

I never knew my father, Lee Owen Cunningham, growing up. He and my mother divorced when I was five years old. I was raised by my mother's family. I knew very little of him except for a scrap book from WWII my mother made. It contained the article about my father receiving his Distinguished Flying Cross from General Chenault and that he was a "Flying Tiger". There was also the picture of the crew he flew with. That was all I knew of him until 2005 when I learned I was living not far from one of my uncles. By this time my father had passed away without my being able to ask him so many questions only he had the answers to. I was able to spend quite a bit of time with my uncle and his family and teach me a lot about my father. I was told often by my relatives how much I remind them of him.

Over the last several years I spent many hours researching as much of his military history as I could find. I learned about the 14<sup>th</sup> AF, 308<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, and the B-24 he navigated. The specific flight that earned him the Distinguished Flying Cross, his flights in the Pacific, "the hump" flight from India to China. I obtained a set of all his ribbons and medals which are on display with the pictures of him, the planes, his crew, and the many memorials honoring his groups at the Wright Patterson Memorial Park (which I saw in person). All the items I have displayed are not just objects in a museum; they are part of him and a chapter in his life, and part of mine.

The more I learn and know about him makes me feel closer to him and realize what a great man he was and what a shame, due to divorce and contentious feelings between the two families, he was not a part of my life. I am preserving not only a part of American history, but the life of a wonderful man and decorated WWII serviceman for my children and grandchildren.

I am a member of two organizations dedicated to preserving the history of the Flying Tigers and the men of that group. I feel this preservation is important to the next generations of children to see and know the sacrifices made by men they never met for them all those years ago. We must all do our part in this, or the past will be forgotten and the thousands of men who sacrificed for us will have all been in vein.

" During World War II, over 14,000,000 men and women served in the armed forces of the United States. The services of many of these veterans in the European and Pacific Theater are well known and have often been memorialized. There was, however, a smaller contingent of about 260,000, who saw service in the far away lands of China, Burma and India. Few of today's archivists or historians take note of their services but the knowledgeable ones that do, write and tell of the true dedicated service of those who served in the China Burma India Theater of Operations (CBI).

"There was a true spirit of all the military forces that served in the CBI Theater that was not present in any other World War II area. It can best be remembered by the military actions in western Burma in the spring. The Japanese were concerned with the quantity of supplies being transported by air from Assam to China. They decided that they could seriously disrupt the flow by severing the ground supply route in eastern India. Accordingly, the Japanese launched an invasion from mountainous western Burma into India, near the towns of Kohima and Imphal. They were opposed by British and Indian ground troops, who were supplied by air units of the United States. The fighting was bitter but, after several weeks, with many casualties on both sides, the Japanese were driven back into Burma in full retreat. In the military cemetery in Kohima, there is a written epitaph that reads:

**"When you get back, tell them of us and say  
For your tomorrow, we gave our today."**

That was the true spirit of all veterans who served in the China Burma India Theater during World War II. May they be remembered along with all the dedicated others who have served their country in the past and are honorably serving today so that we may have a better tomorrow."

"In April, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt wrote of the American Volunteer Group:

"The outstanding gallantry and conspicuous daring that the American Volunteer Group combined with their unbelievable efficiency is a source of tremendous pride throughout the whole of America. The fact that they have labored under the shortages and difficulties is keenly appreciated . . . "

I am very proud to be the daughter of Lee Owen Cunningham and have made sure my children and grandchildren will know about him and his service to his country, and the millions of other brave men willing to sacrifice their lives for the good of the many.

1. Wilkat, Albert O. (May 20, 2006). Citing Website. In *Memorial to CBI Veterans*.

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# AIR FORCE Magazine

## April 1990

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### Nitemare's Secret Score

By Jack Samson

#### **A lone B-24, using a novel radar bombing technique, sank a Japanese cruiser at night.**

On the night of August 19, 1944, a lone US B-24 Liberator of the 14th Air Force, based in China, repeatedly attacked, then finally sank, a heavily armed, 5,000-ton Japanese cruiser in the South China Sea. The Commander of the 308th Bomb Group, to which this Liberator belonged, was Col. William P. Fisher. He thought it was a special event; in fact, he regarded the attack as one of the finest combat aircrew achievements of the war.

Just as remarkably, at a time when newspapers avidly reported every US victory, coverage of the feat was virtually nonexistent. By and large, the outcome of the incredible Liberator attack attracted no public attention.

How the US press missed such an extraordinary story can be traced to two factors. One was the remoteness of the air war over China. The other, far more interesting reason was that no one in any way involved with this particular Liberator wanted to open his mouth about it.

#### **A Well-Kept Secret**

With good reason. This Liberator had only recently been equipped with a novel system that, in 1944, was one of the war's best-kept secrets. The device was called "LAB"—for low-altitude bombardment. The LAB was a sophisticated marriage of two of the day's highest technologies, radar and the Norden Bombsight. Few had any knowledge of LAB's existence. Those who didn't know certainly could not have suspected it.

To be sure, radar had been used in conjunction with the Norden Bombsight before. The two had been paired for use in high-altitude heavy bombardment of Germany. The technique was not deemed a success. Used when clouds blotted out targets on the ground, it permitted bombardiers to drop bombs in a general area. It didn't even approach the accuracy of the Norden Bombsight when used in clear weather.

By early 1944, the situation had changed. Scientists had come up with a means for mating the Norden sight to a combination of radar search scopes. The development provided the team of bombardier, pilot, and radar operator with power it had never known: It could now drop bombs on a target, with great accuracy, *from an altitude of 100 feet, and in total darkness.*

No effort was spared to cloak the existence of the new device. Training of bomber crews in use of the new system took place only at highly restricted Langley Field, Va. In early 1944, crews trained in B-24s with blacked-out nose compartments. There, the bombardiers learned to operate the LAB system in darkness, even though they were bombing targets in the nearby Chesapeake Bay in broad daylight. Crew members were ordered not to discuss their training with anyone other than fellow flyers.

#### **How It Worked**

Stacked up against the ultrahigh-technology systems of today's Air Force, LAB is primitive. In those days, however, it was truly the state of the art. In essence, it converted the delicate cross hairs of the Norden sight to horizontal and vertical radar cross hairs. These were displayed on a small scope in the nose of a B-24.

The movable cross hairs allowed the bombardier to "center" his sights on a blind target while skimming over the surface of the ground or water at low altitudes. At the same time, the radarscope sight was tied into the directional control system of the bomber—in the same manner the conventional Norden sight enabled the pilot to make the necessary corrections by following a PDI (Pilot Direction Indicator) needle on the instrument panel.

Operational use was fairly simple. A bomber crew first would locate a distant target using a large search radar, which was operated by a radar specialist in the waist of the bomber. Once the target had been identified, the plane would turn in the direction of the target and descend to an altitude of about 1,000 feet. When the plane was ten to twelve miles away, the radar operator would transfer the target's image to the smaller bombing scope in the bombardier's nose-area compartment.

Then the bombardier would overlay his horizontal and vertical radar cross hairs on the target and endeavor to keep them there during the short bomb run. The aircraft would drop to the extremely low altitude of 100 feet. Bomb bay doors would open. When the correct position was reached for bombs to drop, they were automatically released by an electrical instrument called an intervalometer.

This was tailor-made for an Air Force eager to attack Japanese surface ships. It was the perfect weapon for Lt. Gen. Claire Lee Chennault, commanding officer of the China-based 14th US Air Force, to use against Japanese shipping in the South China Sea. The Imperial Navy was using the narrow Formosa Strait to run both commercial and naval shipping from the Japanese homeland to and from its military bases in South China, Hainan Island, and Southeast Asia.

General Chennault had been sending conventionally armed, twin-engine B-25s and four-engine B-24s from forward bases in eastern China to attack Japanese convoys and warships off China's southern coast. Though they sank some supply ships with bombs and machinegun fire, intense antiaircraft fire from large naval vessels had prevented Chennault's bombers from sinking heavily protected warships.

### **Chennault Begins LAB Sorties**

Hearing of LAB in early 1944, General Chennault put in an urgent request for the radar-equipped B-24s. The first one, piloted by Lt. William Cashmore, arrived in Kunming, China, in April. Several other crews followed later that month and in May. One crew was led by pilot Lt. Jay LeVan of Stroudsburg, Pa.

It is safe to assume that Japan knew nothing of the new weapon possessed by Chennault's flyers. Japanese military intelligence was excellent, but this secret had been well guarded.

The first radar-equipped LAB crews flew a number of sorties in May, June, and July from such eastern China bases as Kweilin (now Guilin) and Luichow (now Leizhou). Lieutenant Cashmore's crew sank a few supply ships in the first months, but it was always difficult to report accurately what had been sunk. It was the monsoon season, and most flights were made in rain and fog. From such a low altitude, the plane passed over the target so rapidly it was almost impossible to determine the exact identity of the vessel.

The usual bomb load was either six 1000-pound bombs or eight 500-pounders, equipped with one-second delay fuzes. The delay was to allow the bombs to sink below the waterline of ships before detonating. Most of the time, only the tail gunner had a chance to see the result, and even he saw little other than the vague silhouette of a ship.

Even so, experience gained in these night missions soon began to pay off. The big Liberators operating out of Kweilin and Luichow in June were sinking 900 tons of enemy shipping, on average, during each mission. General Chennault even worked out a precise calculus: For every 2.5 pounds of bombs dropped and two gallons of fuel burned, the US aviators would send a ton of Japanese shipping to the bottom.

In early August, Lt. Col. William D. Hopson, commanding officer of the LAB Detachment, and his copilot, Maj. Robert G. Killam, asked for a volunteer LAB crew to fly with them on a special mission. Jay LeVan's crew volunteered. Lieutenant LeVan and his copilot, William R. McCaffery, were not needed and did not fly. Others who did were Lt. Lee O. Cunningham, navigator; Lt. John D. Shytle, bombardier; TSgt. Charles W. Hemsley, engineer; TSgt. Harry A. Niess, radar operator; and TSgt. Edward N. Odom, radio operator.

Their target was an Italian liner, *Conte Verde*, which had been built in 1922 with an 18,766-ton capacity for the Naples to New York run. At the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor, it had been caught in Shanghai and did not venture out. When Italy surrendered to the Allies on September 8, 1943, *Conte Verde's* Italian crew scuttled it in the harbor.

The Japanese had managed to refurbish and float the ship, and it was due to be towed to Japan for further repairs when Colonel Hopson and crew attacked on August 8, 1944. With Niess guiding the plane through the rain and fog of the harbor by radar, Shytle dropped six bombs on the liner, capsizing it and sinking it for the second time. Both Colonel Hopson and Lieutenant Shytle received the Distinguished Flying Cross for the action.

It wasn't until the night of August 19, 1944, that the radar-equipped B-24s established their worth beyond all question.

### A Significant Mission

It was raining, as usual, at the eastern China forward base of Luichow. Three LAB crews were flying out of the remote advance base: LeVan's, Cashmore's, and a crew led by Lt. Folk Johnson. The monsoon season was in full swing, and the slit trenches around the makeshift wooden barracks were filled with rainwater. Mud was everywhere. Clothing in the barracks was discolored by mildew, and the crews were weary from months of late-night flying.

Moreover, Japanese bombers each night had been bombing both Kweilin and Luichow and, with each raid, the crews were forced to take cover in the cold mud and rainwater of the trenches. Men were thin from lack of food and sleep and from the constant bombing.

It was the LeVan crew's turn to fly the nightly patrol mission over the South China Sea. The crew was composed of LeVan and his copilot, McCaffery, navigator Cunningham, bombardier Shy tie, engineer Hemsley, radar operator Niess, radio operator Odom, and four gunners—Sgts. Bruce L. Ludwig, Lawrence Bowar, Norman Lareau, and Thomas Murphy.

The big, olive-drab, shark-nosed B-24 known as *Nitemare* was loaded with six 1,000-pound bombs. Taking off in the drizzle from the bumpy, crushed-rock runway, the crew settled down for the grueling mission over the Strait of Formosa.

Six and a half hours later, Sergeant Niess picked up a big "blip" on the search radarscope. The size of the blip did not cause any heightened anticipation among crew members. They knew the size of a radar return did not necessarily, or even usually, correspond to the size of a target.

Lieutenant LeVan acknowledged receiving the information from Sergeant Niess and took a heading for the target. All crew members took combat positions, and the plane began to descend. When the B-24 closed to within nine miles of the still-unknown target, Lieutenant Shytle assumed control of the radar bomb run with his small scope in the nose of the aircraft. The radar trace on the screen, he later recalled, did seem a bit larger than usual.

It all happened in a flash. The big bomber dropped down to 100 feet above the water, closed quickly, passed over the target, and unleashed a barrage of 1,000-pound bombs. One bomb scored a direct hit on the deck of the target vessel. Sergeant Lareau, the tail gunner, reported a huge explosion and a burst of light. The B-24 banked away from the target.

Some crew members looked down. It was not until then that the crew realized they had made a run on a large Japanese naval craft—a 5,100-ton, 550-foot-long heavy cruiser of the Imperial Navy.

LeVan made a tight circle and came in for a second attack, this time at an altitude of 1,000 feet. Bombardier Shytle scored another direct hit. The cruiser had not yet begun to fire its awesome air defense armament at the bomber. Circling out some distance from the cruiser, LeVan got on the microphone and told the rest of the crew members what kind of target they had been attacking.

"We were a little leery about making the third run," LeVan said later. "We knew how tough a job it is to tackle a warship. We held a hurried crew conference with the help of the intercom and decided to stick it out until something gave out—either our bombs or that ship."

Crew talk was animated. Bombardier Shytle: "Let's plaster the hell out of it." McCaffery: "We can't pass up a chance to sink part of the Japanese Navy." Niess: "She's sure hard to sink, but let's go after her again."

The fact that the heavy cruiser had not fired on the attacking plane could only be attributed to the heavy damage it sustained in the first attacks. In time, the Japanese gained some fire control. As the big bomber began its third run, the sky erupted with enemy flares. A dense curtain of antiaircraft fire met the advancing plane.

LeVan began evasive action. Shy tie scored the third direct hit of the night as the B-24 blasted through enemy fire. The B-24 flared up and away from the stricken cruiser. No one aboard the plane had been hit by the concentrated fire.

As the bomber circled the burning ship from a distance of several miles and LeVan was trying to decide whether to make a fourth and final attack, Niess suddenly issued a startling report: The big cruiser had disappeared from the radar screen. Having sustained such heavy damage, the enemy ship had capsized and sunk.

### Keeping Victory Quiet

Radio Operator adorn reported that his immediate reaction to the victory was strange. "I remember being concerned about taking two bombs home and landing with them on board," he said.

Low-level radar bombardment had come into its own. No longer did the Japanese Navy feel as secure in the South China Sea as it once had. Even so, hardly anyone in the States knew of the extraordinary feat. The Associated Press wire service did crank out a brief dispatch about the mission. Included in the AP account, however, was a crucial error: It referred to Harry Niess as a "radio operator," not a "radar operator." That Sergeant Niess was a radar man, and not a radio man, was of course the secret of the LAB B-24.

Lieutenant LeVan won a Silver Star, pinned on him by General Chennault himself. Lieutenant Shytle was given the Distinguished Flying Cross, as were Lieutenant Cunningham and Sergeant Niess. All other crew members were awarded the Air Medal, their orders being signed by Chennault.

Lieutenant McCaffery died in 1988. Lieutenants LeVan, Cunningham, and Shy tie, and Sergeants Lareau, Niess, adorn, and Hemsley are still alive, witnesses to a great feat of combat aviation.

What of the remaining crew gunners--Sergeants Ludwig, Bowar, and Murphy? All were judged to have been killed in action during the war. They disappeared when another LAB B-24, piloted by Lt. Folk Johnson, failed to return from a mission. It was thought that the plane had attacked a Japanese aircraft carrier.

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Jack Samson, author of a biography of Lt. Gen. Claire Lee Chennault, was a bombardier on Lt. William Cashmore's LAB crew and flew with Lt. Jay LeVan's crew out of Luichow and Kweilin.

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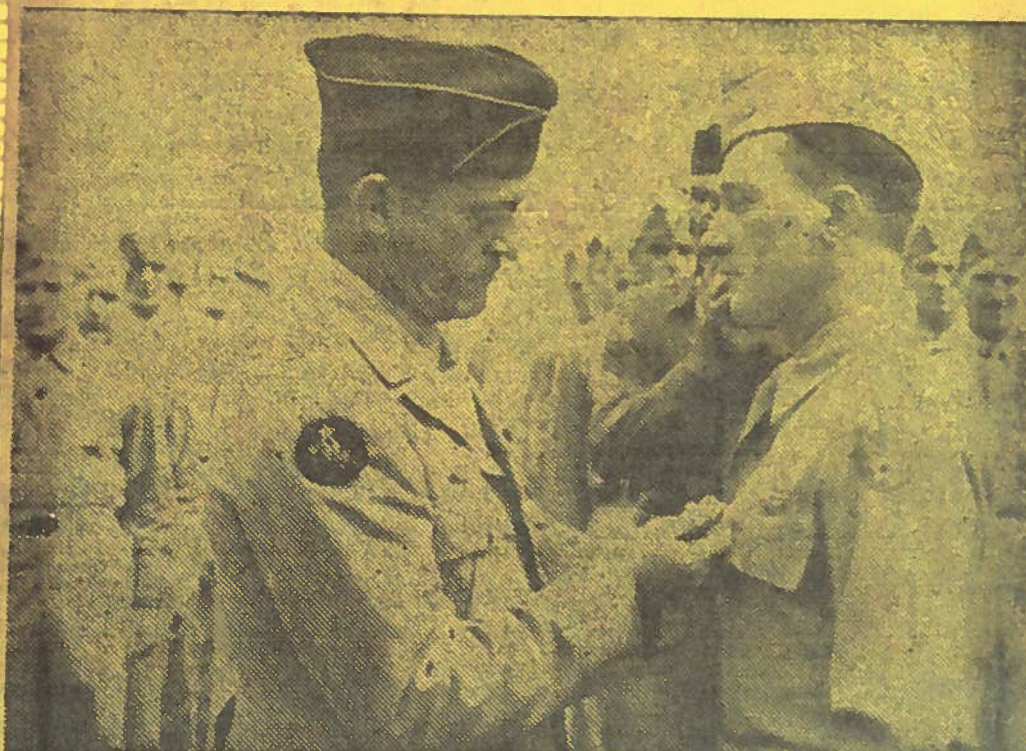


SEPTEMBER 20, 1944

EIGHT PAGES

# Gen. Chennault Decorates Lee Cunningham in China

FOR SINKING JAP CRUISER FROM THE AIR.



U. S. Air Force Photo.

HEADQUARTERS, 14th AIR FORCE, CHINA: For extraordinary achievement as navigator of a heavy bomber which recently sank a 550 foot Japanese cruiser in the South China Sea, First Lieutenant Lee O. Cunningham of Corydon, a member of Gen. C. L. Chennault's famed 144th Air Force "Flying Tigers" was recently awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. The citation described that Lt. Cunningham as navigator guided the lone bomber far out over the sea during a heavy rain and haze. After a two-hour battle during which the Jap cruiser was finally sunk, Lt. Cunningham navigated his plane safely back through the adverse weather to its home base.

Lt. Cunningham was decorated by Gen. Chennault himself, who addressed the bomber crew and said that "he was proud of their decision to sink the ship in disregard of all personal safety to destroy the enemy . . . and their action was more than expected of even American fighting men."

*"Nightmares Crew"*





Navigator,  
Capt. Lee Cunningham

Co-pilot

Bombardier  
Lt. Skyles

Pilot  
Lt. Jay Barker



The best crew members - enlisted men.





**14<sup>TH</sup> AF**

**WORLD WAR II**

**B-24 "NITEMARE" CREW**

**LEE CUNNINGHAM**

**JAY LOVAN**

**BILL MCCARTHEY**

**JOHN SHYSTER**

**LAWRENCE BOWAN**

**CHARLES HEMSLEY**

**NORMAN LANEAU**

**BRUCE LUDWIG**

**HARRY NIESS**

**BOB ODOM**



