

## Carl Kostol's Experiences as a B-25 Bomber Pilot with the Flying Tigers in China during WWII

by  
Gary Dielman

Lt. Carl Kostol's parachute jump from his fatally crippled B-25 bomber was short. He had purposely delayed opening his chute until the last moment, so that he would not be a target any longer than necessary for Japanese soldiers on the ground. The ploy worked but separated him from his crew, who had bailed out ahead of him. On August 17, 1944, their plane had been hit by anti-aircraft fire while bombing a railroad yard on the Yangtze River in central China. It would be a month before pilot Kostol was united with his crew, after they had made their separate ways, guided by Chinese guerillas, back to their base 500 miles away in southwestern China.



Lt. Carl Kostol in Flight Gear

The pilot I'm writing about is lifetime Baker City resident and retired physician Dr. Carl Kostol. I first met Kostol in 1954, when Kostol, wife Virginia, and infant son Shot moved next door to my parents in the Grandview section of Baker City. As a teenager, I saw the Kostol family grow every couple of years to include Teresa, Chris, and, by 1961, Casey. As an adult with my own family, Kostol was our family physician. I got to know him socially in the 1970's playing recreational YMCA basketball. Even at age 50, he had the smoothest and deceptively-fastest moves of anyone I've ever played against. And today, at age 76, Kostol is perhaps the youngest-looking and acting septuagenarian you'll ever meet.

Kostol's military adventures began in 1937, when at age 15 he enlisted in Baker City's Company F of the Oregon National Guard. By graduation time in the spring of 1940, WWII had already begun. Although the United States was not an official participant in the war, trouble with Japan was anticipated. Company F was activated that summer for

further training on what was supposed to be a one year tour of duty. But after a year Company F's tour was extended.

Bored with infantry life, Kostol aspired to get into the Army Air Corps' pilot training but didn't have the required two years of college. But after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, the college requirement was dropped. Kostol applied, was accepted, and in the fall of 1942 began his flight school training at Ontario, California.

At the end of his cadet training in June 1943, Kostol was certified for further training on the P-38 fighter. The P-38 was a twin-engine, twin-fuselage plane, perhaps the most exotic of the military's fighter planes. But Kostol ended up assigned to fly the B-25 bomber with initial training at La Junta, Colorado. "I was crushed over that," says Kostol, who, after he was shot down and eventually returned to the United States, tried again to get into fighter planes. To his chagrin there were 15,000 eager applicants ahead of him. Still today he regrets not getting to fly fighters.



B-25 Bomber, called "Billy Mitchell" Bomber

Instead Kostol flew the B-25, also known as the "Billy Mitchell" bomber, named for the Army's most ardent advocate for U. S. air power. The B-25 was made famous when Jimmy Doolittle led a flight of carrier-launched B-25's on the first bombing raid of Tokyo April 18, 1942.

The B-25 was designed as a medium-range bombing and strafing plane. It had two 14-cylinder engines (1700 hp) and a fin at each end of the tail assembly, which gave the bomber its distinctive appearance. Its maximum range was 1300 miles with a 3000-pound bomb load. Kostol says his planes usually carried six to eight 500-pound bombs or a load of fragmentation bombs.

Armament on the B-25 varied but typically consisted of one or two .50-cal. machine guns in the tail, two .50-cal. machine guns in the top turret, a .50-cal. machine gun at both sides of the waist, two to eight .50-cal. machine guns in the nose, and two .50-cal. Machine guns on each side below the cockpit. In strafing missions, the B-25 could bring to bare eight to twelve forward-pointing .50-cal. machine guns, which might fire a

couple thousand rounds per mission. An optional weapon was a nose-mounted 75 mm (3-inch) cannon, which at night, Kostol says, spewed spectacular flames 25 yards in front of the ship.

Following a couple months' training on the B-25, Kostol was sent to Columbia, South Carolina, to form up a crew and do more training. In December 1943 Kostol and crew got orders to proceed to Savannah, Georgia, to pick up a B-25 and head for Puerto Rico with sealed destination orders to be opened an hour after take-off. With no little anticipation, they opened their orders to discover they were being assigned to the Eleventh Bombardment Squadron, 341<sup>st</sup> Bombardment Group, 14<sup>th</sup> Air Force (Flying Tigers) at Kweilin (today Guilin) in southwestern China.



Lt. Carl Kostol Home on Leave

Among the many stopping places on their flight east were South America, Ascension Island in the Atlantic (Christmas day), Accra (Ghana), Khartoum (Sudan), Aden, Karachi (New Year's day 1944), and Agra (India), home of the Taj Mahal and where Kostol was laid up for six days with amoebic dysentery. After recovering, Kostol flew on to the Assam Valley of eastern India (now Bangladesh), then over the "Hump" (southeastern Himalayas) to Kunming, eastern terminus of the famous Burma Road.

Finally in mid-January Kostol's B-25 and two others arrived at the 11<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron's base at Kweilin located about 300 miles northwest of Canton and Hong Kong. That brought to six the number of B-25's at the base, which had just suffered the loss of seven planes in ten days. In fact, Kostol's commander in the States had died there just before Kostol arrived in China. (By the end of WWII, the 11<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron had lost 70 men.)

Shortly after the arrival of the three new bomber crews in China, they received an unnerving greeting from Shanghai Mary, who announced over Japanese radio the name, rank, and serial number of each crew member.

Kostol never found out how the Japanese got the information, but it was probably a spy at Kweilin. Kostol experienced how harshly spies were dealt with when one of the men in his hostel forgot to light fire to the out-of-date code books sitting in their heating stove. When their Chinese houseboy was caught retrieving the books from the stove, he was turned over to the Chinese Army which promptly executed him. Another Chinese worker at the airbase was executed for stealing tools.

The day after Kostol arrived at Kweilin, the commander ordered up a six-plane mission to do a "sea sweep" over the South China Sea looking for Japanese ships to bomb. Kostol flew as co-pilot on this mission, as he did on his first seven missions, in order to get experience in combat. Kostol's plane and one other made two bombing runs at a 300-ft. merchant vessel with each plane scoring direct hits on the second run. Upon leaving the area, the ship was sinking with only its superstructure visible above the water.



Lt. Carl Kostol Posed for this Portrait Before Leaving for China

A few days later, Kostol's plane scored another direct hit on a freighter southwest of Hong Kong. Kostol says the ship doubled in the middle, just like in the movies, and quickly sank. The crew wrapped up the mission with a run at another freighter strafing it with its numerous .50-cal. machine guns.

On his third mission, six B-25's bombed Kaitak Airport at Hong Kong. Several of their P-40 fighter escort planes were shot down by fast-diving Japanese Tojo fighter planes. Kostol says that for the most part the fighter escort was able to engage attacking Japanese fighters preventing them from reaching the bombers. One exception was on Kostol's fifth mission, a bombing raid on the railroad yards at Kiukiang (Guijiang) on the Yangtze River, where Kostol would be shot down several months later. A Japanese Zero pilot penetrated the fighter escort and impressed Kostol by flying under the B-25, then coming back at them with his guns firing while still upside-down during an Immelmann roll.

Kostol says his seventh was a “fabulous mission.” Six B-25’s, accompanied by twenty-three P-40 fighter planes, attacked the airport at Kiungshan on the north end of Hainan Island off the coast of Vietnam. Kostol’s plane almost had to turn back before the attack, because an oil pressure gauge showed zero. But, since the engine temperature was normal, they decided to continue the mission.

In order to avoid Japanese radar, the planes flew so close to the water that prop wash from the lead planes sprayed following planes. Upon reaching their target, the bombers flew over a hilltop at 150 feet in line-abreast formation completely catching the Japanese by surprise, including a transport plane with wheels down on a landing approach. Due to intense ground fire, they made just one pass dropping fifty 100-pound fragmentation clusters and strafing with machine gun fire. It was estimated that more than 20 Japanese aircraft of all kinds were damaged or destroyed.

In February and March sea sweeps became unproductive with no enemy ships sighted. It seems the Japanese were losing so many ships they started flying low during the day and then running under cover of darkness. The ploy was successful, because without radar the B-25’s could have little success against shipping at night.

Besides flying combat missions, Kostol also made several round-trip flights over the Hump to ferry back new planes from Agra, India. On the return trip Kostol was usually followed by several fighter planes which took advantage of the bomber’s navigator. These trips were like mini-vacations when one could relax and get some good food in less primitive conditions.

One of Kostol’s most harrowing flying experiences was ferrying a war-weary B-25 to India over the 20,000-foot peaks of the Hump during particularly bad icing conditions. Kostol says the Hump was “incredibly beautiful” in good weather but a “mean place” in foul weather. Two of the four planes turned back due to mechanical problems. Kostol and the remaining plane began icing up and had to continually search for warmer layers. The other plane, with a faltering engine and chunks of ice breaking a window, managed to land in a narrow valley. Kostol arrived alone in India thinking the others had crashed in the bad weather. After waiting three miserable days, he was cheered when all three planes came flying in together.

In May 1944, when the Japanese began a push south, Kweilin and other airbases were regularly bombed by the Japanese. Kostol, whose housing was a mile from the base, says he got so used to the raids that he sometimes stayed in bed rather than running to the slit trenches for safety. Occasionally he and others would shoot their sidearms at the planes passing by overhead. Chinese workers quickly patched up the damaged runways.

Besides flying out of Kweilin, Kostol also flew missions out of the fighter bases at Lingling and Hengyang, located 100 and 200 miles northeast of Kweilin. Starting with the Japanese offensive in May 1944, many of Kostol’s missions were flown in support of

Chinese Army ground troops, who were trying to prevent the Japanese from overrunning southwest China, including the American airbases. But on May 31 the fighter base at Hengyang was evacuated to Lingling. And within three weeks Lingling airbase was also abandoned.

Kostol's June 10<sup>th</sup> mission in support of ground troops was particularly successful. Northwest of Changsha the B-25's dropped parachuted fragmentation bombs and strafed with machine gun fire pack trains and troop columns. Kostol says a parachute was needed to slow the bomb's descent allowing the low-flying planes to clear the impact area to avoid being hit by the blast of their own bombs. Strafing passes were also made at tree-top level, so that Japanese troops had a hard time seeing the planes coming and passing by so fast they made difficult targets to hit.



Lt. Kostol, top center, and Crew in Training

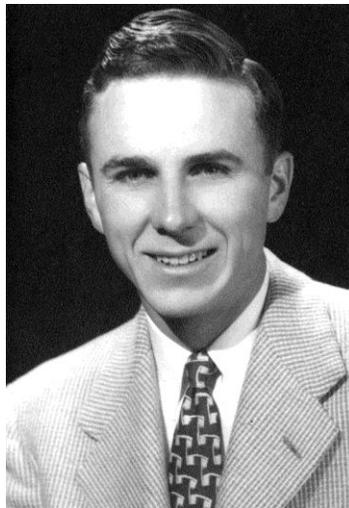
In July 1944, with Hengyang airbase in Japanese hands, Kostol found himself bombing the base he had flown out of just a couple months earlier. According to the history of the squadron, the most successful mission in July was conducted by two planes, one of which was piloted by Kostol. Loaded with butterfly bombs and extra ammo, the two planes were sent out at night to strafe truck convoys. Locating several convoys they managed to destroy about a hundred trucks.

Kostol says that until his fateful 37<sup>th</sup> mission, the planes he flew suffered very little damage due to poor Japanese anti-aircraft fire and excellent protection afforded by their fighter escort. They would find holes in the plane, but the worst hit they suffered was a shot out engine cylinder. None of his crewman were hit by enemy fire, but Kostol came close to being injured or killed when a dud 20 mm shell lodged beneath the armor plate under his seat.

Kostol says his closest brush with death was of his own doing. Making a low-level night bombing drop on shipping in the Yangtze River with just a quarter moon for lighting, he lost the horizon while banking sharply. Being that close to the water, he had almost no time to find the horizon before the plane might crash. Luckily he got his bearings in the nick of time and righted the plane. Kostol says the near-tragedy left him “drenched by a cold sweat.”

Being at the end of the longest supply route of any unit in WWII, news of what was going on in the world was scarce. I asked Kostol what his thoughts were when he heard about the D-Day invasion of Europe on June 6, 1944. He said it wasn't that big of a deal. More important to him on that day was the news reported all day long by Radio Calcutta that B-29's flying out of China had conducted their first bombing raids of Japan.

In the spring of 1944 Kostol was made assistant operations officer for the 11<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron. The operations officer was in charge of, among other duties, lining up planes and crews for missions. For several weeks Kostol filled in for the operations officer, who was suffering from malaria. About this time Kostol was promoted to 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant.



Carl Kostol in College after Discharge from Army Air Corps

During the time the operations officer was laid up, General Vincent ordered a bombing mission over Hong Kong. Weather reports indicated the area would be socked in by clouds, so, relying on Kostol's advice, the squadron commander delayed the mission. When Vincent found out he was furious and ordered an immediate mission. Due to the weather, the mission was a disaster, which raised Vincent's regard for Kostol's judgment.

Kostol hoped to use his new-found stature to eventually get assigned to the general's staff, a hope that would be dashed by his being shot down and sent back to the States, which was the military's practice. The military didn't want to run the risk that downed

pilots who had been helped by guerillas might fall into enemy's hands and be forced to divulge secrets about guerilla operations.

The downing of Kostol's plane, the Green Hornet, is recounted on page 64 of "The Record of the 11<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron," published shortly after the end of the war:

"A most remarkable illustration of escape and evasion from enemy territory occurred in the period here under review. On August 17, in a high-level attack on the Yangtze River city of Kiukiang (Giugiang), one of our aircraft, piloted by 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Carl Kostol, was hit by flak while directly over the target. The ship burst immediately into flame and the crew of eight members was forced to bail out. The point at which this crew landed was less than five miles south of Kiukiang, deep in enemy territory and in an area thickly occupied and systematically patrolled by the Japanese. Yet in slightly more than three weeks the entire crew returned safely to Kweilin."

Kostol's 37<sup>th</sup> and last mission involved twelve B-25's in two flights (groups) bombing the Kiukiang railroad yard on the Yangtze River about 350 miles southwest of Shanghai. The squadron commander led the first flight and Kostol was lead pilot of the second flight.

On this mission Kostol's crew of six was expanded to eight. Flying the lead plane, he had a navigator as well as a bombardier, when normally one person performed both duties. The rest of the regular crew consisted of a co-pilot, who was on his first combat mission, a radioman/waist gunner, an engineer/top-turret gunner, and a tail gunner. Plus on this mission there was also a photographer on board.

"Things go quickly," says Kostol about the downing of his plane. "Before you know it it's over." On his last mission, flying at 14,000 feet, Kostol's plane had just dropped its eight 250-pound bombs, when an exploding ack-ack shell hit the right engine. The co-pilot immediately reported flames coming from the engine. The extinguishers were employed but the flames came right back. Within a minute or two Kostol gave the order to bail out. Although the top hatch above the cockpit wasn't used, the co-pilot opened it, causing Kostol's shirt and billfold, which, due to the summer heat he had draped across the armor plate behind his seat, were sucked out of the plane.

Before Kostol could bail out, the right engine had already dropped off the plane. Kostol estimates that everyone was out of the plane within four to five minutes after it was hit. The seven members of Kostol's crew came down close together and quickly located each other. But being the last to bail out and delaying the opening of his parachute until the last moment to avoid detection by the Japanese, Kostol landed apart from his crew.

As the t-shirt clad Kostol hit the ground in a rice paddy, his knee made a loud popping sound but seemed to work o.k. Kostol was in good shape except for a cut to his arm he believes he sustained in bailing out. The injury would later result in a Purple Heart medal. Not only had Kostol lost his shirt and billfold, he was also without his sidearm, a .45-cal. pistol, the only time he had ever forgotten to take it along on a mission.

An American P-51 fighter plane made a low pass right over the rice patty. After the war he found out the pilot was Tex Hill, one of the original Fighting Tigers of the American Volunteer Group under the command of General Claire Chenault. (In 1999 Hill was featured on a PBS television program about the Flying Tigers.) Seeing Kostol's plane go down and the men bail out, Hill followed them down to render assistance against the Japanese strafing a Japanese truck which may have been headed for the downed flyers. Kostol said that considering the high concentration of Japanese in the area Hill's actions were above and beyond the call of duty.

When I asked Kostol's wife, Virginia, what she thought about his war experiences, she remembered the first meeting of her husband and Hill at one of the Flying Tiger reunions they've attended over the years. Hill saw Kostol's name tag and said, "I always wondered what happened to you." He said he was going to throw out an escape kit if he had located any of the flyers.

Kostol set about right away cutting the shroud lines from the parachute so he could take the backpack with him. No sooner had he hidden the parachute than a Chinese farmer came running up to him. Through the use of his Chinese phrase book, which pilots called a "pointee-talkee," he made it known to the farmer that he wanted to get in contact with Chinese guerillas. For about an hour he jogged behind the farmer, who led him to his hut where he asked Kostol to remain while he got the guerillas.

Kostol could only wait and hope that the farmer would bring Chinese guerillas and not Japanese soldiers. The U.S. military offered a \$500 reward for the safe return of American fliers, a huge sum for the Chinese, but the Japanese also offered rewards. After an hour of anxious waiting, Kostol was extremely relieved when several guerillas showed up. They marched him several hours to their camp, where they had him lay low a week while Japanese activity died down.

When the other eleven crews returned to base, they reported seeing only seven parachutes. Although Kostol was presumed dead, the official message sent to his parents said only that he was missing in action. For his part, Kostol didn't get much information about his crew until he got back to his base almost a month after being downed and just three days after his crew had safely returned.

In order to earn their \$500 reward, these armed guerillas had to escort Kostol through 200 miles of Japanese-controlled territory and get him safely across enemy lines. Mostly the dozen guerillas and Kostol, dressed in native garb, moved at night and always on foot until across the frontline. Kostol says he walked so much he wore out a new pair of custom-made boots he had bought in India.

To assist with the language problem, the guerillas obtained the assistance of eighteen-year-old Kwei Yo Ting, who had learned a little English from his brothers who had worked for the English before the war. His brothers had rendered similar assistance in the successful return of football legend Tom Harmon and Rex Barber, who had also

been shot down in China. Barber, an Oregon resident, is famous for having shot down and killed Admiral Yamamoto, commander of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Ting's wife came along as cook, whose bread made Kostol sick. Ting's reward for helping rescue Kostol was a job at an American base.

Kostol was fascinated by how the guerilla's operated. When they entered a village, they simply commandeered whatever they needed: sleeping quarters, food, and even locals to carry their gear. If Kostol wanted chicken to eat, Ting would just go out and take one from a villager. That doesn't mean that life was comfortable. Although Kostol avoided getting malaria, pesky bedbugs were a menace that left his legs covered with black and blue marks. And, of course, they had to be ever vigilant for Japanese soldiers. Kostol says that if it weren't for the constant worry of being captured, his trip to freedom wasn't really that bad.

When they got close to the frontline, they marched for two nights and days. In order to stay awake, Kostol took a stimulant included in his survival pack. Kostol was sorry he took the pill, because it affected his judgment causing him to freak out when a person appeared on the road ahead of them at night.



Dr. Carl Kostol at Home Reminiscing About His WWII Experiences

Once safely south of the frontline, Kostol could move during the day and even had the luxury of a boat ride. Kostol found himself an instant celebrity. Besides being a downed pilot, often he was the first American locals had ever seen. Villages he passed through officially welcomed and feted him with parties, food, and drink, and then gave him a firecracker sendoff. The mayor of one village, where Kostol stayed two days, ordered a pig roasted in his honor and plied him with rice wine. The mayor, who inquired about the health of "Mr. (Henry) Ford," became so drunk that he was carried off in a sedan chair with persons on each side to keep him from falling out.

Finally Kostol arrived at Kian (Ji'an), a town with telephone service, which he used to call the Suichwan fighter base 75 miles away. The base commander came in a jeep and picked up Kostol and another downed fighter pilot, who had also just made his way to the town. From Suichwan Kostol got air transportation back to his home base at Kweilin. The very next day, September 14, 1944, planes and personnel had to evacuate Kweilin moving 50 miles south to Liujow, which was in turn evacuated several weeks later. As soon as he could, he wired his parents that he was still alive.

For the next couple of months Kostol did non-combat flying, checking out planes and ferrying a plane from India to China. In November he was reassigned to the United States, returning via air transport to Casablanca, where on November 11 he boarded a Liberty ship for home bringing with him two Distinguished Flying Crosses, an Air Medal, and a Purple Heart.

Those who know Kostol's calm manner might never guess that inside is the stuff for making what we call these days a "top gun." Kostol says he never had so much fun as learning to fly in cadet school. "Combat wasn't so much fun but was really exciting. Everything since then is pretty dull."

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