

# The trip from Houston to Burma

by Carl Hunt

The experiences brought on by the passing of years form for some people a life they would prefer to forget. Others fondly recall their experiences and have the ability to entertain people with the oral recreation of their life's events to the wonderment and even the excitement of the listener.

I recently had the wonderful opportunity to meet a person who had such an ability to tell such a story so marvelously that I would have sworn that what the clock indicated was one hour seemed like a mere five minutes. I spent one of the shortest hours of my life that evening as well as being totally engrossed with the adventures of a true hero.

My storyteller was Jack Girsham, big-game hunter, army scout, and gentleman extraordinaire. Right out



Captain Jack (in earlier years) poses above a buffalo he shot in Burma. This was one of his duties while working for the Burmese government.

of Kipling and Defoe came the personification of all of that which true heroes are made. The excitement of the tales, the gleaming of the eyes, and the conviction of the voice of "Captain Jack" kept me on the edge of my seat the entire hour.

Jack Girsham, the youngest 82 year old man in the world, was visiting Houston during the week of March first and had to return home to London all too soon. By an act of great friendship of Phyllis Nathan, an intern to the Planning Division from the University of Houston, I had the privilege of speaking with Girsham.

My interview with the Burmese native was hardly the first for him though. In 1973, author Lowell Thomas and Girsham co-published a book entitled *Burma Jack*, an autobiography dealing with the former British Army Captain's role as the head scout for Merrill's Marauders. General Merrill commanded one of the most daring elements that fought in the Pacific Theater of World War II.

"I was approached by two American Army colonels several times while I was still scouting for the British

forces," Girsham recalled. It was also at this time that the Japanese Imperial Army had placed a substantial price on his head, because of several jungle skirmishes in which Girsham's meager platoon of 17 soldiers had defeated superior Japanese forces. "I guess I was what you could call a wanted man," said Girsham, referring to both the Americans and the British as well as the Japanese wanting "Captain Jack" for one reason or another.

Girsham ended up with Americans on a loan basis from the British and worked for Merrill. Much of the area he scouted for the US Army was as familiar to Girsham as the back of his hand, since he had previously worked for the Burma Department of the Interior, hunting man-eating animals. These animals included wounded tigers and rogue elephants.

There is a little difference between hunting a mad, rampaging elephant and hunting tigers, however. "Oh yes, it may take up to two years to even get a shot at a particular tiger. They are very clever animals," said Girsham. They can also be quite deadly he added, but his greatest fear was of snakes.

The most terrifying tale related by Girsham was also re-told in the book *Burma Jack*. "I was walking through some rather tall grass, when I heard a noise that sounded like two pieces of sandpaper being rubbed together. I stopped dead at what I saw. I stared almost eye-to-eye with a 12 foot long King Cobra, apparently quite irritated with me for disturbing him from sunning in the grass.

"I had my rifle with me, but it was pointed in the wrong direction, over my shoulder. The quickness of the cobra makes it impossible to even flinch without the danger of being bit. The cobra swung back and forth, in a circular motion, apparently deciding whether or not to attack me.

"I was helpless. Any motion I made could have triggered the snake and it would have been all over for me. After several moments of terror, the cobra eased itself down and went on its way." Captain Jack couldn't express the relief he felt at that turn of events, but I certainly felt relieved.

Girsham also told me about the time he was sitting on a dead log in the jungle waiting on some friends. "I was sitting on one end of a log with my shotgun pointed at the other end. Hearing a rustling noise, I looked towards the end of the log where my gun was pointed. Raising up slowly was a fairly large cobra, giving me the eye. Since I was in total control of the situation with my shotgun pointed directly at him, I decided to wait and see what he would do.

"He spread his hood, and slowly started to crawl towards me. I gave him ample opportunity to leave, but he insisted on drawing closer to me. The shotgun blast ripped him completely in half, but the top half still tried to come towards me. The next blast finished him off though," recalled the great hunter.

By the time this tale was over my hour with Captain Jack was concluded. He had taken me from hum-drum Houston to war-time Burma, and my balloon really burst when I realized the time was over. Captain Jack may not guide people through the jungles of Burma anymore, but he certainly knows how to guide a person's mind through a fantastic expedition.