

'Kwai' crew gathers to remember a legend

By DENNIS ROSENBLUM

April 3, 1945. Drafted Ray Hanson was a 20-year-old halfway around the world in the middle of a war.

The orders were to destroy a bridge. The 7th Bomb Group took off from its base in India at 2:30 a.m. and reached the target about 9:30 — earlier than normal, to catch the enemy off guard.

"There was supposed to be a plane ahead of us to take out the flak," he recalled the other day. "But we got there ahead of time."

The group of 10 men in a B-24 bomber went over the Kanchanaburi Bypass Railway Bridge three times, dropping 1,000-pound bombs. On the third swing, the bomb hit and blew it apart, destroying the work of thousands of prisoners of war and laborers and cutting off Japan's supply route from Thailand to Burma.

But within seconds, the bomber was hit by artillery on the ground. It started spiraling downward.

Somewhat — Hanson credits the wind — the big plane straightened out. "I gave the pilot directions," he says. "We got to a British airbase, but the airfield was too small."

The B-24 was finally forced to crash-land on a beach in Burma, which was friendly territory. Except for a few scratches, the crew was safe.

IT WASN'T THE most dramatic episode in Hanson's military career as a navigator. "That's what we were doing all the time — blowing up bridges," he says.

A couple weeks earlier, for instance, he had been forced to parachute from a plane on another mission, and he'd never had any parachute training.

But someone just happened to think the Kanchanaburi bridge episode would be the good basis for a war novel. And then a movie.

In the film based on the attack, "Bridge on the River Kwai," the bridge is blown up by British Secret Service agents on the ground.

But the mission was the same. "It was my job to find the target," Hanson explains. "When I found the target, the

bombardier took over." He recalls using two nearby mountains as the landmark for the bridge. And the two mountains were in the movie.

THE TWO MOUNTAINS will most likely come up in conversation along with reams of other war stories this weekend in Livonia as the crew of the B-24 meets at Hanson's home for a reunion.

It'll be the fourth such get-together since the 10 discovered their mission had become immortalized on the silver

screen. Previous reunions have been hosted by other members of the crew, now living in Virginia, Montana and Texas.

Hanson has been an engineer for Ford Motor Co. for the last 26 years. The others, some retired, have carried on their lives as well. The former pilot is a state patrolman, the radioman is working for an electronics firm and the bombardier became a careerist in the Air Force.

Only seven of the 10 will be able to make it this weekend. They'll be com-

ing into town on Friday. Except for the radioman, who will stay with relatives in Garden City, they'll be camped at the Hines Park Inn.

There's a reception planned for them Saturday at the Renaissance Center with cocktails at the Summit atop the Detroit Plaza, and a tour of downtown.

Then it's back to Hanson's for a big party in the backyard with friends and neighbors and a trip to Greenfield Village on Sunday.

Hanson was gearing up to the event the other day with every bit of memor-

abilia he's got spread out on the kitchen table on Country Club Drive. His old coat is a bit beat up but it still fits, though it's a bit tight.

There's also the rip cord from the time he had to bail out of the plane after a mission. "Funny, I didn't let go of it," he says. "I just held on."

IN SPITE OF the differences in plot, Hanson enjoyed the movie, by the way. But he would have preferred that it stuck to the facts.

"I like my way of doing it," he says.

Tel-law tapes available

A new service for Oakland County residents to obtain legal information began last month.

Sponsored by the Oakland County Bar Association in cooperation with United Way of Pontiac-North Oakland, the Tel-Law service gives callers a brief description of their legal rights in a number of areas, including consumer affairs, divorce, home ownership, bankruptcy and civil and criminal matters.

The Tel-Law number for north Oakland County is 338-9217; for south Oakland, 545-8030. Anyone may call the service, request information about an area of law and hear a prepared tape.

The service operates from 8:30 a.m. to 11 p.m. Monday through Friday.

For a brochure listing tape numbers, call the Oakland County Bar Association, 681-6211 or 398-3937.

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