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C O N F I D E N T I A L

Narrative by: Lieutenant Commander Landon L. Davis, Jr.
USS PAMPANITO
Rescue of Prison Ship Survivors.

This is an interesting account of the rescue of 73 British and Australian prisoners who survived the sinking of a Jap troopship which was taking them from Burma to the Empire. Another account of this rescue is given in the narrative by Commander Fluckey, Nos. 354 & 354-1, p 12-16.

Film No. S-96

Recorded: 26 October 1944
Transcribed at Pearl Harbor

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Lt. Comdr. Landon L. Davis, Jr.
Executive Officer, U.S.S. PAMPANITO

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Lt. Summersell:

Today is 26 October 1944, headquarters of the Commander Submarine, Force Pacific. The interview is with the executive officer of the U.S.S. PAMPANITO, Lt. Comdr. Landon L. Davis, Jr. Commander Davis, will you give me the narrative of your personal experiences concerning the last patrol of the PAMPANITO and the rescue of the prisoners of the ship that was sunk by the SEALION?

Lt. Comdr. Davis:

We were patrolling off the Hainan coast one afternoon on the surface when we began to see some wreckage and lifeboats and other loose and miscellaneous gear in the water. We had sunk several ships in the vicinity recently and we had seen lots of wreckage. As we drew close to some of this we realized that it was more than just wreckage, we could actually see some people on a certain group of wreckage out there, pretty far away. So we went a little closer and it turned out that there were a bunch of people on it--they were really pretty bad looking--about fifteen on it. There was a float made of cargo, deck hatches, pieces of log lashed together, loose lumber, timber, and all these men were grouped on it, half in the water and ^half out. We couldn't recognize them, we didn't know what they were. So, not knowing who they were, that they might be, we broke out our deck guns and went in close to examine them, we went right alongside of them and even then we weren't able to say what kind of people they were. They were all hollering and screaming at the top of their voices, in fact,

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so much that that is the reason we couldn't understand them. The captain thought they were Dutch, and we felt pretty sure that they weren't Japs because I saw one of them in particular who had curly hair, but they were covered with oil and grease and their clothes were all torn and they had on part Jap uniforms, as a matter of fact. But one of them, when we spotted them, had curly hair and we knew that they weren't Japs. Another thing, we heard one of them talking; and we did recognize it--we heard, "Save us, please," and we heard his please very distinctly--but anybody could say please in almost any language. So we still didn't know what they were. We decided to pick them up; we put the guns away, made a big circle and came back to them. The biggest problem with the first boat load was to keep the sons-of-guns from jumping off the raft. They wanted to jump and swim aboard right away. By this time we realized that they were British or Americans or something because they were speaking English--we could recognize it all right. We put a couple of men over the side, they jumped over and swam to this raft and persuaded the people to stay on it, and we fastened a line and pulled it in close to the sub and then put some men down on the side and heaved them aboard. They were very hard to handle, they were just covered with a heavy oil, all over their bodies, their hands, and we had a devil of a time trying to get them on board, they were slick, couldn't pick them up. They were quite weak and they couldn't help themselves very much because they had been in the water

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about four days and didn't have much strength left. We didn't know exactly what to do with them--they were just as happy as they could be--I remember the first one that came up--he actually kissed the man as he pulled him up on deck, he was so happy to get on there. They were quite in a state of hysteria, they had practically given up and when they finally got picked up by us, even though they had been in the water four days, they were very excited and moved around fast, were nervous and just full of very profuse thanks and everything else, tried to give us some jumbled stories. We finally figured out from the first boatload that they were survivors from a ship that had been sunk about four nights ago and there had been about thirteen hundred of them on the ship and practically all of them had gotten off into the water. In the meantime the officer of the deck had sighted various other groups of people on little makeshift rafts all around the horizon and we had taken true bearings on them and marked the spots so, as soon as we got this first group picked up, we headed for the others, went to get them. Each group was just about the same. They were very thankful, I remember they said, "You bloody Yanks, you sink us one night and pick us up the next." They were taken below after we gave them a good wash-down topside. We had a pharmacist's mate up there and two or three men around with buckets of water. We gave them water right away, that was their biggest need--they hadn't had any water. Some of them couldn't even drink the water, we had to give them a wet rag to chew on

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in their mouth. Others had very bad skin conditions, we tried to wipe the oil in big buckets topside and with that fuel oil we managed to wipe most of the heavy grease off. Cut all their clothes off and threw them away. A few of them had a money belt, wallet or something, strapped around their waist, but other than that they had nothing at all. That oil was really the saving factor, it kept them warm in the night time and kept the sun off of them in the daytime. They were all subject to immersion feet because these rafts weren't like boats where you could keep yourself dry, they were actually hanging half in the water all the time and their feet and hands were all greatly wrinkled, and very loose, poor condition of the skin.

As I say, each group, we picked up and gave them a good swab-down as best we could topside and then sent them below and took them all to the after torpedo room. Of course, the pharmacist's mate in the meantime was as busy as a bird dog, we had to give about 12 or 15 hypo shots as they came on board, to make some of them snap out of it, some of them would just keel over as soon as they got up on deck--and they needed a little treatment. Others had cuts and bruises that we couldn't do much about right away, a couple of other had a broken rib--they were treated easily and sent below. We got, altogether, 73 of them out of the water. I know--they told us the story, as we came along, that the Japs had been by to pick their survivors up but had left them on the rafts and they were pretty darn upset about that. This one gent that we came to was on a raft by himself and he was sleeping on his back.

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We thought perhaps that he was dead when we first came up to him. As he came right alongside the submarine he still didn't move and it wasn't until a man jumped over the side with a line and made a splash in the water that this gent did wake up, and when he did he was scared, he looked up and saw the bow of a big submarine right at the side of him and he almost jumped over the side, right on the spot, but we persuaded him to stay on the raft and we brought him on board and got him below. That particular fellow was the only one who died, of all that we recovered. He had been on this raft by himself and he was extremely dehydrated--the condition of his skin.

Aside from having been in the water for four days without any food and practically nothing to drink, these men had been slaves in the Malay Peninsula for three years, since Singapore fell, and they themselves were in no darn physical shape to withstand any hardships, so our immediate problem was to get them below and get them in a bunk and give them some food. We did that--prepared some soup and broth for them--I remember that night we gave them some bread, it was the first white bread they had had in three years. We gave them some broth, warm water, tea, and they were still very active all that night--we finished recovering them just about dark, and all that night they were very active, talked, told us stories of how their ships had been sunk in a convoy, and how thankful they were, and about their life in the Army beforehand. But next morning, when we went down to look at them, boy, they were really tired out, there wasn't a one of them rolling around a bit, it had been quite a mental strain and they just keeled over completely.

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The story they told us was that they, some of them, hadn't even been in the Army two weeks and they were shot right up to Singapore to reinforce the garrison up there. After they got there, about three days, Singapore fell and they were taken prisoners, put up into various parts of the Malay Peninsula, and their most recent job had been to build a railroad down the Peninsula. They, all during this time, had suffered quite a few hardships. They had no food, that they were used to at all, they had rice only. They had practically no medical care, they had no clothes, they all went barefooted. Every one of them on board had malaria, most of them had pellagra, beriberi, bad cases of scurvy, and then they had salt-water sores on them that they got when they were in the water before being recovered. Our pharmacist's mate was really faced with a problem, he had to make immediate inspection of all of them to find anybody who had serious injuries that he could fix up and then he had to slowly work through the rest of the crowd and fix up the little scratches and bruises and cuts and things like that, which he did. We were running a sort of short of medical supplies too, I know, we didn't have enough gauze or bandage to take care of these 73 men. About 10 or 12 cases were critical. We had to put them in bunks in the after battery with a special nursemaid--they were actual bad patients, where to others, boy, you should have seen them stacked up back there. We put two in each bunk and four in each torpedo rack in the after torpedo room and we were very profusely apologizing for the lack of space we had to offer them and they were very profusely saying, "That's all right, you should have seen the space we've been living in," because they said that they

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used to just stack them in the these troop-transport^ys, everywhere they would go; when they would ride in trucks anywhere, they would just stack them in like bundles, and then didn't mind this little space at all.

There were no officers in the group, they were all British and Australian soldiers, a couple of sergeants, and we appointed one of the sergeants to be chief of the prisoners and he did a pretty good job, he handled all their problems and put them into shape and they were just as nice as they could be, it wasn't but two or three days before they were up on their feet and were standing their own little "billet watches" as they called it, to help take care of the place, clean up the compartment and wait on their own sick people, and we worked out a very nice little schedule with them. In the meantime, of course, the officers, like any good American, wants to get a story out of everybody he finds, and they were writing stories down from all the people and two or three of them wrote down their complete diary, so to speak, of what happened to them since the time Singapore fell, and we have those on board, very interesting records. And I, myself, was quite surprised when I found that about six of them knew a good friend of mine in the Australian Army and had been with him in Singapore. When I was down in Australia I met this family, and their brother was a prisoner of war taken at Singapore, and I was quite surprised to find that six or seven of these men we picked up, from Brisbane, Australia, knew this Eirc Long that I had known.

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We cut their clothes off when we first took them on board, so we had to donate them skivvies and things to wear on board, and we gave them blankets to make bunks out of and they made off pretty well for themselves.

After about the first two days they began to want a little bit more than just broth and tea and soup, and then we began to give them scrambled eggs and bread and some other more stable food and they certainly did like that, it just perked them up and with 24 hours they were back up on their feet again and ready to do anything.

It was quite surprising how much these men knew of what was going on in the world; we thought for a while that they would want to know all about this that and the other of the war progress, but they knew quite a bit. One group of them had been way up in the mountains with an aviation unit that had a radio and they picked up American broadcasts and knew all the story. But they were fairly well informed of the landings in Saipan and in Europe and the progress of the war.

The reason these prisoners were being transported was something that we wanted to know about and we asked them about it. They weren't quite sure in their own mind whether they were going back to Japan to boost up the morale, to show the people back there that they had a lot of prisoners, or whether it was a very far-sighted viewpoint to have prisoners for exchange, or whether they wanted to get them out of that Malay Peninsula down there because they knew they were going to lose it. I know one thing; of the 1300 they had on

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board, that they were the 1300 strongest of the group that were down in the Malay Group. They said that all the others, who had physical difficulties, who had dysentery or serious cases of malaria, and cholera and all that, did not come back up. These men, whom we thought were physical wrecks, and they were, they said were the strongest of the group that were down there, I certainly feel sorry for the other poor jokers who didn't make it.

I know one gent whom we picked up--he was by himself also, no raft at all-- he was just floating in the water, and it was almost dark, night-time, and we saw him waving what I thought was a white hat or a hand, or something like that, and we came alongside and the only thing he had been waving was his own hand, they were so white from the salt water immersion that it looked like a white sheet of paper, and we never would have seen him if he hadn't been waving his hand there in the dark of the night. It wasn't long before, with a little care, his hand got back into shape again, but we certainly did see him that time with that very sheet-white hand he had. When we picked the prisoners up we had a pretty long ways to go to port. But we ran on across through Luzon Strait on the surface and headed towards Saipan, sent a dispatch in, of course, telling them that we were coming, and the circumstances, and Saipan sent out a destroyer to meet us. They met us about three days out and transferred to us a doctor and a pharmacist's mate with a couple of seabags full of medical supplies to replenish our supplies--the ones we had used--and that certainly was a relief for our "doc" because he had been working steadily for about 72

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hours and he was just plain worn out. Not many of the men actually needed medical treatment, what they needed--with the exception of two or three--was just somebody to tend to their cares, sores, cuts and bruises, all the time and that was why our doctor was completely worn out. So we didn't transfer them to the destroyer although they were all set for taking them had we wanted to, we figured that it was a rough sea and a small boat would make it dangerous work. We carried them on into Saipan and got there and transferred them all to the Army general hospital. They certainly were a thankful looking lot too when they went over the side, they gave a big cheer for the captain and they were nothing but smiles from one to the other.

Of the 73 we picked up, about 20 of them were English and all the others were Australians. They were scattered from all parts of Australia and England, too, and Scotland. I think that most of the Australians were at the same unit but the British--there was quite a varied assortment of them. I don't know what unit they were with--I know I found some from Brisbane, some from Sydney, some from Victoria, some from Queensland, and all parts of Australia. I know that we asked a couple of them about what they thought of their trip up to Japan in this transport, and they had been told when they left Singapore that if they ever got to the Empire they would be lucky, and they said that as long as they were right off Singapore they were OK but once they got into the China sea that they would be walking on American periscopes all the way, and they

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were, too, they walked over a couple of them that night. Then, I remember one-- two or three of them had heard this one Japanese officer say that there was no doubt in his mind that the Jap Empire would ^Soon lose the war, it was just a question of time until they got all folded up.

The experiences that these men had had with the Japs were very interesting. They had been prisoners and, as such, had been subject to every sort of mis-treatment--quite a few beatings, lack of food, and various types of punish-ment. I don't believe that there were any cases of actual torture of any of the men that we had, except that anybody who is a prisoner gets kicked in the seat of the pants every now and then, and they had been subject to such treat-ment as standing in the sun in the middle of a courtyard all day long because of some minor infringement of a rule, but they hadn't been subject to tor-tures that people lead you to believe. Their own story was that they were enlisted men and, as such, didn't know anything and the Japs did not want to question them because they knew they couldn't get anything, but they did say that officers were tortured, particularly if they were high ranking and they thought that they had some dope that they didn't hesitate to do most anything to them to get some dope from them. They had come into contact with both the regular Imperial Army, with the reserves, and with the Korean Guards. I know their personal opinion was that the regular Jap Imperial Army soldier was a pretty stalwart fighter and not a bad character. The Reserves were very weak

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and disorganized, a lot of talk, and fanatic in quite a few ways, and the Korean Guards, who had been guarding them on board the transports on the way to the Empire, were strictly the paid soldier type, they were doing duty for the Japs and they did what the Japs made them do and no more than that. I know--they told the story that when the torpedo first hit their transport that there was a working party topside and the ship didn't sink right away so this working party had a chance to go down and released all 1300 of the prisoners, and in the four or five hours between that and the time the ship sunk they had an opportunity to fill a few canteens with water and get lifejackets and tear the deck hatches off and make something to ride on in the water. There wasn't a boat at all, all the Japs took the boats, but they did have a few lifejackets, a couple of canteens of water and what makeshift raft they were able to put together in the meantime. Unfortunately, we could pick up only a small percentage of them. It was a good thing for us that we were able to pick up every single man that we sighted, there wasn't a question of having to make a decision that "we've got enough now," because at the time it was getting dark, we had contacted every little group of men we had sighted in the periscope and had picked them up, and it was very lucky--I would hate to have to make a decision when to leave some of those poor devils back there in the water.

We had picked up 73 of the survivors, the SEALION picked up 53, the BARB and the QUEENFISH between them picked up about 32. We had one of ours die coming in, and the SEALION had several of hers, unfortunately. That made a

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total of about 150, I believe. I know in the newspaper report that we saw after we got back here, the Japs reported that they themselves had picked up 170 some survivors from a ship that was torpedoed by American submarines. The dates didn't exactly jibe but I believe that they referred to some of that they had picked up from the same convoy. Tokyo Rose, of course, had her say-so about it, it wasn't ten hours after the thing happened that she brought out the story about a transport with a bunch of prisoners of war being sunk at quite a loss of life to American, English, and Australian people on board. But it didn't bother the people that we picked up, they said they were darn glad they were sunk, when they were in the convoy coming in they would cheer every time they saw a torpedo hit even if it did hit their own ship, because they wanted to see the sons-of-guns go down. One of the most gratifying things that we had on board in this contact with these British and Australian survivors was the whole-hearted cooperation that our crew put out toward these people--they stayed up extra hours waiting on them and taking care of them, they gave them clothes to wear, they gave them candy, they wrote letters for them, and they talked and chatted to them and it was just amazing to see the brotherly spirit between the two of them. It's quite seldom in the submarine navy that we come in contact with the actual so-called horrors and disagreeable side of war. We go merrily along and sink a ship and then go under the waves and never see the results of the thing, but this was one time when our whole crew was exposed to one of the most thrilling and interesting stories that I have ever

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witnessed myself and you could see every man on board get a big relief and a lift in his feeling and a great hate for the Japs, too, after contacting these poor fellows who had been subject to their mistreatment for three years, and there wasn't a one of us who wouldn't go out of our way now to take a good hard sock at those Japs, wheress before we were sort of noncommittal about it, even though we were fighting the war very seriously.

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