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Editor's Introduction: This issue of MEMORIES is a segment of a comprehensive story of the Rangoon Disaster experience of Norman Larsen. Because it is believed by some that Norm was the only 40th Group POW sentenced to be executed (not carried out fortunately) this story has some separate meaning. There is much more to the Rangoon POW story. In particular, there is the story of the march out to Pegu, a narrative to which many participants have contributed -Nick Ogelsby, Julian Cochran, Bud Etherington, Bob Derrington, Cameron Benedict and Hank Pisterzi. At least another issue of MEMORIES will be used to tell this story.

In the Rangoon Air Disaster, 17 men died, 29 were taken prisoner and were not freed until May 1945. Of the 11 planes that bombed the target, only one returned to Chakulia, and this one had a dead crew member aboard. The magnitude of the disaster warrants the attention it receives in MEMORIES. At the same time, everyone is urged to remember the equally horrible experiences endured by Dale Johnson and Walter Oestreich who were taken prisoner after bail out during missions to Tokyo. They were held in the infamous Kempei Tai stables/prison until released after the Jap surrender. Their stories have been written and will form a future issue of MEMORIES.

THE FATE OF POW 1117 IN THE RANGOON AIR DISASTER

Editor's Prologue: Norman Larsen was Navigator on Wayne "Doc" Treimer's crew in plane #831 on the disastrous mission to Rangoon. The usual crew for this plane had not returned from Calcutta in time so Col. Oscar Schaaf approached Doc Treimer's crew asking if they wanted to take the mission. After all, it was a "milk run" to the Rama VI Bridge with the secondary target being the marshalling yards at Rangoon. The crew would receive mission credit. While the crew was scheduled for rest leave and were not to go on any missions beforehand, they agreed to fly the mission. Additionally, Norm Larsen was scheduled for hemorrhoid surgery in late afternoon on the 14th, the day of the mission. Norm insisted on flying the mission, not wanting to be separated from the crew. Some believe that the bombs which collided precipitating the disaster came from plane #831. After bail out, Norm landed in a river. He was picked up by the Japanese.

Norm Larsen's Story: It was late in the morning on 14 December 1944, and I found myself in the not so enviable position of having my hands tied securely behind my back and being transported by Japanese soldiers in a truck to the New Laws Court jail in downtown Rangoon. I was soaking wet after having parachuted into the Rangoon River as a result of what has since come to be known as the Rangoon Air Disaster.

I was questioned briefly, actually no more than name and rank and then brought to a room which had a shower in it. The guard motioned for me to get under the shower. I was glad for the chance to wash off the muck of the river. After a few minutes, the guard had me strip naked, and then he left with my clothes. I resumed my shower without, of course, soap or a towel. But still it felt good. I didn't realize it was to be my only shower, aside from standing out in the rain, during my stay at Rangoon.

After the shower I was marched, still naked, to a cell on the ground floor of the jail. It was two cells to the left of the doors to the inner courtyard. It was a large cell with a tiny wattage bulb in the ceiling which burned continuously. The only object in the cell was a small, tin-lined British ammunition box which I was told later was called the binjo box and which served as a toilet. On the back wall was pasted a piece of paper. It was headed Rules for Prisoners. I recall the last of the eight or nine rules was: "THOSE WILL BE CLEANLINESS EVERYWHERE." Ah so.

There wasn't anything about that cell that I particularly liked, but there was one thing I came to hate. The entrance was only about three feet high so to get in or out, I had to crawl on my hands and knees. I always felt this put me at a disadvantage with the guards even though when I stood up I towered over them. The bars were made out of wood about three inches square (teak I think) and were as hard as steel.

I was alone, scared, and down in the dumps. I didn't know who on the crew had made it and who had not. I saw no one except the odd guard going by. The cuts under my chin and on my wrist were minor, but my ribs ached.

That evening I had my first taste of POW cuisine. A tin dish was shoved into my cell. It held a small portion of rice liberally mixed with small pebbles and dead bugs and covered with a thin watery liquid which I subsequently found out was called "soup."

I wasn't given a spoon or a fork so I drank the liquid and shoved some of the rice in my mouth. The rest of it went into the binjo. It actually takes a day or so before you get hungry enough to eat swill like this.

That night when the doors to the courtyard were closed and the jail quieted down, I tried to get some sleep. I lay down on the bare wooden floor, but sleep was out of the question. It was cold and worst of all, I was being eaten alive by a swarm of mosquitoes. I've never been so miserable in all my life. I remember saying what I suppose could not be considered a prayer, but was more a petulant complaint to the Man Upstairs; I'll take care of the Japs by myself, but these damn mosquitoes are yours, and they are driving me nuts. Little did I know that in a few days I would really desperately need help.

The next morning I had the first of many interrogations during the two days and nights of the 15th and 16th December. I still had no clothes, and I found it is rather difficult to act like a proper soldier when facing the enemy naked. I refused to go beyond name, rank and serial number and tried to invoke the Geneva Rules of War. And I heard for the first of many times that "Here in Rangoon we go by the Japanese Rules of War." These rules were never spelled out for me, but I gathered that one salient feature was that to be granted POW status, you had to "prove" that you were a soldier. The fact that I had bailed out of an American bomber which had just bombed the Rangoon railroad station, that I was wearing a khaki uniform and had dog tags on didn't count. (I even had a 20th Air Force patch on my shoulder. I was not supposed to have it on but after all, the mission was only a milk run.) The proof they demanded was the number of my squadron and group and the name of the airfield I had come from. I refused to give any information and was given quite a hard time during the interrogations.

When I was escorted to my cell, I found some of my clothes on the floor. No flying suit, belt, shoes or socks, but I did get back my underwear and my shirt and pants. It cheered me up immeasurably to get my uniform (such as it was) back on. I ripped off the 20th shoulder patch and used it as a spoon. Also that night, when I tried to sleep, I wrapped my tee shirt around my face and tucked my hands in my pockets. This only exposed my ankles and feet to the mosquitoes. The quality of life was improving.

I remember one interrogation that I enjoyed. The interrogator was a young Jap who had been brought up in the United States. He told me that he had been back in Japan visiting relatives when the war started and had been drafted. I asked for, and he gave me, the first cigarette I had smoked since being captured. We also learned that we had both been students in New York University, he in the daytime and me at night. It was an interesting session. He pleaded with me to give him any kind of information, even if it was meaningless, so he could show his superiors that he was doing his job. He said he didn't think these superiors really trusted him. I regretfully declined but did thank him for the cigarette and said I hoped we could get together sometime in New York.

Back in my cell I was reading the Rules for Prisoners for the hundredth time when I noticed that the top left side of the paper was away from the wall.

I looked in back of the paper and found the most astounding document I have ever seen. It was the diary of an American prisoner who had subsequently died. I read it on the sly a little bit at a time. Once I had to slip it in my pants pocket when I was taken out for an interrogation.

It was written in pencil on small pieces of paper which had been carefully pasted together, presumably with paste made from rice and tea. The story was horrifying, heart breaking and filled with despair. Yet it was also tender and loving. The writer said his name was Lt. James Gray from Philadelphia. He had been a navigator on a B-24 when he was shot down. He described the brutality, the beatings, the starvation and the many deaths. I read with horror about the pitiable cries of the untended, badly wounded, who lay in their own filth until they mercifully died.

Of course I never met him, but I felt that I got to know Jim Gray rather well. I learned he was married and that his wife gave birth to a boy after he left for overseas. He wrote longingly of his son, and I recall that he wrote a poem which he lovingly dedicated to the little boy he was never to see or to hold.

I don't remember the dates of the diary entries, but there was a long stretch when no words were written. When the entries resumed, Jim explained that he was heartbroken when the Japs discovered his pencil and took it away from him. It was a long time before he got another. As I recall, he said it was from a new prisoner.

In the last entry in the diary, Lt. Gray wrote that he was becoming very weak and knew he would soon die. His last words were of his deep love for his wife and his little boy.

I had not seen another American since arriving at New Laws Court, and I presumed, from reading the diary, that all the other POWs had perished. I had to assume that I too had little chance for survival.

A rather odd thing happened on the afternoon of the 16th. There was a small hole in one wall of my cell, at floor level. Several times I had seen a tiny little mouse come in from the next cell into my cell. I had not reached the stage where I talked to a mouse, but I did try to make friends with it. I had put several little mounds of rice on the floor, and I had seen the mouse occasionally take a grain of rice before running off. I was sitting on the floor watching the mouse hole and hoping my buddy would come in. Instead of the mouse I saw a small stick with a tiny piece of cloth attached to the end poking through the hole and waving back and forth.

I got excited thinking that perhaps it was a member of my crew trying to make contact. I hurriedly checked to see if any guards were around and then leaned over and whispered a hello into the hole. It wasn't a member of my crew, but instead the voice identified himself as a Burmese civilian who had been put in jail for stealing and who said that he hated the Japanese. He then asked me if I would like him to help me escape. I took this with a grain of salt, but I said, "Sure, that would be very nice." He then said he had to make sure that I was an American soldier and would I please tell him the number of my bomber group. Same old baloney I thought. And of course it was so superficial that only an idiot would have fallen for a gag like this. I moved away from the hole and when the flag came back inside I quickly shoved it back through the wall. A little later I saw a guard take the guy out of his cell, and I saw that he was indeed a Burmese. At the time I could not help but wonder why it was so important for the Japs to find out the number of a B-29 bomber group. It just didn't make any sense to me.

A half hour or so later I was taken out for yet another interrogation. It was the same old stuff until surprisingly the interrogator said, "OK I will tell you the number of your squadron. You are in the four five squadron of the four 0 group." I neither confirmed nor denied it, but I felt a tiny sense of disappointment because at that point I thought only my crew had been shot down and so it had to be someone from the crew who had given the Japanese the information that they seemed to want so much.

In the very early hours of 17th December I was awakened and taken out for what turned out to be my last interrogation at the New Laws Court jail, and it was a dandy. At each session I had tried to size up the interrogator. Some were worse than others. I quickly decided that this guy was a real mean one. In no time he was screaming at me, and I will admit that it could get very intimidating. At one point he stopped, took out a pack of cigarettes and lighted one up. And he carelessly left the cigarettes on his desk.

By now I had reached the point where I just didn't give a damn. I was sitting in a chair on the left side of the desk. I suppose it was rather foolish, but I got up, reached across the desk and helped myself to one of his cigarettes. I took his matches, lighted the cigarette, stuck it in the corner of my mouth and sat down again. I gave him what I hoped was a wide-eyed innocent look that tried to convey the message that, after all, we are all soldiers in this thing together. Eh?

I don't think that he got the message because he suddenly jumped up and hit me a stunning blow to the right side of my jaw. I went flying off the seat across the floor just barely conscious. I managed to get up on my hands and knees, looked around the room and found my cigarette. I crawled over to it, stuck it back in my mouth and crawled back to my seat. I lifted myself up on the chair and sat down and resumed smoking the cigarette. Remembering Rules for Prisoners and the importance of cleanliness, I pulled his ashtray closer so I wouldn't have to dump the ashes on the floor. The Jap sat there glaring at me, and I could see the blood rising in his face. I thought, the son of a bitch will have a stroke, and I'll probably be blamed for it. He never said another word but incredibly let me sit there and finish smoking the cigarette. He then shouted for the guard who came and escorted me back to my cell.

As I said earlier, the doors to the inner courthouse of the jail were two cells to my right. This was important because when the doors were open I could hear the temple bells in town tolling the hours. It was shortly after 10:00 a.m. that I was again taken out of my cell. Only this time instead of one guard with a club for an escort, there were two Japanese soldiers armed with rifles. Instead of going to the left where I knew the interrogation rooms where we went to the right and up a flight of stairs. We entered a room in which there were two people. One was a civilian who turned out to be an interpreter and the other was an immaculately dressed Japanese army officer. I remember noting that he was wearing a shirt which looked like silk. He was sitting behind a huge polished desk. There was

nothing on the desk except a neatly stacked sheaf of papers. The interpreter said this is Major so and so. I immediately came to the attention and saluted. I decided this was really serious, and I better try to act like a real soldier, even though I had a stubble of beard, my shirt was dirty and bloodstained, I was barefooted, and worst of all I had no belt. This caused my trousers to slip down when I sucked in my stomach. But I gave it the best shot I could.

I recited my name, rank and serial number, and then the major went into the all too familiar routine about "proving" that I was a soldier and again he told me about the Japanese rules of warfare. I tried to reasonably explain to him that he was an officer in the Japanese army, and I was an officer in the American army and that if he were in my position he would simply obey the Geneva Rules of War the same as I was trying to do. He coldly replied that Japanese officers don't surrender but prefer to die fighting. So much for my argument.

He then abruptly changed the subject and told me that morning I had been charged, tried and found guilty of the murder of innocent women and children in Rangoon on 14 December, 1944. I can quote the rest verbatim:

Lt. Larsen: "I demand the right to an attorney."
Japanese Major: "You were represented at the trial by an attorney."
Lt. Larsen: (To himself, The bastard couldn't have been very good.) Out loud, "I demand the right to appeal the sentence to his Imperial Majesty Emperor Hirohito of Japan."
Japanese Major: "Appeal denied." He paused and then continued, "Now would you like to hear the sentence Leftenant?"
(I didn't particularly want to hear the sentence so I said nothing.)
Japanese Major: "I hereby sentence you to die tonight at 7:00 p.m. by beheading with samurai sword." He paused again then leaned forward and sort of leered at me. He said, "Now Leftenant, do you have anything else to say?"

I relaxed my military bearing, hitched up my pants, and planted my dirty fists on his clean, shiny desk. I leaned across the desk, and I said to him, "Yeah BLIP you Major." The civilian duly translated this, and I guess it must have sounded a little funny in Japanese. One of the soldiers let out a laugh. This infuriated the major. He shouted something, and the two guards grabbed me by the arms and started pulling me out of the room backwards. The room had a bare wooden floor, and I was worried that I would get splinters in my heels, so I was trying to bounce up and down. We got out into the hall and the guards hit me with their rifle butts and kept beating me until we got back to my cell.

The rest of the day is somewhat of a blur. I tried to put the thought of the execution out of my mind. They are only trying to scare me, I thought. Any minute now they will be back to take me out for another interrogation. But as I listened to the temple bells in town, I began to realize that it was probably only wishful thinking on my part.

Two positive things did happen that day. First, my shoes and socks were thrown into my cell. And I thought, at least, I will die with my boots on. Early in the afternoon, the first American that I had seen, was put in my cell. He said he was Captain Bud Meyers and that he was a B-29 aircraft commander who had bailed out on the same mission I was on. He also told me that many or all of the planes in the formation had been hit. He said he was able to keep his plane aloft for only about five minutes before his crew bailed out, and he also told me his radio operator had been severely injured.

I told Bud about my session with the Japanese Major that morning. I also asked him to try to contact my parents if and when he got out of war alive and to explain to them what had happened. He was only in the cell for a short time when a guard took him out again.

Once more I was alone. I don't know how I got through that day but suddenly I heard the 6:00 o'clock bells, and I really started to sweat. I had come to terms with the thought of dying, but I had this overriding fear that I would break down before the enemy and show them how terrified I was. Gone was the tough-guy front I had put up before the Major that morning. Instead I was just plain scared silly.

Finally two soldiers armed with rifles with fixed bayonets showed up to take me out of my cell. I crawled out the door, stood up and suddenly my knees collapsed completely. The guards grabbed me by each arm. And I said the most desperate prayer I'll ever say in my lifetime. "Help me to die like an American soldier, without blubbing." Strength seemed to surge back into me, and I was once again in complete control. I pushed the guards away, cursed them and told them I damn well could walk out by myself without any help.

When we got into the courtyard, I saw a scene that was strictly out of a grade B movie. There were armed Japanese soldiers ringing the courtyard which was lighted by many burning flares. There were four Americans kneeling on the concrete who had had their legs tied to each other. All with the exception of Bert Parmalee (engineer on my crew) had their hands tied behind their backs. I was made to kneel down next to Bert and was similarly tied up. I saw that Bert had his right arm in a sling, and I whispered to him to ask him how bad it was. He said it was pretty bad. At that time Richard Brooks (radio operator on my crew) was brought out and tied up like the rest of us. He was tied to me. In a short time there were seven people from the 40th Bomb Group lined up on the concrete. Bill Walsh and one other person were from Captain Meyers' crew. In addition to Richard, Bert and myself from our crew were also Chet Paul (co-pilot) and Karnig (Tommy) Thomasian (left gunner). I glanced in back of me and saw a very muscular little Jap who was stripped to the waist and who was waiving a sword around over his head. I idly thought, he looks like a baseball player warming up in the on-deck circle. Richard whispered to me, "What do we do now, Lieutenant?" Since I assumed he knew he was about to be executed, I thought that was rather an odd question. So I sort of growled at him, "Say your beads, Sergeant. Say your beads."

It wasn't until many years later when Tommy and I got together that I came to the realization that in all probability I was the only one sentenced to death that morning. It is, of course, pure speculation, but I think it is possible that when I cursed at the Major and the Japanese soldier laughed, that the Major lost face, and he may have simply ignored telling the other victims about their impending execution. I remember the pile of papers on his desk.

The officer in charge of the execution was very neatly dressed and was wearing shiny black boots. After what seemed like an eternity, I saw a soldier come running out of the jail with a piece of paper in his hand. He went to the officer, and they conferred briefly. I kept thinking, it's getting awfully close to 7:00 p.m. The soldier with the paper told us in English to stand up, and we struggled to our feet. He then started reading from this document.

I didn't hear, and have long forgotten, most of what he said. But I do remember two things. Our sentences had been commuted to life in prison, and we were to be transported immediately to the POW camp and any untoward action on our part would be dealt with severely on the spot. Wow!

Closely guarded by enemy soldiers, we were brought out of the jail to a small beat-up old Chevrolet pickup truck. We were loaded in the back and joined by the other B-29 people who came directly out of the jail. Among them was Jim McGivern (bombardier on our crew) so now I knew who the sixth and last survivor on the crew was.

At the POW camp, after some nonsense about "voluntarily" signing a statement giving our parole not to escape, we were brought to the cell block and placed in cells on the second floor. In my cell were Bert Parmalee, Karnig Thomasian and Richard Brooks. There was nothing in the cell, which was about 9½ feet square, except the inevitable binjo box. We were issued two burlap rice sacks which had been opened and which were full of holes, two tin dishes for our food (one of mine was a rusty old sardine can) and a prison-made spoon. We were also issued a small piece of cloth and a pin. On the cloth was written our POW number. It had to be worn at all times.

It was dark when we reached the cell which was to be our home for the next month and a half. There was no electricity in the cell-block building, nor was there any in compound 8 which we were later transferred to. There was a window in our cell which had no glass in it, but only contained bars. There was also a full-length set of bars in the door opening which for me was a notable improvement. We bedded down the best we could although it was bitterly cold, and the two skimpy rice sacks didn't provide much warmth. But at least now I owned a pair of shoes again so I tucked one into the other and used them as a pillow.

In the morning I got my first look at Bert's wound. A piece of steel had gone into the underside of his upper right arm, severed the bone completely and went out the top. The wound on the bottom was about 2½" to 3" long, almost an inch wide and ugly as sin. The exit wound was about the size of a silver dollar and looked considerably nearer. Bert told me many hours after he was captured, he was taken to a medic. This medic took a couple of swabs, dipped them in a bottle of some kind of liquid and pushed the swabs completely through the arm. He did this three or four times and then put a bandage on the wound. He then fashioned a device made out of two pieces of wood in an "L" shape and put this on his arm and put the whole contraption in a sling which was wrapped around his neck. This was the extent of his medical treatment. The wooden contraption was doing no good and was causing Bert needless agony. So I took it off and tightened up the sling so the arm was a little more comfortable. For the first few weeks Bert couldn't sleep lying down so I had him propped up in a corner of the cell with his head against the wall, and he was able to get a certain amount of sleep. Although the pain must have been almost unbearable, Bert never once complained.

In the compound were a total of about 100 POWs, mostly American and English. There were also two New Zealanders, one Canadian, one Aussie and one Dutchman. Grades and ranks went from Private (one) to Wing Commander (two). The biggest single contingent was the 29 people from the 40th Bomb Group. All of the POWs had one thing in common. We had all come to Rangoon by air. The Japanese still considered us to be criminals, and we continued with the skimpy diet. But other things were now much better. There was a cement trough in the compound about 25 or so feet long which was filled with water. We had the chance to dip this water out over ourselves and take a bath. This felt great. However, it wasn't long before allied bombers destroyed the water system of Rangoon, and that was the end of our bathing. From then on we could only run out in the occasional rainstorm to clean up.

Medically speaking, we were a pretty sorry lot. Bouts of malaria were common, as were cases of diarrhea and dysentery. Many of the guys had ugly looking ulcerous sores on their bodies, and everyone had beriberi to some degree. One prisoner had lost his mind and refused to believe that he was a prisoner of war. Miraculously both Bert and Monty were healing quite nicely. At one point a scab had formed over the wound in the lower part of Bert's arm, but there was still pus inside the arm. The Jap medic took a pair of scissors, jabbed them into the arm and cut up through the flesh for about a ½". Cruel and effective.

Life went on in compound 8. There was the ever-present starvation diet the disease and the deaths. But there was also a chance to freely move about, and the chance to associate with so many different people. At News Law Court and in cell block No. 5, I somehow felt that I had been singled out for special attention. Why, I have no idea. But here in compound 8, I was just plain old No. 1117 and largely ignored. This was fine with me.



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