

“Flak Alley” Terror

By Eino V. Alve (453rd)

August 25 – Belgium: This was one of our most dangerous missions. We were just entering the Zuider Zee or, as it was called “Flak Alley”. It was a narrow corridor with anti-aircraft guns on each side. We knew that if we were able to fly directly down the center of this alley, the flak would not be able to reach us. Suddenly a burst of flak exploded under our plane. The number four engine failed immediately. The bomb doors were partly torn loose and began to flap wildly. A fuel line was severed and the bomb bay was filled with gasoline and vapors. A fragment of the shell had hit the only vulnerable part of the system, and fuel began to drain from one of the tanks. We could explode any minute.

The cockpit was clear of gas, but vapors were all I could see in the bomb bay. Due to the loss of No. 4 engine, we could not keep up with the rest of the formation. Bob Jordan and Bill Heerts realized that the flapping of the bomb doors could cause a spark and that would be the end of all of us. Bob then proceeded to remove his chute to enable him to reach out to kick the remaining doors loose. To do this, Heerts held Bob’s parachute harness while Bob literally hung out in empty space to kick the doors free of the plane. Together, these two men actually saved the lives of the entire crew.

During this same time, a shell exploded directly in front of us. I could see the fiery center. During our training, I remember being told that the next explosion in a case like this would be in the same area, but exactly on the target. “Count to ten and then change direction” – thousand one, thousand two, etc. Immediately upon turning, another explosion occurred where we would have been if we had not turned. This one German gunner had us “bracketed”; that is, he knew our exact air speed and altitude. To confuse him, the next time I would change altitude after flying for another ten seconds. It worked again! Now another gunner began firing and we were surrounded by flak. The No. 3 engine was hit and had to be “feathered” (stopped). With two engines out on the same side, the plane began to turn or “yaw” to the right. With the help of Horton and his long, strong legs we were able to hold the rudders long enough to engage the autopilot, which kept the plane on course.

At this point, I must admit, fear got the best of me. Emergencies were occurring faster than I could cope with and figure out what to do next. Co-pilot Horton had kept his “cool” and pointed to the airspeed. In changing altitude I had ignored it and we were about to go into a flat spin. In a B-24 a flat spin is almost uncontrollable and makes a “bail out” impossible. This realization shocked me enough to get me “back on tract” and do what I was trained to do – save the crew and the equipment.

Horton now left his position and went to the bomb bay area to supervise and do whatever he could to help. The crew was already doing what had to be done; lighten the aircraft by unloading anything that was loose, radios, flak suits, ammunition, etc. They knew that with all the fuel we were losing, a lighter craft would go further on less fuel. Bombardier Moore and Navigator Marx were concerned with the bombs which were still on board. They spotted a heavily wooded area over which we were passing and “salvoed”, or dropped together, the entire bomb load. Because we were over Belgium and friendly territory, it was important not to cause any damage to life or property with our bombs if at all possible.

To increase our chances of survival, all electrical equipment, which might cause a spark and ignite an explosion, was turned off. The damaged gas line couldn’t be repaired, nor could the gas be transferred, since the pump motor could cause a spark. We had done everything we could think of to help us survive the long, lonely trip back to England. The rest of our group was now out of sight.

Flying alone, we became sitting ducks for German fighter planes. This crippled B-24 was an easy target. A fighter plane did pick us up, but thank God it was American not German. He was flying a P-47 and came within eyeball range. He called over the radio “Hello big friend, this is your little friend. How much fuel do you have?” Just then a flak battery had our range and began firing again – hoping to finish us off.

Our “Little Friend” dove earthward, heading directly toward our enemy. His courage and skill put a stop to the German firing. We were saved. At this point, we could have headed for Sweden and internment for the rest of the war. However, with the P-47 at our side as an escort, I was determined to get our old B-24 safely back to Old Buck.

The aircraft had stabilized by now but it was losing altitude steadily, due to the loss of No. 3 and No. 4 engines. However, once we reached 10,000 feet, it leveled off and maintained altitude. We were now confident that “big friend” would get us back to Old Buck even though the two right engines were inoperative. In the distance I could see a sight that never looked better to these weary eyes – the White Cliffs of Dover – We were Home!

We landed without any problems, but our faithful B-24 was full of holes. It had no brakes or flaps and was damaged beyond repair. She never flew again, and was only used for parts.

We were an hour and a half returning and discovered that many thought we had been downed. And they would have been right, had it not been for the help of our “Little Friend”. I regret that I never got the name of that pilot who escorted us to safe territory. It seems we had another bit of luck going for us that day. I learned that the crew chief of our plane put in an extra amount of gas for this flight. I don’t know what made him do it, but without his prescience, we wouldn’t have made it back to England. Later, we found out that the official records listed one B-24 bomber missing from our Group – we had fooled them!