

Forget the Enemy - Beware of the “Friendlies”!

By Dwight Bishop (453rd)

It was early in my tour that I learned there was much more danger out there than enemy flak or fighters. Flak I saw plenty of – but fighters – NONE! It was on my fourth mission – July 7, 1944 – mission nearly over, coming off the ‘enemy’ coast when it happened. Everything was going well, and I wanted to see the scenery below, so co-pilot Walter Mahanay was driving. We were #3 in the lead squadron, so I was standing by on fighter channel. I felt the airplane take a sudden lurch upwards, and thinking of the high-right element above, pushed forward on the wheel as I turned to look at Mahanay and switched to intercom.

All I heard was unintelligible yelling, especially from the nose gunner, John Portoghese. I soon learned that our group had met another group at the same altitude on a reciprocal heading. Both lead planes started down to evade so Mahanay – bless his soul! – Went up. The two lead planes collided and were the only ones lost – that was enough!

On mission #16, August 26, 1944, I was flying group deputy lead, and after ‘bombs away’, lost #3 engine. With the briefing admonitions about ditching in the North Sea in mind, I would play it safe. Held about 9,000 ft. altitude and headed for the narrowest part of the channel. The lovely coast of England was well in sight, when a line of flak appeared across my course. I made a correction to starboard and told engineer John Fiel to fire a flare of the ‘colors of the day.’ The line of flak appeared again – a little closer. It had to come from British batteries, but WHY? I turned to starboard, and now, NOW! Navigator Max Marcus tells me we were too close to the Thames Estuary, which was “never, never land” – forbidden to ALL aircraft!

On either a practice mission or aircraft check flight, can’t remember which, the landing WAS memorable! I was in the landing pattern at Old Buck, gear and some flaps down, when I saw a gaggle of B-17s at our altitude and coming straight at us. The designers of the B-24 did not plan the maneuver I made, nor did they engineer the Lib to be able to do it. Throttles full forward (and then some) and haul back on the wheel! I remember seeing the ‘rate of climb indicator momentarily reading 1,000ft per minute, as we leap-frogged’ above the 17s. But normally, the B-17s WERE on our side!

On mission #18 – October 17, 1944 – my first PFF lead – the target was marshalling yards. After the group strung out in squadrons in trail, Bob Dault, radar operator, said he had the target on the scope. Seconds later, the bomber stream began to angle off to the left. Now what?? Do I follow the stream and shake Bob’s confidence, or do I trust him and his training? I decided to go with Bob’s call, and kept an eye on the rest of the group. WE were still on the bomb run when the rest of the group made a right turn and would fly over us. Now the big question was ‘Have they dropped?’ Relief THAT day was spelled “BOMB BAYS CLOSED!”

The most hair-raising experience with “friendlies” came when I aborted a mission and was trying to land at Old Buck in bad visibility. If I was close enough to the field to see the runway flares, I could not make the turn to final approach. If I was out far enough to make the turn, I could not see the flares! Then came to mind something taught in the States – the PROCEDURE TURN! You fly over the field on the reverse of the landing heading, make a timed turn to the opposite side to come back to your landing heading, in line with the runway. While doing this, the bombardier, Ed Dekker, told me he looked UP at the trees! Then I saw IT! A B-24 passing from right to left in front of us, in a slight climb. I could not go down, or up or turn. I knew I would hit it right behind the wing – No way out!

The next thing I remember, it was gone and we were still flying. Dekker leaned over my shoulder and said “Dewey. Let’s get the h--- out of here!” I agreed!

I got some altitude where I could SEE, and was directed to a base in western England. Now comes the strange part. On the landing approach, the boys in the back room (waist) were making book on how many times and how high the ‘shook-up’ skipper would bounce on this landing. During the discussions, Portoghese looked out the window, then said, “Forget it guys, we’re on the ground!” I never DID make a smoother landing! I met Marcus at the So. Calif. Dinner, March 1991 and he told me we suffered a bent radio antenna from this escapade.

I believed back then, and I believe now that during these events, neither Mahanay nor I was in control of the plane. Some Supreme Being, Force, Power, Spirit – call it what you will – was taking care of us. For a long time, I wondered why I had been protected. A few years ago, I realized that maybe another crew member was being protected, and I was just lucky enough to “go along for the ride.” The crew members not previously mentioned were: tail turret, John Baillie; pilotage navigator, Clyde Colvin; top turret, Joe Ferrara; radio, Ray rogala; ball turret (and Chief Chaff Chucker), Geo. (Ed) Yarbrough.