

Name of Expedition:

Hkamti Plane Search Flag Expedition

Date of Expedition:

January 11, 2007 - February 13, 2007

Report Contributors

Report Prepared by Brenda Davidson-Shaddox
Photos by Brenda Davidson-Shaddox and Ko Nyein Chan
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Purpose of the Expedition:

To search for an American airplane that crashed in the western mountains along the border of Myanmar (formerly Burma) and India during WWII and, if found, to later research and try to identify the specific plane and its crew and, ultimately, notify family members where the plane was found.

Flag Expedition Members:

Brenda Davidson-Shaddox (MN '04), Expedition Leader, San Antonio, Texas USA
Nancy Nenow (MN '04), Team Member, San Diego, California USA
Don Morley (MN '90), Team Member, San Antonio, Texas USA
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Ko Nyein Chan, Director/Guide of SST Tourism, Yangon, Myanmar, SE Asia
U Kyaw, Coordinator of Local Ground Support, Hkamti, Myanmar, SE Asia
U Maung Ngu, Member Naga Culture Committee and Head Naga Guide, Zee Phu Gone, SE Asia
Aye Aye, Personal Coordinator, Pambien Village, Myanmar, SE Asia
U Taung Mya, Assistant Coordinator of Local Ground Support, Hkamti, Myanmar, SE Asia
Sonny Soe, 2nd Assistant Coordinator of Local Ground Support, Hkamti, Myanmar, SE Asia
U Maung, Driver, Hkamti, Myanmar, SE Asia
Ten Naga Bearers, men and women, Village of Middle Fongse, Myanmar, SE Asia
Various Ground Support, Boatmen Security and Field Personnel, Myanmar, SE Asia

Background

For ten years I have worked in Myanmar, SE Asia photographing ethnic tribes people who continue living traditional lives. One of my photographic projects took me into Hkakaborazi National Park at the base of Mt. Hkakaborazi, Myanmar's highest peak at 19,000+ feet. This range of mountains was known during WWII as "The Hump," an area made infamous for the number of military aircraft transporting troops and supplies between China and India (known as CBI, or China-Burma-India route) that disappeared trying to wind their way through the high peaks.

During my Hkakaborazi trek, I heard stories about crash sites in the area that had never been investigated. That trip (plus an expedition that took me along the Ledo Road) peaked my interest in America's part in the CBI theater. I began to inform myself about the history of Burma, and its significance in the war, and to fantasize about finding one of the planes.

In 2000 my work took me into the Naga Hills west of the ChinDwin River, the major obstacle for troops and civilians alike who tried to escape to India after Japan occupied Burma during the war. I became involved with the Nagas in several projects and continued to return to their homeland annually.

Four years ago some of my Naga friends told me about WWII airplanes that had crashed in their territory, somewhat farther south than Hkakaborazi. They knew where some of the planes had gone down.

I learned that our government has a crashed plane retrieval agency, but because of the political situation between Myanmar and the US it was highly unlikely there could be a cooperative effort between them, even to search out WWII planes and MIAs. I began to think more seriously about trying to find one of the wreckage sites myself.

I discussed my idea with Naga and other Myanmar friends, and they assured me of their cooperation. The more I thought about it, the more possible I believed it to be.

October 2006 I flew to Myanmar and met with Nagas to gain more information, then had an appointment with a high ranking Myanmar Government official and told him of my idea. Surprisingly, he was supportive, and within an hour, I had permission to do the search. (The wrecked planes are in highly restricted areas not normally open to "outsiders.")

I returned to the States and put together a search team consisting of Nancy Nenow and Char Glacy of San Diego, California and Don Morley of San Antonio, Texas. Don and Nancy are Explorer Club members. Then, I applied to the Explorers Club for "flag expedition" status. The application was accepted.

Expedition Activities and Results

After an international flight to the capitol city of Yangon on January 11, 2007, Nancy, Char and I continued by plane to Mandalay January 13, where Don, who had visa and plane delays, caught up with us the next day. We had two days of sightseeing in the Mandalay area that included a visit to Sagaing Hill, an ancient pagoda on a high hill overlooking the Ayeyarwady River valley and the city of Mandalay. We toured historic sites, including the towns of Ava and Amarapura, still rife with walls, temples and pagodas from ancient kingdoms.

We visited silk, gold leaf, cheroot, and alms bowl making factories and 45th Street, famous for making most of the marble, bronze and brick Buddha images that fill places of worship throughout the country. Half of one day took us on a boat ride up the Ayeyarwady River to Mingun, site of King Bodawpaya's grandiose stupa and the 90-ton Mingun bell, supposedly the largest uncracked bell in the world. Traditional fishing boats with colorful patched sails, enormous rafts floating bamboo downriver, and public ferries offered countless river life photo opportunities.

Evenings ended with a walk across the more than 200 years old U Bein Bridge where women with baskets on their heads, monks, and romantic young lovers strolled across the bridge in silhouette against the blazing red orb of a setting sun. Women, shivering in the cold water, crawled about catching fish and prawns with their hands and stuffing them inside their garments, protein to add to the rice they would serve for their families' evening meal.

We were lucky enough to encounter a noviation parade of young boys in ornate costumes on horseback, followed by pretty girls wearing their finest silks and carrying offerings to Buddha and highly decorated bullocks pulling equally decorated carts in a procession that would take the boys to their first religious indoctrination.

On the third day, we departed by van to the town of Monywa, the last big town we would visit until our expedition was over. We passed through Sagaing where a monumental standing Buddha dominates the countryside, and 1000 sitting Buddhas guard the growth of an equal number of newly planted trees.

Ultimately, we arrived at our destination for a last night of rest in a Western style hotel.

At 3:30 the next morning, we rose to board a van that carried us to the jetty where a traditional ChinDwin River ferry moored at the dock. Food vendors moved among the waiting crowd, some of whom were to be fellow passengers on our ferry. We waited inside the relative comfort of our van until boarding time.

The next three days marked the beginning of what was to be an exotic adventure into the far reaches of this developing country. We had the "first class" cabin on the ferry, which was simply a low-ceilinged, enclosed area where we sat on the floor, leaning against our gear and personal luggage stacked behind us, while other passengers occupied benches in the open ferry.

The first day on the river took us through the plains area of Sagaing Division where farmland and small villages lined the river banks. We made stops at major villages where some passengers disembarked while others boarded. Vendors crowded onto the boat at every stop, offering candy, bright baskets of oranges, sticky rice and other treats. Ko Nyein Chan dashed off the boat at Thindaw Village to get us a chicken and pork curry lunch that we spread on a space blanket and ate out of plastic bags as we continued upriver.

Early on, the wide river cut its way through flat farm land where farmers worked their land with bullocks or water buffalo. Women did laundry by the river's edge, while children splashed, naked, by their sides.

As we proceeded north, the land changed from prairie to hilly thick forests and, finally, to dense jungle. Hawks and eagles perched on high branches eyeing the land and water below for an opportunistic meal. Kingfishers painted the air turquoise with brilliant wings, and ruddy shell ducks waddled along the river's edge in mated pairs. Open-billed storks paraded majestically along the banks. It was an ever-changing scene, but our discomfort often distracted us from enjoying the beauty of our surroundings. Don toyed with his gadgets, determining our speed and exact location on his GPS. Nancy and Char played cribbage. I kept my journal updated.

We spent nights in modest river village guesthouses that had been forewarned of our visits. New mosquito nets hung above the beds. The smell of fresh paint mingled with the damp musk of river life. Proprietors put the best face on their lodgings for their foreign visitors.

AyeAye, a long-time friend, joined us at the village of Maw Laik, half way into our journey. She was to be personal companion to the women in our group, helping us adapt to local customs and facilities. The boatman extended his stop at Pambien Village so we could enjoy a delicious lunch prepared by AyeAye's mother and served at their family home.

As we moved northward, the river became increasingly narrow and swifter. Sandbars just below the water's surface brought the ferry to a lurching halt as the bow plowed into the sand. Male passengers jumped over the side, tucked the hems of their *longyis* (skirt-like apparel worn by both men and women) into a kind of shorts, then, heaved, rocked and pushed until the boat broke free.

Everything was done with smiles, with laughter. While our team suffered discomfort and impatience, the Myanmar people accept their harsh life with equanimity. They view us and our dependency on comfort with slight amusement, though never judgmentally.

Finally, on the third day, we came into view of the end of the ferry run and our project kickoff destination, Hkamti. Less than a mile from the jetty, we struck another sandbar.

This time, those saviors of past rescues did not jump into the water to push us free. They piled onto a narrow canoe that had rushed to the ferry to pick up any passenger willing to pay a few *kyats* to be taken

ashore. Unlike us, the foreigners who were too laden and too uncertain to leave the "first class" accommodations of our boat, they were unencumbered by heavy baggage, and left us, isolated, in the middle of the river.

Crewmembers dug sand away from the prop, then the pilot revved the motor to try to push us free. It didn't work. They dug more sand, revved the motor again -- and again and again. They rocked the boat, tried to push us free, continued to dig. We didn't budge. We could see the village ahead. As time passed, we could see only lights. A damp darkness descended over the river, black as only a jungle night can be.

Finally, our boat moved slightly. We were elated. The pilot put the boat under full power. We lurched forward. The heavy sound of sand being thrown backward from the prop mixed with the sound of water, but we kept moving. At last, we were free.

Tired and hungry, we climbed the jetty steps into the village of Hkamti.

After a good night's sleep at Aye Kaung Maing guesthouse, a modest accommodation in the Myanmar tradition, we were all in better spirits. Everybody was happy to be off the boat, even though Aye Kaung Maing is not a dwelling of Western standards.

There was no indoor plumbing, and a night trip to the outhouse was cold and damp. Traditional bathing requires pouring cold water over yourself (fully dressed) from a concrete vat in an open courtyard.

But proprietor Ko Thet and his wife Mar Mar Gyi made every effort for our comfort. Though basic, sleeping rooms were comfortable and clean, and in honor of our visit, they rigged up a 5 gallon can of water heated over a hibachi and piped it into a wooden enclosure so we could bathe in relative comfort and privacy. Boiling water for coffee and hot tea were always available in the lobby. Laundry service could be had for a small fee, or we could rinse out our own clothes and put them to dry on a line strung between buildings in the courtyard. If we wanted to air our sleeping bags, Mar Mar Gyi propped a bamboo pole between fence railings where we could hang them in the sun.

We were supposed to have a two day wait in Hkamti before our Naga colleagues would return from their annual New Year's Festival at the mountain village of Lahe. During our wait, we relaxed, shopped at the local bizarre and explored the area.

Once the Nagas returned, we continued to linger. Even though we had government permission to do the expedition, local authorities delayed us. We would, I was assured, be allowed to start our trip into the jungle soon, but no specific time was given.

As the delay continued, we checked out rumors of airplane parts and other war paraphernalia retrieved by villagers from and around the ChinDwin.

One villager used a large piece of stainless steel that he had found in the river as an exterior wall on his house. It was soot blackened on one side, and we determined that it was probably some sort of firewall from an aircraft.

At a monastery we found two drop tanks that had also been pulled from the river. One was used as a rubbish bin. The other had been made into a wheelbarrow.

Another villager had a gate bell made from riveted aluminum -- obviously from an aircraft exterior. Metal ammunition boxes, mess kits, leather belt packs, even a British War Medal had been acquired by various villagers.

Despite frequent visits to the district commander's office, our trip continued to be postponed. Reminding local authorities that we had higher official permission to do the expedition did not speed up the process.

We visited Lundau, Larwell, Tha Ya Gone and other Naga villages in the vicinity. We were invited into homes where we viewed the proudly displayed skulls of hunters' trophies, or sipped tea while we listened to stories about the many places where we may find evidence of the war. Always, the Nagas welcomed us with friendliness and hospitality. We were invited to the home of U Hla Phay, the top Naga leader and old friend. He brought out hornbill feather decorated headdress and cowry shell adorned body wrap and allowed Don to wear the precious garments for a photo session.

Nagas are former head hunters, a practice slowly eliminated by the introduction of Christianity plus government intervention. During the Colonial era, missionaries converted many tribals. Today, a mix of Christianity, Buddhism, and Animism is practiced among the Nagas. Religion and modern attitudes have been blended into their traditional beliefs. They are a proud, intelligent people who, though often educated, prefer to live within the conventions of their established communal society. They are fierce about their independence, but just as fierce in their loyalty to a friend, even an outsider.

In one instance, we visited a Naga Shaman who predicted that we would find the airplane if we showed proper respect to the spirits of nature before going into the jungle. She instructed Nyein Chan on the ceremony we should conduct and explained that we would face difficulty but that we should persevere.

We toured Kachin, Lisu and Karen villages, hiking along the water and stopping at temporary river camps where young women wove grass into mats to sell, and old women wove fishing nets for their husbands and sons to ply their skills in the ChinDwin.

We visited the Naga Tribal Museum in the village of Zee Phu Gone, a museum I helped the Nagas develop 5 years ago, then attended a ceremony to deliver money from American donors to build a school for the Naga children. In our honor, Naga Cultural Committee members wore traditional headdresses and body wraps, ceremonial attire reserved for special occasions.

Still, local authorities continued to detain us. It was frustrating, for we were eager to get the project underway. It was a challenge for Nyein Chan to keep us busy so we would not become bored and too impatient.

We grew restless and searched for ways to fill our time. We decided to get the blessing of local monks for the expedition. Nyein Chan and our guesthouse hosts made arrangements for the ceremony. Two days later, five monks arrived in somber procession. Nyein Chan had instructed me in the part I was to play, pouring water from a tea pot into a bowl in symbolic cleansing and purity.

The monks sat on the floor in a straight line before a small table, their backs to an ornate altar. An assistant sat to their right. Our team formed a semi-circle on the opposite side of the table from the monks. Nyein Chan, U Kyaw, U Hla Phay, and others knelt throughout the room. Incense perfumed the air. The monks prayed and chanted their blessing, locals responding in unison at the appropriate time.

When it was time for my part in the ceremony, I slowly poured water from the teapot as instructed. Slowly, very slowly, for I had been warned that I must not run out of water before the prayer ended.

After the ceremony and some conversation with a young monk who spoke English and translated for the others, an elaborate meal of curry, rice, fruit and vegetables was served by our guesthouse hosts. An elder monk smiled gently and predicted success for our search.

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We had learned a few days earlier that Buddhist friends in Yangon had held a similar ceremony in that city, and that the Yangon monks also predicted our success. We now had the blessing of rural and city monks, plus the assurance of a Naga Shaman. It was authorities, however, not gods or spirits, that held the fate of our project in their hands.

Delay after delay had us on edge. We had been notified that it would be at least one more day before we could begin the final leg of our journey. We used the time to catch up with chores, including laundry. Just as we finished hanging our wet garments on the line, Nyein Chan rushed in to announce that we would leave within an hour. After a frantic rush to get everything packed and arrangements made with Mar Mar Gyi to take care of our drying laundry and other undone chores, we piled into a Jeep and were driven to the jetty by U Maung, an old friend and past driver who always looked so happy that he earned the nickname "Smiley."

Men were already loading supplies onto the long boat that would be our final means of transportation. Food, camping gear, fuel, tools, guides -- all the equipment and people necessary to conduct our project were crammed into the narrow wooden boat. At last, we were happily underway.

Within sight of Hkamti, we came to a sudden stop. We had blown a gasket. For over an hour, we sat in the open boat, with the hot sun scorching down on us and still able to see the jetty we had just left, and fretted through yet another delay. We struggled to get comfortable on the hard board seats and to protect ourselves from the blistering rays. Finally, to the cheers of overheated and slightly disgruntled passengers, we were underway again.

Once Hkamti was behind us, we saw fewer and fewer signs of civilization. An occasional fishing canoe, water buffalo lolling at the water's edge, or signs of cultivated fields cut out of the jungle indicated village life, but usual signs of population were non-existent.

Just before 5:00 p.m. we arrived at the confluence of Nampuk Stream and the ChinDwin River. Manipulating swirling waters where the two bodies of water came together, our boatman landed us on an isthmus where we would spend the night before continuing up the Nampuk to our ultimate destination.

Before setting up camp, we paid respects to villagers at Middle Fongse, a village situated high up the hill from the merging rivers where we would pick up porters, buy fresh vegetables, and otherwise make final arrangements. As we strolled through the village, children and adults alike followed us, stopping to form curious circles around us whenever we stopped to greet an elder or to satisfy our own curiosity about village life. A small Naga woman demonstrated the skill of rice pounding, a daily chore for village housewives that requires beating husks off of harvested rice. A long, heavy pole is pounded with some force into a shallow hole carved into an upstanding log where the rice has been placed. Once the rice is stripped of the inedible hull, it is then winnowed in a flat basket to separate grain from the chaff. Chickens rush to scratch through the leavings for any rice that has fallen away with the husks.

Back at the confluence camp, we rushed to set up our tents before dark as U Taung Mya, head cook, prepared dinner. A structure known as a way station stood near the water's edge. Bamboo slat floor, thatch roof and two walls on the sides from which prevailing winds blow barely accommodated our tents. Ne Lin Tun, one of our security men, dug a toilet at the far end of the isthmus and constructed palm leaf walls for our privacy. We settled in, our first night using our own camping equipment, for a less than perfect rest.

We awoke to the smell of fresh fish cooking on sticks over an open fire. The air was damp and thick with fog. As the sun burned through, tree tops pushed out of the mist while the ground lay hidden in a milky vapor that muffled all sound. It was both beautiful and eerie.

After breakfast, we went back down river a short distance to Lower Fongse, another Naga Village where a

local man showed us a banded pressurized metal tank still filled with whatever liquid it contained from the war. We could only speculate as to its contents. He told us that he found it in the general area we were headed.

We returned to camp for lunch, then some of our native colleagues went upriver on a scouting run. We wiled away the time taking pictures, watching Sonny Soe make pellets for his black powder rifle out of a bar of lead, and packing gear for the next and final leg of our boat ride. Just as Don decided to have a swim in the ChinDwin, the boat returned. We were loaded and underway in record time.

Boating up the ChinDwin had been beautiful. Maneuvering the pristine waters of the Nampuk was breathtaking. The silt-laden waters of the ChinDwin behind us, we now glided over a shimmering flow of water so clear that we could count pebbles, brilliant as gems, glistening on the bottom. Darters, lapwings and other water fowl occupied every sandbar in search of fish and frogs in trapped shallow pools. Water starts, fork tails, and birds beyond our ability to identify darted among the moss covered boulders at the river's edge. Wild bougainvilleas drooped out of trees, a startling pink against the tangled green of palms, banana and bamboo. Ferns framed the path of the river in a lacy jade. Far ahead of us, muted blue mountains jutted into a paler blue sky.

Manipulating small rapids, calm pools, shallows, and deep but deceptively fast stretches required cooperation between the pilot and men posted on the bow of the boat who constantly scanned the waters for obstacles. The rest of us were free to enjoy the beauty.

We arrived at our base camp next to the Nampuk around 4:00 in the afternoon. After setting up camp on a river island, we settled in for a dinner of stewed sambur (deer) with snow peas, fish and onions, Shan sausage, greens, potatoes and rice. We never lacked for delicious food.

After eating, I introduced the Naga women from Middle Fongse, who had come to act as our bearers, to the art of marshmallow roasting with a supply that I had carried all the way from Texas. They giggled the word "good" through lips sticky with melted sugar. The men eyed us enviously from their campfire near the cooking area but kept their serious masculine demeanor. After each woman had eaten their fill of the toasted treats, I left what was left of the marshmallows on a log near the men. The next morning, the bag was empty.

To save us time and the discomfort of bushwhacking through the jungle, the Nagas planned a scouting trek to look for the exact wreckage location. But before they left, the proper spirit ceremony recommended by the Shaman had to be performed.

Banana leaves were spread on the ground at the edge of the island. Offerings of fruit, cigarettes, and candy were placed by candles and incense, arranged as instructed by the Shaman. In solemn respect, Nyein Chan knelt before the makeshift altar and prayed to the spirits of the trees, boulders, mountains, and streams and apologized for our intrusion into their land. He explained our purpose and asked that they protect our party. The altar was left intact, for we were advised by the Shaman not to forget to give thanks for our success and our safety once we were out of the jungle.

Nights were damp and chilly. Each morning, tents and supplies were as wet as if there had been a two-inch rain. While the Nagas went on their scouting mission, we laid our bedding in the sun to dry then went for a hike up a nearby stream. Our guides pushed through reeds 10 - 15 feet high at the river's edge. Ants nesting in the midst of a banana tree thicket swarmed over us as we passed through. We slipped on mossy rocks, sank into the mud, and scrambled over fallen logs. At times, the excursion seemed pointless, but we realized that we had a much longer, possibly much harder, trek to get to the wreckage site. This was a trial run. Ultimately, the stumbling and insects and sucking mud were worth it. Our path ended at a tumbling waterfall

so beautiful we soon forgot the trial of getting there.

In the afternoon the porters loaded up excess supplies and made their first carry into the jungle, following the trail hacked out earlier. The rest of us boated up the Nampuk for an hour to visit Upper Fongse, another Naga village situated up a steep embankment well out of range of a flooding river. A Christian village, the Nagas came out to greet us with handshakes.

We paid respects at the home of one of the leaders then went to watch the construction of a new house, a project in which all able bodied men participated. With cooperation, a village dwelling can be built in one day. We visited various households, bargained for handmade crafts, took pictures.

By the time we left the village, the sun was well behind the hills. Night herons, plovers and other birds flew to their roosting places. A black-backed stork perched in silhouette against the fading sky. A tree full of monkeys clustered in the forks of a bare tree, settled for the night.

The next day, as we had our morning coffee, hornbills thrilled the air with jet-like sounds as they glided back and forth over the river. After breakfast, we disassembled our tents and laid everything in the sun. Mid-morning the porters returned to carry the rest of our supplies and our gear, and we headed into the jungle.

The trek was a combination of water crossings, steep hills, wading through streams and walking in sand and mud. But the distance was not nearly as far as we had been warned. Perhaps our guide underestimated our hiking ability, or, more likely, he told us it would be a five hour hike when, in reality, it was only two, because he wanted us to arrive at our destination sooner than anticipated to lighten our mood. We were at our jungle camp by noon.

The support team had cleared the area of trees, stumps, rocks, and other obstacles for comfortable tent sites. They had even cut palm leaves to spread under our tents for padding. A toilet, which we dubbed "the penthouse," was dug far up the hill, and even running water was piped through a bamboo flue at the nearby stream.

After a rest and getting into dryer clothes, we went for our first look at the crash site. Don took a reading on his GPS and determined that we were at N 26.13, E 95.74. By the very nature of impact, crash debris spreads over a vast area. Over 60 years of monsoons had washed parts over an even larger area. We began probing the dirt, checking the ground with a metal detector, digging into the muck of a stream at the bottom of the steep hill where the plane had crashed.

We began to unearth parts -- manifold pieces, pumps, wheel housings, bits and pieces too small to identify. We knew we had a plane, but we did not know if it was American or Japanese.

The defining moment came when the Nagas dug a large engine piece out of the mud. Don identified the gigantic chunk of metal as the magneto. It had what we needed to identify the origin of the plane. Even after sixty plus years being buried in the mud, "Aircraft DC-3, Westinghouse Elec. Co.," with serial, parts, and other numbers etched on an aluminum tag attached to the part were clearly visible. It was American. I did a dance, right there in the mud.

Later, I interviewed Ham Mon, adult son of Mon Kan, the Naga hunter (now deceased) who was the first to find the airplane approximately 30 years ago. The plane was seen smoking out of the sky by natives from different villages, but it glided so far into the remote jungle that they could not find it. During a hunting excursion some forty years later, Mon Kan came upon the wreckage. It was, according to the son, loaded with 50 gallon drums that were filled with liquid. One would assume fuel. Mon Kan and his relatives took all of the barrels out of the jungle and sold them to boatmen. We found one mangled lid to a 50 gallon drum,

which gave validity to the cargo story. U Nagar, nephew of the finder, verified Ham Mon's story.

According to Ham Mon, no bodies were there when his father found the plane. One boot and some human teeth were all the evidence of the crew that his father found. I asked what happened to the teeth, and Ham Mon did not know. Since the wreck was discovered some forty years after it fell out of the sky, if there were no survivors, the bodies could have washed away in the torrential monsoons that sometimes take out whole mountain sides or been subject to predatory destruction. It is possible, of course, that they could also be buried under the ground among the wreckage debris. We did not dig, specifically, to find remains.

Mon Kan also took the fuselage out in pieces, selling them to various boatmen. He sold the wings and tail, all exterior parts that would have identifying numbers of the specific aircraft. All that he left behind were pieces too heavy to transport or too small and insignificant for Mon Kan to have an interest.

Still, we were thrilled to find parts numbers on several pieces and hoped it would be enough to trace the identify of the craft.

The next day, we dug more, recorded more numbers. We found a battery cable and post to which it was still connected, cylinders, tire valve and even pieces of an inner tube and tire pieces. Some parts were so mangled, we were not sure of their identity. Many, too small to identify, littered the debris field.

Two of the Nagas in our group were members of the Naga Cultural Committee and had a meeting to attend in two days. Some of our own group were also eager to be back in civilization. We made the decision to leave the area sooner than originally planned. We did not have information that specifically identified the plane we had found, but chances of learning that on site were almost nil. We had enough information to begin research toward that goal once back in the States.

We spent one more night at our base camp by the Nampuk where Nyein Chan finished his spirit ceremony to the gods of the jungle. As our gear dried the next morning, we organized ourselves for departure.

My feelings were ambivalent. I was happy for the success of our search but sorry that we had not spent time necessary to do a more thorough excavation. I was eager to be back in Mandalay, but sad to be leaving my Myanmar friends. We had eaten, slept and lived among each other for days. We had worked together, laughed together, teased each other, relied on each other. Our project brought us together in a common purpose that united us despite our differences.

We shared stories and gave each other nicknames. Nancy and Char had dubbed U Taung "Tom Cruise." One of the security men called me "Pyone," which means "smile," because he thought that I was always happy. Some others called me "Bogoke," which means "general." The Nagas confided in me the names they had given each of us.

In a moving gesture, Sonny Soe, second cook, presented me with the Naga necklace he had worn since the expedition started. A man's necklace in this culture is a treasure. In response, I gave him my tent. We shared the frustration of delays, the anticipation of what we may find, the excitement of discovery, and a bag of marshmallows. We had become friends.

Our boat had taken some of the natives back to their village but did not return when expected. We fretted, for we hoped to reach Hkamti in time to catch the weekly Sunday flight back to Mandalay. But there was another boat mishap. The wrong fuel had been put in the motor, and it had to be cleaned. We would miss our flight.

Disgruntled but still eager to get underway, we rushed to load. As we passed Middle Fongse, our Naga

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women porters, who had returned to their village earlier in the day, were bathing and doing their laundry at the edge of the Nampuk after a week in the wilderness. They waved and yelled "thank yooooo," as we passed.

While none of us looked forward to another public ferry ride back to Homalin, where a plane was scheduled to leave in two days, we certainly didn't want to miss it and have to boat all the way back to Monywa. We wanted to be sure we reached Hkamti in time to catch a ferry that would get us to Homalin before we also missed that flight.

Perhaps our spirit ceremony paid off, for when we reached Hkamti, we learned that the local plane that normally leaves early on Sunday had been delayed. There was a chance we could make it and eliminate a ferry ride altogether.

Once we landed at the jetty, our Myanmar friends rushed us and our gear back to the guesthouse. As we frantically gathered up our belongings and said our too rapid goodbyes, Nyein Chan and U Kyaw went to the airport to make arrangements for our departure.

The Hkamti Plane Search Flag Expedition was over. It's success, however, is just the beginning of the story.

Conclusion

Once back in the States, I began the research that I hope will lead to identifying the plane we found and, ultimately, family members of the crew. Several MIA organizations, WWII groups and DC-3 enthusiasts eagerly cooperate and advise me on how to proceed with my research.