

Narrow Escape From Canton

by Frank Palmer

118th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron

January 15, 1945 was not a good day for the 118th, then based at Suichuan in the eastern pocket. Two missions were planned with strikes against Canton and Hong Kong airdromes. I was leading the second flight of P-51s (two flights of four each) in the attack on Canton. Both our flights and the two other flights headed for Hong Kong passed over a new Japanese radar installation, so the enemy was waiting. We came in south to north across Tien Ho airdrome strafing aircraft in revetments. After crossing Tien Ho, we turned south across White Cloud airdrome and again north across Tien Ho. We were doing a lot of damage, but then I got hit by AA fire, probably in the oil and coolant radiators, since the engine started to seize up. I had enough speed to get away a little distance from this hot spot. I headed northeast and bailed out near the small village of Lieochoukang. But a bit of a problem getting out of the plane. The canopy would not release, so I had to knock out the individual pieces, one at a time. Then as I started to climb out my parachute harness caught on something and I had to climb back in to release it. Things were getting a little tense! The bail-out started out 1800-2000 feet and now was down to 300-1000 feet. The chute billowed open close to the ground (and a river). Despite my efforts to side slip, I got dunked in the river. My chute was tangled in a tree, so I had to go down under the water several times to get out of my harness and struggled to the bank. Some Chinese grabbed me and hauled me across the river hidden in the bottom of a small boat, then across a road blocked by loads of spilled hay, apparently to slow down the Jap searching parties, and then to another small village just northeast of Canton. The whole distance of about five to eight miles was covered on a dead run. The Chinese had no problem but I was really huffing and puffing. They hid me out in the village for three days.

I still vividly remember today, a little Chinese girl in the village, probably four or five years old who had the job of leading a two-ton bullock around and around by a ring in his nose all day long. On the third night we started walking back in the direction of my bail-out. About an hour after our arrival, a party came along carrying supplies heading for unoccupied China. That night we started walking through Japanese lines. We walked all night and all the next day, evading the enemy troops, and finally arrived at a Chinese army outpost at sundown the next day. After a good meal and a short nap we were off again for another 12 hour walk. We joined up with two Indian soldiers that had escaped from a Japanese prison camp and an American pilot who had been shot down months before. Disguised as a priest, this pilot, with the help of our Chinese friends, had been walking through heavily occupied enemy territory for two months. There was a Eurasian guide (from Hong Kong) sent by the British, who had a rescue operation in the area, to assist all of us, especially the Indian soldiers, in getting back.

We walked all the next day, arriving at the city of Kukong, on the Kukong River in the late afternoon. Again I was impressed by the graciousness and hospitality of the Chinese. The city magistrate provided shelter and hosted a beautiful six course dinner in our honor as friends of China. No more walking! The next morning we got on a river boat pulled upstream by a tug running on two old Packard auto engines, converted from gas to burning charcoal. The magistrate had supplied us with food and a cook to care for us on the boat. After two nights and three days, we left the boat to meet a jeep for a ride back to a U.S. airbase at Kanchow. Ten days of walking and boating coming out as compared with one hour's flying time going in, a most enlightening, and now it seems "enjoyable" experience!

While I was on my non-flying exploration of southeast China, the Japanese had captured the 118th base at Suichuan, so I couldn't rejoin my squadron there. We stayed overnight at Kanchow, about 60 miles south of Suichuan, and then hopped one of the last transports out to Kunming. The enemy was closing in, so that night the Kanchow base was blown up to prevent usage by the Japanese. Each day

that went by, my admiration for the Chinese grew, their courage in the face of danger, their disregard for their own safety, and their willingness to risk their own lives to save ours, So many things came to mind, the different and tasty foods along the way, the kindness of the Chinese people, their way of life, and most of all, the joy of being alive-and on the way out.

I learned later that Dan Mitchell from my squadron was shot down at the same time on the north end of the airdrome at Canton and walked out months later. We lost two other pilots from the 118th at Hong Kong that day, who didn't walk out. Not a good day for the 118th.