

WW II, THE POLISHING TUMBLER

9/7/2016 segment

We will familiarize ourselves with a B 29's features and idiosyncrasies during several months in the hot Alamogordo sun. Take offs are before 10 AM, or after dusk, because the air is too thin for sufficient lift during most of the day. We are completely unaware of the feverish preparation nearby for Trinity, the first nuclear test eruption which will bathe the entire region in bright light on July 16, 1945, just about the time, soon to come when we will leave for the Pacific.

Soon after arriving we began flying lengthy practice missions simulating distances we will confront overseas. To Savannah, Georgia and back, a typical training flight, was about 2500 nautical miles, a peaceful facsimile of the 2700 mile round-trip between the Marianas and Tokyo.

The ten of us had already become a team by the time radar officer Dave Romanick appeared a few weeks later. He was a new friend, not quite a brother yet. He needed to wear in before we accepted him as a member of our tribe. So we were still a bit stand-offish with him when we left on the second long-distance flight with him on board. It was Seattle and back, about 1,200 nautical miles each way. We had already learned, thanks to a series of little incidents, that the term SNAFU applied in spades to B 29s -- that our craft can and does test its inhabitants with ugly surprises. -- that maybe we'll have cause to worry more about it than our enemy. The planes and engines, rarely but sometimes crew behavior, occasionally ground administration, perhaps training errors, and, of course the weather -- all presented abundant opportunity for disasters that had zero to do with actual combat.

This Seattle trip proved the point. Trouble came in a three-part drama featuring the plane, the weather, and our new team-mate, radar man Romanick and his newfangled desk-size console.

Dave's position was a dark interior section in the rear behind the gunners and bomb bays. He couldn't see out. His compartment had no view of the outside world. His focus was entirely on his screen and dials.

Everything was hunky-dory, copasetic we would have said, on the way up to Seattle, and for a few hours after we reversed course to return home. We were deep into practicing routine tasks. Dave synchronizing his screen shots with a map of the passing terrain. The bombardier, Ed Wojtowicz and I, positioned for cross-training Ed in the basics of my job. He sat at my desk. I perched next to him on the wheel-well cover, stepping him through plotting techniques.

Suddenly, a tell-tale danger signal. An alteration in the plane's steady drone. A foreign noise, even a slight pop will instantly alert crew members in flight, even from deep sleep. In this case, air hisses past our ears. A frozen moment of mystified fear. Then, over the intercom, we hear from the right-side Gunner, Frank Szamocki. Frank, a rugged farm hand from Minnesota, is a young man of few words. Perfect for the occasion. He tells us succinctly "my blister just blew."

We are a punctured balloon. Cabin pressure immediately zooms from 10,000 to our actual 30,000-foot altitude. Everyone jams on his oxygen mask; connects it to a nearby supply hose. I scramble up to the bombardier's nose position and attach there.

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Fortunately, the gunner is strapped in, so is still with us rather than ejected from his perch. We can relax now that we know what has happened and Frank is safe. I give special thanks that I was not sitting in the thirty-foot tunnel practicing star navigation when the blister blew, or I would have shot through to the rear like a circus performer.

It would have been nice if the blown blister was our only problem. No such luck. As we descended to a breathable altitude one of our engines "ran away." It had suffered a failure and begun to revolve increasingly faster, a common B 29 problem. To keep it from shattering into shrapnel the pilots effectively shut it down; "feathered" it. We continued our descent.

An hour later a second engine gives way. We are no longer able to remain level, much less climb. We have no alternative but an emergency landing at an en-route field. Tucson, Arizona Army Air Field's tower clears us in. As we gradually descend, I peer from my emergency seat in the bombardier's position at mountains looming ahead. From my position encased in the clear Lucite nose, it seems to me touch-and-go whether we will remain sufficiently high or smack right into them -- until I see the summits thankfully pass beneath us. While hardly ho-hum, we are still fine, following routine emergency procedures. Until.

Until a blinding area-wide sand storm erupted over the Tucson area just as we approached. Theoretically we can no longer land there. But we must. Here's Captain Cool sitting up there thinking it over. No intercom chatter now. He asks the radar man, the unknown quantity, our new team mate, if he can see the field on his scope. Dave says he can. Skipper shots back: "Take us there." Dave gives him a heading. We turn onto it and soon Dave confirms that we are approaching the field. Still visibility zero.

Sitting in the nose I see nothing below, just billowing sand. The pilot is hoping the storm will abate, I guess because he feels he is always lucky and deserves it. But it doesn't and he continues along into a landing pattern, guided by beacon radio signals emanating from the turning point antennas below. He changes headings at the first two. I get a lucky quick glimpse of the third beacon tower through a momentary break in the swirling sand as we pass over it, and the Skipper turns the plane again.

We all hear on our intercom "Radar to Pilot, I can see the runways. Do you want me to guide you to them?" Theoretically, I learned later, this is impossible with the radar equipment we carry. This is no time for niceties. The captain accepts the offer, tells the tower we are landing, and descends toward the runways on the heading the radar man gives him. Still nothing but swirling sand. Suddenly I see the twin runways appear just below of us, one wingspan to our right. Another fact; B 29s cannot be slipped sideways. Fact turns to fiction as the pilot slips the clumsy plane to the right, and a few moments later we touch down. Smack on the runway. The visibility is so low that we are two thirds of the way down the strip before we see the emergency vehicles bearing in alongside of us.

We come to rest and pile out of the plane. We in the front drop to the ground and dash around to the rear door. Like a ball team just having scored the victory of the century, all of us, in knotty groups, hug the radar man as he steps out. He is one of us now.