

# LIGHTNING *Strike*



**The Secret Mission to  
Kill Admiral Yamamoto  
and Avenge Pearl Harbor.**

**By Donald A. Davis**

"Mission Accomplished" by Roy Grinnell

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*Roy Grinnell ASM*



On April 18, 1943, 0800 hours local time, a squadron of American flyers from the U.S. Army 13th Air Force intercepted a pair of Japanese bombers and their fighter escort high over the South Pacific island of Bougainville. Inside the lead bomber was Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, the brilliant commander of Japan's combined Fleet and the military genius behind Pearl Harbor. On orders handed down from Admiral Nimitz, and approved by President Roosevelt, the Americans pounced, killing Yamamoto at a critical moment in the Pacific War. It was a turning point: Japan never won another major naval battle. For over 60 years, mystery has swirled around that day's events. The men who flew the mission spent the rest of their lives fighting over who fired the fatal shot that downed Yamamoto.

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**Bougainville, South Pacific  
P-38 Lightning, 15,000 feet  
18 April 1943**

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As soon as Canning announced the planes, Mitchell spotted them. He estimated they were about five miles away and at a ninety-degree angle from his path. Although he was uncertain that this was indeed the Yamamoto flight, because there were two bombers instead

of the one that had been predicted, Mitchell turned his flight of P-38s onto a parallel course. Then he began to climb. As he did so, he counted six Zeros flying about one thousand feet above the bombers. He decided that he had the right target.

"Skin off your tanks," he ordered and his pilots pulled the handles that sent the big silvery auxiliary fuel tanks tumbling away. Unleashed from the extra weight, the P-38 Lightnings lunged forward and upward and were almost level with the bombers within moments. Mitchell was tempted to go after the big planes himself, because while the four planes in the killer flight certainly could handle a single Betty, they were now going to have to bring down two of them. Mitchell knew that he and his wingman might be able to add some extra firepower, but he decided to stick with the plan.

The eleven planes he was leading climbed to reach a higher altitude in order to provide cover for the killer flight. Chances were very good that a horde of Zeros could be on the way. The Japanese had about seventy five planes on the Kahili airstrip, also near the southern tip of Bougainville, and Mitchell anticipated at least half would rise to escort Yamamoto into the base. "Old John is going to have himself a turkey shoot," he thought, hoping to bag himself at least two or three Japanese fighters before the morning was done. The P-38s in his covering flight needed to reach twenty thousand feet to establish an altitude advantage, so the pilots opened their throttles and were pressed hard against their seats as they "went for angels." From up high they would be able to use the preferred and proven American tactic in fighting a Zero, which was to dive down on him, with guns firing, in an initial pass before the enemy pilot could react.

Mitchell trusted that the four guys in the killer flight, all of whom were veteran

combat pilots, could fight through the six escort Zeros and bring down the bombers. The job of the remaining P-38s was to wall them off from the expected counterattack by dozens of Zeros, although none had yet been spotted. Mitchell radioed Lanphier, "All right, Tom. Go get 'em. He's your meat."

When Besby Holmes heard the order to shed his external fuel tanks, he yanked the handle and nothing happened. He pulled on it harder, again and again, but the outside tanks stuck like glue beneath his plane. He called out, "Hold it a second, Tom. I can't drop my tanks. I'll tear them off."

Holmes spun back to the west and went down into a violent power dive, corkscrewing his plane. "I put my nose down at 350 miles per hour, pulling such high G's (multiples of the force of gravity) that I almost blacked out, then I kicked the rudder. No external stores will stay on an airplane at those forces," he said. The stubborn auxiliary tanks finally ripped away.

At the speeds they were moving, he soon lost sight of the others except for Hine, who had followed the ironclad rule of a wingman and stayed with his leader, despite the slewing, jerking, diving maneuvers.

But this was not a normal mission on which normal procedures were to be followed, for their firm instructions were to get Yamamoto, no matter what the cost. "We were ready to do anything, even if that meant ramming him," Mitchell said. "Those were the orders."

By dropping from the formation to rid his plane of the fuel tanks, Holmes also pulled Hine away from the attack and thus cut the strength of the killer flight by 50 percent.

That left only two P-38s: Lanphier in the lead, with Barber off his right wing. We went after the two bombers, with no way to tell which Betty contained the admiral and three of the escorting Zeros fully alert and coming at them.

The Bettys had begun their gradual descent for landing when the Americans were spotted and the pilot of the lead bomber steepened his dive toward the haven of the airstrip, picking up extra speed as he nosed over and slammed his throttles to full power. The second bomber followed. Admiral Ugaki looked out of the window and saw the green jungle canopy coming up fast.

The P-38s had closed to within a mile by the time the first three Zeros reached them. Lanphier had watched silver belly tanks flutter away from the escort fighters, which had also carried extra fuel, then saw them rocketing toward Barber and himself in a race that the Zeros were sure to win. There was no way to reach those fleeing bombers before the enemy fighters would bounce them. The other three Zeros also were closing in.

History is measured in fractions of moments. When the fighting erupted in a savage and sudden fury in the sky above the southern tip of Bougainville Island on April 18, a controversy was born that would last beyond the twentieth century. Each pilot would recall the fight from a different angle and would remember it the way he saw it unfold. But the recollections were conflicting and confusing when matched



against one another and against facts that would emerge years later, those differences would become significant.

According to Lanphier, he assumed the Zeros would shoot down both himself and Barber, or even ram their planes, to protect the Bettys, so he pulled up to meet the lead Zero head-on. Tactically, it was the correct maneuver, for it allowed a Lightning pilot to fire effectively with all of his machine guns and cannon. Their closing speed was hundreds of miles an hour and both were throwing bullets. He remembered that the Zero gave way first and slipped beneath him, on fire, with its left wing twisted. By then Lanphier was dashing higher and flew right between the Zero's two wingmen.

His split second decision, which many believe blocked the first wave of attacking Zeros, again reduced the strength of the killer flight by half. Now there was a single P-38 left to bring down two bombers. They were running for their lives with the fighter escorts swarming to protect them.

Mitchell, looking down at the action from his own rising P-38, was furious. The careful plan was falling apart before his eyes. He called out for Lanphier to forget the attacking fighter planes. The target was Yamamoto! "Get the bombers," Mitchell said. "Damn it all, the bombers!" That message apparently was not heard.

Meanwhile, the P-38s in Mitchell's cover flight were already miles from the action and going even farther and higher as fast as they could. Their job was not to shoot down the bombers but to prevent the killer flight from being jumped by any Zeros from the land bases.

For Mitchell, there was an inviolable rule for the pilots of his 339th Fighter Squadron: "Formation flying is vital."

"We fought the Japanese all over Guadalcanal and the Solomons for months and I can't remember a time when we weren't badly outnumbered. You can meet that kind of opposition in one way only, by sticking together. You must stay together, at least in pairs," he said.

Just as Ray Hine had stayed on the wing of Besby Holmes, Rex Barber ordinarily would have stayed with his leader, Tom Lanphier. By not doing so, he hung Lanphier out to take on three Zeros by himself. He also turned his one unguarded tail to the enemy planes. But if he had made any other decision, there would have been no one at all left to hit the bombers.

Barber and Lanphier had been approaching the Bettys from a ninety degree angle with the big planes moving in front of them from left to right. Then the escort fighters came in hard. Lanphier was gone and the bomber pilots dived for the treetops.

Barber would recall that he was closing in on the bombers too fast as he overtook them. He had to slow down to get behind them, although by reducing his speed, he knew he would be a perfect target for an attacking Zero. He did it anyway. "My primary job, as I saw it, was to get that bomber," he said.

Barber banked sharply right to swing in behind his targets. His left wing and engine tilted upward, momentarily blocking the bombers from his view.

Hiroshi Hayashi, at the controls of the second bomber, had maintained a loose formation with the lead Betty.

Later he said that he was unaware of what was really going on until he saw the flash of red tracer bullets. Looking up through the top of his cockpit, Hayashi saw Barber's P-38 almost sitting on top of him and the Japanese pilot bent away to a new course.

Barber said he didn't know he had almost collided with Hayashi below him, because when he rolled back level, he saw only one bomber. He was slightly to the left and fifty yards behind it. Even with his throttles back, he was quickly overtaking the Betty.

Barber held that he nosed in until he was only a plane's length away from his target and able to look into the position of the bomber's rear gunner, wondering when that 20-mm cannon would start shooting at him. It never did. Instead, Barber said he pulled his own triggers and the P-38 spat a line of bullets and cannon shells over the fuselage of the bomber and into the right engine. As the smell of gunpowder filled his cockpit, bits of the bomber's engine cowling spun away. Barber slid in directly behind the Betty and walked the line of fire into the vertical fin. Pieces of the rudder came off. Barber saw the plane shake.

He put another long burst into the right engine, then raked his fire across to the root of the wing against the fuselage, across the body of the plane and into the left engine. The bomber shuddered with each bullet that hit it now and a plume of heavy, black smoke spewed out as it staggered downward with only about five hundred feet of altitude left. Still riding the tail of the burning aircraft, Barber said he nearly ran into the Japanese plane's right wingtip when the Betty heeled over and seemed almost to stop in midair. Barber thought the pilot may have been hit and reflexively jerked back on the controls in his final moment.

The P-38 dashed away from the stricken plane that was falling fast. Barber said he never saw it crash. He never saw that Betty again at all. He had other problems to think about, because several Zeros were on him and firing in fury. He had no idea where the other P-38s were and as far as he knew, he was the only American still in the sky. The Miss Virginia was peppered with 7.7-mm machine gun bullets as he dodged and

twisted to escape, trying to make himself small behind the armor plate that covered the back of his seat.

Hiroshi Hayashi had turned the second bomber sharply toward open water to escape his attackers when he noticed that the lead Betty was on fire. Zero pilot Kenji Yanagiya also watched Yamamoto's plane trailing a stream of black smoke and saw it fall into the jungle, still burning. Ugaki, whose own life was in jeopardy, was helpless as he, too, watched the plane that carried the Commander in Chief burn and fall.

After plowing through the three Zeros, Tom Lanphier recalled he also was alone, still arrowing up into the blue sky. He flipped his P-38 onto its back and hanging upside down in his straps, looked around. In the distance, he said he could see Rex Barber way off to the right being chased by some Zeros. The two enemy fighters that Lanphier had passed between were circling around for another run. Against the jungle below he spied a darting shadow. It was one of the bombers. "The Betty pilot must have executed a perfect circle in his evasive dive and flattened out of it, once again on his original course," Lanphier said.

In Lanphier's scenario, it was as if he and the Japanese bomber pilot were at some macabre carnival, with Lanphier going up-and-over on a Ferris wheel while the Betty spun on a merry-go-round. In a matter of seconds he had made a complete roll while the bomber apparently had flown around in a flat circle. Both planes were back in the patch of sky where they had started.

Lanphier said he cut back on the speed, dropped his flaps and made a controlled skid to slow down as he dropped into the attack. In his autobiographical account, Lanphier described approaching the Betty from a near perfect right angle. He saw the pesky Zeros coming again and guessed everybody was going to arrive in the same place about the same time. He had time for only one shot. He fired a long, steady burst of his machine guns at the extraordinary deflection angle of some seventy degrees beyond the target in the bomber's estimated line of flight. The bullets ripped into the right wing and the engine burst into flames, then the wing caught fire too. He said that despite the

damage, the rear gunner in the Betty was pumping a steady stream of bullets at him. Lanphier remembered being very close to the plane when the bomber's right wing tore away and the plane slammed into the jungle. He had slowed down so much to attack that the Zeros were back on him and with only a few feet of altitude, he had little room to maneuver. He called for help as he dodged into gullies and wove close to the treetops. Flying down so low would prevent the attackers from making easy, steep dives to attack him. He needed room to pull up.

John Mitchell and his wingman, Jack Jacobson, had passed through eighteen thousand feet and were still leading the other Lightnings up in a steep climb for more altitude when they heard the cry for help over their headsets. Looking down, they saw a P-38 in trouble and the blink of guns of a pursuing Japanese fighter. Mitchell and Jacobson had flown together for so long that no words were needed. They rolled over and dived in perfect tandem. The rest of the cover flight kept going, the pilots sticking to their orders and looking for a pack of enemy fighters that had not shown up. Surely, they thought, with all of the airfields around Bougainville, there had to be more than just six Zeros protecting Yamamoto.

Mitchell and Jacobson swept down on the attacking Zero, closing in straight above Tom Lanphier's head and shooting as they came. They said that as their bullets reached out for the enemy plane, it winged over and escaped. That was enough to spring Lanphier free. As he dashed away, thinking that he was putting distance between himself and trouble, he flew through a thick cloud of dust. When he looked down, he was shocked to discover that he was passing over the left edge of the Kahili air base and that Japanese fighters were scrambling to take off. He pulled up the nose of his P-38 and started the kind of high speed climb that no pursuer could match, but as he roared over a harbor, ack-ack guns popped away. He soared for safety.

Most of the P-38s in the high cover flight had reached their desired altitude only to find nothing but sky. When they had heard excited calls from the killer flight, they had braced for the anticipated rush of enemy planes, but now as they looked around, the heavens were empty. The action involving the bomber had been left far behind and far below them, down near the trees. Once the nervous guardians reached their assigned altitude, thousands of feet above where the action was hot, they had nobody to fight.

The passing seconds seemed like hours to Barber. He recalled hunching down as low as he could get in his armor-plated seat while Japanese bullets hammered against it with loud metal-on-metal smacks. "The Zeros had found my range and I was taking hits all over the plane," he said. Miss Virginia was receiving terrific punishment, but somehow still answered the controls as he skewed about the sky in a violent, low level dance with three aggressive Zero pilots. He hugged the treetops, jammed his throttles full and hurtled toward the coast, relying on the speed of his two big engines to pull away from the stubborn Japanese.

More controversy was born when the P-38s found the fleeing, dodging second bomber. After shaking his fuel tanks, Besby Holmes and Ray Hine witnessed the strange sight of a bomber being chased by a P-38 that was itself being chased by three Zeros. Back into the fight, they dived in to join the parade and sped into the unsuspecting Japanese planes.



Holmes said he gave one Zero a long burst and blew it apart in a sheet of flame. He automatically flinched as he went through the debris and then opened up on another Zero that fell, burning, into the sea. Hine shot down the remaining Zero as the two P-38s flashed along at an airspeed of about 425 miles per hour. Holmes zoomed directly over Barber's plane and closed in on the Betty bomber that was hugging the water with the tail gunner shooting up at him. A short burst from Holmes was off target, a second splashed behind the bomber, and the third burst he adjusted to put machine gun bullets and cannon fire into the target. He held his trigger down firmly and pounded the Betty as his P-38 bucked with the recoil of the guns.

He pulled even nearer and fired into the right wing and engine, which began to burn, but the bomber still refused to fall! "Go down! Go down or blow up, dammit!" Holmes yelled. "What do I have to do to make you go down?"

As he remembered it, Holmes believed he had hit the Betty with enough bullets to knock down a dozen planes, but he continued shooting until there was a puff of smoke and a flash of orange flames. His concentration had gotten him too close and he was moving too fast. To try to fly over the bomber would risk a collision with the large tail, so he rammed the controls forward so hard that negative G forces briefly lifted him off the seat as he flew under the falling plane. Holmes was aware of the shadow of the bomber over him, then he was out and free, hauling back on his controls. He was pulling up for another pass when he saw the bomber hit the water and explode and watched Rex Barber barrel across the wreckage with his own guns blazing.


According to Barber, it happened differently:

His P-38 had already evaded the chasing Zeros by the time he crossed the coast. There he saw Holmes and Hine circling and the second bomber flying south, parallel to the shore, so low that the blast from the propellers created a wake on the surface. The plane was only about ten feet above the water, almost as if it were a cruising boat.

Barber watched his two fellow killer flight pilots dive on the bomber, with Holmes closing very fast and walking his gunfire from far behind the Betty and through the right engine, which emitted a puff of smoke. Hine's bullets stitched the water ahead of the bomber, both P-38s flew over it and continued south. Somehow the Betty was still in the air, but was leaving a streak of dirty smoke as it ran away.

Over the next three minutes, Barber slowly pulled to within twenty feet of the bomber. He opened fire and the big Japanese plane blew apart with a tremendous detonation. Barber was too close to dodge away and flew right into the exploding debris. A large piece sliced into his wing, another banged against the bottom of the cockpit and bits of shrapnel needled into the skin of the Miss Virginia and heavily damaged it.

By the way the bomber crashed, it seemed to Barber that Holmes must have severely damaged the right wing fuel tank and then his own bullets sparked off the fumes. The bomber carrying Admiral Ugaki went into the water.

The entire fight had lasted no more than ten minutes from the moment Doug Canning called his warning until John Mitchell, believing the mission to have been successful, spoke on the radio: "Let's get the hell out of here." 

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