

I have never minded being the youngest of six kids, but I am jealous that my siblings all had more time with my grandparents than I did. In my twenty-one years of life I have yet to meet somebody I respect more than my grandfather, Ray Burkett. A lot of my admiration stems from his service in the China-Burma-India Theater in WWII. He used to, from time to time, share some of his stories from his time in the service with us grandkids. Now that he is gone, I wish I would have had a tape recorder out every time he told one of his stories so I could remember every detail. Although on rare occasion he spoke vaguely of some of his trying moments, most of his unbelievable tales were infused with laughter at the incredible circumstances he lived through.

One of these stories was about the time his plane was shot down and he was missing in action in dense jungle terrain. He was wandering through the jungle for a few days before he came across a tribe of local head hunters. As soon as they saw his blood chit on his jacket they were very friendly because they were sympathetic with the Chinese. They took him in and provided him with food and sheltering. (This is the part where he would always laugh as he told the next part of the story). They served him a bowl of unknown food that he claimed tasted like cashews, but he later found out he had eaten roasted maggots. After that, although he claimed the taste wasn't bad, he sort of avoided that particular entre for the remainder of his time with that tribe. Before they helped him find his way to somewhere he could call for help, he made a trade with some of the head hunters. He traded a pack of gum for two gems; one ruby and one topaz stone. I can't remember if it was a collection of gum from his K rations or one stick. Either way, it is safe to say he made a pretty decent trade. As unbelievable as that part of the story sounds, there are two rings in our family that were made using those gems that can validate it. One of which (the topaz) has been passed down to my mother.

I'd like to reflect on something I stated earlier in order to put how courageous and modest men of The Flying Tigers were into perspective. I said very rarely my grandfather would share a solemn story with us, he usually laughed as he shared his tales. The story I just told would be a horrifying experience with the potential to permanently scar most people. I can't even imagine being shot down, injured, lost in an unknown jungle, and at the mercy of a random local tribe of head hunters. But he, along with many other veterans with similar stories, could recap their times with lots of smiles and laughter. And if you asked him about anything he had done, or survived, he would brush it off as just doing his job. He made it seem like the conditions of WWII were just another day at the office when, in actuality, he and all the other members of the 14<sup>th</sup> Air Force (this is the part where I would be lectured by my granddad for not calling it The Army Air Corp) went to unbelievable lengths to fight for not only our freedom, but the freedom and well-being of other countries as well.

Many aspects of my grandfather's stories were so interesting to me, that I would research some of the details on my own. Many aspects from that last story can be researched to find fun, interesting little details. For example, the blood chit, is a notice carried (stitched to the back of their flight jacket in the case of The Flying Tigers) by military personnel and addressed to any civilians who may come across an armed-services member in difficulties (like my grandfather after being shot down). The original message read, "This foreign person has come to China to help in the war effort. Soldiers and civilians, one and all, should rescue, protect, and provide him with medical care". The blood chits that were used in the CBI Theater, the blood chit that saved my granddad's life, were the first used by American pilots. Even though the idea is extremely useful in a combat setting, the original idea spurred from a peaceful hot air balloon flight. A French hot air balloonist came to America to showcase his hot air balloon flight, which departed from Philadelphia. Because nobody knew where the flight would end, Washington gave him a letter addressed to the citizens of The United States that instructed them to aid in the return of the Frenchman to Philadelphia (Weidenburner).

With easy access to all kinds of sources on the internet, it is pretty easy find out more about any subject. It is unfortunate that a lot of today's youths are uneducated on the services of The Flying Tigers and the China-Burma-India Theater. In both my American history and world history courses back in high school, nothing was mentioned of the CBI Theater. Luckily, we were given the freedom to do an assigned presentation over just about anything having to do with WWII and I had the opportunity to educate some of my peers as well as my teacher on the aspect of WWII not many are familiar with, The Forgotten Theater.

#### Sources

Weidenburner, Carl. " Blood Chits of the China-Burma-India Theater of World War II." Blood Chits of the China-Burma-India Theater of World War II. N.p., 2005. Web. 24 Aug. 2014.