



Snafuperbomber and its Crew on the Omura Mission, November 21, 1944

Editor's Introduction: MEMORIES #52 was about this crew's experience ditching off the coast of Africa en route to India. Their pilot contracted malaria and was returned to the States. Jim Cowden was assigned as their new Aircraft Commander. The crew, as a unit, flew Hump missions to China carrying gasoline. They flew two combat missions to Formosa (Taiwan) prior to the November 21 mission to Omura. Following is the account of the Omura mission as told by members of the crew. A number of significant events occurred on the plane and after bailout. Various members of the crew have contributed their memories of these events. Their thoughts are identified as the story unfolds. Leland Jones wrote the main narrative.

Date of event: 21 November, 1944

Date written: July-August, 1994

Written by: Leland Jones, Jim Cowden, Dick Steiner, Leonard Koenig

The crew for this mission, according to Dick Steiner's records, was as follows:

Captain	James H. Cowden	Aircraft Commander
1st Lt.	Leland G. Jones	Co-pilot
1st Lt.	Floyd D. Steiner	Navigator
1st Lt.	Ira C. Redmon	Bombardier (D)
1st Lt.	Leonard J. Koenig	Fit. Engineer
Staff Sgt.	William J. Salmon	Radio Operator (not on roster)
Staff Sgt.	Ray P. Adamson	CFC Gunner (D)
Staff Sgt.	Michael P. Shebak	Right Gunner
Staff Sgt.	Edward W. Bronson	Left Gunner
Staff Sgt.	Glen L. Voris	Tail Gunner
?	Stephen Kosinski	Radar (D)

Leland Jones starts off the story: Our first two combat missions were to Formosa. The Omura mission was to be our third target. The take-off part of the Omura mission was considered routine. On the climb-out, we entered a low-ceiling, stratus-type cloud shortly after the gear and flaps were retracted and reduced the power to the number two setting, which was climbing power.

As soon as possible after the #2 power was set up and stabilized, pilot procedure is for the pilots to visually check each engine for oil leaks and exhaust manifold leaks at the exhaust collector rings. As I was starting this procedure, an eerie condition appeared; a ghostly aura of bluish orange tint glowed all around the nose of the aircraft outside, and immediately, creepy-crawly blue streaks outside the windshield started to lazily crawl around on the windshield's outside surface. This phenomenon I recognized as foxfire, or St. Elmo's fire, but I had never experienced the aura of orange glow before.

Then I remembered that I was supposed to check each engine visually. When I looked at the engines, I got the shock of my life. The propellers were apparently just barely turning on number 3 and 4 engines. My reaction was a fast check of the tachometers. They were reading a steady 2450

RPM or whatever RPM to climb is. I rechecked the props outside, and now they appeared to still be just barely turning. Hard to believe, but I could actually read "Hamilton Standard" printed on the blades. After another reassuring look at the #3 and #4 tachometers, I finally realized this condition was caused by the stroboscopic on-off frequency of the foxfire light coinciding with the propeller RPM.

By this time I was calmed, and I hollered over to Jim to check his engines, and he turned his head to look and absolutely snapped his head back around. Boy, his eyes lit up, and his mouth dropped open. Obviously, he checked his tachometers. He saw that they were reading correctly. After he double-checked a couple of times, he grinned and looked at me and hollered at me to recheck my engines. After I told him that I had seen it, we both broke up laughing. Apparently, we had taken on the same electrical charge that the cloud had, which caused this phenomenon.

We routinely flew to our assembly point, one of the three large lakes just a few miles inland from the China coast. After drawing the formation up, we departed for the IP, just off the coast of Japan. Before arriving at the IP, Jim gave the order for all the crew members to don flak vests and helmets. After donning my flak vest, I decided to leave my flak helmet off until we saw flak or fighters. The helmet was pretty heavy and unwieldy. That was my reasoning, anyhow.

After we headed for the target from the IP, the flak became heavy, and old stupid me was sitting there fat, dumb and scared, forgetting that my helmet was not on my head. Because of our position in the formation (number three ship in C element), that put me next to the element leader off his left wing. Because of this, Jim told me to fly off the leader, and he would watch for fighters. We had a good bomb run and had a formation drop of bombs off the leader.

Shortly after bombs away, the flak stopped, and almost instantly the fighter planes came swarming in. It was later estimated between 125 and 150 fighter planes came up to intercept and engage us. Right after bombs away, we made a breakaway formation turn, and, while turning, we also started descending at the rate of about 1200 feet per minute, and of course we were gaining speed. Ballistically speaking, this maneuver makes it very difficult for a fighter pilot to aim properly to hit a target that was changing so many ballistic factors, such as speed changing, turning, and altitude changes, and so on. In spite of these difficulties a fighter shot us up pretty badly. He either didn't read the damn book, or he was just plain, damned good, because he sure clobbered our butts.

Our bombardier, Ira Redmon, got credit for shooting down two Zeroes, including the one that shot us up. Observers in the formation stated in the debriefing that the Jap fighter plane blew up at the same time that we were hit. One of the shells blew our nose out, and Redmon was instantly killed. Dick Steiner, the navigator, and I were wounded.

The next thing I remember, I was still in my seat with our first-aid man, the radio operator, and someone else, treating my wounds. I had my hand holding my head at the left temple, and when I tried to move the arm and hand, they wouldn't move. One of my wounds was at the temple, and I apparently had grabbed my head, and my blood froze my hand to my head. Dick Steiner told me later that the temperature inside the nose section dropped immediately to the outside temperature, which he said was -55 centigrade. And, of course, it didn't take much time for the blood and the hand to freeze. Bill Salmon used his knife and pried my hand away from my head.

Jim told me later that when we got hit our plane dropped down and away from the formation, and before he could get the plane back under control, we were too far from the formation to try to rejoin them. Knowing that the fighter planes would concentrate on a damaged and lone airplane, he steeply dove the airplane into a bank of clouds that was several thousand feet below, to try and elude the fighters.

This was, I think, an example of cool thinking and reacting under severe stress conditions on Jim's part. The dive into the cloud worked. The crew said that they didn't see another fighter after we entered the cloud. We also had taken a 20 mm explosive shell hit in the upper section of the radio compartment, which ruined all of the radio systems, including the intercom system.

One of the hits from the 20 mm explosive shells was one that hit and tore a hole out of the top of the right wing. The hole was located over the #3 fuel tank. The right gunner said it was large enough to drive a jeep through. This damage caused a large rupture in the top of the fuel tank and siphoned off more than 500 gallons of fuel. However, the #3 engine didn't run out of fuel.

One gunner came forward through the communications tunnel. (Remember, the intercom system was shot out.) He told Koenig about the damaged wing and all the white stuff (fuel) that had sprayed out over the wing. Of course, the low pressure that the wing is designed to create created the suction that caused the loss of fuel. The flight engineer fuel selector valve cables had been severed by one of the explosive shells that hit in the radio compartment. Due to the intimate knowledge Koenig had of the aircraft system and knowing in his mind what position each valve was in at the time of the damage, he located the severed valve cables and was able to manipulate the valve remotely by pulling the appropriate cable to feel the click of the valve detent when he reached it. He then was able to transfer fuel from good tanks through the fuel manifold line to the damaged tank. He devised a simple hand signal system with the right gunner, and that way they could transfer fuel into the damaged tank until the siphoning from the tank started again. The gunner would signal to stop the transfer system. Amazingly, I think this procedure worked out, and we were able to keep #3 engine running, which greatly enhanced our efforts to get back as far as we did before having to bail out.

Cowden notes: Now that we were in the clouds, we could assess our damage beyond the cockpit. The left wheel well and tires were blown apart and were dragging in the wind. The radio compartment was blown apart with heavy shrapnel, and the intercom system was out completely. At this point the radio man and the radar operator pieced together a radio with which we could reach the other planes in the formation. When the squadron found us, they circled once to let us join the formation for added security on the way home, but we soon ran into a nasty lightening and rainstorm, and we couldn't keep up in our crippled condition. So we were on our own again.

Jones resumes the story: In addition to the fuel problems created by the drag of the left wheel and the loss of fuel due to number three tank damage, there were the headwinds that were over 100 mph that we had not known to expect. After being airborne 15 hours, the flight engineer advised Jim that we could expect to run out of fuel at any time. At the time we were over very mountainous terrain, Jim advised the crew that we'd find and fly over a flat valley somewhere, and then he would order the bailout while we still had fuel. Shortly after this we flew over a big mountain and finally over this large valley. At that point, the engines started sputtering and cutting out. The bailout exit for the forward compartment was the nose wheel exit. Some of the crew members had devised a system to get my chute open because my right arm was so shot up it was practically useless as far as pulling the rip cord. Jim had previously briefed us on the order of exit, when the bell rang for abandon aircraft. He told the crew they would get me out first. When the order was given to bail out, I jumped feet first from the rear of the exit opening on the flight deck. I exited cleanly and was slowly tumbling. I was expecting my chute to open at any time, but it never did. Apparently the knot in the rope that they had tied to my ripcord had come loose some way. I looked down, and the earth seemed to be rushing up mighty fast. My rip cord handle was flailing around. It was out of its pocket. So I frantically took my right arm with my left hand. I grabbed the ripcord handle with my right hand, with which I still had a good grip; I used my grip and flung my right hand away from me. My chute popped open, and I started swinging violently backwards and forwards, three times, and then I banged very hard into a dry rice paddy. I hit the ground backward with my heels, butt and back, knocking the breath out of me. I finally got my breath back, looked around and saw a bunch of coolies running towards me. It turned out that they were very friendly and helpful. A short time later, another bunch of Chinese

appeared, and Koenig was with them. He was in good shape after the jump. Of course, none of the Chinese could speak English, so Koenig pulled out his pointee-talkie book from his escape and survivor kit. Koenig found an appropriate phrase in English and pointed to the same phrase in Chinese. All the Chinese folks scratched their heads and looked at each other. By their expressions it was clear that they couldn't read the Chinese characters.

They took us to a nearby village. By this time it was after dark. I was feeling very sick and weak, and Koenig told me that I had a raging hot fever. I guess I must have passed out about then, because the next thing that I remember I awoke and was disoriented. I was jostling around, and finally I realized that I was being transported in a chair contraption that had two long poles attached under the chair, and that a coolie was trotting along at the end of each of these poles. We were travelling along the tops of the dikes that surrounded each rice paddy. They didn't have roads in that valley. We finally came to a village that had had a high wall around it. They carried me into a building and down some stairs, apparently to the basement, and placed me on a hard surface. I guess it was a Chinese type of bed. They had wrapped me in my parachute for warmth. Apparently, the chute got to the village before the chair car. Shortly, a Chinese man and a woman showed up and started unwrapping the parachute, and he and this Chinese nurse looked over my wounds. I had figured out by this time that these two were probably doctor and nurse. He had a bag with him, he used some scissors from the bag and cut off the right sleeve of my flight suit up close to the shoulder and exposed the wound in my bicep. I looked at the wound and saw these green, red and some other colored streaks running up and down my arm from the wound. I found out later that I had a case of blood poisoning. He took a dark brown bottle out of his bag and a piece of gauze about an inch wide and a couple of feet long. He stuffed this gauze down into the bottle and pulled it out. It was, of course, saturated, and had turned real dark. He took that gauze stuffing and, with a straw, stuffed it into the wound. I remember, I screamed, I guess from the pain and apparently passed out at this point. The next thing I remember, the Chinese lady was gently slapping my cheeks and jabbering in Chinese. I guess that is the way they wake up folks in China, just as they do here. She had a bowl of hot soup that looked and tasted like chicken soup. After feeding me, she washed my face and hands; she went through this procedure several times during the next day or two that I was there. I don't remember much of how I got to the hospital in Chengtu.

While I was at the hospital, I found out that Jack Ledford was there also. He had been shot down a couple of weeks before we were. He and his crew also managed to fly back pretty close to home. He had been wounded severely but was making a good recovery by the time I found out that he was there. After being there a week or so, a bird colonel came by for a visit. He introduced himself--I can't remember his name and stated that he was the 20th Bomber Command forward area Commander. He said the doctor okayed Jack Ledford and me to have breakfast with him the following A.M. at his mess hall. I thanked him profusely and gladly accepted the invitation. The next day he had us sit at his table, near a heater. We were feasting on the best breakfast we had since leaving the States when someone hollered attention. Of course, Jack and I nearly overturned the table, jumping up to attention. Someone finally said "as you were." The Colonel excused himself and started walking in a hurry towards the front door. I looked around, and there standing inside the door was a fairly large group of people. The Colonel brought them over to the two tables adjacent to ours. There were all kind of colonels, majors, etc. The colonel who had invited us brought two of the party over to his table where Jack and I were seated. The colonel escorted these two officers to the other side of table, opposite Jack and me. I about fainted. One was wearing two stars, and the other one was wearing one star. The colonel introduced us to these two generals. The major general was Curtis Lemay. Jack attempted to start a conversation with him. He seemed to me to be a grouchy type and would only say a few words at a time back to Jack. A Chinese waiter brought a pot of hot coffee over, and he served the two generals. General Lemay still had his sheepskin flying jacket and gloves on. So after he was served the hot coffee, he picked up the coffee cup with his gloved hand and apparently took a mouthful of coffee, not realizing that it was very hot. He spewed coffee all over Jack and me.

After he wiped his mouth and sort of regained his composure, he uttered, "Damn, that was hot." After that, Jack again attempted to strike up a conversation with him. He asked the General which state was his home state. General Lemay said Ohio, and Jack retorted, "Gee, that's the state I'm from." He then asked the general which school he attended. General Lemay said, "Ohio State." Jack came back saying, "That's my school, also." Lemay immediately started warming up to the prattle that they were having. General Lemay said, "Wait a minute! Aren't you the fella that was the AAU diving champion when you were at Ohio State?" Jack of course said yes. After that, they got along famously.

About a week after our breakfast with General Lemay, Jack Ledford came by and said that they were going to ship him back to India the next day. Two or three days after Jack left China, the bird colonel commander came by and stated that the doc had okayed me to return to India. The colonel said that a couple of B-29's were scheduled to return to India the next day and asked me if I would like to leave on one of them. I said that I would really like that.

Dick Steiner tells what he recalls: We were scheduled to go on the strike on about the 18th of November, and we all got up early to go to the briefing. Then, for some reason, the mission was delayed for 24 hours and, as we went back to our quarters, Ira Redmon, in his east Texas accent, said, "Well, that gives us another day to live." This comment would have gone unnoticed except for the events that followed resulting in Red's fatal injury.

We were briefed again the next morning, and the mission took off on schedule. We were all apprehensive about this mission as the defenses in the area of northern Kyushu were heavy and concentrated around the nearby industrial area at Yawata. We flew eastward across China and, at daybreak, we began to see other B-29's converging on the assembly point. We assembled in formation with our plane, flying left wing on the lead. As we flew on toward the target, I couldn't see much of the formation out of my little window, but I could see up front that Jones was doing the formation flying in the right seat as his view of the other planes was much better than Jim's. We were flying at around 22,000 feet, and the weather consisted of broken clouds at various levels, but the bomb run was visual with constant checks by radar.

I recall a perfect picture of the target on my radar scope. The run looked good to me. Redmon opened the bomb-bay doors, and I felt the usual lurch as the bombs were released. Many fighters were being called in by the gunners, and the bombardier immediately after the release. As the bomb-bay doors closed, the forward turrets began firing almost without interruption. I heard Red ask for control of the upper and lower forward guns and could see him hunched over the gun sight.

There was a sharp explosion in the front cockpit, and the air inside turned foggy as we lost pressure. Shell fragments were flying around the cockpit. One hit my flak vest just under my left rib cage and lodged in my vest. It felt as if someone had slapped me. One fragment hit my wooden sextant box on the desk in front of me and shattered a lens in the sextant.

Looking forward I could see Red's gunsight swinging free and Red, with flak helmet fallen down over his face, slumped in his seat. Leland Jones, who had been flying the plane while in formation, was slumped in his seat with blood pumping from the side of his head onto the aisle stand.

The engineer's face was a study as he tried to analyze the power situation and get control of the engines and props. Number two engine just outside my window appeared to be dead, and there was a terrific vibration out on the left wing which was probably from the number one engine also damaged.

Jim called for me and Bill Salmon, the radio operator, to come forward with first-aid kits to try to help Redmon. We broke out walk-around oxygen bottles and kits and moved Redmon's lifeless body back on the aisle stand and tried to administer plasma, but his veins had collapsed. His face was mostly shot away by the impact of the 20 mm shell which entered the nose just left of center and exploded in his face. We helped Leland, who was bleeding from numerous puncture wounds in his face, neck and right arm. We bandaged him as best we could and got back to the business of trying to nurse the crippled plane back to safe territory. I recall just at the moment of explosion seeing the "Tojo" that hit us in a head-on attack move around to the left side of the plane trailing smoke and fire. We all felt he was mortally hit by Red's fire the moment he hit us.

I gave Jim a new escape heading out across the China Sea and, still losing altitude, we headed west. At least one other plane left the formation and began to escort us. I think we got pretty well stabilized at about 14,000 feet, but we were flying very slowly as we had full power on only two engines. The other airplane left us as we made landfall on the China coast, and we were on our own. Jim asked me to come forward and man the front guns as the other aircraft ahead of us were encountering fighters in the area of Hungtse Lake.

We continued to fly westward toward our base at A-1, slowly losing altitude. When we seemed to be free of fighter attack, I went back to my station to try to establish some sort of fix. Although we were in broken clouds, I had no working sextant, and the radio homing systems were giving us nothing intelligible, I did my best to reconstruct by DR what had happened and revised our heading toward home. The last positive fix was at the south end of Hungste Lake, about 50 miles inland from the China coast. After several more hours of flying, our usable fuel supply was dangerously low. We began seriously to consider abandoning ship.

Leonard Koenig records his memories of the bailout: Forward compartment crew members went out through the nose wheel well, so the nose gear had to be extended prior to bailout. When Jim decided we had to jump, he activated the gear extension switch. Then we learned that one more system was out. I made a quick trip to the bomb bay and picked up the emergency flap-gear extension motor. Thank God it worked. Leland was the first to jump, and he is correct when he says he fell a long way. Steiner, Salmon and I were sweating him out all the way, and there was one big sigh of relief when that white blossom appeared. Steiner and Salmon followed; then it was my turn. I didn't like the idea of trying to jump from those close quarters, so I climbed down the ladder, hung on with one hand and swung out, dangled there until I had a good hold on the ripcord handle and let go. The descent was uneventful, but I wound up hanging upside down from a low tree. I was still trying to get out of my harness when some Chinese arrived and extricated me.

Jim Cowden brings the story to an end: I had spotted a nice long valley. I gave the signal for the crew to drop the co-pilot. Then the alarm was given for the crew to jump. I jumped last. As soon as my chute opened, I started counting the line of white chutes against the rice field. The farmers in the fields were very excited and came right over to where I had landed. They picked up my chute and gear and pointed to the hill where the plane had crashed. I went with them to make sure that no one had frozen in the jump. All was O.K. I had hit the ground at 4:30 pm. The Chinese farmers escorted me to a little village where I caught up with the crew. This was about 9:30 that night. By the time I got there, the crew had arranged to have Leland attended to by the Chinese doctor. Leonard Koenig accompanied Jones. That night, the rest of us slept on stone slabs. The next morning we caught up with a small army of Chinese who helped the crew get the body of Ira Redmon out of the wreckage and to wrap him in his chute to be carried back for burial. There was also the matter of destroying the bomb sight which was attended to. Then we got to the only telephone in the area and gave our base the message that we needed to be picked up and that we needed an ambulance. After the call, we kept walking toward our expected pick-up point. When we met up with our rescuers, we put Leland in the ambulance to be taken to the university hospital in Chengtu. The rest of us piled in a troop carrier

of some sort. We were starved and were looking forward to a big turkey dinner because it was Thanksgiving Day this date in 1944. When we got to the mess hall, we were disappointed to discover that we were too late all the turkey was gone. It turned out it was the day after Thanksgiving when we got back. We had forgotten about the extra day's travel. But Big Joe, the Chinese cook, said he would fix us all the eggs and toast we wished. We settled for that. It had been a long mission.

Date of event: Summer, 1944
Date written: 26 June, 1994
Written by: Donald F. Manfredo

A Philosophical Lesson

I think that it is worth mentioning that when I was rooming with Jim Cowden in India, a friend of mine in another squadron, on more than two occasions, stopped by our quarters when a mission was scheduled and left his will with me. He would tell us that he believed that he was not going to survive the mission. Jim and I tried to talk him out of it. Both Jim and I told him the same thing: do your job and stop worrying about it. The last time he left his last will and testament at our room, we told him that he should believe that he was going to survive and that if he didn't stop worrying, his efficiency would be greatly diminished which could contribute to his demise. If he couldn't stop what he was doing, he should go see the flight surgeon.

Jim and I talked briefly about this subject, but it was very clear that we both believed that we were going to survive and we both refused to believe otherwise because it would be a waste of time. You would spend so much time worrying about yourself, you wouldn't have a chance to do your job--which would be fatal.

(By the way, the guy that left his will with us survived and died of natural causes many years after the war. We must have convinced him to believe that he was going to survive since he flew many missions after leaving his will with us.) I also believe surviving the Omura mission strengthened Jim's belief, and mine, that we were going to survive the war...or at least the odds got better in one hell of a crap game.



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