in mid-air. He shrugs: "It was better to try it than pull a rice-shovel the rest of the war."

They work out of homemade jungle strips 500 feet long, and sleep in sodden straw-thatched huts with bamboo mats on the mud floor, and their blankets smell permanently of mildew; some of them have been living in the damp jungle that way for two years or more. They have no headquarters of their own. It's a catch-all outfit: shoe salesmen, garage mechanics, high school students, truck drivers and commercial artists - middle-aged civilian flyers who were too old to get commissions as regular combat pilots, some 18-year-old washouts from cadet school. They are all GI's, staff or tech, or sometimes master sergeants. Even the chaplain of the outfit is an enlisted man. Staff-Sgt. Richard Dickson of Englewood, Colorado, who used to conduct revival meetings.

"The Blankety-Blank Host"

Every Sunday night he holds church services in the bare, dank mess hall. The men kneel at the mess table, the mud-caked soles of their big GI shoes upended side by side in a long row, their flying covers bent in prayer. Sergeant Dickson says he can always tell by the attendance how many narrow escapes the squadron has had during the past week. Most of the time they are flying, of course. You have to order them to the hospital to make them rest. There was a flying sergeant with Col. Phil Cochran's outfit who hauled out 43 wounded in a single day. Colonel Cochran said he bumped into the kid one morning, looking pretty green. "How many missions have you been on so far today?" he asked. "Eleven, sir," the kid said, "but I'm okay - it's just this blankety-blank heat."

They evacuated 400 injured Marauders in the Tanai River fighting alone between February 24 and May 5. General Merrill said frankly: "Many of our wounded would never have gotten out alive except for these little liaison planes. They've been our best morale factor."

They do a thousand other jobs. They fly blood plasma, sterile gauze and alcohol to isolated field hospitals. One flying sergeant landed on a straightaway stretch of the unfinished Ledo Road to deliver a surgeon for an emergency appendectomy. They rig bomb racks under the flimsy wings, and haul mortar ammunition or barbed wire to outposts under siege. Staff-Sgt. T. Y. Qwon, Chinese-American pilot, made a dozen trips in a day hugging dynamite to Myitkyina. They carry live chickens and ducks, and sometimes a case of beer that is worth its weight in gold out here.

They are frequently called in to help search for a lost plane, dragging the jungle at tree-top level. They fly numerous photo-missions over the enemy lines, following in the wake of a fast A-36 bomber like a puppy chasing an automobile. During the North Burma campaign, they dropped dispatches and important maps to an isolated unit. They flew combat team commandos on reconnaissance. When pack artillery was dropped to Merrill's Marauders on May 2, they flew right over the Jap positions to divert artillery fire.

They like best of all to act as artillery observers. Gives them a grandstand view, they say. Sometimes they locate a Jap ammunition dump, and mark the target till the bomb-ers come over. As they dodge in and out amid the tracer bullets and shells the Japs lob up at them, they gaze sympathetically at the infantrymen below; they wouldn't trade places for anything in the world. "Those guys down there have really got it tough."

Most of them have crash-landed in the jungle, and most have walked out. They tell walk-out stories on each other, as they sprawl on cots around the basha at night, with the monsoon rain beating against the basket-weave walls and the jackals howling. About Tech. Sgt. Stan Colwell, ex-schoolteacher from Eureka, California, whose single engine cooked out over a jungle stream and a bunch of highly irritable rhinoceroses. He sat on the wing of his plane, out of reach of their tusks, until some natives heard his yells and came after him in a dugout canoe.

Or Staff-Sgt. W. T. Burgess of Charleston, S. C., who crashed in the heart of the Burmese mountains. After a couple of miserable days fighting mosquitoes and leeches and gnawing hunger, he was found by a party of Kachin hillmen. They put him up for the night in the chief's house, in a single large room with 75 or 100 men and women all sleeping together. There was one homemade mosquito net; they draped that over him, and then they put the chief's year-old baby under the net with him. "And then the mosquitoes came up through the floor," he said, "and bit the hell out of me anyway." They gave him a one-piece sarong to wrap around him, while his own clothes were drying. Unfortunately a couple of rescue planes appeared overhead just then, and Sergeant Burgess had nothing else to save them but the sarong. They told me later it was too bad I wasn't Dotty Lamour."

Paralyzed Victim Rescued

There was another rescue story you never saw in headlines, about a soldier in a remote outlying area sickened with infantile paralysis. His abdomen was paralyzed so he couldn't breathe, and he had to be evacuated at once to the nearest iron lung, which happened to be in Calcutta. They fitted an improvised artificial-respiration device into a cub plane. For three hours the pilot operated this respirator with his left hand while he fought his way through the worst typhoon weather seen thereabouts in a Burmese year. He landed with the gas supply so low that his engine quit just as he was taxying down the strip.

They say there are no heroes in the Army nowadays; just men. But the men themselves have heroes. You ask the soldiers fighting out here and they will tell you their own heroes are these nameless GI flyers. They have a little trouble expressing their gratitude sometimes. They give the pilots souvenir enemy rifles, sabers, a torn Jap battle-flag that they captured at the risk of their lives. It isn't much, but it sort of says how they feel. Better than headlines, maybe.

Oh, yes. This report would not be complete without the story of one Worm that Turned. It seems that a sergeant-pilot found a 30-pound Jap bomb lying on the field at Myitkyina. He headed back home, carrying the precious souvenir in his lap. He was brooding about a rifle-hole in the windshield of his defenseless plane just above his head. Perhaps he wanted to be a bomber-pilot because he washed out in primary school.

By an odd coincidence, he said, he found himself over a narrow-gauge railroad, and by an equally odd coincidence there were a Jap locomotive and a string of supply cars toiling along the track. And by the oddest coincidence of all - he seemed very embarrassed about the whole thing - his plane happened to tip over onto one wing just then. The door happened to come open, and the bomb happened to slide out of his lap and hit the locomotive right on the nose. He said there was a very beautiful pink explosion, full of flying spectacles and buck teeth. He was very proud to have his new souvenir, but he felt much, much better about that Jap-made hole in his windshield now.

The End