

Interview with Cmdr. Arthur Anders by R.H. Growald

When Japan Sank the *Panay* in '37, Anders Was Aboard
By R.H. Growald, *San Diego Union*, 7/12/89

It was a December Sunday, 51 years ago, four years before Pearl Harbor. Arthur Anders of La Mesa, then a Navy lieutenant and executive officer of the gunboat *Panay*, was sprinting toward the forward machine-gun battery when the first Japanese bomb hit.

Moments later, his hands split open by the explosion, Anders gave the first American orders in history to fire on the Japanese.

Anders and his wife Muriel sit in their living room. They discuss what happened, a half century ago, up the Yangtze River, beyond the far Pacific shore. "That Sunday on the *Panay* we had just had our chicken dinner. We heard Japanese heavy bombers coming. It wasn't a new sound," Anders says.

Japan invaded China in 1931, and the two nations had been fighting, off and on, since then. The invaders had driven the Chinese from one capital to another, from Beijing to Nanking and now, 200 miles up the Yangtze, to Hankow.

Aboard the *Panay* at Hankow, for two months Anders had heard and seen the Japanese bombers. "They were hitting the Chinese ashore. Our sister gunboat, the *Luzon*, had just evacuated the U.S. ambassador and most of his staff to Chungking, 1,500 miles upriver," he says. "The Japanese hadn't struck us. America was neutral."

The Navy's Asiatic Fleet had sent the patrol up the Yangtze, China's Mississippi, to aid Americans and others caught up in the conflict. Muriel and other Navy wives had established homes at various cities on the Yangtze.

"I loved China," Muriel says. She was a Pacific veteran. Her father had been a Navy civilian official in the Philippines for decades. She remembers going as far as Chungking, when the *Panay* was sent to that farthest river port. "We had a great rambling place, a two-story house, up on the hillside where there were no streets, just paths. The big house had no running water," she says. "But it did have a most famous bad Number One boy."

The Number One boy in pre-war China was the butler, the majordomo, the one who hired and fired the small army of servants. And Navy wives knew of him.

"He was a thief. He stole from Navy couples living in the house. I had spent more time in Asia than other wives," Muriel says. "I was going to stop that." Muriel did.

It was Anders' first morning in the big house, and Number One boy didn't bother to serve breakfast. Anders went off to the *Panay*. Muriel called in Number One boy.

"You're fired," Muriel said.

"You can't fire me. You a missy," Number One said.

Muriel nods. "This was the old China. I was a missy, the wife, a woman. Only a male master could fire Number One. When Tex (Anders was born in Texas and is forever "Tex" to Muriel) got home, I told him what happened, and he fired Number One," she says.

Several nights later, while Anders was aboard the gunboat and Muriel was asleep, thieves cut through screens and burgled the big house.

"They didn't touch Tex's clothes or the clothing of Bill, our 4-year-old boy. They just took all the summer clothing I had bought in San Francisco," Muriel says. "It was Number One boy's revenge, of course."

Anders says, "I found one excellent clue - a clear handprint. I called in the Chungking police. Two detectives in robes came." He showed them the handprint. The two detectives nodded. One reached out and wiped away the evidence. He thought he was helping in the cleanup.

With the war spreading in China, the Navy ordered wives home. Muriel, because her father was in the Philippines, waited there for Anders.

On Sunday, Dec. 12, 1937, as the Japanese closed in on Hankow, the *Panay* was anchored near three merchant vessels. The sound of the Japanese planes, as ever, sent the five officers and 54 crewmen of the *Panay* toward their battle stations.

"This time the heavy bombers didn't wing past us and hit the Chinese on shore. The three heavies came at us. And they were followed by six dive bombers," Anders says.

Some historians say the Japanese army in China, meeting more resistance than expected, grew furious and launched the attack because the United States, although neutral, was friendly with China.

The first bomb —it hit at 1:38 p.m. — mangled the *Panay's* sick bay, radio room and bridge. The skipper, Lt. Cmdr. J.J. Hughes, fell with a smashed hip, in shock.

Anders, his hands ripped, picked himself up from the deck and scrambled to the battery of two Lewis machine guns installed to fend off river bandits.

Open fire, he ordered.

The gun couldn't swing toward the attacking planes. "We had to wait until the bombers had finished their run and were pulling away," Anders says.

Most of the gun crew had been wounded. Anders manned one of the guns himself. The other was manned by Chief Boatswain's Mate Ernest Mahlman, who had been taking a shower when the attack started.

"I'll never forget Mahlman manning his gun with no pants on," Anders says.

Sailors yelled that the captain out of action. Anders scrambled to the bridge. A bomb exploded and a piece of shrapnel, the size of a grain of corn, pierced his neck.

"I was bleeding profusely. I couldn't speak," Anders says. (Four days later he coughed up the shrapnel.)

He grabbed a pencil and wrote out an order to get the boat underway. He was told the *Panay* was stuck, the boilers blown apart. He wrote an order to radio the Asiatic Fleet. The radio was destroyed, he was told.

Anders made his way below deck. He found his ship's innards torn. The *Panay*, its bow already underwater, was sinking. At 2:02 p.m., Anders wrote out the order to abandon ship.

At 3:52 p.m. the gunboat went under. Anders, his crew and the civilian refugees aboard the *Panay* made their way to shore and safety.

Japan made a sort of apology for the attack, which killed two members of the *Panay*'s crew. "At first, the Japanese government said had visibility was the cause. But one of our U.S. refugees was a motion-picture cameraman. His film showed the clear, cloudless weather," Anders says.

"The attack on the *Panay* was deliberate and planned. It was no mistake." Four Decembers later, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

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The Anders' son, Bill grew up to become an astronaut. Bill, Frank Borman and Jim Lovell in Apollo 8 reached and circled the moon in December 1968.

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