



More About **THURMAN**

(Editor's Note: The fall issue of "WHY" contained a story about a gorilla named Thurman who became an airline pilot. Quite a few passengers have written telling us how much they liked it, but the most interesting response came in the following letter addressed to the author, Captain Emmett Spinks, and we offer it to you with tongue in cheek and all fingers crossed as to its veracity.)



Bogey Flying School

November 15, 1973

Emmett Spinks
c/o Frontier Airlines
Denver, Colorado

Dear Captain Spinks:

I have just finished reading the story about Thurman, the flying gorilla, and I feel I must take exception to your statement that Thurman is just a dumb gorilla.

No, sir. I knew Thurman personally and he is as smart, sly, crafty and cunning as any gorilla who ever bent a throttle. Incidentally, that South American incident described in your story was *not* the first time Thurman was at the controls of an aircraft. The reason I know this is because I was responsible for Thurman's early flying career which also ruined my career with the U.S. Air Force. It was a long time ago and it happened like this:

During the early days of World War Two, I was stationed with a fighter squadron on a small jungle island way out in the South Pacific. This area was called the CBI which stood for the China-Burma-India Theatre of Operations. It was monotonous and dreary duty for more reasons than one and just to give you an example, I'll start by informing you that we didn't even have an officers' club. As you are probably aware, the good old U.S. military wouldn't think of fighting a war without plenty of officers' clubs, but they sure goofed in this case which just shows you what a tough war it was. Of course we were attacked before we were

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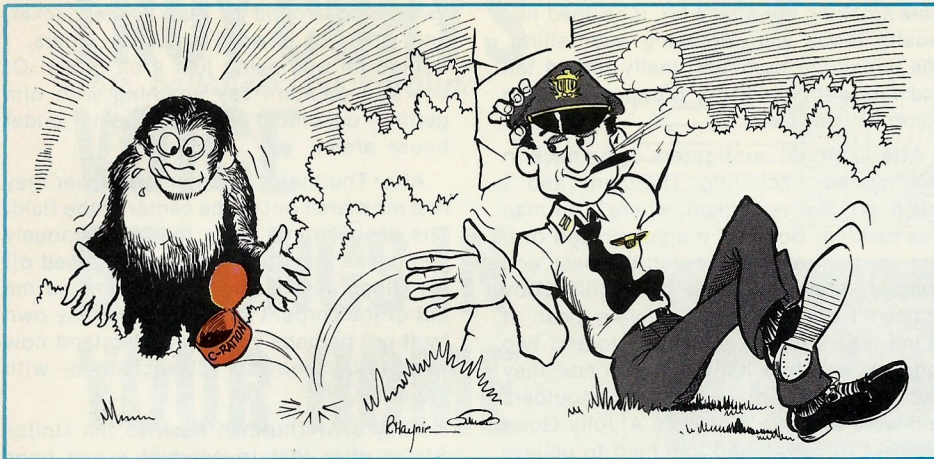
ready, which probably had something to do with it. Also, we didn't get to take our motor scooters which was just one more disappointment heaped on top of the others. This will give you an idea of the conditions under which we were fighting this war and I can tell you it was *grim*.

Also, during these early days of the war there just wasn't enough shipping to go around so consequently we were always short of supplies and especially aviation gasoline. This made it absolutely essential that we conserve fuel. What with no extra fuel to do any flying and no officers' club and no motor scooters, I don't have to tell you that time really hung heavy. We would invent all sorts of things to give us something to do but finally we just sort of ran out of ideas. To break the monotony, I started taking long walks out into the jungle which is where I first became acquainted with Thurman. One day I was sitting in a little clearing eating a can of C-rations when this little tyke of a gorilla stuck his head out of the dense underbrush and watched me eat the C-rations with what seemed like considerable interest. I tossed him part of the rations and he really gobbled it up. I just couldn't believe that any man or beast would like

C-rations but this little gorilla did. Maybe if I had been eating bananas all my life I might have looked more fondly on C-rations. I really just don't know.

The following day, I took several cans of C-rations with me and returned to the same spot. I was a bit surprised but sure enough as soon as I opened that first can of C-rations that little gorilla was right back staring at me. I tossed him some more food and pretty soon he overcame his shyness enough to approach quite close to me. This went on for several days until finally we became quite good buddies. This was when I named him Thurman. If I had known the evil lurking inside his hairy little body, I probably would have named him Blackheart. Actually, I guess I shouldn't say he was evil but he certainly was an opportunist as you will see as you read further.

Well, I took Thurman back to my quonset hut and gave him a bunk next to mine. The parachute riggers made him a parachute and also a leather helmet and leather jacket just like the rest of us were wearing. One of the enlisted men scrounged up a small pair of goggles from somewhere, and Thurman, completely G.I. outfitted, became our squadron mascot. It



wasn't long until he started swaggering a bit and you could tell that he really wanted to be a fighter pilot. All in all, everything was going along fairly well at this point but I just wish I could have foreseen the storm clouds gathering on the horizon.

Thurman went back into the jungle a couple of times and then I guess he just "went native" in reverse. He just really loved those fighters and that fighter pilot life he was leading. We were flying the old Curtis P-40 Warhawks and some had been transferred to us from General Claire Chennault's area and still had the sharks' teeth painted on the front. Thurman would put on all his flying gear and spend hours just sitting in the cockpit of my fighter. I thought it was kinda' foolish but figured it was perfectly harmless. I just wished I could take Thurman up for a spin but of course I couldn't because we couldn't spare the gas. As it turned out, one day I

had to fly a test hop which afforded me the opportunity to take Thurman up with me. I even gave him about a 15-minute flying lesson and then we came on back in and landed. I guess the best way I could describe Thurman's feelings is to say he was exhilarated.

During the early years of the war, radar had not been invented but our Chinese allies had worked out some sort of early warning system to let us know when enemy bombers were approaching. We never could figure out the Chinese system. All we knew was that it worked and worked good. The enemy was quite methodical in all of his air raids which was O.K. I guess except they always headed out at four a.m. I have always been a night person, and to me it just seems unsanitary that anybody would want to fight a war at four a.m. Each time the enemy took off, the Chinese on our base would run one lantern up the

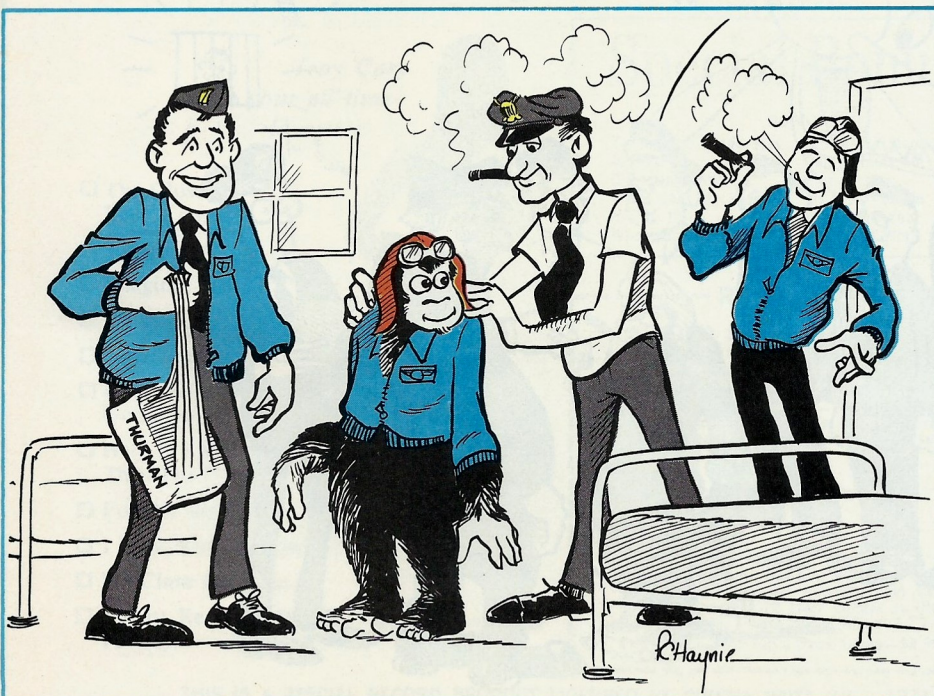
flagpole and I think called it one ding ho. This was the signal for us to throw on some clothes, grab our helmets and goggles and run for our fighters which were parked in revetments near the dirt runway, which had been scraped out of the jungle by the seabees. These were a group of courageous engineers who always went in first and got the job done and usually threw in an officers' club for good measure.

After we got in our cockpits, we would just sit there to see which direction the enemy bombers would head. If they headed in our general direction the Chinese would run another lantern up the flagpole which gave us two ding ho's. On receiving this signal, we would start engines and let them idle. We still wouldn't take off since we wanted to wait and see if the enemy really was headed for our place of business. This system was absolutely essential since we had to save the fuel. I was there in that jungle a long time and every single morning it was the same old thing. Just when you were doing your best sleeping, you would have to haul out of the sack and go strap on that airplane. I just hope that someday we become civilized enough and get a strong enough union that we can fight our wars from nine to five.

Once in a great while, we would start the engines, but the enemy just never did come close enough to scramble (takeoff). If they had come close enough, the Chinese would have run up three lanterns which would have been our signal to scramble and intercept.

I suppose I have to give Thurman due credit because he didn't have a lazy bone in his hairy little body. Each morning when they would drag me kicking and screaming out of the sack, little Thurman would race me to the cockpit with all his flying gear on. Now like I told you, we never did takeoff and almost never did start the engines so one day I got me what I thought was a real peach of an idea. Since little Thurman was so crazy about airplanes, I reasoned, and since he had all his flying gear, why not let him run jump into the cockpit every morning and I could stay in the sack and sleep. Well, Thurman was so bright that it didn't take any time at all for him to learn this trick and I was really enjoying my sleeping in. I finally decided that maybe I should teach Thurman how to start the engine just in case the other guys fired up so they wouldn't catch on that I wasn't there. Thurman being smart like he is caught right on to starting the engine which made me feel a whole lot better. I figured this was plenty for Thurman to know since we never had taken off to intercept.

I just guess you never would suspect



what happened one early four a.m. alert but the Chinese finally ran three lanterns up the flagpole which means we had ourselves a full blown three ding ho on our hands. In other words, the war had started. The entire squadron scrambled and in the excitement, little Thurman scrambled right along with the rest. The enemy was heading right for us and I can tell you truthfully that it was some air battle. Of course, I was on the ground looking up since Thurman had taken my fighter. Well



there were planes zooming all over the sky and lots of machine gun fire and some of theirs were smoking and some of ours

were smoking but after a bit, it seemed like mostly theirs were smoking and falling. The remaining bombers finally turned tail and ran without having dropped a single bomb on our field.

After a bit, all our fighters came back in and landed, including Thurman, and I raced for the revetment where Thurman was parking. Soon all the guys raced over and started pounding me on the back and congratulating me and then somebody noticed I didn't have any flying gear. It didn't take them long to put two and two together and in a matter of seconds they had hoisted Thurman on their shoulders and were singing "For He's A Jolly Good Fellow." You may find this hard to believe but that little rascal had shot down three of those bombers all by himself.

In a matter of seconds, the word was all over camp and the C.O. placed me under house arrest until he could figure out what to do with me. On the one hand I had derelicted my duty but on the other hand it was *my* gorilla that shot down the bombers, so you can see it was a delicate situation.

A couple of weeks later a bunch of big brass flew in and had a big parade formation drawn up. It was then they had Thurman step forward and this general pinned the Distinguished Flying Cross on Thurman's flying jacket which he always wore those days. It seemed kinda' like an affectation to me the way Thurman

swaggered around in that leather jacket, and when he started smoking cigars, I figured he was being just a bit gross. Of course I couldn't say anything with him getting decorated and me being under house arrest.

After Thurman's ceremony was over they had me march out to the center of the field. The snare drums were rolling ominously and it was then that the general ripped off my wings and epaulets and drummed me out of the corps. I suppose it was my own fault but perhaps you can understand now why I became so disenchanting with Thurman.

They sent Thurman back to the United States after that to conduct a war bond tour and that's the last I heard of him until I read the story in "WHY?" Magazine. I'll just bet that if you do a little inquiring around the Pentagon, you'll find that the first monkey in space probably was Thurman.

Yours truly,

Sam Bogey

Sam Bogey

P.S. Is Thurman's girlfriend cute?

