English 1A
Floyd D. Steiner
13 March 1974

November 21st, 1944, dawned gloomy and bitter in Hungtse Province in East China. I found myself in a small rice paddy, soaked to the skin, hopelessly entangled in a maze of bamboo and parachute cord and covered by an expanse of white nylon that draped over the tall grasses like an untidy tent. My mind flashed back to the intelligence briefing so many hours before and recalled that Hungtse Province was "sparsely occupied" by Japanese infantry and should offer a "fair" chance of survival and escape. The disarming peace and quiet of the countryside provided welcome relief from the incessant monotone of engines. Relieved from the uncertainties and pressures of attempting to nurse a crippled bomber back to friendly territory, I freed myself from the parachute harness and sat back to take stock of my assets and liabilities. Fatigue, stark and inevitable, began to take over. I dozed, in spite of my obvious problems, and was startled into consciousness by the appearance of a tall Chinese, dressed in a pyramidal coolie hat, gray quilted jacket and trousers and straw sandals. He carried a tall wicker basket, like an over-sized laundry hamper, and proceeded, without a word, to gather up the parachute nylon and stuff it in the basket.

The ordeal began, with my crew in a B-29 on a routine bombing mission over the Japanese port city of Omura. The objective was a steel plant dedicated to production of ball bearings which were desperately NEEDED by Japanese war industries. I was the navigator on the crew and the only other member of the eleven-man crew whom I shall mention in this writing was my close friend,

Ira B. Redmon, the bombardier. Our flight from the staging base at Hsinching, China, to Kyushu was the usual monotony, the calm before the storm. Thirty minutes short of the target we crossed the coast line, which appeared remote and serene twenty five thousand feet below. As we turned on our final heading toward the target area I could see Ira slouched over his bomb sight. His calm, East Texas drawl broke into the interphone, calling out dropping angles on the bomb run. He opened the bomb bay doors and the huge aircraft leaped with apparent relief as eight tons of bombs were released from its belly. Ira's voice announced "Bombs away!" and then, "fighter at twelve o'clock." These were his last words. I heard the ominous rumble of the "50's" in the upper turret near my head, and the anti-climactic rattle of spent casings falling into the collector bin near my feet; this ceased abruptly as the entire front cockpit erupted in acrid smoke and screaming fragments.

The airplane wheeled sharply to the left, shuddering like a wounded goose, as we fell out of the formation and began a rapid, involuntary descent. The commander's voice, "don oxygen masks," was hardly necessary, as the white vapor and sudden chill in the cockpit told the crew that our cabin pressure was gone. The commander's voice crackled in the interphone again, " Navigator, I need a heading home, just in case we can keep this thing flying." I left my seat, climbing forward through the debris, passing the commander a small bit of paper bearing the notation, "270 degrees," and hoping to discover the seriousness of our situation without further conversation. The pilots were both struggling with the controls, fighting to maintain altitude and coaxing the crippled behemoth around to a westerly heading.

As I moved forward, I called to Ira and grasped his shoulder. He was slumped forward in his seat, his gunsight swinging impotently with the roll of the airplane. His body was limp, his face shattered by the explosive shell of the Japanese fighter. Hampered by heavy clothing, armored suit, parachute and oxygen mask, It required almost super-human effort to drag his body back through the crowded cockpit to a litter. My attempts to administer plasma failed; he was dead.

As each surviving crew member took stock of his situation, reporting conditions to the commander, he began to weigh the odds on the two options open to us. One was to continue our descent to a ditching in the China Sea and possible rescue by a friendly submarine; the other was to conserve our altitude as long as possible on the two remaining engines and hope to reach the China coast and the better chance of survival among the friendly Chinese. After discussion of pro and con by the crew, we all agreed that we should try to make it to a parachute landing in China.

During the endless five hours required for the crippled airplane to cross the China Sea, I interrupted my navigation long enough to rig a spare parachute to Ira's body, as the idea of leaving his remains to crash with the airplane sickened me. The sight of the China coast was welcome, although we all knew that a thousand miles of enemy-occupied territory lay between us and a friendly air strip. The altimeter read five thousand feet as we crossed the coast-line; it was impossible to climb on two engines and an eight thousand foot mountain pass lay fifty miles inland. The moment of decision was at hand.

As we reached a remote area near Hungtse Lake, the final radio report went out, "Actor 38 abandoning ship." According to plan, the co-pilot was the first to drop out through the yawning nose hatch.

I waited the crucial ten seconds, saw his parachute billow out, and pushed Ira's body through the hatch. The static line snapped tight, and the parachute opened. Now it was my turn, and somehow it never occurred to me that parachutes were not exactly fail-safe. I dropped through the hatch and experienced a sensation of absolute quiet, a great sense of relief and a dreamy, unreal feeling that I was being born upward by the fragile fabric suspended above me. My reverie was short and I was suddenly startled to note that objects on the ground were taking shape. I tried to remember my training in parachute landings, but was interrupted by an undignified crash into the water and mud of the rice paddy.

My new-found Chinese friend, in spite of the language barrier, recognized the tiny replica of the Stars and Stripes on my shoulder. He picked up the hamper containing my parachute, motioned for me to follow, and trotted briskly down a pathway to a small walled village in the valley. We entered the gate, between two scowling stone lions, turned down a narrow alley and stopped abruptly at the door of a hidden store room. He shouted a pass-word in his own language, the door opened, and I entered to be greeted by my crew. We were fortunate to be in the hands of the Chinese Communist Underground. Thirty five days later ten surviving crew members and the remains of First Lieutenant Ira B. Redmon were delivered to American Forces at Chengtaq China.