They hit upon their method by a lucky accident, but the members of this Burma bomber squadron have a record of 114 targets destroyed and 51 more damaged.

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A MEDIUM BOMBER BASE IN NORTHERN BURMA

The B-25s with the skull and wings painted on its sides banked sharply to get around the last of the mountains and then roared toward its target, a thousand feet above a bell-shaped pagoda that glistered in the noonday sun. Directly ahead, sprawled across the green plain at an elbow of the blue ribbon that was the Irrawaddy River five miles away, were rows of city blocks and clusters of buildings.

"There's Mandalay," said someone over the interphone. "Somehow the matter-of-fact way he said it didn't fit the fabulous city of Kipling's thumping song, the largest city in central Burma.

But this bomber's crew wasn't interested in cities, and Mandalay, for all its history and importance, wasn't the target today. The B-25 belonged to one of the most specialized bombarding squadrons in the world—the Burma Bridge Busters, who operate on the principle that destroying a bridge will do more to beat the Japs in Burma than bombing an enemy base. Today I was riding along with them to learn how they do it, and why.

The plane banked until the city was behind. Then it nosed into a flat, thundering 300-mile-per-hour power glide. The bomb-bay doors rumbled open. Suddenly twin banks of 30-caliber machine guns began to clatter along both sides of the fuselage, their tracers darting into the trees and the open ground below. Tripping the triggers of the nose gun, I added to the fire by spraying possible ack-ack positions. The whole ship shivered in response.

Then through a break in the foliage we spotted the target. It was a road bridge about 100 feet long, spanning a narrow river and mounted on two concrete piers. No sooner did we spot it than a puff of white flak blossomed dead ahead, almost directly over it. Crouched beside me in the nose, 2d Lt. L. P. Bloodworth of Ruidoso, N. Mex., the navigator, yelled: "Hope that's the last burst in that spot. We'll be there in about 10 seconds."

The plane leveled out and we quit firing. From his cabin just behind the "greenhouse," 1st Lt. John T. Reynolds of Hendrysburg, Ohio, the pilot, kept his eye close to the machine-gun reflector sight that he bombs with and made final adjustments of the plane's course. The bomber jolted slightly—the bombs were away.

Just as the plane raced over the target, we noticed a railroad bridge upstream—or what had been a railroad bridge but was now nothing but a half-submerged mass of twisted steel. On the tracks near it were a dozen empty freight cars. "We knocked out the railroad bridge eight days ago," Lt. Bloodworth shouted in my ear. "It's on the only rail line from Mandalay to the Japs in northern Burma."

The bomber flipped into a steep-climbing turn to get away from some ack-ack ahead as the bomb-bay doors rumbled shut. Almost simultaneously our delayed-action bombs exploded below, kicking the ship a solid boost in the tail.

"Tail gunner to pilot, tail gunner to pilot," crackled the interphone. "Our bombs missed the bridge—they landed short and to the left—but it sure as hell looks like the Leaning Tower of Pisa now."

Banking away, we caught a glimpse of the next B-25 making its bomb run through the blue-gray smoke of our bursts. We passed another of the squadron's target-bound ships on our way home. By the time we landed, one of the bombers hadn't radioed the field of a direct hit.

"That means," explained the squadron intelligence officer, "that we've cut the only railroad and the only good motor road to the Japs north of Mandalay. Of course they will float and hand-carry supplies across the river to trucks on the other side until they can build new bridges there.
Bridge Busters

But that’s a slow process—and as soon as they build a new bridge, we’ll knock that out, too.”

By doing the same kind of precision bombing week after week against enemy supply routes all over Burma, the Bridge Busters have destroyed 134 bridges and damaged 51 beyond use in less than a year—a record which is probably unequalled in the entire Army Air Force.

Strange enough, what got the Bridge Busters started on this record-making rampage was a mission that failed. And stranger still, the type of bombing I had just seen, the type they have used in wiping out most of their bridges—hop-bombing—was hit upon purely by accident, although it has now become as standard a technique as dive- or skip-bombing.

U P until a year ago, the Bridge Busters were just another run-of-the-mill medium bombardment outfit, activated in December 1942 as the 49th Squadron of the Tenth Air Force in India. For 10 solid months they pulled the usual routine missions against such targets as Jap airfields, bases, supply dumps, ships and occasionally bridges. The crews had always dreaded bridge targets most of all, because they were hardest to hit. Whether the planes of the 490th bombed in formation from 6,000 feet or attacked singly at treetop level, they seldom could hit a bridge.

One day at bombing they were told their target was the Myittha River railroad bridge, over which the Japs were pouring supplies into southern Burma for a possible invasion of India. The intelligence officer warned them that the bridge was probably the most important target they had yet been given and that the brass hats had declared it must be destroyed. The B-25s of the 490th went out in full strength that day and literally saturated the target area with bombs, leaving the surrounding territory a mass of bomb craters. But when the smoke cleared away, much to their chagrin the bridge was still standing. Even direct hits had plowed right through the trestles, then exploded harmlessly deep in the river. The mission had been a dismal failure.

When the crews of the 490th came back to their field that day, some of them were humiliated and some of them were fighting mad. And everybody thought they were going to catch hell when the CO, Lt. Col. Robert D. McCarten of Fargo, N. Dak., called the combat crews together for a meeting. Instead, he told them: “That’s the last straw. We’re goin’ to learn how to knock out bridges if it’s the last thing we do.”

After that, for hours a day, the 490th practiced by aiming dummy bombs at a target on a nearby rice paddy. Having read of the success of skip-bombing against Jap shipping in the Southwest Pacific, they tried it against bridges. But they found that a bomb’s skip cannot be determined on ground as it can on open water, especially with trees and houses in its path. Nor is a bridge something solid that will stop a skipping bomb, like a ship. The bombs either ricocheted off their course, skipped clear over the bridge or slid under it to explode on the other side.

They tried dive-bombing but found that the B-25 isn’t built for the necessary steep dive and quick pull-out. They tried attacking at tree-top level but found that big bombs didn’t have time to turn before hitting the ground; they would either hit on their sides and skid off at an angle or enter the ground sideways and not go off at all. To make the bombs turn sooner after leaving the plane at low altitude and prevent them from skipping, they tried air brakes on the fins, then spikes in the noses, then parachutes on the bombs. These tricks helped, but they were too much trouble and far from foolproof.

It was then, after all these weeks of experiments, that the 490th stumbled upon hop-bombing purely by accident.

The squadron’s target on New Year’s Day 1944 was the Mu River bridge, on the important railroad line from Rangoon to central Burma. Roaring in for the attack at treetop level, Maj. Robert A. Erdin of Paterson, N. J., squadron operations officer and that day’s squadron leader, saw a large tree looming in his course. He gunned his plane upward to avoid hitting it. By the time he got back to the predetermined altitude of attack, he was already on the target, so he dumped his bombs.

The plane was then nose downward in a shallow dive. Cursing the tree that spoiled the bomb run, the crew looked back to see how far the bombs had missed. What they saw changed the whole course of the squadron’s history—and eventually had an effect on the course of the war in northern Burma.

Two trestles of the 480-foot bridge lay toppled in the river in the smoke of the bomb explosions.

“ That’s it!” yelled Maj. Erdin to his crew.

“That’s what we’ve been looking for. Bring on those bridges!”

A raging back at the field, Maj. Erdin (who is now squadron CO) explained what had happened. The shallow dive just as the bombs were released at low altitude sent them earthward at an angle which prevented them from skipping or failing to go off on impact. The squadron soon added other refinements to bring hop-bombing to perfection. The pilots learned to sight during the shallow dive through the machine-gun reflectors. Sight. They found that with their new technique, near misses would do more damage.

Two weeks after Maj. Erdin’s discovery, the 490th got sweet revenge when Capt. Angelo J. Boutsalis of Dracut, Mass., destroyed the Myittha River bridge—the target which the entire squadron had missed before—with only two bombs, using the new hop technique. Boutsalis was so happy he conducted prayer-meeting hymns over
The interphone and twirled his 10-inch mustache all the way back to the field.

Then the 400th started begging for bridge missions—and got them. The squadron's ships ripped apart the Mezra railroad bridge, 800 feet long, over which had passed 90 percent of supplies and reinforcements for the Jap front lines in northern Burma. Exactly a month after stabling upon hop-bombing, six of its B-25s destroyed three bridges on a single mission. A few days later, six other planes blasted out two more spans. Before the week was over, the squadron had accounted for eight bridges.

When the news reached Maj. Gen. Howard C. Davidson, commanding general of the Tenth Air Force, he sent this message to Lt. Col. McCartan: "To you, your Bridge Busters and all the boys on the ground who keep 'em flying on their successful accomplishments, my personal congratulations. Your devastating results have been received with glee."

Although that was the first time anyone had ever called the squadron Bridge Busters, the name stuck. From then on, even though the squadron kept its skull-and-wings insignia, it became officially known by the new name and has specialized in knocking out bridges ever since.

Within a few weeks, the Bridge Busters discovered that 1,000-pound bombs would do more damage with near misses than smaller ones, so they figured that putting more of these big babies on each ship would reduce the number of ships needed to wipe out a bridge. What they did about this would have turned an airplane designer's hair white. They loaded one more 1,000-pound bomb on their B-25s than the plane is designed to carry. When the ships still flew okay with this load, Capt. William C. McIntyre of Nashville, Tenn., squadron armament officer, decided to try still another.

"I'll bet you 150 rupees," declared a fellow officer, "that the B-25 can't get off the ground and go anywhere with that weight.

McIntyre took the bet, packed one more 1,000-pounder into each ship and won his 50 bucks hands down when the ships not only took off and flew, but five planes knocked out three bridges. The monthly average since then has been three to four planes to knock out one bridge. Burma on a relief map looks like a huge strip of corduroy. It is just a series of mountains and valleys, mostly running north and south. In every valley are rivers: there are thousands of these rivers and streams. This means that any road must cross water at intervals along its length. This is why bridge busting became so valuable in hampering Jap supply.

The Bridge Busters' most spectacular mission was smashing the 11-span 1,800-foot Sittang River bridge—one of the biggest in Burma and vital link in the railroad connecting Rangoon with the only route to Bangkok, in Siam. To accomplish this, Lt. William E. Cook of Fullerton, Calif., used the glinting rails as his guide in bright moonlight. His bombs toppled several hundred feet of the long span. But the mission nearly resulted in the loss of Lt. Cook's ship. Just as he banked sharply to evade ground fire after leaving the target, his left wing hit the spine of a Burmese pagoda, which ripped four feet of the wing off. He managed to nurse the lop-sided ship 400 miles over the mountains back to the field. He was later killed in a crash.

Then there was S/Sgt. James D. Crain of Chattanooga, Tenn., who lowered himself into the open bomb bay over one target and kicked loose some bombs that had failed to release. There was T/Sgt. David N. George of Rifle, Colo., first crew chief to send a plane out on 100 consecutive missions without a mechanical turn-back. There was Cpl. Marvin Beckman of Inglewood, Calif., who bailed out of his ship when it was hit in a half-hour running battle with 25 Zeroes, watched the Zeroes strafe and kill everyone else, and then walked for five days in the jungle before staggering into an Allied outpost.

There were those like Lt. Arthur C. Sanders of Coronado, Calif., who turned 70 miles over to his co-pilot above Rangoon to photograph another running flight with his amateur movie camera. Later, he was missing in action. And Pvt. Joseph W. McErlane of Jersey City, N. J., who lied so well put up such a Crap game, 1300 hours and who went up on just one mission to see how it was. It got on just one mission to see how it was.

When the battle for Myitkyina began last spring, the Bridge Busters had knocked out 40 bridges—every important span in the area to soften up the Jap base for a full-scale attack. During the summer monsoons, they carried 65 missions in four months through thunderstorms and low ceilings. When good weather returned in October, they opened up in full blast again by destroying 13 bridges in 13 days.

The Bridge Busters have had to do other kinds of bombing jobs, too. They joined other outfits of the Tenth Air Force in sinking river steamers that used to ply the Irrawaddy laden with Jap supplies. Although they do most of their bombing in daylight, they send a few of their planes out on moonlight nights to spot and wreak whatever damage they can. Everything was de-emphasized for the Japs do most of their moving at night. Every week planes pull missions against enemy bases or troop concentrations. But the Jap engineers keep the Bridge Busters busiest in their specialty. The engineers either repair an important bridge that has been bombed out or build a by-pass bridge nearby as soon as possible after a bombing. While they are doing this work, the Bridge Busters just fly by occasionally to see how things are coming. As soon as they're sure a bridge is nearly rebuilt or bypassed, they pay another visit with their 1,000-pounders and knock it out again. The squadron had to knock out the Bawgyo River bridge—the 100th bridge destroyed—twice in a few weeks recently. There have been two or three overseas tributes to the Bridge Busters' work. One was the discovery in a village taken by Chinese forces of 150 emaciated Jap bodies; all showing signs of having starved to death for lack of supply lines. Another was an official statement that the Japs are retreating from Northern Burma, leaving behind them burning villages, partly because of their inability to get more supplies and troops up from Central Burma.

And that is why the British engineer, who buttonholed an American intelligence officer, said, "I say, old boy, I complained the British. "Would you mind telling those Bridge Busters that I think the job is just bloody fine work but that actually, old boy, it is making things blasted inconvenient for us engineers. Every time our forces come to a river, they find the bridge bombed out."