

Ledford Crew Makes It Back From Omura

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Date written: Various from 1980 to 1997

Written by: Harry Changnon, Russell Elwell, Bill Gardner (deceased), Jack Halpern, Jack Ledford, Duoyne McCullough, Howard Oblender, Gilbert Rodencal

Following are crew members who took part in this mission aboard #281 "*The Heavenly Body*"

Capt. Jack C. Ledford A/C
1/Lt. James V. DeCoster P (Deceased)
2/Lt. William L. Gardner B (Deceased)
1/Lt. Howard T. Oblender N
M/Sgt. Harry C. Miller FE (KIA)
Sgt. Gilbert Rodencal Radar

Sgt. Duoyne McCullough Radio
Thomas A. Clark CFC (Deceased)
S/Sgt. Wilmer C. Paslay RG (Deceased)
S/Sgt. Russell Elwell LG
T/Sgt. Jack Halpern TG

Prologue: This was the 13th combat mission in which the 40th participated. A number of details relating to this crew and plane occurred before the mission began. Some confusion needs to be resolved concerning the name of the plane. Prior to being assigned to Ledford's crew, the plane (#281) carried the name *20th Century Unlimited*. This name had been painted on the plane, and Ledford's crew were photographed beside the plane under this name.

The Ledford crew changed the name of the plane to *The Heavenly Body*. Jack Ledford recounts that they had a beautiful nude air-brushed on the plane by a former Vargas (*Esquire Magazine*) artist who worked in the Service Group. I think we paid him ten bucks, reports Ledford, and it was a beautiful sight to behold! The name change and the paint job took place only a day or two before we deployed to A-1 for the Omura mission. Jack further reports: Fr. Adler gave me hell about the paint job and was always convinced that it had something to do with our misfortune over Omura. He may have been right. Shortly after that, Fr. Adler persuaded Col. Blanchard to require that all nose art figures be clothed.

Another event occurred before the mission that had a bearing on what happened later. This took place at Chakulia and involved Jack Halpern. Here is how Jack Halpern tells the story: I used to be an aerial (flight) engineer on B-18A, LB-30, B-26, and B-17 aircraft. I was briefly shown the B-29 flight engineer panel, but I never received training as a B-29 flight engineer. At Chakulia one day after our second or third mission, I remember passing by some flight engineers on the line. One of them was Louie Grace. They were talking to a Tech. Rep. from Curtis or Boeing. I overheard the Tech. Rep. say, "There is another position for the fuel mixture controls that does not have a detent on the fuel mixture control panel. A move to this position will give the engines a 10% leaner fuel mixture--that is, 10% more than the normal lean detent position. In order to obtain this 10% extra lean mixture," the Tech. Rep. said, "move the mixture controls out of the full lean detent and move them aft towards the closed or fuel cut-off position about one quarter to three-eighths of an inch. Do not move them beyond that point or you may cut off the fuel entirely, due to cable rigging. A leaner fuel mixture is a means of conserving fuel. This procedure--a 10% leaner fuel mixture--has not been approved by the Air Corps but we're working on getting official approval."

Mission: Primary target was the Omura Aircraft Plant. It received little damage from an attack on it on 9 July. It was the most important aircraft manufacturing target within range of the China bases. Engines as well as airframes were manufactured at the plant. *Petes*, *Zekes*, and a new carrier plane *Grace*, were products of the plant. Additionally the plant performed engine repairs. Turning to the targeting of aircraft manufacturing plants represented a shift from coke and steel manufacturing targets that were in the original target plan for the China-based B-29s.

The field order directed that each plane carry a minimum of ten 500-lb. bombs. Average takeoff weight was 133,000 lbs. Planes were to carry 8,200 gallons of gas. Three auxiliary bomb bay tanks were to be carried to provide a 500-gallon reserve for the flight home. For this daylight raid, it was necessary to take off from A-1 in darkness, a hazard because the China bases were provided with few field lights, the runways were muddy, and there was the possibility of rain at takeoff. Actually, on takeoff there was a 5,000-foot ceiling and three-mile visibility in light rain and fog. Bomber Command delayed takeoff for 30 minutes hoping for improved weather that never came. Launching all the 40th planes took an hour and 42 minutes.

This mission represented a change over to large formations. There was confusion at the assembly points in part because Groups had different radio frequencies. High tailwinds caused the majority of the planes to drift north of their rendezvous points making it difficult to join formations.

Of the 78 planes launched, 59 reached and bombed the target from 23,000 to 25,000 feet at an IAS of 195. Weather was CAVU which was unusual. Planes formed seven formations to attack the target. Despite the mixed formations, post-strike photos showed excellent results.

AA was meager to moderate. Fighter action was rated as moderate with 102 attacks by approximately 50 Tojos, Tonys and Oscars. A new Jap twin engine fighter was observed. Fighter strategy seemed to be to attack the B-29s after bombs away. Attacks came from the nose, and focus was on the high plane or the #4 plane in the formations. Twelve B-29s were damaged in addition to *The Heavenly Body* (#281). Planes on the mission claimed seven enemy aircraft destroyed, five probably and 18 damaged. Planes counted 14 cases of aerial phosphorus bombings.

The Heavenly Body (#281) joined a 21-plane formation led by a plane from the 444th.

#281 Takes a Hit: Ledford records what happened: Forming up on the formation on this mission was a real "camel stampede." I joined up with a formation positioned as #3 aircraft in the left element. I traded positions with DeCoster so I could better view the rest of the formation.

After bombs away, the formation turned to the right, away from the target. We were under fairly heavy fighter attack at this time since Clark, our CFC gunner was calling out targets and allotting gun control. As we turned right away from our target, our aircraft was hit. As soon as I realized we had been hit, I pulled away from the formation in order to minimize a possible collision. I also yelled at DeCoster to take the controls. The next few minutes were hectic. My legs were paralyzed, and Miller, our flight engineer, was unconscious from a severe head wound. We had cabin explosive decompression, and everyone was busy with oxygen masks and trying to take care of Miller and me. Since we were already out of formation with #3 engine useless, DeCoster and I decided to take our aircraft down and ask other aircraft to drop down with us for cover. A couple did for a short time but they had to climb back up to a higher altitude to save their own fuel. Our #3 engine was windmilling, but we didn't feather it right away so we wouldn't attract any more enemy fighters.

Rodencal, our first-aid man, treated Miller and bandaged his head wounds. He then treated my side wound, poured sulfa powder in it and used a huge body bandage to wrap up my side. I learned later that shrapnel had cut away a 17x6 cm. gap in flesh and muscle from my right side. Pieces grazed my spinal column (hence the paralysis of my legs, especially the right one) chipped my right hip bone and just grazed my kidney. The doctor who sewed me together again in the big hospital in Chengtu said

this was the biggest wound I could have sustained and not destroyed a vital organ or bone. I still have three pieces of shell fragments in my back muscles. I refused Rodencal's offer of morphine at the time because we had some big decisions to make. (I really wasn't hurting much at this point because I was partially paralyzed.) I asked some of the crew to carry me back to the engineer's panel so we could get the engines and fuel tanks configured for best range. I found that there was no fuel in #3 tank. McCullough informed me that some of our radio equipment and nav aids had been destroyed.

About what hit us, Clark and Gardner later said they thought we were hit by a rather new Jap aircraft named *Jack*. Could we have been hit by our own aircraft in the formation as some have speculated? We agreed it could have happened. Damage to the plane was severe. In general, the whole right side of the aircraft was a mess. We were lucky we didn't explode when hit.

Because of the damage to the plane and the loss of fuel, we knew we couldn't make it back to A-1. We had to decide to either go to Vladivostok or try for somewhere on the mainland. I had discussed the Vladivostok option one time in a bull session with Lou Scherck. Based on what Lou had learned from other flights that had diverted there, he did not recommend any diversions there except as a last resort. I felt the same way. I didn't trust the Russians and any way, I didn't want to fly up the west side of the Japanese islands to get there and possibly expose us to further fighter attack. We decided to try to make Liangshan, a Chinese-American Composite Wing (CACW) base.

In a letter to his wife, Gardner wrote that bullets were flying around inside the cabin. One came close enough to cut his throat like two inches from his neck.

Rodencal recalls: The fact that Ledford had his back pack chute on had helped to prevent more damage. The whole bottom corner of the chute was blown to shreds. Miller was unconscious. McCullough and Oblender had laid him on top of the wheel well hatch. The only visible wounds were three very deep scalp wounds over the right ear where shrapnel had penetrated his skull. He was wearing his flak helmet, and the wounds were away from the explosion. I could not figure how he got hit on his right side.

McCullough recalls these minutes: Shortly after bombs away, there was a loud "ping" sound, and someone on the intercom said, "We have been hit; put on your oxygen mask." At that moment I looked over at Oblender and noticed that he had pieces of dried prunes all over his face that had come from a box of prunes that was apparently blown away. I asked if he was OK, and he said he was. He pointed to Miller. I leaned over to check on Miller and found him slumped forward with mucus running from his nose. I immediately put a small oxygen tank on and started to get Miller out of his seat and on the floor over the wheel well hatch, but because he was much larger than I, I had some difficulty getting him laid down properly and an oxygen mask put on him. I went back to my position, and Ledford instructed me to contact the lead plane to request two planes be assigned to fly protective formation with us. I'm not sure how long the other planes stayed with us.

Elwell, right gunner and electrical specialist, was called to come forward and take over the flight engineer's position. At the engineer's panel, having no hands-on experience, Elwell says: I realized I didn't know enough to be helpful so Halpern was called to come up front.

At just about this time, Halpern, tail gunner, reported: I noticed fighters in the area. They were doing "rollover" maneuvers, but they were far out of range of my guns. Soon after bombs away, I saw those same fighters. This time I noticed small flashes of light coming from the underside of their wings. At that moment, the inside cabin pressure of 8,000 feet immediately went to our bombing altitude pressure of 20-22,000 feet. My tail gunner's compartment fogged up. My ears popped like they were going to burst.

DeCoster called for me to come up and man the flight engineer's position. I could not leave the tail gunner's position right then because a number of enemy fighters were now coming in around the tail. I fired my guns in a scatter fashion to ward off any penetrating attack. I admit firing guns in this matter could be ineffective in downing any enemy aircraft, but it had the effect of dispersing the Jap fighters. As a tail gunner, I was issued a chest-type parachute that detached from my parachute harness. I left the chute detached during missions. I kept the harness on, but left my chute in the gunner's compartment when I crawled through the tunnel to the front.

As I started to crawl through the tunnel I caught sight of an extra back-pack chute leaning against the left side of the fuselage in the radar compartment. It apparently had been left by the passenger we ferried from India to China. When I took over the flight engineer's position, I saw the fuel mixture control levers in "full lean" I remembered what the Tech. Rep. had said, "Move the mixture controls about a quarter to three-eighths inches toward the OFF position." I did that thinking that this would give us more range from the depleted fuel supply. We were approaching the China mainland at about this time.

I remember clearly seeing Ledford's parachute torn to shreds from enemy fire. When Ledford moved out of the flight engineer's seat, I could see the bones of his hip socket. He was obviously gravely injured. I felt air coming from the right side below the flight engineer's panel—the effect of battle damage.

After I transferred all the fuel from the bomb bay tanks, I gave a sign to Gardner to let him know it was OK to salvo the two bomb bay tanks. Due to battle damage, Gardner could not salvo them electrically. The two bomb bay fuel tanks had to be released to relieve the plane of their dead weight. After failing to salvo the tanks Gardner told me to go into the bomb bay and salvo them manually. Without my parachute I crawled out into the forward bomb bay. Gardner had already opened the bomb bay doors.

The wind turbulence added to the "fright factor" of going out into the bomb bay at 10,000 feet with the doors open. I struggled across the narrow metal structure and pulled the emergency release lever. Down dropped both fuel tanks. The resulting vacuum made me feel like I was being sucked out of the bomb bay. I hung on to a stanchion with all the muscle I could muster. I then crawled back into the cockpit and resumed my seat at the engineer's panel.

En route to the target I had eaten a full box of prunes from my flight lunch. Now I began to experience horrible gas pains, and I had to get to the portable john. When I left the engineer's panel, I remember seeing 40 gallons of fuel TOTAL remaining in the wing tanks. I did not want to crawl back to the portable john and then return to the forward cockpit. I thought, what if the engines quit, and I was stuck in the tunnel? Moreover, my parachute was in the rear. I knew bailing out was inevitable.

The Bailout from the Back of the Plane: Halpern recalls watching Gardner who was wearing his headset. He thought he heard Gardner say "Roger" which he interpreted to be an acknowledgement of an order to bail out. Accordingly, as Halpern remembers it: I pushed my way through the opened door into the 200 mph slip stream. I held onto my rip cord and, as a result, the wind yanked my right arm, pulling my rip cord and opening my parachute. My right foot caught underneath the rear entrance door jam. I was being bashed against the right side of the fuselage by the wind. My opened chute dragged across the right horizontal stabilizer and elevator. Gardner leaned down and untwisted my right foot, allowing me to fall free of the plane. Luckily, my chute did not become entangled with the stabilizer.

I was the first to bail out from the rear of the plane. Gardner, Rodencal, Elwell, Paslay and Clark followed, I saw the five chutes open. We all landed in the same twisting canyon 10,000 feet below but miles apart.

Elwell remembers the bailout: The crew in the back of the plane bailed out a little sooner than the crew in front; thus, when they got on the ground the two segments of the crew were separated by a mountain. I remember Clark stepping into the door opening and having the slip stream pin the door jamb between his body and backpack chute and not allowing him to jump or move back. Since I was behind *him*, and anxious to jump, I gave him a push and then dove out myself. As I rolled face up and saw the tail assembly pass over, I pulled the rip cord. Still in the slip stream, the chute opened with a hard impact, straps slamming against the back of my head'. I believe I was knocked unconscious, because there was a period of time I don't remember. I also had cuts on my neck and head. The next moment I remember floating down not far from Clark and trying to make conversation but not saying much.

Rodencal's recollection of the bailout: When the time came to jump, Halpern was the first to go. Gardner, Elwell, Paslay, Clark, and I followed. Clark had a little problem with the idea of jumping, but a stiff push helped in a hurry. My first attempt wasn't too good. I stuck my head out, lost my glasses, and got slammed against the door frame. The second time I made it. I could see the plane leaving with puffs of smoke coming from the engines. I am now alone, flat on my back at 10,000 feet, and I open my chute. What a jolt. It was very quiet, just the swish of air from the chute. Sounds from very far away could be heard. I heard Halpern hollering way up the valley that he is in a thermal and going up. First to jump, last to get down.

Bailout from the Front of the Plane: Ledford recalls: McCullough was able to transmit a couple of messages. He received some Japanese messages trying to persuade us to turn on some bogus heading. Oblender adds to this, saying: At the Navigator's briefing we were told this was not a friendly airfield, and Ledford told DeCoster to continue to fly the heading I had given him.

McCullough tells about this: After flying for several hours, Ledford requested that I make a voice transmission "May Day" distress call in an effort to locate a base for possible emergency landing. After making contact with a station, I explained our problems and requested a QDM (Direction to the base). We were asked to fly a certain pattern while I made a long count so that our position could be determined. The station then gave us a bearing, but Oblender claimed that the bearing was not right.

Oblender writes his memories of this moment: We were on course when we crossed the China coast. We were flying over an undercast, and the only navigational aid we had was the sun. I used the heading and wind that I received at our briefing before the mission. The sun did help us with ground speed.

McCullough recounts: I remained in radio contact with the base while bailout preparations were being made. I put the transmitter on CW and screwed the key down so that it might be possible to locate the crash site and see that the plane was destroyed to prevent anything useful from falling into the hands of the enemy. I followed Ledford out of the plane. I was a little too quick pulling my rip cord, and this caused me to black out for a short time. It also resulted in my harness separating from a section of my evasion and escape kit, and I lost some items in it.

Ledford's recollections: As we approached the Chinese mainland, there was solid cloud formation beneath us at about 12-14,000 feet. Oblender had a good sun line, but there was no way to fix our position along that line except for dead reckoning. (We found out later that we had bailed out within 10 miles of Obie's estimated position.) It soon became evident that we weren't going to locate any possible landing area before our fuel ran out, and I certainly wasn't about to let down blind through that overcast because we were in very rough mountainous country. So we prepared to bail out.

By a stroke of great good fortune, we had a spare chute. Our guys put this chute on me and then used the shroud lines of my damaged chute to make a static line so that we could open Miller's chute after dropping him. By this time DeCoster was down to two engines and nervously encouraging us to get out. The guys dropped Miller and then carried me over to the nose wheel well and dropped me. I was still paralyzed in my legs. As I fell, I delayed opening my chute in order to slow down my forward speed and have as gentle an opening shock as possible. I also hoped I could get on the ground before Harry and see where he landed.

On the Ground in China—Rescue and Walkout: McCullough says: We bailed out at about 10,500 feet and on my way down, I noticed two other chutes. My chute caught the edge of a tree causing me to hit the ground horizontally. This made me somewhat nauseated for a little while. After my stomach settled down, I got my chute rolled up around my escape kit. I sat down on the edge of a rice paddy to gather my thoughts and look around. We had landed in a narrow valley between two mountain ranges. While sitting there, I noticed a figure in the distance coming toward me. When he got a little closer, I was relieved to see that he was a Chinese soldier. I got my translation booklet and pointed to the phrase, "Take me to your garrison." The soldier then pointed to the phrase, "You stay here," so that's what I did.

Shortly after that, another Chinese soldier and Oblender joined us. The two soldiers then escorted us into a small village where we joined up with Ledford. About an hour or two later, DeCoster was led into the village. We had no contact with the six men who bailed out from the back of the plane.

Ledford describes his landing: I landed in a muddy rice paddy and for a few minutes, I sat there somewhat dazed by my landing in addition to being quite apprehensive about where we were in relation to the Japanese forces known to be nearby. In a few minutes, several Chinese farmers lined the banks of the rice paddy, and we traded stares for a while until suddenly two Chinese soldiers appeared on the bank. I was relieved to see the white-on-blue star of the Chinese Nationalist Army on their caps. They came down and carried me to a small village. One by one, they brought in the rest of the crew from the forward flight deck. The Chinese had found Miller and carried him to a nearby Norwegian mission clinic. We found out the next morning that Miller had died shortly after landing. DeCoster and McCullough went to the mission. With the care of the missionaries, Miller had been given a Christian burial. (Military Graves Registration units removed the body after the war.)

The Chinese were wonderful to us. Aided by the Norwegian missionary who had helped Miller, they built a sedan chair to carry me out. We also had a Chinese doctor who had studied Western medicine in Europe, to accompany us for the five days it took to reach Laohokow. I don't remember much about the five-day trip out. By this time I was hurting pretty bad. I had recovered most of the feeling in my left leg. My right leg was still paralyzed. My wound was beginning to throb and, in spite of the wonderful care, the doctor the Chinese and the crew gave me, I was pretty uncomfortable.

I remember several incidents that were funny or interesting. On about the third day of our trek, we arrived at a Chinese Nationalist Army Headquarters commanded by a General Li. General Li asked me if I knew a Captain Grubaugh. Somewhat astonished I informed him that Capt. Dan Grubaugh was my best friend and my roommate at our base back in India. (Dan and his crew had bailed out in the same area several months before, and his rescue had also been aided by General Li.) The General then said to me, "Please ask Captain Grubaugh where the hell are my tennis balls?" It turned out that Li loved to play tennis, but had run out of tennis balls and had no way to getting any. I promised General Li that I would try to get some sent to him after I got back to our base. Later at the American-Chinese Hospital in Chengtu, I arranged for some tennis balls to be sent to General Li.

The next day General Li put us on one of his wood burning trucks on the road to Laohokow. We were all pretty much hung over from the wine we had at the dinner the night before and on the bus I kept smelling this wine which is very potent. I noticed McCullough was several shades of green. Mac was not a drinker, but he joined in the festivities the night before. At that point our Chinese doctor

informed us that, in addition to the wood, the truck also used this wine for fuel. All of us were pretty sick for several hours.

When we arrived at Laohokow, we were to be picked up by a CACW C-47. It was escorted by two CACW P-40s. They were to fly cover for the C-47, but for some reason, one of the P-40s had to land and when it did, it ground looped on the runway. I thought, oh boy, we are in trouble because the Jap fighters strafe the field a couple times a day and were probably on their way. Fortunately, the C-47 had enough room to land. We were quickly loaded on and roared out for the main CACW base (can't recall name). From there the others were evacuated to A-1. I was taken to the hospital in Chengtu.

After a week of gaining control of the infection in my side wound, the doctors at Chengtu operated to close the wound. After three more weeks in the hospital, I returned to Chakulia. I was still grounded. My crew was permanently assigned to another Aircraft Commander. While I was awaiting for my side to completely heal, I was appointed Assistant Group Operations Officer. I was notified that I had been appointed to the Army Command and General Staff School at Ft. Leavenworth. I was on my way back to Tinian from the school when the war ended.

McCullough tells what he remembers: Most of the communicating between us and the Chinese was handled by a Chinese civilian official (who I believe was in the mail service) and a Norwegian woman missionary who had lived in this village for 20 years. Both of them spoke very limited English. They informed us that Miller had died about ten minutes after the parachute landing and that his body had been taken to the Chinese garrison just outside the village. Since it was dark by then, it was suggested that we go to view his body in the morning.

Shortly after awakening, DeCoster and I were escorted by a soldier to their garrison for the purpose of obtaining one of Miller's dog tags. It took us about 30 minutes to get there. They had Miller lying on boards supported by two sawhorses and covered with some kind of material resembling cheesecloth. We removed the dog tag, and I suggested we have a short silent prayer before heading back to the village. The Norwegian missionary assured us that Miller would have a Christian burial the following day. We could not stay for the burial because of the need to get Ledford to a hospital.

Before leaving the village, the civilian officials honored us by providing a very elaborate mid-morning meal. We then left the village, each of us being carried on a stretcher-like pallet. At the end of the village, there was a group of Chinese children waving at us with crudely made little U.S. flags. We acknowledged them by waving back. We were on the trail until well after dark at which time we stopped at what appeared to be a cluster of farmhouses. We slept the night on boards covered with straw.

The next morning we immediately got back on the trail with the Chinese again carrying us. After being on the trail for a while, I decided it would be much safer walking on the uneven surface than being carried. The Chinese official escorting us was concerned that I would not be able to keep up, but I had no problem. I believe Oblender also decided to walk from that point on. After walking the mountain ridge for a lengthy time, we came to a fortress-type structure that had two very large doors and a courtyard. As I recall, we resumed our trek after a short stop there. The next thing I remember was that then we started down the mountain range. As we did so, a large city could be seen in the distance. We spent the night in a large garrison there where we were treated to a fine Chinese dinner with high-ranking officers.

The morning after breakfast, we were loaded into an old school bus in which all the seats had been removed. The bus was fueled by a charcoal burner. A Chinese soldier ran alongside and stoked the burner occasionally when we would go up a steep incline.

After traveling in the bus all day, we arrived at an advance fighter base. Shortly after arriving at the field, a C-47 landed. We immediately loaded onto the plane and took off. This was just at dusk.

After about an hour of flying, we arrived at a medium bomber base, but we could not land because the based was on blackout. There was an air raid alert. The tower requested that we circle the field with our lights on so that we would not be mistaken for a Jap bomber. After about 30 minutes of this, the field lights were turned on, and we were given clearance to land. We spent the night at this field and enjoyed our first good American meal. Next morning we continued our trip to A-1 in the C-47.

Crew from the Rear Compartment have a Different Experience: Rodencal recalls what happened after he landed: I came down near the top of the mountains, but I could see a village down in the valley. A straight line is not a good way to go down a mountain. After a few falls, I came to a trail, and some Chinese appeared and motioned me to follow. I was worried because I did not know if they were friend or foe, but I followed them. After a while we came to a house in the mountains which seemed to have several generations living in it. The first thing they did was to make tea. I tried to use my pointy-talky, but none of them could read. After a while a boy came in who could read, and I got the message across that I wanted to get to the village. He and an adult took me down the mountain to the village. The rest of the crew from the back of the plane had already arrived.

We spent the night in the village. During the night, a runner had gone down to the next village and came back with some police/soldiers to guide us out. The next day we arrived at a village where we met Mr. B.T. Chang who spoke English. We talked him into staying with us as an interpreter. We spent one whole day on a riverboat drifting down into the valley where we ended up at a grass landing strip. It took us several days to get to the strip because we were on the other side of the mountain, and we had no roads, just trails.

While at the village near the airstrip, we stayed with some missionaries who fed us. There was also a small unit of GIs (maybe four or five) who took care of the strip. They had a radio and some 55-gallon drums of fuel—that was the total of the equipment at the "air base." We were at this strip for several days because every time they would try to get a C-47 in to rescue us, the Japs would send fighters to strafe the place. One day I got so damn mad lying on my back in a ditch that I opened fired on the Jap planes with my .45.

Elwell gives his version of the rescue and walk out: Clark landed safety on the tile roof of a peasant house with his feet going through the roof. He wound up straddling a rafter. I landed some distance away in a garden. I will never forget the old, bent-over Chinese farmer with a white goatee and clay pipe appearing from around the corner of the house, looking up to see what was on his roof. He disappeared only to return with a bamboo ladder and again disappeared, unconcerned, as though this happened every day.

Gardner landed in a small rocky river bed and injured his knee. Halpern hung up in trees on a rock cliff.

Within a short time, all six of us from the back of the plane got together and arranged to spend the night in the shed of a house nearby. During the night, one of the Chinese people secretly took one of our jungle packs as proof we were there. He traveled about 20 miles to a village for help. The next morning we heard a commotion outside. When we looked out we found about 15 Chinese soldiers with guns drawn. After some pointy-talky conversations with their leader, the Chinese set about cutting bamboo plants and building litters. Because Gardner was limping, they wanted to carry him. The rest of us were to be carried, too. There were no roads in this area, only foot trails.

For extra manpower, the soldiers drafted the peasants from their gardens and homes as bearers. If they refused, they got a rifle butt in the back. About halfway through this first day, as we went over a steep rise in the trail, a bearer put down his end of the litter and took off up the mountain. Two soldiers took off in pursuit. A little later, we heard a gun shot.

Towards the end of the day, as we approached a walled village the path leading to it was lined on both sides with villagers, boy scouts, girl scouts, and a band. They were all waving flags and clapping for the great "American heroes." A delegation of village elders approached. A young Chinese put out his hand and said. "Hiya Joe, am I glad to see you." This fellow, Chan Ching Yang (Mr. Chang) stayed with us for the next several days as an interpreter. He apparently learned English at one of our air bases. He was also traveling behind Japanese lines to Shanghai. He said the inside lining of his jacket was stuffed with bribe money with which to get through the lines.

We spend the night in a schoolhouse, and there had our first meals. The next morning, so the village people could see how we came down from the sky, I put on my open parachute and paraded in a gathering area. It was at this village, I believe, that Gardner was able to communicate by telephone with someone about our destination. On this day we also started walking to our next destination. Our entourage was complete with live chickens in a crate, donkeys, and several soldiers. That destination was a small village on a steep bank next to a river. We spent the night there. Next day we boarded a sampan and drifted with the current most of the day arriving at a sizable town. Here, we rode rickshaws into the town's main street and paraded on foot through crowds of people celebrating in our honor. The street was covered with exploding firecrackers. The smoke from them was knee deep. Flags were waving in celebration. That night at a tin roof theater, a special show took place in our honor complete with knife twirling, fiery baton twirling, singing and all the rest. The scouts sang an American patriotic song. It was a hot night. Notwithstanding, by tradition, they supplied steaming hot towels for us to freshen ourselves.

Next morning we posed for pictures with a large group of VIPs and then rode rickshaws to a house outside of town where we jammed into a small car, traveled to another town, boarded an old school bus, drove on to a ferry to cross a river (the raft almost submerged) and on to the village and a Norwegian mission near the field being used as a landing strip. We spent about three days waiting here for the C-47 to evade the Jap fighters and get in. When it came, we jumped in and were on our way back to A-1.

Halpern has his share of interesting stories to tell: All six of us landed in the same twisting canyon though miles apart. I crashed through a tree on the side of the mountain. My chute caught the branches and there I was, dangling from my shroud lines, unable to touch the side of the mountain. I looked down to the valley below and saw several Chinese men looking up to where I was perched. I kept hollering "MEG-Wah-Fiji" which I remembered to be Chinese for "I am an American airman." I really needed help to get out of the tree and down the mountain to the river below.

About ten minutes later, I saw two men climb the side of the mountain and move towards me. They both climbed a little above my level. I noticed then that they were carrying a rope that had been made by twisting vines together. There was lots of sign language, pointing here and there, hollering and listening. They spoke Chinese, which, of course I did not understand. They threw the "rope" down to me. I caught it and tied it around my waist. They then pulled me up a bit to relieve the tension from the parachute shroud lines. Next, I took my GI knife and cut the shroud lines. The Chinese then slowly lowered me to the valley floor below. I had forgotten to take my .45 with me when we left India and now I felt defenseless when surrounded by seven or eight muscular mountain men--all waving and pointing and urging me to move on.

I removed my E&E kit and took out the Pointy-Talky. I turned to the page with the question, "Where are the Japanese?" They pointed while turning around 360 degrees. I understood. The Japanese were nearby and all around looking for me. In those days I smoked two packs of cigarettes on a mission, one pack going to the target and the other on the flight home. I had one full pack left. I opened the pack and offered the cigarettes all around. The whole pack was gone within seconds. The E&E kit contained \$50,000 American money. I saved the money for other payments.

I wanted to recover my parachute and take it with me, but the Chinese men motioned that I could not go back. My plan of escape was to head down the river and, as I was always taught in those Evasion & Escape classes, follow trails downstream to get to civilization. But the Chinese who surrounded me, forbid me to go downstream. I was beginning to fear the worst--that these Chinese were really bandits who would turn me over to the Japanese. In some manner, I got the message from the Chinese that the Japs were still looking for me and the others and that there were Chinese soldiers who would fight the Japs to prevent them from getting us. Against my better judgment, this being a matter of survival vs. judgment. I continued to follow the two Chinese men up the river. The other "mountain men" that initially surrounded me after I was lowered to the ground, had disappeared. I asked my guides. "Where did they go?" Answer; "Go fight Japanese."

Just before dark, on the other side of the river, I saw something *white* moving down the trail. I stopped out of fear and could barely make out the figures with *white* objects in their arms. They were the five other crew members who had bailed out from the back of the ship who were carrying their parachutes. The five other crew members did what we were trained to do, "walk downstream." The six of us all got together and, that night, the two Chinese that led me upstream, hid us in a loft of a farmhouse.

The Chinese rescuers, it turned out, wanted our parachutes to show a Chinese general that there were others besides me, who bailed out and needed help in escaping and evading the Japs.

Around 10:00 the next morning, about 15 Chinese scout troops with their general, came to the farmhouse. All were carrying their *live* chickens in wicker baskets and all of their cooking gear in addition to machine guns and other war-fighting equipment. After the usual Chinese greetings and exchanges using the Pointy-Talky books, the message conveyed was: Some of the Chinese troops went downriver and killed the Japs to clear the way for our escape. They also returned Gardner's parachute. A young Chinese boy returned my parachute after recovering it from the tree where I left it.

With the general and half his troops up front, the six of us following and then the other half of the Chinese armed party bringing up the rear, we started out. The general ordered some of the troops to cross the river and the others to remain with us. They were to clear the way of Japs. I could hear the sound of gunfire.

Gardner was having much difficulty walking because of his bad knee. The general noticed his limping and ordered us to stop. He motioned to the scout troops to assemble in front of him and within 45 minutes they had fashioned six stretchers. The rope they used was made from vines, and the canvas for the stretchers came from the covering of their cooking utensils, chicken baskets, etc. Thin trees were used for the twin poles that formed each stretcher. The general ordered us into each stretcher and then motioned for the scout troops to do something. About ten minutes later, the soldiers returned with 11 farmers. We were later told that they were conscripted right off their farms to act as our stretcher bearers. I walked next to the general. Within minutes we were ordered to stop. The general began to talk to a farmer next to the trail, pointing for him to come with us. The farmer hesitated and instead started to run away. The general took his pistol and fired at the farmer while, at the same time, all 15 of his soldiers let loose a rifle barrage at the farmer. The poor guy never had a chance. Again we started walking and again we stopped. The general started to talk to another farmer, but this time the farmer joined the group.

We started off again, this time all six of us sitting on our stretchers. It was an uncomfortable means of transportation traveling up and over mountain ridges. After a couple of hours being carried on a stretcher, we rifled through our Pointy-Talky booklets to find an appropriate English to Chinese translation of what we wanted to say, which was: "Dear General, we know you mean well, and we wouldn't want to hurt your feelings for anything, but you're wearing us out. We are not making much progress, so let us walk and let Gardner stay on his stretcher." Of course, we could not find any such

translation, but after a lot of arm movement, pointing, and talking off the top of our heads, the general got the word and ordered stretcher bearers to stop and put us down.

There were frequent skirmishes between our soldiers and the Japanese. We all saw three or four dead Japs floating down the river. We made frequent stops while the Chinese troops cleared the way for us.

We finally came out of the mountain area and onto a huge meadow. Standing almost in the middle of that clearing and off to the side of the trail was a Chinese man. He was dressed in usual garb--a long robe with a shawl-like collar. As we got closer, to the surprise of all of us, he said, "Hiya! Any way I can help you?" It was spoken in perfect English, but with a New York accent. We all shouted, "Do you speak Chinese?" He answered, "Why, sure, I am Chinese." We asked him if he would be our guide and speak to the general for us. He answered, "Why certainly. I'll help you get out and back to your base." His name was Mr. Chang.

Around the third week of our trek, I had worn through the sole and toe of my GI boots. It was continuous hiking, hiding from the Japs, climbing mountains and hiking down them, fording streams. Each day the general and his troops outfoxed the Japs.

Now with Mr. Chang up front with the general, communication was easy. Mr. Chang would tell us every move the general was about to make and where we were heading. Around the end of the third week, we finally hiked out of the mountains and away from the Japanese. I got to know the general well. I did some cigarette tricks and Chinese coin-disappearing tricks for him. I even showed him how I did them. He liked this more than anything else. I showed a few magic tricks to the soldiers from time to time. A day or so after we met Mr. Chang, the general said we still had a long way to go, but it would be a safe passage from here on. We bid farewell to the general and his troops. We tried as best we could to express our thanks to them. As he was leaving, the general walked up to me, took his dagger and sheath from his belt and gave it to me. I still have that dagger.

We were now getting into Chinese civilization which was indicated by ancient Chinese cities and villages all located along rivers. Mr. Chang told us from where we bailed out, we had covered approximately 300 miles. We still had about 300 miles more to go.

By now we had come to know Mr. Chang very well. He gave us a world of information, but we never did find out how and where he learned to speak English with a New York accent. By this time I had replaced my GI boots with a pair of Chinese sandals. Walking on the trail adjacent to the river, I saw a walled city in the distance. We were heading for the entrance to the city. The entrance was two huge gates of carved wood. The two gates opened slowly, and both sides of the street were lined with hundreds of city officials. Men, women, and children were all waiting for our arrival. Mr. Chang told us this was a 3,000-year-old city, and these people had never seen a white person. There were banners all over the city. We learned the school-children had used English language dictionaries to make up the signs, one of which read, "Welcome Back American Airmen."

Some of our crew played basketball with the upper-grade school children. I put on a magic show for a group of them. As we traveled through other towns, when we entered the town, they would declare a holiday for the school children. As we were leaving one of these towns, a general surprised us with a ride in his 1927-29 Dodge, four-door, touring sedan. It was hard to understand how that car stayed together taking into account the dirt roads it traveled over, dropping into deep, wide holes at 35-40 mph.

By now the stretcher-bearer farmers had left us. We had accumulated loads of gifts from each village--bolts of colored silk, ceramic pieces, metal and wooden ornaments and several sets of sandals.

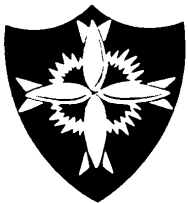
We finally got to the Chinese P-40 fighter strip. Adjacent to the field was a Norwegian mission. We stayed at the mission for about two weeks. Every day the six of us would go out to the strip and wait for a C-46 to come in and fly us out. Field operations consisted of a shelter with a flat roof covered by a bush. It was supported by four poles at each corner. Inside was a stand with a small aircraft radio. The radio was salvaged from a P-40 on the field that was out of action. There was no such thing as scheduled arrivals and departures. Jap fighter planes strafed the field almost every day. Finally, a C-46 did arrive and landed. Both its engines remained running while we were ordered to get aboard *fast*. The C-46 had no extra chutes I chickened out. I was afraid to fly without a chute. Standing next to us on the ground beside the small ladder into the plane was a Chinese P-40 pilot. He immediately took his own parachute off and gave it to me. The C-46 crew told him that the next time they came back they would return the chute to him. Incidentally, the parachute the Chinese pilot gave me was made of silk instead of nylon.

We landed at A-1 and stayed there for two days. We visited Ledford who was still in the hospital in Chengtu. The second day we got word that a B-29 that had brought gasoline up was on its way back to Chakulia. We caught a ride on it. The night before we left, while we were asleep in the barracks at A-1, someone stole all the gifts we had received. I did have my parachute and the dagger the general gave me.

Editor's Note: Certain modifications of style have been necessary in doing this manuscript. (1) Quotation marks are not used when each crew member is telling his story. Quotes have been used to set off other people's statements and to set apart certain words and phrases so much that there would be excessive confusion if quotes were used when crew members are telling their stories. (2) To avoid misunderstanding, only crew members' last names are used throughout this issue. This gives a feeling of insensitivity when crew members refer to one another, rather coldly, by their last names. This is not the way they spoke of one another. Using only last names in this manuscript minimizes the chance for misunderstanding about who is being referred to.

With a few exceptions, city, town and village names are not used. There are differing references to these community names among the crew members' stories. Additionally, the spelling today is different (Peking vs. Beijing) from the time we were in China. To minimize confusion and because they are not essential to this story of evasion and escape, they have been removed from the crew members' stories.

It should be remembered that these are the stories the crew members have written *as they remember the events*. They should be read and respected with this in mind. In getting these down for MEMORIES, no effort has been made to reconcile differences in how crew members remember the events. *These are their stories*. Note that every surviving member of *The Heavenly Body* crew contributed to this issue of MEMORIES.



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