

Cookeville's Bailey had many close calls

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It's hard to pinpoint the most exciting time that Jasper Bailey experienced in WW II as a radio gunner with the 99th Bomb Group.

The most dangerous time was probably when he was flying in a B-17 over Munich and there was an explosion near the plane.

"It actually raised the ship higher and flak came through the walls and floor of the plane. Later we counted 100 flak holes," he said.

Bailey was sitting at his radio desk when the explosion occurred and the flak started flying.

"If I'd turned my head to look out the window at that moment, I would have been hit in the head and killed instantly. As it was flak came through the bottom of the plane and a couple of pieces flew up between my feet," he said.

The ugliest moments in the war for Bailey were probably the times when he was flying over the Himalayas providing American and Chinese troops with supplies, and periodically flying Chinese troops to the fighting.

"The Chinese troops *always* got air sick," Bailey said. "There were benches on both sides of the plane where they'd sit and then we'd put buckets all down the middle of the plane between them."



But the most exciting time was probably when Bailey's plane went down over Burma and he spent two weeks officially listed as Missing In Action, but was actually hanging out with a native tribe that protected him from the elements, the Japanese and the neighboring headhunters.

"Actually the headhunters were for the Allies," Bailey said. "When they met up with the Japanese they didn't take prisoners. Instead, they took heads, displaying the skulls on hand made units."

Bailey found himself among the gentler tribe of Kachins who regularly helped western soldiers to get back to civilization. Bailey ended up in the Burman village of Htawgaw after his plane crashed as it was flying over the mountains

and the engines iced up. Two of the crew lost their lives helping the others to bail out of plane.

The co-pilot was the first to get his parachute on and go through the escape hatch in the roof of the plane. When he jumped part of the tail boom hit him in the soldier and he was knocked out. When he came to he was on the ground on a narrow ledge overlooking a drop off of hundreds of feet.

Bailey almost went down with the plane when he didn't have the strength to heft himself up from a table to get through the escape hatch.

"I was just a puny thing. I weighed about 145 lbs. and there was tremendous air pressure going across the top of the plane. I had to boost myself to the hatch from a table and then get through the wind resistance to get out of the plane, and I wasn't able to do it," he said.

"Then the other crew member, J.W. Tharp, grabbed the bottoms of my feet and just pushed me through the hatch," Bailey said.

Pvt. Tharp and the pilot, William Montgomery, both went down with the plane, but Bailey parachuted safely into the dark night. His parachute got tangled in some tall trees and Bailey spent the night suspended in the air not knowing how much of a drop was below him.

"Mainly, though, I was afraid of the Bengal Tigers that were notorious -- and plentiful -- in that part of the world at that time," he said.

When the predawn light brightened the sky, Bailey found himself suspended a whole four feet off the ground -- and not a hungry tiger in sight.

What he did find after a few hours was a friendly native who gestured for the 21-year-old to follow him.

"It was a scary call because we knew some of the people in that region were working for the Japanese and were given rewards when they brought prisoners in. But we also knew there were some Christian tribes who had allied themselves with the West."

Fortunately, Bailey had met up with the latter when the headman, Jang Bhir Rai, of the friendly Kachin tribe spotted him and led him to safety. The two were able to communicate through sign language and the chief's pigeon English. They formed a friendship that lasted until the headman died a few years ago.

During the 15 days Bailey was with the tribe, the two Americans were fed chicken with bean sprouts. But the natives, having had most of their pigs and chickens taken by the Japanese, subsisted on bean sprouts and grubs.

To get the word out that two crew members were alive and well, the co-pilot and radio-gunner found a knoll with a large pasture area, tore their parachutes into strips and laid the strips out on the grassy field forming the call number of their plane: 0610. And they created a smoky fire to attract the attention of planes flying over the area. It took several days and many planes before anyone spotted the SOS.

"After three days one plane flew past us and we thought it was all over. But then he banked and came back and signaled us that he'd gotten the message," Bailey said.

The Kachins escorted the two airmen 100 miles to a base that had an airfield and the two Americans were flown back to a different part of the war.

In all, Jasper N. Bailey flew 50 bombing runs over Germany and 23 over the "hump" in the Himalayan mountains. The adventures he had and the friends he made are still uppermost in his mind.

His "war room" in his home in Cookeville contains many items that bring back the memories. Among other things is a framed collection of the gifts he received from Jang Bhir Rai, a poison dart (without poison on its tip) and blow gun and some decorative women's jewelry. On another wall is the framed three-foot sword of a headhunter and a smaller knife.

His war room also contains photos of his comrades-in-arms, the planes he flew in, and items like the metal covered Bible that his parents sent him to keep in his shirt pocket so it would protect his heart from bullets, the honors he won for his service in WW2 -- a certificate in Chinese characters for his help in flying supplies and aid to Chinese soldiers, a shadow box of his medals (which include an Air Medal and two Oak Leaf Clusters), and an old typewriter he used for his reports.

But the photos and the memorabilia are only symbols. They're interesting to the person who hasn't heard Bailey's stories or read the account he's written and collected of that time.



Jasper Bailey reflects on his dozens of missions as a World War II radio gunner for the 99th Bomb Group. Bailey's plane once went down over Burma and spent several weeks among a tribe of headhunters (top right). Fortunately, the headhunters supported the Allies during the war.

For Bailey, everything is still inside his mind and the war room is a simple reminder of events that seem like they happened just a moment or two ago.

"There isn't a day I don't think about these people and this time," he said.

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