

The Story of the B-24 Liberator

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On January 8, 1945, from the steps of my shanty in Santo Tomas Prison Camp in Manila, my family and I were watching a bomb group of B-24s flying in formation right over head in the middle of a sky full of flack. I know everyone else in camp was as focused as we were. As usual they were on a bombing run which was always exciting for us to watch. We always thought they were gifts from heaven - shiny, silver slivers catching the sunlight which streaked across the sky. The loud heavy droning we knew so well alerted us to their approach before sightings. It was like a symphony orchestra tuning up before the music began. We knew our liberation had to be near. Where we were standing they were positioned at about 11:00 o'clock. When one of the bombers took a direct hit, projectile tears sprang from our eyes as we choked and grabbed our throats in horror, not believing the scene we were watching. The plane split apart and started its spiral downward in smoke and flames as it dispensed one parachute after another. We were devastated not knowing their fate. I can honestly tell you that these boys became part of my daily prayers for the rest of my life. I prayed that they made it – that they went home to their waiting families – to their rich, full lives ahead of them. After we were shipped back state-side and resumed a free life, all of us from Santo Tomas met each other at yearly reunions. I was amazed that among us younger people in these groups we always spoke about the B-24 incident and always wondered what happened to these boys. Funny, how this story never left our hearts and minds. Frank Stagner, a childhood friend in camp who had their shack next door to ours, was my buddy during and after the war. Over the years Frank and I spoke often about this incident, always surmising and hoping that they were alive. It wasn't until I was 60 yrs. old that I ran into an old friend, Bill Dunn, a CBS radio war correspondent during the war in the Far East, who listened to the telling of this story. I was living in Hawaii at the time and he excitedly introduced me to a friend of his who was a wing Commander for B-24s flying the Philippine campaign. We met, compared stories and the date of the hit. To our surprise, this was his bomb group. I was excited. We spoke at length and he gave us contact numbers for the reunion group of his outfit, the 13th Air Force, 307th Heavy Bomb Group, 370th Bomb Squadron. As I was on my way back to Manila the very next day, Frank attended their reunion in my place and received this information. The group also known as the Long Rangers, because of the large amount of fuel they could hold, had been based on Morotai and had flown up to Bomb Nielsen Field that day. The remains of most of the crew were recovered from graves near the crash site shortly after our liberation, while three or four were listed as MIAs. Today, some of these boys rest with The U.S. Battle Monuments Cemetery in Manila. The MIAs are remembered on the Walls of the Missing. On my next trip to the Philippines I gathered most of my travelers at the gravesite and at the Wall. We finally could pay proper homage to our long time pals and liberators who had been with us all of our lives and who were so instrumental for our freedom. We owe these men and

boys so much. On one of my trips back to Manila, my good friend, Jim Litton, who was in the 3rd grade with me and who still lives in Manila, also witnessed the same catastrophic scenario from his home on the outside. Sixty five years later Jim, Frank and I compared notes on what we had witnessed and the final closure of this heartfelt story. This past February – 2015, when I brought back 78 people for our 70th Anniversary of our liberation, and while visiting the U.S. Battle Monuments Cemetery, we laid a wreath and paid homage to these amazing boys while I related their story of the B-24. Allow me now to introduce you to these wonderful boys who sleep within these hallowed grounds and whose loving attentions are bestowed upon them each day by two wonderful, caring Superintendents, Larry Atkins and Burt Caloud. I thank them both from the very depths of my heart for their genuine care and devotion to so many who gave their lives so others could be free.

Lt. John D. Lucy, Pilot – California – Plot C - Row 15 – Grave # 68 Service #0771070

2nd Lt. William O. Goodlow, Co-Pilot – Oregon – Plot D – Row 8 – Grave #40 – Service # 0205878

Lt. Harvey Max, Navigator

Lt. Tris S. Hooker – Bombardier

Sgt. Forrest R. Phibbs, Engineer

Sgt. George Hadjopoulos – Asst. Engineer – New York-Army Wall of the Missing – Service #12225898

Sgt. Theodore R. Benner – Radio Operator

Sgt. John C. Grim – Asst. Radio Operator

Sgt. William O. Dilsburg – Gunner

Staff Sgt. – Harold R. Sargent – Cameraman – Service # 39408838– Army Wall of the Missing - California

Cpl. Rudolph Szmans – Gunner –Service #42103316 – Plot J – Row 5 – Grave # 9 – New Jersey

Addendum

January 9, 1945: At the same time the plane went down the day before, the Squadron came over again in Missing Man Formation. At the exact same spot where the plane had been hit, a huge rain-bow puff of smoke was released and cascaded down like a fountain in between the black ack ack that had riddled the sky. It was a necessary sign we all needed, and an homage well paid to the downed crew.