

LOCATING FLIGHT OFFICER ROBERT CHARLES HALL

—FROM THE JUNGLES

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Photo captured from newsreel taken by the Signal Corps, Army Pictorial Center, National Archives. 4:37-4:46

"Return of Former Japanese Prisoners' shows a large group of American & British prisoners from Rangoon Central Jail that were force marched from Rangoon to Pegu, Burma then abandoned by the Japanese. It shows the newly freed men relaxing, smoking and eating. Also shows the men being issued new British clothing."

—————From researcher Leslie Roane.



Readers, when last we met, I explained the details of the 1st Air Commando Group in Burma, and their mission: Operation THURSDAY. To briefly recap, THURSDAY's objective was to allow Allied troops to penetrate behind Japanese lines in order to allow the resupply of beleaguered Chinese forces resisting the Japanese occupation. Overwhelmingly, the mission was a success, though not without cost. Landing zones were seized, and supplies began to flow as British and Indian Chindit guerillas prosecuted objectives behind the Japanese lines.

In the course of the Research Team's efforts, we often catalogue MIA and KIA names from National Archive reels. We also regularly research the careers of our glider pilots on behalf of their descendants. On rare, exciting occasions, there are mysteries that unravel. The story of F/O Robert Hall is one of the latter.

F/O Hall was a glider pilot assigned to the 1st Air Commando Group during Operation THURSDAY, the secret Allied invasion of Burma.



“The first gliders of the 1st Air Commando Force take off from Lalaghat, India for the flight to Broadway, Burma.” —10th Combat Camera Unit, National Archives, College Park. This is Operation THURSDAY.

Northern Burma 1944

MAP SHOWING BROADWAY

BROADWAY

Officer: I/S	Glider Pilot	Gl. No.	Top P
Col. Scott	Taylor & Carter	1	Walker

Snippets of operation orders showing crew list and formation position.

Officer: I/S	Glider Pilot	Gl. No.	Top P
Walker	Walker	107	Walker
Newell	Walker	108	Walker
W. Daver & Arnold	Walker	109	Walker
Bracchiello	Walker	110	Walker
Everett	Walker	122	Walker
Don	Walker	123	Walker
Hankins	Walker	143	Walker
Randall	Walker	144	Walker
Quiz	Walker	145	Walker

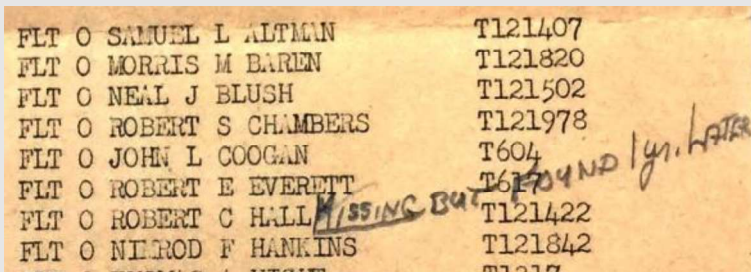
Officer: I/S	Glider Pilot	Gl. No.	Top P
Clark	Walker	167	Walker
Clements	Walker	168	Walker
Shaw & Whelock	Walker	197	Walker
Hennie	Walker	183	Walker
Newland	Walker	207	Walker
Johnson	Walker	208	Walker
Hall, R.	Walker	247	Walker
Wolman & Sanderson	Walker	248	Walker
Kuenstler	Walker	249	Walker
Hight & Dover	Walker	248	Walker
Schritzer	Walker	267	Walker
Moland & Henderson	Walker	268	Walker
Arkfield	Walker	287	Walker
Hedley	Walker	288	Walker
Hadsell	Walker	307	Walker
Scott	Walker	308	Walker
Coogan	Walker	327	Walker
Chambers	Walker	328	Walker
Wienke	Walker	347	Walker



MAP SHOWING RANGOON

Hall's glider was one of many that flew in the invasion, glider number 22P. A firsthand account from one of his fellow glider pilots, Anthony Bracall, acquired by fellow researcher Keith Thoms, tells us that Bracall assumed Hall was dead. (Bracall's last name in 1944 was Bracaliello and he flew in position 10P.) As they flew their mission into LZ BROADWAY, Bracall, after landing, thought he saw Hall's glider go down in a wall of flak.

The 1st Air Commando Group records listed Hall as missing, and news of him fades during the war. It would seem most of his fellow glider pilots never learned what happened to Hall. Various accounts have



A snippet of Special order Number 53, Troop movement, 1 Troop Carrier Command, from Bowman Field, Kentucky to India shows Flt O Robert C Hall's name. Someone cared to update the list.



since been located that shed more light on this pilot's experiences.

Years after the war, a declassified Judge Advocate General (JAG) dossier¹ was located detailing the release of prisoners from Rangoon Jail in Burma. Many Allied prisoners of war were held in Rangoon Jail throughout the war. They suffered unmentionable atrocities at the hands of their Japanese captors. I will not go into detail here as to the specifics the prisoners endured by their tormentors, but suffice it to say that the prison guards were creative in their work. As Allied Forces drew near, the Japanese soldiers evacuated the healthiest prisoners and attempted to flee towards their own lines. This resulted in a 50+ mile forced march along the Old Burma Road towards Pegu, during which many more of the Allied POWs were killed or succumbed to wounds and sickness. Many were barefoot. On 30 April, 1945, the Japanese – cut off by the advancing British 14th Army – abandoned their prisoners and fled. How the prisoners escaped summary execution is unknown, though it is speculated that their Japanese captors feared retribution at this stage. The Allied prisoners were recovered by the advancing British, were clothed, fed, and treated. [Video reel footage obtained from the National Archives](#), and shared by POW researchers Matt Poole and Leslie Roane, shows a newly-freed Hall smiling with another liberated prisoner.

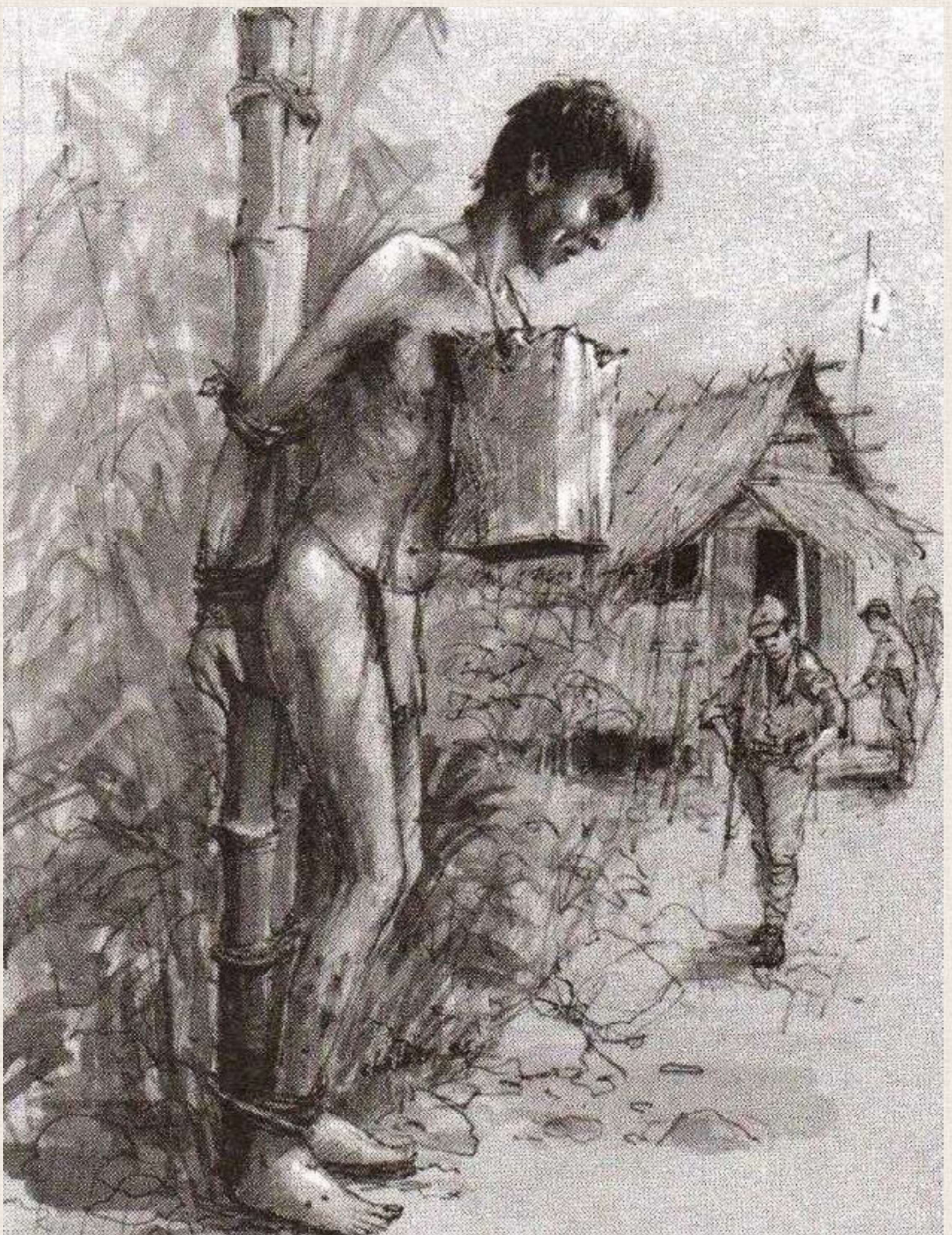
Among the reunions on the road were three members of the 1st Air Commando Group:

S/Sgt Robert Bicknell, of Friona, TX. (Back Left)

Cpl Fred Pugh, of Athens, TX, who was the LZ BROADWAY co-pilot for KIA glider pilot Leroy Shimulunas. (Front Middle)

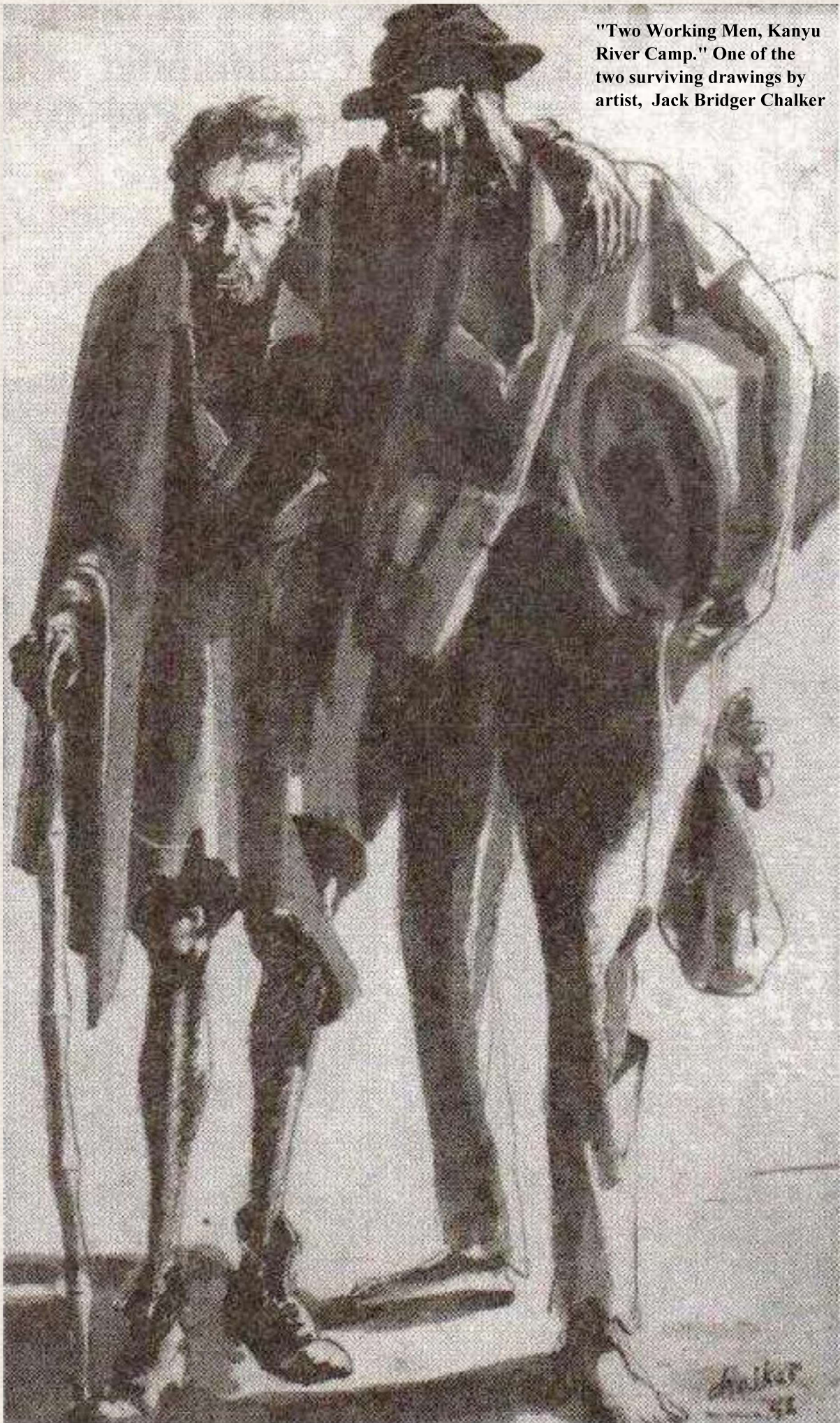
And a third name, F/O Robert Hall. The three are pictured in this photo provided by Jim Miller, the son of Capt "Red" Miller who is pictured front right. (F/O Hall, Back Middle)

"Flight Officer Robert Hall of Spokane, Washington, S/Sgt. Robert Bicknell of Friona, TX, and Cpl. Fred Pugh of Athens, TX had been forced down behind enemy lines during the first night of the Wingate-Cochran airborne invasion of northern Burma on March 5, 1944." (Buttrick, 26)²



(Chalker) The two hand drawn pictures, "Punishment" and "Two Working Men, Kanyu River Camp." These are from an article on the prisoners being released that was put out in an ex-POW news bulletin. The artist, Jack Bridger Chalker, was interviewed and said that he drew pictures to document atrocities in the camp. One day, a Japanese guard caught him with his drawings. They beat him and made him tear them up. After the ordeal was done he noticed that these two had escaped destruction.

"Two Working Men, Kanyu River Camp." One of the two surviving drawings by artist, Jack Bridger Chalker



Records from the JAG dossier note that while F/O Hall may have been captured that first night in the jungle, the Japanese finally processed him as a prisoner on 26 March, 1944. From there he was transferred into Rangoon Jail on 10 April. After more than a year of brutal captivity, he and the other residents of Rangoon were liberated on or about 30 April, 1945.

“Hall looked confused and said, ‘Second Air Commandos? My God, is there a ‘Second’ over here now, too?’” (Buttrick, 27)²

During my research into the prisoners of war listed in the JAG file, I made contact with a group of POW researchers. I had found a reference to Hall in a newsreel from the liberation of the jail. This reel mentioned the glider pilot by name as well as provided a time stamp to where he appeared in the video. These researchers were able to provide me a copy of an ex-POW news bulletin that included interviews with those liberated. The above quote shows just how long Bob was out of the action – when he went down there was only the 1st Air Commando Group! The bulletin also details how lucky Hall and the other pilots and aircrew were to survive. Overwhelmingly the Japanese treated airmen far worse than ground soldiers.

Reading this news bulletin was like a whisper from the past. It feels so rare to uncover verbatim quotes tied to our glider pilots so long after the fact. Over 400 prisoners were liberated that day and expedited back to the United States to reunite with their families.

The communications technology of the time would largely have prevented the rest of Hall’s comrades in Burma from learning of his capture and subsequent release. For years in the community, he was thought of as MIA. Despite this, F/O Hall made it home to Spokane, WA. There are numerous paper clippings that detail a large welcoming party. Hall also received his Air Medal there for his actions in the China-Burma-India Theater, published in a newspaper article by The Spokesman-Review June 16, 1945, pictured at right.

Our quarterly briefings have highlighted a lot of excellent histories. They also detail the number of requests the Research Team receives from families. In my own research process, I get attached to names. It started with my great uncle, Leroy Shimulunas. I had exhausted all avenues on him, and so began looking into his co-pilot, Fred Pugh. Through numerous online sources I tracked down Pugh’s name in the JAG dossier. From there Hall’s story came to light. I am nearing the end of several avenues on Bob Hall, but there are still open doors.

SPOKANE MAN GETS AIR MEDAL

Flight Officer Hall in Calcutta
Hospital.

F/O Robert C. Hall of Spokane, now recuperating in an army hospital near Calcutta after spending more than a year in a Japanese prison camp, has been awarded the air medal.

He was released, along with other allied soldiers, when Rangoon



Robert C. Hall.

was recaptured by the British. One evening all prisoners were given supplies and told they were to march to a new prison. After two days the Japanese left, saying their captives were released.

For example, the Spokesman Review replied to my inquiry. I am hoping they have a high resolution photo of Hall receiving his air medal in their archives. Currently, the archives are being moved and catalogued. One of their archivists told me that things would be back in order by 2022, so we may see a better photo of Hall.

In addition to the photo, and in my opinion a more exciting prospect, Matt Poole informed me that in The National Archives, London, there exists a post-war affidavit credited to R.C. Hall, in sections relating to Rangoon Jail. Archival research here has been on pause due to the pandemic, but once things open up again it should be possible to acquire that affidavit which would provide more testimony on Hall's experiences. Personally, I'm hopeful there may also be one from my uncle's co-pilot, Fred Pugh, that could shed a more firsthand light on my family history.

Thank you to all those who made this research possible, including Matt and Leslie with the POW research team, Libby with the Spokesman Review, Jim Miller for his photo, our own Keith for his interview with Anthony Bracall, and Patricia for help with photo and layout.

References:

- (1) JAG Dossier, declassified. Accessed from http://www.mansell.com/pow_resources/camplists/death_rr/deathrailwaycamplist.html
- (2) Liberated Prisoners of Pegu, by PFC Jim Buttrick

Other sources:

- Personal Orders and crew lists of John H. Price, Jr., declassified, Silent Wings Museum, Price collection
- 319th Troop Carrier Group, 1st Air Commando Record Group historical records 1943—1945 declassified. U. S. Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, Alabama.
- National Archives Photos, Record Group 76; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
- U.S. Air Force Historical Research Agency, Burma 1943– 1945



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Unit focus: 1st Air Commando Group,
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Trevor is the great-nephew of KIA F/O Leroy Shimulunas, who was a WWII Glider Pilot in Burma during Operation Thursday. Trevor's area of study is the CBI Theater with a focus on the 319th Troop Carrier Squadron. Right after joining the LBS Research Team he published in the *US WWII Glider Pilot's Briefing (USWWIIGP Briefing)* from his research the story of his great-uncle who was killed in action during the

Burma invasion. He went on to research other members of the 319th which lead to this article on Flight Officer Hall. He helps families find their relatives' history and to provide details of the military operations in the CBI. His military experience gives a great perspective and knowledge in assisting the Research Team. Trevor is also the editor of the *USWWIIGP Briefing*. He holds a Degree in English with an emphasis on Creative Writing. We hope that he will not be on deployment as much in the near future. —Patricia Overman, National Wing Commander