

# 12

Ralph Wells immediately hung up the phone in haste and shouted across the room at Jack. "That was our American consul asking almost desperately if we had any shipping available for a rescue or evacuation mission to Nanking."

"What?" Jack swiveled his chair around and looked at Ralph in shock.

"It seems that the situation there has gotten terribly worse. Japanese soldiers are basically running amuck, raping and pillaging anyone and everything they can get their hands on." Ralph's voice was grave and grim. "They want to get the rest of any remaining Americans who did not heed earlier urgings to leave the city as soon as possible."

Instantly Jack responded, "Sherwood left there last week to go to Hankow to check out the prospects of relocating our operations there, along with the retreating Chinese government. But that still leaves Andrews, Johnson, and Fielding from our offices there and their families."

"Absolutely," Ralph confirmed.

"Ok, so what do we have that can move immediately?"  
Ralph grabbed a sheet of paper and examined it for a minute or two. "We have three tankers, the *Mei Ping*, the *Mei An*, and the *Mei Hsia* available, but they are not fully loaded."

"Fully loaded!" Jack let out. "That's not the issue. Order them fueled up and ready to go immediately. They are just oil tankers, but they ought to be able to pick up a couple of hundreds of people."

"Gotcha, you, boss," Ralph said, picking up the phone again to issue the orders.

"Are we going to get any sort of escort or cover for this mission?" Jack asked.

"Oh, yeah," Ralph said. "The navy's river patrol has the gunboat the *Panay* alerted and ready to go."

"We can probably get the flotilla off in a couple of hours if they are willing to wait," Jack speculated, while reaching for the phone on his desk. "I'll call Admiral Yarnell and see if we can get this going right away."

"Say, boss. I think I want to go with them," Ralph said. "I'll get on one of the tankers."

"Are you sure? This might not be an ordinary run." Jack expressed his concern.

“With the *Panay* providing cover, what could happen?” Ralph said a bit flippantly.

“I guess you are right. But don’t do anything foolhardy and bring those people and ships back here safe and sound.”

“Of course, Jack. Of course.”

By late afternoon, a flotilla of three Stanvac oil tankers and the *USS Panay* were steaming upriver as quickly as possible to answer the distress call from Nanking. As they left Shanghai, they passed by and could still see the tangled remains of the battles recently waged.

“Wow, they sure pulverized the city,” Captain Carl H. Carlson said to Ralph as they stood at the railing of the bridge of the *Mei Ping*.

“You should see the district around the Sihang Warehouse. It is basically just rubble and dust,” Ralph offered.

“Think this will last long?” Captain Carlson asked.

“Hard to say. But I am certain it has already lasted longer than the Japanese thought it would.”

They heard the sound of planes above and looked up to see a flight of Japanese bombers heading toward Nanking. That had been an almost daily occurrence for nearly all of November, and now the first two weeks of December.

“Poor devils,” Captain Carlson said. “I hear they are really taking it on the chin in Nanking.”

“That’s why we are going. We need to rescue some of our people before it’s too late,” noted Ralph.

After twelve uneventful hours, the flotilla reached Nanking on December 11<sup>th</sup>. Early in the morning of December 12<sup>th</sup> the evacuees, including dozens of Chinese, packed themselves onto the tankers and the *Panay* itself took four embassy staff members and ten civilians. Making haste, the flotilla left for the return trip just after noon. The sun was shining, and Ralph was on the deck of the *Mei Ping* to enjoy the view and watch the crew of the *Panay* leisurely go about their business. He could not help but notice a flight of Japanese planes approaching the city from the east. Suddenly, a single Japanese plane broke away from its formation and began to menacingly circle overhead.

Amazingly, as crewmembers of the *Panay* and Ralph and some of the passengers on the *Mei Ping* watched the plane, it started an attack dive and commenced bombing the *Panay*. It so happened that one of the passengers on the

*Panay* was the Universal News newsreel cameraman, Norman Alley. Seeing what was happening, he alertly sprang into action and captured most of the aerial attack on film.

“Christ! They are attacking us!” Ralph screamed.

“Take cover everyone!” The oil tankers were absolutely defenseless as they too were assaulted by the thirteen Japanese planes raining destruction down on them and the *Panay*. The crew of the *Panay* did what it could to return fire and defend itself and the tankers, but after an hour and casualties among its crew, the order was given to abandon the badly damaged ship.

Captain Carlson, of the *Mei Ping* almost at the outset of the onslaught, had shouted above the noise and chaos, “Abandon ship, get off the ship!”. While passengers and crews alike from the oil tankers and the *Panay* attempted to make it to shore, a small Japanese army boat approached and machine-gunned the struggling men abandoning their ships. Many of the Chinese passengers on the tankers were killed outright.

Ralph hit the water and began to swim toward the shore of the Yangtze. Not a very strong swimmer, gotta keep going, he urged himself. Gotta keep going.

“Hey, I’m here,” he called out to some of the men who had already reached the shore. “Help me, please.”

“I got you,” a fellow said as he waded out to grab Ralph’s hand.

“Thanks, pal,” Ralph said, heaving and puffing from exhaustion.

After catching his breath, Ralph leaped up to join in saving those still in the water. While doing so, he quickly surveyed the damage. Two of the tankers were almost completely destroyed and on fire. One was beached which enabled its passengers to more or less just jump to the shore. Some bodies of unlucky victims began to drift near the shore. Ralph recognized one of the floaters and waded out to carefully guide a lifeless Captain Carlson to the riverbank. I was just talking to him this morning, Ralph thought. Goddammit.

The launches from the *Panay* ferried their wounded to shore and then circled the tankers to pluck people still in the water. Fearing the return of the Japanese patrol boat, everyone on shore hunkered down in the reeds for some time, rendering as much assistance to the wounded as possible. One member of the *Panay* crew and an Italian foreign correspondent were very seriously wounded. Ralph and a few seamen from the *Panay* decided to try to get them and everyone else to the nearest Chinese village. Everyone painfully and laboriously limped through some rough terrain for several miles before reaching a tiny Chinese village. At least there they got a little hot water and some food, but not much else. Unfortunately, the Italian newsman and the wounded crewmember of the *Panay* succumbed to their wounds in the village. Bedding down on

mats graciously provided by the Chinese villagers, the marooned people spent an awful night of little sleep.

“What are we going to do now?” Ralph asked the army officer who was the adjutant at the American embassy in Nanking.

“We are going to have to get to a bigger town and send word somehow about what happened and get some help,” the captain said. With the assistance of the embassy Chinese translator, the captain enlisted the aid of a few Chinese soldiers who were in the area and had been attracted to the sound of the attack. They struggled to march another several hours, the dozen miles or so to the nearest real town. Once there, they discovered a platoon of Chinese soldiers with a radio. The army officer managed to convey what happened to his headquarters and call for quick assistance. The calls for help were broadcast out to a couple of British ships that happened to be on the river not too far away.

“What now?” Ralph asked the captain.

“The radio men say that they have gotten through to the British ships *Ladybird* and *Bee*. The Brits are going to come upstream a bit to pick us up. Possibly by tomorrow morning.”

“So, we’ll have to spend the night here and then get back to the river to be picked up.” Ralph blurted out.

“Yes,” confirmed the captain.

The next day, the motley survivors, cold and hungry, loaded up on some Chinese sampans on the nearby creek, which took them to the riverbank to await rescue. When they got to the bank, they saw the approaching *Bee*, and a badly damaged *Ladybird*, which had been shelled by Japanese army artillery a couple of days before. Another American gunboat was with them, the *Oahu*, and between the three ships, all the weary and traumatized survivors were accommodated for their evacuation to Shanghai. It took them three days, after the sinking of the *Panay*, to get the injured and wounded to the safety of the American flag and the Union Jack. As he boarded the *Oahu*, Ralph looked at the American flag and momentarily wondered how much protection those stars and stripes might offer anymore.