

Date of event: December 14, 1944

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

The 40th Group's most tragic mission occurred Dec. 14, 1944 -- a mission many expected to be a "milk run." A 12-plane formation was ordered to bomb the Rama VI bridge in Bangkok with a mixed load of 12 1000-pound and 6 500-pound demolition bombs. Some key officers, including Capt. Frank Redler, armament officer, and Lt. Col. J. I. Cornett, commander of the 44th Squadron and of this formation, protested to the Group CO, Col. "Butch" Blanchard, that the mixed bomb load was an unnecessary risk with little payoff. Faced with conflicting advice and information from his staff (opposing the mixed bomb load) and XX Bomber Command staff (supporting it but granting Blanchard the option to change the load), Col. Blanchard ordered the mission to proceed with the mixed load--a controversial command decision that has left some crew members bitter to this day. After takeoff, one plane had to abort and bomb a tertiary target. The rest made two bomb runs on Bangkok without dropping bombs; 9/10 cloud cover prevented visual sighting of the target. As ordered, the formation proceeded to the secondary target--rail yards in Rangoon, Burma.

Immediately after bombs away over Rangoon, there was a tremendous explosion underneath the low element of the 11-plane formation. Subsequent evidence convinced staff officers and all surviving crew members that the explosion resulted from mid-air collision of bombs in the mixed bomb load. One of our own bombs blew the formation apart, causing the four planes of the low element to crash in the target area and damaging all planes in the formation. Two complete crews bailed out successfully; 6 members of another crew bailed out; one plane went down with its entire crew. Only one plane returned to home base, with a fatally wounded crew member. The remaining six limped to emergency bases. In all, 17 men were killed, and 29 were imprisoned by the Japanese for 5 months until liberated in May, 1945.

The lead plane of the low element was #574, which was one of two planes (along with the "Eddie Allen") contributed to the war effort by employees of Boeing's Wichita plant. Two members of its crew tell their stories here. The crew members, with nicknames sometimes used in the following accounts, were:

Pilot:	Robert Shanks (Bob)	CFC:	Nicholas Oglesby (Nick)
CP:	Harold Fletcher (Fletch)	LG:	Arnold Basche (Arnie)
FE:	G. M. Etherington (Bud)	RG:	Walter Lentz
B:	Robert Benedict (Benny)	Radar:	L. W. Sommers
N:	Julian Cochran (Cocky)	TG:	Henry Pisterzi (Hank)
Radio:	Ferrell Majors		

DISASTER AND CAPTURE

Memories of G. M. Etherington (written February, 1985):

The weather was clear as we approached Rangoon. Apparently we had taken the Japanese by surprise as there was no defensive action. Seconds after bombs away there was a tremendous explosion. We were hit and hit bad.

The exact events of the next several minutes are not clear in my mind. I guess all four engines had been hit. Two engines were on fire--#3 and one other. My first concern was to get these fires

out, which fortunately I was able to do. One of the other two was running so rough that we decided to feather it. The gunners reported there was a big hole in the right wing and the control surfaces were badly damaged. Bob and Fletch had a lot of trouble flying the plane but managed to control it. There were several holes in the plane, but miraculously nobody was seriously hurt. I had a scratch on my left arm and Julian Cochran had a small piece of metal in the sole of his shoe and a small wound on his leg. His parachute had been shredded, and he went through the tunnel to get a spare chute which just happened to be in the back.

We were heading west, hoping to make the Burma coast. If we were able to ditch in the Bay of Bengal, we stood a good chance of being picked up by air-sea rescue. We were losing altitude so we restarted the engine that had been running so rough; #3 and #4 were still out. We began to throw out everything we could to lighten the plane. Benny caught his chest pack on something, and the pilot chute started to pop out. We caught it and had him hold it in place with both arms. Somewhere in this time period I seem to remember that we all said the Lord's Prayer together over the intercom. We had to feather #1 again, leaving only #2 running.

We managed to fly 15 or 20 minutes after being hit and were somewhere over the delta of the Irrawaddy river at about 6,000 feet with a higher mountain range ahead of us when #2 engine started to burn. I don't remember who was the first one out of the front of the plane, but I know I had to help Benny get out with his partially popped-open chute. I switched on the autopilot to give the pilots a better chance to get out and told Bob and Fletch to come right behind me. Then I jumped and pulled the rip-cord. There was quite a jolt as the chute opened--but it sure looked good to me. Several chutes were open in the direction we had come from. After what seemed like too long a time, two more chutes opened. Soon the plane turned to the left and started toward me, with #2 engine now burning fiercely. It turned again to the left, losing altitude, and as it was flying away from me, crashed and burned.

Arnie Basche and I were probably less than fifty yards apart when we landed in a field near a small Burmese village. As we were descending in our parachutes, we heard a gong being rung in the village. The men from the village came streaming out armed with old rifles and long rice knives and had us practically surrounded by the time we hit the ground. We had a few pieces of personal papers which we managed to bury as the group closed the ring around us.

These people were not really hostile to us, and they took us into their village. The village consisted of a number of mud and thatch huts, for the most part surrounding a cleared central area. They put us in one of these huts. No one in this village spoke English, but within a couple of hours they had gotten someone from another village who spoke a little bit of English and served as interpreter.

In the meantime they had brought us some food. The thing I remember was some huge eggs--perhaps goose eggs. I told Arnie that he better eat something because there was no telling when we might get to eat again. We were also trying to negotiate for a boat; if we could get down the river and out to the coast, we might stand a pretty good chance of being picked up by air-sea rescue.

By mid-afternoon Hank was with us, and the village people had a boat lined up. They had taken our parachutes and a few pieces of debris from the plane and put them in the boat. We went from the center of the village a few hundred yards down a jungle path to their boat landing. The whole village went with us. We were anxious to get going but were told that we must wait until dark and that we must now go back to the village. I sensed something wrong but had no idea what it was. Reluctantly we started back toward the village. I was leading the procession, beside the village head man and the interpreter, with the enlisted men right behind me. As we made a turn on the path to the central clearing of the village, the three of us--Basche, Pisterzi and I--were suddenly alone. Across the clearing we were facing a Burmese Warrant Officer and two soldiers with rifles leveled at us. We had

been captured. The Warrant Officer (W/O), who had at one time been with the British Army but had changed loyalty as the fortunes of war shifted, informed me, "This is your lucky day. For you the war is over." I had trouble believing that for some time.

We walked for two or three miles under the surveillance of the two guards and the W/O to another small village. On the way we went through some knee-deep muddy water and the two packs of cigarettes in the shin pockets of my flight suit became casualties of war. From that village we were taken by motor launch to a larger village several miles away. The W/O was pleased as he took the shells from my GI .45 pistol, because he figured he had some new ammo for his revolver. However, the cartridges fell right through the cylinder and barrel of his revolver. This dismayed him. I knew, when I had been looking down the barrel of that revolver as we were captured, that it was the largest caliber pistol I had ever seen.

It was after dark when we arrived at a larger village. We docked at a restaurant/ store/warehouse type of structure. Here the W/O ceremoniously turned us over to the Japanese. Lentz had joined us either at the previous village or this one; I don't remember which. We were taken again by boat to what seemed to be a small Japanese Army outpost and were put, under guard, in an out-building where we spent the night.

The next day was the first of numerous interrogations. Some time in the early afternoon a guard came and took me to another building. I was to stand at attention in front of a table where a Japanese Lieutenant was seated. Behind me was the guard with his bayonet touching my back. The lieutenant had on the table various items taken from us which he wanted me to identify. He had a Japanese-English dictionary and had to look up nearly every word, as he really spoke almost no English. One item he wanted me to identify was the silk escape map that we carried. His small dictionary used the word, "chart." In an effort to be as uncooperative as possible, I insisted that it was a map. He could not find the word "map" and was quite frustrated. I had a small wallet of pictures of my wife that I had always carried with me in a shirt pocket. These had been taken from me, and he wanted to keep them. Thinking that I didn't have much to lose, I raised a big fuss about this. To my surprise, he gave them back to me, keeping only one or two pictures. I managed to keep these through the rest of the internment and still have them today. I believe that one or two of the gunners were also interrogated, but I do not remember if they all were.

That evening we went by boat to another village; I believe it was there we met Cocky and Nick and maybe one or two other members of our crew. What I'll call a motorized rice barge took us somewhere else along the river. I remember being almost in the bilge, and I thought I was going to be eaten alive by rice weevils.

By the third or fourth day, all of our crew were together again. Fletch had sprained his ankle when he landed and had trouble walking for a couple of days. At each place where we had a new set of captors we were interrogated again. It seemed that the closer we got to civilization, the better informed, and apparently more intelligent, the captors were. As a generality, you had to give some kind of answer to the questions or get punished, but the answer could often be the biggest lie you could fabricate. Once we were being questioned by a Japanese officer in something like a public square of some little village. Someone (maybe Ferrell Majors) was beaten because he didn't answer something quickly enough.

After some point we stayed with the same group of three or four guards who took us from one place to another en route to Rangoon. We moved by various means of transportation--boat, train, truck, and walking. These guards treated us reasonably well and saw to it that we were fed every day. We usually traveled at night because, we learned, there was much greater danger of being attacked by Allied aircraft during the day. We had not realized that the Japanese Air Force in Burma was, at this point, so weak as to be almost non-existent. We later learned that the entire Japanese military effort in Burma was in serious trouble from lack of supplies, and their armies in the North had

been ravaged by disease and malnutrition. It was said that everything that moved in Burma during the day got shot up, and I guess there was some truth to it.

I don't remember the exact sequence in which the next several things occurred, but I will remember each of them. One day we spent in a little village in a Jungle or forest. There was a large pavilion-like structure with a large Buddha. This temple was our place of internment for the day. The village people prepared food for us during the day. Before we left, the village head man got permission from the guards to give us some cigars. I don't remember just how it was expressed, but we left that village knowing that those people would have liked to do more to help us but could not. The Japanese domination over Burma was very strong.

One day or longer we spent in a building like a chicken coop, made of bamboo with a thatched roof. This seemed to be some kind of a military headquarters area, and here we were given one of the more thorough interrogations. The interrogating officers spoke pretty fair English and had an intelligence book written in both Japanese and English which, among other things, seemed to contain answers to all the questions they asked us about the 45th Bomb Squadron. They had identified us, probably by tail markings. As they asked questions, they had the book open, and I could read many correct answers. I remember seeing in the book that we were based in Chakulia and that Oscar Schaaf was our Squadron CO. You could lie about some other things though; for example, I had only been in India for a few days before this mission, or this was my first mission, or I've never been to China. I didn't mind giving them information I knew they already had, and it made life easier to be able to give them answers to some of the things without too much hemming and hawing.

One night we were in a rather large house, and Cocky and I helped with the cooking chores that evening. Another night we were taken to a train station and waited several hours for a train. We slept for a while on the station platform before the train came. One of the guards was trying to make a phone call--we thought to his superiors. The communication system was so bad that he must have been on the phone for a couple of hours before he got his call through.

The train had some long baggage racks over the seats, and as I recall it, Benny and I slept up there for part of the night. It was a bright moonlight night, and at one point the train stopped for quite a while, probably because of Allied planes in the area. We were on a bridge that had been shot up, and some of the smaller trusses appeared to be temporarily repaired with something like bailing wire. It was very uncomfortable being such a good target: on a train, on a bridge, in the bright moonlight. I didn't much care for that train ride.

The last stop before Rangoon was a place where we stayed in what we called a bear cage: one side had bars from floor to ceiling; the other sides were solid walls. We were there maybe a day and a half. One afternoon they had us all out working--cutting and hauling bamboo. We were always closely guarded. At this place a Japanese Captain and a Major, both of whom spoke rather good English, interrogated Benny and me together, and they were after different information than we had been asked about before. They asked how many B-29's were being made each month. Of course, we didn't know and told them so. They said that was all right but we must guess. We hemmed and hawed for a while and finally told them that the U.S. was probably making about 3,000 B-29's a month. We knew this was preposterous, but it had the desired effect of really concerning them. Then they asked how many B-29's there were in the U.S. Again the same routine: We don't know; all right, you must guess. Having told one whopper, we figured we should be consistent, so we said probably about 30,000. Now we had them really upset, so they sent us back to our bear cage.

The next morning we were taken by truck to Rangoon. For a number of miles along the side of the road was a pipe several feet in diameter which was at least part of the water supply for the city of

Rangoon. Part of it seemed to be constructed of wood, held together with steel bands. Periodically we would pass an area where the pipe had been strafed, and jets of water were spraying many feet into the air. In many places efforts had been made to patch the holes.

Our first destination in Rangoon was Judson College, which was serving as Headquarters of the Japanese Air Force in Burma. The Headquarters was adjacent to, or a part of, a hospital area plainly marked with red crosses. Here we were interrogated by a Japanese officer who had a degree in aeronautical engineering from a West Coast college. He asked me about engine performance and some other questions that I didn't understand. He finally produced a copy of Air Force Magazine which was far newer than any we had seen. In this magazine was a write-up of this new development he had been asking us about and of which we knew nothing. My recollection is that we were taken by truck to Rangoon Central Prison that evening. We arrived there on Christmas Day, 1944, and remained for several months.

Memories of Julian Cochran (written November, 1984):

I have no memory of ack-ack on this mission. The explosion beneath us was of gigantic proportions. I immediately felt something hit my right ankle on the inside about one inch above the top of my GI shoes. My left shoe had a hunk of the sole knocked out just in front of the arch. A small piece of metal, probably skin of the plane, was just under my skin. It bled little and did not hurt. I picked up my chest chute from the floor and found it blossomed out in white. The whole bottom was shredded. I announced on the intercom that my chute was ruined, and Nick came on to say there was an extra chute in the radar room. I immediately flew through the tunnel to get it, and when I got back up front, I was out of air and quickly hooked on the oxygen at the front of the tunnel. I was of course immediately aware that the plane was badly damaged but paid little attention to it until my personal problem was fixed. I am not sure what each engine was doing. I think that #3 was dead and #4 dead or mostly so; #2 was possibly the best. It seems to me there were one or two fires on the right side. Bob asked me for a heading, and I gave him one for the ditching island west of Rangoon. I remember grabbing the wrong map once.

Bob and Fletch couldn't hold the plane level. The right wing would fall; they would bring it back up, and then the left wing would fall. This happened 2 or 3 times. I knew that if we fell off into a steep dive, we'd never get out. While we were flying in this erratic condition, Nick crawled into the rear bombbay and kicked out a hung-up 1000-pound bomb. I don't remember the order to bail out nor any discussion as to who would go first. I know the nose wheel was lowered, and I immediately climbed down straddling the hole and standing on the handholds, pulled my legs together and dropped out. I thought I was first out, but two chutes were already open. Two of the guys in the back moved even faster than I did. I remember looking up toward the plane and pulling the cord as soon as I was clear. I never remember seeing the rip cord handle in my hand; I apparently simply pulled it and dropped it.

I landed in an irrigation ditch, in waist-deep water and up to my knees in mud. Mine was probably the softest landing of anyone. Then I observed the plane off to the west, probably at 1,000 or 2,000 feet, turning slowly to the left and going down. I don't remember seeing any other chutes, but it never occurred to me that everyone might not get out. I started walking west. A large water buffalo stood up in front of me, causing me to reverse my direction. About that time several Burmese came toward me holding what appeared to be sticks about four feet long with a rather long knife affixed to the end--rice knives, I think. As I recall, they took my .45 but did not threaten me with it. (Probably they did not know what to do with it).

About dark we arrived at a shack on the river, where I met Nick and two others of the crew--I cannot remember who. Nick still had his first aid kit and put some sulfa powder on the small hole in my ankle. It never did get infected. Soon some Japs (2 or 3 of them, I think) showed up in a

motorboat and took everything personal away from me. Though I remember few details, we eventually all got together; it seems to me it took several days. To get to Rangoon we traveled by motorboat, large rice barge or boat (rice bugs chewed on me), train and truck. Along the way we all got a haircut and shave. We ate more or less regularly. At one place Bud and I helped cook something. Also we slept on a railroad station platform waiting for a train. We spent a day or more in wooden cages we called "bear cages." At some point we were interrogated several times by different officers. Some were slapped from behind across the side of the head when an answer was not what the officer wanted to hear.

We finally arrived at Judson College in Rangoon by truck. A Japanese Lieutenant, who had attended college in Seattle, refused to share his bunch of bananas with us, and we were hungry. We were forced to stand up in a small building on a road leading to the college. Here we were joined by two officers of the British Army, an Aussie pilot of a Mosquito and his navigator, a New Zealander. Bill, the pilot, had a bad facial injury. They were buzzing a river when a prop hit the water.

Next day we were taken to the Rangoon city jail, which was used for POWs. We were placed in a two-story brick building, four to a cell. We found that other B-29 crew members were in the building. About half the space was taken by a wooden platform which we slept on. We had only a few pieces of burlap for so-called bedding. We stayed there for about a month. I do not remember any interrogations after arriving in Rangoon. While there we were severely beaten by guards with a club nearly the size of a pickax handle. Two crewmen of other planes had gangrenous wounds, and one, Montgomery, had his arm amputated about four inches above the hand. All of the B-29 crewmen were moved to another building without cells: officers on the second floor, enlisted men on the first. There were about 105 men, all but one in the Air Corps.

We each had two hand-made dishes, about 6" by 8", soldered sheet metal, about 2" deep, one for tea, the other for food. Meals were wormy bran for breakfast, tea and rice for noon meal, tea and soup for evening. We had little meat, usually a small front quarter of water buffalo thrown over the wall into the dirt. A Capt. Hunt was in charge of the cook crew. At first we slept on a platform made of bamboo, full of bed bugs. Then we used that for firewood and slept on the floor. We never had enough firewood and burned wood decorations from the long porch roof which was on one side of the building. Also a great number of heavy bracing timbers were removed from the attic area of the building. No one from our building was placed on work crews, as were other POWs from other buildings. They received extra food; they left camp in the morning and returned each evening. We received no tobacco and had nothing at all to do except walk and talk. Once or twice Indian POWs threw tobacco over the wall, wrapped in newspaper. We also had no toilet paper and used leaves from our one tree until they were gone.

Once a guard asked for a typist, and I volunteered, hoping I'd get out to go to the office building (maybe to get something to eat). No luck--he brought the typewriter and a table and chair into the compound. I was given a stack of forms to enter POW names so each could sign saying he would not attempt to escape I hurriedly tried to count the forms and thought there were extra ones. I gave them to others to be used for cigarette paper. Before I finished the list of names, I ran out of forms. The guard was very, very mad, to say the least. I thought I was going to get the kicked out of me. He finally gave me more forms with no bodily harm.

All the time there, I had one bath at an open hydrant with a small piece of soap. About two months after we entered the camp, B-29's attacked Rangoon and severely damaged the water supply; thereafter we had even less water, none to wash with. I grew a beard which was finally shaved off using a sharpened silver-plated table knife and a sharpened iron spike. No soap; only water.

Many had beri-beri; everyone had malaria; everyone had lice to a degree. By wearing only a loin cloth, I gave the lice no place to hide. We all lost weight. Those weighing 180 pounds lost as much as 60; I lost only about 10, for I weighed only 128 when I went down. You were required to bow to the guards, and if caught not bowing, you were forced to stand at attention in the sun for hours. I think the New Zealander was caught once. There was one fighter pilot from Arkansas who had a mental problem and couldn't talk. Another POW who did not have a full deck took care of him.

We got the word that those who could walk would go by foot to another camp, we assumed to the east in Thailand or the Malay States. Those who could not walk or were too weak were left behind. We left in the afternoon carrying buckets of cooked rice, some pulling 2-wheeled carts loaded with the guards' belongings--food, cigarettes, quinine (more than we knew existed). About dark we stopped to eat, and by then the rice had soured, but as I remember we ate it anyway. We walked at night and slept by day, hiding from the British aircraft that shot at anything that moved. At one point I was near the end of the procession, or one segment of it, when a man fell over due to exhaustion. He was clubbed by a Jap guard. I removed myself from that area speedily and do not know if he was killed. Once we were in a grove of trees among scrubby pineapple plants with no fruit. Another stop was in some buildings. The road was blacktopped. I walked barefoot though my shoes were on one of the carts--and later were stolen. We abandoned the carts after 2 or 3 nights. I believe we walked 4 nights, a total of about 51 miles. The last few miles were along a railroad on the ties or on stone ballast.

We were taken into the village of Pegu, and about dawn the guards abandoned us. A Union Jack (where it came from I have no idea) was displayed in an open field, and the letters POW were spelled out using white knee-length underpants that the Japs wore (where these came from I also have no idea). Shortly thereafter we were attacked by 3 to 5 Hurricane fighters with small bombs and machine guns. The only person killed was a British Brigadier General captured about 3 years earlier in Singapore. One or two other British soldiers were wounded. The rest of us were only scared nearly to death. That night we were led to another village where the Burmese fed us the most we had eaten in over 4 months. Then we were led to the British lines and bedded down with the soldiers right at the front. They also fed us, including a ration of rum. There were a few American GI's manning anti-aircraft machine guns on a GI 6x6. We shared their IO-in-1 rations. They were using their weapons in ground support as there were few if any Japanese planes at this time.

We were taken by truck to a forward airfield from which Hurricane fighters were operating. While waiting for transport, we were again nearly killed when a Hurricane bellied in and the wooden prop splintered, flying too close for comfort. It seems we spent one more night before some DC-3's arrived to take us to India.

Our last scare occurred when we were lounging around waiting for the planes. A British field piece was fired only a few feet away from us; we did not know one was even close. The planes took us to a British base (Comilla, I think), where they wanted to put us in their hospital. The ranking American officers raised hell, and we were taken to the General Hospital in Calcutta. There we were treated royally, fed too much, and given too much booze--but no real harm was done. Some ate as many as a dozen eggs at a time. A ranking officer asked us what we wanted and was told watches, sun glasses, and B-4 bags, and we got them all.

"LOOKING UP"--A memory of Christopher W. Morgan, formerly of the 529th Squadron, 311th Fighter Group, and a POW in Rangoon at the time of this mission (written April, 1985):

When I was a POW, the only thing of beauty to behold from the Rangoon Central Jail was the sky--at night, the Southern Cross constellation, and during the day the magnificent B-29 formations. You fellows didn't know it, but we were down there rooting for your success and praying for your safety.

The bomb runs always came over the prison, because your targets, either the railroad marshalling yards or waterfront shipping, were on each side of us.

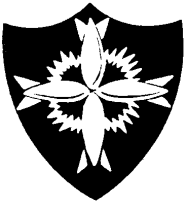
You cannot believe the sound of the bombs as they fell--like the continuous crashing of a not too distant surf. We thoroughly respected your marksmanship; nevertheless we had made zigzag trenches for protection from errant five-hundred pounders.

On December 14, 1944, you had started your bomb run, and I had started mine (for the trenches) when a sudden tremendous cracking explosion from above caused me to dive headlong into the nearest hole. "Oh, my God, look!" One of our invincible B-29 Superforts was in a flat spin; two others were smoking and peeling off in opposite directions; opening parachutes were beginning to appear. What an unexplainable tragedy.

Forty years have passed since that day, and as I recall the many experiences of 560 days of captivity, none is more vivid or painful than the memory of that day when some of you, our heroes, fell from the sky to join us in our misery.

EDITOR'S POSTSCRIPT: Please send us your memories of events in the 40th Group's history for future issues. MEMORIES is supported by dues paid to the 40th Bomb Group Association and by your contributions. If you wish to contribute, make your check to 40th Bomb Group Association and mail it to M.E. Carmichael, Treasurer, 2514 Oregon, Alamogordo, NM 88310.

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