

Air and Space this Week

Item of the Week

MAJOR THOMAS BUCHANAN MCGUIRE

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The most recent past Item of the Week spotlighted Richard Bong, America's highest-scoring Ace in WWII. This week, it's only appropriate to focus on the second-highest scorer, Tommy McGuire. Dick Bong survived the War only to die in test flight on VJ-Day. McGuire didn't make it to the end, probably felled by a matter of aeronautics. This is his story.

PRE-WAR LIFE

Thomas Buchanan McGuire Jr. was born on August 1, 1920, in Ridgewood, New Jersey. His parents divorced early on, and young Tommy and his mother, Polly, moved to Sebring, Florida. He graduated from Sebring High School, class of 1938. Like many his age, he was fascinated by aviation, and enrolled at Georgia Tech. After three years, looming war clouds called him, and he left the Rambling Wrecks and joined the USAAC's Aviation Cadet Program, like Bong did, on July 12, 1941. After basic flight training in several locations in Texas, he earned his wings at Randolph Field in February, 1942, and was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant. His initial assignment was with the 313th Pursuit Squadron in Michigan; in May, he was transferred to the 56th Pursuit in Texas.

His first combat assignment was to help keep Alaska safe for Democracy, flying P-39s with the 54th Fighter Group. McGuire would return to the U.S. in December, 1942, and soon marry Marilyn Geisler, whom he called "Pudgy." [Good pilot, not-so-good romanticist!] He began training on the new Lockheed P-38 Lightning the following February, in southern California.

WARTIME

2Lt McGuire Southwest Pacific was assigned to the 9th FS in the 49th Fighter Group, located in New Guinea. The P-38s showed a lot of promise, as did McGuire, so LtGen George Kenney formed an all-P-38 unit, the 475th Fighter Group. McGuire was in the 431st FS, flying bomber escort missions, in a P-38 with "Pudgy" proudly emblazoned on his plane. He quickly justified Kenney's faith in him. On August 18, 1943, shot down two early-model Ki-43 Oscars and a Ki-61 Tony. Two more Oscars fell to his guns the following day. An Ace in two days! He was promoted to First Lieutenant the following month.

His promising combat career was almost cut short on October 17, 1943. By that time, his squadron was based at a place called Dobodura, in New Guinea, still providing bomber escort, but also base support. Dobodura was a new facility, and the Japanese wanted it neutralized. McGuire and company were sent out to interdict an incoming bombing raid, and met the Japanese over Oro Bay.

1Lt McGuire saw a P-38 in distress, trailing smoke and beset by seven or more Zeros. Showing a strong trait of protection of his buddies, McGuire charged into action. In no time three Zeros were flaming their way oceanward. However, the Japanese defended their own, too, and the remaining four or more shot up McGuire's P-38. Fatally crippled, his mount followed his three victims downward. McGuire went to hit the silk, but his harness snagged on the cockpit, preventing him from deplaning as it fell from 15,000 feet. He finally got free a mile above the sea, opening his chute with only 1,000 feet to spare. He was pretty banged up, with a bullet through his wrist and several broken ribs from his difficult exit from his dying plane. He was rescued by a PT boat, and spent the next six weeks in the hospital before he could return to combat. His actions this day were recognized by a Silver Star, and of course, a Purple Heart. He was promoted to Captain and became the 431st FS Operations Officer.

Captain McGuire became the Commanding Officer of the 431st in May, 1944. He literally wrote the book on *Combat Tactics in the SouthWest Pacific Area*, distributed across the Fifth Air Force on May 4, 1944. He promoted to Major on May 18, and his victory score had been increasing steadily as he applied the tenets of his combat guidance. He had three iron-clad rules for flying combat in the P-38, especially on longer combat missions: Never dogfight down low; Never dogfight at low speed; and never, never dogfight with supplemental fuel tanks were still attached to one's aircraft.

As Major McGuire's score climbed, Bong's did, too, and they were engaged in a competition as heated as combat with the Zeros. Both men wanted to be the Ace of Aces! Shades of the [competition](#) between John Smith and Marion Carl!

Bong reached 40 victories, on December 17, 1944, well ahead of McGuire, and was ordered out of combat, to go home to a well-deserved hero's welcome (and a number of war bond drive events). At the time, McGuire's count was 31, and in early December, he became the Operations Officer for the entire 475th Fighter Group, and could assign himself combat missions without constraint.

General Kenney didn't want Bong's return home eclipsed by McGuire, so he "suggested" that McGuire not fly combat for a while, but he did not forbid it, although he did forbid any strafing attacks as being too dangerous for a senior high-scoring pilot to risk. Bong made it home at Christmas time, and McGuire began flying combat again with a will. He downed seven Japanese planes over the course of Christmas Day and the day following, raising his score to 38. He was supremely confident in his abilities, and extremely confident in the performance of his aircraft. McGuire had always insisted on having the top mechanics work on his Group's aircraft, and woe to the Crew Chief who did not deliver.

Bong, McGuire, and some other pilots knew they had a big advantage over their Japanese counterparts, both in terms of piloting experience and capable aircraft. But the Japanese were being pressed hard by American advances in the Philippines and elsewhere, and they were really fighting hard to hold the Americans at bay, even using kamikaze tactics. While the Zero had changed little over the course of the War, the Japanese were able to make a few better aircraft and get them into the field, including a souped-up version of the Ki-43 Oscar and the new Army fighter, the Ki-84 Hayate, codenamed "Frank." They weren't quite as good as the Lightnings, Corsairs, and Hellcats they were up against, but in the hands of capable pilots, they were much more of a fair match, especially if the Americans fought on less-favorable circumstances.

A few of the top pilots were fighting very hard to be the Top Gun. Bong had set the mark high, but McGuire was treating combat as a hunting trip, assembling a trio of comrades whose entire purpose was to back him as he did the shooting down. One of his flight members was 2Lt Douglas S. Thropp Jr. He had a single victory (although he claimed five), scored on the third anniversary of Pearl Harbor, when he shot down a Zero over the Celebes Strait, a victory witnessed and confirmed by McGuire.

The 475th was moved to the Philippines to be closer to the action. Young Thropp recalls being in his tent and hearing McGuire talking nearby about "going hunting" the next day, January 7, 1945. He went over to the next tent and found McGuire and a half-dozen other pilots talking. McGuire recognized Thropp, reminded him of how he had confirmed Thropp's victory the month previous, and asked him if he'd like to go hunting with him and two of the others present. The response was an immediate, "Hell, yes!" So Thropp, along with Major Jack B. Rittmayer (on loan from the 13th Air Force) and Captain Edwin R. Weaver, would go a-hunting with Major McGuire on the morrow, a so-called "Daddy Flight." It would be McGuire's 54th combat mission, adding to his total of over 130 combat hours. Major McGuire would, of course, fly lead, with Major Rittmayer on his wing. Captain Weaver was the element leader, with 2Lt Tropp on his wing. They were going to sweep over Mindoro Island and then patrol over the Japanese-held Fabrica Airfield on Negros, looking for victims.

McGuire had named every aircraft assigned to him after his wife, "Pudgy." His latest mount was *Pudgy V*, but he would not be flying it on January 7, for reasons I was not able to discover. Instead, he was flying a spare P-38 named "EILEEN-ANNE," the wife and mother of the pilot first assigned to it, Captain Fred Champlin.

The primary/sole purpose of the sweep was to provide opportunities for McGuire to pass Bong. The other three were there to watch his back and to provide confirmation of the victories. His crew chief had already blocked out the outlines of an additional four Japanese flags on *Pudgy V*, awaiting notification of the surely-coming victories.

Cue ominous music. Meanwhile, meet the opposition.

The Japanese forces were spread very thinly over the Philippines in the aftermath of the invasion of Leyte. But there were still a few good pilots and even fewer good planes available for the defense. One was Warrant Officer Akira Sugimoto of the 54th Sentai, flying a Ki-43

Oscar, upgraded version, out of Fabrica. Another was Sergeant Mizunori Fukuda of the 71st Hiko Sentai, flying out of nearby Manapla Airfield (aka "Carolina), also on Negros. Their job was to scout for American ships supporting the Negros/Leyte ground forces.

JANUARY 7, 1945

Off they went. McGuire had been one of the hosts of Charles Lindbergh, who had come out to the Pacific as a civilian to teach P-38 pilots how to get the most range out of their aircraft; McGuire was using Lindy's advice that day to get the most out of the two large auxiliary fuel tanks, one under each wing, to allow for a long hunting trip. Their Lightnings carried a full load of ammunition, too, for their four .50-caliber machine guns and 20 mm cannon in front of their cockpits.

January 7 was a cloudy day over Negros, with a ceiling of about 2,000 feet. The Daddy Flight had been cruising at 10,000 feet initially, seeing no activity above the clouds shrouding the Fabrica area; then McGuire opted to go lower in search of enemy aircraft. The second element lost sight of McGuire and Rittmayer in the clouds, and slowed a bit for safety.

Sgt Fukuda was having trouble with the clouds, too. He couldn't perform his mission above the clouds, so he descended through them to approach Manapla to await better patrolling weather. He popped out of the clouds and sighted WO Sugimoto below. He swooped down, waved at his comrade, then they split to return to their prospective fields, Fukuda to Manapla and Sugimoto to Fabrica.

Just after the two parted, the Daddy Flight entered the clear air below the cloud ceiling. McGuire could see Weaver and Thropp lagging behind, and thinking Weaver might be having some sort of engine trouble, radioed Thropp to take the element lead and close up.

They could see 15 parked fighters on the field, but none aloft, at least at first. McGuire kept the flight at 175 MPH, far less than optimum combat speed, in order to conserve fuel. Now they were low and slow for air combat, violating two of McGuire's cardinal rules.

Thropp and Rittmayer had almost caught up with McGuire and Weaver when Weaver radioed, "Bogie at 12 o'clock low." Thropp saw it, but wasn't sure he should make an attack on it, because, in his words, "If you stole a kill away from McGuire you were in big trouble." McGuire and Weaver passed over the bogie and went into a left turn. Sugimoto knew he couldn't outrun P-38s, especially when they had an altitude advantage, so he did the only thing he could: pull up into a vertical climb and attack. McGuire and Weaver were not in a good position for him to hit, so he focused on Thropp, turning tightly to try to hit him from close range. Thropp turned his P-38 sharply, nearly stalling, and reached to release his heavy wing tanks. At that moment McGuire radioed, "Hold your tanks!" to the team. The tanks, slung under each wing, were almost full of fuel and very heavy, adversely affecting their P-38's speed and maneuverability, but allowing for a long hunt after the single bogie was eliminated.

Now all three cardinal rules were violated!

Recall from a [recent Item of the Week](#) that the regular Oscar was the only WWII fighter that could pull a Double Immelmann from level flight. So it's no surprise that its improved version could climb at its erstwhile attackers with surprising speed.

Thropp radioed a warning that he was under attack. A short burst of fire winged Thropp's aircraft. Sugimoto continued a vertical climb as the American flight started to circle to trap him. Sugimoto then executed the rest of a "Whifferdill" maneuver across the circle (see reference, a vertical climb with a sharp-wingover at the top into a vertical dive with a pull out at the bottom). He dove on Weaver, who called out to McGuire that the bogie was attacking him.

Thropp pulled a whifferdill himself, then turned to attack Sugimoto. Thropp saw that the bogie had enough lead and was in close to McGuire and Weaver to hit them, but did not actually see Sugimoto fire. Sugimoto then broke off and climbed quickly into the cloud cover. Thropp then turned back himself, seeing a large fire on the ground in the process. He noticed that his left engine was producing less power than expected, and then he was beset by a bogie nearby firing at him. He jinked left and right, barely evading fire as he made for the safety of the clouds.

Thropp's new assailant was Sgt Fukuda, seeing the commotion from afar and making his way into the fray. It would be decades before Americans knew the fact that there were two Japanese planes involved with McGuire's team that day. He and Thropp exchanged fire, but it wasn't enough to stop Fukuda from blasting Major Rittmayer out of the sky in his first pass.

Captain Weaver and 2Lt Thropp returned to base separately. Thropp was surprised to see that his left engine had, in fact, been hit by bullets from one or both of his assailants.

I have reviewed a number of accounts and have had a difficult time sorting out the details of this action; no one account has a fully-believable timeline of the action. Including this one.

A debate as to the exact fate of Major McGuire continues to this day. But there was no doubt that he, and Major Rittmayer, were gone forever.

WHAT HAPPENED?

Two scenarios emerged in the aftermath of McGuire's loss. 2Lt Thropp opined that the bogie (Sugimoto) had actually put fatal damage into McGuire's aircraft after it had crossed the circle in the whifferdill, and that may be actually what happened. However, it seems more likely, at least to me, that McGuire became a victim of his overconfidence and breaking of all Three Rules (Weaver's opinion).

McGuire's P-38 was heavy and slow, and he was trying to get it to turn as quickly as possible to cover Weaver. Slow + Heavy + Overly-tight turn = Stall + Snap Roll. If such conditions had prevailed at a higher altitude, there would have been enough room to nose down, gain speed, and recover safely. But the combat took place at less than 2,000 feet.

[A similar fate befell the last flyable P-38 in Europe, at Duxford in 1996. The pilot at an airshow did a series of rolls close to the ground, where the loss of lift when his wings were (near) vertical put him right into the ground. Too low, too slow, and not enough lift!]

The loss of a pilot with McGuire's skill level in a plane as good as a late-model P-38 was difficult for American forces to understand. And the quality of (most of) the remaining Japanese pilots was too low to overcome one as skilled as McGuire. So some mythmaking happened. As did a whole lot of cover up! The military records of the circumstances of the loss of McGuire were kept sealed for decades, until the Freedom of Information Act pried them open in the 1960s.

One idea that was floated was that famed Japanese Ace Saburo Sakai shot McGuire down; a notion quickly deflated because Sakai survived the War and could truthfully state he was nowhere near the combat area at the time. Another story was that Soichi Sugita, one of Japan's finest pilots, had to have been the one. He didn't survive the War, but records clearly refute this story, too. It was difficult to believe that McGuire could have crashed on his own; it was more comforting to think that he had been lost because he tried too hard to save his wingman (behavior that he exhibited when he was shot down earlier in the War).

In any case, McGuire was awarded a posthumous Congressional Medal of Honor, the DSC, the DFC with a Silver Oak Leaf Cluster, the Silver Star with two Silver and two Bronze Oak Leaf Clusters, and two Purple Hearts. He also had a still-extant Air Force Base named after him, along with many other awards

CODA

McGuire's P-38 crashed in a ravine at a place called Hacienda Progreso. Locals took a great personal risk by retrieving part of McGuire's body and giving it a burial kept secret from the Japanese. The crash site was investigated in 1948, and the buried part of him and other remains found on the site were returned to the U.S. where they were given an honorable funeral at Arlington in 1949.

Major Rittmayer's crash site was found about that same time and his remains were shipped to the American Graves Registration Service Mausoleum in Manila, then later buried at Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Glendale, CA. He had four victories to his credit, three over Ormoc Bay on December 7, 1944, and a fourth on December 17, 1944, a Ki-43 Oscar over Mindoro.

Thropp and Weaver survived the War. I could not find much information about Weaver, other than he had two aerial victories on April 18, 1943, attained the rank of Major, and died on November 1, 1985, at age 65. He is buried at the Wildwood Cemetery in Williamsport, PA.

Thropp lived a good life after the War as a financial consultant in Richmond, Virginia, although he did survive two crash-landings along the way, one in a P-38 during the War and a second, in a P-40E back in the U.S. He provided a lot of information about the loss of Major McGuire. He passed away on April 15, 2004, at age 80, and is buried in the West Laurel Hill Cemetery in Bala Cynwyd, PA.

WO Sugimoto's Oscar had taken battle damage from Rittmayer and Thropp during the fracas and could not make it back to Fabrica. He crash-landed in a sugar cane field. A group of Filipino guerrillas rushed to the wreck. One account said Sugimoto was shot when he refused to surrender. Given the treatment the Filipino people suffered under the Japanese, I rather think that surrender was neither requested nor offered. In any case, Sugimoto ended up with six bullets in the chest.

Sgt Fukuda returned to Manapla Airfield. His Frank had been damaged in the fighting (23 bullet holes were counted in his airplane, most if not all likely from Weaver), causing his left landing gear to collapse on landing, flipping his aircraft over on its back and causing him a significant back injury that required three months of hospital treatment in Japan. He flew some combat missions over Japan until the end of the War, after which he returned home to Kagoshima and became a farmer.

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