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The Walk Out from Rangoon Prison

Editor's Introduction: From 14 December, 1944 to the end of April, 1945, 29 members of the 40th Group were held prisoner by the Japanese in Rangoon, the result of a mission on that December day that went bad. The story of the Rangoon imprisonment has been told in MEMORIES Issues #6 and #32. A book, *The Rats of Rangoon* by British Wing Commander, Lionel Hudson, gives another view of life as a Jap POW. In all of this, a major part of the story has not been covered. That part is the effort by the Japanese to march all of the able-to-walk prisoners out of Burma and east into Thailand. The column got to Pegu, about 50 miles northeast of Rangoon and a little beyond when the Japs saw their escape route being cut off by the southward sweeping British 14th Army whereupon the Japs abandoned their prisoners and set about saving their own skins by heading for Thailand. The marching POWs were shortly rescued by the British troops. This is the story of that tortuous march out.

Whereas with most issues of MEMORIES, the material to work with is slim, this time the problem is the opposite. Manuscripts of 23, 17 and 11 pages had to be reduced. Other contributions of from two to five pages provide additional supporting material. Thus there has been need for major editing of these extensive narratives to get them down to the pages we have available for MEMORIES. The file of manuscripts we have in hand gives testimony to the superb skills our POWs have in remembering this experience and getting it down on paper--accurately--over 40 years later.

Nick Oglesby starts off the story: In late April, the Japanese became a little easier to get along with. They had passed out Red Cross packages, for example, which was the one and only time we realized that anyone knew we were there.

In addition to the twice-daily regular formations where we all formed ranks and counted off (in Japanese) so they could be sure no one had flown the coop, they held a special formation and a formal inspection, complete with the doctor and several officers. They designated each of us as "well" or "sick." We were uneasy about that without knowing why, for such attention by the doctor was unusual.

Then, one day, a large supply of clothes and shoes was dumped in the compound, and we were told to find clothes we could wear. The jackets were Japanese army issue and so were the pants, which resembled culottes. The shoes were sneakers, rubber and canvas, with the big toe separated from the other toes.

Late that afternoon (April 25), those of us designated as "well" were formed into columns of four and were marched out of the compound accompanied by a number of the guards with their bayonets mounted on their rifles. We had some handcarts loaded with supplies which we pulled along with us

We marched about fifty minutes and rested ten minutes. We continued the march all through that night and were exhausted long before dawn. The Japanese guards were almost as weary as we were. (They had been fed better than we had, for sure, but I doubt that there were in much better shape to undertake this march.)

My shoes were unwearable because my feet had swelled from being barefooted all the time. The Japanese shoes wore blisters on both heels, so they were discarded. This was not too bad while we were walking on the paved road.

The Japanese guards warned us that we might well be strafed by allied fighter planes; thus the night was the time the Japanese could move about. We used no lights, and it was an eerie sensation to be a part of a long column of marching men, in the dark, with the light of the moon providing the only illumination we had.

As best I recall, we were surprised twice by the British fighter-bomber plans while we were on the march. In each case we rolled off the road into the ditch and lay there while the planes cruised the roads, perhaps fifty to one-hundred feet above.

In these two encounters, we were warned of the approaching planes and, if my memory is correct, while we were scared to death, we were not actually attacked.

What was surprising to me was the absolute stillness with which the planes approached our location. It was only after they had reached us that their engine noise was heard.

In the morning, we were fed from the supplies we pulled in the carts and were sheltered from view in a wooded area. As the day wore on, we were increasingly aware of the Japanese army units moving on the roads. Many of them were seemingly in not much better shape than we were.

The military trucks all had to be started by being pushed. Many of the wounded were loaded on ox carts and, in some cases, were being pushed or pulled by soldiers.

The following night we repeated the march, continuing up the paved road to the north. Since Rangoon is located on a peninsula, to get to the mainland to move south away from the British Army advance, we had to be moved north and then east around the bay.

I think during the third night, we were moved off the road and began to cut east, following a railroad line. At that time, the lack of footwear became a real problem. The gravel was sharp, and the railroad ties were spaced just wrong for walking, especially in the dark. The bottoms of our feet became cut and bruised and hurt like hell.

There were moments of humor, of course. I remember someone asking one of our Japanese guards, a fairly chubby, moon-faced short man with those Coke-bottle-bottom glasses, when we were going to stop to rest.

He mopped his brow and said, "Soon, I hope!" with such feeling that we all chuckled.

There were about 400 prisoners on the march, and we were guarded by a much smaller number of Japanese guards.

While I was not privy to the thinking going on with the upper ranks, I believe they planned to attempt to overpower the guard detachment on a signal after we had marched as far north as we were going and before we went too far east.

I believe this word had been passed to us that third night. However, before the signal had been given, we stopped shortly before dawn at a wooded village and were allowed to lie down and rest.

Soon after day broke, we were given the news the Japanese guards had left us, having given to the British Brigadier General (ranking officer) a written document passing command of the prisoner detachment to him.

So, we were free! (Of course, we were free behind the Japanese lines with Japanese troops moving all around us as they attempted to get to the safety of Thailand before the British Eighth Army overran their units.)

While we were certain the British knew exactly where we were (remember spies that saw us march out of jail?) we felt we needed to pinpoint our present location so they could plan our rescue operation more easily.

Therefore, large, white cloth panels were arranged on the ground outside the village wooded area, stating that released allied POW personnel were here.

We had seen and heard four British fighter planes attacking other villages near us. When they came over our village and began to circle the panels we were very relieved. We felt it was only a matter of a short time before they would drop some instructions, etc. and perhaps a radio for us to use to talk with them.

Norman Larsen tells what he remembers of the march out: We left Rangoon jail late in the afternoon of April 25th. There were about 430 prisoners on the march. At the head of the parade strode British Brigadier Clive Hobson, walking stick under his arm and marching as erect as a West Point cadet. At his side, equally erect, strode the Japanese commandant known to Japanese soldiers and us alike as Big Tai. Dragging ass at the tail end of the parade was the motley gang of Air Corp people most of whom, like me, walked barefoot. We were forced to pull a couple of large, two-wheeled bullock carts loaded down with Japanese equipment. A group of about 10 of us took turns pulling each cart. We were allowed to stop and rest for a few minutes every once and a while, and everybody would immediately drop to the ground.

Everybody more or less got through the first night's march and in the morning we made camp in what appeared to be some sort of military bivouac area. We were fed a rather generous portion of rice and tea, and I thought that things aren't all that bad. Little did I know that this meal was to be the last we would have until the night of the 29th. For the next three nights and days, all we had to eat was what we could liberate from the bullock carts. This was a precarious and dangerous undertaking because if caught, the penalty would have been rather severe--and permanent.

I recall that Chet Paul and his buddy, Joe Levine (bombardier on Bud Meyer's crew) swiped a couple of raw onions. Somebody else got a very sweet substance which looked almost like fudge. I got a little of this. In my one attempt at pilferage, all I got for my effort was one Burmese cheroot.

In the bivouac I had scrounged around looking for something to carry tea in. I found a small piece of bamboo and then, incredibly, found the top of an Eveready flashlight which fit in the bamboo quite well. It held about a cup and a half of tea. I tied my "canteen" to my waist with the vine I was using as a belt.

We did the best we could to try to get some sleep. Our biggest fear was that we would be spotted by allied aircraft, and we were sure that our own people would have no idea that we were prisoners of war. In this connection, I remember a bit of black prison humor. When we heard the roar of an approaching aircraft, the cry invariably would go up, "Is it friendly or one of ours?"

The events of the following three nights of marching are somewhat blurred in my mind. There was the matter of the fat little Weary Willie, one of the guards assigned to the Air Corp group. Willie was very overweight and way out of condition. We all knew him because each of us at one time or another had been interrogated by him. He really wasn't all that bad of a guy, and we wanted to keep him as our guard rather than get some strange roughneck Jap. He was sweating profusely, and at one point I suggested to him that he stop drinking so much tea, and maybe he would stop sweating. Then he started limping badly.

Willie was simply not used to soldiering. It reached the point where we were afraid he was going to drop out altogether so some of the guys lifted him up and put him on top of a cart we were pulling. And for a while, one of our people actually carried his gun until it was pointed out that if a Japanese soldier saw him carrying the gun he would no doubt be killed. The gun was passed back up to Willie. We knew if the time ever came to revolt against the guards that we would have easy access to Willie's gun.

Early on there had been a few successful escape attempts by the people in the groups ahead of us. Many of us had formed small four- or five-man escape units and were planning to take off at the opportune moment. However, Big Tai put a quick stop to this. He passed the word back that if anyone escaped, ten people were to be picked at random from the group he was marching with and shot. The Brigadier, in order to protect our own people from being shot, passed the order that anyone who escaped would be subject to court-martial. That was the end of the escapes for the time being.

As extreme hunger, fatigue and thirst took over, we were in very desperate straits. One of our guys, Lou Bishop (a P-40 pilot and long-term POW) developed a severe case of diarrhea. He was dropping further and further behind the column and was using those precious and infrequent rest periods to catch up with the rest of us. When I wasn't pulling one of the bullock carts, I dropped back to help Lou. But I found that it was more than I could do to stay with him all night. I got four or five of the other guys to take turns helping him. Incredibly, he somehow managed to get through the march.

As the nights dragged on, some of the POWs from the groups ahead of us were dropping out. We passed these pathetic-looking creatures who were sitting at the side of the road as we went by. The word was that they would be picked up by trucks and brought back to the POW camp in Rangoon. In actuality they were picked up by Japanese soldiers and immediately shot and killed.

One of the things I worried about was falling asleep during a rest period and not waking up promptly when the order came to resume marching. Several times I had slept for two or three minutes while pulling one of the carts. My buddy, Jim McGivern (bombardier on my crew), had solemnly promised to see that I was awake in time after a rest period. However, one of the people in our group (I understood he was an American major) was not so fortunate. Evidently he overslept by a minute or so, and a Japanese stuck his bayonet into his chest and killed him.

In the morning after the third night's march, our group was hiding out in a small grove of trees a couple hundred yards from the road. The sounds of aircraft were now almost constant. Flight after flight of P-51s went zooming by a hundred or so feet over our heads. It seemed like almost a miracle that they didn't spot us. I was sitting on the ground watching the plane fly by when the guy sitting next to me casually remarked that it was his squadron of P-51s overhead. He said his name was Roger something or other and that he was the CO of the squadron. He said the planes were ranging up and down the road looking for targets of opportunity, and for this reason it was very important for us to stay absolutely motionless. He also told me that each plane was carrying two small napalm bombs. I had never heard of napalm, and he explained to me what it was and how devastating it could be. He said that if one plane dropped its two bombs in our area not one of us would survive.

Later than morning we got word that the Japs were abandoning the bullock carts. This was great news, but it also created a problem for me because my shoes were tied on the back of one of the carts. P-51s or no P-51s, I had to cross an open field to get down to where the carts were hidden at the side of the road. There was no question in my mind that I had to get my shoes. If I were ever to escape, shoes could be essential, especially if we got further north and into a jungle area.

I ran across the open field and got about halfway down to the road when I heard the damn P-51s coming again. I had been carefully avoiding a huge ant hill on my left, but now it was the only shelter available, and I dove in back of it. I was soon covered with huge black ants. I stayed absolutely motionless until the fighter planes had passed, then got up, brushed the ants away as quickly as I could, and made my way to the cart where I was able to retrieve my shoes and get back to the grove of trees.

The events of the last night of marching are somewhat blurred. The complete lack of sleep and a diet of nothing but rice and tea was pushing all of us to the very edge of complete exhaustion. How some of the weaker prisoners ever made it through that night is almost incomprehensible. Not having to pull those cursed bullock carts any longer helped a bit.

During the course of the night, we passed the remains of a Japanese truck which we assumed had been destroyed by one of our planes. There was debris all over the road, and as I slugged along more asleep than awake, I came down hard on a nail sticking through a piece of wood. The nail was driven deep into my heel and as I hopped along on one foot, I got the guy next to me to pull the board out. It hurt like hell.

During the early morning hours we walked through the bombed-out city of Pegu. It was only a shell, and I didn't see one living creature. It was kind of eerie. At one point the column had to go around a hole in the middle of the road. In the hole was crouched a Japanese soldier cradling a rather large bomb. The British later told us this was a Kamikaze booby trap. When a British tank or truck went over the hole, the Jap would detonate the bomb and blow himself and the British equipment to bits.

We walked a few miles past Pegu and just about daybreak left the road and went into this all but abandoned Burmese village. As I recall, it was Sunday morning. We could hear the sounds of gunfire and knew the front could not be too far away.

A couple of hours later I was scavenging around the village looking for something to eat when I noticed there weren't any Japanese guards around. Just about that time a POW came running down the path shouting "We're free. We're free. The Japs have gone?" I turned to the guy nearest me, an English soldier, and we solemnly shook hands. I saw that tears were streaming down his face, and he kept repeating, "Good show. Good show. Jolly good show." A feeling of complete exhilaration swept through me. I have never again experienced a feeling quite like it.

It took me a few minutes to come down to earth and realize that our situation still wasn't all that great. There was a Japanese army between us and the British 14th Army. If the Japanese retreated back through our village, they could very easily wipe us all out. And on the other hand, the British in the mistaken belief that we were the enemy could also shell and shoot the hell out of us.

But first things first, and it was back to looking for something to eat. I and five or six other guys found a fruit tree in a field just at the edge of the village. One of the guys reached up and picked up a fruit, tried it, and said it was delicious. It was a little tiny fruit about 1 1/2" to 2" long. But they were ripe and ready for eating. In a flash, all of us were up in the tree, and we were quickly joined by about ten other guys. I managed to pick seven of the little darlings and threw them down to Jim McGivern on the ground. So we each had 3 1/2 pieces of fruit. And I thought: Wow! Things were sure improving. A couple of hours ago we were slaves and here we are free men and gorging ourselves on delicious fruit.

Back in the village we found out that Big Tai had formally turned over command of the POW to Brigadier Hobson. Then Big Tai gathered up his troops and ran out to fight the British. The Brigadier, a real soldier, quickly organized things in a military fashion setting up things like G-1, G-2, etc. He evidently decided that our best course of action would be to try to attract the attention of allied planes which were now almost continuously overhead and to try to get a message to them that we were in this village.

A bunch of guys quickly scrounged up some red and white cloth and sewed together a large British flag. The flag was placed on the ground in a field just outside the village. In each corner of the field was a POW who had a stick which was attached to a white piece of cloth which he was waving around. There was a haystack in the field which was set on fire. And in the middle of the field was Roger, the P-51 CO who said he knew all the latest codes and how to send them. He had a piece of mirror, and he was attempting to contact the planes that were flying overhead. A group of B-25's saw this astounding scene, and I guess decided it was a lot of nonsense and since they had

already dropped their bombs, they proceeded to go back to their base. The next reaction we had was from a group of four British Hurricane fighters. They were manned by Royal Indian Air Force pilots. They were flying at possibly 2-3,000 feet and saw all of this stuff on the ground. They did contact their base and tell them about it. And some guy at this base said it's a lot of baloney, it's a Japanese trick, all the POWs are back at Rangoon, go on in and hit them. So this is precisely what the Hurricanes did.

Before the Hurricane raids started, I had heard that a first-aid station had been set up underneath the Burmese basha that the Brigadier had taken over as his headquarters. The basha was built on stilts like all the Burmese huts and had a little platform extending in front of the door. It was here that the Brigadier presided. I had gone to the aid station hoping that perhaps they could do something for my heel, which by now was aching continuously. They couldn't do anything, they had nothing for it, but this was no more than I expected.

When I heard the sound of machine-gun fire, I knew we were being attacked. I dove behind a huge tree which was next to the Brigadier's basha. The bullets slammed into the tree and also hit the Brigadier killing him instantly. Bombs were crashing into the village, and I decided this was no place to hang around. So after the first wave passed, I made a dash across an open field for a bomb crater that I had remembered seeing when we came to the village that morning. I got part of the way across the field when the fighters came around for the second pass. There was no place to hide so I just lay flat on the ground and waited for the worst to happen. A line of bullets plowed up the dirt no more than a foot away from my head. After this pass was over, I did manage to get into the bomb crater which by now was full of guys and in fact several came in on top of me which was quite comforting.

The Hurricanes made four passes and when they were gone, we drifted back into the Village. We found out that, incredibly, the only person who was killed in the raid was Brigadier Clive Hobson. A number of people were wounded by bomb fragments, but he was the only fatality. The Brigadier had been captured in Singapore early in 1942, had endured over three years of Japanese imprisonment and now he had been killed by his own people, a few hours after liberation.

Colonel Douglas Gilbert, an American Infantry Officer who had been attached to the Chinese Army, assumed command. There was no further thought given to try to signal Allied airplanes. Now our big worry was that the Allies knew there was activity in our village and of course they did not know it was occupied by POWs. Our fear was that we could be bombed again or hit by British artillery fire. Scouts were sent out to look for a place where we could suitably regroup.

Late in the afternoon the order was passed for us to retreat in small groups to a village a mile or so to the south of our present position. We were told to stay off the road and to keep a low profile. When we got to this village we found that there were still some Burmese occupying it and also found to our great delight that arrangements had been made to feed us. It was fully dark when we were fed a huge meal of rice and tea. For the first time since I was captured, my hunger was completely satisfied.

We learned that a couple of our people had been dressed up as Burmese and, accompanied by some Burmese children, had set off down the road in an attempt to reach British soldiers. Since by now it was pitch dark the word came that we were to scatter about the village and bed down

for the night, and hopefully a rescue party would show up in the morning. I was with 10 or 12 other guys when we found a nice grassy plot off the path running through the village. I lay down and was sound asleep before my head ever hit the ground.

The next thing I knew, someone was shaking me hard. I sat up and, to my horror, when I looked around no one was near me except the young Burmese who had awakened me. In my befuddled state of mind I thought that I had only been asleep for a matter of minutes. I should have realized that the moon was now up and shining as bright as daylight and that some hours had passed since I had lain down. The Burmese were no friends of the air people from Rangoon Jail's compound 8. Many of our POWs had been found by Burmese civilians who invariably promised to help them escape but instead turned them over to the Japanese for a few pennies. When I saw that I was alone with this Burmese I was absolutely sure that he planned to turn me back over to the Japs. I reacted violently. I hit him as hard as I could and knocked him down and then jumped on him. I tried to wrestle his knife away from him and had every intention of killing him.

We were rolling around the ground, and the Burmese was shouting something unintelligible. I guess he realized that he was literally fighting for his life. At that time two British POWs came walking down the path and quickly broke up the fight. The young Burmese ran off like a scared deer.

The British guys explained that he was only trying to help me. They said the rest of our people had been rescued by the British, but that there were some stragglers left in and around the village. They told me that some of the guys had gone quite far away from the village to spend the night and as a result missed the rescue operation. They also said they were sure that the British would send in a rescue force to pick up the stragglers in the morning. They suggested that I find an inconspicuous spot in or around the village and stay out of sight for the rest of the night.

I went back into the village and found a middle-aged Burmese who spoke a little English. He agreed to let me spend the rest of the night in his basha although he told me that he was sleeping outside. I tried to talk him out of a gun or a knife to defend myself with. He finally, and rather reluctantly, gave me a small hand axe. I climbed up the ladder of his hut and went into the main room. I found a mat on the floor, lay down and promptly went to sleep.

I woke up at dawn still clutching my little axe. As I stood up and looked across the room, to my complete horror, I saw a young Japanese soldier. He looked to be as completely exhausted as I was. He no longer had a gun but did have a bayonet which he quickly drew. I guess I didn't look like too dangerous a soldier. I was dressed in that Japanese army shirt, a pair of torn khaki pants and was, of course, barefoot. During the air raid, I had lost the little homemade cap I had been wearing. I had a full beard and a shock of very unkempt hair. The Jap and I looked at each other for a long, long moment and then I think we both simultaneously said to ourselves "BLIP IT." He slowly backed up to the doorway and then was down the ladder and gone in a flash.

I stayed in the room until I saw some activity around the village and cautiously went out to see if I could find some other people. I came across an American, Master Sergeant Schneider, of the Chemical Warfare division. He told me that some months before he had met an observation plane pilot who was a friend from his home town. They had gone up for a joy ride in northern Burma, had gotten lost and ended up running out of gas and crash landing behind the Japanese lines.

Schneider told me that he had spent the rest of the time in cell block 5. He said the guards told him that he would be fed regular POW rations since he was not from the Air Corp. We then ran across another American, a Lieutenant from compound 6. There was also a number of British POWs in and around the village. One of the British told me that aside from my roommate, several other Japanese soldiers had been spotted in the village. He suggested we stay out of sight as much as possible until the rescue party arrived.

Early in the morning we had heard considerable artillery fire, and it must have been about noon when we first heard rifle fire. One of the other guys and myself crept to the edge of the village where we had a ringside view of the ensuing battle. We saw far across the fields a line of Gurkhas advancing and going out to meet them what later we found to be a total of 23 Japanese soldiers. The fire fight was over very quickly and in the end the 23 Japs who had gone out had all been killed. Among those killed was my roommate of the night before.

In short order the Gurkhas, who evidently were at the point of the attack, swept past the village and continued on south. They were followed by a group of English soldiers who thoroughly searched the village for Japanese stragglers. One English soldier was left to guard us. I still had that cheroot in my pocket so I gave it to him and then lit it for him with the one match that I owned and which I had been hoarding for many months. He sort of grinned and said, "Blimey, It's just like Christmas."

Later that afternoon, when, I presume, the area had been cleared of enemy soldiers, a truck came to pick us up. Some of the Burmese villagers had gathered near us to watch our departure. I saw the man who had loaned me his hut the night before. I took off my shoes, which were tied around my neck, went over and offered them to him. He gratefully accepted and kept repeating thanks and shaking my hand.

The truck quickly took us to what appeared to be a British forward headquarters area. Incredibly all 400 POWs who had reached there the night before were gone. We tried to find out where everybody had gone to and could not get any firm answers. We did find out that at dawn an area right next to the headquarters area was leveled off and a steel mat runway was laid down. Shortly thereafter C-47s came in, and the POWs were gone. We were given a ration of cheese and crackers and one of the British officers promised to find out where the Americans had been taken. He did add "Try to be patient, Gentlemen. After all we are fighting a war, you see."

The next morning we still knew nothing and were just sort of hanging around. A reporter from the *New York Times* came up to me and said he would like to interview me. He told me that a war correspondent had been killed by a sniper the day before, and he was waiting to attend a service for him. While he was waiting he said he would like to get my story. The story was rather lengthy and was printed in the *New York Times* a few days later. This was how my folks first learned that I was still alive.

By that afternoon we three Americans decided we better make a move on our own, or we would be spending the rest of the war in southern Burma. We had seen some C-47s coming in and leaving. We went to the landing strip and found a pilot of a C-47 which was being unloaded. He told us that he was from a base in northern Burma and when we asked, he assured us that he would be happy to let us hitch a ride to his base. When we were airborne he called his base and told them he had on board three freed American ex-POWs. And what a fantastic reception we got when we landed! Everybody

from the CO of the base on down the line was there to greet us. As we stepped out of the airplane a great roar of welcome went up. We went down the receiving line shaking hands, and we were treated as if we were real VIPs. At the end of the reception line was the base chaplain who, with a big grin on his face, handed each of us an ice cold can of beer.

In short order we were enjoying the amenities of real civilization--a hot shower with real soap, a toothbrush and toothpaste, a towel. The other two guys had serviceable uniforms, but I was in rags. So some of the guys on the base quickly rounded up some clothes for me. I got a clean set of underwear and socks and a GI gave me a khaki shirt and a pair of pants. I offered him my Japanese army shirt as a souvenir, and he was delighted to get it. I couldn't get a pair of shoes on my swollen feet, but somebody came up with a pair of sneakers which was just fine.

A flight surgeon came to give us a quick checkup, and he gave me what I presume was a tetanus shot for the puncture wound in my heel.

From there we went to the mess hall for a meal which the cooks had especially prepared for us. It was absolutely delicious, and I don't think I have ever before or since eaten so much at one single meal. Among other things I remember eating about a half a loaf of bread and jam on the side.

When we finally reached the point where we couldn't eat another morsel of food, a major invited us to his tent for a nightcap. He said that he had been hoarding a bottle of Scotch for a special occasion, and he couldn't think of a more special occasion than this one. We sat around talking and sipping on the Scotch until it was gone. When we got up to leave for the tent we had been assigned to, somebody came in and offered us each a can of chocolate drink. I accepted and drank it. I headed for my tent, but I never made it. I did make the head, however, and I have never been sicker in all my life. Must have been that damn chocolate drink.

In the morning the three of us decided to push on. The night before, the flight surgeon had suggested that most likely the other POWs had gone to the 142nd General Hospital in Calcutta so we caught the first C-47 which was heading for that city. When we landed we checked with operations and told them we were three POWs from Rangoon and could he tell us where we were supposed to go. He told us he would try to find out and to come back in an hour or so. It was getting on to lunchtime and even though I had no great interest in food after the event of the night before, I joined the other two guys and went to the officers' club for lunch.

We went into the club and were met at the door by a lovely young Indian girl whom we told we would like to have lunch. She said, "Yes, Sir. That will be three rupees [about 32 cents] each." We explained that we had no money because we had just gotten out of prison camp, but we would like to have lunch anyway. She adamantly refused to let us in, and we finally asked if we would talk to the Club Officer. She brought back a captain who asked us what the problem was. We again told him that we were just freed POWs, and we wanted to eat. He looked at us and, admittedly, we didn't look exactly like spit-and-polish soldiers. He asked if we had any identification. This was the most asinine thing I had ever heard in my life, and I said so. His reply was that we could not come in unless we had identification and unless we paid three rupees. Like the other two guys, I was a little annoyed. But then the thought occurred to me that this is really great because now I finally realized that we were once again part of the United States Army Air Corps. A colonel who had listened to the conversation intervened and saw to it that we were fed.

When finished we went back to operations to try to find out again if somebody knew where we were to go. And then we had further proof that we were back in the Army. The operations officer came out and demanded to know what the hell we were doing wandering around the base when we were supposed to be in quarantine until we had been deloused. At any rate we were bundled into an ambulance, given an MP motorcycle escort, and were driven out to the 142nd General Hospital in style.

There I had a joyous reunion with the guys who had long since given me up for dead. And a wild period of my life had come to a quiet and peaceful finish.

Bob Derrington .gives us an aftermath vignette and more: Word had been passed among the prisoners that after crossing the Sittang River, we would enter an area occupied by Karens, a Burmese tribe known to be friendly to the allied forces. We planned to try an escape at that point, knowing that our chances would decrease after boarding trucks or trains. Forty-two years later I finally met some Karens when Joan and I returned to Rangoon. While searching for our prison site, we asked our driver to take us to Judson College, the Japanese headquarters, where some of us had been detained and interrogated when first captured. The driver thought about this for a few minutes and then remembered that the name of Judson College has been changed to Rangoon University. It was on a Sunday morning when we visited the campus. We stopped at the chapel and met several Burmese students about to start a Christian service. They were Karens.

Back on the march out in the early morning, we arrived at a small, deserted village. It was here that the Japs declared us to be free, and they immediately continued on their way at a much faster pace. During the day, several more soldiers passed the village singly and in small groups, ignoring us in their haste. We learned later that the advancing army troops were rapidly nearing our position.

Somebody found a mirror, or piece of glass, and tried to signal the fighter planes as they patrolled the area. The reflections must have looked like rifle fire to the pilots so they promptly attacked the village. We were caught by surprise and could only take cover behind small trees during the first strafing pass. As the planes circled for another run, we all jumped in foxholes and slit trenches that had been dug by the natives. I remember that two men landed on top of me. One of them still had his rear end and legs still above ground. After two or three more passes, the aircraft went on their way, and we began to sort ourselves out again. I returned to the small tree where I had stretched out during the first attack. There I found the remains of a canteen that had been beside me. It was now just a piece of tangled metal, and loose bark and leaves were everywhere. Excuse the expression, but that is where I almost had my ass shot off. Miraculously, of the 400 men, only one was killed. He was the ranking officer, a British General who had been imprisoned about three years.

Somehow we made it through the day. During that time, contact was made with the approaching Army. After sundown a young native boy led us in small groups through fields to meet with advance troops. I was in the first group to leave the village, and we were soon stopped by a lone English officer. He very carefully checked us to verify our identity. When he was satisfied that we were escaping prisoners, he gave a signal. Just then, a bright moon broke through a large cumulus cloud formation, and we found ourselves surrounded by a squad of Gurkhas carrying their large curved knives. These fierce-looking, turbaned soldiers were a welcome sight!

We were escorted to the infantry camp and given some food and a blanket. I rolled the blanket for a pillow and fell into a deep sleep in a nearby field. The next morning I awakened to the sights and sounds of low-flying fighter aircraft, and a bulldozer was scraping a landing strip close by. Hank Pisterzi was lying next to me, and he said that the noise woke him up earlier. He was about to get up and run when he saw me still sleeping. He said to himself, "Oh, the hell with it" and went back to sleep.

A C-47 arrived and took several of us to an air base some distance to the north. I don't remember if it was Akyab or Chittagong. We reported that many more prisoners were still in Rangoon and described the prison complex so it could be identified and supplies flown to them. After one more night we were flown to Calcutta and placed in the 142nd General Hospital for medical treatment and processing. Soon, those who had remained in Rangoon arrived at the hospital. The rest is history! [Bob noted to MEMORIES that the date on which he wrote this was exactly 44 years after the date he and his fellow prisoners were freed.]

Bud Etherington tells more about the walkout: Shortly after the last of the marchers (those of us from #8 compound) arrived in the patch of woods about five miles beyond Pegu, the Jap Commanding Officer called for the ranking Allied officer, Brigadier Hobson. He gave the Brigadier a note saying that we were free. The Japs then all took off in a hurry eastward down the railroad, hoping to avoid being trapped by the advancing British 14th Army. WE WERE FREE--much of our fatigue suddenly almost vanished.

The exhilaration of freedom was tempered by the reality of our situation. Here we were, over 400 weak, exhausted, starving men, trapped behind a battlefield with no food or supplies, no contact with either friendly or hostile troops, and no one except us and our fleeing guards knowing of our presence. A collection was made of all spare clothing which was then spread out in one of the adjoining fields in the form of a message-something like "POW'S HERE." We felt quite safe in doing this as there had been no sign of any Japanese planes since we left Rangoon. We had seen several Allied fighters and reconnaissance planes already that morning.

An hour or two later four Royal Indian Air Force fighter planes arrived overhead. They circled our patch of forest and then started down in a series of strafing passes. I was terrified. Several of us sought what shelter we could behind a very inadequate tree. I was on the outside edge of this pile of people. On about the third pass I was horrified to watch a stream of machine-gun bullets striking the earth in a path almost parallel to my body and only about four inches away. As that strafing pass ended, I ran from the tree and dove behind a mound of earth just as I heard the machine-gun fire of the next strafing. Unfortunately, I had, unknowingly, dived into an ant hill, and by the time that strafing pass was over, I was being attacked by numerous vicious ants about an inch long. At that point I was wearing only a loin cloth so I had no clothing to protect any part of my body. That was the last of the strafing, and I left the ant hill frantically brushing off the ants as fast I possibly could. Their bites were painful, and many of the resulting sores did not heal for several months.

During these strafing attacks, our ranking officer, British Brigadier Hobson, who had been a prisoner for over three years, was killed and one British sergeant was wounded. Those were our only strafing casualties.

After this attack our situation seemed more uncertain and precarious. We were, however, still a military organization of sorts. Word was passed around to hide out the best you could and wait for further instructions. I wound up in the shack by the railroad with perhaps six or eight others. We could look out through the cracks in the wall to see if something was happening. More stray Jap soldiers wandered across the fields near us, but apparently were unaware of our presence. Late in the afternoon we saw a parachute drop (presumably of supplies to the British troops) going down over Pegu. This was too much for one of the fellows, who grabbed our canteen and ran off down the rail tracks toward Pegu yelling 'I can help.'

A little later we got word that about dusk we were to go to a small village in the woods across the fields to the southwest. We were to go only in small groups and should try to be as inconspicuous as possible. About four of us in a group were making our way across the fields, crouching rather low. Suddenly two or three men with guns sprang up out of the tall grass. In the fading light it was difficult to identify them. Our hearts sank as we were sure we were about to be shot by some of the Japs we had seen earlier. As it turned out, these men were from the village to which we were heading. They had come to protect us as we crossed the open fields. What a relief! We hurried on to the village.

We were still functioning, at least in part, as a military organization. Most of us from the #8 compound, where our contacts with others had been so restricted, were less aware than some of the others about all that was going on.

An American, Major Charles Lutz, had been serving as an Adjutant to Brigadier Hobson. In this capacity, he was making some arrangements of which we were not aware. He had found someone in one of the little nearby jungle villages who could speak a little English. Through this person he got a guide to take him through the jungle to make contact with the British 14th Army. They were thus made aware of the presence of our POW group isolated behind the front lines. Arrangements were made for the British to meet us at some predetermined point that night. Arrangements had also been made for us to meet at the village about dusk, be fed, and wait for further orders. We did not know all of this when we arrived at the village that evening.

The village people had prepared some rice for us. This was certainly appreciated since we had not eaten for three days. Probably close to three hundred of us, out of the more than four hundred who had left the prison, were guests in the village that evening. The others were fending for themselves in one way or another.

The village people were very friendly and seemed anxious to help us. After eating we were told to go down a path in the jungle, sit or lie down at the first empty place and to be absolutely quiet. It was now well after dark.

Sometime later the fellow next to me whispered for me to get up, place a hand on his shoulder so I could follow him, continue to be quiet, but whisper the message to the next fellow. We all got up and soon started to move single file down the jungle paths. In some places it was so dark that you could barely see the fellow you were following, so the hand on his shoulder was a good idea. In some other places it was quite open. We understood the need to be as silent as possible as we were still traversing enemy territory.

After walking in this manner for what I think might have been four or five miles, we came out of the jungle into some open area. We had gone several hundred yards, and my heart sank again when I spotted the silhouette of a machine gun against the skyline. We quickly realized to our great relief that it was not the Japs, but rather the British who were covering us as we emerged from the jungle. We walked on another few hundred yards to where some British trucks were waiting for us. What an incredibly good feeling-REALLY FREE AT LAST!

Nick Oglesby records arrival at the hospital in Calcutta: I was on the third plane out, I think. We flew to Calcutta and there transferred to trucks to take us to the 142nd General Hospital.

When we got to the hospital, we were taken to a special ward set aside for us. We were shown our beds and given some items we would need. Our ward was one of two beside each other, and we were told we would have our own mess hall for the two wards. However, that would be activated the next morning so we would need to walk to the central mess hall for dinner that night.

When we got there, we found the damnedest, biggest, most delicious meal being piled on our trays by the cooks and attendants, all of who urged us to take more! (We did.)

Steak and potatoes, green beans, biscuits and strawberry jam and all those great subjects of our jailhouse dreams were almost unbelievable.

I ate it all. I don't know how. I do know that I ate too much for I quickly developed a horrible headache and became sick to my stomach, losing all of it after I managed to get outside the mess hall. I felt horrible. All I wanted to do was find that ward and get in that bed.

Unfortunately, the mess hall was huge and had four identical sides. I did not know which direction to start walking. So, I had to go back inside to wait for the group.

When I got inside, the smell of the food made me get another full tray. This time it stuck.

The next day, the processing began. We had been eating very well ever since we had that first chicken and dumplings with the British. I weighed 105 pounds on the hospital scales so I have no idea what I had weighed when we were trucked out by the British. I certainly was not in as bad shape as many.

That was quite a mess hall we had between our wards. We had our own cooks and attendants who fixed what we wanted and urged us to eat more. We certainly wanted to be cooperative, all of us, and we ate more, and more, and more.

I remember one of us ate 14 fried eggs for breakfast for several days. Each meal was two eggs with a ration of bacon. He ate 7 every morning.

That was the same man who, when we were in Rangoon and I was so sick with malaria and could not get my rice down, came to me and gave me a hard-boiled egg, saying he had lots of them and could get more. I still remember that was one very good egg! (I later found he had one egg previously, in his two years in jail, and I don't think he ever got another, until we were released.)

The prisoners from Rangoon who had been designated as too sick to march joined us in a few days.

Henry Pisterzi tells how he remembered the walkout: We left the prison--those of us who they determined were able to march--with supplies loaded on carts and pulled by Japs and POWs. We traveled north for two nights. Some of us felt that, since we were headed north, there was a possibility of an exchange of prisoners. (The last word we had before the march was that the British 14th Army was closing in on Rangoon from the north.) However, when we changed directions and headed east, we thought maybe the Japs were trying to get us to another prison camp in Indo-China.

Near the end of the second night, some of us had planned to break up into groups of three or four and try to escape. About noon of the third day the Jap commander told us we were free men. Free, hell! Here we were in an open field. Ahead of us were the Allied troops. Behind us were the Japs. Heavy artillery was being fired over us even before we had been turned loose.

During the march, we would have a ten-minute rest period about every hour. For me and those in our group this turned out to be anything but. When we stopped for the rest, the Japs guarding us would line us up and have us count off. "They didn't trust us. We formed up probably three deep and the front row was to count off in Japanese. Somehow, it seemed that each time we were to count off, we had three or four people in the front row that couldn't count in Japanese so by the time we had been counted, the rest period was over.

While in prison, most or all of us had not worn our shoes or much of any clothing, save these for a later need if required. My feet were so sore that I didn't think I could make another step so I could have used the ten-minute rest, but that was not to be.

All along the route, Japs were wiring the bridges we had crossed and were digging holes in the road. These holes were large enough for a bomb and one Jap. The bridges were to be blown up after they were no longer needed by the Japs. We asked what the holes were for and were told, "Bomb and Nippon in hole with hammer. When enemy comes over, Nippon hits bomb with hammer. Boom! Hammer, Jap, bomb and enemy all blown up."

After our rescue and delivery to the hospital, we posed a problem for the hospital staff. "What do we do with these people? Set up a diet and control their eating? Or, do we turn them loose and see what happens?" They decided on the latter. Without any exaggeration, I saw some of the POWs eat a dozen eggs, a dozen pancakes along with all the trimmings--all for breakfast. I recall no ill effects from this for any of the POWs. After getting cleaned up--showers, haircuts, decent clothes, etc.--it was not unusual to barely recognize the person you had slept next to in the prison. After a day or so,

several people-Bill Rooney amongst them--arrived at the hospital to see and interrogate the men from the 40th. What a sight to see someone from your own squadron!

After our month's stay in the hospital and the 60-day furlough most of us got, I was in the process of reassignment at Ft. MacArthur. The reassignment procedure was probably half over when the war ended. Separation, if desired, was started. I was discharged out of Ft. MacArthur in August of 1945. Thus ended my military career.

Julian Cochran brings the story to an end: We were placed on normal rations immediately. We were fed too much, and we also received too much booze, but I had no complaints, and no harm was done. All, of course, received medical exams and were treated, if needed. Everyone had malaria, many had Beri-beri, some had open sores. A ranking officer visited us and asked what we wanted. We told him "watches, sun glasses and B-4 bags." We got them all. I still have mine-the watch and sunglasses are worn out, and the B-4 bag is in the basement in a musty condition. In the Officers' Club in Calcutta, I ran into a friend from my hometown, John Cross, who thought I was dead. I last saw him in the Officers' Club in Karachi when we were on the way to Chakulia.

On May 19--according to my knowledge and order No. 2, APO 496, dated 18 May, 1945--the first six POW's from Rangoon departed from Calcutta for the USA. Five members of the 40th were on the orders: Julian C. Cochran, Robert E. Derrington, Joseph Levine, Chester E. Paul and Norman Larsen. The other man was Harold W. Goad, outfit unknown. It is possible other 40th members departed prior to 19 May. I was always of the opinion that I was one of the lucky ones to leave with the first bunch. We were flown in C-54's across Africa to LaGuardia Field, New York.

Home in America at last. Thus was the five-month ordeal ended.

Editor's closing note: While this issue of MEMORIES tells the story of the 55-mile walk out from Rangoon and the rescue of the POWs, it does not begin to tell the complete story. Each member had his own experience. This is only a consolidation of narratives, edited to give the best possible recounting of the ordeal using the largest number of accounts provided to tell the story. This issue of MEMORIES is the biggest issue, in number of pages, published to date. Notwithstanding, it still doesn't do full justice to the accounts furnished the editor. For this, we ask everyone's understanding.



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