

My Grandfather was Lee O. Cunningham a brave member of the 14th Air Force, and I want to tell his story. But first, I should tell you a little about him. My memory is limited as I was 8 years old when he died, but someone like Papa is hard to forget.

Born in 1918 in Corydon, Indiana to a family of eight he grew up very poor. His father farmed and drove a school bus and his mother sold chicken eggs to make ends meet. Lee, who I will now call "Papa" was the second born to his older brother, Andrew. The story starts when one day my grandfather and his brother Andrew were walking home from elementary school in 1928 and some children throwing rocks. Unfortunately, one of the rocks hit Papa's brother Andrew in the head. The following day he died from a cerebral hemorrhage in his bed. Papa's parents became afraid and kept the kids home from school as a result. Papa missed a year of school for this and subsequently became an avid reader. It was this year at home, through his reading he decided to become a teacher on day. Graduating the oldest in a one room school house of 15, he set his goals for college and obtained a teaching degree at Indiana Teacher's College in 1939. This was a feat unheard of in such a poor, uneducated family. While teaching he became intensely patriotic, and with the encouragement of his friends and family, he decided to enlist into the Army Air Corps in 1941 which later became known as the United States Air Force. Being the exemplary military man he was, he ultimately volunteered as a member of the Flying Tigers, which later was activated as the 14th Air Force in March 1943.

My favorite story, albeit not the most historical, I will share before the "big" one. During the war Papa flew for the 308th and later the 425th Bomb Squadron. During one of his trips over the "hump" his plane malfunctioned and the crew had to parachute or die. Papa parachuted and landed just outside of a rural school yard. He was unconscious and had a broken ankle. He awakened to several young Chinese students screaming, laughing and crying. Since he did not speak Chinese he was uncertain if he was in friendly territory or not. All he could do was reach in his bomber jacket and pull out a small square piece of material he had for an emergency. He held it up and they embraced him. He was then then put on a water buffalo and transported to a medical center and cared for. Turns out that "fabric" was a symbolic flag of the United States and China stating he was an American Soldier and was an ally. All crewman were issued this flag. This small banner, and the parachute head hangs on our wall today- the banner and chute that saved him. Fortunately for us all, he lived. The *Conte Verde*, however was not as fortunate.

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, Col. William P. Fisher, recalled it as a special event; in fact, he regarded the attack as "one of the finest combat aircrew achievements of the war."

Unknown, except to a chosen few, was a new technology at the time called "LAB"-for low altitude bombardment. This was a sophisticated combination of radar and the Norden Bombsight. Every effort was taken to protect this new technology. Training of the bomber crews in use of the new system took place only at the highly restricted Langley Field, Va. In early 1944, crews trained in the 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.

Hearing of LAB in 1944, General Chennault put in an urgent request for the radar-equipped B-24's. In early August, Lt. Col. William D. Hopson, commanding officer of the LAB Detachment, asked for volunteer Lab crew to fly with them on a special mission. Jay Levan's crew of the "Nitemare" volunteered. Lieutenant leVan and his copilot, William R. McCafferey, were not needed and did not fly. Others who did were my Papa, Lt. Lee O. Cunningham, navigator; Lt. John D. Shytle, bombardier; TSgts Charles Hemsley, engineer; Harry A. Niess, radar operator and Edward N. Odom, radio operator.

Their target was an Italian liner, *Conte Verde*, which had been built in 1922 for 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 in 1943, *Conte Verde's* Italian crew scuttled it in the harbor. The Japanese managed to refurbish and float the ship for military use.

It was raining, as usual as the Nightmare's crew prepared to fly the nightly patrol mission over the South China Sea-a night that would later live in history. The olive-drab, shark-nosed b-24 known as the *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 a grueling mission over the Strait of Formosa.

Six and half hours later, Sgt Niess picked up a "blip" on the search radarscope. The rest happened in a flash. The big bomber dropped down to 100ft above the water, closed quickly, passed over the target, and unleashed a barrage of 1,000 pound bombs. The crew made three pass buys in the attack. It was not until the last pass had they realized they had made a run on a 5,100 ton, 550 foot-long heavy cruiser of the Imperial Navy. Having sustained such heavy damage, the enemy ship had capsized and sunk. Despite heavy fire, no one aboard the plane had been hit by concentrated fire.

Just as remarkably, at a time when newspapers reported every US victory, coverage of this feat at the time was nonexistent. The main factor for this interesting reason was that no one in any way involved with this Liberator would open his mouth about it. 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.

Lieutenant leVan won a Silver Star, pinned on him by General Chennault himself. Lieutenant Shytle as well as Lieutenant Cunningham and Sergeant Niess received the Distinguished Flying Cross also pinned by General Chennault himself (See Photo). All other crew members were awarded the Air Medal, the orders signed by General Chennault.

And thus ends my story of my Grandfather, my Papa, my hero.

Chloe Cunningham

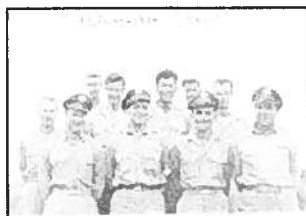
Personal Momentos

- 308th Bomb Group Veterans -

"Preserving the memory of their sacrifices!"

Thanks to Lee O. Cunningham, 425th Bomb Squadron for these images!

Click on an image to view a larger version.



The crew of "Nightmare" (l-r, front); Lee Cunningham (n), William McAffery (cp), John Shytle , Jay Levan (p); (middle); Buce Ludwig (g), Lawrence Bowar (g), Charles Hemsley (e), Harry Niess (radar), (back); Edward Odom (radio) and Norm Lareau (g).

(Courtesy of Lee O. Cunningham, 425th Bm Sq)

The "Nightmare", a shark-nosed B-24 of the 425th Bomb Squadron, 308th Bomb Group. This plane had already flown combat missions against German targets before being assigned to the 425th.

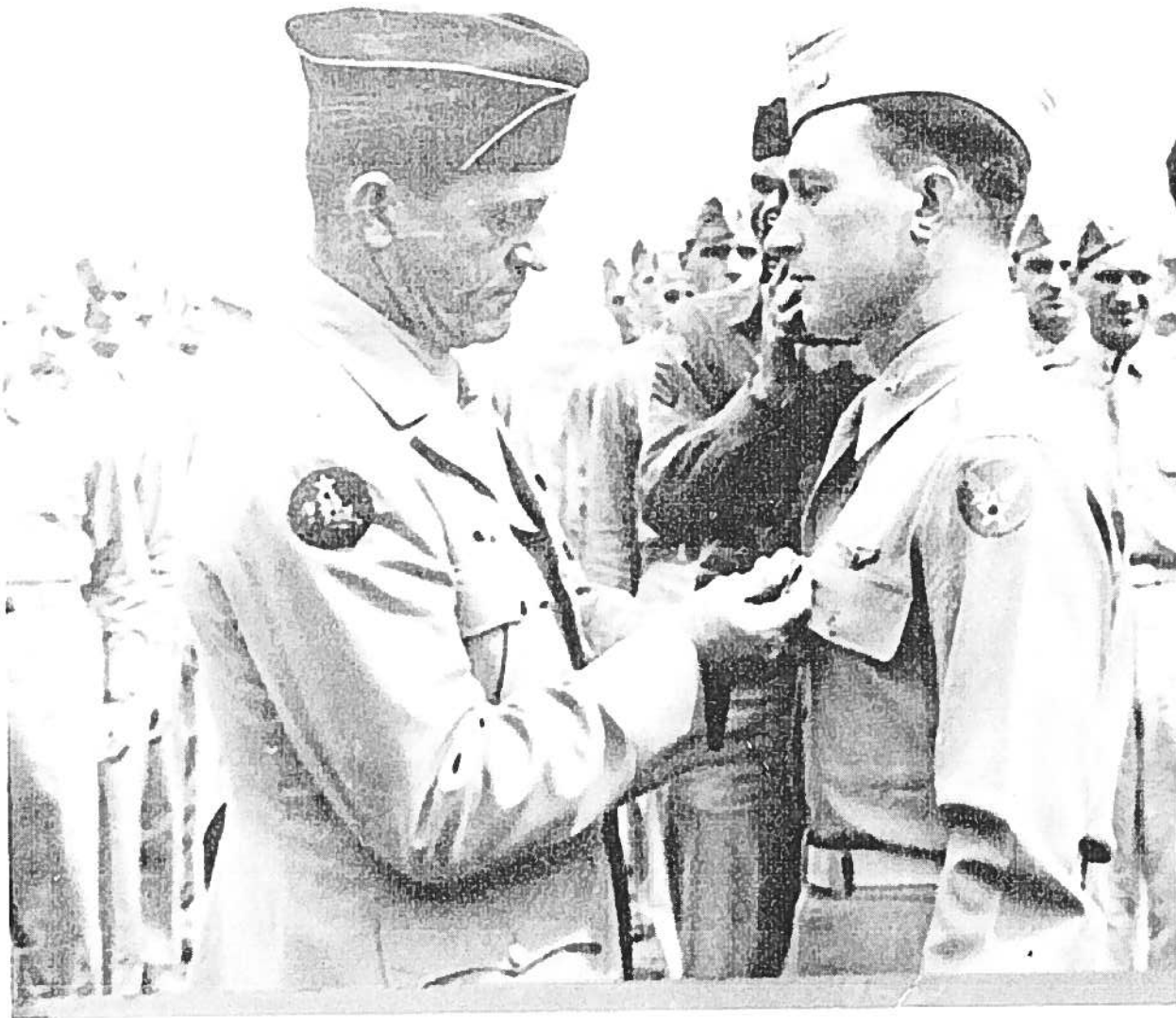
(Courtesy of Lee O. Cunningham, 425th Bm Sq)



Gen Chennault pins the 'Distinguished Flying Cross' on Lee Cunningham, navigator of 'Nighmare'

(Courtesy of Lee O. Cunningham, 425th Bm Sq)





Papa getting the distinguished
flying cross from General Chennault!

"Vitemares Crew"



↑
Papa



NAME	TP	M#	SER	BLK	MF	SERIAL #	AF	BG	BS	SC	RCL/#	V#-P	PHOTO CREDITS
NITEMARE	B	-24	D1	-1	-CF	42-63778	14	308	425	~	~	00-2	LEE O. CUNNINGHAM

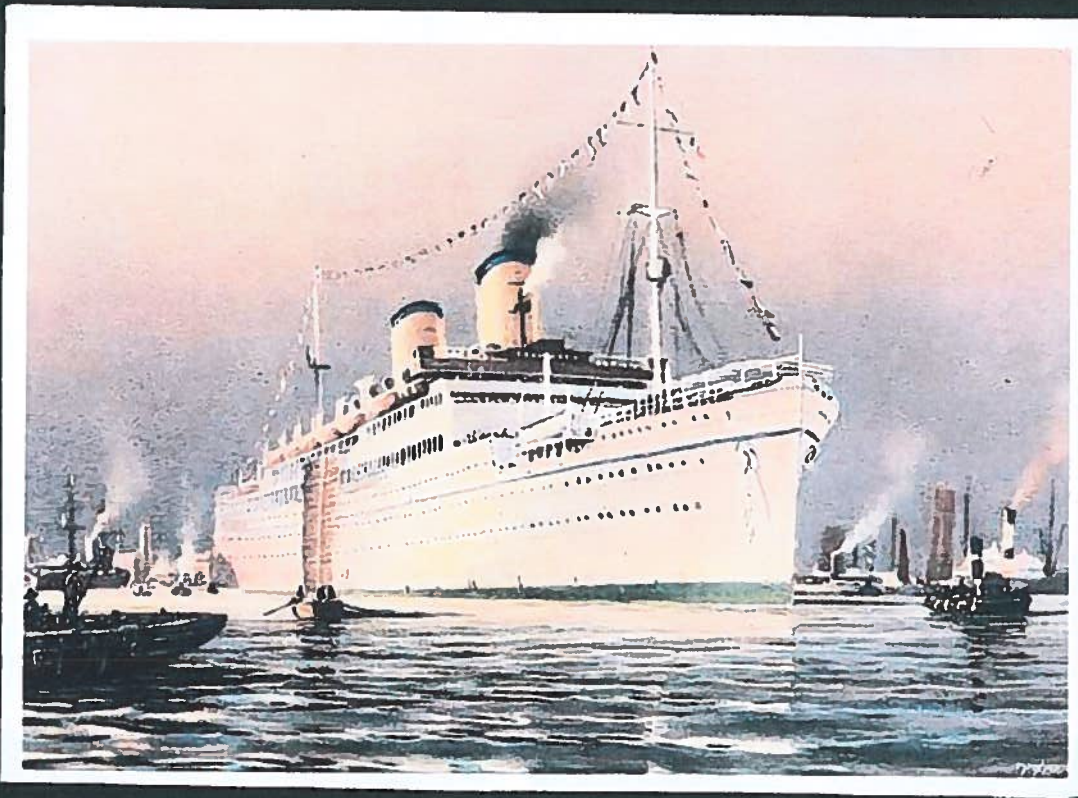
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Originally (DAS) in 480th ASG 2nd ASS.

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TSS CONTE VERDE



Length: 170,5 m
Beam: 22,6 m
GRT: 18,765 t
Built: 1923 William Beardmore, Glasgow, Scotland
Operator: Lloyd Triestino, Trieste
Speed: 18,5 kn
Passengers: 640

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~ SCOOP ~

TOLD TO THE SHANGHAI PUBLIC FOR THE FIRST TIME:

THE STORY OF THE SINKING OF THE "CONTE VERDE".

An interview with Colonel William D. Hopson, AAG.
by Hank Topfer.

The 19,000 ton luxury liner "Conte Verde" which had been scuttled by its crew in the Shanghai harbor following the Italian surrender, had been refloated and made ready for towing to Japan to be converted into an aircraft carrier.

Information to this effect had been received at General Chennault's Headquarters of the 14th Air Force and aerial reconnaissance showed that preparations were finished by the middle of 1944.

General Chennault decided to destroy the liner before the Japs could use her for their military effort. There were two alternatives of attacking her. Either by daylight bombing from a high altitude using several bombers with fighter escorts, or a night attack by a single plane at a low altitude making a quick getaway and catching the Japs unawares.

It was decided to take the latter alternative and Col. Hopson of the 308th Bombardment Group, which he later commanded, took charge for the preparation and execution of this mission.

A B-24 was selected, fitted with special sights and a scale replica of the "Conte Verde" drawn on the taxi strip at Liuchow, the base of the 308th Group, which was used for practice bombardments.

A clear moonlit night was necessary to make the attack and four days in succession the attack had to be postponed. Finally, on the eve of August 8th 1944, weather reports from Shanghai were favorable and the B-24 took off despite a driving rain-storm at Liuchow. It carried an extra load of gas for the 2000 mile round trip and six onethousand pound bombs. The crew had been briefed to expect heavy Japanese anti-aircraft fire over Shanghai, and was cautioned to avoid the Internment Camp for Allied Nationals at Pootung.

After two hours flight the weather cleared. Col. Hopson headed from Hangchow Bay north towards Shanghai at an altitude of 10,000 feet. He came in slightly south of his intended route and, over Shanghai, cut back his engines going into a glide. He did not like his angle of approach to the 575 feet hull of the "Conte Verde" and circled, making a second run at 350 feet. This time he gave the command "Bombs Away" sending his missiles on their way. This was at 3.30 a.m. The bombs were fitted with 5 second delay fuses and on pulling out, the crew watched the explosions shattering the quiet of the night. They had scored one direct hit and one hit under the water line caused by the skip effect of a bomb dropped in the water besides the vessel. They returned to their base without any interference except for slight

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anti-aircraft fire south of Shanghai and came down at Liuchow, 13 hours after their take-off.

Aerial photographs taken from a P-38, nine days later, showed the "Conte Verde" settled in the mud of the Whangpoo with its decks awash. It took the Japs 10 months to salvage her again.

Col. Hopson was decorated for his daring exploit with the Distinguished Flying Cross by the United States and the order of the Cloud Banner by the Chinese National Government. The 308th Bombardment Group under his command sunk and damaged a million tons of Jap Shipping between Saigon and the Yangtse Delta.

At present Col. Hopson is with the AAG, heading the advisory team to the 8th Heavy Bomb Group of the Chinese Air Force, based at Da Tsang Airdrome near Shanghai.

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