burma, on April 10, 1942. The first attack came early that morning did little damage, but no aircraft were lost.

On the second attack, The Tigers were alert and waiting for them, and LT Hinoki met R.T. Smith of the AVG's Third Squadron. LT Hinoki espied four AVG P-40s coming at him and moved to attack. Two of the P-40s dove away toward the cloud deck below, with Hinoki in hot pursuit, trading fire with R.T. along the way. As he popped out of the cloud deck, Hinoki saw a P-40 below him and started an attack run. Just as he opened fire, twenty-one .50 caliber bullets smashed into his aircraft. Hinoki and his Oscar were badly damaged. He was hit by three bullets, one each in his right arm and back, and a third that was prevented from penetrating his heart by his parachute harness. His instruments were shattered, and he had a serious fuel leak, but his engine and flight controls were still sound. It took two hours for LT Hinoki to make base in Thailand, gliding the final approach out of fuel. R.T. claimed one victory and one "probable" (Hinoki) in this combat.

LT Hinoki would be out of action for almost a year. Surgeons removed one slug from his arm, which he kept as a souvenir amulet for the duration, but the one in his lower back stayed in place for the rest of his life. During his recovery, he was an instructor at the Akeno Army Fighter School until he could return to his old unit in Burma, in March, 1943.

### **ACT TWO: LT HINOKI MEETS RIP MELTON**

LT Hinoki got to Burma the same time the Americans replaced their P-40s with the vastly more-capable P-51A Mustang. CAPT Melton's 311<sup>th</sup> Group was tasked with bombing a Japanese Air Base in Mingaladon, Burma, on November 25, 1943, as mentioned above. COL Melton led a squadron of P-51s escorting a dozen B-25s. The cloud ceiling was at 7000 feet, and the Mitchells came in just below it to drop their bombs, damaging two aircraft on the ground. Twelve Oscars of the 64<sup>th</sup> Sentai, and five twin-engined "Nick" fighters ([Ki-45s](#)) opposed the bombers. Escort fighters disposed of one of the Nicks.

LT Hinoki was scrambled with three others from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron of the Sentai. Hinoki's radio did not work, but he looked around for attacking planes nonetheless. He saw a formation at a higher altitude that resembled a flight of Nicks, so he led his three on a climb to rendezvous. But the planes weren't Nicks, they were Mustangs, led by CAPT Melton, who fired a burst at the just-now-realizing-trouble Hinoki.

Then Rip made a big mistake.

A common maneuver to get back in position for fighting (or to evade trouble) was called the "Split-S." It's really a simple one: the pilot does a half-roll to be upside-down and then pulls back hard on the stick to do a half-loop downward. The only problem is, if your pursuer is above you, turning over before turning down exposes your plane's belly to return fire. And Hinoki did, indeed, return fire, badly damaging the cooling system of Melton's engine.

Melton's wingman almost shot down Hinoki, but Hinoki's wingman intervened and chased the American for over 100 miles before shooting him down.

The Japanese were impressed by the performance of the Mustang, which they had not seen before. They claimed several shot down that day, but only CAPT Melton's did not return to base.

### **ACT THREE: LT HINOKI MEETS 2LT ROBERT MULHOLLUM**

The Allies soon laid on another bombing attack, this time on the railroad marshalling yards and machine shops at Insein (a place with a very notorious prison long after WWII). 311 Group B-24s would carry the bombs, and 311 Group Mustangs, along with P-38s from the 459<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron would provide defensive escort. LT Hinoki managed to get his flight behind a group of five B-25s escorted by four Mustangs. They closed from the rear unseen, and claimed one of the Mustangs. In the melee that followed, Hinoki claimed a P-38 out of a group of two, downing either CAPT Armin J. Ortmeyer or 2LT Jay R. Harlan. The bombing formation was broken up, and turned toward home. LT Hinoki claimed two of the stragglers, piloted by LT R.W. Meredith and 2LT N.J. Kellam, with the loss of both crews. He would be credited with one

victory and two “probables.” Actual U.S. losses that day were two P-38s, four P-51s, and three B-25s.

The B-25s had been flooding the airwaves for fighter support for several minutes. Several Mustangs responded. 2LT Mulhollum charged Hinoki’s plane from below, plastered Hinoki’s plane with hits then came around for another pass, but Hinoki’s plane was obviously out of the fight, so Mulhollum sought more threatening targets.

LT Hinoki was in a bad way. His plane was badly hit, and much worse, he was badly hit, too. A .50-caliber bullet had made a mess of his right leg. Fortunately for him, his base was nearby, enabling Hinoki to put on a makeshift tourniquet and survive. He would lose his leg below the knee and he would be hospitalized for months.

Japan’s need for pilots only grew as the end of 1944 approached. Hinoki was too valuable not to press back into active service as soon as possible, which he did, by this time with the rank of Major. He was posted to the Akeno Fighter School (the Japan Army’s version of “Top Gun”) as an instructor. These were the best pilots remaining in all of Japan’s Army. They were graduated *en masse*, forming the 111<sup>th</sup> Sentai, and were given the best airplanes the Army had at that point ([Nakajima Ki-84](#), code-named “Frank,” and the [Kawasaki Ki-100](#) Goshikisens). The latter was basically the older “Tony” airframe modified to accommodate the 14-cylinder Mitsubishi Ha-112-II radial engine, a big improvement. MAJ Hinoki commanded a twelve-plane squadron of them.

The USAAF Seventh Fighter Command was based on newly-captured Iwo Jima. The Seventh had two fighter groups, the 21<sup>st</sup> and the 506<sup>th</sup>, tasked with flying long-range support missions for B-29s heading to Japan from the Marianas. On July 16, 1945, fighters were assigned to strike airfields in the Nagoya area, in order to attrit the fighters capable of attacking the B-29s. Forty-eight Mustangs from the 506<sup>th</sup> drew the duty that day. The Japanese spotting network provided enough of a warning for two squadrons of defending fighters to get aloft. The leader of the fourth flight in Hinoki’s squadron saw a formation of eleven Mustangs, and dove his flight to intercept. Hinoki and company followed to provide cover, then Hinoki took on a Mustang lagging behind the others, piloted by CAPT John Benbow, who had just shot down one of the Japanese fighters. Benbow was shot down in turn by Hinoki, which attracted other Mustangs to the fray. Now Hinoki was in trouble, but his excellent piloting and the Ki-100s powerful engine saved his bacon.

The Japanese claimed six Mustangs downed with five probables. In actuality, only Benbow’s Mustang was shot down and only four others were damaged, but made base. The Seventh Fighter Command claimed that 25 Japanese fighters were shot down, two were probables, and another 18 were damaged. In actuality, the Japanese lost five planes and three pilots.

Less than a month later, the War in the Pacific was over.

#### **ACT FOUR: CAP MELTON IN PERIL**

The last we saw of CAPT Melton, at the end of Act Two, was that he was in a damaged airplane trying to make it home. He was being escorted out of the combat area by CAPT Sidney M.

Newcomb. At first, Melton's Mustang could manage high speed, but soon his speed dropped off and his engine began trailing smoke, a sure sign that his oil was nearly depleted and his engine would soon seize. Melton kept slowing and descending and, at 1000' above the jungle, he hit the silk. CAPT Newcomb saw the parachute open and Melton make a good landing in the jungle.

CAPT Melton was quickly captured by the Japanese. LT Hinoki was informed that the pilot he had shot down was a senior commander, and he was given the opportunity to meet his victim, but declined.

CAPT Melton and another downed pilot were jailed. The other pilot had been burned and injured, and was soon shipped out to Rangoon. Melton followed soon thereafter, where he spent a month of very cruel interrogation, then he was sent to a POW camp in Singapore, where there were a lot of British and Australians captured early in the War.

The Japanese wanted to bring POWs to Japan's main islands. CAPT Melton and 2,200 other POWs were loaded aboard the cargo ship, *Rakuyo Maru*, which sailed in convoy on September 6. The conditions aboard were Hell-on-Earth, and *Rakuyo* wasn't the only Hell ship in the convoy. Six days later, near Hainan Island, *Rakuyo Maru* met with a submarine wolfpack, comprising the *USS Sealion II*, the *USS Growler*, and the *USS Pampanito* (now on display at San Francisco). All three attacked, with torpedoes from *Growler* sinking the destroyer *Shikinami*. The wolfpack was able to catch up with the convey a while later, hitting the *Zuiho Maru* and the Hell Ship *Kachidoki Maru*, disabling both. Then *Sealion* got the *Rakuyo Maru* in its sights, fired two torpedoes, and observed both of them hit.

During the short voyage, CAPT Melton had met a British officer and they struck up as much of a friendship as one could have under such trying circumstances. CAPT Melton wrote a love letter to his wife, and, perhaps with a premonition, and gave it to the Brit, to give to her if he could. The Brit hid it in his shoe, and kept it there for the duration.

The *Rakuyo Maru* was sinking and crew and cargo were abandoning ship. Many POWs died in the explosions or otherwise didn't get off the ship. Of those that did, the Japanese segregated them onto 11 lifeboats; only the British officer was kept with the Japanese. What happened next is difficult to ascertain; the existing accounts vary considerably. At least some of the escort destroyers attacked some of the POW lifeboats and machine-gunned the POWs in them. Alas, CAPT Melton was one of them.

The subs didn't know right away that POWs had been on the ships they'd been hitting. When Naval Intelligence found out on September 15, the immediately ordered *Sealion* to return to the site of the sinkings three days before. *Sealion* rescued 54 POWs, four of which would die before the sub could get them to safety.

[On its next patrol, the *USS Sealion* would become the only U.S. sub to sink a battleship. In the wee hours of November 21, 1944, the *Sealion* caught major fleet movement, with super-battleship *Yamato*, battleships *Nagato* and *Kongō*, and six escorts. *Sealion* was in a prime position and launched a full salvo of six torpedoes at *Kongō*, then turned and fired an additional

three at *Nagato*. Three torpedoes hit *Kongō*, and their explosions alerted *Nagato*, which turned out of the way just in time. However, one of the “misses” hit the escorting destroyer *Urakaze*, detonating its main magazine and blowing it out of the water. *Kongō* continued on without much outward appearance of damage, escorted by destroyers *Isokaze* and *Hamakaze*, with *Sealion* in hot pursuit. A half-hour after getting hit, *Kongō* suddenly erupted in a large explosion and sank. A battleship and a destroyer with one salvo, quite an accomplishment!]

## DENOUEMENT

The British officer survived the War. He would report the circumstances of CAPT Melton to the U.S. War Department and write to Melton’s widow, Natalie, giving her all the details along with the love letter entrusted to him by her husband.

MAJ Hinoki ended the War with twelve victories. In October, 1980, he learned the fate of CAPT Melton, to his great sorrow. He would also write a letter to Natalie Melton, explaining that his bullets had hit the plane, but not her husband. He also said, “I heard your husband died *en route* to Japan – it was so regrettable.”

Hinoki became a successful businessman after the War, and wrote a best-selling book about his experiences. He was known as the “Master Falcon.” He also found time to come to the U.S., where he met R.T. Smith, his early adversary. Hinoki showed Smith his special aviator’s helmet originally given to him by Iwori Sakai; he had worn it on the day R.T. wounded him.

MAJ Yohei Hinoki passed away on January 29, 1991. R.T. died on August 21, 1995.

## A FINAL TWIST OR TWO

After CAPT Melton was shot down, Charles Chandler took command of the 311<sup>th</sup> Group.

Hinoki’s son ran a popular restaurant in Irvine, California for years. Chandler’s son, a police lieutenant who lived nearby, dined there often without knowing the connection.

Even odder, Robert Mulhollem had become an airline pilot after the War and was living in retirement very near that same restaurant.

Go Figure!

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*USS Sealion*: [https://military-history.fandom.com/wiki/USS\\_Sealion\\_\(SS-315\)](https://military-history.fandom.com/wiki/USS_Sealion_(SS-315))

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