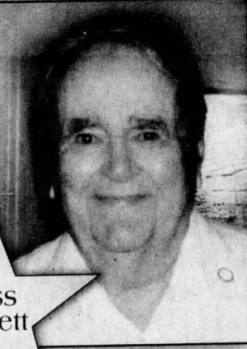




Brazos Valley HEROES

One in a series of tributes to members of "The Greatest Generation" who served our country during World War II

Ross
Garrett

Second of two parts

By Bill Youngkin
Special to The Eagle

The nine members of Ross Garrett's B-24 crew were shot down in Burma on May 1, 1943. Two members of the crew were killed by attacking Japanese Zeros and one parachuted out of the plane before it crash landed. He was captured and subsequently shot by the Japanese. Crew members gave first aid to the engineer, Bodell, who was badly injured and could not travel. He was left with the plane as the remaining five attempted to escape the Japanese.

During their attempt to flee, another crew member was killed by the Japanese and another was wounded when they were captured.

The Japanese took the surviving crew members, including Bodell, to Rangoon, Burma, and placed them in the former British Rangoon Prison. Here's Garrett's account of what happened afterward:

"When we arrived our engineer, Bodell, was badly wounded, and Lt. Kavanagh, our pilot, was also wounded. They were treated for their injuries, but Bodell was left in the infirmary. We had to reuse his old bandage on his arm and you couldn't keep it very clean no matter how hard they tried. As a result, his arm became very infected.

"After our arrival, the Japanese also indoctrinated us in proper obedience. They placed a table in the prison yard and you were told to bend over and hold onto the table. A Japanese soldier stood about twenty feet away with his rifle pointed at your chest. You were told that if you removed your hands from the table you would be shot. They then proceeded to beat you on your arms, back and elbows with a cane and sometimes a pipe. If you withstood the beating and kept your hands on the table, you lived. If you lifted your hands from the table, you died.

"One of our Japanese guards was born and raised in Hawaii but left to join up with the Emperor. We called him Tarzan. Whenever I went out on a work detail he would make sure he was assigned to us. He called me 'Tex' and he worked me over with the butt of his rifle every chance he got. After we were liberated I checked on Tarzan with the British, who informed me that the Burmese made sure Tarzan never made it back to Japan or Hawaii.

"One day shortly after we arrived, I came back from a work detail. The guys told me Bodell was asking for me and to go check on him. When I went in to see him he raised up and grabbed me, held onto me and cried like a baby. We both knew he was dying. Two days later we buried him. That left four of us still alive.

"Lt. Kavanagh was a good pilot and a good man and he felt responsible for all of us. He had been wounded, but I think he felt so badly about what was happening to all of us that, more than

his wound, is what finally killed him. After we buried him, that left Cotton, our co-pilot, Moxley, our navigator, and me."

During the time of his capture, Garrett's wife Thelma was told by the War Department only that his plane was missing over Burma.

Thelma remembers that time: "Our daughter Sharon was born on April 26, 1943, five days before Ross was shot down. He never knew our child had been born until after he was liberated. After I was visited by the War Department I prayed very hard for his safety. One night I had a dream, and in that dream Ross and two other men walked out of the jungle toward me. I knew then he was alive and that we would be together again."

As the days turned into weeks and the weeks into years, Garrett said, more and more men in the camp died.

"It was a lot harder for the bigger guys than the smaller ones. It seemed as if they shrunk faster and lost their strength faster. I remember watching one big Australian fellow who was a boxing champion before the war just die before us daily. I just tried to tough it out. I couldn't do much about my situation, so I just tried to survive, one day at a time.

"The last few months we got different camp commanders and things got a little better, but the problem was lack of food and disease. Just before we were liberated I conducted the last burial, and that is why I have the burial detail Bible and I have kept it ever since. I'm glad I wasn't used for me."

Ross and the other two members of his crew were liberated on May 1, 1945, exactly two years after being shot down and captured. His weight had slipped from 165 to 110 pounds. He was hospitalized in India and eventually returned to the U.S. On June 9, 1945, he was reunited with his wife, Thelma, and was able to see his daughter, Sharon, for the first time in Nacogdoches.

After being discharged he returned to school at Stephen F. Austin State College, got his degree and taught school. He eventually entered the extension service and in 1953 became the extension agent for Madison County, where he remained until his retirement.

"I guess I'm lucky to be alive. To survive, you had to be strong mentally as well as physically to cope with what happened to us. It was tough, tough, tough."

Of the crew only Garrett remains today. He has his family, he has his memories and he has the burial detail Bible.

Ross Garrett's name can be found on the Brazos Valley Veterans Memorial. For more information, to make a contribution, or if you know a World War II Veteran whose story needs to be told, contact the BVM at www.veteransmemorial.org or Bill Youngkin at (979) 260-7030.

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