

Another View of the Early Days

—by Orley B. Cahdill

In his article, "The Early Days," appearing in the March 1988 issue of *Invader*, Tony Curto told of a very exciting day mission he had flown. I was navigator on that mission, and Sgt. Joe Wagner was gunner. As Tony recalled, things went very well until we picked up the target just north of Pyongyang. We were to destroy railroad overpass bridges and do whatever other damage we could along the railroad running from Pyongyang to Sinanju, a town north of the capital, and on a river which emptied into the sea.

We were leading a flight of four B-26's, and began a let-down as soon as we crossed the main battle lines. We circled around Pyongyang on the deck while south of it, and picked up the railroad just to the north of the city. No sooner had we reached the railroad than Wagner, the gunner, called and said that he had seen a large explosion and fire and thought that one of our formation had been shot down, which turned out to be the case. I was navigating from the right seat, and had been given a large camera by the intelligence officer with a request that I get photos, but as soon will become apparent I had no time even to pick up that camera from the floor.

Our tactics were to fly on the deck, about 25 feet, or at most 50 feet, above the ground and about the same distance to one side of the track and when we came to an overpass bridge Tony would toggle off a bomb and simultaneously tip the wing up, effectively tossing the bomb into the target. As Tony mentioned, our squadron commander and his crew had been blown from the sky a few days previously by a premature explosion of a bomb.

We were well into the run, and had taken out a couple of bridges when we came to a cut through a ridge. The track ran through the cut, and it seemed that the tracks were about 40 to 50 feet down from the top of the cut. We went through about fifteen or twenty feet above the tracks and about the same distance below the top of the cut, which at our speed of about 325 miles per hour made everything zip by. By the same token, it seemed that our senses were at an absolute peak, things registered on our minds and memories which had only been glimpsed.

A couple of things—three, in fact—fascinated me later about the cut. First, I glanced up at the top, and there sat a military tank—one which had guns and carried people, although I never determined whether it was a relic of earlier fighting or was on guard there. It was several feet above us, and no threat whatever. But the tank was in my view only a few seconds, and all of my attention was taken by a group of people—soldiers—working on the tracks. We appeared over them so suddenly that Tony could not bring our guns to bear, although he tried valiantly. One whom I assumed was in charge was standing up, but ducking to one side, and looking at us, as if he thought he would be beamed (which he would have, had I the means!) We were only a few feet above him as we passed over, and it seemed as if he and I looked into each other's eyes. I couldn't determine the color of his eyes, but later by careful probing as to uniform colors, etc., the intelligence officer developed that he was most likely a Chinese officer. Tony quickly radioed the following planes to try and get the men, and our gunner also gave them a quick squirt.

The third experience in the railroad cut was as we were emerging from it at the north end. It had been a very exhilarating experience trying to get the soldiers, but this was a little

shock. By this time I had given up any idea of getting pictures, and was trying very hard to spot both targets and obstructions for Tony. As we emerged from the cut, some cables passed a few inches beneath us. As they went under the nose both Tony and I saw them and both of our heads turned to the other in a classic double-take to say, "Did You See Those CABLES!!" I recall that we both laughed, even though it would not have been funny to hit them. But we still had the mission to finish so we wasted no time discussing them.

We emerged from the cut with other targets ahead of us, and I noticed several people—probably peasant farmers—working in a field some distance ahead. At the same time I located a bridge near them. It was one of our targets. I pointed it out to Tony, who already had seen it. He squeezed off a few .50 caliber rounds toward the people. As we approached, they heard us and one of them began a slow, lumbering trot toward the bridge, evidently looking for a place to hide. I kept willing him or her not to go any farther and was relieved when finally, apparently deciding that he or she couldn't make it to the bridge, the person lay down in a shallow ditch. Tony threw a bomb into the overpass bridge and, according to the gunner, destroyed it.

We burst out over the town of Sinanju into a hornet's nest. The defenses probably had been alerted by the noise of explosions and they were ready. The flak was very intense, and seemed to consist of .50 caliber as well as 20 and 40 millimeter explosive flak. The sky was filled with tracers, and we could see a gun emplacement some distance away blasting away at us. As Tony wrote, he got it with a rocket. We were in a rather precarious position. Tracers seemed to have us in a cone, they were going above and below and to the right and left. It seemed impossible to fly through. Tony started to turn left and was confronted with a solid wall of explosions. He aborted the left turn and started to turn right, which was as bad. Tony said, "Wow, it's all over the place." About that time there was a loud explosion and the aircraft lurched fifty or a hundred feet higher. I looked over at Tony and he give the trim tab wheel a spin to show that some of our cables had been cut. We couldn't get much lower, but off to our left a short distance was the river, which, as I recall, was almost dry. I suggested to Tony that we duck down behind the river banks and go out to sea, which was only a few miles away. He did, and we soon were out of danger, except for a long trip home with a damaged airplane.

I recall that after we were hit I called the gunner and asked, "Gunner, are you all right?" It took two or three calls to get a response. Then he came on the telephone saying in an excited, high pitched voice, "I'm all right, but our tail is shot off, I can see right through it." Later, after things had cooled down, he called me and said, "I apologize for not answering you when you first called, but when I heard your voice, I thought it was St. Peter, and I was afraid to answer." Clearly his sense of humor had not been damaged.

As we rallied the other members of the flight, it became clear that we had lost one of the ships. Tony called several times to try and raise our missing plane, but it soon became clear that they had flown their final mission. Our return to base was much as described by Tony—but all these years later I can still see those men in the cut as well as the tank, the cables, and above all the carpet of flak that was laid out for us at Sinanju. □

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