

We have published three issues of MEMORIES about the sufferings experienced by the 40th men who were held in Jap prisons in Rangoon. Two of our number--Dale Johnson and Walter Oestreich--were held prisoner in the infamous Jap Kempei Tai prison in Tokyo. (Kempei Tai prison was the stable for the imperial palace.) Dale and Wally have written their stories here.

KEMPEI TAI PRISON

Date of event: 25 May, 1945
Date written: 6 February, 1985
Written by: Dale L. Johnson

Editor's Note: In MEMORIES #8, we told the stories of the missions of 24-26 May, 1945. This account by Dale Johnson tells us of the fate of their crew and plane on this mission. Dale was the only member of the crew to survive. Members of the crew were:

Maj. Roland A. Harte
1/Lt. James D. Haddow
1/Lt. George P. Appignani
1/Lt. Harry O. Lee, Jr
1/Lt. Robert L. Brush.
S/Sgt. Edward A. Gusburne, Jr.

S/Sgt. Lyman F. McGhee
S/Sgt. Algernon Matulis
S/Sgt. Dale L. Johnson
Pfc. Clements E. Gorman
T. Sgt. Harry Spack

Dale had other experiences worth noting. En route back to Chakulia from a photo mission to Singapore, the plane on which Dale was a gunner had a runaway propeller. The crew weathered this when the prop spun off without doing harm, whereupon it was discovered that they were out of gas and would have to ditch. Another B-29 was in the area, spotted them and signaled to the Air Sea Rescue Service in Calcutta. A PBY from Calcutta picked up the crew. All of the crew survived, but two passengers on the plane were lost.

Dale Johnson tells his story: On the mission of the 25 May, 1945, everything was going fine 'til we got near Tokyo where we made our turn toward the target. Our altitude was pretty low, we all thought. The searchlights started to pick us up. We could have read a newspaper in the gunners compartment. We had dropped our bombs before we were hit.

I think we were hit by anti-aircraft. There was no communication from any crew members after we were hit. The plane had a big hole near my position (Right Gunner), and I felt it was falling so I rolled out the hole, waited a few seconds and pulled the rip cord on my chute. That was the last I saw of any members of my crew.

I landed on the edge of a bay or lake. Needless to say, I was scared to death. An anti-aircraft gun camp was about a half-mile from where I landed. I watched them shoot down two planes, plus it looked like they hit some others. The camp seemed to be in a good position for hitting the planes. I never did see any night fighters from the ground where I was.

I hid out the rest of the night, and the next morning I walked to the gun camp M.P. booth and gave myself up. I thought that was better than the civilians catching me. I caused a lot of excitement. I should mention I had only a few cuts and bruises from the hit and baling out. I believe the good Lord must have been watching over me!

The Japs took me to an office and took my watch, pens, jacket, rings, knife and anything they thought they could use. They then took me in a truck to an interrogation center. I was always blindfolded, so I really didn't know for sure where I went. Some English-speaking Jap asked me a lot of questions about family, where home was, where I was stationed, and if I was in a B-29. My answers were pretty vague, so he made me stand on my head with my feet on the wall, then beat my back and rear. After I collapsed on the floor, they quit asking questions and let me be. Next they took me to where I spent most of my POW time--a building with about six rooms where they put 12 to 14 men in about a 10 x 12 ft. space. Food was rice balls and water with a little fish once in a while. I went from 150 lbs. down to 100 lbs. in the one-hundred days I was there.

Most of the other men in my room were from island invasions; some were Navy men. Once they brought in two Navy pilots who were injured badly (including a broken leg). They got no medical attention. They got so sick the Japs took them out. I'm sure they died; they were so bad. We would get some news through the knotholes from room to room when somebody new was brought in. We were not supposed to talk at all. It was hard for that many men in one room to get along with such a shortage of food. Some would get greedy and want more than their share.

The guards would take one or two men out each day to clean the toilet boxes, which was the only exercise we got. I got out twice in the time I was there.

After we dropped the A-bomb and they surrendered, we were moved to a regular POW camp (Omori). Conditions were much better there. We even got to wash and take baths--which was the first time I was able to do this since I baled out.

A Navy small boat came in and picked us up and took us to a hospital ship in the Tokyo Bay area. That was a great day in my life. We got good food for a change, but we couldn't eat too much as we were not used to it. I got to send a telegram home through the Red Cross. This was the first I could let my parents know I was still alive.

Next, we were put on a LSV Navy boat and sent to Guam where we were put in the base hospital for a few days for a checkup. Most of us just needed time to get our strength back and gain some weight. I thought they were going to airlift us back to the States, but I guess they didn't have enough planes so they put us back on the same ship we came to Guam on. We headed to San Francisco with a stop at Honolulu. In about a week I was in Letterman General Hospital in San Francisco. This was about the last week of September. I had more checkups and recuperation.

From Letterman, I took the train back home to Rio, Illinois, and a thirty-day leave. I was real happy to be home after three years! I was an outpatient at Mayo General Hospital, Galesburg, Illinois, until March, '46. It was April, '46 before I was discharged from the service.

Date of event: 24 May, 1945
Date written: 23 January, 1990
Written by: Walter W. Oestreich

Editor's Note: Of the members of this plane's crew, only four survived the crash and were taken prisoner. They were Delbert Miller, Walter Oestreich, Elmer Bertsch and Patrick Pellecchia. Of these, it is believed Elmer Bertsch died in the Kempei Tai prison. Miller and Pellecchia returned to the States, but have died in the years since. Wally Oestreich is the only survivor.

Walter Oestreich tells his story: After 45 years, will try to write about my experience as a POW. On May 25, 1945, we were briefed for a night mission to Tokyo, and we flew in B-29 #42-63538, "WINGED VICTORY II." The crew was as follows:

Capt. Andrew C. Papson, Pilot	S/Sgt. John A. Yon Gonten, T.G.
1/Lt. Martin J. Long, Co-Pilot	Cpl Ralph Allen, L.G.
1/Lt. Joseph N. Murphy, Nav	Cpl Walter W. Oestreich, R.G.
2/Lt. Delbert Miller, Bomb	Cpl Elmer K. Bertsch, CFC
2/Lt. Adolph C. Katzbach, F.E.	Pfc Hershell Hill, Radio
2/Lt. Patrick E. Pellecchia, Radar	

We were an hour late for takeoff because of a hydraulic leak in the landing gear. We reached the target area around 01:00 on May 26th. I was called by Capt Papson to go to the camera hatch and throw out foil to jam the Jap radar. While throwing out the foil, I heard Ralph Allen say on intercom that we were hit and on fire. Then everything went dead.

When standing up and looking out the top hatch, I saw #2 and #3 engines on fire. We were hit before we could drop the bombs. I tried to call that I was bailing out, but received no answer. Lt. Pat Pellecchia came out of the radar room and said, "Let's get out of here." I ripped off my flak suit and dove out; he followed. My parachute opened with a bang, everything below was on fire, and I could feel the heat. I said some prayers on the way down. Soon I drifted away from the fire below. I noticed my head was bleeding. I didn't have time to think of that for I could see where I was landing, and a mob was on the ground to greet me. They piled on top of me and gave me a beating. Two Jap MP's pulled them off. I was disarmed and handcuffed and taken to an office with another crew member and put under guard. We had to kneel and could not talk.

At daylight I was taken by flat-bed truck to Kempei Tai headquarters. I was taken to a big room which held all the rest of the prisoners who were shot down on the night of May 26th. Everyone was blindfolded, and we all sat on the floor with our backs to the wall. At roll call, I believed I heard Cpl Elmer Bertsch's name called. My blindfold slipped, and I believe I saw him. They had trouble pronouncing his name. He did not answer at first and got a kick in the ribs. I never saw him again. In a telephone conversation with Delbert Miller, when we arrived home, we both believed it was Elmer Bertsch we saw.

In the afternoon of May 26th, we were placed in cells. There were 13 prisoners in the cell about 9 x 10. There was a hole in the floor with a cover on it. That was our latrine.

The names of the prisoners in the cell were: 1/Lt John Newcomb, 1/Lt Arthur O'Hara, 2/Lt Delbert Miller, 2/Lt James Marins, 2/Lt Theodore Fox, 2/Lt Patrick Pellecchia, S/Sgt Dale Johnson, S/Sgt Michael J. Robertson, T/Sgt Harold B. Hallvarsen, S/Sgt Sivia LaMarca, and Cpl Walter Oestreich. Lt Theodore Fox and T/Sgt Harold Hallvarsen died while in prison.

About a week after being captured, I was taken for questioning. My answers did not please the interrogator. Two guards gave me a beating with a bamboo club across my back which I will never forget. I was kicked in the ribs and stomach and poked in the face with the jagged end of the club. They said they would poke my eyes out.

I blacked out for a while. When I came to, the guard gave me a kick in the ribs and spit in my face. I was taken back to the cell. I was questioned by a Jap Navy officer about 10 days later. They were nice. I received no beatings from the Navy men.

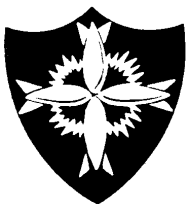
Our food was three balls of rice with water per day. Sometimes we had seaweed, and once or twice a fish head. The cell was full of lice and fleas; we were all full of flea bites. I lost around 70 pounds. We all suffered from malnutrition, beri-beri, and infections of some kind. We received no medical treatment as we were "special prisoners" (B-29 crewmen). If the United States had not used the atomic bomb, none of us ever would have got out of there alive.

On August 6th, 1945, the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. We did not know about it at the time, but a lot of shouting and yelling could be heard outside the prison. We knew something was happening. On August 9th, a second bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. On the 15th of August, we were awakened early in the morning, blindfolded and loaded on trucks, and taken to Omori prison camp, not far from Tokyo.

There we were given more food and a box of vitamins. We were told we would soon be going home. Some B-29s came over and dropped clothing, food, and candy bars.

On August 29th, the U.S. Navy came ashore in landing craft. We were taken to the hospital ship, "BENEVOLENCE." We had our first shave and shower and full meal since we were captured. I was on the hospital ship until September 18th when Col Richard Carmichael, a Navy lieutenant, and I were flown back to the U.S.A. in a C-54. We reached the U.S.A. on September 21st, 1945. I was taken to Letterman General Hospital in San Francisco. I was processed and promoted to Sergeant. On 2nd of October, I was taken to Vaughn V.A. Hospital, Hines, Illinois and was there until December 1st. I was separated from the service on December 3, 1945.

Footnote: We are indebted to historian Harry Changnon for getting Dale and Wally to put down their recollections of their imprisonment and for preserving them.



40th Bomb Group Association
517½ Ridge Road, Wilmette, IL 60091