

When America Needed Heroes

'Shorty' Wheless and 'Buzz' Wagner typified the kind of air warriors the American public was eager to recognize early on during World War II.

By Donald J. Young

After the disastrous attack at Pearl Harbor, the loss of Wake Island and the rout of American and Filipino forces in the Philippines, the United States was in desperate need of someone or something to indicate that the country was fighting back in 1942. It needed heroes or heroic deeds to offset the dark headlines that daily dominated every newspaper in the country. Captain Colin Kelly -- who died on December 10, 1941, during a bombing mission near the Philippine island of Luzon -- was the first such hero. But two other remarkable American fliers, Hewitt T. "Shorty" Wheless and Boyd T. "Buzz" Wagner, came into prominence shortly after that. Ironically, however, few today remember their exploits.

When the war broke out, 28-year-old 1st Lt. Shorty Wheless was a Boeing B-17D Flying Fortress pilot with the 19th Bombardment Group, stationed at Clark Field in the Philippines. After the Japanese attacked the Philippines on the afternoon of December 8, Wheless and others -- along with what was left of the original 17 B-17s at Clark -- flew south to Del Monte Field on the island of Mindanao two days later. There, they were some 500 miles out of range of Japanese bombers. On the afternoon of December 14 six of the Fortresses were ordered to attack an enemy invasion force at Legaspi, on the southern tip of Luzon. Wheless' B-17 was one of the six assigned to the mission.

Although the Legaspi attack would be the biggest single raid against the Japanese to date in the week-old war, bad luck and mechanical difficulties, which had plagued the 19th Bombardment Group from the beginning, continued. When the lead B-17, piloted by Lieutenant Jim Connally, began its takeoff run, a tire blew out, forcing the big ship off the runway. As the Fortress slid off the field, its right wingtip dipped to the ground and crumpled. Clearly, that was one less plane available for the mission.

The five remaining planes, piloted by Wheless and Lieutenants Lee Coats, Jack Adams, Elliot Vandevanter and Walter Ford, got off safely, the last plane leaving the runway at 12:14 p.m. About 200 miles out, the group ran into a spot of bad weather. When they broke out of the storm a few minutes later, Wheless was nowhere to be seen. His No. 3 engine had quit, forcing him to drop out.

From that point on, things went from bad to worse. A half-hour out from the target, Ford radioed Coats, who had taken over from Connally, that he was having engine trouble and was returning to Del Monte. At the scheduled rendezvous point, about 35 miles from where the flight was to make its final turn for the target, Coats radioed that his engines were performing so badly that he was unable to make altitude, and was turning back.

That left Vandevanter and Adams to go it alone. Forced to drop down to 18,000 feet because of cloud cover, Adams was the first over the target. After releasing his eight 600-pounders at the line of enemy transports sitting off the Legaspi beach, he was jumped by five Mitsubishi A6M Zeros. Although a Japanese carrier was not spotted in the invasion force, one probably was lurking nearby, given how quickly the Zeros appeared.

Adams dived for cloud cover, with the Zeros right after him. Before he could get far, however, two of his engines were knocked out and two of his crew were wounded. Adams' crew managed to shoot down two of the enemy fighters during the race for the clouds, but the remaining three Zeros were waiting for them when they came out. At that point, Adams "pulled a cute one," according to Harry Schrieber, his navigator. "He throttled back suddenly and one Zero overshot us to the left, which our side gunner picked off. Another came up under the stabilizer, and our bottom gunner got his second for the day."

Losing altitude while still battling the last enemy fighter, Adams decided to try for a beach landing on the nearby island of Masbate, just south of Luzon. Unfortunately, there was no real beach -- "only jagged rocks with white surf wrapped around them," Schrieber recalled. Desperately looking for a place to land, Adams spotted a rice paddy. "Cutting the remaining two motors so we wouldn't have to climb out of her in flames, he made as nice a belly landing as you could hope for," said Schrieber. After a couple of passes over the downed bomber, the lone Zero turned for home.

Vandevanter, in the other B-17, arrived over the target three minutes behind Adams. Fortunately for him, Adams had attracted the attention of all the Zero pilots, so Vandevanter was able to make three uncontested runs over the target before more fighters appeared and chased him into a cloud bank. Vandevanter's plane escaped without a scratch and returned safely to Del Monte.

Meanwhile, the engine trouble that had caused Wheless to drop out of formation had been corrected. Although he was far behind what he thought were the other four B-17s, Wheless chose to continue on to the target, knowing that he would likely be attacking an alerted enemy whose defense might well include fighter planes.

That decision would soon vault his name into virtually every major American newspaper and magazine. In addition, Wheless' flight would be chronicled in a radio address by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. For the most part, the president's account was accurate.

Roosevelt: *"By the time [Wheless] arrived over the target, the other four Flying Fortresses had dropped their bombs and stirred up the hornet's nest of Japanese Zero planes. Eighteen of these Zero fighters attacked our lone Flying Fortress. Despite this mass attack, our plane proceeded on its mission...."*

In fact -- although Wheless didn't find it out until two days after the mission -- only the two B-17s had made it to the target ahead of him. Although the number of enemy planes that jumped him was estimated at 18, in reality it was probably closer to 12. While the running battle with the enemy fighters was in progress, Wheless headed straight for the six enemy transports neatly lined up off Legaspi. After bombardier R.W. Schlotte released his eight 600-pounders, Wheless' attention was focused on taking evasive action and giving his gunners a crack at the Japanese fighter pilots.

Roosevelt: *"...As it turned back on its homeward journey, a running fight between the bomber and the 18 Japanese pursuit planes continued for 75 miles. Four pursuit planes of the Japs attacked simultaneously at each side. Four were shot down with the side guns. During this fight the bomber's radio operator was killed, the engineer's right hand was shot off, and one gunner was crippled, leaving only one man available to operate both side guns. Although wounded in one hand, this gunner alternately manned both side guns, bringing down three more Japanese Zero planes."*

W.G. Killin, the radio operator and belly gunner in what was called the "bathtub" position in the Fortress D-model, had the top of his head blown off and his gun put out of action. Gunners Russell Brown and W.W. Williams each claimed a Zero before being wounded. Williams, who was hit by a 20mm shell from one of the enemy

planes, had his leg ripped open, knocking him out of the fight. Brown, whose right hand had been nearly shot off, was unable to operate his gun. The job of firing both waist guns went to Sergeant John Gootee, who though himself wounded in the right wrist, kept firing both guns until helped by the bombardier, Schlotte.

The seven enemy planes claimed by Wheless and the four claimed by Adams in his brief fight may seem hard to believe in light of later WWII statistics. Remember, however, that this was the first time the Japanese had tangled with a B-17. The Zero pilots were unfamiliar with the Fortress' firepower and the location of its guns. On the other hand, the system of authenticating a kill by a witness had not yet been put in place by the U.S. Army Air Forces. Had it been, the count might have been reduced to five or less. Also, it was apparently not possible for a large number of planes to literally swarm all over a B-17. Saburo Sakai, the Japanese ace who shot down Colin Kelly, said: "It was impossible for (a large number of Zeros) to make a concerted attack against the bomber, for in the rarified air we could easily overcontrol and collide with each other. Instead, we swung out in a long file, and made our firing passes one after another, each plane making its run alone." This was particularly easy against the D-model B-17, since it had no tail gun, relying instead on the gun in the bathtub position to help cover the tail.

Roosevelt: *"...While this was going on, one engine in the American bomber was shot out. Out of 11 control cables, all but four were shot away. The rear landing wheel was blown off entirely, and the two front wheels were both shot out."*

As far as it went, this assessment of the damage was correct. The 5-foot-6, 138-pound Wheless was struggling for all he was worth to keep the big plane in the air while it was being shot to pieces by machine-gun and cannon fire from the Zeros. The running battle with the Japanese fighters, which had begun the minute the plane appeared over the target, would last, as the president said, for 75 miles. First the No. 1 engine was shot up, its throttle cable shot in two. Then, in rapid succession, Wheless lost the radio and the oxygen system. Then a 6-inch hole appeared in the right wing fuel tank, the result of 20mm cannon fire. After that came a sudden loss of control, when a hail of 20mm fire severed seven of the control cables of the big plane, leaving cables intact for only right rudder, one elevator and both ailerons. By that time, as the president stated, both wheels had been shot flat and the tail wheel had been blown completely out of its mount. Then there were the three wounded crewmen and one killed in action -- with three machine guns jammed or otherwise out of commission. Fuel was spewing freely out of the right wing tank, which meant that a second engine would quit just miles from the Mindanao coast.

Roosevelt: *"...The flight continued until the remaining Japanese pursuit ships exhausted their ammunition and turned back. With two engines gone and the plane practically out of control, the American bomber returned to base after dark. The mission had been accomplished. The name of that pilot was Captain Hewitt T. Wheless."*

Well, there were a few dramatic details left out. Looking for protection from the gang of Zeros on his tail, Wheless ducked into a cloud bank as he left the Luzon coast. When he broke out minutes later, not a Japanese plane was to be seen. The enemy pilots -- either low on ammunition or fuel, or sure the battered B-17, trailing smoke and gasoline and limping along on three engines, was finished -- had given up the chase. As Wheless neared the Mindanao coast, it was getting dark and had started to rain. After fighting to keep the plane in the air for more than 300 miles, he knew his chances were slim of reaching Del Monte. When the second engine ran out of gas,

with nothing but jungle between the Mindanao coast and Del Monte, Wheless decided to head for an auxiliary strip at Cagayan, on the northern coast of the island.

Afraid to fly other than in a straight line because of his damaged control cables, Wheless would not be able to check out the field first before coming in. He knew that he would have just one shot at landing. As he gingerly banked the plane toward the field and started in, he was aghast to see it had been barricaded in anticipation of its being used by the Japanese. Past the point of no return, Wheless lowered his wheels, possibly unaware that the tires had both been shot flat.

After the plane ripped through several barricades, some 200 yards down the runway the big bomber's brakes suddenly locked, causing the 39,000-pound aircraft to stand on its nose for a second before crashing down on its tail. They were down at last, even though it was far from the routine landing the president had implied. After getting the wounded crewmen to the small hospital at Cagayan, the ground crew counted at least 1,200 bullet holes in the plane. Each propeller blade had been hit five or six times.

For his gallant efforts in bringing the shot-up Fortress and her wounded crewmen back to base, Wheless received the Distinguished Service Cross. Promoted to captain, he also received the Legion of Merit, Flying Cross and Air Medal. Later in the war he flew Boeing B-29 Superfortresses.

There is an interesting postscript to Wheless' story. On the island of Saipan on March 9, 1945, Boeing B-29 aircrews were shocked to learn that henceforth they would abandon the high-altitude bombing they had been using and bomb Japanese targets from the unprecedented altitude of 5,000 to 8,000 feet. The attacks would be carried out at night with incendiary bombs.

That night, 300 B-29s bombed Tokyo, resulting in more than one-fourth of the city's being consumed by fire. From that night on, the strategic bombing of Japan was done differently. Although credit for implementing that strategy went to General Curtis LeMay, the concept had actually originated with Brig. Gen. Thomas Power and Colonel Hewitt Wheless. The two men had gotten the idea after studying a strike photo of Tokyo, where several blocks of the city had burned after the last high-altitude raid. LeMay listened intently to their idea, then gave them 24 hours to put it into practice. The rest is history.

The other American airman who became a war hero early on in the conflict had quickly made a name for himself as a fighter pilot in the Pacific. In fact, 26-year-old 1st Lt. Buzz Wagner was described by those who knew of his exploits as the best fighter pilot they had ever seen. He was admired for his combat skills as well as his flying prowess.

Wagner was serving as commanding officer of the 17th Pursuit Squadron, stationed at Iba airfield, on the west coast of Luzon, when the Japanese struck the Philippines on December 8, 1941. By the end of that fateful day, only five of 18 Curtiss P-40Es of his squadron were left, and Iba, as a functioning base, had been mostly destroyed.

Early on the morning of December 12, Wagner -- who up to that time had not seen any action -- took off on a lone reconnaissance mission to observe the enemy ships off Aparri, where the Japanese had landed two days earlier. Because of the devastating losses suffered by the U.S. fighter force between December 8 and 10, orders had come down from headquarters restricting American fighters to fly reconnaissance only. Any confrontation with enemy fighters was to be avoided if at all possible. But Buzz Wagner was just about to be confronted with several very tempting targets.

The morning was overcast, forcing Wagner to rely on his compass to lead him to Aparri. Estimating that he was close to his objective after approximately 200 miles, he

descended through the overcast, only to find himself practically on top of two Japanese destroyers. His appearance brought a quick response from the anti-aircraft gunners on the two ships, forcing Wagner to, as he later said, "turn nose-down and dive within a few feet of the water" to avoid the heavy barrage.

Flying inland, directly into the morning sun, he was startled moments later by tracer fire zipping over his canopy. Looking back, he spotted a pair of Japanese fighters on his tail and three more above him. Surprised by how quick they were to respond to his presence, he "pulled nose-up...directly into the sun at full throttle. The two Nippos...lost me," he said, "[and] I went into a half barrel roll onto their tails....They were in close formation and both burst into flames almost simultaneously" from the hammering by his six .50-caliber guns. According to author Walter Edmonds' version of Wagner's exploit in his book *They Fought With What They Had*, the Japanese aircraft were Nakajima Ki-27 "Nates," and on finding them on his tail, the American pilot "suddenly throttled back and let the astonished enemy flash past" -- which contradicts Wagner's own account.

Looking down, Wagner found himself directly over the Aparri airfield, with 12 enemy fighters neatly lined up on the edge of the runway. "I made two passes at the field," Wagner said, and "saw five of them burst into flames."

Just as he pulled up from his second pass, the American saw the three enemy fighters boring down on him. "I dropped [my] empty belly tank...and dived close to the ground, then gave it the needle and easily outdistanced them," Wagner recalled. "The last I saw of the field was two columns of black smoke." Not long after Wagner returned from that eventful mission, word of his foray reached the news-hungry correspondents hanging around General Douglas MacArthur's headquarters in Manila. Wagner, it seemed, was well worth watching. Four days later, he proved that he was the fighter pilot hero they had been hoping to find.

On the morning of December 10, the same day the Japanese invaded Aparri, another landing force had come ashore on the northwest coast of Luzon at Vigan. As at Aparri, the enemy had flown in a squadron of fighters to the Vigan airfield. Those planes, along with several troopships, had been spotted by Lieutenant Russell Church during a reconnaissance mission over the area on December 15.

Both Wagner and Lieutenant Joe Moore, the 3rd Pursuit Squadron's commanding officer, volunteered for the sortie to Vigan. When the two men tossed a coin to determine who would go and who would stay behind, Wagner won. At 6 a.m. on December 16, Wagner and Church took off from Iba. Each airman's plane was carrying half a dozen 30-pound fragmentation bombs. A third P-40, piloted by Lieutenant Al Strauss, would fly cover for them.

As at Aparri, Japanese anti-aircraft gunners were quick to open up on the unwelcome visitors. Undaunted, Wagner, with Church flying only a few hundred yards behind him, headed for the row of enemy ships off the coast. Coming in at 2,500 feet, Wagner unloaded all six of his bombs, several of which hit their targets. Pulling up, he looked back in time to see Church's plane take a direct hit.

Flames were shooting out from the belly of Church's P-40. At that point, he banked his burning fighter toward the Vigan airfield, a single north-south strip four miles southwest of the town. Leveling off at treetop height, the young pilot dropped all six of his bombs on a line of enemy fighters. It was a "perfectly executed attack," Wagner recalled, and "for seconds it...seemed that Russell would be able to regain control, [but] the plane suddenly rocked wildly and plunged sideways to earth."

There was no doubt in Wagner's mind that Church had realized he was facing certain death when he chose to attack rather than try to gain altitude and bail out. "The Medal of Honor has been given for less," Wagner later told a correspondent.

By the time Church crashed, Wagner had been joined by Strauss, and both of them were determined to make the enemy pay for the loss of their comrade. When the two

Americans started their attack on Vigan, Japanese pilots and ground personnel could be seen running for their planes. But it was too late. Five times the two pilots crossed and recrossed the field, strafing the enemy troops and aircraft.

As Wagner began his final pass, he spotted a single Nate taking off from the opposite end of the field. Since his view of the Japanese plane was blocked by his own wing, the American calmly rolled his P-40 over on its back to get a clear view of the enemy plane, then righted his ship, throttled back to let the Japanese pilot pull away to a comfortable shooting distance and shot him down.

When Wagner and Strauss finally turned for Clark Field, their ammunition exhausted and fuel tanks nearly empty, they left behind an estimated 17 enemy planes destroyed or burning, with an unknown number of Japanese dead lying on the runway. Despite the fact that the mission had garnered the most devastating results of the air war to date, headquarters was not happy with the "unauthorized" use of its precious fighters. But when the news-hungry correspondents got wind of the second "Wagner foray" in four days, the story made headlines back in the States.

Ironically, Wagner's exploits at Vigan, which earned him the Distinguished Service Cross, were for all practical purposes his last as a fighter pilot. On January 2, 1942, Wagner and 16 other pilots were flown out of Bataan to Australia. The plan was to have them ferry fighters back to the Philippines. As it turned out, however, they, unlike MacArthur, did not return.

By January, Wagner had been promoted to captain, and by April he was a lieutenant colonel, becoming the youngest pilot in the Army Air Forces to wear silver leaves. With those promotions came a new assignment.

Wagner was now tasked with training the stream of new, green fighter pilots coming to Australia from the United States. In that role, Wagner did fly in combat one more time, on April 30, 1942, when he accompanied a group of his students on a raid to Lae, New Guinea. Flying a Bell P-39 Airacobra on that occasion, he shot down three Zeros, making him the top ace in the Pacific theater at the time.

Tragically, Buzz Wagner died later that same year in an accident during a routine flight. On November 29, while he was piloting a plane between Eglin Field, Fla., and Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala., his aircraft went down, and he was killed.

As for our other forgotten hero, Hewitt Wheless, when he retired from the military in June 1968 as a lieutenant general, he was serving as the assistant chief of staff of the Air Force. He died of natural causes on September 7 of that year.

Both Wheless and Wagner typified the kind of heroic warriors that Americans were eager to recognize early on in World War II, when the Japanese were experiencing success after success against ill-prepared U.S. forces in the Pacific. Acting with determination in the face of seemingly overwhelming odds, these two pilots managed to exact a measure of punishment from one of the United States' most potent enemies -- and their country responded with gratitude.

On December 29, 1941, *Life* magazine published "Boyd Wagner's Story: America's First Ace Tells How He Shot Down First Two Planes." On February 16, 1942, the magazine initiated what it called a "Roll of Honor," containing the names and photographs of American servicemen honored by *Life* for their acts of heroism in the war. Interestingly enough, of the 18 men honored in the February 16 issue, nine were pilots, including Colin Kelly. Hewitt Wheless was honored in the March 16 issue and Buzz Wagner on April 20, after he became the first official American ace of the war.