

# CHAPTER 6

## 90<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron

After arriving in Australia by ship with the rest of the 3<sup>rd</sup> BG's four squadrons, the 90<sup>th</sup> BS took a train to Charters Towers, Queensland, where it arrived in March 1942. A week later its strength was bolstered by the arrival of remnants of the 27<sup>th</sup> BG which had escaped the Philippines. In early April three B-25Cs arrived, and a training program was established to get crews familiar with the new type, especially the modern Bendix power turret which was a new concept to all personnel.

Staging from Charters Towers via Darwin 11 April 1942, two 90<sup>th</sup> BS B-25Cs accompanied by eight more from the 13<sup>th</sup> BS and three B-17Es from other units, flew to hidden airfields in the Philippines for what came to be termed the Royce Mission. From these bases the small independent force made a series of strikes throughout the Philippines.

The 90<sup>th</sup> BS flew its first New Guinea mission on 19 April 1942 when a pair of Mitchells was sent to Port Moresby from where they reconnoitred New Britain. The first bomber was flown by First Lieutenant Ralph Schmidt, the second by First Lieutenant John Keeter. This resulted in the unit's first Mitchell loss which took place on late afternoon of 21 April 1942. Upon return to Australia, First Lieutenant Keeter was flying the Mitchell with co-pilot Captain Glenwood Stephenson, who chose to defer to Keeter's experience as pilot-in-command. By the time Keeter arrived off the coast near Charters Towers, the weather had closed in. In the late afternoon amid fading light and poor visibility, the B-25C entered a blind valley which led directly to the side of the 5,200-foot Mount Bartle Frere. The B-25C crashed into the mountainside killing all seven crew.

Then on 24 April three Mitchells got lost during a delivery flight to Port Moresby and ditched off the Papuan coast costing several lives. On 3 May the squadron's most unusual confrontation occurred when two Mitchells departed for a reconnaissance of distant Bougainville. At 1130 they encountered a Mavis flying boat and both B-25s made several attacking passes. However, the B-25s had just a single 0.50-calibre machine gun in the nose, which gave them limited forward-firing firepower. Defensive fire from the Mavis saw both B-25s break off the engagement.

Eventually the 90<sup>th</sup> BS was the most heavily engaged B-25 unit in the Fifth Air Force. Over a nineteen-month period from 30 March 1942 to 2 November 1943 it lost 30 Mitchells to accidents and fourteen to combat including anti-aircraft fire. The squadron had seven commanders during its Mitchell era. Major Ronald Hubbard was the first, before he was replaced by Major Thomas Gerrity on 23 August 1942 after Hubbard was promoted to group operations officer. He in turn was replaced by Major Raymond Petersen. However, Petersen went missing on 24 November 1942 during a reconnaissance flight and was replaced by Captain Wesley Dickinson, who was replaced in turn by Major Ed Larner on 28 December 1942. When Larner was killed on 30 April 1943 (see Profile 25) he in turn was replaced by Major John "Jock" Henebry. Major Richard "Dick" Ellis replaced Henebry when the latter was promoted to 3<sup>rd</sup> BG commander.