

The Man ... Behind the Guns !

A Look at Lt. Colonel "Pappy" Irving Gunn

On the 5th of August, 1942, Major General George Kenney, the new Commander of the Fifth Air Force in the Pacific, was touring Australian bases under his command when he came across a middle-aged Army Air Force Captain dressed in mechanics overalls and supervising a "home-made," clearly unauthorized, installation of a pack of fifty caliber machine guns into the nose of a 3rd Attack Group A-20 Havoc light bomber at the repair depot at Charters Tower airfield near Townsville. Intrigued, the General approached and learned that the man's name was Paul Irving Gunn, but due to his age, he was called "Pappy". The Captain briefed the General on his modification and its envisioned use in low-level fast strafing attacks against the Japanese. The General was impressed by the Captain's frank desire to more effectively rain death and destruction on the enemy since Kenney was of a similar mindset. General Kenney also asked if it would also be possible to rig bomb racks in the A-20s for the use of small "Para-frag" bombs. Captain Gunn assured the General that this would be relatively easy. The General liked what he heard and instinctively recognized that Captain Gunn was both an innovator and a maverick. Without hesitation, the General had orders cut for the Captain to join his personal staff as a "Special Projects Officer." In the meantime, he told Captain Gunn to stay on at Charters Tower and to have sixteen converted A-20s ready within two weeks. Working day and night with the 81st Depot Repair Squadron's engineers and mech-



Photo above is of "Pappy" Gunn – courtesy of the Larry Hickey collection.

anics, Captain Gunn didn't quite make the nearly impossible deadline. However, enough modified planes, with gun packs, racks for forty para-frags, and a droppable bomb-bay fuel tank, had been delivered that by the 12th of September, nine crews of the 3rd AG, fully practiced in the art of low level attacks, were able to participate in a highly effective raid against the Japanese airfield at Buna. The success of this mission marked the beginning of a long and close relationship between the General and his new "gadget man".

What General Kenney did not realize during his initial meeting with "Pappy" was that Captain Gunn was not a member of the repair depot, or of the 3rd AG. Technically, he was merely the Commander of an improvised transport squadron formed in the Philippines shortly after the Japanese attacked. But flying unarmed transports was not how the cigar chomping, eccentric, "Pappy" Gunn intended to spend the war. He had a personal vendetta with the Japanese as his wife and children had been captured in Manila and were civilian internees. In fact, by the time General Kenney met "Pappy", the Captain had already been in the thick of combat several times flying A-20s and B-25s with the 3rd AG. His activities prior to that had become legendary among the locals. But, before discussing these further, a look at his unique background is warranted.

Paul Irving Gunn was born in 1901 in Quitman, Arkansas. As a young teen-ager, he became fascinated with airplanes while reading about the heroic exploits of Allied pilots dog-fighting in their biplanes. When the United States entered WWI, Paul was 17 years old, but the war ended before he could chase his dreams to become a pilot. With the war winding down, the services had little need for pilots, so Paul enlisted in the Navy and became an aviation machinist's mate, learning about airplanes from a technical aspect. In his spare time, he paid for his own flying lessons, and eventually bought a surplus Navy seaplane that he restored and flew for fun. In 1923, he was offered a chance to become a naval enlisted pilot if he would re-enlist. He jumped at this, excelled, and earned his Navy wings, eventually becoming a member of the Navy's famous "Top Hat" fighter squadron. A later tour as an instructor at Pensacola would result in his teaching and training many of the future ace U.S. Navy pilots. Along the way, he got married. By 1939, though, he had put in his twenty years and retired out of the Navy, and still seeking adventure, he had migrated with his family to Hawaii to start his own charter flying business. From there he was hired by a wealthy Pilipino businessman to go to Manila and start an airline with Twin Beech passenger planes. He was just starting to enjoy some success when the war came and ruined it. Though around forty years old, he immediately offered his services to the military. The Army Air Corps commissioned him as a Captain on the

spot and his airplanes were incorporated into General MacArthur's Air Force. From there, his legend started to grow.

In the Philippines, the Air Corps kept Paul busy flying transport and recon missions in dangerous circumstances and, on February 1st, a marauding Japanese fighter shot Captain Gunn down into the jungle. Surviving his crash, he returned immediately to flying and became heavily involved in evacuating key personnel out of the Philippines and Mindanao to Australia. He flew anything available, from Army C-47s, to his own Twin Beeches, civilian DC-2s and DC-3s, and even a hastily repaired B-17. It was during these hectic flights that he got to know Lt. Col. John Davies, the CO of the 27th Bomb Group who later took command of the 3rd Attack Group. Not really a member of any particular unit, Paul was pretty much free to do his own thing. Much of what he did is not found in official records. He is said to have, at times, rigged his planes with bombs for targets of opportunity. He is known to have attempted to take a plane to Manila, then under Japanese occupation, to try and smuggle his family out, but this effort failed. He is also rumored to have talked the Dutch into letting him fly one of their Buffalo fighters on a combat mission in Java. As the story goes, he was duly shot down, and supposedly this second walk out of the jungle aged him to such a degree that he earned the nickname "Pappy". With the fall of the Philippines and Java, and with most of his transports temporarily out of service, Captain Gunn was a frustrated warrior. In March, he took to hanging out with the 3rd Attack Group, which had been augmented with the survivors of the 27th BG after it was decimated in the fighting in Java. Initially, the 3rd AG was short of aircraft, and they were flying a few worn out A-24 Banshees, Army versions of the Navy's Dauntless dive-bomber. Their allotted A-20 Havocs were still in mid-shipment. "Pappy" came to the 3rd AG's rescue in a most unusual way.

During one of his transport flights between Melbourne and Townsville, "Pappy" noticed two dozen brand new B-25 Mitchell bombers sitting in storage at Batchelor airfield. These actually belonged to the Dutch government and were meant for the Netherlands East Indies Air Force, but since the fall of Java, they had been idle, and in any case, the Dutch didn't have any trained crews for them yet. Capt. Gunn told his friend, Lt. Col. Davies, about the find and together they went to General Eubanks, the Far East Air Forces Bomber Commander, and got a fake letter of authorization to pick up and ferry the planes to Townsville. With the letter in hand, "Pappy" flew with a bunch of the 3rd AG's pilots to Melbourne. They took off in the B-25s and flew to Brisbane for refueling. An Air Corps Major in charge tried to stop them, having received word that the planes were stolen, but "Pappy" Gunn got in his face and reminded him of the war and threatened a possible court-martial if the



B-25 with 75mm gun – photo courtesy of the USAF

delivery was not made. The Major relented and the crews quickly flew them on to Townsville. Upon arriving, they discovered that none of the planes had bombsights. The next day, "Pappy" flew back to Melbourne in his C-47. By now, the Dutch had found out about the "theft" of their planes. A Dutch supply officer had the bombsights locked away. Somehow, Captain Gunn managed to get the sights. The details have never been confirmed, but, legend has it that "Pappy" brandished and threatened to shoot up the Dutch supply office with a Thompson submachine gun if the sights were not immediately handed over. Though the Dutch protested loudly, the 3rd AG was flying its new B-25s in action within days and, in the end, the Dutch were given a later batch of B-25s to

replace those taken, so everyone was placated. Not to be left out of the action, "Pappy" flew one of the 3rd AG's B-25s on their first Mitchell mission to Mindanao. Supposedly, he flew many more missions with the group, including one in which he landed a B-25 on a beach in the Philippines and picked up a valuable Japanese double agent. However, by summer, the Group's A-20 Havocs had arrived and "Pappy" was involved in helping Lt. Col. Davies make this airplane more suitable for low level attack. It was at this juncture, just after he had designed the strafing nose and the auxiliary fuel tanks for the Havoc, that Captain Gunn met General Kenney.

His successful modification of the A-20s for the Fifth Air Force led to General Kenney telling Captain Gunn in November to do the same thing with the B-25 Mitchell. Kenney wanted twelve forward firing guns on each bomber. The General put "Pappy" to work on this and at the same time sent a proposal to North American, the firm that built the bomber, to have the modifications incorporated into production. By December, "Pappy" was already test flying an up-gunned jury-rigged model and had kits made for several more. In February 1943, one squadron of strafers was fully equipped and put their guns to good effect while skip bombing merchant ships in the Battle of the Bismarck Sea. Ironically, at about the same time, General Kenney was at a high level conference back in Washington and was called into General "Hap" Arnold's office to meet with a bunch of test engineers from North American, who proceeded to tell him that his strafing proposal was un-flyable due to structure and weight and balance issues. Their jaws dropped when he informed them that one squadron of "strafers" were already in action and that sixty more were in line to be modified at the Townsville Depot. The engineering team, duly embarrassed, agreed to return to California and make the changes, and General Kenney sent "Pappy" from Australia to show them how. The recently promoted Major Gunn was instrumental in getting the production line of strafers underway and also in getting the 75mm cannon armed B-25s into production before returning to Australia.

Upon returning to Australia in May, "Pappy" made his way to General Kenney's office with an unusual request. He asked the General if he could get an Army Air Corps pilot rating. When inducted into the Air Corps in the Philippines, this had been offered, but never acted upon. It seems that "Pappy" had been flying all manner of Army Air Corps planes for a year and a half, on both official and unofficial missions, and often in combat situations, without an approved pilot rating. General Kenney sent an immediate request up the chain of command to correct this only to receive the reply that Major Gunn could get the rating only by returning to the U.S. and passing a nine month Air Corps pilot training course. General Kenney contacted General "Hap" Arnold

directly and "Pappy" got his wings within days, retroactive to December 7th, 1941.

For the next year, Major Gunn continued to support the Fifth Air Force with staff work and additional new aircraft modifications, which he often personally tested in combat. Late in 1944, the Japanese finally got a piece of "Pappy". While on the ground at a forward airfield on the island of Leyte, "Pappy" was caught in a bombing attack and burning shrapnel struck his upper arm and shoulder. The wounds were serious enough to take the Major out of the war. On a happier note, when the U.S. Army liberated Manila, "Pappy's" wife and children were found safe and sound, and flown to Australia to be with him. After the war, Lt. Colonel Gunn returned to the Philippines to help restart the airline that had brought him there in the first place. In 1957, a plane he was flying was caught in a major storm and crashed. Thus passed one of the most interesting and heroic characters of World War II. Paul Irving "Pappy" Gunn had been a force multiplier extraordinaire for the Army Air Corps. He is buried in the cemetery at Naval Air Station Pensacola.

- J.D. Webster

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