



VIGNETTES #2

Introduction: Eight vignettes are contained in this issue of MEMORIES, the second devoted to short pieces. It is now 50 years or more since these events took place. There is a message behind this fact: Individual's memories cannot be expected to carry over this many years. Thus MEMORIES in the future will evolve into something different. Whereas, in past issues, factual material could be pinned down with dates, etc., and confirmation could be achieved by having more than one source to check, future issues are more likely to be taken from good, old-fashioned memories. We know the event happened, but sources for cross checking are no longer available. Too many of these cross checking sources are now in our deceased list.

Date of event: March, 1945
Date written: Approximately 1990
Written by: Norman Larsen

The Littlest Jap with the Longest Sword

We were POWs at Rangoon Central Jail. It was normally a rather grim place, but I always found that when you get a bunch of GIs together, something funny is bound to happen. In Compound 8 there were a hundred or so of us from many countries around the world, but with one thing in common. We had all come to Rangoon by air. Ranks ranged from Private (one, Tim Foley) to Wing Commander (two, Wincos Hill and Hudson).

Late every afternoon we had a military exercise which the British called "evening parade". It was count-off time, for the purpose I guess, of making sure that no one had slipped into downtown Rangoon to watch a movie. We would line up in two or three squads of two ranks each. At the appropriate time the people in the front rank would count off in Japanese. We tried to stay in the same spot every night so that no one would forget his number. I was butchy (8) and the man next to me was Jim McGivern, suichi. Next to him was rocco. After the front rank counted off, the last man in the rear rank would yell out Bing or Bong signifying either that the ranks were even or that there was one fewer in the rear rank.

The CO of our compound was English Wing Commander John Hill, a very proper and dignified English officer. His command of Japanese was quite good, and he did a fine job of calling out the orders in Japanese. Things like "casterah nigeer, naga" (eyes right, ready front). Again in Japanese he had to give a breakdown of the disposition of his troops, such as so many men present, so many men sick, so many cooks, so many dead men (a dead man was carried to the end of the ration period when a new total was given). Checking the count was the Japanese sergeant in charge and his assistant, who was usually a three-star private. The exercise normally went off without a hitch.

That is, until that fateful afternoon in March.

Winco Hill had become too sick to carry on and had turned over command of the compound to Australian Wing Commander Bill Hudson. Bill was a nice guy with a very outgoing personality. But

with his broad Australian accent, what he did to the Japanese language made even me wince. What it sounded like to a Jap I can only imagine. Another major problem that night was that he was getting his numbers all mixed up. To make matters still worse, rocco in my squad had also gone off to sick bay and had been replaced by, of all people, a Scotchman.

At the appointed time, through the gate came a new Jap sergeant followed at respectful distance by his private. He was the smallest Jap I had ever seen and he was wearing a sword far too long for his size. It kept slapping him on the heel of his foot, and all of us stared in fascination, hoping that it would trip him and he would fall flat on his face. But he managed to get into position safely, and the exercise began.

Bill promptly got all the numbers fouled up, but did manage to get through his part. Then count-off started and instead of the usual crisp rocco, out came RRRROCCO. The total didn't come out right, and a very annoyed sergeant had us do it over. Again Bill tried to translate the numbers into the correct Japanese, and I could hear him muttering under his breath that popular four-letter word used so much in the Army. And this time in addition to rocco, we had another guy get into the act. The Bing/Bong man in the rear rank was singing out a very musical Boing.

The whole scene was so ridiculous that I could feel the laughter welling up inside of me. I could sense that Jim next to me was having an equally tough time holding it back. About the fourth count-off, Jim just about got his number out when he exploded with laughter. I was right behind him and so were half of the other guys standing in line. The absolutely furious Jap sergeant came striding over to us (sword still whacking him on the heel), stopped in front of Jim and hit him a smashing blow to the cheek, knocking him down. It put an abrupt stop to the laughter and with the help of the guy standing next to him, Hudson managed to get the numbers correct, and the exercise was soon over. As the Japanese sergeant was leaving the compound, I thought I could sense a slight drooping of his shoulders, and I couldn't help thinking we had won a small one. I looked at Jim, and he had this big grin on his face even though it was a bit lopsided from a red and swollen cheek.

And we never saw the little Jap again.

Date of event: Spring-summer, 1944, Chakulia

Date written: November, 1989

Written by: Bob (Ft. Worth) Copley

Jerry Offerman, co-pilot of our crew, was a scrounger par excellence. He reached his zenith not long after we arrived in Chakulia when he got hold of a small farm-type tractor that was the property of the engineers. With equal skill, a bomb trailer was acquired (midnight requisition?). This furnished transportation for the crew of Smokey Stover. We rode in appropriate luxury on these wheels wherever foot travel wasn't desired-to the flight line, mess hall, theater, or briefings. By pulling the tractor behind the barracks and between it and the latrine and removing the distributor cap, we managed to keep that transportation for months, even though we spent a lot of time away from the base on trips to China, missions and passes to Calcutta. Returning from every trip away, the first order of business was to determine if we still had our transportation. We managed to hang onto it for many months without investigation.

Date of event: Sometime in 1945 on Tinian

Date written: May, 1991

Written by: Howard Eppler

As our planes returned from a mission, I, as an Instrument Specialist, wanted to be on hand to greet the crews and to hear from them about the mission. As one of our planes taxied into the space it normally occupied on the 44th line, I met Paul Bremen (now deceased-Ed.), a CFC gunner, as he climbed down from the plane. Paul, it should be noted, was famous for his dry understated sense of humor. Here is how the dialogue between us went:

Howard: "How was the mission, Paul?"

Paul, very tired from the 15- of 16-hour flight:
"O.K., I guess."

Howard: "Were you able to hit the target?"

Paul: "Yeah."

Howard: "Was there much ack-ack?"

Paul: "Well, S-2 said it was 'light to moderate,'" and then pointing to damage on the starboard wing, he added, "but there was one burst that was intense."

Date of event: Summer, 1944

Date written: December, 1993

Written by: Wayne E. Redd

Charles Kissel and I, both Ohioans and both in the 11th Photo Unit, went snake hunting one time in Chakulia. After six hours of hunting without success, we were coming back to base, and we looked into one of the barracks that had been abandoned and saw a snake. When we got close, its hood fanned out. Kissel had me stay with the snake and hold his machine gun on it while he went to the Photo Lab to make a snake catcher. We captured the snake alive and took it to the Photo Lab and photographed it. We had a mongoose and put the mongoose with the cobra. Damned if the cobra didn't kill the mongoose. Where was that cobra when the guys who had occupied that abandoned barracks were sleeping?

Date of event: January, 1945
Date written: About 1993
Written by: Joseph D. White

Advance Man on the Move to Tinian

June 15, 1944, the date of the first Yawata mission was also the date of the invasion of the Marianas by the Army and Marines. When Guam was retaken and Saipan and Tinian captured, runways were constructed on these islands with the 73rd Wing being headquartered on Saipan. The 40th and the 58th Wing were assigned to Tinian.

We had one B-24 assigned to the Group for administrative purposes and, since I had considerable experience in this aircraft and had recently been moved from my crew to the position of Air Inspector General, Blanchard figured I would be the logical one to head up an advance party to be sure that everything was ready for the Group when it arrived on Tinian.

I don't remember all of the names of the people who accompanied me, but I do remember my navigator was Lt. Lossing from my old crew. Capt. Frank Redler, the Group Armament Officer, was also on the plane. The first leg of our journey was a short flight to Kharagpur to pick up orders and instructions. Our Group Vice Commander, Col. Riggs Sullivan, told me there would be a special order that I was to pick up. This turned out to be orders promoting me to Lt. Col. which came to me as a great surprise since I felt I was doing well to be holding onto the rank of major at the time.

The next leg of our flight was to China. From there we proceeded to Mindoro in the Philippines. We flew out of China at night with all of our navigation lights off just in case we might be spotted by some Jap night fighters. The China-Mindoro leg was a long flight and since we had not slept for 24 hours, we had a hard time staying awake. Lt. Lossing was a superman, however, and he kept the plane on course while the rest of us dozed off.

From the Philippines we flew to Guam, the new home of the 20th Air Force, and then on to West Field on Tinian. We found the runways complete and the Seabees were setting up the Quonset huts, tents and mess hall. We all went to work setting up supplies and getting the mess hall in operation. We figured we would be ready to receive the aircraft and the ground crews in a week or two. Unfortunately, this was not to be the case. Out of a clear blue sky, we received the startling word that the boats with our ground crews were already in the harbor. I don't know how we did it, but within 24 hours we had food, blankets, bedding, water and the mess hall in operation. It was rough going for a few days, and I remember Father Adler going back to the boat to live briefly rather than put up with what we had to offer. Everyone pitched in, and we soon had everything ready for the combat crews. I reverted back to my job as Air Inspector with the additional duty of flying first missions with the new crews arriving from the States. I remember being on the last mission when we turned on Saipan radio on the way home and learned that the war was over.

Date of event: 6 May, 1945
Date written: 1990
Written by: Richard H. Moore

I was CFC gunner on Capt. Myrel Massey's crew on this mission. Over the target we encountered very heavy, accurate flak and numerous fighters.

We were all firing away as we were attacked. Shortly after bombs away, devastating damage was being done to us by a George fighter that came in at 12 o'clock. One 40-mm. cannon shell knocked out our left outboard engine, and another exploded in the bomb bay, knocking a large hole in the tunnel plus knocking out a large electrical cable and the electrical equipment it served.

As this fighter first approached, I was firing six-cal. 50s at it in the prescribed short bursts of 10. Soon it became quite apparent that this enemy was inflicting a great deal of damage to our plane and that it intended to ram us.

Under these circumstances,, I really did not worry too much about burned-out barrels and gave him continuous fire. He continued his approach to within a few yards of the nose of our plane when his plane exploded and bits and pieces of it came sailing by.

It is easy to freeze on the trigger when under fighter attack so I was always admonishing the other gunners to fire "short bursts of 10."

Our flight engineer crawled down the tunnel from the front and I from the rear. We met at the huge hole and tried to patch some of the wires from the cable. He would say, "I have a red one" and when I found one of the same color, we would patch them together, hoping we could get something to work. Every once in a while we would get a hot one and, since we were already a little nervous, that didn't help a bit.

As we limped along on our way home, we asked permission to land at Iwo but were told to try to make it home. There was a layer of clouds beneath us but as we passed over Iwo there was a hole in the clouds directly beneath us, and Iwo looked awfully inviting. Soon after this, we tried to transfer fuel but the best we could do was spray gas all over everything.

Smoking was impossible under these circumstances so I just stuck a cigar in my mouth. Since we were almost out of gas-as usual, we had plenty on board but were unable to transfer-we decided to return to Iwo. About that time we noticed fire in the feathered engine.

The little hole in the clouds over the island was no longer there. As we made our first turn we lost all power and just dived through the clouds expecting to either ditch or land--depending on what we found below us. Fortunately, we were perfectly lined up with the runway-a fighter strip.

In the gunner's compartment, we all jammed up against the forward bulkhead in a crash landing position. We came in for a dead stick landing with no flaps and on fire. As we touched down and were breezing down the runway, we all jumped up and cheered until I realized the brakes had not been applied.

We hurriedly assumed the crash landing position again as the plane sailed off the end of the runway and dropped several feet into a rough, muddy area, finally stopping a short distance from a cliff at the edge of the island.

All of us made a hasty exit via the rear escape hatch. I was the last one out and running as I jumped to the ground. That is, I was running, but my feet weren't touching the ground. I thought, "My God, I've died and gone to heaven or somewhere else." It was then that I realized that two of the largest firemen I had ever seen were holding me up by my arms and running away from the plane.

A damage assessment officer informed us we had three minutes to get our gear out of the plane. One of my big regrets is that I failed to get out my Confederate flag.

As I stood some distance from the plane, a Jeep drove up and a captain got out, saying, "Rough?" I had just replied, "It was a S.O.B." when I realized that the officer was a chaplain. I apologized for my remark, and he then eased the tension by saying, "Never mind, an S.O.B. is an S.O.B."

I decided to light my cigar with my Zippo, but my hand was shaking so much the flame kept blowing out. The chaplain asked me what I was doing, and I told him, "Trying to light my cigar." He said, "What cigar?"

It was then that I realized that the entire cigar was in my mouth, well chewed. Kindly, the chaplain then gave me another cigar and lit it for me.

Date of event: 1953

Date written: 1990

Written by: Bob Mrugala

In 1953 I went to work at Keesler AFB teaching electronics. My first assignment was to teach the APQ-13. The course was four weeks and, for the most part, consisted of teaching the detail circuitry. The first part of the first day was an introduction which was a boring, droning message about the set's characteristics. Then it turned out that I was the first person who had ever had anything to do with radar in combat. This made things easy. What I decided to do was tell a "war story" using a little poetic license. I welded together the experiences of two missions for my class introduction.

The yarn as I spun it went something like this: We flew over water between the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra using the radar in the soup for checkpoints. We then flew across the peninsula to the rendezvous, flew up the coast, dropped the bombs on the tertiary target using radar because of bad weather. Then we flew home.

The result of my presentation was fantastic. I had obtained permission earlier to change my introduction to this story. As a result, the head of the department told all the instructors who were not required to cover a class to be there, and I had a standing room only class. From that time on, every time I picked up a new class, I had a standing room only audience. For a new employee who was a brand new instructor, this wasn't too bad.

Date of event: 29 May 1945

Date written: June, 1988

Written by: George Lowry

Editor's Note: The loss of Mansel Clark and his crew as a result of a Jap suicide attack has been a thread that has run through the memories of 40th Group members since the day it happened. It can be likened to other disasters that the 40th suffered. George Lowry has skillfully written his account of this mission to Yokohama on which the crew of Mansel Clark was lost.

Yokohama: Kamikaze vs. B-29. No Winner.

It has been 43 years since the Kamikaze-Mansel Clark disaster. I still feel reluctant to write about it. Probably others will remember it a little different from the way I do, but here is how I recall it.

The mission to Yokohama was a daylight event and was routine in most respects. There was a change affecting me at the outset, however. My regularly assigned co-pilot was to be left at Tinian and, in his place, I was assigned as co-pilot a VIP (a major from the 8th Air Force, as I recall). Takeoff and flight to Japan represented no particular problems. We just got the wheels and flaps up and kept going.

Rendezvous was some distance southeast of the target but for whatever reason, not all the planes assigned to the formation I was to lead arrived in time to get into position. So, we headed on in with only a partial formation put together. At that time, my new co-pilot began what was the almost continuous writing of notes in his notebook so he seemed not to be an active member of the crew. Mansel Clark had arrived on time, joining the formation on my left wing position. Weather conditions were clear so we made it inland and to the initial point without difficulty.

Upon getting onto the run, I noticed another larger formation to our left and up ahead, probably one and a half miles. We were turning parallel. The coast along Tokyo Bay was rather hazy, and the bombardier obviously was having trouble locating our target at the time. I kept searching the coastline and eventually could make out various small peninsulas and inlets. I picked up a map I had placed on the floor and began studying it. After a relatively short time, I concluded that we were headed too far to the left toward Tokyo so I notified the crew by intercom that I was making a turn to the right to get directly on target. When the correction was completed, I turned the run over to the bombardier. Before putting the map down, I took another brief look at it and at the terrain to be sure we were directly on course to the target (about 10 to 15 seconds away). Then I folded the map and put it down on the floor.

I settled back into my seat and looked up. At that very instant I got a glimpse of a twin-engine fighter about 300 feet away, coming directly in, just off our left wing, possibly a few feet higher than the wing tip. It was spurning flames from its left engine, and the flames extended to nearly the full length of its fuselage. No one on the crew had called it out as an enemy craft approaching, and I heard no gunfire from any of our guns. I quickly glanced at the co-pilot to see what his reaction was and found him busy writing notes in his notebook. I called the gunners on the intercom, but just then one of them (probably the left gunner) got on the intercom and began shouting incoherently. I could get nothing but "going down" from what he said. I think I shouted louder than he, I guess, and got him to slow down and speak clearly. Only then did I learn what had happened.

Having a Kamikaze strike on the formation at that time had not entered my mind since no fighter aircraft had been sighted. In addition, I thought Clark was higher above my left wing than my impression of where the fighter was that shot by us on his final pass. A disaster had taken place which I had not witnessed. I asked the gunners to watch the descent of the pieces carefully to see if there were any survivors. After what seemed like an eternity, the answers came in; no there were none. In the meantime, we kept the formation going steadily to the target, dropped our bit for the day's visit and headed west across the bay and on out to sea. We broke formation and made our way home.

My total personal observation of the disaster had consisted of a one-second glimpse of twin-engine fighter streaking past with a trail of fire blowing over the left wing. That apparently was the total observation of the members of the crew up front so, since we had not seen much, we did not have any lengthy discussion of it on the way home.

Debriefing back on Tinian was pretty much individual interviews so I didn't learn what anyone else reported. I don't think I ever heard an actual witness to the collision state exactly where Clark's plane was hit. It has always been my presumption that it was on the right wing. I heard later in the day that the fighter was headed straight for my lead plane, but apparently someone in the formation had disabled the Kamikaze's right engine on the run in and the resultant skid to the right took him off the lead plane and into the plane on the left wing position. Apparently the fighter had been set on fire as it went through the formation ahead of us and to our left.

As formation leader, I had come to feel somewhat like a barnyard hen with a brood of chicks to lead, protect and return to safety. On the Yokohama mission, I had failed to accomplish part of that charge. This was a blow to my ego and sense of worth. After the debriefing, I went, depressed, back to my tent where I had to face a severe blow.

The officers of Mansel Clark's crew had been our tent mates. But they wouldn't be coming home anymore.



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