



Previte's Magnificent Seven

Schoolgirl liberated from POW camp 52 years ago finally gets to thank rescuers

By Melanie Burney, Associated Press writer

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.

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.

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 51/2-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 in Blackwood, N.J.

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.

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."



Top: A photograph taken in northeast China in 1945 shows four of the seven paratroopers who rescued Mary Previte from a World War II Japanese prison camp. Duck Mission Rescue team members included, from left, James Moore, Tad Nagaki, Stanley Staiger and Raymond Hanchulak. Previte finally tracked them down in 1997. Middle: Mary Previte holds the parachute fragment given to her by the widow of one of the paratroopers. Bottom: The photo rests on a piece of silk parachute embroidered with details of the mission.