

Out of the JUNGLE

Veteran shares WWII
experience of being
stranded for 94 days

by **ALEX
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He can feel the muggy air around him, clogging up his throat and like rocks on his chest. His feet and lungs burn—they've been on fire for weeks. His torn clothing is molded to his exhausted body, and he only gets the chance to unstick them in the river under the cover of the night. This

settling life, he thinks, is much different than the one he left behind in that small farming town in Arkansas.

It's been two months since the plane crash, and he is still walking. Constantly walking. Constantly trying to find a way out of the expanse of Indian jungle that he and 15 other servicemen have been trapped in for 63 days and counting.

The forest that serves as a sanctuary for so many animals has become his prison, and possibly his future grave.

On Dec. 10, 1943, 20-year-old James Brown shipped out from an Army base in Virginia to begin his time of service in World War II. Upon his arrival in India, Brown was immediately stationed at a base in the city of Kharagpur, where he readily assumed his duties of transporting supplies from India to China.

"There was no supply squadron in China, so everything that went to China had to be flown over there," Brown said. "No telling how many times I flew the [Himalayas] back and forth from supply depot to supply depot."

On one of these trips crossing the Himalayas, or the Hump, as it was called by Allied pilots, an event occurred that would change the course of Brown's life.

"On one trip coming back, and I

wasn't even on the crew of this B-29. I was... I call it hitching a ride back. There was only 16 aboard that plane," Brown said. "These B-29s was the first B-29s that was out [and] the engines would be malfunctioning and other things would be malfunctioning."

When two of the plane's four engines began to malfunction, a state of panic swept over the crew members. Almost everyone on board grappled desperately for parachutes and supply kits. The pilot saw an opportunity to land the aircraft, and slowly started his descent towards the sandbar of a nearby river.

"All of [the crew] jumped out except for me, the pilot, and the co-pilot," Brown said. "[Once they landed on the sandbar] all three of us started running away from [the plane]. And by that time it caught fire, so it was just gone."

In a stroke of good luck—the last one they would have for a while—every one of the 16 passengers survived the crash. Once they regrouped, the group was divided into two groups, with eight in each. The group that Brown was not in entered the jungle, leaving behind their crewmates which they would never see again.

"There were eight of us [in my group] and the pilot, he decided to take part of the crew and he let me take the other part, which was four people," Brown said. "I wanted to go west and he wanted to go south-east."

Immediately after beginning their trek through the sprawling terrain, Brown and his three companions realized that the territory was not unoccupied. Headhunters, tribes of hostile, cannibalistic people, were scattered throughout the jungle.

"At night, we slipped down into the river, 'cause [Headhunters] was in the area," Brown said. "One of us decided he would go during the day, and he got captured. We don't know what happened to him."

The imposing threat of the hostile tribes drove Brown and the other men into extreme caution when navigating the forest. They were only able to travel by the faint moonlight that broke through the gaps in the trees above them—the trees

that were also the only place to settle down without the risk of being attacked.

"We'd climbed up in those trees and we had little ropes and things that we'd tie ourselves with," Brown said. "Then, if you started falling out, then you'd be hanging there."

Every night, after determining that it was safe enough to continue, the men surged forward. Alone, aside from the constant buzz of the mosquitoes ringing in their ears, they stumbled across the abandoned camps of the other groups but never encountered them.

"We just picked up and tried to figure out where we were and how we were going to get out, and we just started walking," Brown said. "Two or three times, we found [a camp site] where they had been."

If Headhunters weren't a big enough problem by themselves, there was also the ever present issue of the sparsity of food and water. The first few days, the men were able to rely on the supplies they had taken from the plane.

"All the people on the plane crash had jungle kits, which gave you food, and we all had to put them on when we started to land," Brown said. "Now, this jungle kit would last about 10 days."

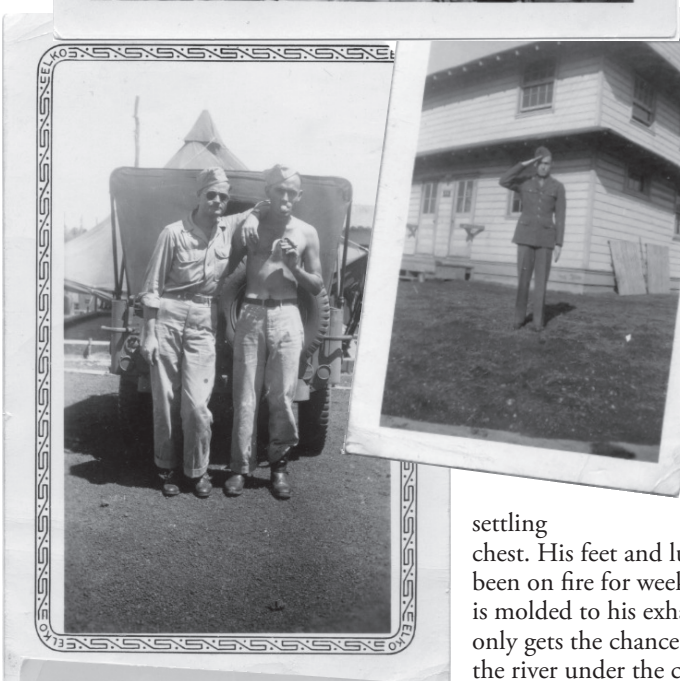
Once the 10 days of rations had run out, however, Brown and his group were forced to resort to other ways of obtaining sustenance.

"Well, you could watch birds," Brown said. "If they eat a berry, or something like that... Of course, we didn't eat any worms, but if the bird ate something we knew it was safe to eat."

While the food was a struggle, water was nearly impossible to locate. Due to the possibility of contracting an illness from the river water unable to be purified without fire, Brown relied solely on the showers that the jungle produced. In the tropical environment, the rain came often, but not often enough.

"We didn't have fire. We didn't light no fire ever," Brown said. "Sometimes the rain would rain on you, and we'd get leaves and things like that, and licked [the water] off of them."

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These unlivable conditions proved fatal for two of the four that were in Brown's small group.

"We had one that died of malaria," Brown said. "And then one guy, he was... he just died of exposure. We just covered him up and went on. The others, I don't know what happened to them."

On day 89 of being trapped in the jungle, Brown and his only surviving companion came across someone who would prove to be vital to their survival in their weakened state: a boy who looked no older than 10.

"He knew where the tribes were nearly," Brown said. "He would go up to the tribes and see if they was friendly, and see if they would give us some food or something to eat."

Despite the fact that going ahead of the group meant death if the tribe was hostile, the boy did it anyway, communicating only in broken English that he had learned in a Christian missionary camp.

"He came back to us and said 'let's go on,' and we walked on," Brown said. "Five days after we found him, well, he pointed us out to a Gurkha guard camp."

The Gurkhas (soldiers from Nepal) were stationed at a camp that was one of many positioned as guards for India. The

Gurkhas did not perceive them as a threat and pointed Brown and his fellow survivor to an English base a few miles away.

"We went to the English base and then they flew us back to our home base at Kharagpur," Brown said. "From there we were hospitalized, naturally, then they sent me to a rest camp."

Ninety-four days. Ninety-four days spent in that mossy, humid prison. Four of the 16 people who entered had made it out, two from Brown's group and two from the pilot's group. While Brown had at last been rescued, the aftermath remained. He had contracted malaria. His weight had dropped from 151 pounds to 94 pounds.

"I thought I was coming home," Brown said. "But we got ordered to fly over to China, then to Manila, in the Philippines. Then we got ordered from there onto Honolulu."

After leaving Honolulu, Brown travelled to Guam, Saipan, Okinawa and I-Shima. Wherever he went, the war seemed to follow.

"They were still bombing Okinawa, and Saipan when we were there," Brown said. "There was bombing, and there was guns too. Well, we just had [.45 caliber handguns]."

Afterward, Brown received the Bronze Star Medal, the award ranking below the Silver Star Medal, for his bravery and courage in the seemingly impossible situation.

"I don't know how I got it, but I just took it and run," Brown said. "Pilots and those kind got silver stars; I got bronze."

After two years of service— two years that would follow him for the next 72 years, and more years to come— Brown was honorably discharged. He returned to Texarkana a different man than he was when he left.

"When I got home, well there was no write-up or nothing in the paper," Brown said. "'Cause there was thousands of others coming home too."

His family, who had not received a single scrap of information about Brown since the day he shipped out from Virginia, welcomed him back with tears in their eyes and choked up greetings caught in their throats.

"They didn't know where I was," Brown said. "Well, they didn't have time to let [my family] know. God knows if they'd've known if I had gotten killed in those [months in the jungle]."

Adjusting to civilian life wasn't easy. Eventually, however, Brown was able to re-

learn what it was like to not live in a war zone. He began with picking up where he left off before being drafted.

"Before I went in [to the service], the reason I didn't fly a plane was I didn't have a high school education," Brown said. "I left the year we'd graduate. When I got back, I went to get my G.E.D. at Texarkana College and graduated."

Some aspects of life were not so easy to re-learn. The memories from the war affected Brown in ways that could not be understood by most. To this day, he doesn't eat fish, and refuses to allow one drop of water to enter his mouth.

"I hadn't drank any water, I don't guess for 60 years, maybe longer than that," Brown said. "Back in the service, the water wasn't too good anyways. It had that chlorine in it like nobody's business. You could taste it, the chlorine."

Looking back 72 years later, Brown recounts his greatest fear during the three months he spent in the desolate and harsh environment of the Indian jungle.

"You didn't have the proper food, didn't have the proper sleep and you didn't have proper nothing; you just didn't know if you were gonna make it or you wasn't gonna make it," Brown said. "So here I am at 92, and I'm still trying to make it."