

Joseph Cunningham Witnessed America's Entry Into World War II

It was dusk as the big B-17s lumbered down the runway of Hamilton Field in San Rafael, California. Two groups of the heavy, four-engine aircraft lifted off and turned southwest as if chasing the sun that had just dipped below the dark blue waters of the Pacific Ocean. It would be a long flight, practically all of it over water, and the B-17s had been stripped of their defensive machine guns and other unnecessary weight so they could carry as much gasoline as possible. Lieutenant Joseph Cunningham, a bombardier from Travelers Rest, South Carolina, was aboard one of the airplanes.

The twelve aircraft were part of the 7th Bombardment Group (Heavy) and were bound to join the rest of the Group in the Philippines, where the Army Air Corps intended to enhance aerial defenses by beefing up its heavy bomber force. The Navy stationed ships along the route the big bombers would fly on this first leg of their trip. The ships served as navigational aids and could also assist in the event any of the planes experienced in-flight problems. The long flight was dark and uneventful. As they neared Hawaii, aircraft navigators tuned in to KGMB radio in Honolulu, using the signal as a homing beacon. With the sun rising behind them, the pilots and crewmen were no doubt happy to see the green islands of Hawaii take shape ahead. At 0745, Captain Richard Carmichael, one of the pilots, contacted the Hickam Field Tower. Apparently, the formation was still too far away for the transmission was too garbled for anyone to understand. It was December 7, 1941.



Joseph Ralph Cunningham was the son of Sloan and Mable Cunningham of Travelers Rest. He enrolled at Clemson in the late summer of 1935, but remained for only two years. After working in textile manufacturing, he enlisted in the Air Corps' aviation cadet program on July 21, 1941. Joe was trained as a bombardier.

Cunningham, like the rest of his squadron mates, probably expected a pleasant if brief layover in tropical Hawaii. Instead, they flew right into the Japanese Navy's sneak attack on Pearl Harbor.

As the B-17s neared the end of their 14-hour flight, they were pleasantly surprised to find a waiting fighter escort to accompany them the last few miles to Hickam Field. But the fighters turned out to be Japanese and opened fire on the defenseless bombers. In the melee that followed, the big airplanes scattered toward Hickam, Wheeler and Bellows Fields, searching desperately for a safe place to land. By 0820, all the bombers were on the ground, their exhausted crews stunned by the welcome they had received. Four of the B-17s were total losses, three airmen were wounded and the flight surgeon, First Lieutenant William Schick was killed.

After Pearl Harbor, the Japanese attacked the Philippines. Over the course of a three-month campaign, US and Philippine forces fell back along the Bataan Peninsula eventually evacuating to the Island of Corregidor. Wishing to avoid the capture of his top commander in the Pacific,

President Roosevelt ordered General Douglas MacArthur to leave the besieged island. MacArthur complied, escaping through the fog on a PT boat to the Island of Mindanao. From there, a flight of B-17s carried the General, his staff and family to Australia. It is likely that Cunningham also took part in this mission.

After arriving in Australia, Cunningham and his crew became part of the 435th Bomb Squadron. The B-17 had been designed for high altitude bombardment of land-based targets, but the war in the Pacific at this time was dominated by naval forces. The 435th's bombers were flung into action against Japanese warships where the relative mobility of their targets yielded little success for the B-17s. Although ineffective at high altitude bombing of the Japanese fleet, the 435th provided valuable intelligence. Through accurate reconnaissance of enemy movements, the 435th played an effective role in the Battle of the Coral Sea. Crews from the squadron had observed the Japanese fleet assembling at Rabaul over the two weeks leading up to the battle. Based on this intelligence, the Navy was prepared for the Japanese attack.



Joe Cunningham, standing third from left, and crew at Port Moresby, New Guinea.

The squadron also provided valuable aerial photographs of Guadalcanal prior to its invasion by the Marines. Photographs of the beaches and the enemy's fortified positions assisted Marine planners' preparations for the invasion.

On the morning of Friday, August 14, 1942, Cunningham was assigned to a reconnaissance mission. The aircraft that day was the *Chief of Seattle*, a B-17 paid for by the donations of nickels and dimes by the citizens of that city. This would be its second mission. The pilot was First Lieutenant Wilson Cook of Edmunds, Oklahoma. The target was the large Japanese naval base at Rabaul, some 500 miles northeast across the Solomon Sea.



Boeing B-17E Fortress 41-2656, "Chief of Seattle" was assigned to the 435th Bombardment Squadron, 19th Bombardment Group on 29 May 1942. Lost over Buna, Paupa New Guinea, 14 August 1942 on a reconnaissance mission, crew MIA

Before daylight, the *Chief of Seattle* rumbled down the runway and lifted into the sky. There was no further contact from the airplane. No transmission was received from the crew; no wreckage was ever discovered. The plane was on a solo mission, as most reconnaissance flights were flown by single aircraft. The ten men aboard the *Chief of Seattle* disappeared into history.

Joe Cunningham was “a well built, quiet boy... He was one of our best and had done his share in the Coral Sea Battle, New Guinea and New Britain areas. Dropping bombs on ships, airdromes and then shooting his way back home by manning a gun down in the nose,” wrote James Sweeny, Class of '39, in a post-war remembrance.

Joseph Ralph Cunningham was survived by his parents; brothers Charles and Norwood; and sisters Evelyn and Mary Ellen. He never married. He is memorialized on the Walls of the Missing in the Manila American Cemetery and Memorial at Fort Bonafacio, the Philippines.