

A Boot Full of Blood

By W. Patrick Lang

(Off Nanking, China – 12 December, 1937)

Panay's alarm bells rang in the early dawn.

The loudspeaker system spoke. "Action stations! Action stations! This is not a drill! This is not a drill!"

Chief Petty Officer Sean Laine woke in his bunk and "caught" the end of this announcement from the bridge. He listened and heard the sound of aircraft engines. He put on yesterday's "wash khaki," and went out on deck.

With five other Chief Petty Officers he lived in a small wooden structure on the weather deck behind the sick bay and overlooking the stern. Each of the senior enlisted men had a curtained cubicle in which to sleep. There were several comfortable chairs around a central table. A Chinese steward had the job of bringing their meals while they played cards or discussed the day's events. A short wave radio was on a corner shelf. It was usually tuned to the Imperial Service of the BBC.

He heard engine noise to starboard, and went to that side of the ship. At the rail he looked up and found himself looking at the nose of a Japanese aircraft approaching the ship in a shallow dive. He could see the pilot's face through the windscreen. There was another, similar aircraft behind the first.

As he watched, a bomb detached from the plane. The bomb fell 50 yards off the starboard quarter of the ship and threw up a fountain of dirty river water. The bomber turned

hard to port. He could see the red, rising sun insignia of Japan on the bottom of the wings as it banked left.

At least one machine gun was firing from somewhere near Panay's bridge. Holes opened in the belly of the aircraft. It "wobbled" away losing altitude.

Laine thought the second aircraft's bomb might strike the ship where he stood, so he went to the port side and wrapped his arms and legs around a stanchion. He hoped for a "dud," but a dull "boom" shook the ship and she began to list to starboard.

As Chief Quartermaster, his place of duty was in the wheel house. Going forward, he passed several "Lewis" machine guns mounted on the rails of the uppermost deck. Sailors were firing at the planes. Many of them were still in their underwear.

There were a number of passengers on Panay that day. The Chinese and Japanese were at war. The long standing desire of the Japanese to acquire Chinese resources and labor had brought war earlier in the year. The Japanese Army was literally at the gates of Nanking, the Chinese capital. The city was thought to be too dangerous for foreigners. Panay was ordered there to evacuate; diplomats, business managers and a Life magazine crew. The attack was unexpected. The United States was at least officially neutral in the Sino-Japanese War, and the US Embassy believed it had arranged safe passage with the commander of Japanese forces.

USS Panay was Shanghai built and 191 feet long. There were 59 officers and men in her crew. She was thought to be the "Princess of the Yangtze," fast at 18 knots, spacious, beautifully fitted out, and the recipient of every prize and award the Navy could bestow on her. Her gleaming bronze metalwork and hand rubbed teak decks were immaculate. Dressed for a celebration with colored lights strung from every "yard" she was an adornment for any river

port entertainment. Command of "PR-5" was a prize widely sought among US officers. All who served aboard her loved her.

Nearing the wooden wheel house, Laine saw that the structure had been blown away by the bombing. The brass and wooden wheel was untouched, and the stand to which the log was chained remained, but the three members of the bridge watch were dead. The commanding officer, Lieutenant Commander James Hughes, lay on the wheel house deck. He was badly wounded in the legs.

The airplane noises sounded different. Looking up, Laine saw that the earlier planes had left and had been replaced by other bombers now in the process of "rolling over" and diving out of the sky.

Sailors were gathering on the weather deck. Some were looking up at the bombers.

"Get on the damned guns," Laine yelled.

They then began to form up in lines behind the machine guns waiting for a "turn" and an opportunity to shoot at the Japanese.

Laine lashed the wheel over toward the side of the river that the Chinese still "owned," and then picked up Commander Hughes. He put him over a shoulder. The journey to the sickbay was hard because the deck was slippery and the ship was listing more. Laine was small and Hughes was large. Laine smiled at the thought that he had never touched the captain before, not even to shake his hand. He was on his way back to the bridge when several more bombs burst aboard wounding him severely in the legs, face and back.

He freed the wheel, put Panay on a hard course for the left bank and called the engine room. "All ahead," he ordered.

“Who is this?” was the answer.

“It’s Laine. I am going to beach her. The ‘old man’ is gone. I think his legs are... finished.”

There was a momentary pause. “This is Lieutenant Johnson,” a voice said from the engine room. “Are you sure?”

““Aye, sir, we’re done, she’ll be on the bottom soon,” Laine answered.

“Right, all ahead,” Johnson replied. “Put her on the beach. “

“Thank you, sir,” said Laine.

The machine guns continued to fire at a maximum rate. Sailors brought ammunition up from the magazine and stacked the open metal “cans” beside the guns. The Lewis guns were water cooled but were firing so much that the cooling jackets were very hot. Crewmen poured buckets of river water over them. The water hissed and boiled on all parts that were exposed to the air. This would ruin the guns, but that did not matter now.

Standing at the wheel, Laine stared at the wooden stand to which the open log book was chained.

Another Japanese air attack screamed down from above.

He logged the attack with details of; direction, damage, and hits on aircraft. When he finished, he noticed that he was dripping blood on the page. He tried to rub it off with his hand.

The Chinese held bank seemed impossibly far away.

Another attack struck the ship.

He logged that one as well and resolved to log them all.

The bottom of the hull dragged on the gravel of the riverbed.

The Japanese were still making passes at Panay but seemed to be losing interest. There were fewer planes.

The ship's undamaged boats came up to the weather deck rail. Panay was now resting on the bottom but moving with the current, and rolling from side to side as though she wished to live.

He unchained the log, put it under an arm and walked aft.

A sailor helped him over the rail and into a boat.

"Jesus, chief, can you walk?" the man asked.

Laine felt a little faint, but other than that, was just angry.

The boat moved to the river bank.

When it "grounded," Laine climbed out into the cold, thigh deep water. He shook off attempts to help him. Clutching the log, he struggled up the bank, and turned to sit where he could contemplate his beloved home. She was now leaning far to one side with smoke and steam pouring from many wounds.

Someone asked him to open his mouth and then tied a bandage around his lower face.

"You've been shot through the face," the man said.

Laine looked up and saw that it was the ship's medical officer. "What, what did you say?"

“A bullet passed through your cheeks, right behind your mouth, and another through your upper lip. You have lost several teeth. I am giving you some morphine...”

He had not felt the face wounds, but he knew that this was common in the heat of action. He probed his mouth with his tongue. The tongue hurt. It was damaged toward the back, near its “root.” There was a hole in each cheek, a mess where his lip should be, and the broken teeth were jagged.

One of the news photographer passengers approached and took his picture. This man helped him to his feet so that he could leave the river bank.

He walked unsteadily until he reached a farm road a few yards away.

Commander Hughes’ stretcher was there. The captain was unconscious.

Laine felt that his feet were wet. Looking down, he saw something surprising. He had recently bought a fine pair of black calf Wellington boots from his old friend Luigi, the Italian *clothier*, in Shanghai. Red blood was welling up and running over the top of one of these ten inch boots. “I think I will sit down,” he said to the doctor.

The survivors of Panay’s company walked for a day until they reached a Chinese village. They carried their wounded. Laine walked with them. They were rightly afraid that the Japanese would kill them if they could to conceal as much of their deed as possible by eliminating witnesses

Eventually, Chinese Army medical help arrived at the village to transport them to a rendezvous with a US Navy destroyer downstream.

Three months later Laine was still in the small US Navy hospital at Shanghai. His wounds were healing. The broken teeth were gone and he was growing a mustache to hide some of the holes in his face.

The Navy had awarded him another Navy Cross.

The US and Japan came close to war over the destruction of Panay. The Japanese government of 1937 did not want that. Profound apologies were offered and accepted for this terrible "mistake." Japanese school girls sent letters of sorrow and sympathy for the suffering of the crew. The emperor's government agreed to pay for the ship and to pay reparations to all those attacked. Laine received a letter awarding him \$40,000 for his injuries. The Navy decided to send him to recruiting duty when he mended enough. He had decided to buy a Packard convertible loaded with all options when he arrived in California. He was in the process of ordering the car with delivery at the pier.

The Japanese Army Air force which had ordered the attack on Panay refused to take notice of the problem they had caused. The Japanese Navy air arm decided to send their pilots to the hospital to apologize. The Imperial Navy command wrote to ask for an appointment.

On the day agreed, Laine asked the ward nurse to put his dress coat on a chair in such a way that the medal ribbons would face those in the room. He then asked her to put the chair

next to the “head end” of the bed. The dark blue of the jacket and the bright colors of the ribbons made a pleasing contrast to the white walls.

The pilots brought flowers. There were chrysanthemums in the bouquets.

The Navy nurse brought vases and soon the room stank of flowers.

The four young officers stood at the foot of the bed in their blue uniforms. It was clear that they could see nothing but the glory of the “Order of the Chrysanthemum” among Laine’s ribbons. He had been given it by the “son of heaven” himself ten years before for commanding Japanese Navy sailors with honor in an emergency.

“What can we do to make amends?” the senior lieutenant asked.

Laine sat up in bed and grasping his hands together “mimed” the act of “seppuku” by “stabbing” himself in one side of the belly and then drawing his hands across to the other side.

The four pilots grew very still. One trembled slightly.

After a moment Laine laughed aloud. “No. No,” he said. You were just doing your duty. You come back when I am better and you can take me out on the town...”

They bowed.

And, that is what they did.

The End

“A Boot Full of Blood” is based on an event in the life of Chief Warrant Officer John H. Lang, US Navy.

