



Date of event: April-June 1945
Date written: Fall 1988
Written by: Father Bartholomew Adler

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION: This issue of MEMORIES contains stories of two construction projects undertaken on the Island of Tinian, plus one additional story. Those of us who have heard Fr. Adler deliver a homily at our reunion memorial services, know of his gifts as a speaker. Here we learn of his gifts as a first-rate storyteller. The events leading up to the construction of the Tinian chapel actually begin in India. Fr. Adler starts his story there.

FATHER ADLER BUILDS A CHAPEL

The 40th Bomb Group ground personnel boarded the Navy Transport USS Nelson at Calcutta, India on February 25, 1945. The ship lay anchored out in the Hooghly River and we were taken by lighter from the wharf to clamor up the rope ladders hanging over the side of the ship. I remember being very grateful for the help I received from the sailors on the lighter. Burdened with my gear and Mass Kit, climbing the rope ladder was not a very easy task.

I was assigned to a room with twelve bunks. A few men, stripped to the waist, were lying on their bunks enjoying the refreshing breeze that came off the river through the open portholes. As I entered the room I heard someone say, "Hey, look who just walked in - a chaplain." Ignoring the open portholes, I looked around for an air vent. I found one in one corner of the room and threw my gear on the top bunk under it.

Having crossed the Atlantic by troop ship and then traveled from Oran, North Africa, through the Mediterranean (with a diversion to Naples harbor where we were caught in a German air raid) to Bombay via the Suez Canal, I knew from experience that the portholes would be closed at night because of blackout regulations.

The trip from Calcutta to Tinian lasted 44 days. Throughout the trip at night I slept under the air vent covered by a sheet, while the poor fellows near the portholes really sweated it out. Our voyage from Calcutta took us to Australia. We enjoyed a shore leave of several days at Melbourne. Then we proceeded to cross the Coral Sea, sail past the Solomon Islands and on to Tinian, arriving there on April 10, 1945.

The island of Tinian was a beehive of activity. Runways were under construction, Quonset huts were replacing tents in the living areas, briefing halls, officer and enlisted men clubs and theaters were being erected. But alas, no provision had been made for the construction of chapels.

At the various meetings of the chaplains on the island, those of us who complained about the lack of chapels were told to remember that there was a war on and a shortage of materials. Furthermore, the Chief Chaplain on the island told us that he didn't need a chapel to perform his ministry. All he needed, he said, was the "Book" and the open sky. Needless to say, his remark was not enthusiastically received by we chaplains as a whole.

In due time our planes began to arrive from India. I learned that some of them carried, as part of their cargo, cases of liquor purchased in India before the planes left for Tinian. Besides, since arriving on Tinian, a monthly liquor ration had become effective.

After making some discreet inquiries I found out that there was plenty of material on the Island for the building of a chapel. So I approached various individuals in our outfit with a plan. I felt if I could get a donation of a bottle here and a bottle there, I could secure lumber and other material in exchange for the liquid refreshment. And with the help of volunteer labor on the part of the men of the 40th, we could build a chapel.

Encouraged by their reaction to my plan, I began to make the rounds, noting in my little notebook the promises I received. I must say that many men of the 40th were generous, both with their liquor and their hours of volunteer work.

With my little notebook in hand I approached the chief of the Navy lumberyard. The yard had plenty of lumber, once used to crate airplane engines and other material that came to Tinian by ship. I explained my proposition, liquor for lumber in order to build a chapel. The chief agreed.

Then I went to the Seabees and the Army Engineers with the same proposition. Liquor for help in preparing a building site for a chapel and supplying various materials along with a certain amount of expert advice. They agreed. The Seabees were especially helpful.

Carter McGregor in his book, "The Kagu-Tsuchi Bomb Group," has this to say about the Seabees: "The Seabees had everything, but if they didn't have it at the minute, they would get it. They were the world's greatest scroungers. It would have been impossible to win the war without them. These were the guys who moved into an area being taken from the Japanese, and with the firing still in progress, they would be busy with dozers and equipment, building airfields, docks and facilities. On an island in the Pacific it was not uncommon for the Marines and GIs to be fighting at one end of an airfield and for the Seabees to be working on the strip itself, making it ready for the planes to land. As far as we were concerned, our crew chiefs and the Seabees were the unsung heroes of the war effort and entitled to the same recognition as the men who were doing the actual fighting. On Tinian they had done their job well, and now if they could come up with boards to swap for libation, who was going to complain."

And so we built a chapel. But before I tell you about the chapel itself, I must say this in admiration of our Commanding Officer, Col. Kenneth Skaer. He surely must have known what we were up to, but he acted as if he did not know, for which I was extremely grateful.

The 40th Bomb Group Chapel was an open-sided structure with a tarpaulin roof. It was equipped with pews seating 300 men. The altar end of the chapel was enclosed. I had my office and sleeping quarters there. On the altar was a removable tabernacle made out of the hub of a propeller from the engine of a wrecked B-29. It had two little doors in front and the inside was lined with parachute silk. Needless to say, I was quite proud of the tabernacle and regret to this day that there was no way I could bring it home after the war.

We also had a bell. Acquiring it came about this way: One day a supply sergeant came by to ask me if I had a bottle of "barter." It seems that there was a ship in port with an extra bell that could be had for a bottle of liquor. The deal was made so we obtained a bell and had it mounted. On the Sunday when we were to hold our first religious service in our new chapel, I was vigorously ringing the bell announcing it when the officer of the day drove up in a cloud of dust and ordered me in no uncertain terms to cease ringing the bell immediately. I had forgotten that the ringing of a bell was the alarm for a gas attack. So our bell was never rung again.

There was an enlisted man in the 40th who was quite an artist. He volunteered to decorate the beams of the chapel. And he did so painting them in a polychromic style in a variety of colors, making the interior of the chapel quite attractive.

A group of Japanese civilians were being held in a POW camp on Tinian. It is my impression that they were moved to Tinian from Guam after the Allies had recaptured that island. Among them were some gardeners and I arranged to have them landscape the west side (ocean side) ground area of the chapel. The gardeners did an excellent job planting native flowers and shrubs in several beds and then enclosing the beds with knee-high stone hedges.

Now, by way of postscript, I must tell you what happened after the chapel was built.

First, it was reported to the Inspector General of the Island Command (by whom I never sought to find out), that I was responsible for the building of an unauthorized structure and in doing so, misused government property. The Inspector General, a colonel, paid me a visit and implied that the charges were quite serious. In reply I told him that I had no intention of remaining in the service after the war was over. If the authorities decided to send me home for building a chapel, I assured him I would not be quiet about it. Furthermore, I had no family dependent upon me. Besides I was sure of a job if I were sent back to the states. He answered my remarks rather heatedly and somewhat profanely by saying that I and other chaplains like me were too damn independent.

Secondly, soon after the Inspector paid me a visit I was also visited by the General of the Island Command. He asked me if all the material used in the construction of the chapel was found on the island. I assured him that everything with the exception of a bell was found on the island of Tinian.

As a result of our conversation, the General authorized that other groups could have chapels similar to the one built by the 40th Bomb Group.

Finally, on October 2, 1945, I left Tinian for Saipan, to await passage by ship back to the states. Several days after arriving on Saipan a severe typhoon first struck Okinawa and then moved on to strike Saipan and Tinian. The storm lasted three days, after it was over, the 40th Bomb Group chapel lay destroyed. And so ends the saga of a chapel built on the island of Tinian by the 40th Bomb Group.

Date of Event: July 1945

Date Written: March 1988

Written by: Robert L. Hall and Paul Bremen

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION: Bob Hall remembered the story of the building of a skeet range on Tinian. He wrote his memories of the experience and he persuaded fellow CFC gunner, Paul Bremen to put his memories of the project on tape. Sadly, Paul Bremen died 30 November 1988 without seeing his story appear in MEMORIES.

A SKEET RANGE GETS BUILT ON TINIAN

Bob Hall Tells His Story: In July 1945, there were lots of flight crews in the 40th who were finishing their tours of duty, but crew members did not all finish 35 missions at the same time. Often pilots and bombardiers, I believe, got an extra mission or two. Sometimes a crew member was sick and missed one or two missions. Hence we began to accumulate crew members, especially gunners, who had about 32 or 33 missions, whose pilots and often a couple of other crew members had finished 35 and were to be shipped home.

I was one of many caught in this limbo. At one point the operations officer offered to schedule us to "sandbag," i.e., fly as an extra person on a mission with no duties, just to get the mission credits and be rotated home. Some did this. As badly as I wanted to get home, I decided I'd sit it out for years rather than expose myself to the danger of missions for no purpose. Several of us searched for ways to keep ourselves busy.

At this point the special services officer told us he had some skeet guns and ammunition and plans for a skeet range. If we could find the materials and build a range, he'd provide the guns, ammo, birds, etc., and we could shoot skeet. That was an attractive proposition.

Paul Bremen was a CFC gunner and one of the oldest persons on flight status in the 40th. He was caught in the same limbo. Paul took charge of building the skeet range with assistance from three others of us. To say the least, it took lots of ingenuity to find the materials and tools, but there were Seabees on the island who had both, and we cultivated them. We worked hard on this project for a couple of weeks and the very day that we finished building the range, 2 August 1945, new orders came through authorizing us to ship home. None of the four of us who built the skeet range ever got to shoot a round on it. But for a return trip to Uncle Sugar Able, we were more than willing to sacrifice skeet shooting.

Paul Bremen Tells His Story: I did help out building the skeet range. We had quite a lot of fun building it. It was about a half or three-quarters of a mile north of the tent area right along the western shore, and it fired out over the water. In order to keep from doing more sawing than was necessary, we just doubled the lumber. The high house had double thickness of 1 x 12s where the loader sat, and the low house was all double thickness. The ready area was sort of an angled bench with a shade built over it, and there were eight stations.

I remember one afternoon I was working out there, and a car drove up. It was Colonel Skaer and General Ramey. The Colonel was showing the General around. Of course I pitched in and told him what I could about it. The General said that it looked to him like we were doing a pretty good job. He said, "By the way, Sergeant, where did you get the materials?" I said, "Sir, I got some of the material by requisition, some by barter and some by 'moonlight.'" That was all that was said.

Unfortunately, I never got to shoot on that range, because I was shipped out before it was quite finished. A friend of mine from out in Kansas who spent several weeks on Tinian after I left, told me that before they left they took a bulldozer and shoved the whole works over the edge of the island into the water--houses, benches, traps, birds, guns and ammunition. But before that, he said, the range became the officers' skeet range. Now, when we built it, there was no such limitation.

Date of Event: April 1944

Date Written: February 1986

Written by: Howard Eppler

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION: Howard Eppler wrote this contribution to MEMORIES three years ago. Our most recent information on Howard is a notice of change of address with a new address in the Philippines. Howard has written other short pieces for MEMORIES that will be used in future issues.

MY FIRST B-29 MAINTENANCE PROBLEM IN INDIA

Within a very few days of our arrival in Chakulia, Sgt. Robert Cook, Cpl. Richard Wehmas and I (then a Sergeant) began setting up the instrument shop in a tent near the short east-west runway and the temporary north-south taxiway and dispersal area for our nine B-29s, none of which had yet arrived. However, there was a B-29 at the base and the flight instruments were crazy. Bob Cook and I were called upon to find the trouble and correct it.

We first unbolted the thick steel armor plating forward of the pilot's instrument panel to gain access to the altimeter, a/s indicator and the rate-of-climb indicator. As soon as we disconnected the aluminum tubing from one instrument all of them returned to normal--pilot's, copilot's, navigator's, etc. So we knew the problem was not with the instruments.

The next step was for us to trace the "plumbing" back to its source, the static air openings on the side of the plane below the pilot's window. This involved removing the blanket padding exposing the bare skin of the fuselage. When we finally got the tubing removed, we found it to be plugged with mud. "Mud-dauber" wasps had built a nest in the B-29. The corrective action recommended and immediately approved was to provide handmade plugs for the static ports to prevent a recurrence of home building by mother nature's little critters! From then on it was part of the pre-flight inspection to make sure the plugs were removed before take-off.

EDITOR'S POSTSCRIPT: Please send us your memories--any story you believe worth telling. Length doesn't matter. We are especially interested in getting items about the funny things that happened to you when you were in the 40th and also any experience you had at Christmas time, 1943. We intend to do an issue on that subject as the last issue of MEMORIES for this year.

If you should like to send a contribution of money in support of the publication of MEMORIES, make your check out to 40th Bomb Group Association. Mail it to M.E. Carmichael, 2514 Oregon Avenue, Alamogordo, NM 83110.



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