

Capt. Nelson Flack: The rediscovery of a Black Sheep

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On Feb. 14, 1944, the 8th Fighter Squadron launched P-40 Warhawks from their base at Gusap, New Guinea, to attack an enemy airfield known as Wewak. First Lt. Nelson Flack was numbered among the pilots who flew into combat that morning, which proved to be anything but a typical Valentine's Day. No stranger to combat, Lieutenant Flack recorded his first aerial victory Nov. 7, 1943, during a mission supporting the Australian Army's 7th Division.

On the fateful Feb. 14 mission, Lieutenant Flack noticed his wingman, a new pilot named 1st Lt. Ed Glascock, was in trouble and under attack from an enemy Ki-61 "Tony" fighter. Although Flack shot down the Ki-61 and likely saved the life of his squadron mate, his P-40 took damage. It soon became apparent that the aircraft would not make it home. Flack attempted to land his P-40 into six to eight foot tall grasses. However, the plane stalled, hit a tree, skidded across the grasses and stopped after impacting a small hill. Lieutenant Flack found himself 150 miles from home, with a broken arm, gashed forehead and behind enemy lines.

Pilots of the 25th Liaison Squadron spotted the burning P-40, but could not tell if Lieutenant Flack had survived. Manned by enlisted pilots, who maintained their own planes, the 25th gained a reputation for recovering allied pilots across the southwest Pacific.

As Lieutenant Flack's P-40 burned, Tech. Sgt. Eugene Salternik attempted to land his small, light L-5 observation plane into the same tall grasses. Hitting the tough grasses, Sergeant Salternik's aircraft somersaulted. Although Sergeant Salternik exited his aircraft without injury, two American Airmen were now evaders in enemy territory. As the sun began to set, Sergeant Salternik stayed with his broken plane and

planned to search for Lieutenant Flack the following day.

The next morning, L-5s from Sergeant Salternik's squadron dropped supplies and a note telling him to stay put, and informing him an Australian commando would soon come to help. In his first parachute jump ever, Australian Lt. Hector Henstridge made a perfect landing near Sergeant Salternik's position. Completing the first half of their mission, Lieutenant Henstridge and Sergeant Salternik found a tired, hungry and injured Lieutenant Flack the next day.

Getting back home would prove dangerous and difficult. On Feb. 22, 1944, Staff Sgt. James Nichols landed an L-5 on a makeshift airstrip, built by Lieutenant Flack, Sergeant Salternik, and Lieutenant Henstridge. Without any tools, the three men flattened the grasses by rolling on it, creating what became known as "Flack Field." However, instead of Sergeant Nichols picking up the downed airmen and returning them home, Nichols' L-5 was damaged upon landing—resulting in four Airmen in enemy territory.

By this time, the 25th Liaison Squadron could not risk losing any more airplanes or pilots. Instead, the group of four would have to rely on the navigational skills of the Australian, Lieutenant Henstridge, and walk 35 miles to a recovery point. Attempting to stay clear of Japanese patrols while traveling through dense jungles, wading through chest-deep swamps, and climbing over steep ridges, the men had limited rations and no ability to communicate with the outside world. In fact, when they had not been spotted for several days, their status was changed to missing in action, as they were assumed to have been captured or killed.

After nearly a month in the jungle, living only on the food they could catch, Lieutenant Flack, Sergeant Salternik, Lieutenant Henstridge, and Sergeant Nichols were found by an Australian patrol. Returned to a hospital at Gusap, each man had lost

25 to 30 pounds and had contracted malaria. Yet, all made a full recovery and returned to service.

For his actions, Lieutenant Henstridge was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, Sergeants Salternik and Nichols received Silver Stars, and Lieutenant Flack the Air Medal and Purple Heart.

Flying P-38s over Tacloban, Captain Flack went on to score three additional aerial kills in two days—Nov. 1 and 2 in 1944—as the 8th Fighter Squadron helped liberate the Philippines. These achievements lifted Flack's official aerial victory count to five. From this point forward he proudly hailed the coveted title of "Ace."

After World War II, when the vast majority of military men took off their uniforms and returned to civilian life, Flack remained a pilot with the newly established United States Air Force. During combat in the Korean War, Lieutenant Flack was shot down again. This time, there would be no heroic rescue, as he was killed in the air-to-air battle.

When stories of the Fighting 49ers passed from generation to generation, names of air power legends such as Bong, McGuire, and Johnson filled the history books. The nearly forgotten rescue mission of Nelson Flack may have been completely lost to history, if not for an incredible event which happened last year.

Visiting remote villages only accessible by helicopter, aviation archeologist, Mr. John Douglas, was promised by New Guinea villagers that they would take him to the wreckage of three aircraft in exchange for school supplies and watches. With both sides making good on their promises, Mr. Douglas became the first outside visitor to the wrecks of two L-5s and Flack's P-40 in more than 60 years. Other than vegetation growth and the decay of time, the three aircraft sat undisturbed on the jungle floor. The Australian War Memorial museum gathered the remaining sections of the P-40 in June 2004 and planned to restore the P-40 to its original condition, proudly displaying the markings of the 8th Fighter Squadron.



A Stinson L-5 "Sentinel," similar to the ones flown by the 25th Liaison Squadron.



The engine of Staff Sgt. Nichol's L-5 remains intact after 60 years on the jungle floor. Sergeants Salternik and Nichols received Silver Stars.



Photos courtesy of Mr. John Douglas

The 49th Fighter Group flew P-40s, such as this one, in combat from 1942 to 1944.



The remnants of Tech. Sgt. Eugene Salternik's L-5.



A propped-up wing from Lieutenant Flack's P-40.



Villagers stand next to the remains of the nose of Sergeant Eugene Salternik's L-5.



Local villagers stand next to the tail section of Lieutenant Flack's P-40.