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BOMBS OVER BURMA

A YANK Reporter Writes First Eyewitness Story of a Moonlight Raid on Rangoon By American B-24s From India

By SGT. ED CUNNINGHAM
YANK Field Correspondent

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It was a bomber's moon, the kind that puts a shimmering silvery finger on the target and holds it there until blotted out by the fire and smoke of bursting bombs: That's what happened to Rangoon when the Man in The Moon teamed up with Yank bombardiers for a little workout on the Japs.

This is the first eyewitness account of an air attack on Burma by India-based American bombers. I saw it through the open bomb-bay doors of a giant B-24, stretched out on the floor of the radio compartment with my head hanging out over the catwalk.

The moon hadn't come up yet when our flight of B-24s took off from this U. S. bomber base. Capt. Joseph S. Pirruccello, squadron operations officer, briefed pilots and crews in a tiny smokefilled room lighted only by a gasoline lantern. After announcing the primary and secondary targets for the mission, plus usual weather information, Pirruccello told them to expect Japanese night fighters on this trip over Rangoon.

In Last Bomber To Take Off

Lt. Col. Conrad Necrasson, of Cooperstown, N. Y., 31-year-old group commander, added:

"There's a 10-day furlough waiting for you gunners who get Jap night fighters on this mission. Good luck to you." He added as an afterthought: "Incidentally, we all got shot down over Bankok [*sic*] the other night, according to the Japs."

Our big, four-motored bomber, with Capt. Pirruccello at the controls, was last to take off. It was individual bombing tonight, not formation attack. Pirruccello, as flight leader, chose to be last in place over the target. He would take the butt of the attack rather than have ack-ack guns and night fighters gang up on one of his other pilots. Likewise, he wanted to check on damage done by preceding planes. So we took off in the hot spot.

The moon came up at about 11:30 to lead us into Rangoon. A few hours out, the crew started to warm up their guns. They weren't going to miss any Jap fighters – or that 10-day furlough – because of a cold gun.

Sgt. Pete Lanchak, rear gunner, suggested I fire a few bursts from the waist-window gun, just to get the feel of it in case one of our gunners got shot and needed a pinch hitter. So I buried several rounds in a nearby cloud, the busts [*sic*] of fire disappearing into billowy whiteness.

Soon after that, Sgt. Larry Phipps, the engineer, came around to get my signature on a form which lists the names of all members of the plane's crew and the passengers. Our crew's names looked like the line-up of a Notre Dame football squad. Here's how they were listed with home-town and ancestry supplied by later questioning:

Capt. Joseph S. Pirruccello, Omaha, Nebr., pilot; Italian.
2nd Lt. Richard T. Henning, Albemarle, N. C., co-pilot; Norwegian.
2nd Lt. Robert J. Shimanek, Chicago, Ill., bomnavigator; English.
2nd Lt. Fletcher F. Taylor Jr., Dallas, Tex., navigator; English.
T/Sgt. John W. Irme, Burlington. N. J., engineer-gunner; Hungarian.
Sgt. Joseph V. LeBlanc, New Orleans La., radio operator; French.
T/Sgt. Lawrence L. Phipps, Ponca City, Okla., engineer; Scotch-Irish.
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S/Sgt. Marcel R. Vuilleuoier, Los Angeles, Calif., aerial photographer; French.

A half-hour away from Rangoon, Pirruccello ordered all gunners to their positions for the attack. Phipps climbed into the top turret, LeBlanc and Irme manned the two waist-window guns, with Lanchak in the rear and Vuilleuoier nosing his camera down through the belly turret.

Ten minutes later, through the interphone, Pirruccello gave the alert order. We were still 50 miles from Rangoon. But Jap searchlights were already visible.

We were up to 1400 feet now. The searchlights grew brighter and red flares from ack-ack spit furiously into the moonlit sky. Over the interphone, Henning ordered everyone to don oxygen masks. The navigator phoned minute-by-minute course directions to Pirruccello. We leveled off at about 1800 feet and started up the right bank of the Rangoon River.

Over the interphone, the navigator called "We will be over the target in four minutes." I opened the door leading from the radio compartment to the catwalk and stretched out on the floor with my head hanging over the bomb-bay doors. Equipped with oxygen mask and interphone I had a ringside seat.

The searchlights were after us now. Long stabs of white light sought to box us in for ack-ack batteries below. But Pirruccello kept the B-24 just out of range, eluding them like the tacklers he dodged when playing halfback for Creighton University.

Two feet below me, a pair of yellow-painted blockbusters nestled in the bomb racks. Behind them were more thousand-pounders: I reached out and patted the nearest one. "Give 'em hell baby," I said.

Suddenly the bomb-bay doors swung open. Blasts of icy wind whipped into my face, watering my eyes and temporarily obscuring my vision. When my eyes cleared, I thought for a minute that I was back in the States witnessing a Fourth-of-July celebration.

The ack-ack was getting hotter and higher now. It climbed up toward us relentlessly. Huge billows of smoke and roaring flames marked the spots below where other B-24s had dropped their loads.

Our target was a warehouse. We started our run. Through the interphone, Shimanek called, "On course!" He had levelled his bubble. Seconds later came the bombardier's "Bombs away!" He yelled it out like an Indian war whoop. Two yellow thousand-pounders in the front rack dropped away simultaneously. The others followed a split second later. The plane lurched upward as it lost its load, jolting my head further out of the door over the open bomb bay.

I lost sight of our bombs in the layer of darkness between the plane and the ground. Down below the earth trembled with the shock of exploding bombs dropped by our predecessors over the target. At one point along the dock, three mountains of smoke rose up from direct hits. Bombs had been dropped so accurately it was as if a drill sergeant had called, "Dress right dress!"

Hounded by Ground Lights

The ack-ack was getting closer now. It no longer had the festive look of a Fourth of July. Three searchlight batteries were trying to pick us up. They chased us all over the sky, once flashing across our tail momentarily before we ducked out of range again.

Our B-24s rode over the target area for four minutes after Shimanek "killed" his bomb trip. Pirruccello wanted to check on the damage and give Vuilleouier time to get pictures of it.

The ack-ack was getting too close for comfort now. Then the Jap radio-spotter system picked us up. A series of six red lights trailed along in our wake, pointing out our course to gun batteries and fighter planes. The train of red ground lights hounded us continuously. They were setting us up for concentrated fire. Our other planes had cut out for home. It was us against the field now. The bomb-bay doors slammed shut. My ringside view of the ack-ack and bursting bombs was cut off. I peered out the side window to see the last round.

From his waist-gun position Irme interphoned the appearance of two Jap night fighters off to the right. They were looking us over, but wouldn't come within range. The Japs don't like the guns on a B-24.

Shimanek called out from the nose: "There's a twin-engine plane about 3000 feet below us. She's headed in the opposite direction." A few seconds later, Shimanek reported again: "Three gun batteries and two searchlights directly ahead. They're lining us up."

That was the final gong so far as we were concerned. Pirruccello cut sharply to the right, away from the gun batteries, and went into a slanting dive at 230 miles per hour. We levelled off at about 7000 feet and tailed it for home.

Behind us, Rangoon warehouses and docks still burned fiercely. A red glow marked the blacked-out city of ancient pagodas and monasteries. Rangoon, derived from the Burmese word "Yangon" meaning, "the end of strife", wasn't very appropriately named tonight.

No.5 Still Fails To Return

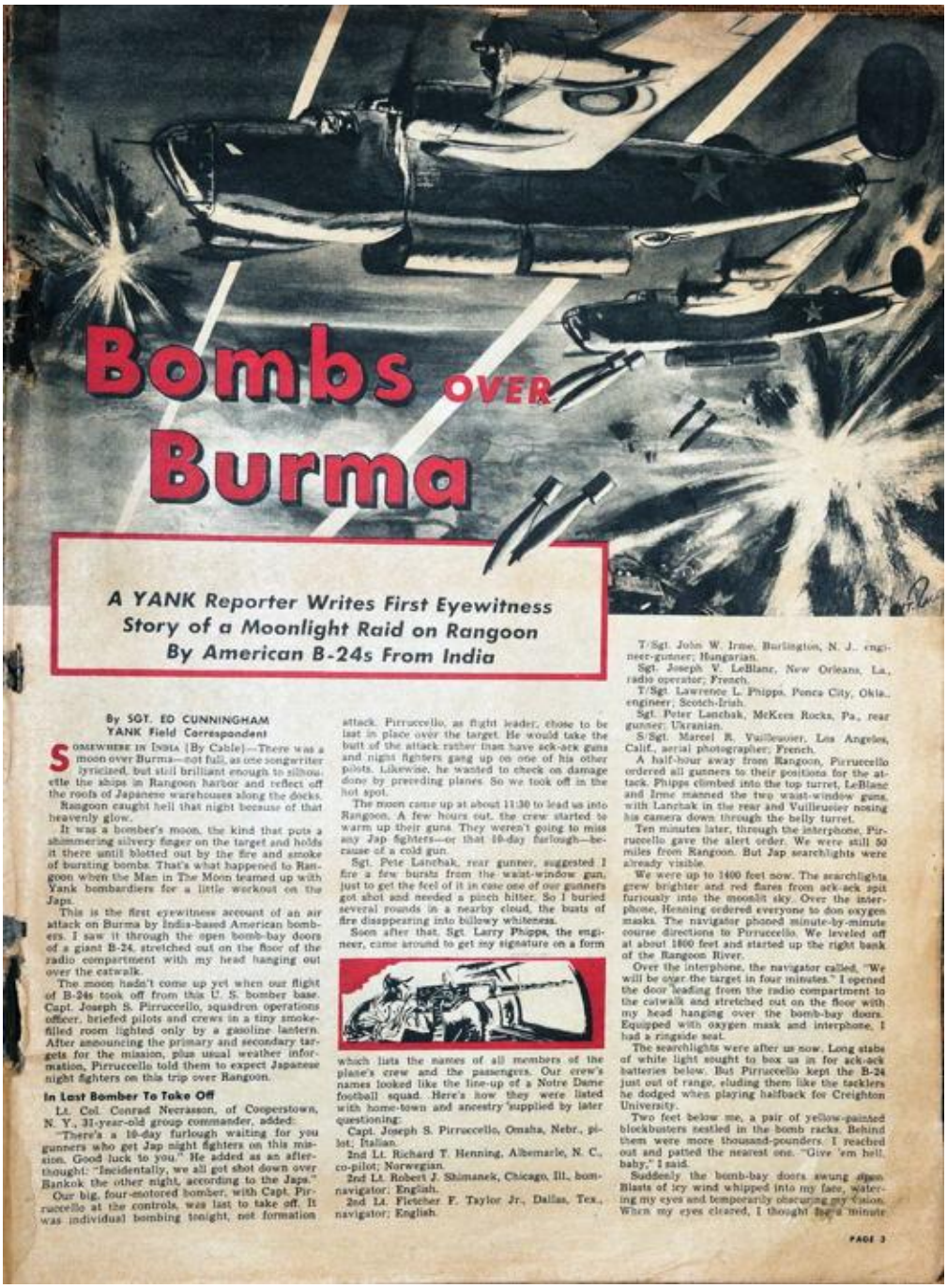
The Jap fighter planes didn't follow us, much to the disgust of Lanchek and Irme. They had counted on

getting the Japs out into the open where they didn't have their ack-ack guns to keep us doubly busy. Pete and Johnny would have to wait for another crack at the pea-shooters – and that 10-day furlough.

All planes in the flight were slated to report to Pirruccello at a designated time en route home. And their reports came in one by one until only No.5 plane was unreported. LeBlanc, the radio operator, kept tuned in continuously, waiting for the missing message. It never came.

At post-flight briefing, when we had landed, pilots and crews gave detailed accounts of the mission. Five direct hits on the docks, other hits on the warehouses, was the score. Some of our bombers had exchanged shots with Jap fighter planes at long range. But nobody had seen plane No. 5 after it had reached the target area. It's crew of four officers and five enlisted men are still unreported.

The moon over Burma knows what happened to the nine Americans on plane No. 5. But it can't tell us. It's only our silent partner.



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