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Authority: NND 735001

By: NARA NARA Date: 1973

THE MISHAP OF CREW "02"

On March 18, 1945 crew 92 was dispatched on an operational bombing mission to Berlin, Germany. We were leading the second squadron of the 467th Bomb Group. About 25 miles from the target we encountered a barrage of heavy flak, and at that time the mickey operator gave me a five degree right correction which seemed to be all the evasive action necessary as we went through this barrage with apparently no damage. Visibility was good and the pilotage navigator said we were right on course. The DR navigator called that we were on course and making a ground speed of 300 mph. The mickey operator called the bombardier to get ready to clutch in, and the bombardier replied that he already had the target in his sight. The drift was killed as several minutes passed, and the pilotage navigator said we were coming in right on the target. About 20 seconds before bombs away we received a direct hit by heavy flak just forward of the bomb bay.

We were at 19,800 feet on the bomb run, and the first thing I noticed after the explosion was that we were at 16,500 feet in a tight right turn. I had a severe jolt under my seat and my left leg felt numb. I could not exert much pressure with my left leg, but with the co-pilot's help, we managed to right the ship. The turn and bank indicator, rate of climb, airspeed, and altimeter seemed to be the only instruments that were any good. I switched the inverter to #2.

A white fire was burning beneath the flight deck. A molten piece of flak landed between the co-pilot's legs. Where it came from and how it got there is still a mystery. Without thinking he stomped on it, but hurriedly withdrew his boot. The molten piece of flak bore through the steel and dropped out the bottom of the airplane with the echo of an ash burning through paper.

My interphone was shot out and about half the oxygen outlets had no pressure. The co-pilot's interphone was all right, so I told him to tell the crew we were low enough to come off oxygen. Flak was bursting all around us. I looked up and to the left and saw the bomber stream turning left, away from the target. We turned left following them out. The mickey operator told me that the navigator had been killed by a piece of flak which went through his helmet and out the other side. He said that the engineer, who was standing by the bomb bay to hold the utility control handle open and to fire flares at bombs away, was blown out of the airplane.

There was a large hole in the ship about the size of the forward bomb bay where the engineer had been standing. The bombs were still in the ship. The bombardier salvoed but nothing happened. I then pulled the pilot's salvo handle and just pulled out a piece of wire. It was impossible for the bombardier to get from the nose to the bomb bay, so I sent the mickey operator down to see if he could release the bombs.

We were still over the center of Berlin, and a lot of flak was bursting around us; but, I don't think any hit us after we started down, as we were changing headings and losing altitude. The instrument panel was in a mess. I noticed we had full left trim rolled in. When the co-pilot pulled the throttles of #3 and #4 engines all the way back, then pushed them all the way forward, there was no effect on the ship. We tried to feather #3 and #4 but could not.

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The co-pilot and I then decided to head for the Russian lines. The pilotage navigator told us to take a heading of 90 degrees. The fire was out now, and the mickey operator and top gunner had thrown out everything they could that was burning. The bombardier's glass had been blown out by the concussion, and the air rushing through the huge hole probably helped blow out the fire below the flight deck. The co-pilot called Blue Leader to tell him we were heading for Russia. There was no answer. The set may not have been working as the liaison transmitter and the mickey sets were shattered.

I sent the top gunner to check the gas, and he said the glass tubes on the gauge were broken, also that the catwalk was all that was holding the ship together. The mickey operator said it was impossible to release the bombs as the A-2 releases were blown off and the shackles were twisted and distorted. Mickey also said he had released the arming wire from the shackles.

We were clearing the eastern suburbs of Berlin, and I know it would be impossible to land the ship, but was trying to get across the lines to bail out the crew. We were now at 11,000 feet losing altitude at about 800 feet a minute. We knew we would have to hold what altitude we could before crossing the lines. I turned the supercharger to #10 position and had all throttles full forward. The co-pilot pointed to #2 manifold pressure which read 64". I moved the throttle back then forward and apparently the gauge was functioning properly. I left it there for about five minutes, as we were crossing the battle line. At this setting #1 manifold pressure was reading about 28", #3 - 17", and #4 - 10". I think we were getting full power from #2 engine, a little from #1, and none from #3 and #4. It was very difficult to hold the ship straight. My left leg felt dead and without the co-pilot's help, we could not have made it.

An Me-109 then made a pass at us from 7 o'clock. The tail gunner fired, also the left waist. The Me-109 knocked out the tail guns on this pass, and the left waist could not aim accurately as there was no power for the K-13 sight. The 109 had his right landing gear down. Three Russian Yak fighter planes then came up and the 109 left. I noticed the large Red Star on the fuselage of the Russian planes and started dipping the left wing. They looked us over and turned back toward the tail. A minute or two later we heard a rain of slugs going through the waist and bomb bay. I think each ship made one pass, as we were raked over three times. We were now over the Russian lines. I kept dipping the left wing hoping they would recognize us. We were at 6500 feet now, and flak had been following us all the way from Berlin. After the second Yak made a pass at us, I told the co-pilot to order the crew to bail out. My interphone was out, so he gave the order over interphone and rang the alarm bell. He said it was acknowledged from the nose by the bombardier and from the waist by the waist gunner. The waist gunners said the bell did not ring, but it was heard in the nose. From the flight deck, the top gunner went out the bomb bay first, followed by Mickey. After the co-pilot called again to the waist and nose and received no acknowledgement, he tapped me on the shoulder and left. I watched them go, then set the C-1. I stopped for a minute and looked at the navigator. He was lying across his table with blood all over the flight deck. There was a large hole in his head and part of his brains lay on the table. It was awfully quiet; then I heard the slugs from the third Yak ripping through the ship, and I got down on the station five bulkhead. It would have been

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difficult to recognize the ship from this position, as everything was twisted and covered with oil. I then went out the bomb bay.

I went into a cloud right after leaving the ship, so I opened my chute. My first sensation was like being suspended in air, and it seemed very natural to be floating down. I saw two chutes about 3000 feet below me. Then a Yak fighter came in and made a pass at me. I could see his tracers streaking by me and hear his guns as he fired. The first two passes he made were while I was too dazed to think; I just hung there and watched him. However, on his third and fourth passes, I remembered what I'd been told about slipping a chute, and I pulled on the right riser so hard I nearly collapsed the chute. I saw another Yak making passes at the two chutes below me.

About 500 feet from the ground I heard rifles and machine guns firing from the ground, so I kept up the evasive action slipping my chute. Some of the slugs whistled by pretty close. Nearing the ground, I turned the chute so I was facing downwind and the jolt was not so much as I had expected. Maybe I was too scared to have much feeling. As I collapsed my chute on the ground, I saw a Yak turning to make another pass. It seemed to take a long time to unfasten my chute. I rolled on the ground about 20 feet away from the chute and lay still as he passed over. He did not fire this time. Men were running down the hill toward me firing overhead, so I stood and held my hands up. I first thought maybe I had landed in German held territory, but as they came closer, I saw some with Cossack hats with the Russian star on them. I shouted "Ye Amerikanets", but they thought we were German paratroopers. They had me walk in front with my hands overhead to a truck where they had the radio operator and the tail gunner. As we were driving off a soldier rode up on a horse waving a revolver. He swung at the tail gunner a couple of times and pointed the revolver at his head, snapped it several times. Luckily it did not go off until we were about 50 yards away, at which time some of the other soldiers stopped him.

We were taken to the Commandants Office of the 29609 Field Unit at Vormfeld, Germany, about three miles from where we were picked up. It was now about 1430 hours. After an hour I convinced him we were Americans. They then fed us and sent us to the hospital about two miles away in a wagon accompanied by a Polish flyer. The radio operator had his ankle bandaged, and I had my rump bandaged. They also gave me a tetanus shot. The airplane had crashed, and they told me they had the body taken from the wreckage. They insisted on our eating again and brought out some food, but I only drank some "Spirits"(white lightning). Pretty soon the radio operator and I looked at the body, but the ship had burned and there was no identification. They gave us some papers and Mickey's log book which were in the ship and picked up out of the wreckage.

A car was waiting for us then, and we were taken about six miles to Landsberg, Germany. We were given supper, and they opened a bottle of vodka for us and gave us a room. There was a fire built in the room and everything possible was done to make us comfortable. The next day I was carried across town and met the co-pilot, Mickey operator, and waist gunner. They were then brought to the place we were staying and given an adjoining room. There were still three of our crew unaccounted for.

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The funeral for the navigator was set for 1800 hours March 19, 1945. The Russians came by about 1630 hours for us to write an inscription to go on the grave. Later we went down to the street, and there were two trucks waiting. The one in front had a rug over the back. On it was the corpse in a metal casket with four palms in pots at each corner. There were two armed guards of the Russian Army standing on each side of the casket. The second truck had rows of chairs placed on it for the crew members with some Russian guards. We rode about 3/4 mile to a large square in Landsberg, Germany. About 90% of the buildings enroute had been bombed or shelled. When we arrived at the square, I noticed about twenty graves of Russians with wooden crosses and a Red Star on top. We met our top gunner for the first time at the funeral. There were three Russian Colonels, a major, several other officers, plus a company of about 50 soldiers. I said a few words and gave a short prayer. Then we all came to "present arms", and the company of men fired three volleys. The body was then placed in the grave. The Russians took several pictures. They placed a black marble marker about four feet high at the head of the grave and an oak leaf wreath about the top of the marker. The inscription read:

Lt. Van Tress, Harold
U. S. A. A. F.
Born 1923, Springfield, Ohio
K.I.A. March 18, 1945

The Russians said it would be inscribed both in Russian and English the following day.

The top gunner went back to our quarters with us. After we had eaten that night, we were carried about 20 miles to a hospital where we met the pilotage navigator and the bombardier, which accounted for all the crew that had bailed out. We arose at 1000 hours on the morning of March 20, ate breakfast, and were motored to an airfield near Posen, Poland. From there we were flown in a Russian C-47 to Lublin, Poland, where we were met by Lt. Col. Wilmeth of the U.S. Military Mission to Moscow. We were quartered at a hotel in Lublin where he had his office. We remained at the hotel till a plane from an American air base in Russia came to pick us up. The food at the hotel was very good, as was the Polish beer.

Crew "92" consisted of the following personnel:

William R. Chapman, pilot
John W. Wallace, co-pilot • 677.0 859
Edward J. Alexander, pilotage navigator
Harold F. Van Tress, DK navigator KIA 0722 400
Martin F. Bezen, mickey (radar) operator
William M. Yarcusko, bombardier
George E. Fuller, engineer KIA
Albert B. Palmer, radio operator
Myrl L. Johnson, tail gunner
Robert C. Twyford, waist gunner
Alicia G. Austin, top gunner

William R Chapman
Capt A.C. 0-705320