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Date written: Three in 1987; one (Dan Sweeney) in 1945

SUPPLY MISSIONS TO P.O.W. CAMPS

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION: At the end of the war in the Pacific, late in August of 1945, POW camps in Japan, China, and Korea contained many prisoners--American, English, Dutch, Australian, etc.--some of whom had been living under harsh prison conditions for a long time. From August 27 through September 20, there were 1,066 B-29 take-offs on mercy missions which dropped over 4,400 tons of supplies to 154 different POW camps housing an estimated 63,400 prisoners. Tragically, though the war was over, eight B-29s and 77 crew members were lost on these missions. Here we present the stories of four members of the 40th Group who were involved in these missions.

Memories of O. W. Burchett, pilot of B-29 #44-70100 on 30 August 1945:

I will do the best I can with my recollections of this mercy mission. We had extra personnel on board, but I do not recall just who they were. I do recall they were ground personnel. One of these men was busy with the K-20 camera.

The Japanese envoys who met with U.S. representatives to arrange terms of the peace agreement were asked for, and provided, longitude and latitude of the POW camps. Some aircrews in the 40th and other Groups were immediately assigned and started loading aircraft with oil drums rigged with parachutes and loaded with medical supplies, food, and clothing. This was to be our first contact with our surviving comrades in the prison situations. Both bomb bays were loaded, and we were briefed with very little information as to the identity of our drop zone and very little information on the anticipated drop trajectory. It seems to me there were four other aircraft in addition to mine. We were assigned to drop on a camp at Taihokli, Formosa. We were briefed to fly direct to Formosa, locate the target, drop one bomb bay from very low altitude of less than 500 feet. After observing the results, we then could make some calculated corrections to drop the second bomb bay of supplies.

We arrived over Formosa in good weather, but finding and properly identifying the POW camp proved to be difficult and time consuming. We did locate the camp at the base of some hills on the edge of a small stream. We observed a sign on a roof reading, "TWO KILLED AVOID CAMP," and next to the camp was an open field with a sign reading, "PW SUPPLIES DROP HERE." We took K-20 pictures of these signs. Then we dropped the first bomb bay satisfactorily, but the prisoners rushed the field in such panic that we had to delay the second drop until they cleared the field. This was an extremely tear jerking sight. We really would have enjoyed stopping to pick up the load of POWs.

While circling this area, we observed an adjoining airstrip that was extremely well camouflaged. It appeared to have large bomb craters, etc. However, a white, twin-engine Japanese aircraft, with a large green identity cross on the side of the fuselage, came in, refueled and left from this strip. This aircraft was carrying the Japanese envoy who had been in the Philippines discussing the peace. We also observed during our time of circling at low altitude that the civilian population were apparently informed of our arrival and seemed to completely ignore us. They were walking, riding bikes and a few vehicles on the roads in a very normal manner.

After making our second drop, we had depleted our fuel until it was necessary for us to head for

Okinawa to Yon Tan airstrip to refuel. En route to Okinawa I enjoyed a moment of superiority. We overtook the white envoy aircraft. We were cruising approximately 1,000 feet above it. I could not resist a shallow dive, some extra throttle and buzzing him real well, much to my pleasure as well as the crew's.

Upon landing at Yon Tan, I lost tread from one of the tires on the right landing gear that not only ruined the tire but did skin damage to the aircraft. Because of the war's end, things were well disorganized, and repairs took two days. Upon my return to Tinian I found I had been removed from orders to fly back into the states with a composite crew of high mission and high point men. At the time this seemed like the end of the world to Vonnie (my wife) and me. However, we later flew back into the states as a group. Our crew and passengers arrived stateside on 16 October 1945. My recollections of the POWs waving and greeting us will never fade, and I will never regret that mission. I am proud that the 40th had the opportunity of sharing this mercy mission.

Memories of Delmar Johnson, bombardier:

After the end of hostilities, volunteers were requested to fly POW supply missions, two of which I flew on. The second, which was to Yawata, became the eventful trip. This was also the mission on which John Cornwell, our original CP, flew on another aircraft. Knowing some of each crew, I had my choice of AC and crew. Since I had flown once before with Ken Dothage as AC, I chose his crew, which was to be our good fortune. The flight was long and uneventful until we were approaching the Islands, which were completely "socked in." We stayed on top in almost clear weather, searching for openings to get down to our drop altitude of 800 feet. After a couple of hours circling the target with no such opening appearing, we decided to go out over the water to get down under the heavy clouds, head into the harbor, make our drop, and immediately climb out. If my memory serves me correctly, our maps showed hills, etc., to be not over 600-650 feet nearby in the heading we were on. There was absolutely no visibility above our approximate 600-800 feet. Our drop was made and as we began climbing slowly, my recollection is that the radar observer screamed to "pull up and turn right," which Ken immediately did--with all throttles at limit. Evidently the radar operator saw a dark left patch on his screen and lighter on the right. Not too many seconds later--and I remember as I was looking off to the right--we were about 1300-1350 feet altitude--and a brief second of clouds disappeared. Off our right wing, not more than twenty or thirty feet, were the trees, just as we cleared the top. Ken Dothage, John Laxton and I saw what in all probability John Cornwell and the others in the B-29 a couple of minutes behind us did not see--and they were killed in the crash of their plane.

Several times during the flight out, we had seen their aircraft slightly higher and behind us by two or three miles. This was not, however, to be the last of our worries. Because we had been up in the air so much longer than expected, we could never make it back on our fuel supply. Our heading was changed to Okinawa, and when we landed among all the little potholes on the runway, it was on fumes and not fuel. We were told, and Ken's engineer and CP can verify, we had no more than 25 gallons of gas in each of our tanks. We slept under the plane, and through the night we heard gunfire somewhere not too far away. Next morning we were refueled, partially I'm told, because of the shorter runway, and took off, clearing the masts of ships below us in the harbor by not too many feet, and returned. I wish I could remember all of the crewmen on this flight, but to those I remember--Ken Dothage (pilot), John Laxton (CP), Pat Daily (Navigator), and Sgt. Valley (Engineer)... "We were lucky."

Memories of Maurice Righetti, Co-pilot:

After V-J day, I helped load our B-29 on Saipan for a drop at a POW camp a few days later in Japan. It was the hardest work I had done in a long while. We looked forward to the low-level drop with no enemy opposition. At the last possible moment, I was scratched as second pilot, and Lt. John G. Cornwell (from Texas) went in my place. His ship never came back. The pallets did not jettison completely and banged the plane into uncontrollability, I later learned. It was just not my time to go.

THE FOLLOWING LETTER, reproduced in full, was written by Lt. Dan Sweeney, Jr., to his parents on Sunday, September 2, 1945. He was navigator on Capt. Ralph Learn's crew. We are grateful to Sweeney's family for making the letter available to us.

Dearest Mother & Daddy,

I just heard the president proclaim V-J day--the day we've been waiting for so long. Now all I need to convince me that the war is over is for them to send me home. I still haven't heard much about that. There are a lot of rumors going around over here but nothing official has come out yet. A few guys that had quite a number of points have already gone home. I believe that something will turn up pretty soon now, though, since the treaty is all signed and everything seems to be going along pretty well with the occupation. I still have hopes of being home by Thanksgiving but I'm not building myself up for it because it would be a big disappointment if I didn't make it.

I really took a nice tour Thursday--We flew a mission way up into northern Korea carrying 9,000 lbs. of supplies to a prisoner of war camp. We had a lot of rank aboard our ship, too--a colonel from the continental air force in Washington, and the group operations officer, a major, of the 40th Group. Dobney was the only one of the crew that didn't go. I'll just start from the first and tell you all about it. We took off from here Thursday morning about 3:00 & headed for Okinawa. We landed at Okinawa about the middle of the morning & refueled before going on into Korea. We only stayed at Okinawa for 2 1/2 hours, so none of us got a chance to look the island over except from the air. We took off about noon for Korea. When we hit the coast of Korea, the weather began closing in on us so I "suggested" to the colonel that we go up a few thousand more feet to be sure of clearing the mountains as it is very mountainous country and not very well charted either. I can't see much sense in flying below the tops of the mountain, especially when you can't see the tops. We got through the weather OK, though, and broke into the clear about an hour before we got to the target. We were flying only 1,000 feet above the terrain so we could see everything. We flew right over Jap cities & airfields, and could practically look the Japs on the ground straight in the eye. We all "sweated it out" a little at first because we weren't too sure the Japs in Korea knew the war was over, but we were all tickled to death to see they had heard the good news and weren't shooting at us. It would have only taken about one good burst of anti-aircraft fire to knock us down as low as we were. Well, after that we relaxed a little & finally reached the target area about 4:00 p.m. that afternoon. We found the prison camp pretty easily and incidentally, we were down to 800 ft. above the ground by this time. We had to make one run over the camp to check the wind because the supplies had parachutes on them and they had to be dropped within the camp but still they had to miss the huts the prisoners were kept in to prevent killing some of them. Boy, you should have seen those guys down there--that was probably one of the biggest moments in their lives seeing a B-29 circling around there after their being imprisoned way up there in Korea for a few years or more. They started running around patting each other on the back and waving everything from sticks to handkerchiefs, we made two more runs over the camp dropping the supplies this time, and then we made one last run to check everything and see where the packages had landed. They all hit right in the camp & didn't touch the huts. Two fell outside the big wire fences but we saw some of the guys outside the fence dragging the packages in, so they got them all OK. We headed back home then, coming across the Jap mainland at a fairly low altitude on our way back but we didn't have any trouble there either. I was very lucky in my navigation all the way and the colonel complimented us all when we got back on the ground here at Tinian. We got back Friday morning about 2:00. We flew 20 hours and 20 minutes and a total of 4,400 miles. That's the longest ride I've ever had. We all feel like we did more good on this mission than any we've ever flown--you can drop tons of bombs and never be too sure where they hit and just how much good your own bombs did, but we know those guys needed the supplies and we also know we got 'em there just right! Put yourself in one of those American prisoner's places and try to imagine how happy you would be to see an American plane for the first time in quite awhile only 800 feet overhead and carrying a big load of supplies for you. The packages contained cartons of cigarettes, chewing

gum, canned foods, & medicine and probably a lot of other things like clothing. We had no information on the location of this camp except its approximate position since nobody had ever been up that far before. We thought we were pretty lucky to find it so easily. Learn asked for one of these missions quite awhile ago when we first heard the 29s were going to fly some of them. I don't blame him a bit since his father is in Japanese hands somewhere. It would really be something if it turns out that his dad was in this particular camp we hit.

The trip was pretty nice for sightseeing, too. As I said before, we didn't see much of Okinawa except from the air, but we could see enough from there to tell that it was pretty well torn up from the recent battles. There was absolutely nothing left of the villages there & you could see bomb craters over the island. I saw a few of those caves they had to blast the Japs out of, & it beats me how they ever got those rascals out of there--but everything is very peaceful there now. We flew right over Ie Shima, the little island Ernie Pyle was killed on & also the place the Jap envoys landed when they went to Manila to confer with MacArthur. Korea was really beautiful--much nicer than I ever imagined. There were big rivers running all through mountains almost like you see on a golf course. Along the coast they have some of the prettiest beaches I have ever seen. There are small cottages near the beaches and it really looked nice. We saw one big yacht along the beach, something like you would expect a millionaire or big sportsman to have back in the states. There were quite a few large cities & a lot of industry all over the place. We are all pretty well convinced that the fighting is over now after flying over that once-considered enemy territory at low altitudes.

I got a letter from you Wednesday--the first in some time. I think the army has all the transport planes tied up with occupation business so that slows down our mail now.

EDITORS' POSTSCRIPT: Please send us your memories--any story you believe worth telling. Right now we especially want your memories of the Yokohama mission of 29 May 1945, on which Mansel Clark's crew was rammed out of formation by a Jap fighter. Also we seek your memories of bits of wartime humor. Send your brief account of an amusing situation or event to either editor: William A. Rooney, 517 1/2 Ridge Road, Wilmette, IL 60091, or Robert L. Hall, P.O. Box 544, St. Michaels, MD 21663.

If you want to send a contribution of money in support of the publication of Memories, make your check to 40th Bomb Group Association, and mail it to M.E. Carmichael, 2514 Oregon Avenue, Alamogordo, NM 88310. The Group's historian is Harry Changnon, 10455 Westacres Drive, Cupertino, CA 95014.



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