

LONG WALK FROM CANTON

By Daniel Mitchell

118th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron

On January 15, 1945, I was one of sixteen fighter pilots of the 118th Tactical Reconnaissance 'Black Lighting' Squadron flying P-51s out of Suichuan, China on a mission to Hong Kong harbor and Canton. The mission was flown at ground level in CAVU (clear and visibility unlimited) weather direct to Waichow. At that point, eight of the fighters continued to Hong Kong and my group of eight turned west up the Pearl River to Canton.

Our mission was to strafe the two aerodromes, White Cloud and Tien Ho, in the Canton area. As we turned the corner at Waichow, we began to encounter machine guns and small arms fire. We flew very low over the water down the river and I can remember machine gunfire from both banks of the river crossing over my fighter.

On approaching the city of Canton, four of the P-51s turned north to strafe the Tien Ho aerodrome. Moments later, my flight of four P-51s turned north directly over the city of Canton to strafe the White Cloud aerodrome. As I crossed the city, I began firing at some trucks that were speeding toward the aerodrome. At that instant, my aircraft was hit by heavy ground fire, and there was an immediate loss of power and a roughness in the engine. I quickly scanned the instrument panel. The engine was only pulling 35 inches of manifold pressure, where I had been pulling 69 inches. Because I had been using full power as we approached the target, I had considerable speed. I decided to stay right on the deck to avoid further exposure to anti-aircraft fire. As I crossed White Cloud aerodrome, I got in a final shot at some ground vehicles.

A range of mountains begins immediately to the north of White Cloud aerodrome. I hauled the fighter up to clear the mountains and reached an altitude of approximately 6,500 feet. I had hoped to get further away from White Cloud before I had to bail out, but by this time the coolant and oil temperature were far into the red and it was getting very hot in the cockpit. It was time to get out of the airplane. As I pulled the canopy release, the canopy came off the airplane and hit the top of my head; it hurt like blazes but did not knock me out. After getting unplugged from radios, oxygen and shoulder and seat belt

harness, I bailed out over the right wing. I calculate I was 1,500 to 1,800 feet above the mountain ridge and opened the chute immediately. As the chute opened, I watched my airplane stall, oscillate one more time into another stall, and then go into the base of a mountain, explode and bum.

The ride down in the chute seemed to take forever; I knew I needed to get on the ground and start running, as I was still deep in enemy territory. My chute brought me down near the crest of the mountain ridge and into a small tree. I was not injured as I fell through the tree and ended up dangling about six-seven feet above the ground. The chute was tangled up in the tree so I was not able to gather it up and hide it as I had hoped. To hide the chute was the desired escape procedure, but it was more important to me to get the hell out of there. So, I simply released the harness, fell to the ground and started running.

After running about a quarter of a mile, I was aware that eight-ten people in peasant clothing were running up the hill trying to stop me. Then I remembered what our briefing officer had said that morning before the flight, if we got shot down, be very careful who we let help us. There were puppet troops in that area who might turn us over to whoever offered the most money. It became obvious to me that I could not outrun these people that were climbing the hill toward me. I had sprained both ankles getting down from the tree and they were beginning to slow me down. So, what the hell, I simply stopped and waited for them to get to me. Suddenly I was aware that it was very cold!

Ten armed men surrounded me. They quickly took my .45 pistol away from me and urged me to start running with them back down the mountain. At the base of the mountain, we ran into a small compound that contained a building with a large room with a dirt floor. Many people were in that room and all of them were talking at once. They took all my clothes off including my GI shoes. They reclothed me in coolie like clothes and sandals. I was dress like a peasant farmer (a rather large looking one, I might say). Without any rest, we began running south (the 10 of them and me). I knew that was back toward White Cloud where I had come from. With every step, I worried that perhaps I had gotten in with the wrong bunch. It was approximately 12:30 p.m. at this time and we ran the rest of the day back down the side of that mountain, I didn't know I could run so far or so fast, but I decided I had to keep up with these "marathon" runners. I had no

other choice. At sundown we stopped. We were well hidden in a clump of very tall cane or reed type growth. I could not see White Cloud aerodrome but I could hear airplanes taking off and they seemed fairly near.

It was at this point that I decided to try to find out who these people were. In the money belt, which we all wore, there was a small handbook (pointee-talkie) with English phrases and questions and the corresponding Chinese questions and phrases. I attempted to find a question that asked who they were. As I was thumbing through the little book, the obvious leader of the bunch, a man whose name was Mr. Hsi (pronounced Shee), grabbed the book away from me. In the middle of the book on opposite pages were an American flag and a Nationalist Chinese flag. He very impatiently pointed at the American flag and pointed at me and then pointed at the Nationalist Chinese flag and pointed at himself. They were Chinese underground fighters, what a relief! Now I knew for sure that they would help me. I also understood then why we had run back to the White Cloud aerodrome for that was not where the Japanese would likely look for us.

We rested there until near midnight and began a very quiet and careful walk back to the north, staying in the valley. We walked right by encampments of Japanese troops! Mr. Hsi admonished me several times to be very, very quiet. At just before daylight, we entered a well-hidden cave where a distinguished looking Chinese man and his wife lived. He spoke English and explained he was the commanding general of the Chinese underground forces in that area. His wife fed all of us a warm broth of some sort and he assured me that they would get me back to my base.

We stayed there all day and rested while Mr. Hsi and the distinguished looking gentleman had long, very serious and animated talks. When it was dark, the ten underground fighters and I began walking north in a valley. I do not know how far we walked that night but we walked all night. At dawn the next morning we sat down to rest up against the side of a hill. With the help of my little translating book, Mr. Hsi let me know that we were out of enemy territory, maybe one Chinese *li* which is about one-third of a U.S. mile. That made me really nervous again, but Mr. Hsi only grinned!

After resting several hours, we walked a short distance to a village where they fed us and returned my GI clothes to me, including my GI shoes and leather jacket. It was a relief to get out of the coolie clothes that were getting quite ripe by this time. We spent

the night in this village and Mr. Hsi advised me that he and I alone would continue our walk back to my base. We walked every day, all day. He seemed to know exactly where he was at all times. At the end of each, day, there was always a village we would walk into. The village people were waiting to feed us and bed us down for the night. I had no idea how they communicated but they always seemed to know that we were coming.

They tried to look out for my comfort the best they could. I remember one night while staying in a barn-like structure, two small children had been put in my bed to warm it for me. The Chinese fed us what they had, which was rice and sometimes a leafy broth. They were always very giving and gracious and I have carried a warm spot in my heart for them all of my life. Mr. Hsi turned out to be a very tough and resourceful little man, and we did not walk all the time, we stole horses and on one occasion a motorcycle. (I hope they got them back.)

As we passed through the city of Kukong, we bummed a ride on a charcoal-burning truck with maybe 50 other people, ducks, chickens and geese. Japanese troops were marching on the city so the population was moving out. After getting off the truck, Mr. Hsi and I continued walking north from Kukong for several more days. We finally arrived at Namyung, an auxiliary American base, maybe 40-50 miles northeast of Kukong. This was an old base used by China National Airlines (CNAC) to evacuate Hong Kong during the Japanese invasion. It was now used as an emergency base for our bombers returning from raids low on fuel. The base had a small detachment of American personnel and a stockpile of fuel. It was here that I learned that my base at Suichuan had fallen to the Japanese on January 22, 1945, and my squadron had returned to Chengkung.

Namyung sent a radio message to my squadron headquarters that I had made it safely to this base. Fourteenth Headquarters sent a C-47 airplane out to pick me up. We left at night with a full load of evacuees, since the Japanese were now marching on this base. It appeared that Mr. Hsi and I were just always one breath ahead of the enemy. Needless to say, I was more than delighted to arrive in Chengkung. I learned that Frank Palmer had been shot down over Canton just when I was. Guerrilla forces also rescued him and were walking out. Two other of our pilots had been shot down over Hong Kong harbor the same day but we did not know what happened to them. (The other two pilots shot down that day were Major David H. Houck, the newly assigned CO of the 118th and Galen

Theobald. Theobald broke his ankles in the bail out, but was rescued by Guerrilla forces. Major Houck was taken prisoner and later executed by the Japanese.)

Mr. Hsi and I were sent over to Kunming to the 14th Air Force Hospital for an examination and later interrogated by our G2 forces.

A word about Mr. Hsi, he and I became great friends during the weeks we walked and learned to communicate on most subjects. During interrogation, Mr. Hsi was asked if he could get propaganda leaflets onto the White Cloud and Tien Ho bases. He said that he was sure he could as he had been on those bases with a truck before, so our G2 hired him. For all he had done, I was glad they put him on the payroll.

I gave him clothing, all the money I had which was a substantial amount, and my .45 service automatic. That was the least I could do. Mr. Hsi protected me and guarded me like a big brother and I shall be eternally grateful to him. His gift to me, besides saving my life, was a Japanese flag, which he took off a Japanese soldier he killed on his way to rescue me. I am donating this flag to the Flying Tigers exhibit at the Museum of Aviation, Robins Air Force Base, Georgia.