

*Sunday, February 1, 1998*

# A schoolgirl POW thanks her rescuers a half-century later

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Last modified at 1:41 p.m. on Saturday, January 31, 1998

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*The AP*

BLACKWOOD, N.J. (AP) -- On a sweltering summer morning more than 52 years ago, seven men dropped from the heavens and liberated Mary Previte from a Japanese prison camp.

They were like "angels falling from the sky," she recalls. She never forgot them, but she never had an opportunity to thank them, either. "It was like unfinished business," she says now.

But last year, Previte set out to tell these men how much she appreciated the efforts they had made, the risks they had taken to restore her freedom.

In May, while speaking to a New Jersey reunion of veterans of the China-Burma-India theater, she read the names of her seven rescuers. No one in the room knew them, but it led to a chain of contacts she followed as far as she could.

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Previte (pronounced PREH'-vuh-tee) was the daughter of Methodist missionaries in China. Mary and her three siblings studied at Chefoo, a boarding school for children of American and British missionaries.

The school on the coast was converted into a military base by Japanese invaders in 1942. The children and teachers were taken to the prison camp across the Shandong peninsula, where they awaited the end of the war. Previte's parents, working in central China, were never taken prisoner.

Previte was 12 years old when the paratroopers landed on Aug. 17, 1945, just outside the gates of the Weih sien Civilian Assembly Center. Three days before, the Japanese had announced their surrender, but another two weeks would pass before the surrender papers were signed.

The men were sent by the Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of the CIA, to liberate 1,400 captives taken by the Japanese during the war. Unable to land at the camp because of the guards, they made a low drop from a B-29 into a nearby cornfield.

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This photograph, taken in northeast China in 1945, shows four of seven paratroopers who rescued Mary Previte from a World War II Japanese prison camp. Rescue team members, from left, were: James Moore, Tad Nagaki, Stanley Staiger and Raymond Hanchulak. Previte tracked down these men in 1997.

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A Salvation Army band began playing "The Star-Spangled Banner" and the prisoners hoisted their rescuers onto their shoulders. Suddenly, unexpectedly, the war was over for them, and they were free.

"The camp went berserk. We didn't know the war was over," Previte recalls. "People were dancing, weeping, pounding the ground."

Weeks would pass before Mary and her siblings would be reunited with their parents after a 5 1/2-year separation.

They returned to the United States. Mary married, had a daughter, divorced. She taught English, and went to work as administrator of Camden County's youth detention center.

She has run the jail since 1974 and says she draws upon her prison camp experience as she seeks to bring a sense of safety and order to the lives of juveniles awaiting trial.

Last year, she was chosen president of the New Jersey Juvenile Detention Association and was elected in November to the state Assembly, where she hopes to be an advocate for troubled youngsters.

In 1985, Previte obtained a copy of a declassified military mission report from a fellow camp survivor. In it were the names of her rescuers. She tucked it away; it would be impossible to find them, she thought.

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On a whim, at the meeting of the veterans group in Mount Laurel, she read the names. "Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would ever be able to find all of these people," says Previte, 65.

In October, a notice in the group's newsletter produced the first lead: The widow of Raymond Hanchulak was living in central Pennsylvania in Bear Creek Village. Her husband, a medic on the mission, died the previous year.

Meanwhile, a man who had been at the May meeting sent Previte pages and pages of names gleaned from the Internet to check out. The search seemed daunting: There were more than 150 listings just for James Moore.

Then Previte found Peter Orlich's widow, Carol, in the New York City borough of Queens. Orlich, a radio operator and the youngest of the group, died in 1993 at age 70. He, too, had tried to locate the others, unsuccessfully.

"If he were only alive -- what this would have meant to him. It's just hard for me to imagine," Mrs. Orlich says.

She sent Previte a piece of yellowed silk parachute embroidered with the men's signatures that her husband had kept in his dresser drawer.

"Now I was really heartsick because my first two connections were with two widows," Previte says. "I thought I could not wait one more minute to start calling every name on this list."

She found Tad Nagaki, a Japanese-American interpreter on the mission. Now 77, he is a recently widowed beet farmer in Alliance, Neb. Nagaki sent Previte photographs his wife kept in a wartime scrapbook.

Nagaki told Previte how to find Moore, 78, of Dallas, who attended the same Chefoo missionary school before joining the FBI and then the OSS. He later joined the CIA and retired in 1978.

Moore, with help from a neighbor with a national computer database, joined Previte's search for the remaining men.

He found Stanley Staiger, 79, the mission commander, recovering from a broken hip at his Nevada home. The last, James Hannon, was located by Moore in Yucca Valley, Calif., where he is a writer, drafting plot summaries about the war.

Previte ended her search without locating the seventh man, Eddie Wang, the Chinese interpreter. The others said he was a Chinese nationalist and they had no idea how to find him.

For Previte, it was an immensely gratifying experience.

"It's never too late to say thank you," Previte says. "It's been like goosebumps up and down my spine to be able to say thank you to these men after 52 years. I told them I have so much to be thankful for."

She has been getting to know her rescuers and what happened to them after the war. They were surprised by her interest in their lives.

"I don't think we made that much of a difference. It could have been anybody," Moore says, modestly. "It's nice of her to remember us."

Staiger was a stockbroker and hotel owner before retiring in Reno. "We did our job, not knowing what would happen when we parachuted in," Staiger says. "We had a few rough moments with the Japanese, but everything worked itself out."

Previte would like to organize a reunion of the group, but the men's failing health may prevent that. She plans to keep in touch.

"We were bonded by a war that wrapped us together for so many different reasons," Previte says. "We've become family now."

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***EX-CAPTIVE, LOCAL HERO'S WIDOW CELEBRATE  
EDWARDSVILLE NATIVE RAYMOND  
HANCHULAK WAS ONE OF PARATROOPERS  
WHO LIBERATED MARY PREVITE FROM A  
JAPANESE PRISON CAMP. NOW SHE  
WANTS TO MEET THE REST OF HER RESCUERS***

By MELANIE BURNEY; Associated Press Writer

**Sunday, November 29, 1998** Page: 1A

MOORESTOWN, N.J.- A year after setting out to thank a Luzerne County native and six other men who liberated her from a Japanese prison camp 53 years ago, Mary Previte is on another mission.

She has embarked on a cross-country trek to meet her rescuers to express her appreciation for their valiant efforts in a cornfield thousands of miles away a half-century ago.

This month, she met the widow of one of her rescuers, an Edwardsville native.

Raymond Hanchulak, who died in 1996, had been a medic on the mission. His wife, Helen, lives in Bear Creek Village.

"Raymond would have cried," she said. "Then he'd say OK, let's have a drinkie-the ceremony is over."

Previte was just 12 years old when Hanchulak and other paratroopers landed on Aug. 17, 1945, just outside the gates of the Weihsien Civilian Assembly Center. Three days before, the Japanese had announced their surrender, but another two weeks would pass before the surrender papers were signed.

She never forgot the men, who were like "angels falling from the sky." Last year, she began what seemed like an impossible task: to find her rescuers.

"I want to find out who they are. These are the people who saved the world," Previte, 66, of Haddonfield, N.J., said in a recent interview. "I'm trying to find

every detail I can about them."

Hanchulak said she wasn't surprised that Previte called to request a meeting. "She's a very persevering woman."

The two women embraced at an emotional meeting the Thursday before Thanksgiving, arranged by a Moorestown couple who gave Previte her first lead in locating the rescuers.

Mrs. Hanchulak gave Previte a bouquet of pink roses; Previte showed her a piece of yellowed silk parachute embroidered with the men's signatures.

"This is so exciting. My third hero," Previte said as she wrapped her arms around Hanchulak. "Oh! I cannot believe it. I have looked forward to this so much."

Raymond Hanchulak signed up for military duty soon after graduating from high school, his wife said. He had a decorated career, which included service in the Office of Strategic Services.

It was only at his death at age 79 that relatives and friends learned of his security background. His wife, once sworn to secrecy, speaks guardedly about his career, even today.

"When he died they were all shocked at what he did," his wife said. "They didn't talk like they do now. He was something else, he really was. Thank God for men like that."

"I would have loved to have known him," Previte said. "How I wish he were here."

Reflecting on her meeting with Previte during an interview Saturday, Hanchulak said it brought back a flood of memories of her husband.

"I was just speechless. So many things ran through my mind at the time about my husband. His jump into the camp, all his missions ... you just get a quick flashback of his career," she said.

Hanchulak said she and Previte have talked about once every month since Previte first contacted a year ago.

"She knows what (the men) did. There's a person who was actually in one of their missions. It forms a bond with all of these people. It's sort of a common denominator," Hanchulak said.

Previte located Hanchulak and another widow, before eventually finding four of the surviving men. She ended her search without locating the seventh, a Chinese nationalist.

The men were sent by the Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of the CIA, to liberate 1,400 captives taken by the Japanese in the China-Burma-India theater.

Previte and her three siblings were studying on the coast of China at Chefoo, a boarding school for children of American and British missionaries. The school was converted into a military base by Japanese invaders in 1942.

After the war, Mary and her siblings were reunited with their parents and returned to the United States. She later married, had a daughter and divorced.

During the past year, Previte has been getting to know her rescuers and what happened to them after the war. They married, had children; some landed civilian jobs, others continued to work for the government.

She wanted to organize a reunion of the group, but the men's failing health prevented that. The men are scattered around the country.

Previte traveled in October to Alliance, Neb., to meet Tad Nagaki, a Japanese-American interpreter on the mission. Now 78, he is a widower and a beet farmer.

In August, Previte was moved to tears at reunion with James Moore in Trenton at the Statehouse, where she is serving her first term in the state Assembly.

"I'm doing it step-by-step," she said. "There's something wonderful to be able to look a person in the eye and say thank you."

Next, she hopes to arrange a meeting with Peter Orlich's widow, Carol, of the New York City borough of Queens. Orlich, a radio operator and the youngest of the group, died in 1993 at age 70.

Stanley Staiger, 80, the mission commander, a retired stockbroker and hotel owner, lives in Reno, Nev. The last, James Hannon, 79, is Yucca Valley, Calif., where he is a writer, drafting plot summaries about the war.

Previte says she is still awed by the men.

"They all say 'I'm not a hero. Any American would have done it,' " she said. "It just blows my mind."-

Times Leader Staff Writer Steve Mocarisky contributed to this story.

AP PHOTO

Mary Previte, left, and Helen Hanchulak of Bear Creek Village hug as they meet for the first time in Moorestown, N.J. Hanchulak's husband, Raymond, who died in 1996, was one of seven men who liberated the Japanese prison camp Previte was in 53 years ago. Raymond Hanchulak was an Edwardsville native.

