Japs Must Pay Dearly, Savior of Ceylon Says

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By KENNETH C. CRAGG

Ottawa, Oct. 10 (Staff).—Wing Cmdr. Len Birchall of St. Catharines, who skippered the flying boat which on April 4, 1942, alerted Ceylon to the approach of a Jap invasion fleet, came back to Canada today.

Behind him, with occupation authorities, he left a black book that promises ill fortune to a large list of Japanese and, on behalf of all other prisoners, fervently hopes they will pay well for their war crimes.

Other than that, the man who is hailed as the "Savior of Ceylon" has a story of imprisonment, of Jap cruelty and of Jap stupidity that salts laughter with tears and promises to take a prominent place in the annals of the RCAF.

The permanent force officer, who trained at Trenton in 1937, survived clubbings and semi-starvation to lead a motley crew of Britons, Americans, Dutch and Canadians—230 of them—out of a prison camp at Suwa, due west of Tokyo, down to freedom at Yokohama; and, as the prisoners met men of their own kin, their colors were flying and their hearts were brave.

Fashioned From Crayon

Yes, they had their own colors. United States aircraft dropped an American flag—the others made theirs. The Canadian emblem, fashioned from crayon on the best bedsheet in Suwa by little Corporal Gaudin of the Royal Rifles from down New Brunswick way, flapped with the rest before a newly kowtowing Jap citizenry.

Gaudin's design was a Union Jack with a huge green maple leaf in the centre and the word Canada in scroll-work beneath it.

They marched without music. The trumpeter had a trumpet, it is true, but he had lost his playing fingers and besides he had to help a pal along who had lost his legs through disease.

But even those beaten and starved men had something to be thankful for. The Japs kept some American nurses down in the cellar of the boathouse, near port for Tokyo. They communicated to them through a hole bored in the floor. The prisoners tried to send food and clothing to these American women from their own pitiful stores. They were refused. Birchall doesn't know what became of the women.

It all started when the P.B.Y. flying boat, out on anti-submarine patrol, sighted the Jap fleet and wirelessed back to Ceylon the fleet's speed, position and course.

It nearly ended when the boat went down in a flurry of Zero fire. Eight of the nine men got out and were strafed by the Jap planes. Six were finally picked up by a Jap destroyer, three of them badly wounded.

The first interrogation was polite enough, Birchall standing with a leg wound, another standing, the other three prone on the deck.

Punished for Silence

Then came the payoff—the Japs picked up from Ceylon a request for a repeat back on the warning message. The Japs asked what it meant. They were not told, and all six were thrown into a hole, without attention, for three days.

One of the wounded, several holes in him, lost control of his bowels, and his excrement mixed with his blood on the blankets. It was that kind of a trip.

They were transferred to an aircraft carrier and the wounded received medical attention. Birchall there got his first beating in what he laughingly describes as an interrogation.

"What was it like?"

"You don't just care; we didn't think we would pull through, anyway, after a couple of days."

Confined Five Months

Birchall was in close confinement for five months in that type of camp in which they told one if they found any lies, they would shoot him and list him as killed in action. They shot quite a few.

He was in a camp adjacent to Tokyo all through the heavy bombing and burning of the capital city. He saw his first B-29 bomber in November, last year. "Oh we had got wind of them before, but really didn't know what it was all about," he says.

"There came a most noticeable change among the civilians, especially at the beginning of this year. The bombings were very hard and they lost mouth under them. The real effects of those bombings were worse than was ever realized outside. They found then the war was not very good. Too, they were not getting very much to eat."

Beat Their Own People

The Wing Commander has an explanation for the beatings, also. "You understand," he said, "the beatings was not alone in the camps. They did it to their own people and in their army.

"Why, I have seen a duty officer, yes duty N.C.O.'s, lay men out. And then, the same Japs couldn't understand why we complained about it, because they got it themselves."

A beating, he explained, also depended on the individual who was giving it. "They work themselves up into a temper—some got into terrible rages. You couldn't imagine, and when they cooled off, the beating was over."

At Suwa they knew when the end was coming—a civilian, a second generation Hawaiian Jap, very pro-American, who got caught by the war while taking a university course in Japan, told Birchall, as camp senior, of Hirohito's broadcast.

Had to Steal Food

He warned the Canadian to be careful, for as the wing commander explained, the camp was starving and, night after night parties would slip out, steal vegetables and food—they even stole a goat one night. The natives weren't too cheerful about it. The Hawaiian Jap warned there might be trouble—maybe reprisals in case there was a revolution or blow-up.

Then, he explained, the official Jap army interpreter sold out to them, and gave the news from Tokyo hot from the griddle. He told them about United States aircraft dropping food to prison camps. The Americans came over in sweeps, on Aug. 29 and 31, looking for camps, and when food was finally dropped, "it was the greatest thing that happened, even greater than the news of the capitulation."

But just before that the camp had its first red meat when they negotiated for a cow—2,300 yens and some cigarets stolen from a Jap depot, and later bought a horse. As Birchall tells it, it was quite an event.

There was little collaboration, but there were many cases of false propaganda broadcasts being made in the names of men who had not consented to participate, the flier said. He had heard of messages in which his name had been used, but he had been careful to keep a transcript of his remarks so he might compare the authenticity of the message as received here.

The messages were doctored and worked into broadcasts by collaborators — usually men whose nerve had broken under the terrible strain of torture and mental anguish.

He and his companions were forced to work in coolie gangs under threat that their wounded and sick companions would be left in the cold to die. But the questioning continued and after they were warned not to communicate with each other they were forced to resort to all manner of means to keep informed as to the line the general interrogation was taking.

Cell walls snapped to the tap of air force code telling the prisoners what changes to make in their stories if changes were needed.

When word of surrender infiltrated to the camps and the supply transports appeared overhead the camp organized battle formations. The guards tried to prevent them going to the spots where the provisions were dropped, but "we just clipped them and threw them into a near-by pig pen."

Home Town Welcome Today

St. Catharines, Oct. 10 (Special).—Wing Cmdr. Leonard Birchall will meet his proud parents, Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Birchall, for the first time in nearly four years late Thursday afternoon, when he arrives at St. Catharines RCAF station from Ottawa. He will be accompanied by his wife who greeted him at Ottawa Wednesday night.

St. Catharines will extend a brief but rousing welcome. Birchall, a native of St. Catharines, will be greeted by Mayor W. J. MacDonald, members of city council, relatives and friends, at the airport. The officer will be paraded to the municipal building by St. Catharines' area men who served in the RCAF, for a formal civic welcome.

The parade of airmen, a cadet bugle band and cavalcade of autos will proceed to Birchall's home where it will disband.

Mr. and Mrs. Birchall have talked to their son by long-distance telephone since his arrival at Ottawa.

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149
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