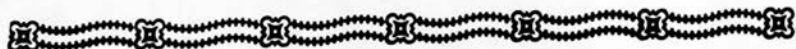


"SOS" ON THE YANGTZE

"Bob" Shrader

Radio Officer S.S. President Hoover relates story.



"S O S" ON THE YANGTZE

WAR CLOUDS OVER CHINA BRING NEAR TRAGEDY TO AMERICAN LINER

ROBERT L. SHRADER

"SOS SOS SOS DE KDMW SS PRESIDENT HOOVER BEING BOMBED BY CHINESE PLANES SOS SOS SOS DE KDMW--"

So the world was first acquainted with the unexpected and distressing news of an American vessel, a ship of a neutral country, being the victim of the war that was growing each day, in 1937 in the far East.

Who answered this frantically rushed call for help I will never know as the planes were circling back. I decided a live radio operator is of more use than a dead hero. I left; leaving heroic to someone else, anyone at all who wanted them. The third or fourth bomb landed a few yards off our port side as I reached the officers quarters on the deck below. I found that I had companions. Approximately eight of the ten men living in this immediate area were attempting to become more inconspicuous--all but Captain Yardley, apparently unperturbed and carrying himself in the true tradition of his position as leader of his men.

Harry Hansen, First Officer, on watch at the time on the bridge, was the first to notice the arrival of the three planes. All afternoon airplanes had been flying over our anchorage at the mouth of the Yangtze River, passing harmlessly here and there. Through glasses Harry watched the approach of the three newest planes. When they were close ahead he noticed a spot of white appear under the belly of one. His first thought was that they were dropping propaganda as is done by American aircraft with advertising matter. But this was different--it did not spread as bits of paper would and was growing larger each second. It appeared perfectly round. Suddenly he knew what it was--a bomb; and it looked round because it was evidently aimed directly at Mr. Hansen. He was petrified. As he watched the deadly missile approaching, its' nose dropped, and finally, with a plop it hit the water, shooting up a geyser of water directly before our bow--only some fifty yards away. Harry hit the deck behind the steel bridge bulkhead and listened to bits of steel sing by overhead. We were being bombed!

What happened from then on, the many incidents that crowded themselves into the next few minutes, we are not able to set into any definite sequence. Each man's story varies slightly, sometimes greatly, from that of his companions.

Mr. Hansen dashed into the chart room, down the inside stairway to the officers quarters and met the captain as he emerged from his room after hearing the bursting shell outside. "Captain, We're being bombed!!" exclaimed Harry excitedly. The two officers were quickly being surrounded by other members of our quarters as they piled out of bunks and rooms to learn what was happening. We were being bombed! But we couldn't be! We were a neutral ship, an American ship coming to take refugees from the war torn Shanghai area. For answer the blood curdling wail of a plane in a power dive sounded outside and a spurt of muddy yellow river water started up 100 yards off our starboard side. We became suddenly and thoroughly convinced.

A general exodus was started to find someplace of greater safety. But where? At this time I made my first precipitous arrival on the officers quarters deck from the radio room directly above. I had heard the scream of the plane as it dove towards us. My first thought had been that one of the plans that had been circling about all day had decided to show off a bit. No one expects an attack, of course. However I took very little time to decide that we were being used as targets when the crescendoed wail was punctuated by the broom of the shell hitting out there within too plain view.

I had just surprised myself by actually succeeding in coping in English a weather report sent in French (My French teachers please note). Back in the radio room again after delivering the weather message I decided to adjust one of our transmitters to a different frequency. Inured to planes as we had become during the afternoon, I had given the howling plane only a passing glance and noted that it was headed in our direction. I must have been intent on what I was doing for I kept right on setting the dials. The bomb of the exploding shell in the water caused me to turn in time to see a great sheet of water rise, linger a split second and then fall back. I heard someone tear down the stairway and I knew that we were in for something that we had not been expecting.

Passing through the war zones as we had been doing for the last week or so I had meditated upon the inadvisability of remaining in the radio room if bullets were ever to fly in our direction. I had often wondered if a .22 calibre bullet would pass entirely through the wooden walls. I had no doubts as to what a bomb would do.

As I gained the deck below (I don't remember the trip downward, probably because of its infinitesimal duration) I found a group of officers and crew milling around the figure of the Captain, none know what to do. In all was an urge to be moving. Men were moving from doorway to doorway, looking out one side of the ship and then out the other. As the planes would return to the attack all gravitated towards each other and formed a group near the center of the alleyway.

"Duke" Eisenberg, Third Radio Operator, not being on watch and unable to think of any reason for his remaining up there headed for the service access, a ladderway leading down to the engine room. On his way back to the access he picked up the Chief Electrician, Mr. Wickel, also headed in the same direction. As they passed the entrance to the engine room elevator Wickel shouted to Duke suggesting they go down by the elevator as that would be faster. Duke hesitated a few feet short of the entrance to the access and as he did he heard a terrific crash, felt a shudder shake the ship beneath his feet and saw a flash of orange light, followed quickly by a billow of black smoke emerge from within the access. The bomb had struck on the opposite side of the ac-

"SOS" ON THE YANGTZE—Shrader

cess. The bomb had struck on the opposite side of the access, bursting through the wood and steel deck and scattering shrapnel in all directions. It had landed within 25 feet of where he was standing. Had he not hesitated he would have been around the corner and in the 20 foot alleyway, the opposite end of which was completely wrecked. The elevator was disabled because of the explosion and Duke rushed into the access and down the ladderway, getting a fleeting glimpse of the tangle of broken wires and pipes hanging by the jagged hole almost above the ladderway. Water was pouring from the pipes and a shaft of early evening light filtered through the smoke that was stinging his nose. Added to the acrid smell of the high explosive was the choking odor of sulphur dioxide gas escaping from a punctured coil of an ice machine. This was certainly no place in which to linger, and no one did. There as a concerted rush downward by everyone still in the locality.

Nearing the bottom decks Eisenberg passed one of the engine room gang lying quietly on the floor holding a sopping reddened towel to his abdomen, which together with his legs had been sliced by flying shrapnel after it had pierced the ships' steel sides. No one spoke. Each man looked at his neighbors and wondered what had happened—or what was going to happen. Slowly the men clustered together in little groups and began speaking. As no more disturbances were heard above, no more shakings of the ship felt, the air was soon filled with debating voices, questioning voices, already started on the whys and whos of the attack, the answers to which have not yet been entirely explained for many people.

Up "topside" we were having our own experiences. Our Messroom steward, Lionel Haskell, hearing the commotion going on outside, left the messroom, where he had been preparing for the evening meal, rushed up the alleyway and stood at a doorway looking out at the scene of droning airplanes diving over our heads. As he stood there, a companion on both sides of him, a bomb burst in the water near the side of the ship. Shrapnel flew in all directions. A few of the jagged bits of steel drilled up through the deck, caromed off a steel bulkhead and struck young Haskell, knocking him over backwards. His two companions, both unhit, were also bowled over but merely from the concussion. As they picked themselves up and started back towards the alleyway, Haskell called to one of the, "Help me, Jack. I'm hurt."

His friend, together with Clyde Parker, a Junior Officer, carried the wounded man into a nearby room. They used what first aid they knew and then carried him down to the doctors' office. The wounds were so severe that although our own ships doctor, aided by the doctors who came aboard from the British warship Cumberland, gave him immediate attention he died during the early morning hours.

The same bomb that caused the death of young Haskell, also drove through the steel plates of the ship and injured a few of the crew who were below at the time. Pieces of shrapnel were driven through most of the port side life boats. Portholes and windows were shattered. Up through decking and against the steel bulkheads, shrapnel splattered. The midship section of the side of the ship was pitted by hundreds of the deadly pieces of ragged steel in their hungry search for victims.

At the outset of the activity, Carl Bolger, Chief Radio Operator, rushed out of his room, movie camera in hand, and dashed out the nearest doorway. A plane swooped down and a bomb landed in the water not far from the ship. Carl slid to a stop, turned, and dashed back inside and put away his camera.

"Did you get your pictures?" the Captain asked as Carl went speeding by the second time. But no answer was really necessary. This ended all picture taking during the actual bombing.

Mr. Hansen, accompanied by Mr. Lees, a Junior Officer, started down one passageway, where to or why they could never after remember, when a bomb landed somewhere outside. That wasn't so good. They turned and went back and down another passage. Another bomb. And again they returned to their starting place. Hansen dashed up onto the bridge as one of the planes came low over the ship. Two bombs appeared and streaked by overhead, to land in the water on the opposite side of the bridge. Hansen returned hurriedly below.

Mr. Sweetser, Second Officer, happening to be on one of the passenger decks at the time of the attack quickly deduced the ship's dilemma and led a movement to get all passengers off the decks, down below and as far from danger as possible. He was aided by some of the members of the stewards department.

Up on the highest passenger deck, in the gymnasium, the attendant and a passenger, hearing the bombing ran out of the room into the hallway. As they stood there wondering what was happening and what to do, less than thirty feet away the ceiling crashed through, accompanied by a rending crash, a blinding yellow flame and a puff of smoke. The force of the concussion knocked them over, but seriously hurt neither. The gym attendant received a small piece of shrapnel in the fleshy part of his shoulder. Because of the shock to his system he was only able to crawl into the gym again and sit on the floor, his mind refusing to function. There one of the stewards, helping direct passengers below, found him. After a couple of counter shocks in the form of solid slaps on the jaw, he finally became mentally alert enough to understand that he was needed to help round up the passengers. A few minutes later, learning that a deaf and dumb young man was in one of the cabins on the bombed alleyway, he crawled past the hole made by the bomb that had landed so near to him, opened the door of the young man's room and found him sitting there, looking wonderingly about, not able to comprehend what was happening. Besides this young man three other passengers were found huddled together in one of the cabins off this alleyway and had to be actually forced to leave, so paralyzed with fright were they.

Up on the bridge, Jack Rogers, Cadet, had responded to the alarm bell that had started ringing almost immediately after the bombing commenced and had assumed his station on the bridge. The telephone rang. He picked it up and heard something resembling "Gark-lewoptf--" issue from it. He didn't even ask the party to repeat as the planes were returning again. Rogers threw the phone one way and himself flat on the deck the other way and waited for the explosions to indicate where the bombs were landing this time. When he returned to the phone the other party had hung up. He never did find out just who was on the phone at that time or what he wanted. After another fling at the deck in deference to the swooping planes he decided that was no place to hang around in any longer and he joined the rest of us on the deck below.

The doctor had been up in the Captains room at the start of the bombing. As he stepped through the port doorway that led out to the boat deck he was just in time to witness a plane hurtling towards us and aimed at the bridge directly over our heads. Two ball-like objects detached themselves from the plane and fell towards us as the plane zoomed upward. But the pilots judge of distance was poor, luckily for us, and both bombs dropped unexploded into the river a hundred yards away. Had those two little round objects been released about a second and a half later they probably would not have missed, possibly scoring direct hits on the bridge and radio station. The possibilities were not pleasant.

All during the bombing the attacking planes came at us from the sides. This gave them a target only 80 feet high at which to aim. Had they attacked along the length of the ship their target would have been over 600 feet long and not many of their bombs would have been as ineffective. The reason for their method of attack was probably due to mistaking us for the Japanese troop ship, The Asama Maru. They expected some form of anti aircraft defense from us.

Up in our alleyway the Captain turned to me as I emerged from the corner I had instinctively started for as I heard a plane roar overhead, ordering me to send a message indicating our predicament. Here was something, at last, for me to do besides inadvertently ducking as I heard a plane go by over us and freeze in anticipation until the few seconds of eternity ended before the bomb hit somewhere. This sensation is, as far as I am concerned, the most appalling possible. I have heard of a persons heart coming into his mouth but to me it seemed my whole abdominal region was attempting to cram itself into the upper section of the thoracic cavity. Between the time the planes' motor begins to hammer a fierce song as the pilot levels off and lets go his 120 pounds or so of death and destruction and the the sound of the bomb hitting a mark, a multitude of thoughts pass through ones mind. I can remember some of mine--I better find a safer place--But where?--What the devil are they bombing us for?--If I ever get home again I'll never leave--Who are they, anyway?--Won't that thing ever land--What if it hit above us-- What will it feel like to have that deck blown down onto us?--Better get away--Can't go far;still on watch--Whew! There it goes. Safe for a little longer anyway--.

When we reached Honolulu I read the first American newspaper accounts of the episode and was very much interested in the statement that the operator on watch during the bombing was "obviously nervous" when sending the first message. May I take this time to commend the veracity of the press.

As I reached the radio room immediately following the suggestion of Captain Yardly I switched on the 600 meter transmitter, threw in the antenna, waited the few short seconds for the motor generator to gain its correct speed and started banging out an SOS. Out of habit I glanced at the clock. It read 5:16 PM, China coast time. "Just exactly right", I remember thinking, for from 15 to 18 minutes after each hour there is a period of silence when all stations are to listen on 600 meters for emergency and distress calls. The first message was quite hurried--for two reasons. I did not know how long our radio equipment would be in working order, and I heard a plane coming again when half finished with the transmission. I gave out the only information we had, that the President Hoover was being bombed by what appeared to be Chinese planes. Outside I could hear the engine of a plane start hammering its' deadly song. By the time the bomb landed I was back on the deck below, and had been there for some seconds.

In the meantime, Captain Yardley, sensing the necessity of giving the men something to occupy themselves with ordered the gun locker opened and anyone who wished to was ordered to fire at the planes. The Captain himself dragged out his pistol and joined the others in the firing. He emptied the revolver in the direction of one of the attacking planes but the only apparent damage was a scratch on his own hand. One or two of the guns had been handed out and a few shots sounded as the planes passed us in their last attack.

Below I found myself practically alone. It was necessary for me to find out the position of the ship and to make a broadcast of this information. We were a mile or so from a little red lightship. Up on the bridge I fumed around awhile trying to get someone to pay attention to my question as to what the name of the lightship was. Mr. Hansen had a gun in his left hand and half his right arm disappeared into a box of shells as he dug up the ammunition. He wasn't interested in lightships. Finally I was able to pin down one of the officers long enough to ascertain that it was known as the Yangtze lightship. Back into the radio room again and another broadcast of our position. Contact was made with Shanghai and a minute later with the USS Augusta, to whom I gave all the details that were on hand--extent of damage unknown--believed to be hit at least once by a bomb.

After this I left the radio station to the Chief Operator who had joined me and went up on the bridge. I was very much disgusted to learn that the only guns on the ship were shot-guns. I can not picture a plane being brought down by one of them. On the port wing of the bridge another gigantic American flag had been laid out on the deck, a twin to the one that was nailed to the top of the bridge. Officers and crew stood about anxiously searching the evening sky for any signs of the planes returning. Off in the distance the HMS Cumberland was signaling to us with a flashing light. I attempted to answer by swinging our big searchlight, the only light powerful enough to be visible at that time of day, towards them a short interval for a dot and holding it longer for a dash. The letters were evidently too crudely made to be understandable and they were unable to make anything out of it. They came over anyway, arriving some 30 minutes later.

As I gave up the signaling to the Cumberland I noticed two Japanese destroyers approaching us, and the most welcome sight I have ever seen--an American flag being run up to indicate that she wished to speak to us. By a series of code flags they signaled the question, "Are you damaged?"

To which we ran up in answer, "Yes!"

"Are you in need of immediate assistance?"

"No," we replied, and then, "Please stand by."

With her white uniformed gun crews standing by their loaded and ready anti aircraft guns, they ran up the answer that brought a measure of relief to us, "We will heave to and guard you."

During the bombardment the Italian liner Conte Verde was passing us at a distance of a few hundred yards on her way down river. As the second Japanese destroyer passed her on its way toward us an exchange of signals was made and the Italian ship was presumably advised to return to us in order that both passenger ships might be guarded at the same time.

The dark grey destroyers ploughed slowly around us until the arrival of the Cumberland, at which time, seeing they were no longer needed, they headed upriver and were soon lost to sight in the gathering darkness.

A small boat containing a Commander, Doctors and a small crew was sent over to us to aid us as best they could. They returned to their ship about 8:15PM and we immediately hauled in our anchor and headed for Kobe, Japan. The grind of the heavy anchor chains coming on board was a sweet sound that night, as was the throb of the engines coming to life to put distance between us and Shanghai. For the first few hours we ran with almost no lights showing, although lights were almost unnecessary on that brilliant moonlight night.

In the radio room, doors and windows closed, transmitters running and a soldering iron adding its bit of heat, it became rapidly uncomfortably hot. Here the three operators sat all night long until signals would no longer span the thousands of miles to the United States and we could no longer put through the many messages of well being that were sent by both crew and passengers to loved ones at home. The Globe Wireless station in San Francisco, KTK, turned over its entire marine radio facilities to the traffic of the President Hoover, giving a service so prompt that in many cases the families of those on board had radiograms delivered to them before they had learned of the ships plight.

At 1 AM ships time I went below to catch a nap before going on watch again at 4 o'clock, but sleep was out of the question and the rest of the morning was spent talking with other members of our quarters and discussing the days unexpected outcome.

The next day dawned sparkling and clear. Toward evening we rounded the Southern end of Kyushu and passed close in to shore. People could be discerned on the beach waving to us and in the evening sunlight the whole scene seemed so peaceful that it was hard indeed to believe that just 24 hours before death had rained on us out of the same placid kind of a sky. It all seems incredible and unbelievable but we were forced to admit the reality of our experience when a snarling plane dove close to us, involuntarily making us duck, as we entered the harbor of Honolulu. How good that "U S Army" looked to us on the side of the plane as it roared past!

ROBERT L SHRADER

157-P W6BNB - "Bob" was CHOP for SOWP for several years. His books on Electronic Communication were named as among the top five published in the world. Publisher - McGraw-Hill.

