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Phil Scarce, *Finish Forty and Home: The Untold World War II Story of B-24s in the Pacific*.

Denton: Univ. of North Texas Press, 2011. Pp. xiv, 373. ISBN 978-1-57441-316-8.

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This book inevitably invites comparison with Laura Hillenbrand's best-seller, *Unbroken*, published a year earlier.¹ Both relate the story of B-24 Liberator crews flying in the Pacific in 1943. Hillenbrand limits her operations period to one-eighth of her book, focusing rather on the life story of one crew member, whose flying ended in a May 1943 ocean crash. In contrast, Phil Scarce recounts the experiences of the members of a whole squadron—with emphasis on his father and his buddies—during operations up to the end of the Pacific War. *Finish Forty and Home* is thus a kind of unofficial Army Air Forces unit history, while *Unbroken* concentrates on the extraordinary life of a single person, including his time as a prisoner of the Japanese.

The son of an enlisted man of the 11th Bomb Group's 42nd Squadron, Phil Scarce has benefited from the clear recollections of his father, then Sgt. Herman Scarce, and other surviving men of his squadron. This has enabled him to reconstruct, in an appealing and lucid prose style,² the daily lives of officers and men in the air as well as at their bases. He has as well thoroughly researched the relevant literature, particularly histories of his father's and other squadrons in the 11th Bomb Group.

Like Hillenbrand,³ Scarce convincingly shows that flying a B-24 was a difficult, high-risk occupation, all the more so given the conditions that prevailed in the Pacific theater of operations. Clumsy and prone to mechanical problems, the exceptionally heavy bomber had to be navigated over vast distances between flyspeck islands where the slightest error might mean having to ditch into the ocean. Poor weather conditions often limited visibility in searching for destinations, and when the bomber crews did reach their targets, they were often met by deadly Japanese antiaircraft fire and aggressive Zero fighter pilots pouring machine-gun and cannon rounds into their unescorted Liberators. The shot-up aircraft that survived this gauntlet then faced a long, perilous flight back to base with wounded crew members. Even outside of combat missions, accidents and the errors of green pilots took a toll on the B-24s.

Scarce's expressed aim is to ensure that the wartime experiences of the 11th Bomb Group flying crews—whether exciting or mundane—not be lost to history. The original goal of the B-24 crews was simply to live through their thirty mandated missions (raised to forty in 1944) and return home in one piece. By the end of 1943, fifty of the 42nd Squadron's original 110 members had died in the crashes of five of the squadron's eleven Liberators.

Eleven of the book's twenty-one chapters cover combat missions against Japanese island bases on Nauru, Wake, Tarawa, Maloelap, Yap, Haha Jima, Chichi Jima, and Iwo Jima. The Iwo Jima mission (12 February 1945) was Sergeant Scarce's fortieth, qualifying him to return home. The other ten chapters follow Scarce and his fellow crewmen in more everyday base activities, many of them of a hilarious nature. The book moves chronologically through the 11th Bomb Group's operations from February 1943 to February 1945.

Phil Scarce's dramatic style of writing captures the feelings of flight crews in life-threatening situations as they flew to targets over ocean expanses, dropped their bombs, fought off Zero fighters, and frequently returned to their bases in damaged or mechanically malfunctioning ships. Thus, for example, on their first mission (20 April 1943), against Nauru, under attack by Japanese fighter planes, Sergeant Scarce and his crewmates instinctively functioned

1. Subtitle: *A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption* (NY: Random House, 2010).

2. He studied at the Middle Tennessee State University Writers' Loft.

3. *Unbroken* 59-60, 80-89.

as parts of a whole, a working team, and part of their machine. *Dogpatch Express* was now fully engaged, every gun firing at the attacking fighters in turn. Scarce could hear Marston's .50s in the tail, distinct and staccato, and Johnson's belly turret hammering below his feet, but from where he stood, it was Yankus' gun at his back that Scarce could *feel*. The .50 caliber machine guns pounded like angry fists beating hard and fast on a steel door. Hot, spent brass and gun belt links falling to the floor clinked like glass breaking around the waist gunners' feet. (54)

Seven months later, another pilot in the squadron, returning from his bombing mission over Jaluit, gauges indicating he was running out of gas, tried to land at Nanumea—forty-five minutes short of his base on Funafuti atoll. But, as he touched down on the runway,

Naughty Nanette's nose smashed into the coral with a groaning crunch, like a great wounded dragon felled from the sky, unable to hold its head up any longer and belching its final fire in protest. Plexiglas shattered and wrenched from the bombardier's nose compartment. The aircraft's metal skin, searing hot from grinding against coral, ripped and bent, the rough runway ground the nose in a shower of sparks, and the aircraft's interior lights suddenly went dark. Dechert and Baker shut down the ignition switches as the rest of the men scrambled to get the hell out. (139)

The book's subtitle gives the impression that it will tell the story of *all* B-24s in the Pacific theater, not just those of the 42nd and, to an extent, three other squadrons of the 11th Bomb Group. But readers seeking a history of the Liberator in all units active in the Pacific⁴ will have to look elsewhere.⁵ Nor does it appear that Scarce has made use of Clive Howard and Joe Whitley's classic introduction to 7th Air Force B-24 operations in the Pacific.⁶ He has, however, drawn extensively on 11th Bomb Group Association's own history, the sole previous work exclusively covering the Group's operations.⁷

The only factual errors I have noticed in Scarce's account are the exaggerated claims for Zeros shot down by gunners of the 42nd squadron (an inaccuracy widespread among B-17 and B-24 crews alike during the war). The author seems to have relied on the squadron history and the recollections of squadron members for his figures, without cross-checking against Japanese records. There is even an English-language work providing information on Zero pilots lost in combat according to date, squadron, and location.⁸

With its vivid narrative and thirty-nine well chosen photographs, many from private collections, *Finish Forty and Home* will appeal strongly to a general public interested in World War II personal experiences as well as to professional military historians. Though it has not enjoyed the celebrity of Hillenbrand's book, it has certainly achieved its author's aim of commemorating the bravery shown by B-24 flight crews during the Pacific War.

4. B-24s were flown by the 30th and 307th Groups in the 7th Air Force, the 22nd, 30th, and 90th Groups in the 5th Air Force, and the 5th and 307th Groups in the 13th Air Force.

5. I recommend Robert F. Dorr, *B-24 Liberator Units of the Pacific War* (Oxford: Osprey, 1999)—not listed in Scarce's bibliography.

6. *One Damned Island after Another: The Saga of the Seventh Air Force in World War II* (1946; rpt. Washington: Zenger, 1979).

7. W.M. Cleveland, ed., *Grey Geese Calling: Pacific Air War History of the 11th Bombardment Group, 1940-1945* (Askov, MN: American Publ Co, 1981).

8. See Appendix B in Ikuhiko Hata and Yasuho Izawa, *Japanese Naval Aces and Fighter Units in World War II* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 1989).