

Bail Out !

By Wilbur Stites (453rd)

What was it like to get shot down and have to bail out, is a question I'm sometimes asked. "Well, it was exciting," I sometimes reply. Facetious? Flippant? I don't mean it that way. But how can I describe the thoughts and emotions that flood the mind and senses in a situation like that? If you've had the experience, you know what its like. If not, you'll probably never understand, no matter how hard I try to explain. But if you're interested, I'll give it a try.

For me it happened on October 17, 1944. We were on our 23rd bombing mission. Target: the railroad marshalling yards at Cologne, Germany. We were flying "Lucky Penny II," A gleaming silvery B-24 that had been assigned to us after her first crew completed their tour of missions. The first "Lucky Penny" had been shot down with a crew other than the one to whom she had been assigned.

Classified as a "heavy" bomber in World War II, the B-24 with its thin, narrow wing mounted high on the full bodied fuselage, and its twin vertical stabilizers (rudders) was one of the most distinctive appearing planes in the sky. The four supercharged 1,200 horsepower engines powered the 56,000 pound combat loaded plane, including its 10-man crew, to altitudes up to 30,000 feet. Cruising at up to 165 miles per hour, the plane could deliver 6,000 pounds of bombs on round trip missions to targets more than a thousand miles away. Nose, top, and tail turrets, each with twin .50 caliber guns swivel-mounted on each side, gave the plane a total defensive fire power of some 6,000 rounds a minute.

The B-24 was a tough, rugged airplane, capable of dealing out and absorbing an astonishing amount of punishment. But it was not invulnerable. The heavy barrages of anti-aircraft fire and determined mass attacks by enemy fighters took a heavy toll of planes and crews during the war in the skies over Europe.

"We" were "Lofton's crew" of the 453rd Bomb Group, based at Old Buckenham near Norwich in East Anglia. Ours was one of 14 Groups of B-24s assigned to the Second Air Division of the Eighth Air Force in England. Our crew members were: William Lofton, pilot; Bruce (Joe) Florea, co-pilot; Leonard Lonigan, navigator; Thomas Welch, bombardier; Hilliard (Eddie) Edwards, engineer; Johnnie Miller, radio operator; Edward Paulson, nose gunner; Winford Pace, right waist gunner; Eldon Gould, tail gunner; and me, Wilbur Stites, left waist gunner. We had an additional crewmember on this mission, Edward Rosenberg, assigned to monitor the German radio frequencies as an intelligence-gathering tactic. Gould was flying with us as a replacement for our regular tail gunner, Robert Hon, who was temporarily grounded with a touch of flu.

Our take-off from the base was uneventful and we rendezvoused with the 30 or so other planes from the 453rd Group and took up our customary position in the "slot," the rear-most plane in one of the four plane diamond-shaped elements. The elements formed the group, flying together in close formation in order to achieve a tight bomb pattern on the target and to provide concentrated firepower from our guns against enemy fighter attacks.

We approached the target at the usual 20,000 feet altitude flying over a solid cloud undercast about 5,000 feet below our formation. We reached the IP (initial point) and made the prescribed 45-degree left turn to begin the 12-minute bomb run to the target. As we made our turn, I looked ahead through my plexiglass window and saw a thick cloud of black smoke from anti-aircraft shells bursting over the target. The black cloud was measeled with red-orange flashed from new-bursting shells. Hitler's anti-aircraft gunners were sending up a reception for us we weren't going to like.

I heard the bomb bay doors rumble open. From now on we were committed, fly straight and level – no evasive maneuvers that would throw the bombs off target. I thought of other missions we had flown, Ludwigshaven, Hamburg, Hanover, Kassel, Dessau, and the others, 22 of them so far. A total of 35 to complete our tour. How many more times could we do this and get through it? Would we make it this time? Would I make it this time?

Now we are into it. Flak is all around us. I watch the bright flashing fire of breaking shells. I hear the c-r-r-ump of the close explosions and feel the big plane tremble and shudder from the shock waves. I hear the ping and spang of flak fragments whanging into and through the fuselage like gravel hitting a tin roof. I feel the familiar sweat of fear begin to trickle down my face and back. Fear? You bet! I doubt that any man can honestly disclaim fear when faced with this kind of mortal danger. But you control the fear. To lose control is to panic and panic is the prelude to disaster.

I glanced down at Win Pace crouched on the floor of the fuselage busily stuffing fist sized bundles of "chaff" into the small porthole in the side of the plane. The thin strips of metal foil, looking like Christmas tinsel, scatter in the slipstream and drift down through the thin air. This stuff is supposed to cloud the German's radar screens and interfere with their flak accuracy. I always wondered why we bothered, since it never seemed to do any good. But it was required on bomb runs, so we did it.

Win returned my look. His eyes above the oxygen mask are bright with question and concern. From his position he can't see the flak breaking outside so he gives me our pre-arranged signal by rapidly opening and closing the fingers of his free hand. "How bad is the flak?" he wants to know. I signal back nodding my head and rapidly opening and closing my fingers several times. "Yes, Win, there's a lot of flak," is my signal. Win kept shoving chaff out the porthole, faster now. I can't help grinning behind my own mask. The chaff is supposed to be thrown at a measured pace, but when Win gets the signal from me that there's a lot of flak he always throws it faster, as if this might do more good; of course, it doesn't. Nobody says anything on the interphone. One of the disciplines of our crew is to maintain interphone silence on the bomb run. It's important not to clutter the interphone with extraneous conversation that might interfere with emergency communications.

We're about half way through the bomb run now. Suddenly, there is a tremendous sound of rending, tearing metal. The plane lurches violently, peels over on its left wing and heads down towards the clouds below. The big plane is mortally stricken. A cannon shell had whistled up through the bomb bay, burst through the fuselage and exploded above, sending a hail of jagged metal fragments into the body, wings, and engines. Edwards, in his top turret reported later that he saw the fuselage open up in front of his eyes like rolling back the top of a sardine can.

At that point, a lot of things happened at once. The interphone crackled to life. "Bombs away, Tom!" It was Lofton signaling Welch to drop the bombs. Tom flipped the emergency toggle switch and bombs, thankfully all 12 of them, released from their shackles and fell away from the plane. The last thing we wanted right then was a 500-pound bomb hung up in our bomb bay.

The plane continued its downward slant toward the clouds with a vapor trail of gasoline spewing out behind. Some of the gas lines had been ruptured by flak fragmented and gas was leaking out of the breaks and streaming out behind. Crews in other planes in the formation who saw us disappear in the clouds thought the gas vapor trail was smoke. They assumed we were on fire with no chance to survive.

Lofton and Florea fought with the controls and managed to pull the plane out of its dive into level flight again. But all four engines were running rough and we continued to lose altitude. Lofton called for Lonigan to give him a heading for Belgium with the hope that we could set down on an airfield in American occupied territory. He then called for an interphone crew check. One by one they reported in and, miraculously, no one was hurt.

By now Edwards had scrambled out of his top turret and began trying to stop gas from leaking from the ruptured lines snaking along the bulkhead walls inside the bomb bay. Using pieces of cloth handed to him from the flight deck by Johnnie Miller, he did what he could to stop the leaks, but it wasn't enough. Eddie had to balance precariously on the narrow catwalk of the open bomb bay, working with one hand while clinging to the bomb racks with the other. No parachute. There was no room to wear it in the close confines of the bomb bay. We didn't feel that we dared to close the bomb bay doors for fear that doing so might cause a spark that would ignite the gas fumes and blow us out of the sky. Edwards was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his heroic actions performed in the face of deadly peril.

While this was happening, the rest of us were busy jettisoning whatever heavy items we could sacrifice in an effort to lighten the load to help keep the plane in the air. We opened emergency hatches to be prepared for bail-out and to ventilate the plane as much as possible. We disconnected electrically heated flying suits, most of the interphone connections and whatever other non-essential electrical equipment we could. Again, we were trying to minimize the possibility of an electric spark that would surely set the gas vapors aflame.

We had been losing altitude steadily and suddenly broke out of the clouds at an altitude of about 1,000 feet. I looked out the left waist window at the ground so close below and saw several heavy vehicles, tanks and armored trucks, parked in a wooden area and covered with camouflage netting. Just then, four bursts of flak exploded directly in front of me at a distance of about a hundred yards. Whoever was down there with those vehicles was shooting at us. I punched my interphone button (mine was the one we kept operative in the waist compartment of the plane). "Waist to pilot," I said. "Flak at nine o'clock level."

"Roger," Lofton acknowledged and hauled back on the control column. He managed to coax the struggling ship back into the clouds and out of sight of the gunners below. But there was more to come. A few minutes later we again settled out of the clouds and immediately I saw a string of fiery tracer shells zip under the left wing and the two engines on that side. "Waist to pilot, tracers flying under numbers one and two engines." "Roger, waist," said Bill again and again he managed to pull the plane back into the cloud cover.

Once again we broke below the clouds at an altitude of only about 900 feet. The plane was lumbering in the air. Engines were faltering, cutting in and out intermittently. Gallant "Lucky Penny II" had come to the end of her career. My earphones crackled, "Pilot to crew - Bail out! Bail out! Bail out!" I whirled from my place at the window and shouted to the others in my compartment. "Bail out! Lofton says bail out!" We already had our parachutes snapped in place on the chest clamps of our harnesses ready to go, and out we went.

When my time came, I crouched at the edge of the two-foot square escape hatch in the floor of the compartment. I saw a man go past the hatch opening, arms and legs pumping as if swimming in the air. Someone from the forward sections of the plane, I couldn't tell who. He disappeared from view to the rear of the plane. I somersaulted out of the escape hatch like rolling into water from the edge of a swimming pool. The windstream caught me and turned me over and around so that I was lying stretched out on my back as if lying in bed. I watched "Lucky Penny II" fly away from me, rear her nose in the air, then flip to her left and dive to the ground. She disappeared behind a high wooded hill with a thunderous crash and explosion. A black column of smoke boiled up from the spot where she hit.

I saw no parachutes come out. Who got out and who didn't? I grabbed the metal ring of my parachute, gave it a yank and threw it from me in the same motion. I watched it spiral away and thought, "Darn, I should have hung onto that for a souvenir." My chute popped open with a sound like a bursting paper bag blown full of air. It stopped me with a jolt that racked my whole body. "Pulled too quick," I thought. "Should have waited until I slowed." My body was still traveling at the same speed as the plane, about 165 miles an hour. The human body will slow to about 125 mph, then continue to fall at about that rate of speed. But at the same instant I knew I had done the right thing. At only 900 feet there's very little time to delay opening your chute or you'll hit the ground before it can open.

The chute blossomed above me (a beautiful sight at that moment), turned me around and started drifting me forward and down toward the ground. Below and ahead I saw a man dangling from an open chute. I could recognize the tall, slim figure of Rosenberg, our German radio monitor. He was waving his arms frantically and yelling, "Help! Help!" at the top of his voice. I thought, "Shut up, you dummy, you'll have every German in the country coming in on us." He drifted on, disappearing behind some trees, and I never saw him again, although I learned later that he had landed safely.

Now the ground was coming up fast. An open meadow on a sloping hillside. No trees to slam into or hang up in. In an instant, I hit. Hard. I pitched forward and rolled over and over. I don't know how many times. I came to rest flat on my back just like I had been when I pulled the ripcord to open the chute. I got my breath back, sat up and took stock. Everything seemed to be OK, except for a pretty severe pain in my neck. Later, x-rays showed no broken bones; it was just a bad sprain that left me with a sore neck for a few days.

All at once, I realized I was surrounded by a dozen people in civilian clothes. Who were they and how did they get here so fast? They were jabbering at me in a language I didn't understand. But then I recognized some words, "Boche? American?" as they pointed at me. And, "Belgique, Belgique," as they pointed at themselves. I tapped my chest. "American," I said. "Oh, American, American, bon, American," they echoed, a mixture of relief and gladness in their voices. With that, these fine folks began checking me for injuries, then helped me to my feet, got me untangled from the parachute shroud lines, and proffered cigarettes.

At that point, two American sergeants in a jeep came rolling onto the scene. Where did *they* come from and how did they get here so fast? It turned out we had come down near the little town of Malmedy in Belgium. This was shortly before the Battle of the Bulge was due to break out and we had made it into Allied occupied territory by a distance of about a mile. The American sergeants, from an ordnance company camped nearby, took me into their camp and into their care. I was delighted to find they had also picked up Johnnie Miller and Len Lonigan. But no one had information about any other members of our crew and we were deeply concerned and worried about them.

A couple days later, the American soldiers drove us, in an open-top "scout car," to Brussels from where a C-47 troop plane flew us back to our base at Old Buckenham. Three days after we had gone down, we walked into our hut at our air base to the surprise and delight of the other crew with whom we shared the hut. We found them busily packing our personal belongings to be sent home. They had seen us go down into the clouds and thought we were lost. Some 10 missions later that crew went down with no survivors. We had the sad duty of sending their personal belongings home.

Remarkably, all 11 members of our crew of that fateful mission to Cologne survived with no major injuries. Just a few scrapes, bruises and sprains. We were given seven days rest leave to get ourselves back together, then back to flying again. I completed my full tour of 35 missions, as did most of the other members of our crew. Sadly we lost our pilot, Bill Lofton. He suffered an unfortunate accident on our air base when he fell and fractured both forearms. Of course, he was unable to fly for several weeks and during that time we finished our missions with other pilots. Later, Lofton was killed when his plane crashed during a training flight at the air base.

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