

# Those Unsung Heroes and Their R4Ds

## The Len Mapes Story

By LtCol Tom C. McKenney, USMC (Ret) and John B. Tonkin

Leonard H. “Len” Mapes grew up wanting to fly. He began at age 14 and soloed at 16—on snow in a 1936 Taylorcraft rigged with skis. This was not your customary first solo in a user-friendly Cessna on a 5,000-foot concrete runway. Nevertheless, Mapes was a natural.

He enlisted 1 Oct. 1942, was selected for flight training and went to Naval Air Station Pensacola, Fla. Graduating from flight school near the top of his class, he was given his choice of military services and was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps Reserve, 1 Jan. 1944.

### To the Pacific

Mapes had dreams of following in the footsteps of fighter aces like Joe Foss and John L. Smith; however, that all-powerful administrative trump card called “needs of the service” sent him to multiengine flying. Like fellow Marine Tyrone Power of movie fame (one class behind him at Pensacola), Mapes would fly R4Ds all over the Pacific and be decorated for it.

From San Diego and Camp Kearney (now Marine Corps Air Station Miramar), he was off to the war. Assigned to Marine Transport Squadron (VMR) 152, Marine Aircraft Group 25, First Marine Aircraft Wing, Mapes flew first out of New Caledonia and later from the captured airfield at Piva on Bougainville.

He flew all over the Pacific theater, carrying supplies, equipment, troops and casualties into and out of battlefields from Guadalcanal and Peleliu to Samar, Leyte, Mindanao and Luzon. He used captured airfields with cratered runways, sometimes facing shot and shell. Only after the war officially ended would Mapes have his defining moment of combat, and it would be the kind of which legends are made.

### From Bougainville and Mindanao To China

In September 1945, MAG-25 moved from Mindanao to Okinawa, then to North China. Mapes temporarily was assigned to wing headquarters in Tientsin, transport-

ing senior Chinese officers, both nationalist and communist, to peace negotiations, but early October found him back with VMR-152, flying in support of the First Marine Division out of Tsankou airdrome, 10 miles north of Tsingtao.

It was a difficult and dangerous time of transition, with intact and armed Japanese units scattered throughout the area, some

and dangerous; in terms of its political implications, it was downright nuclear.

### MAG-25 to the Rescue

One of the most commendable yet least-known chapters in Marine Corps history took place in North China and Manchuria in the late summer and autumn of 1945, when MAG-25 and its R4Ds, along with the Army Air Corps and the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), participated in the rescue and evacuation of Allied civilians from Japanese prison camps. Those missions were made more difficult by the Chinese Communist and Japanese forces resisting the rescue operations at times.

### Preparation for the Rescue

The liberation began with an OSS team, inserted by parachute, to create an American military presence and take possession of the prisoners. They laid the groundwork for liberation. Leaflet drops usually followed, notifying the prisoners that food and clothing would be dropped soon and cautions about what and how much the prisoners should eat.

By that time the prisoners were starving. The average man had lost 100 pounds, and many were walking skeletons. Some children’s teeth had grown in, but without enamel.

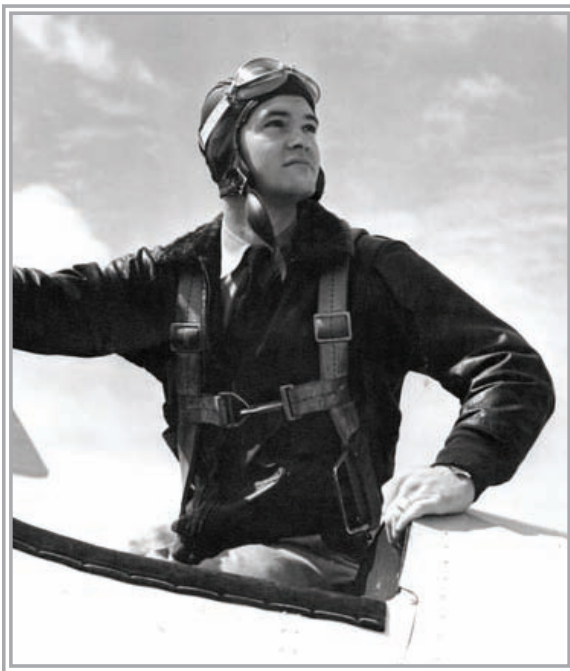
After the leaflets, parachutes containing food and medicine followed.

Next, a small group of officers were flown in to make arrangements for the prisoners’ evacuation by train or aircraft.

The food, medicine and clothing drops greatly improved the condition of the prisoners, with even their ragged clothing replaced. One survivor, who was 12 at the time, remembers that soon “men, women, and children were wearing khaki clothing, including underwear.”

### To the Rescue

From October through December 1945, Mapes flew in support of Marine operations in North China, including 17 missions to rescue civilians in the prison camps. Because the R4D could carry only 18 to 20 evacuees, the flight crew on rescue missions typically consisted of just pilot and copilot. When armed resistance



COURTESY OF MAJ LEN MAPES

Aviation cadet Len Mapes at Pensacola, 1942, had hopes of flying fighters and downing Japanese Zeros in the Pacific. It was not to be.

of whom did not believe the war was over. Ground fire was an everyday occurrence. To make the situation more dangerous, Chinese Communist forces of Mao Tse-tung were advancing. The situation, especially in the contested area of North China, presented not only volatile diplomatic challenges, but at times resulted in armed confrontations with the Japanese and brief but deadly engagements with the communists.

According to historian and author Robert Sherrod, MAG-25’s two transport squadrons, VMR-152 and -153, provided “the only kind of reliable transport in China.”

In addition, the situation was a political minefield with hot wires leading back to the White House. A Marine Corps presence in North China was not just volatile

Assisted by two Army paratroopers and two Marine officers, Weihsien evacuees, dressed in a mixture of Army, Navy and Marine uniform items plus a few personal possessions that survived more than four years captivity, board a MAG-25 R4D in October 1945.



COURTESY OF GREG LECK/NRA

was likely, extra weapons and sharpshooters were taken along. The sharpshooters were combat veterans provided by security units in Tsingtao. Of the 17 rescue missions Mapes flew, the one to the camp at Weihsien was unforgettable.

### One Hero's Sacrifice

One prisoner at Weihsien was “the Flying Scotsman,” Eric Liddell, legendary Olympic gold medalist and missionary. Liddell gained fame during the 1924 Olympics by refusing to run on Sunday in an event he was sure to win, a story portrayed in the movie “Chariots of Fire.” A greatly respected leader, teacher and organizer of athletics in the camp, “Uncle Eric” died before the rescue teams arrived. When he became very ill from a brain tumor, the Japanese offered to set him free to find his own medical care. He might have lived, but he insisted that a pregnant woman be released in his place. His remains lie buried at Weihsien.

### Complications at Weihsien

Only one railroad evacuation from Weihsien was made before the Chinese Communists resumed destruction of the

tracks. It soon became obvious that evacuations by rail would not be feasible. The remaining 1,500 prisoners at Weihsien would have to be taken out by air.

The airfield at Weihsien was garrisoned by a Japanese army unit still not convinced that the war was over. Even after the seven-man OSS team, led by Army Major Stanley Staiger, took nominal possession of the camp, an Army B-24 met opposition. As the B-24 approached the runway, the Japanese garrison went to battle stations, manned their guns and prepared to open fire. The B-24 wisely departed. A furious MAJ Staiger confronted the Japanese commander, but the situation at Weihsien continued to be unpredictable and explosive. Nearby, a Chinese Communist garrison was anxious also to take control of the area, its airfield and railroad station.

On 12 Oct., the first R4D of MAG-25 landed at Weihsien to evacuate prisoners. Eight days later, the camp was empty. But the process wasn't peaceful.

### A Mission to be Remembered

Among the prisoners at Weihsien was a 72-year-old White Russian of distinguished background. She might have

been a countess, related to the late Czarina Alexandra, wife of Czar Nicholas. Her husband was a Romanov, related to the late czar. She would have had enormous propaganda value to the Chinese Communists, who were aware of her presence.

Lt Mapes was briefed about her presence and that the Chinese Communists might take her, and the team was prepared. Sharpshooters were stationed at open windows, instructed to open fire on the Chinese the moment a shot was fired by anyone.

### Into Weihsien

Mapes landed at Weihsien without opposition and taxied to the loading area. The prisoners had been trucked to the airfield, and when the R4D rolled up and stopped, they were ready.

Leaving the copilot at the controls with one engine running and the brakes on, Mapes climbed down to supervise the loading of the prisoners as the sharpshooters took up firing positions. The prisoners climbed aboard on the fold-out ladder, and the loading was accomplished smoothly. The starboard engine continued to run at a fast idle, with the R4D straining against the brakes.



Above: Evacuees from the Weihsien camp assemble at the airfield as a MAG-25 R4D approaches, October 1945. (Photo courtesy of Greg Leck/NARA)

Below: LtCol Louis Metzger (center, right) explains the evacuation process to prisoners at Weihsien as Maj Henry Sabatier (to Metzger's left with leather strap around his shoulder) and an unidentified MAG-25 pilot stand by to assist. (Photo courtesy of Greg Leck/NARA)



## “I Will Have the Countess”

As the last prisoners were being seated, a Chinese Communist colonel arrived with an escort of soldiers. With an air of belligerent authority, he announced that he would take possession of “the countess.” The sharpshooters were at the ready, their M1s locked and loaded. To fire they had only to push the safety forward with their trigger fingers and squeeze. The colonel’s escort stood at order arms.

Mapes’ reply could not be misunderstood, no matter what the language, and the colonel seemed to expect that negative reply. Without another word, his hand moved toward his pistol and opened the holster flap. Mapes instinctively drew his .38 from its shoulder holster. In one uninterrupted motion, before the colonel’s pistol cleared its holster, Mapes shot the colonel in the forehead.

There was no turning back. With that first shot, the Marine sharpshooters opened a fusillade on the colonel’s escort. Shocked at what they were seeing, the Chinese soldiers hesitated, and most were down before they could bring their rifles to the ready. It happened in a matter of seconds.

## “A Little Too Quick on the Throttles”

When the firing began, the copilot started the port engine, released the brakes and eased the throttles forward. The Chinese were not all dead and fired a few ineffective rounds as Mapes sprinted after the R4D. He caught the trailing edge of the fold-out ladder, skipped along as the R4D picked up speed and, with help from the sharpshooters, scrambled through the open door. As he caught his breath, the aircraft lifted off the runway.

Mapes and the sharpshooters pulled in the ladder and closed and secured the door. He then went forward and settled into his seat as the R4D’s 1,200-horsepower engines roared, clawing for altitude at maximum power, climbing away toward safety. Mapes made a climbing, wide left turn, set a course for Tsingtao and chastised the copilot (“he was a little too quick on the throttles”). Everyone began to relax. It had been quite a day, but they had taken no casualties. They were headed for home, and the prisoners were free.

## Great Work That Never Happened

Although there were free drinks and backslapping in the officers’ club back at Tsingtao, the rescue of the prisoners, including the distinguished Russian, without taking a casualty, was one of those exceptional accomplishments covertly appreciated, but never recognized officially. The incident had the potential to produce a political hurricane. For that reason, Mapes never would be decorated for the rescue

# レソゴクグンホリヨへ ALLIED PRISONERS

The JAPANESE Government has surrendered. You will be evacuated by ALLIED NATIONS forces as soon as possible.

Until that time your present supplies will be augmented by air-drop of U.S. food, clothing and medicines. The first drop of these items will arrive within one (1) or two (2) hours.

Clothing will be dropped in standard packs for units of 50 or 500 men. Bundle markings, contents and allowances per man are as follows:

50 MAN 500 MAN			BUNDLE MARKINGS			ALLOWANCES		
PACK	PACK	CONTENTS	PER MAN	PACK	PACK	CONTENTS	PER MAN	PER MAN
A	5	Drawers	2	B	10	Laces, shoe	1	
A	1-2	Undershirt	2	A	11	Kit, sewing	1	
B	22	Stocks (pr)	2	C	31	Soap, toilet	1	
A	4-6	Shirt	1	C	4-6	Razor	1	
C	7-9	Trousers	1	C	4-6	Blades, razor	20	
C	23-30	Jacket, field	1	C	10	Brush, tooth	1	
A	10	Belt, web, waist	1	B	31	Paste, tooth	1	
A	11	Capt, H. Hat	1	C	20	Cash	1	
B	12-21	Shoes (pr)	1	B	32	Shaving cream	1	
A	1-2	Handkerchiefs	3	C	12-21	Powder (insecticide)	1	
C	32-34	Towel	1					

There will be instructions with the food and medicine for their use and distribution.

**DO NOT OVEREAT OR OVERMEDICATE**      **CAUTION**      **FOLLOW DIRECTIONS**

### INSTRUCTIONS FOR FEEDING 100 MEN

To feed 100 men for the first three (3) days, the following blocks (individual bundles dropped) will be assembled:

<b>3 Blocks No. 1</b> (Each Contains) 2 Cases, Soup, Can 1 Case Fruit Juice 1 Case Accessory Pack	<b>1 Block No. 5</b> (Each Contains) 1 Case Soup, Dehd 1 Case Veg Purée 1 Case Bouillon 1 Case Hosp Supplies 1 Case Vitamin Tablets	<b>1 Block No. 3</b> (Each Contains) 1 Case Candy 1 Case Gum 1 Case Cigarettes 1 Case Matches
<b>3 Blocks No. 2</b> (Each Contains) 3 Cases "C" Rations 1 Case Hosp Supplies 2 Cases Fruit	<b>1 Block No. 7</b> (Each Contains) 1 Case Maccafe 1 Sack Sugar 1 Case Milk 1 Case Cocoa	<b>1 Block No. 10</b> (Each Contains) 3 Cases Fruit 2 Cases Juice

This leaflet, notifying the prisoners of Japan’s surrender, and of airdropped supplies and evacuation to come, was airdropped on the Weih sien camp, August 1945.

or have it mentioned in his fitness report. He was, however, decorated with the Breast Order of the Cloud and Banner by Chiang Kai-shek; he even was kissed on the cheek by Madame Chiang.

An indication of the award’s other-than-routine nature is that the citation was not cleared by Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps for presentation to Mapes until August 1948, 2½ years after presentation of the medal in China. Even then, Headquarters Marine Corps had second thoughts; two months after receiving the citation, Mapes was ordered to return it to the Commandant. It finally was returned in 1949 after careful parsing and perhaps some redaction of the Chinese wording. Almost four years after receiving the medal, Mapes finally had the citation.

## The Years That Followed

In January 1946, Mapes was transferred from MAG-25 to Headquarters, Department of the Pacific at Tsingtao, awaiting transportation. On 2 Feb., he left the war and North China astern, in the wake of USS *Seminole* (AKA-104). In the States, he was promoted to first lieutenant and released from active duty on 25 April

1946. He would return to active duty for the Korean War and retire as a major, USMCR, on 1 Dec. 1966.

Now 89, Mapes lives with his wife, Dora, outside of Lebanon, Ohio. The controversial Chinese citation hangs on his wall, reminding an old Marine of one long-ago day: the day he saved a distinguished lady in North China from a cruel imprisonment, public humiliation and death.

*Authors’ note: No official record of the details of this particular mission is available; this account is based on Maj Mapes’ recollections, which remain vivid after more than 65 years.*

*Editor’s note: LtCol McKenney enlisted in 1949, was commissioned in 1953 and was retired in 1971 for disability incurred in Vietnam. He contributed “Yemassee, Gateway to the Corps” for the March 2008 Leatherneck. Former Cpl Tonkin enlisted in 1955 and is a retired labor-relations executive. He and LtCol McKenney served together at Marine Barracks Clarksville, Tenn., in the late 1950s under the command of the legendary Col Walter Walsh.*