

9/28/05

ONE OF MY MOST MEMORABLE MISSIONS

by Roman Ohnemus

This is an account of one of my most memorable missions. My solo, low level, night mission over Clark Field in Luzon (**the main island of the Philippines**), December 28, 1944.





The following are events leading up to that mission. At 4:30 in the afternoon on December 26, 1944, a large Japanese naval force consisting of two cruisers and six destroyers heading toward

Mindoro was spotted by one of our PBY, Catalina's.



The PBY Catalina was the definitive air-sea rescue aircraft of the 1930s and 1940s. It was equipped with depth charges, bombs, torpedoes, and machine guns, and its job was to seek out the enemy at sea.

Our ground forces had landed on Mindoro Island eleven days earlier.



The 345th air echelon, still at Biak, received an urgent order early in the morning of December 27, 1944, directing all available airplanes to depart immediately for Leyte, and help repulse a

large Japanese naval force which had been shelling the beachhead at Mindoro for almost an hour. All surface ships in Mindoro Bay had fled, with the exception of one Liberty ship which was sunk by the Japanese naval force during the attack. Within two and a half hours, twenty- two B-25s of the 345th were on their way.



As it turned out, this was a permanent move for us because more air power was desperately needed in the Philippines. We left most of our belongings behind to be retrieved sometime in the future; however, most of our belongings were lost when two liberty ships, S.S. Morrison R. Wait and S.S. Thomas Nelson, carrying our ground echelon were hit by Kamikazes in Leyte Gulf on November 11, 1944.



The SS Thomas Nelson as rebuilt under conversion program



All available planes at Leyte had been rushed to join the planes already at the newly opened airfield on San Jose, Mindoro, and join with fighters there along with B-25s of the 17th Recon Sq.



One B-25 of the 17th Sq. was piloted by Lt. Ernest Perkins, a very good friend and roommate of mine through our flight training days.



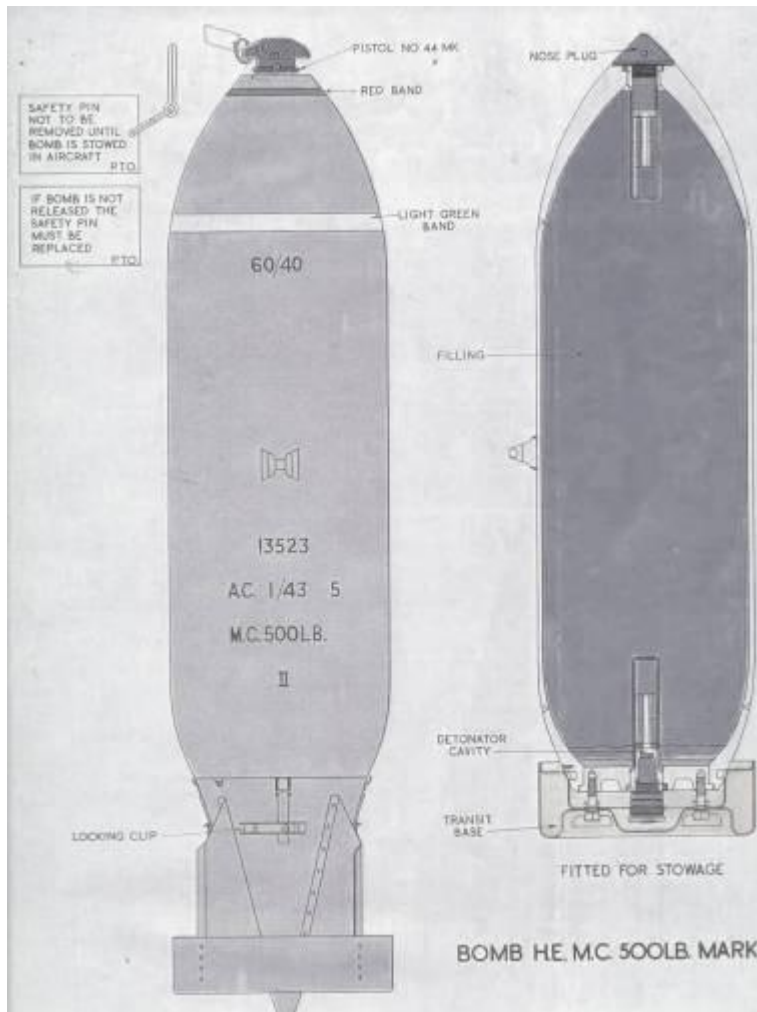
The two of us flew overseas at the same time along with six other crews. We were the only pilots of the eight crews to survive the war. Another B-25 from the 499th Sq. of the 345th BG had just arrived at San Jose on a courier mission and training flight. The crew consisted of Lt. Charles Smith pilot and co-pilot Lt. John Baeta and his crew. This was Baeta's and his crew's 1st or 2nd mission. John's radio operator, Sgt. Foster Stanfield, my close friend since grammar school days, arrived at Biak just a few days before Christmas, and it was a happy surprise and reunion when he dropped by my tent to wish me a merry Christmas. Needless to say, it was a great seeing him. Foster's mother had given Foster my APO address which of course was the same as his. He realized that we were in the same Group. This was the last time for us to see each other until several years after the war. (Foster volunteered for a night mission with another crew on August 12, 1945. The plane crashed into the ocean just after take off at Ie Shima. Foster was the only survivor. The war ended three days later. This was Foster's second 2nd crash at sea The first happened on March 11, 1945 when the right engine of the B-25 he was flying in was hit by ground fire and ditched near the Triton Islands which consisted of a few small coral

and sandy islands. Foster along with his crew were rescued that day by a Navy PBM Mariner flying boat.



Attached is a photo of Lt. Baeta and crew.--??

John Baeta was being checked out as 1st. pilot by Lt. Smith on this carrier fight to San Jose. Little did they know what was in store for them. They arrived just in time to load up with 500 lb. bombs and join the battle along with, I've been told, 100 or more planes.



This was one hell of a way to enter the war on one's first mission during a hectic night melee. It was a dark night at San Jose which was under attack by Jap bombers too. Smith and his crew were ordered to sink any ships found in the bay. Foster once told me, "Our turret gunner flew a couple more missions after that night and was subsequently grounded, sent home and discharged due to combat stress. On this night at Mindoro they were flying on the deck attacking a destroyer but saw a large transport ship and made a sharp turn dropping their bombs on it and pulled up just clearing the ship's masts. Foster said to me, "Our turret gunner ducked as we barley cleared the masts. After clearing the large transport, a huge bright explosion was observed behind us. We thought for sure that we had sunk the ship." However, there was never any conformation that a transport vessel was there that night. It could have been one of the cruisers.

My Friend, Lt. Earnest Perkins had loaded up with four 500-pound bombs and took off to attack the Japanese naval force. Perkins normally flew aerial photo recon missions, but at times like this he was required to fly combat missions. Perk, that's what everyone called him, told me that he circled around for about one hour as the melee was going on and wondered if he really wanted to die. The moon came up behind the Jap ships and he saw silhouettes of the ships. He told me, "I saw a silhouette of a big f--- cruiser loom up in front of me, and I started my attack and decided against strafing which would reveal my position. The Japs would have cut loose and blast us out of the sky. I decided to fly low as possible. Pulling up over the cruiser, I dropped four 500 lb. bombs. There was a tremendous explosion behind us as we departed the scene."



Perk was certain that he had sunk the cruiser, but there is no historical records indicating that a cruiser was sunk that night. However, I heard that a sub sunk one. Records indicated that all of the Japanese ships had been hit at least once that night. Perk and his crew were awarded the

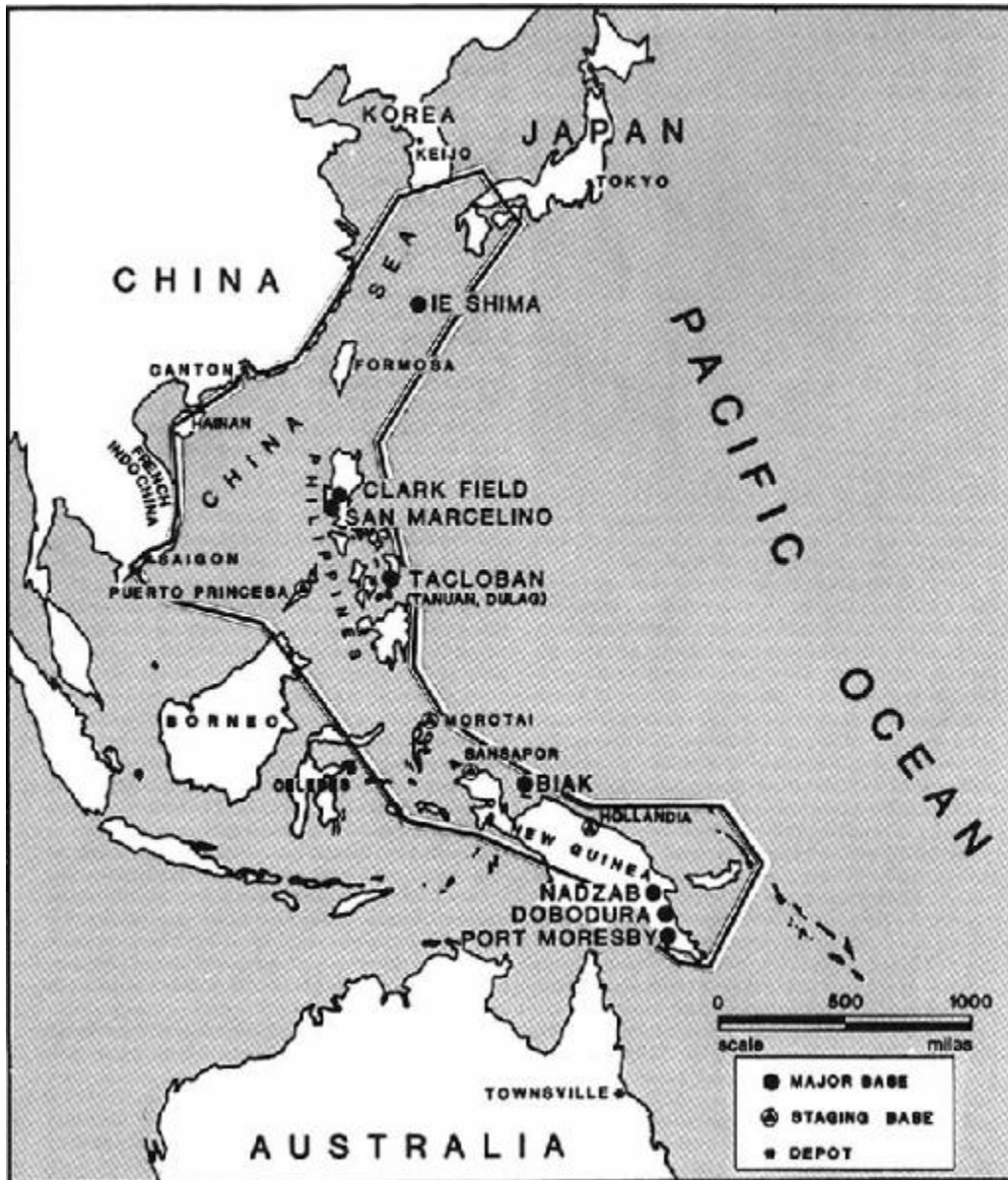
DFC for their night effort, see attached copy.



As he departed for Leyte after his effort, San Jose was being bombed, and our ground forces were not only firing at the Japanese's bombers but at him too. I understand that three or four B-25s were shot down, one ditched. Lt. Perkins told me that perhaps 20 of our fighters were also shot down.

By time we arrived at Tacloban on our flight from Biak, the Jap naval force had withdrawn from the Mindoro area. Six B-25s from the 345th were selected to continue on and attack the retreating naval force. I was one of the six. It was dark when we took off loaded with fuel and bombs. Flying in formation with all lights out, not even formation lights, made formation flying most difficult, to say the least. In order for me to stay in formation flying the left wing of the lead plane, I flew below and to the left of the lead plane using its exhaust flame to maintain my formation position. About four hours into the flight, the lead ship made a sharp right turn, and I lost it. This happened with other planes in the formation too. Our orders were not to go it alone. The others four went on and attacked some ships but not the destroyers and cruisers which had escaped beyond their range. My flying time for that day was fifteen hours.

The next night, December 28th, seven B-25s from the 345th Bomb Group were briefed for a mission to Clark Field.



A mission designed to disrupt Japanese planes harassing the invasion force heading for the invasion of Luzon at Lingayen Gulf. Two planes from the 501st squadron would participate. Lt. Hall, my tent mate, and I would represent the 501 Sq.



Tent on the island of Biak (recording 1)

The briefing took place at Dulag airstrip on Leyte. Members of the 345th BG were scattered all over the island. The ground echelon had been caught by surprise with the early arrival of the air echelon. The Army engineers had been working on Tacloban airfield since late October and it was far from complete. The other airfields were full of aircraft too. For several days our aircraft were scattered all over the island. It turned out to be a logistical and organizational

nightmare: however, we were able to get seven crews together the night of the 28th.



The Air Apaches were consolidating their operations at Tacloban Airstrip which was built on a peninsula jutting into the sea on the east side of Leyte Island. The hardstands at left are full of B-25s from the 345th.

My regular crew was down in Sidney on R&R. I had declined the leave in order to complete more missions and head home sooner. The weather at Dulag was terrible with heavy rain and wind. Our operation officer called Bomber Command and tried to persuade them to scrub the mission, but Bomber Command said the weather was fine at their location and that we were just having a local shower. The crews were quite concerned. Lt. Hall was first to take off. I was

number two. The plan called for us to take off at fifteen minutes interval and attack Clark Field at minimum altitude at fifteen- minute intervals.



Just prior to run-up, my tail gunner became sick and a volunteer was rushed out to replace him. I had a new crew on this mission, and this was 2nd Lt. Alvin G. McIver's, my copilot, first mission. What a way for him to start the war. I'm sorry to report that he was killed February 20, 1945, on a mission to Formosa.



Lt Hall took off and I followed fifteen minutes later climbing out through heavy rain and turbulence and breaking into the clear after passing Northern Leyte and Samar. The tropical

storm by this time had reached Bomber Command, and they canceled the mission. Lt Hall had engine trouble after take off and had returned to Dulag. My radios went out, so I didn't get the recall message. (I might add at this point that the attached mission report, written about three weeks after the mission, indicated that the other five planes took off and four completed the mission. Where they got their information I haven't the foggiest!! I have an idea a report was needed to fill a report requirement. This is understandable being that we lost 111 killed and several hundred wounded when the two transport ships carrying all our ground personnel were hit by Kamikaze Jap planes in Leyte Gulf on November 11, 1944. I'm sure new replacements hadn't arrived yet. (Attached is a copy of the mission report for what it's worth. Also attached is a copy of a news release, which isn't even mentioned in the mission report. Our ground units being scattered all over the island and communication between the units was almost nil had something to do with it, I'm sure. It is possible that the other crews got off, but I've never talked to any of them or anyone who flew this mission.)

I flew up along the coast of Luzon to a point north of Clark Field where I turned eastward letting down through mountain passes. Approaching from the north in clear weather we found Clark Field and the surrounding areas quite dark, surprising because Lt. Hall's attack should have started some fires around the area. We learned later that Lt. Hall had aborted. I flew over Clark Field flying under 50 feet trying to locate my assigned target but couldn't locate it and flew by without strafing or dropping any bombs. As we cleared the area, my tail gunner, SGT. Casty, called on intercom telling me that the runway lights had been turned on.



Making a fast 180 degree turn back to Clark Field I saw two large bombers on the downwind leg of the traffic pattern. Pulling up behind the last bomber and spacing myself, flipping on our running lights to simulate the bombers in front of us, I followed them around the pattern and on to the final approach. About this time my turret gunner reported two Jap fighters above us about 2,000 feet. Deciding that strafing would reveal our location, I decided against strafing and dropping only parafrags would be the best bet. As the bombers landed, I doused our lights, opened the bomb bay doors and spread our parafrags down the runway on the last bomber to land and made a right turn catching the first bomber which had turned off the runway and was speeding down a taxiway. This might have been the 1st B-25 to bomb Clark Field.



As we sped away, my gunners reported explosions and flames on the runway and felt certain that they were the bomber, but there was never any official confirmation. Flying as low as possible to avoid the light ack-ack that started to come up. As we climbed out over southern Bataan passing to the west of Corregidor where we spotted a silhouette of a large troop ship. My first thought was to strafe it but decided against it thinking that our POW might be aboard, so we continued on our way.

If we couldn't hit Clark Field, we were briefed on a secondary target at Bulan. We were briefed that Bulan consisted of a large group of barracks. Ack-ack, we were told, would be light to nil. With this in mind, I asked my co-pilot, "how about hitting the secondary target?" He was all for it. We strafed with ammo meant for Clark Field. Reaching the target we set up a racetrack pattern strafing until our ammo ran out and then headed for Tacloban climbing to 500 feet. My tail gunner called on intercom and informed me that heavy ack-ack was bursting close behind us, so descending rapidly we hit the deck and continued on our way.



Fuel was running low, about 30 minutes left, when we reached the point where we broke out of the weather when we departed Leyte on our way to Clark Field. Our radios seemed to be working, so I called Tacloban for their “Savannah” (code name for weather, number one was “best”, number five was “it can’t get any worse”). They came back with, “Savannah five, call us if we can be of any help.” I thought to myself, “Oh shit.” I tried to fly under the storm. But it was impossible to maintain VFR even at 100 feet. I made quick 180 degree turn flying back to better conditions and climbing to 6,000 feet in order to clear mountaintops in the area. {This is the same area where Lt. Wallace Chalipoux, a good friend and classmate, and we were on the same overseas orders, disappeared 12 days later after taking off in the rain on a mission to support the invasion at Lingayen Gulf. His plane disappeared without a trace; however, I’ve learned that the wreckage of his plane was found in the mid-nineties on the side of this mountain with the remains of the crew. Two other B-25s from our group were lost that day. The Lazy Daisy Mae, which pulled out of formation and crashed into a mountainside. The other was lost to enemy action at Lingayen.}.



Back to my story--, Turning back toward Tacloban trying to maintain control in the heavy rain and turbulence I told my crew to prepare to bail out. I had no idea how we could make an instrument approach with unreliable radios and jamming by the Japs. The radio compass needle was just spinning. Fortunately, just about the time I was about to give the bail out order, an opening appeared in the clouds and I could see lights on ships in Leyte Gulf. Making a very rapid descent, I leveled out at mast height and was again engulfed in the storm. Calling Tackloban and requesting searchlights, located near each end of the runway, be turned on and waved back and forth. They complied, and I was able to locate the field by the bright glare. Tower gave instructions to land to the south, but the clouds were so thick and the rain so heavy that it was impossible to land in that direction even flying and 100 feet. I informed the tower that we would try making our approach from the south and land to the north. After making three very tight turns at 100 feet trying to line up with the runway and the gas gauges showing almost on empty, I told my co-pilot, "No matter what! We have to get down on this try, or we would be

out of gas!” As I turned on final, Lt McIver flipped on the landing lights, but the glare from the heavy rain and fog blinded me, and I quickly flipped the landing lights off. Even then I had to skid and slip the plane looking out the side window to see the runway, which was a metal covered strip, which dropped off 20 feet into the gulf at the far end. I got it down, I don’t know how, and stopped just 20 or 30 feet from the end. Radios started working again. Tower called to tell us that we landed with a tail wind. It was probably best that I didn’t know that when I landed. .

Captain Jones, soon to become our squadron CO, soaking wet met us in his jeep and informed us that the mission had been cancelled and we were the only ones that flew the mission, contrary to the mission report. He said, “I was standing in the doorway of operations, which is about 60 yards from the runway, and was unable to see you as you rolled past.” After the debriefing we were told that we would be recommend for the DFC. That was the last we ever heard of that. That was understandable because we were losing crews and planes so fast during this period that there wasn’t time for things like that. Capt. Jones drove us to the transit tents. On the way the jeep slipped off the water covered road into a swamp dumping us into the muddy water. We managed to get the jeep back on the road. When we reached our open tent, we found the cots and blankets sopping wet, but it felt good to lie down and sleep. I had flown over 20 hours in two days. Attached is the news release of our mission. I’m not sure where captain Clyde C. Carter got his information. I’m certain that he wasn’t at the debriefing which consisted of five or six people. Some of my friends got the story that I had shot down the two bombers. I’m still asked about that at our reunions. End of story.



LT. EARNEST PERKINS ON THE LEFT & LT ROMAN OHNEMUS
AT MOKMER STRIP, BIAK, EARLY DECEMBER, 1944

C O P Y

GO No. 1362, Hq. Far East Air Forces, 6 July 1945. (Contd.)

The citation is as follows:

For extraordinary achievement while participating in an aerial flight near Mindoro, Philippine Islands, on 26 December 1944. These officers and enlisted men were crew members of a B-25 aircraft which attacked a Japanese naval force, consisting of a heavy cruiser, a light cruiser, and 6 destroyers, approaching to shell our newly-established installations at Mindoro. Because there were no Allied naval units near enough to intercept the enemy force, all serviceable planes on the island were dispatched in an attempt to destroy the Japanese ships. Since the darkness made formation bombing impractical, the planes made their runs individually. Flying through intense anti-aircraft fire, this crew approached a cruiser from below deck level and dropped their bombs on the vessel, scoring 2 direct hits and starting a fire amidships. The outstanding courage and devotion to duty displayed by these officers and enlisted men during this flight are in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Army Air Forces.

By direction of the President, under the provisions of the act of Congress approved 2 July 1926 (Bulletin 8, "D", 1926), a Distinguished-Flying Cross is awarded by the Commanding General, Far East Air Forces, to the following named officers and enlisted men:

**DFC CITATION FOR LT. PERKINS AND CREW FOR
MISSION ON THE NIGHT OF DEC. 26, 1944 AT
MINDORO ISL, PHILIPPINES.**



2LT. JOHN BAET'S CREW

TOP: E. THOLRNQUIST (E), F. RICHARDSON (TC), FOSTER STANDFIELD (R0)

BOTTOM: F. ROGARS (CP), J. BAETA (P), D. WARRAN(N)

PARTICIPATED IN THE BATTLE OFF MINDORO 12/26/44

244 HEADQUARTERS 345TH BOMBARDMENT GROUP (M) AAF
OFFICE OF GROUP INTELLIGENCE OFFICER
A.P.O. 72

23
CAS/jdj

17 January, 1945

SUBJECT: Narrative Report on Mission 364-A ; 28-29 Dec 1944.

TO : COMMANDING GENERAL, FBAF, APO 925. Attn. A.C. of S., A-2.

1. Seven planes took off on the late afternoon for a night strike against CLARK FIELD, with BULAN A/D as secondary. Only four of our planes reached the target; three returning early, one due to mechanical failure, the others due to weather. One hundred forty-four parafrags were dropped on CLARK FIELD, while the runway at ANGELLES No. 1 was strafed. The planes then proceeded to BULAN A/D, where seventy-one (71) parafrags were dropped and the airdrome area strafed. Due to darkness, no accurate assessment of damage could be made.

2. "Softening-up" in preparation for the LUZON OPERATION was the objective of this strike, while grounded airplanes between No. 4 and No. 6 runways at CLARK FIELD was the particular target assigned.

3. a. The planes flew individually to the target, taking off at five-minute intervals; since it was felt that it would not be possible to fly formation over the target at night. The Group Leader was Lt Hall of the 501st Squadron.

b. The planes and pilots participating in this strike and their squadrons are as follows:

Lt Hall	A/P 173	501st Sq
Lt Onnesus	A/P 034	501st Sq
Lt Symington	A/P 007	500th Sq
Capt Nunes	A/P 030	499th Sq
Lt Phillips	A/P 013	499th Sq
Lt Price	A/P 785	499th Sq
Lt Slaughter	A/P 174	499th Sq

c. Only four of our planes reached CLARK FIELD. Two of these dropped 151 x 23 lb parafrags there, 72 falling along the South side of No. 2 R/W trailing off to the Southeast, and 72 falling in the assigned dispersal area between No. 4 and No. 6 R/W's. At ANGELLES A/D, South of CLARK FIELD, the No. 1 R/W was strafed. Three planes, hoping to find better weather at the secondary target, proceeded to BULAN A/D where they strafed and dropped 71 x 23 lb parafrags just South of the East half of the strip. In all cases accurate damage assessment was impossible, due to the poor weather and to darkness.

CONFIDENTIAL

Narrative Report on Mission 364-A ; (cont'd)

d. The enemy's opposition at CLARK FIELD was nil. However at BULAN light and medium, moderate and inaccurate A/A fire was received from positions along the beach West of the R/W. Positions spotted were: a 20mm. on point at E end of BULAN TOWN; a 20mm. on beach at the W end of town; a 20mm. position on the beach halfway between the W edge of town and the mouth of the stream W of the strip. A .50 calibre position was seen firing, as were two medium positions 2500' and 3000' W of the W end of the R/W.

4. The success of this strike was impaired due to the fact that CLARK FIELD was "soaked in" when our planes reached there.

5. In the opinion of this officer, there were no actions justifying awards on this strike.

6. STATISTICS.

a. Time Table:

Take-off:	1920-2250/1/28 from TACLOBAN
Attack:	2250-2300/1/28 at CLARK FIELD
	1220-0155/1/29 at BULAN A/D
Landing:	0430-0710/1/29 at TACLOBAN

b. Route: TACLOBAN-MINDORO-E COAST OF LILION-CLARK FIELD
BULAN A/D-TACLOBAN.

CARL A. STRAUSS,
Captain, Air Corps,
Ass't Intell Officer

Will you please request extra clippings from your family, if the story is printed, and bring them to your Squadron Public Relations section so they may be put into the Unit Scrap Book.

Clyde C. Carter
CLYDE C. CARTER,
Capt. Air Corps,
Public Relations

Per: Lt. Ohnemus.

WITH THE 5TH AAF IN THE PHILIPPINES - - It was an old trick, but it worked.

First Lieutenant Roman H. Ohnemus, 22, husband of Mrs. Carol May Ohnemus, 421 North Valencia Street, Alhambra, California, was flying a night mission over Luzon for the Air Apaches, crack 345th Bombardment Group in the 5th Air Force. When he came in sight of Clark Field - at that time still Jap held - he observed the field lights ablaze and two large Jap bombers circling to land.

Apparently undetected, Lt. Ohnemus decided to put reverse English on a common Jap trick in the early days of the war, and buzzed the field at 50 feet as though requesting landing signals. The Waps in the tower gave him the green light so he pulled up to join the enemy in their traffic pattern. Spacing himself behind the second bomber in the pattern, he followed their landing procedure, blinking lights when the Japs blinked theirs. Then, when the planes had landed and were taxiing off the runway, Lt. Ohnemus swooped to less than 25 feet and dropped his bombs directly over them, doused his lights and high-tailed it back to his Leyte base.

A 1939 graduate of Garfield High School, Lt. Ohnemus is the son of Mrs. Ola E. Ohnemus, 1316 Wellshire Boulevard, Los Angeles. He entered the Army in 1943 and won his wings and commission in La Junta, Colorado in 1944. He has been overseas 8 months.