From the 2002 Zephyr Archives

A DATE with the 'LONESOME LADY'

Tom Cartwright

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is one of the most extraordinary stories I have ever heard by one of the best men I have ever known. Tom's account first appeared in The Zephyr, in December 2003; we are proud to re-post it here. Please take the time to read and appreciate every word.

Tom died on January 11, 2015.

Characteristic of WWII veterans is that after the war they tended not to talk about their experiences in combat. Now that they have retired and think more about their mortality, they have tended to record for their families and others some of their experiences as well as return to places where they been stationed. I am one of those veterans. The following was condensed or excerpted from the book of the above title.

Based on Okinawa at Yontan Airfield, which had recently been taken by U.S. forces, I was the pilot of a B-24 bomber. It had a sufficient range from Okinawa to bomb the main islands of Japan and some coastal cities of China held by the Japanese. My crew members were all very compatible and we enjoyed each others company with little regard to military rank. We had become close friends––not an unusual thing where each often depended on the other for their life.

On July 28, 1945 we were posted to fly a mission to bomb the Battleship Haruna which was anchored in Kure Harbor---a major naval base on the main Island of Honshu. Our crew was assigned a B-24 nicknamed Lonesome Lady. We took off early in the morning as part of a formation of six flights of six planes each with several slots missing. Our flight had only five planes. About noon we arrived at the target area and the lead plane of our flight spotted the Haruna. We had been briefed that the Kure Harbor Naval Base was heavily armed with anti-aircraft installations and that the Haruna and other naval craft in the area were also heavily armed. An old adage among pilots was "never fly over a battleship." We had orders and followed them.

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Just after we dropped our bombs, a B-24 in our flight nicknamed Taloa, was hit and went down quickly. A second plane of the five was hit but was able to fly to an Island short of Okinawa. In quick succession my plane was hit but we could still fly. I did not realize how badly we were damaged and planned to head for the open sea where there was hope that our Naval seaplanes would spot us and pick us up if we ditched and survived. We started losing altitude and the controls were becoming less responsive and I could not head out to sea---the plane flew back toward land on it own.

The Engineer came up to my position and said that our right inboard engine was on fire. He was soaked with hydraulic fluid that was spouting from a broken line. The inevitable became obvious and I ordered the crew to bail out. Pete Pedersen, our navigator, came to my position and reported that the bomb bay doors, the exit point for all the crew on the flight deck, were stuck closed. I ordered that he kick them out which they were designed for in emergency. Pete was a stout, capable fellow and this would be scary but no problem for him.

We were getting close to the ground by this time, and the Lonesome Lady was completely out of control. I looked around and saw that the flight deck was clear so I ordered the copilot to bail out. I then left the controls, scrambled on my hands and knees to the bomb bay and bailed out. After a very short time hanging in the chute I hit the ground pretty hard.

All of the crew were able to bail out and were scattered for miles along an area south of Kure Harbor in a mostly wooded, sparsely populated area. We were all captured and after some harassment taken to a city (later identified as Hiroshima). We were always blindfolded when out of a prison cell. I saw all of our crew there except Pete and Bill Abel, the tail gunner. We were not allowed to talk but all of the crew looked in good to fair condition. I learned later that the tail gunner had been taken to a military base in the city of Kure. Months later I read Japanese reports that Pete went down with the plane---this worried me very much because I was sure that the flight deck was clear of people when I bailed out. There were some Navy fliers and at least one of the Taloa crew there also. It is not clear but several of the Taloa went down with the plane. Those who successively parachuted were apparently killed either by civilians or the military.

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Hiroshima was a major military center but the military officers were not trained as interrogators. At that point in the war we were briefed, that if captured by the Japanese, to tell them anything that we knew because they would already know it or it would not aid them. I told the truth in answer to rather simple questions, but I was told that they knew that I was lying and would be shipped out to the interrogation center (the Imperial General Headquarters at Tokyo I learned later). As I left my crew in Hiroshima on about August 1, 1945, I felt a bit sorry for myself.

During a couple of days of a stop and go train ride, I was delivered by my escorts to the Interrogation Center. After questioning for several days with threats of various sorts, it became obvious to the interrogators that I knew nothing of importance. However, on August 6 or 7 I was rushed out of my cell to the interrogators and questioned intensely about a new kind of bomb.

Of course I knew nothing about it. I guess out of frustration and hate, I was sent back to my cell where a very large Japanese soldier brandished a sword at me. Then I was taken out, blindfolded as usual, and judging from the noises in front of me there were some troops present. I was pushed down to my knees and then my head was pushed down. Beheading was a common fate of many U.S. POWs in Japan. After some shouted

commands, I was jerked up and prodded back to my cell. For some strange reason after this obvious threat, I was not interrogated again.

After a few more days in my solitary cell surviving on one rice ball a day, I heard music come over the PA system. The music sounded to me like a funeral dirge and the first thing that I thought of was that the Emperor had been killed in a bombing raid---that would be bad news for POWs. I learned later that the music was the equivalent of the Japanese National Anthem. After about 20 minutes a very modulated voice came on and spoke for a few minutes. All of the guards that I could see stood at rigid attention. I learned later that it was the playing of the recording of the Emperor's Rescript in which he stated in part "enduring the unendurable and suffering the insufferable" which translated into announcing the surrender of Japan. (This was the first time that the Japanese had heard the voice of their Emperor/God).

I suspected something when the next day one of my guards solicitously asked about my parents. Then my rice ball arrived larger than usual and with some dried fish added. I was convinced that Japan had capitulated, but I was still wary. Fifty American POWs were beheaded at Osaka after the news of surrender was announced.

The next day I was shipped out a short distance to a marked POW camp. It was the small island of Omori in Tokyo Bay. There we could move about and talk and got a bit better ration. I met B-29 airmen who had been terribly abused, emaciated and some were on the edge of death. Also there were Australians and others who had been POWs for several years.

We could see U.S. warships in the bay and U.S. planes flew over and dropped all sorts of supplies by parachute. On August 28 before the surrender was signed and official, Marines came in with two landing craft and liberated all of us. This was a wild and hectic scene; the crafts were met by every able bodied POW so exuberantly that the craft almost could not dock. We were taken to various Navy ships (I was dropped off at a destroyer), given showers, clean cloths (all seamen outfits), and good food. Many of the emaciated could hardly eat. I ate too much but adjusted in a day or so. I had lost a pound a day but had been a POW only thirty days.

In the process of being repatriated, I was sent to Okinawa to await suitable transportation to the U.S. I made my way to my old outfit where I was at first not recognized in seaman's cloths and then incredulously as I was presumed dead. Reports from companion aircraft indicated that the anti-aircraft hit on us went though the pilot's cabin when in fact it was just to the right going through the wing.

Shortly after I arrived at my old outfit, Bill Abel, my tail gunner, walked up, also in Navy garb. We ran to each other and hugged and shook hands repeatedly. While keeping a lookout for our other buddies from the Lonesome Lady to possibly show up, we exchanged stories of our capture and internment. Bill had been badly mistreated. We had to part ways and make our way back to our different ships without seeing our buddies but with high hopes of them showing up somewhere soon.

After arriving in the U.S. and being given physicals, getting medals and a promotion, I made my way back home to see my parents and friends and especially my girl friend, Carolyn, who I later married. I kept waiting to hear about the remainder of my crew and no word came. I wrote the War Department requesting information but got no answer. A few weeks after I got home a book came out with pictures of Hiroshima and it dawned on me that that was where my crew had been interned. I contacted the War Dept again detailing all of the limited observations that I had made while interned with my crew indicating that I thought that it was Hiroshima. For example the interrogator there asked

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me why this important city had not been bombed. Also I could tell from the noise and streets that it was a large city and that I was taken to a second floor for interrogation.

Some months later the families of the six member of my crew were informed that their sons were had been killed in Hiroshima. I was never informed about the fate of my crew. It is still unclear how many American POWs were killed in Hiroshima, but there were at least 17. The atomic bomb was never mentioned in the letters to parents, and the public was never informed that there were Americans killed by our atomic bomb.

I believe that it was a real disservice to the families and to the American public for the military officials in command to have kept this information secret. Whether it was a deliberate cover-up or an insensitive oversight in the ecstatic days following peace, I don't know. Years later under the freedom of information act, a documentary film producer uncovered the truth and made a film about it. Still it seems to be a little known fact.

My first trip to Hiroshima was, to say the least, unpleasant. I entered and left with hands tied and blindfolded and saw little more that the inside of a prison cell and interrogation room.

My next trip to Japan was in 1983, when I was invited to give a paper at a beef genetics conference in Kyoto. I took advantage of this trip and went to Hiroshima to visit where I had been interned and where my crew mates were killed by the atomic bomb. Later I went to the Peace Memorial Museum where, after viewing the gruesome depictions of victims of the atomic bomb, with my mind full of memories of my comrades who died there, and perhaps feelings of survivor's guilt, these displays were repulsive to me.

Also, the presentations seemed to be unfairly accusatory of the U.S. without any background information or rationale for the atomic bomb being deployed. I could not bear this scene any longer and left early.

I had always felt a void about my crew, my friends, vanishing (except for the other survivor Bill Abel) with nothing to connect to them. One day in 1985 I got a letter from a Japanese man, Mr. Keiichi Muranaka, who had lived close to where the Lonesome Lady crashed. He had been stationed at an anti-aircraft battery at Kure Harbor and had witnessed our attack and saw my plane heading down, trailing smoke. A few days later after witnessing the mushroom cloud over Hiroshima he asked for leave to check on his parents. When nearing his home he saw the wreckage of the Lonesome Lady and sneaked a piece of the torn aluminum as a "reminder of the war." He wrote, "Forty years have passed since the crash of your plane. The U.S. and Japan has overcome the difficulties caused by the war. This pleases me greatly. I could not imagine the peace we enjoy today when I was in the Navy. I always relate my sad experiences regarding WWII and A-bomb and the crash of the Lonesome Lady. Now I would like to give you this article which I have kept all these years as a reminder of the sad experiences that we shared during that terrible time in history. By remembering we shall be able to maintain this peace we enjoy now. This is our responsibility."

I was emotionally overwhelmed. Though meager, this twisted piece of aluminum was something solid, palpable related to memories of my crew that had been lacking---they had vanished, with only speculation on my part for so long. I corresponded with Mr. Muranaka for several years. Mr. Muranaka initiated an effort to raise funds to place a monument at the small village of Ikachi, close to the crash site of the Lonesome Lady, in memory of all military who gave their lives in the war and to specifically honor the memory of the airmen of the Lonesome Lady.

Mr. Shigeaki Mori was an eight-year old boy in Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. He survived as a "hibakusha" (a Japanese term translated as "explosion affected person") and has health problems associated with radiation effects. As an historian he had become very interested in the historical record of the crew of the Lonesome Lady and other U.S. airmen interned in Hiroshima. He has traveled extensively to crash sites and interviewed people who were eye witnesses as well as digging through archives for long forgotten records. He continues these activities and I am told that he is the most knowledgeable person about these events. He wrote to me in 1995 and we have continued an active correspondence.

Mr. Mori has clarified many things that were incorrect in the records and detailed much information that was not previously recorded. After he had written me about a number of points important to me about the crash and fate of my crew, I asked him specifically about my Navigator which the records reflect went down with the plane. If his remains had actually been found in the plane, it is likely that he had been captured, tortured, killed and his remains placed in the plane. Mr. Mori's initial reply was that of the official record. I wrote my concern and reason for not believing this report. I have no idea how much effort Mr. Mori put into this question but he finally wrote that he had uncovered in a remote village the record of a woodcutter finding the remains of a body in a dense forest in 1947. A report of the inspection of the scene and of the body was made by a British doctor and a Japanese official. Parachute remains were close by the site, dog tags on the body were for Roy Pedersen, etc. Examination of the bones indicated that the body crashed to the ground breaking many bones. This clarification, though gruesome, was a relief in the sense that he had not been tortured. Also it vindicated my feeling that he had left the plane before I left. It is clear that his parachute had failed to open properly; perhaps this failure was related to Pete's kicking the bomb doors open.

Mr. Mori also erected a plaque, at his own expense, on the building that stood at the site of the old Chugoku Military Headquarters building where my comrades were held when the atomic bomb was dropped. It was dedicated to the American airmen killed in Hiroshima. He had a proper dedication with appropriate American and Japanese present. A marine, Major Keefe, Information Officer at an American base in Japan, participated and brought a Boy Scout troop with him when the U.S. Consulate refused to participate.

Gradually the thought of returning to Japan became appealing to me in order to visit the sites of the memorial plaque in Hiroshima and the memorial monument in Ikachi village and to meet Mr. Muranaka and Mr. Mori. Travel plans were made and my wife Carolyn, son Dr. Pat, and Matt Crawford, President of our Bomb Group veteran's organization asked to join me. The purpose of my visit was to meet and thank the people who had erected a plaque and monument acknowledging my crew and other U.S. airmen. Also, at the appropriate places and times, we wanted to pay homage to my comrades who died there. We expected to be involved only with those with whom we had become acquainted through correspondence.

We flew from the U.S. to Kansai Airport at Osaka. We were surprised to have been met by a TV crew from the NHK, the national TV network for Japan. This crew was very polite, considerate and helpful, escorting us to Hiroshima by train. However, by this time we became aware that, as they posed me by the window of the bullet train flashing through the country side at 120 to 150 miles per hour, that our visit would not go unnoticed by others than our hosts.

However, we were not prepared for the reception at the Hiroshima train station. As we stepped off the train we were greeted by our hosts, but there were also TV cameras, photographers and reporters making up a crowd of a dozen or so hovering around us. We were ushered through this melee to our hotel. After checking in and having a cup of tea, we went for a short walk to the location where the Chugoku Military Headquarters Building had stood and Mr. Mori had placed the memorial plaque.

The Plaque area was tastefully decorated with the American and Japanese flags and flowers. We placed flowers at this shrine and turned for the throng of photographers to

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