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A Long Way Back to Kunming.

A Reminiscence by Robert F. Layher, as told to Bob Bergin, Alexandria, VA (bbergin99@gmail.com).

The American Volunteer Group (AVG) Flying Tigers existed in what the Chinese call “interesting” times. The Tigers led lives of adventure and excitement, particularly in the early months of World War II, when things could unexpectedly take a dangerous turn—even when there was no direct contact with the enemy.

Pilot Bob Layher remembered those times well. When he joined the AVG in 1941, he was a US Navy pilot, a patrol plane commander in Consolidated PBV Catalina flying-boats. That would have been adventure enough for most young men, but Layher wanted more action. He had tried to volunteer for one of the Royal Air Force’s Eagle Squadrons, but the Navy would not release him. The AVG did manage to secure his release and later satisfied his thirst for adventure. Layher saw a good bit of action over Burma and China, but one easy mission stuck in his memory—an escort assignment that turned into a week of adventure he was not sure he would survive.

The following account is based on an interview I conducted with Layher at an AVG reunion in Kissimmee, Florida, on 18 April 2004. He reviewed an edited transcript of the recorded interview for accuracy. —B.B.

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I was in the AVG’s Second Squadron, the Panda Bears. We had been down in Rangoon since December 28, 1941, helping the British Royal Air Force defend the city. By the end of February 1942, the Japanese were very close and we had to evacuate. Although some of the AVG went up to Magwe in north Burma, most of us went back to Kunming, our primary base in China.

We had been back in Kunming for perhaps a week or ten days. I don’t recall the dates exactly, but it was early March 1942. The Generalissimo, Chiang Kai-shek, and the Madame, who resided in Chungking, China’s wartime capital, flew into Kunming to honor the AVG and thank us for our efforts in the defense of Rangoon. We had a very nice banquet that night. It was a memorable evening. Many of us met Chiang Kai-shek for the first time. The Generalissimo gave us silk scarves with his chop on them and the Madame was very kind to all of us. She made a little address in which she called us her “angels, with or without wings.”

Early the next morning we were back on the job. We always had six pilots on alert at the airfield, and I was among the six who had the duty that morning. Harvey Greenlaw, [Commanding Officer Claire Lee] Chennault’s executive officer, came over to the alert shack and told us that the Generalissimo and the Madame were going to depart in the next hour, and he would like us to fly a little farewell exhibition for them just before they boarded their airplane. Once they were in the air, we were to join up and escort them on their way back to Chungking. Greenlaw explained that our P-40s would escort them just ninety miles east of Kunming. There the Generalissimo’s transport would turn northeast and head for Chungking. At that point they would be out of range

of Japanese fighters that were based in northern Thailand and French Indochina, and we would turn back. That was the beginning of a fateful day—almost a fateful week, in fact.

While the Generalissimo and the Madame stood by their transport saying their goodbyes, we flew overhead and did some tight formation work. Frank Lawlor was leading the flight and Greg Boyington was flying on his wing. The second flight was Gil Bright and Hank Gesselbracht, and the third was Red Probst and myself.

I happened to be the tail-end Charlie that day. So as our little air show was finishing and they were starting to board their airplane, Lawlor took us in what we called a “string.” We would fly over them and, in turn, each of us would do a slow roll. Well, the airfield at Kunming is at six thousand feet, and Lawlor only had us up at about eight thousand feet. The air is a little rare up there, and we were fully loaded with ammo and fuel. To come out of a tight formation and get your interval to do your slow roll, you had to slow down. Being number six, I held back. I slowed until I was almost hanging on the prop, just a little above stalling speed.

Well, Lawlor was first, and as he did his slow roll, his baggage door came open. The door is on the side of the P-40’s fuselage, right behind the cockpit. With the door open, Lawlor had no choice; he had to go in and land. This left his wingman, Greg Boyington, in charge of the flight. We continued our slow rolls. I was the last man, and when it came my turn, I started to gather speed. We would never slow roll a P-40 with a full load of ammo and fuel at less than 210 to 220 knots indicated—and I was only coming up on 190. Boy, I thought, I better not roll this thing. And then I thought—well, I don’t want to spoil their show. But I darned near spoiled it.

I did my roll, right over the Generalissimo. I was two hundred feet above the ground and I stalled out completely—100 percent! My controls went floppy. I didn’t dare throw on full power; I would have snapped. I went back to the basics: needle, ball, and airspeed. The minute the ball started coming out of the slot, I threw on full power. I looked out and saw that I was just twenty feet above the ground. It was a good thing there were no trees out there. It took me about a quarter of a mile to get up enough speed to climb out.

Everybody thought I had crashed. They didn’t see me pull up. Later I learned that the Generalissimo had turned to his aide and told him to find out what happened to the pilot who had just crashed. He wouldn’t get aboard the transport until he got a report.

I caught up with the rest of the flight, and we climbed and waited over the field for the Generalissimo to take off. With Lawlor gone, we were five P-40s, with Boyington in the lead. Once the Generalissimo’s airplane was in the air, we fell in behind. Ninety miles east of Kunming the transport turned northeast toward Chungking. Now, instead of turning back to Kunming as we expected, Boyington led us after the transport. We later came to find that he had not been paying any attention to Greenlaw’s instructions. To make things worse, this was March, and the monsoon winds were blowing out of the northwest. The wind was very strong and we were drifting fifteen degrees at least, just to keep our heading.

We tried every which way to get Boyington’s attention and get him to turn around. Our airplanes had commercial RCA radios, and we were never in touch with one another. We tried hand signals, with no success. We flew as far west of Boyington as we could to try to get him to come in close, but he paid no attention to us.

Our cardinal rule was to follow the flight leader. And so on we went—until Boyington finally concluded that we wouldn’t have enough fuel to turn around and get back. When he finally realized that, he turned around and took a reciprocal course. This meant that while we were drifting fifteen degrees going north, now that we were turned south, that error was compounded and we were twenty-five to thirty degrees off course.

I was the first one to run out of fuel. We had three fuel tanks in the P-40, one in each wing and a fuselage tank. I went around three times and each time my gauge showed empty. I knew that I had to decide real quick what I was going to do. We were way down in southwest China, about seventy-five miles north of Hanoi. It was rugged country down there, a place we never flew over. Then I saw a nice little green valley,

and I thought I better take advantage of it. I flew up beside Hank Gesselbracht, waved at him and pointed down. Hank knew what I meant. I hoped somebody was paying attention to where we were so they would know more or less where I would be.

Now I had to make up my mind: should I go in with my gear down, ready to land; or should I take a look at the landing area first? Well, I knew I was low on fuel, so I thought I better put my gear down. On the down wind leg, at about five hundred feet, I suddenly saw this nice green valley a little better. And there, right across my landing path, were irrigation ditches. There was one every hundred yards, and each one had a berm, maybe four or five feet high.

Oh, boy, now I don't want to land with my gear down. Then the engine quits. I'm completely out of fuel. I go to retract my landing gear, but the indicator never showed that the gear was coming up and locking. So I knew that my gear was not completely up, but I didn't know just where it was. All I had time for was to tighten my belts. I held the airplane off to get as slow as I could. I knew this was going to be quite a ride.

I touched down and headed for the first berm. The airplane touched the berm and we were launched into the air. It was just like a ski jump. When the P-40's landing gear retracts, it folds back. On my airplane, the gear had folded just half way back, so now I had two skids under me. I sailed over the first berm, went seventy feet, rode up the second one and was again launched into the air. By the time I finished I had sailed over all three berms. It was not a bad ride at all. There was very little damage to the plane. With the engine stopped, only one prop blade got bent back. Of course, the oil cooler below was beat up. When the airplane stopped moving, the only thought I had was that the good lord just didn't want me that day.

So now I'm sitting there, and it was not ten minutes before I start seeing Chinese. I could tell they were farmers. They stood back about two hundred yards from my plane. I thought what the heck am I going to do now? The farmers did not come closer, but then two militia men showed up. They were in uniform and had these German revolvers with the fitted wooden stocks. They took charge of me immediately.

I wasn't worried—at first. We had that blood chit we wore on our back. But it was Murphy's law: that was the one day I didn't wear my chit. When our flight suits got washed, the chit was taken off. I had put on a clean suit that morning, and no chit. Also, having just come back from Burma, I was sunburned, had a short hair cut, and didn't look American. Down in this part of China, they had never seen Americans anyway, but the Japanese were the ones with the airplanes, and they had been using the Chinese here for target practice. We started walking down the valley.

Four or five miles later we came to a little village, if you can call it that. It was just a collection of a half dozen buildings. They took me into one and put me up on what I thought of as the hay loft. The people kept their animals on the ground floor and lived up on the loft above. Of course, nobody could speak English, but even if you can't understand the language, you can tell from the atmosphere how things are going. My two guards stood over me with their pistols. They couldn't figure out if I was friendly.

Finally, after about two hours, they took me down stairs, and we started marching on out to the edge of the village. This was something I didn't like. I saw it happen in Kunming. They would catch somebody stealing and take him out to the edge of town. There they knelt him down, and that was it—a bullet in back of the head. I thought that if I can get them to take me back to the plane, surely there was something there that would identify me. The bottom of our parachute had some Chinese writing. I had no idea what it said, but I needed to try. I stopped walking and started drawing pictures of my airplane in the sand.

The guards finally got the idea and we walked back to the plane. I had them bring the parachute, but we couldn't find anything else that might identify me. We took the parachute and went back to the village. Everybody looked at it. Finally, they sent me a small bowl of rice. A little boy of about thirteen brought it to me. He must have been in touch with missionaries. He had some English. "So sorry," he said, "so sorry." Which was all he could say.

About the time I finished the rice, another guy came in. He'd been running, and he was jabbering; he had a lot to say. I didn't know what, but I could tell that he had new information, and that made me feel better. It seemed that the atmosphere was easing too. My guards took me out again. We went on down the

valley about two miles to another group of buildings. There was quite a crowd there. It was almost dark now, and we went into a good-sized building. There were torches on the wall, and it was completely packed with people. In the middle of the room a militia man was sitting at a little table. On it was a World War I telephone, one of the old jobs that you crank to make it work. The guy was jabbering on that phone. I had no idea what was going on. After about two minutes, he handed the phone to me.

The voice on the other end of the line was my best buddy, Hank Gesselbracht, who had gone on with Boyington and the others. God, was I glad to hear him! I said, "Where in the hell are you?" He said that he and the rest of the flight had gone on another seventy-five miles before they all had to belly in. They landed in a cemetery. They had to ground loop because there was not enough room. I said to Hank, "Do they know who in the hell you are?" "Hell, yes," he said, "They're wining and dining us. The mayor's here...." "Well for God's sake," I said, "put him on and have him tell these people here who I am."

What a relief! I handed the phone back to the Chinese guy, and he jabbered for another five minutes. I could tell by the smiles on faces that they were starting to understand. Now I was not a prisoner; I was a friend. They took me to somebody's residence, nearby. Inside, a couple of old Chinese guys were seated on a little platform, smoking pipes. They gestured for me to sit, and have a pipe too. Well, these were opium pipes, and I wouldn't know how to smoke it anyway. So I just sat there for over an hour, while these guys smoked their pipes and we all smiled at each other. When the two old guys finished their pipes, I was escorted to where I would spend the night.

We got there and I realized I hadn't eaten all day. They had a fire going right on the ground. Somebody grabbed a chicken walking by, and popped it in a steaming kettle, feathers and all. After a while, they broke off a leg, stripped some feathers from it, and offered it to me. God, I was hungry, but I knew that if I ate it, it would come right back up. I figured where there are chickens, there are eggs. I finally had boiled eggs.

There was a straw bed up in the loft of this building and I slept well. I came down the next morning to find a burro waiting for me. The night before, when I talked with Hank on the phone, he said the guys were going to commandeer a military truck and drive to the narrow gauge railway that ran across the area. It was the line from Hanoi to Kunming. The idea was to catch a train and ride it back to Kunming. We picked a place where I could meet them. It would take me two days to get there, but they said they would wait.

So there was this little burro with a wooden saddle. I boarded it, and my feet touched the ground. A little boy and four soldiers escorted me as I set off to join our guys and the truck. Well, I tell you, it only took three hours before I had blisters the size of half dollars on the insides of my thighs. It was that wooden saddle. So then they came up with a sedan chair. The four soldiers carried it. I don't know if you have ever ridden in a sedan chair.... We were on trails, going up ridges where you can look down three or four hundred feet. After a bit of that, I suggested that the little boy ride the sedan chair. But they were persistent. They made a stretcher from tree limbs and vines and had me ride on it. That was actually a lot better.

It was two days of rough going before I met up with the guys and their ten-wheeler, and there would be more rough going. There was nothing you would call a road in that part of China, just trails full of rocks the size of grapefruit. We rode in back of the truck standing up, and hanging on to the staves that held up the canvas top. As our leader, Boyington decided to ride up in the cab with the driver, a Chinese soldier. The driver had one speed, about twenty-five miles an hour, and it made for a really rough ride. Then suddenly the truck stops and Boyington says he's going to shoot the driver. He told the driver to slow down or something and the driver didn't pay any attention. So now Boyington wanted to drive, but there was no way that Chinese soldier was going to give up that truck. We carried on, along the trails and across ravines on bamboo suspension bridges. What a ride that was.

We arrived that night at the narrow gauge railroad from Hanoi to Kunming. The train came only two days a week, so there were little huts there by the station where people could wait. Each one of us got a hut. There was a cot and a bidet, the first bidet I had ever seen. Well, one of the guys found some white wine, and we sat there and drank for about an hour. All at once, Gil Bright jumps up and takes off all his clothes. What the hell, we wondered. Then he went to the bidet and started to take a shower. Now that seemed like a good idea, and each one of us followed on after him.

We were there for a day and a half before the train came. What a train it was! A lot people boarded because there were only two trains a week. They had everything from crated chickens to a pig. Every time we came to a very severe grade on the way, we all got off and pushed. The train just could not make it up the grade by itself.

When we got to Kunming, AVG commander, Claire Chennault, let us rest the first night, but the next night we had dinner with him. He wanted to hear about the whole fiasco. He was not happy that we had lost five airplanes. The AVG was really low on aircraft by then. After what we lost during the fall of Burma, I think we were down to about ten P-40s.

During dinner Chennault turned to me and said, "Bob, I have to tell you one thing. Before I came to China, I had an acrobatic team called 'Three Men on a Flying Trapeze.' We barnstormed and put on air shows. During those years I saw a lot of crashes. But I have to say that I was never so sure in my life that somebody would crash as you would when you did that slow roll." That's when he told me that the Generallissimo would not get on his airplane until he knew about the pilot who had just crashed.

After Chennault heard from Boyington, he kind of forgave us, but he was most unhappy with Boyington for not paying attention to what we were supposed to do. As kind of a punishment for Boyington, he sent him back to the cemetery where the four planes had bellied in. A couple of them had been ground looped, but not badly damaged. They took the guns off them and made them as light as they could. They put in just enough gas to get to Kunming, and Boyington flew them out. That was quite impressive. The other two P-40s—and mine—had to be disassembled and brought back on a truck. If nothing else, they could be used for spare parts.

And that was the end of a very memorable week.

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Gregory Boyington resigned from the AVG on 2 April 1942 (with a dishonorable discharge). He returned to the Marines and was sent to the South Pacific where he became known as "Pappy" and commanded the Marine fighter squadron VMF-214, "Boyington's Black Sheep." He was shot down in January 1944 and "posthumously" awarded the Medal of Honor. As the war drew to a close, he was found in a POW camp in Japan. His exploits were celebrated in books and a TV series. He died in January 1988.

Robert Layher continued to serve with the AVG until the unit was disbanded in July 1942. He returned to the US Navy and served as captain on Sikorsky S-44 flying-boats on diplomatic runs across the Atlantic. After the war, he flew briefly for American Airlines before going into farming and ranching in Colorado, and later Kansas. He died in November 2006.