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The Goldfish Club

Bill Streifer



Courtesy 1st Lt. John Grant's daughter.

Two weeks after the Japanese surrender at the end of WWII, more than one thousand B-29's began delivering five thousand tons of food and medical supplies to POW camps in China, Korea, Formosa, Manchuria and the Japanese Home Islands. Although largely successful, some sorties were "non-effective," resulting in the loss of eight aircraft with seventy-seven casualties. Although most of the losses were likely due to mechanical failure, B-29 "Hog Wild (73th BW, 500th BG, 882nd BS) was shot down by a Russian Yak fighter over Soviet-occupied Konan, Korea (now Hungnam, North Korea). As a result, nearly 800 tons of supplies were

never delivered to Allied prisoners who had suffered years of abuse at the hands of their Japanese captors. The Konan POW camp, for example, housed 354 British and Australians who were captured in 1942 during the fall of Singapore, which is considered one of the greatest defeats in the history of the British Army. First detained at the infamous Changi prison, and later to camps in southern Korea, the men were eventually transported by locked cattle car to a “work camp” in northeastern Korea, five hundreds yards from a carbide factory. There, they labored long hours — seven days a week — under grueling conditions. Five men died. The rest remained prisoner of the Japanese until August 28, 1945 when Russian troops, who had recently arrived in the area, occupied the camp, interrogated and disarmed the Japanese officers and Korean guards, and led them away.

The next morning, two B-29s arrived over Konan. Prior to their arrival, the prisoners were instructed to paint “PW” in large orange lettering on the top of buildings so that air crews could spot the camp. Each B-29 — with “POW” painted in white lettering under each wing — carried ten thousand pounds of supplies: Class I (food, drinks, candy, cigarettes and matches, etc.), Class II (clothing, soap, razors, underwear, socks, etc.) and medical supplies known as a “Medical Kit.”

With joyous prisoners waving their hands and yelling below, barrels, tethered to parachutes, were dropped into the camp’s parade grounds. Unfortunately, B-29 commanders were instructed to fly too fast and too low, resulting in parachute failures. One plummeted to the ground, killing a Korean civilian. Another fell into the camp as prisoners scattered to avoid being struck. And one crashed through the roof of the camp, nearly injuring a Soviet colonel. When reports of parachute failures began pouring into 20th Air Force Headquarters, B-29 crews were advised to drop their supplies from one thousand feet, up from five hundred. But the change came too late for the Hog Wild which arrived later that afternoon from Saipan via Iwo Jima.

Armed with poor maps and provided incorrect camp coordinates during their pre-flight briefing, the 11-man Hog Wild crew and two passenger/observers: 1st Lt. Robert W. Campbell and 1st Lt. John B. Grant, arrived over Konan and began searching for the camp. The Airplane Commander was 1st Lt. Joseph (Joe) W. Queen and in the pilot’s seat was 1st Lt. Robert (Bob) S. Rainey. As they circled the area several times, Soviet commanders ordered four Yak fighters to escort the B-29 to a landing field nearby. When Queen, who was specifically instructed not to land, continued searching for the camp, a Yak moved up parallel to the B-29 and fired a shot across its nose. “When a fighter does this,” Campbell said, “you have one of three things to do: land, fight, or get the hell out of there,” so Queen ordered the gunners to hold their fire as he flew out to sea with two Yaks in hot pursuit. One of the Yaks approached at seven o’clock low and began a pursuit curve, firing several bursts of machine gun and cannon fire at the B-29 causing considerable damage, including a direct hit on the No. 1 engine resulting in a severe fire; a solid white sheet of flame a good ten feet thick rushed over and under the wing, extending past the tail.

When Queen believed the engine was about to explode, he ordered the crew to bail out. Two jumped from the rear of the plane and four others from the nose wheel, as Queen headed the Hog Wild back to shore. When the B-29 was too low to bail out from safely, Tech Sgt. Arthur Strilky, the radio operator, who was caught between the nose wheel well hatch and the turret, was ordered back into the plane, as Queen crash-landing the Hog Wild on the short landing field. When the severely damaged B-29 came to a rest, Russians threw dirt on the engine to extinguish the fire. The crew was then led from the plane, checked for weapons, and marched under guard to a nearby building where they were interrogated by high-ranking Soviet officers.

Some members of the crew who parachuted into the water later complained their personal life rafts had come undone and sank. Others said they had swallowed a lot of sea water. One crewman said that the Yak pilot strafed him in the water, and another said he wouldn’t have survived the night. Miraculously, all six crewmen — some of whom who remained in the cold and rough sea for up to four hours — were eventually pulled to safety by Korean fishermen. Recently, all six airmen — four of whom were later awarded the Purple Heart for hypothermia and related injuries — were inducted into the Goldfish Club. Founded in 1942 by a member of one of the world's largest Air Sea Rescue equipment manufactures, the Goldfish Club was formed as an exclusive club for airmen who had survived a wartime aircraft ditching and who owed their lives to the Mae West inflatable life preserver or individual life raft. Each newly inducted member (or their family) is then presented with an embroidered badge which displays a white-winged goldfish flying over two symbolic blue waves. The “gold” represents the value of life and the “fish” represents the sea. Since uniform dress regulations prohibit the

wearing of the Gold Fish Club Badge on American and British uniforms, naval airmen attach their badge to their Mae Wests, and USSAAF and RAF airmen place their badge under the flap of their left-hand uniform pocket.

Why Russian fighters would shoot down an American bomber during peacetime has remained the subject of debate for nearly seventy years. The Russians offered various explanations, and each member of the Hog Wild crew offered his own. Flight Officer Marion J. Sherrill, the navigator, said the Russians might have thought it a good time to get their hands on a B-29, and while Strilky said he never knew for sure why the Hog Wild was shot down, he did recall the following conversation:

A lieutenant-general came out and apologized for shooting us down. He said two B-29s had been over the camp earlier in the morning and dropped supplies. Some of the drums came loose from the parachutes and crashed through buildings, almost hitting a Russian colonel. So the fighters were told to intercept any other planes and get them to land on the airfield.

Documents:

“Report of War Supply Missions from 27 August to 20 September 1945,” 20th AF HQ

Chicago Daily Tribune, Sept. 21, 1945. p. 1

St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Aug. 8, 1963, p. 3D

Robert Campbell’s diary and intelligence debriefing.

Joseph Queen’s intelligence debriefing.

WarOpDiv to Gen. John R. Deane, Oct. 3, 1945

The Goldfish Club (UK) <http://www.thegoldfishclub.co.uk>

Streifer, Bill & Sabitov, Irek. The Flight of the Hog Wild (unpublished)

Special thanks to Bill Gray (a prisoner at the Konan POW camp) and Arthur Strilky (the Hog Wild’s radio operator).