

# **A Mutual Near Life Threatening Experience**

*By Max Stout (453rd)*

On or about December 28, 1944 our crew was scheduled to fly a mission. We were to be the first plane off. It was to be an instrument take-off. For some reason we were late to taxi and when we arrived for take-off a new crew was lined up to take off first. Why they lined up in take-off position is not known. Being a new crew in the 733rd, I suppose they were eager to show their mettle and that the order of take-off wasn't all that important. In any event, they crashed on take-off, killing all crewmembers. The mission was scrubbed with no more planes taking off.

I relate this incident because I was not feeling well and my symptoms soon turned into a case of the old fashioned flu.

On New Years Day 1945, no one expected to fly. Some of our crew partied but Joe Lutes came home when they told him that we were on alert for a New Years Day Mission. I did not party because I had bone aching, cold chills, fever, Flu.

On reporting to the flight line and prior to mission briefing I told our other crewmembers that I was going to report in sick and not go on this mission. Our tail gunner "Shorty" Kingsbury begged me not to break our continuous streak of no one missing a mission. He said it was bad luck and he was sure something terrible would happen. I really did feel awful and very weak, but after extracting promises from some of the guys to carry all my gear to the plane, I relented.

The entire crew now proceeded to begin flying another mission, our 20th; and yes, make another instrument take-off. The weather was cold, very foggy, and the ground, grass and trees were all white with rime ice (hoarfrost) and a light dusting of snow. At briefing we learned that we were going to cut off the German retreat across the Rhine by destroying the Remagen Bridge. A specially equipped plane would come from the 389th base and Judd (732nd) would take-off first and lead the Hi- Right and our crew would take-off second and lead the Lo-Left.

As we taxied toward runway 26 I had my window open – the fresh air felt good on my feverish face. As I said before, I felt awful but I had no concern about the pending take-off because we had already done several actual instrument take-offs and Joe and I practiced mock instrument take-offs at every opportunity. To wit: Joe would line up using the runway heading, then he would "slink down" and concentrate on his instruments. I would concentrate on the edge of the runway – 90 degrees to the direction of take-off. Throttles forward to full RPM, Joe would maintain heading correcting only by my toe taps on either right or left rudder. My tapping (if any – usually some) would get correcting response from Joe until we were airborne, at which time I would come in on instruments also and assist in trim, rate of climb and other routine tasks. We were good at instrument take-offs and Joe was an excellent pilot.

Take-off time on January 1 was 8:05 A.M. In spite of the time it was still dark due to the thickness and density of the fog. Visibility was about 100 feet. In addition, it was below freezing. There was some icing but it did not seem to be severe. Judd started his take-off and disappeared into the fog. He crashed, killing all but two crewmembers; some bombs exploded. As best as I can recall, I was completely oblivious that anything bad had happened. Other members on our crew claim they heard both the crash and the bombs exploding. My only explanation is that my physical condition combined with the fact that my window was open prevented me from recognizing noises that I would have normally recognized. In any event, I had no apprehension regarding our pending take-off. I have often wondered if Joe heard and recognized what happened to Judd's crew. Joe was on the radio with the tower while I was on the intercom.

There was a long wait for us until we got the green light from the trailer. Joe was “slinked down” as usual and started the throttles forward. I would normally close my window at this point but I didn’t – guess I forgot. I could see Joe had us going a little left so I tapped the right rudder. Joe corrected but not enough. I tapped the right rudder; Joe corrected again but this time it was way too much. I tapped the left rudder – no response from Joe. Two taps on the left rudder – no response. We started to leave the right side of the runway with me still tapping left rudder. Suddenly Joe fed in lots of left rudder; we were near flying speed if not at it. The right wing was way high, we were bouncing. The adrenalin in my body gushed! I screamed at the top of my lungs, “I’ve got it, Joe! I’ve got it !”

I stuck my head out the window and looking straight down, I leveled the wings while applying slight back pressure on the stick. An instant after righting our plane and with my head still out the window we passed over a hardstand with a parked B-24 and I saw a guy in mid-air. He apparently had just jumped off the wing of his plane. For 47 years I have wondered who that guy was. And last July at the Dearborn Reunion, while Eino Alve and I were talking about this incident, Lloyd Prang wandered into the conversation and said, “It was our B-24 you flew over and the guys name was Victor Mortenson.” We cleared that plane by no more than 30 feet. Our right waist gunner, John Vercler, says it was more like 15 feet. I know that must have been real scary with us coming so close. We were two very lucky crews that day.

Next we skimmed some small tree tops at which point I got my head back inside and flew normal instruments. When we broke out on top, the sun was shining through some higher clouds in the East. Our left wing tip was bent up at about a 40 degree angle. We trimmed the plane and flew the rest of the mission routinely.

Only five planes besides ours got off the ground safely that morning. In addition to Judd’s plane, two or three other B-24’s crashed on take-off before take-offs were stopped.