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After the Long Wait

Three gaunt men stumbled out of an American C-47 transport plane in Chungking. Their clothes hung limply on their thin bodies and their eyes stared hauntingly out of sunken sockets. When American soldiers stepped up to help them, their haggard faces brightened. "I feel I am a real American again," said one.

They were three of the eight Doolittle fliers forced down during the first raid over Japan, April 18, 1942: Lt. Chase J. Nielsen of Hyrum, Utah, Lt. Robert L. Hite of Earth, Texas, and Sgt. Jacob Deshazer of Madras, Ore. They were rescued Aug. 21 near Peiping by an American parachute team, along with a fourth Doolittle flier, Lt. George Barr of New York, who was too weak from beriberi to be moved.

Ordeal by Filth: At the American headquarters in Chungking, Nielsen, Hite, and Deshazer sent messages to their deliriously happy families, ate some GI food, then in hushed, cracked voices told reporters about their 40-month-long ordeal. All had been thrown into solitary confinement from time to time. They spent up to 120 days without a bath, shave, or haircut. They were never allowed to read or write, receive mail from home or Red Cross packages.

All three men had been forced down during the historic raid because their medium bombers ran out of gas. Lieutenant Nielsen crashed into the sea. He swam for four hours, reached the China coast, and joined a band of guerrillas. But the Japs discovered him and flew him to Tokyo where he was tried and sentenced to death for "bombing nonmilitary objectives and schools." He was later "pardoned" by Emperor Hirohito, but sentenced to life imprisonment. Although Hite and Deshazer were harshly treated, they were not put on trial.

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Doolittle Raiders Released

(image added)



~ from left to right: Cpl. Jacob DeShazer, 2nd Lt. Robert Hite, 2nd Lt. Charles Wielsen, Pvt. Eddie Laursen

In Kunming, another haggard group of Americans captured on Wake Island and Bataan and released in Manchuria dazedly caught up with the world. Wracked by malnutrition, tuberculosis, and other diseases, most of them had never heard of President Truman or General Eisenhower, and knew nothing of the Pacific war since their capture.

Manna From Heaven: Meanwhile, hundreds of other American prisoners in China, Manchuria, and Japan waited anxiously for liberation. Lt. Gen. Jonathan M. Wainwright, American commander at Corregidor, remained in the desolate Manchurian town of Sian while the Russians repaired the railroad to Mukden 100 miles to the south. In Mukden a B-24 and C-47 waited to fly Wainwright and his men to Chungking. Other Allied officers in or near Mukden included Lt. Gen. A. E. Percival, the British commander who surrendered Singapore.

In Japan, the enemy carefully marked with huge yellow-painted PW's camps housing some 32,000 Allied prisoners (including 7,000 Americans, 5,000 Dutch, 14,000 British, 5,000 to 8,000 Australians, and 1,000 Canadians). Then, American naval fliers dropped 150-pound bags of food and medicine into the enclosures. As soon as possible, after American occupation forces landed, the United States prisoners would be flown to the Philippines.