



Date of event: 20 October, 1944 to 6 March, 1945

Date written: 1 April, 1992

Written by: Harry Changnon. Drawn from diaries kept by Alman Conrath, Ernest Caudle, William Stocks, Melvin Webb, plus material collected from other sources.

Editor's Introduction: In issue #42 of MEMORIES we told the story of Richard McGlinn's crew and their adventure/ordeal in the forests near Vladivostok. Maj. McGlinn had elected to fly to Russian territory after sustaining battle damage over the target, Yawata. The crew suffered privation and near starvation in the forest after bailout until the last two crew members--McGlinn and Robson--were rescued 44 days later. Their adventure was far from over. It was not until March 6, 1945, over six months later, that they finally arrived back in the States. This issue of MEMORIES covers the crew's time from rescue to return.

Conrath, Caudle, Stocks and Webb managed to keep diaries. The diaries often recorded the same events. In order to avoid repetition, their diaries have been combined into one narrative as much as possible. Full credit should be given to these men and to others who contributed to this story. Harry Changnon deserves a salute for collecting and preserving the material from which this issue of MEMORIES is written.

The Saga, in Russian, of the Crew of #829

After rescue, we were taken from the Village of Monoma to the hospital in Khabarovsk. The first leg of the trip was by power launch on the river. Power was derived from a six-cylinder Scripps engine made in Detroit. The river trip was about 122 miles. On arrival at Khabarovsk, we were transported to the hospital by a Model "A" Ford bus. For a week we received the best possible treatment. We slept until 8:00 a.m.; then we would have breakfast followed by a walk in the hospital garden. There was nothing in English to read. Chess sets and dominos were available with which to kill time. On 5 October, after 44 days, all of the crew was reunited at the hospital. All of us suffered from prolonged exposure. Caudle had lost 45 pounds, down from his usual 190. Others had suffered weight loss of about 25%. McGlinn had a problem with his teeth. While carrying Robson at one point, he had fallen on slippery rocks and broken his front teeth. Others had cuts and sores that took most of October to heal.

For some, the hospital stay was monotonous. Recovery was complete for them. Caudle had regained his original weight, but not his former strength, however.

People at the hospital were very kind, doing everything in their power to make us comfortable, especially nurse Morina Rudolfarina Falikova whom we called "Momma." She was a sergeant in charge of hospital supplies and, in addition, she bossed the other nurses. She was 44 years old and the wife of a Lt. Col. doctor. They had a son, age 22, who was a battalion commander. He was killed on the eastern front. She adopted us and called us her "children" except Maj. McGlinn whom she speaks of as "comrade major." She learned some English from us, and we learned some Russian from her. Conrath can speak German, and it appears most Russians can speak some German. In addition, some French is used. "Momma" saw that we were supplied with tobacco. No tailormades; we rolled our own.

We can never be grateful enough to "Momma" for what she did for us. She was like a mother. On October 23 she came in with a rumor that we would be moving in three or four days. She tells us all that goes on, but says to keep it quiet.

On 28 October, we were given word to pack up our belongings. Maj. McGlinn called a crew meeting and told us to uphold the American name while travelling. We were to watch our manners, our language and to present a good appearance. We left the hospital that afternoon, again in the Model "A" bus, to a rest camp for Russian officers. We met 15 other Americans at this camp--Army and Navy personnel--who made their way to Russian territory while flying from the Aleutians.

At this rest camp, we were able to get out-of-doors more. Even before our move on 28 October, it was snowing. We received new clothes and shoes, which are a big help in this colder weather. Winter is setting in fast. It stays below zero lots of time and goes low enough at night to freeze the Amur River even though the current is fairly fast. Food is good. We even had steaks for breakfast. We were issued five pairs of skis, and some of the guys were using them until Mannatt broke a pair and hurt his knee. The doctor says no more skiing.

The camp consists of quite a number of wooden buildings widely scattered over about 10 acres overlooking the Amur River. We Americans have a barracks of our own. There are four of us to a room. The rooms are small, but comfortable, with clean beds and plenty of covers. Two large rooms in the building are used for recreation. Khabarovsk is about 12 miles from the Japanese on the Manchurian border.

We walk a half mile through the snow to the mess hall for the best food we have had yet--American cheese, tea, fresh meat, white bread, etc.

There is frustration over the fact that there is no English-language reading material and no way of communicating with our government. We are waiting for some other crews to arrive before we start out for some other place. We are becoming impatient. Everyone seems to have a quick temper from being together for so long. Nothing to do but eat and sleep. However, we are grateful to the Russians for the care they have given us.

Robson is improving rapidly but Maj. McGlinn has chills and swollen legs and feet. He does not eat much because of his sore mouth.

In the first week of November we were issued some warmer clothes--shirts, pants, jackets and gloves, but no shoes. Finally new shoes were issued--made in America.

The 7th of November was the 27th anniversary of the Russian revolution. The celebrating didn't amount to much although some Russian girls came and danced for us. We were told that Roosevelt was reelected by a large majority.

The Russian mess hours are really screwy--10:00, 16:00 and 21:00.

It is 9 November, and we are still waiting for other Americans to arrive. Yesterday we heard they are halfway here, but have been stalled by the weather. The winter has really set in. Snow every day. Patches of ice as big as an acre can be seen flowing down the river.

Finally, on 11 November, the men we have been waiting for arrived---a party of 20--which now brings our number to 46. Of the total, only one man is wounded. He took a piece of shrapnel in his hand.

We learned that we will leave this camp on 15 November for Tashkent, a 12- to 14-day journey on the Trans-Siberian railroad. When boarding time came, 39 men were loaded on our car. The seven-man crew of a B-24 were left behind.

The car of the train to which we were assigned was a very poor Russian troop car made of wood with narrow, short benches used for sitting on in the daytime and sleeping on at night. The car was infested with bedbugs. Two cars with Russian passengers are between our car and the diner where we eat. The Russian passengers carry their own food--raw fish being included in their fare. The smell would turn your stomach. Although Tashkent, our destination, is supposed to be warmer, it is 5,000 miles away. We were told that the temperature en route may get to 70 degrees below.

During our trip we had a Russian lieutenant accompanying us whom we called "Steve." He could speak pretty good English and helped us along the way. We passed some barbed wire enclosures with watchtowers that looked like prison camps. When we asked Steve what they were, he professed not to have seen anything and said he did not know what we were talking about. We passed through thickly forested country. Most of the way was double-track railroad. All the bridges were guarded with machine-gun emplacements and barbed wire. We stopped at some of the larger cities along the route Chita, Irkutsk and Novosibirsk. At Irkutsk, the train station was as big as New York's Grand Central. Much-damaged railroad equipment was seen on sidings, probably from the Russian front. Some cars observed on sidings carried signs that said they were made in Erie, Pennsylvania.

Editor's Note: The trip across Siberia took 10 days. The following diary notes made by some of the crew members document the misery of the trip.

Thursday, 16 November: Some fellows slept well, but most of us were eaten up by bedbugs. We eat in an international dining car which is kept warm by a samovar.

Friday, 17 November: Spent most of the day watching the scenery which is flat like Kansas. Luckily we now have a few magazines with which to pass the time.

Saturday, 18 November: Countryside has changed to stunted, timbered, mountain slopes. Lakes and rivers are frozen and snow covered.

Sunday, 19 November: We passed Lake Baikal, maybe the deepest lake in the world, and we went through more than 40 tunnels in one two-hour period. Lots of snow along the way. Time has moved back three hours in the 1,000 miles since leaving Khabarovsk and will change five more times by the time we reach Tashkent.

Monday, 20 November: Snowed hard most of the day. Still in timber country, but the trees are not larger. We passed through Irkutsk today. We also crossed Siberia's widest river, the Angara.

Tuesday, 21 November: We must be getting used to the bedbugs; at least there is not so much complaining. Weather is colder: -22 degrees F this morning. We arrived at Novosibirsk about 16:00 and had lunch in the station which the Russians say is the largest in the world. We got to take showers before supper and then got new sheets and pillowcases. We slept in the car parked in the rail yards. One of the guys had an ear frozen even though he was only outside about five minutes.

Wednesday, 22 November: This morning was the coldest yet: -40 degrees C. Breakfast earlier than usual at 9:30. We all got shaves and haircuts at the station before our lunch at 13:15 whereupon we left Novosibirsk. We had dinner on the train in our own car, but it was only dry bread, butter, salted fish and dehydrated milk.

Thursday, 23 November: Breakfast was the same as last night's supper---only small pieces of Spam instead of the fish. We saw rolling and flat country partly irrigated. We stopped for lunch at 16:00. The train is making slow time. We saw some camels pulling sleds alongside the tracks.

Friday, 24 November: Weather seems warmer, although it snowed most of the day and snow is still on the ground. Trees don't appear to be as frozen. We are passing through desert-like country, and we see animals. Herders use camels to herd both cattle and goats in the same bunches. We passed close to Lake Balkhash. Most men's mouths are cut from eating the dry, hard bread. During the week we passed through the Russian Republics of Mongolia, Siberia, Kazakhstan and are approaching Uzbekistan where Tashkent is the capitol.

Saturday, 25 November: Weather has moderated, and snow has disappeared. We ate lunch late at a station.

Sunday, 26 November: Arrived at Tashkent about 13:30. It is good to see fruit trees and green grass again. We found 62 more Americans at our new quarters. Some of them had landed in Russia as far back as June. There are 101 men in camp now. They have the place fixed up with baseball diamonds, basketball and volleyball courts. They also have supplies received from the American Embassy in Moscow--reading material and a radio. It is the first tuning set we've seen in Russia. We all took baths before meeting others. Our food is wonderful although those who have been here are tired of it. We had our first taste of coffee and even apple turnovers. We get more meat with meals now.

Monday, 27 November: We are allowed to send cablegrams home and also to send letters to our families. Rumors are strong that we will be allowed to "escape" across the border to Iran as others have done. Even the Russian commandant, Maj. Putakana added to the raising of morale by saying Soviet and U.S. officials from Moscow were coming to arrange for a transfer of some kind. He cautioned that earlier attempts to escape had almost caused fatalities.

Thursday, 30 November: Today is Thanksgiving Day. Of course it is not observed by the Russians. Lt. Col. Robert McCabe arrived today from Moscow with good news. He gave us proof that our parents have been notified about our safety. He also brought mail sacks of letters for men who have been here prior to our arrival. Those letters helped us understand the war situation.

Mel Webb's journal picks up the story: On 2 December, we received another bath, and we are supposed to have a party of some kind, too. An eleven-member Russian band played for us this afternoon, and a choral group of 213 sang. They were very good. We had a big meal and all the beer we could drink.

Tuesday, 5 December: We left Tashkent about midnight on the same stinking boxcars as before, and the bedbugs were still biting. There is snow on the ground, and it is plenty cold. Lt. Col. McCabe gave us a talk about following strict orders on the trip.

Thursday, 7 December: We are still traveling toward Tiflis where our orders read we are to help with Russian plane ferrying. Late in the afternoon, the front car started having trouble with the wheels, or so the Japanese might be told. We were disconnected from the train and put on a siding about dark. Some trucks are to come to pick us up and take us near the border for an escape. However, something was fouled up, and we didn't make connections.

Friday, 8 December: We are still on the siding, and the officer from Moscow said orders had come through to stop us. Two more days on the siding living in the boxcar was tiresome.

Sunday, 10 December: Finally, after dark, the officer in charge said we were returning to Tashkent. This was a blow to us.

Editor's Note: Here, one of the cruelest tricks was inflicted upon these men--by our own American press. Columnist Drew Pearson chose this time to publish a story claiming that one of the Doolittle mission crew members who had landed in Russia was released by the Russians at the border with Iran. The Russians fearing trouble on the Manchurian border with the Japanese with whom they were not then at war--stopped the entire operation.

Mel Webb continues: Thirty-four out of the hundred men left the train to try to make it across the border. I gave one man my compass, bread, coat, blanket and wished him good luck. I would not try it myself. I had already had all the walking in Russia I wanted. Besides, I figured it was too cold to make it. The next morning, all of the men were back except seven.

On Monday, 11 December, we left for Tashkent at about 09:00 with Navy Lt. Cmdr. Charles Wayne in charge of our party. He is intensely disliked. We are all happier when Maj. McGlinn took over control of the Army men. We arrived back in Tashkent for the second time after being within 30 miles of the Iranian border. It seemed like our building was cooler than ever. The poor Russian people around Tashkent don't have a chance. They are ragged, hungry and always begging for something. We see American products like trucks, engines, guns and food almost everywhere. In fact, about 95% of their material seems to have come from the United States. We steal wood whenever we can to try to keep our barracks fires going. I guess we give the Russians a bad time.

Tuesday, 12 December: Mike Losik (from Jarrell's B-29 crew) and six Navy men were apprehended by alert Russian guards at the Iranian border. These men were the last of those who tried to escape to Iran from the railroad siding where we were being held prior to our return to Tashkent. They were half frozen, hungry and sick. They were held in cold buildings in Ashkhabad for three days while they were quizzed by their captors. Losik said that was a real low point in his life, and even in 1992, he still doesn't wish to talk about it. The men were returned to the camp on the 17th. Lt. Cmdr. Charles Wayne tried to enforce military discipline and have the men punished which was almost more than they could endure. The Russians threatened everyone by saying that if anyone else tried to escape, they would be put into their POW camp.

Maj. McGlinn's Christmas Plan: After our aborted attempt to leave Tashkent, and our return to the walled camp from which we had set out, Maj. McGlinn noted that morale of the internees had really turned sour. Complaints on living conditions multiplied. Everyone noticed how cold and miserable buildings had become. This was mainly because we were worried about ever getting out of Russia. With the approach of Christmas and New Year's, which were usually festive occasions, men became sullen and mean to each other. McGlinn suggested to the new camp commandant, Lt. Col. Ivan Siminov, that preparing for a Christmas party would give the men something to do which would lift their spirits. The Russians remembered the part on 17 October when the Russians had put on a celebration for their Red Army Day. It got out of hand because too much vodka was available. Almost every door was ripped off its hinges, and windows were knocked out. The commandant would have to give thought to the suggestion before granting approval.

On 16 December, not only was the party approved, but Siminov said the Russians would provide special food for the occasion. Committees were formed to prepare for the party. Twenty-nine more American fliers, including the Weston Price and William Mickish B-29 crews, arrived at the Tashkent camp. They quickly joined in preparations for the Christmas party.

Al Conrath notes: During our sojourn in Tashkent, when time was heavy, I pulled the colored threads from several towels. I used the threads to make an embroidered 20th Air Force patch and a CBI patch in color on part of my parachute. (It is framed and hangs today on the wall in my home.) Other mementos and souvenirs I have are the clock from my engineer's panel, the ripcord handle from my chute, my A-2 jacket, the blood chit flag from my jacket, a signal mirror, a Chinese soldier's cap emblem, a Usbeck Russian cap and the cigarette lighter given to us in Tashkent.

Memories of Jerome Zuercher and others: We realized this was going to be a Christmas party different than any we had ever had before, and for some men, it was the first away from home. We wanted to include all the religious elements possible to show the Russians that Christmas in America has a very special meaning.

Sam Gelber, a Navy gunner from the Bronx knew all the popular Christmas carols so he organized and directed a 70-man choir that often practiced far into the night. Leonard Karkoszyneski, a Polish gunner, found a large white cloth on which he painted a beautiful Christmas scene. He used a piece of charcoal to sketch a figure of an American soldier kneeling at prayer with the Christmas star shining overhead. The rest of us got some colored paper and snipped out the usual yuletide candles, wreaths and holly.

George Hummel, a gunner on Jarrell's crew, had been a baker in civilian life. He got a special ration of flour and beet sugar and worked a whole day mixing up a delicious batch of cookies and cake. The Russians didn't restrict our plans in any way, although they did look in on us occasionally to see that we weren't destroying anything. Several days before the party, out of courtesy, we sent an invitation to the NKVD officers, and they surprised us by readily accepting,

Christmas Eve arrived cold and clear. Sam's choir softly sang their carols and other religious numbers by flickering candlelight with Leonard's drawing dimly showing in the light. Maj. McGlinn told us how the Bible described the first Christmas. When he finished, no one said a word. All of us had forgotten where we were, because in our minds we were back home with our families, gathered around a tree, shouting "Merry Christmas" and exchanging gifts. Even the Russians sat in respectful silence. The lights came on, and the choir sang "Jingle Bells." One of the fellows got up and read a poem poking fun at our Russian commandant. He did not understand English so he sat sternly in his seat.

When dinner was served, we had a pleasant change from our usual diet of rice and goat meat. We eagerly devoured roast chicken, potatoes, pickles, green onions, bread, tea and Hummel's white cake. When we had finished eating, the Commandant stood up and in marched several soldiers carrying vodka for everyone. More entertainment followed including barbershop harmony, poetry and amateur show jokes. Two boys put on an exhibition of jitterbug dancing which amazed the Russians who demanded several repeat performances. The Russians produced an old gramophone and played tangos and polkas. We took turns dancing with the women workers who were there.

Some of the Russian officers wanted to know if Christmas was the birthday of one of our leaders. We tried to explain that it was the birthday of Jesus Christ and were having trouble with this explanation because of the language difficulty. However, one of the NKVD colonels surprised us by explaining to his friends our feast of Christmas, its origin, the exchange of gifts and other customs. Some older officers remembered that in their youth, they had seen such celebrations. The colonel who had explained Christmas used a phrase which was explained to us as meaning "Merry Birthday of Christ." And that's what it was.

The vodka caused the party to get rather wild. Pickles started flying through the air and a Russian was hit. An officer, who was drunk, hit an enlisted man.

Mel Webb notes on the period 27-31 December: After the Christmas party, we were all in the dumps. Loneliness set in, and we felt tired. We didn't even know if we would leave this place until the war was over. We made a trip into town for a couple of hours, but we didn't see much to buy that we wanted. There was another Russian party on December 31st, but it was not well attended even though the Russians served extra vodka. We didn't feel like celebrating New Year's Eve.

8 January, 1945: We received American supplies from Moscow evidently as a result of our requests for things when Lt. Col. McCabe was here a month ago for our aborted escape. There are rumors we may get some mail from home real soon.

17 January: Maj. Paul Hall arrived from Moscow with bags of mail. We were told at noon we may leave soon. They told us we had to swear to secrecy about our plans and trip. They said that we had seen how publicity could hurt us or anyone else who might be in a similar position. In a letter one of the boys received from home was a clipping of the Drew Pearson article about one of the Doolittle men having talked about his leaving Russia. That was why they returned us to Tashkent.

24 January: We turned in extra clothes a few days ago and were supposed to leave on the 22nd, but something happened, and our trip was postponed. Today I and some other boys were brought before the Officer in Charge for throwing mud balls at some Russian officer. The Russians didn't punish us, however.

26 January: We had to sign pledges of secrecy about our Russian story. They gave us food rations again before we left Tashkent on the train about 21:00. The bedbugs sure did bite. We may cross the border in trucks tomorrow night.

28 January: We left the train at 20:15 and got aboard G.I. trucks to make the longest, roughest, dirtiest trip I have ever had. Through all of it, we were closed in the trucks, and the trip was along dirt roads to Teheran, Iran. We did stop long enough to eat and swim in the Caspian Sea even though it was cold. We were delayed one hour at the border. We rode all that night, stopping the next day at 13:30 to eat our second meal. We crossed some mountains during the night, and it became very cold.

30-31 January: We traveled 900 miles in 48 hours and were very tired and dirty. At the hospital at our arrival site, they backed the trucks up to the door so we were out of sight when we unloaded.

Another member of the party picks up the story: Once inside the hospital, we were dusted with an insecticide. Then a hot shower, a good meal and off to bed in a warm room which was a real luxury. After a day or two, 131 of us were loaded into five C-46s and flown to Suez where we spent 10 or 12 days in a little isolated tent camp while we waited for arrangements to be made to get us home. Then we were loaded back into the C-46s and flown to Naples. There we were again, put into the back of trucks, but this time only for an hour or so. We were driven to the docks and put aboard the *John Sullivan*, an empty Liberty ship heading back to New York.

On the second or third day of our sea voyage, after joining a convoy at Oran, we passed Gibraltar. Just after that, a shipboard alarm had us all scrambling to get up on deck. A German sub was operating around a loaded convoy coming toward us. The ship's crew assured us that we were safe because we had no cargo and were not a worthwhile target. This made us feel a little better because we could see that one of the loaded ships had been hit and appeared to be sinking a few miles away. After that the trip was quite pleasant with warm sunny weather even though it was February by now. Only the last two days of the ocean trip were cold and stormy as we neared the Atlantic Coast and got out of the gulf stream. Some men got seasick.

Twenty-three days after leaving Naples, we docked in a heavy fog in Brooklyn. This was 6 March, 1945. We were taken to Ft. Hamilton, New York. Within a few days all of the repatriated men were on their way home for a 30-day leaves.



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