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(Stories 31,32,33,34)

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A NIGHT TO REMEMBER

The date was 6 November 1943, I remember it well, because the next day would mark thirteen months exactly since I enlisted in the Air Force. In those days it was called the Army Air Corps.

Not being of a superstitious nature, I liked the number 13, I had even decided to name my waist gun position, "Lucky Day" in honor of that number. We did those kind of things back then. We named our planes, our gun positions and after we went into combat, we even painted the names of cities we bombed on the back of our leather jackets.

After that first year in the service, I was given a two week furlough. It was early in October and I spent it at home in Illinois getting married on the 13th. Looking back now, it can readily be seen as a big mistake, but many of us did things like that back then too. We blamed it on the war. Many of those marriages turned out for the best, but a few, I am sure, turned out like mine. A quick separation upon returning to the States.

Getting back to that evening, we were scheduled to fly a night training mission - our target was the bombing range in a nearby State. We would be flying a nine man crew instead of the the ten men that normally made up the crew of a B-17 Flying Fortress. We may not have acquired our full crew at that time, I am not sure.

"Woody" Woodson was the pilot and Dick Morauer was the co-pilot. In the nose was Peter Mullin, the navigator and Mal Turner, the bombardier. These were the men up front so to speak, the men who had the serious job of keeping the plane in the air, on the right course and when the time came to drop the bombs, be sure they would hit the intended target.

The five enlisted men had different kinds of work to do. "Dick" Dixon, the first engineer, knew about engines and other important parts of the airplane. He could keep the pilots advised of certain things, he was the crew chief in the air. Mal Clarke was our radioman. It was his job to keep communications going between our plane and any other stations. "Tex" Moore was flying in the tail gun position; Jim Dempsey and I were in the waist gun positions. I am not sure, as I mentioned before, we may not have had a ball turret operator assigned to the crew at this time. This mission didn't require the expertise of Tex, Jim or me, but we were part of the crew and that was reason enough to be there. It did provide a little extra nap time for me as you will read about later on and an experience I could have gone very well without, thank you very much.

Our base was the airfield at Dalhart, Texas and it was a mad house. Because of the shortage of planes and equipment, we worked in shifts of six hours. This meant that four different crews were flying the same airplane on a given day. We shared our equipment in the same way. The equipment room was a mess, there is just no other way to describe it.

The ground crews were working long hours to keep the airplanes in the air. Morale was low among some of the ground crew, the high ranking noncoms especially; they had wives and children who were living off base and the ten and twelve hour shifts they were pulling did not make for much harmony at home. That was fairly understandable.

I recall statistics of serious accidents occurring on an average of one a week. These were the kind of thoughts running through my mind prior to take off on that dark and windy November night.

The B-17 Flying Forts and the B-24 Liberators, we called them Flying Boxcars, were rolling off the assemble lines in record numbers. Trained crews were needed to man them. The 8th Air Force in England, especially had to have more air power to wage the air war against Germany. The training commands in the US. were determined to furnish those crews as quickly as possible.

Mal Turner and I went to the equipment room to pick up our heavy leather flying suits and our parachutes before going to the Bomb Sight storage room. Mal threw a seat type chute over his shoulder and said, "Come on Dougherty, get the lead out." I conjured up enough nerve to tell him, "If I have to wear it, I'm going to make sure it fits." Mine was also a seat chute and the fellow who used it last must have been scrawny little bugger because I had to let out almost three inches on the leg straps to make them fit and about four inches on the chest snaps. When I left the the room the rigging did fit, even though Turner was mumbling something about Woody being upset if we didn't hurry.

I carried the bomb sight and Turner packed the Colt 45. That was one of the nice things about being an officer. I thought, next time we have a war, I hope I can be one myself. If not me, maybe I can hope a Son, if I ever have one, will have that privilege, should he be called to do his part.

When we reached the plane, everything was going along as should be and our timing hadn't caused any problem to my knowledge. Everyone was doing their assigned duties, and if we were missed, it wasn't noticeable.

I didn't own a watch, so I was guessing, but it must have been close to Eleven P.M., by the time we were airborne. Take off was normal and we were soon at our planned altitude. There isn't much to see from the waist windows on a night mission, especially in Texas. Out on the range it can be long distances between electric lights.

I stayed awake until we dropped our bombs on the selected target. They were a simple mechanism, just a cylindrical can that would hold about a hundred pounds of sand and some black powder. It had fins at the back end which made it fall nose first to the ground. There was a shotgun shell with a floating firing pin that would fire upon impact, igniting the black powder, creating a large amount of smoke. This would give one an indication of the proximity to the target that the bombs landed.

It was well after midnight by the time bombs were away, I'm guessing more like One A.M., so we would be heading back to the base. Now would be a good time to get a little sack time. Using my chute as a cushion, I sat down on the cat walk near the ball turret and fell asleep almost immediately. Back in those days, being young, along with the funny hours we kept, sleeping came easy, whenever the opportunity arose.

I have no idea how long I had been sleeping when Mal Clarke shook me and said, "Come on, we have to bail out." Woody had us practice bailout procedure on almost every training mission. This time I thought, "Let them practice without me." I was still half asleep. I fell back into a sound sleep and suddenly someone came back and pulled me to my feet. I thought it was Woody, teed-off because I wasn't doing the drill. It was Dixon though and he pointed my face toward the left waist window where flames from a fire in the inboard engine filled the view.

This was serious, for I remembered a warning Woody had impressed on us from the beginning. He said, "Fire on board or icing up would be two reasons he would ask his crew to abandon ship." The flashing red light in the waist area meant "prepare to bail out." When it was continuous, it meant BAILOUT! The red light was continuous.

I sat back down on my chute and threw the harness over my shoulders. The leg straps locked in easily, as did the connection across my chest. When I walked back to the waist door, Clarke was pulling the hinge release much like he would hold a cup of tea in high society. I grabbed the handle from his hand and gave a hard pull. At the same time I kicked the door outward and it disappeared in a flash. I was still hooked up to my intercom and as I looked out into the blackness, I asked the pilot, "what is our altitude?" His response

was "About 2200 feet." Having been asleep for I don't know how long, I thought, "Where the heck are we - how come we are flying so low?"

I told Clarke what the pilot had said and he leaned out the door as if to get a better look and he was gone. He seemed to be pulled out of the plane and I am not sure whether he wanted to jump yet or not.

With Clarke gone, I was next in line. You can be darn sure, jumping from that plane was one of the biggest and most hurried decisions I had ever had to make in my life. If someone had not been behind me, I may never have decided to do it. Really, I was scared stiff! I unplugged my my intercom and looked back into the face of Jim Dempsey, I saw what could have been a reflection of my own. His face was chalk white, like a statue, so rigid. I tried to force a smile and said, "Here goes nothing!" When I left the plane, I had the sensation of my body traveling in the same direction as the plane. As I look back now, it was what we learned in gunnery school about mount velocity.

In all our previous bailout practices, when to pull the rip cord was never really talked about. It was as if that would come naturally once you were out in space. What about the horizontal tail wing, you wouldn't want to get the chute caught on that, so don't pull too soon. Oh, we had heard about the, "Count to ten," and then pull. How fast do count to ten? Another idea was to say "1000, 2000, 3000," and then pull, yelling Geronimo" as loud as you could. Thinking back, I don't even remember what I did finally do, but whatever it was, must have been at least half right since I am sitting here writing about it.

When I did feel the impact of the chute opening, I thought it was below me and I was going to fall into it; but of course I didn't, although I only made one complete pendulum swing before hitting mother earth. I could not see the ground coming up, so I landed stiff legged and the sudden jarring almost knocked me silly. I sat there momentarily and began hitting myself in the head with my knuckles to see if I was really awake or just dreaming.

A strong wind caught the silk in my chute and began pulling me along the ground. It's always windy in Texas! This brought me back to reality and made me aware of the fact, I would have to ball all that silk up under my arm some way if I were to carry it back to to the base.

I had landed in a sugar cane stubble field and the rows of cut stock were as sharp as razors, because they had had time to dry out. I had no idea where we were before bailing out and in the dark of night was even more lost.

I had a new pack of cigarettes. Everyone used to laugh when I would say, "I had a brand new pack of Phillip Morris cigarettes." while telling this story,

but it was the truth and you better believe, that colorful package was one beautiful sight. My only problem was, I had but one match and in that wind, getting my cigarette lit might take quite an effort. I was not about to take any chances, so I sat down and wrapped the silk over my head, around my body and shoved some under my seat to make sure no wind could penetrate my make shift tent. I was successful in lighting the cigarette and chain smoked from there on, lighting one off the other.

The problem now was to locate a highway or even a back road, with the hope of it being traveled by someone at this hour of the morning. All of sudden, I became aware of a split beacon search light making it's circuitous flash in the sky. A split beacon means it is located on an air base. It could be Amarillo or any of a number of others because Texas was loaded with air base installations.

Finally I came upon a fence row. From my experience as a farm boy, I assumed it should be running East and West or North and South. That's the way it was in Illinois and even though Texas had a lot of open range, I hoped if they did stretch a fence they would adhere to somewhat the same practice. The beacon was in the distance to the right of the fence, so I would head in that direction.

First I had to do something about the parachute. Carrying it was becoming a problem. I would roll it up as tightly as I could and place it under my arm, but it would keep slipping out. Did you ever notice how slippery silk is? I have heard the expression, "As smooth as silk," so that must be the reason causing my dilemma. As the silk would slip out from under my arm, it made little noises as it dragged along the ground and I would think some kind of animal was trying to sneak up on me. Finally it would get caught up on something, making me go through the process of trying to get it under my arm again. This was not only irritating but scary too, so I finally wrapped the darn thing around a strand of barbed wire fencing. I found out later, that was not the thing to do. If I could have found a huge rock I might have been able to secure it to that but out in this field which had been tilled and cultivated over the years, it would be unlikely such a thing could be found.

I followed this fence row for quite a long distance when I noticed what looked like headlights making their way in the direction of the beacon. It was less than a mile out in front of me. It had to be some kind of road or highway.

This piece of good luck caused a rise in my adrenalin and quickened my steps appreciatively. By the time I reached the highway, I was sure it was at least three in the morning and at that hour, cars were few and far between. When lights of one would begin to show, I would wave my arms for them to

stop and help me. They would slow down but then speed up to get past me. The heavy leather clothing must have made me look like a big Ape or Gorilla, because even when when I would stand in the middle of the road and make motions to help me, they would turn out around me and give it the gun.

Luckily, I hadn't walked very far when an Army Ambulance pulled to a stop along side of me and the driver hollered, "Jump in." I was in before he finished the invite and thanking him for stopping. "No problem, he said, but where are the other guys?" I told him I didn't know, probably strung out all over hells half acre! That wasn't the right answer, he thought I was delirious possibly. The reason as it turned out, made sense. There had been an accident involving a jeep with three or four soldiers as passengers. One or two had wandered off and had not been found. He thought I was one of them.

My explanation of having just jumped out of a burning B-17 did not fit into his thoughts at all, but he told me, we were just outside Dalhart, so he would call operations from there. I mentioned that Colonel Snow would confirm my story when he reached base operations.

He bought me a cup of coffee at the restaurant where we stopped and told me to sit tight. I didn't have much time for drinking it though because he came back and said, "Let's move it."

When he spoke to the Colonel, he ordered him to "Get that man in here as fast as you can!" When we arrived at operations, I jumped out of the rig and Col. Snow came toward me with his right hand extended, saying, "Welcome to the Caterpillar Club, Sgt. Dougherty."

Tex Moore had already returned to base and as we chatted, it became clear why our altitude had been so low when the command to bail out had been given. The pilot was letting down approaching the landing strip when the fire broke out. Woody had decided to not risk personnel and planes on the ground so he poured on the power to gain altitude. When he gave the command to abandon, Tex must have gone out the tail hatch immediately. That is why he landed on the perimeter of the air base proper.

Much to my surprise, Woody and the other three officers were also in the Operations room. What had happened? As the story unfolded, I guess Woody had hoped to try and extinguish the fire and Dick, asked to stay with the plane until they both would have to jump. The extinguishers finally worked or the fire burned itself out and they were able to land the plane. After landing, Woody was just as surprised to find Mullin and Turner still on board. He thought they had gone out when the rest of us jumped.

He soon found it was Turner's fault. Because he did not want to take the time before the flight to make sure his chute would fit, he was now faced with the problem of not being able to get one of the leg straps hooked. He was going to jump anyway, which would have been suicide for sure. Mullin was ready to go out but was trying to help Turner lengthen the leg strap. Not an easy task working with half inch webbing when you are in a hurry and your life depends on getting it done.

By the time they were finally ready to jump, I guess Woody and Dick had the plane back in the landing pattern and I suppose, seeing the runway lights in the distance, both Pete and Mal knew they had taken too much time now to jump. It could have been a costly mistake, Fortunately they could learn from this one.

I remember the Colonel being very angry about the circumstances surrounding what happened on this night. He forewarned not only Woody, but the other officers too, "That everyone of your enlisted men better make it in or there would hell to pay." This was probably "rank" talking, but it allowed the Commander to rid himself of some of the anger he was feeling.

It was sometime later when Dixon finally returned to the base and not until the next morning when Clarke finally showed up. As far as I know, Dixon must have gone out through the door up front near where the pilots sit.

Mal Clarke claimed to have taken a nap in an old shed close to where he landed and waited until daylight to begin his trek back to base. I can remember passing within fifty yards of this old derelict shed but I presumed some kind of ferocious animal could be calling it home, so I steered clear of it.

It was funny, because Clarke had thought he got a glimpse of something white collapsing on the ground as he was still drifting earthward. He said later that it would have to have been my chute, and if it was, I know I counted too long before pulling the rip cord.

When the first rays of daylight began to show, a search party was organized to see if they could locate Dempsey who had not yet returned. The other enlisted men and I returned to barracks for some much needed rest, but with the promise from the Colonel we would be notified as soon as any word about Dempsey was available.

Sometime before noon word came that they had found Dempsey, but the news was not good. We rushed down to Operations to find out what had happened. Evidently his chute had not opened until he hit the ground, but the rip cord was not near the chute. They had to find the area of impact, since the

chute had been dragged by the wind until it finally was caught up in a fence row. This necessitated a search to try and find the rip cord so they could determine whether it was chute failure, or something else. In my heart, I always hoped it was chute failure.

The afternoon after the jump, when we were all present or accounted for, Col. Snow scheduled our crew for a flight. He explained to Woody that getting us back in the air again was a must, otherwise they may never want to fly again. It was a short flight, but it made it much easier when we had to take off on the next training mission.

In a matter of a few days, a request had come from the Dempsey family, asking that I be the one to bring the body back. Since Jim and I were occupying the waist gun positions together, we had become pretty close friends; and I am sure this was the reason why the family chose my name.

I explained to Woody that it would be more saddening for the family if I were to go because I was so emotional and sentimental; I would be crying the whole time I was there. I opted to write the family with my explanation and my condolences. Dixon being the ranking enlisted man on our crew said he would do the honors which was agreeable with Lt. Woodson and made me feel a lot better too.

I will always say, "What a great plane it was, what a terrific crew we had and what great experiences we had," during that part of our lives together.

This is my recollection of the "NIGHT RAID ON ALMAGORDO."

Written in November 1993

Fifty years later

By Tom Dougherty