

we might be called upon someday to go to Saigon, but had not speculated on the trip to Borneo.

At the time, I was the assistant operations officer of the 372nd Bomb Squadron and was in attendance only because our regular operations officer had been shot down and was on the high seas in a rescuing submarine thought to be located somewhere south of the Celebes Islands.

General Kenney spoke of the importance of the Balikpapan Oil Fields and Refineries. He emphasized the possibility of shortening the war in the South Pacific by as much as 18 months. He talked of cutting the gasoline and oil supply to the Japanese Navy and Air Force. During questions and answers, it was estimated that 100 to 125 eager Navy Japanese Zeros would be in the air. The 127-mm anti-aircraft guns were thought to be moderate to strong.

Bombing altitude was estimated at 22,000 feet and of the main concern was the length of the mission, which at normal cruising speed would be in the area of eighteen (18) hours. The B-24s as we knew them at that time had a range of approximately 13 hours. For the trip to Balikpapan we would install extra gasoline tanks in the front bomb bays, both right and left, for the purpose of extending our range. Because of the added weight of tanks and gas, our bomb load would be reduced considerably. I am not sure about this but I believe I recall that each B-24 so loaded would carry only two two-hundred-fifty pound bombs. This did not seem like much, but these bombs dropped in the right place would start the fires in the refineries and oil storage areas that would render the oil fields inoperative.



Unfortunately, General Kenney mentioned that anticipated casualties had been estimated to be as high as 50%. US fighter cover would be non-existent because of the long distances from Borneo to our P-38 and P-47 bases.

The island of Morotai was discussed as a possible secondary landing point. That island was about a third of the way between our take-off point of Noemfoor and the target, Balikpapan. At the time of this mini-briefing, the Japanese forces held the island. However, it was under attack by the US Army and while it had changed hands several times, it was thought that the US Army would have established a perimeter around the airfield in time to accept crippled B-24s returning from Balikpapan. It was estimated that 30,000 Japanese troops were dug in, so to speak, on Morotai. It was not known if the island would be occupied by Japanese or by US troops, but that the airstrip might be available should a secondary landing spot be required.

At the time of this premature briefing, no dates had been established for the mission and mechanics were working to see if the B-24 could be modified to gain the increase in range required. The whole idea was in speculation only with no firm decisions being extended.

With this information tightly secured in the back of our minds, we took off for Sydney. I watched the news and during the 10-12 days we were in Sydney, I noticed missions #1 and #2 to Balikpapan had taken place with heavy Zero encounters and heavy losses by the US Air Force.

So here we were back in Noemfoor at 3:00 am on October 10, 1944. We had fresh eggs for breakfast and were on our way to Balikpapan mission #3. We loaded our gear into the B-24 that we will call the “Shady Lady”. This wasn’t actually the “Shady Lady”



that we had flown from Fairfield, California, to Guadalcanal, but one could say it was certainly a replica. In the dark, we checked the plane over very carefully. We topped off the gas tanks and were ready to roll.

The 307th Bomb Group would fly four (4) squadrons of six (6) B-24s each for a total of 24 airplanes in our group. As luck would have it, the 372nd Squadron was scheduled to lead the group; it was our turn. This might appear to be an honor except the Japanese pilots thought there was a General in the lead plane and therefore would attack heavily toward that position.

On this day in the lead plane would be the assistant operations officer of the 372nd Squadron with his crew and with yours truly in the left seat. I'm not sure about this, but I believe the 5th Air Force was to put up three (3) groups. This would give us a total of 96 planes starting the mission. The 5th Air Force would be coming from a more easterly direction and could become part of our formations at rendezvous or could filter into vacant spots in our group for the run across the main target.

You would think that it might be an easy matter for the attackers to take out the lead ship of our 24-ship formations. However, it was no picnic for the Japanese Zeros attacking the B-24 formations. Each B-24 was equipped with ten 50-caliber guns or a grand total of 240 machine guns firing rounds at oncoming interceptors. Every fifth round was a tracer bullet. This was some show, I must say.

Our plans, being the lead ship, meant we were the first to move out of the bunker. We taxied in the dark toward the end of the runway where normally we would stop, run up the motors, check the mags, and proceed from a dead stop. Not so on this day!! We had a very heavy load of gas and bombs, and a short 5500-foot runway. We literally



screached around the turn onto the runway, hoping the gear would not give way and the tires would withstand the added weight, for what we called a running start. As we reached flying speed we staggered off the end of the runway and were airborne. This was a great feeling. We lost several planes and their crews who, as they had not picked up enough speed to get off the runway, crashed into the ocean.

Our usual practice was to make a broad 360-degree circle around the airfield allowing the other five planes to take their places in the six-squadron formation. Not this time! We needed to conserve all the fuel possible so we took off directly toward the rendezvous point. In approximately 9 hours we would assemble the formation at 23,000 feet to prepare for the run across the primary target at Balikpapan.

When we approached the rendezvous coordinates, we would make only one 360-degree circle for the purpose of assembling the bombing formation as well as for protection against intercepting Japanese Zeros. The assembly action was good. One ship was missing in our squadron formation that either lost its way or had to turn back because of mechanical difficulty. Its spot was filled with a 5th Air Force plane that had apparently strayed from its intended path. We slowed our air speed and flattened out our congregating circle to allow the other squadrons to move into their positions.

After going through a number of weather fronts and making a painstaking assembly at rendezvous, we were on our way to the primary target. As I recall, after gathering the group together we were about 25 minutes or 75 miles from the target. Our bombardier had a huge responsibility as all planes would likely drop their bombs on his sightings and releases. We would be on autopilot on the bomb run. The bombsight



would take over through the autopilot, fly the plane, aim and drop the bombs in a time slot of 15 to 20 seconds.

David Rodabaugh was our bombardier and a good one he was. He was a very jovial guy from Indianapolis, Indiana, and tended to be the clown of the crew, which was good for morale...we needed that. We talked before the mission about the length of the bomb run. The shorter the bomb run the better chance we had of avoiding the 127mm anti-aircraft shells that would be coming up from below. My preferred bomb run was 15 seconds. 20 seconds was not too bad; any longer than 20 seconds would come under the heading of "LOOK OUT"!

I told Dave we would travel a long way for this opportunity and while we preferred a short bomb run, it was intensely important that we hit the target. I also told him that we would be at 23,000 feet and our air speed would be 180 mph guaranteed so that he could crank his information into the bombsite and depend on it being accurate.

I watched the timepiece on my wrist after the bombsight took over as 17 seconds ticked off. The plane lunged on the release of the relatively small bomb load; it was "BOMBS AWAY"!

Usually after the bomb release you would drop off to the right or left with about a 15-degree directional change in an effort to throw off those aiming the 127-mm guns from the ground. Knowing this was pretty much standard, I had decided to increase altitude approximately 500 feet and make a 10 degree right turn. This we did and sure enough, there was a bank of 127-mm exploding shells at the spot we would have been if we had gone 15 degrees left and 500 feet down. I've always said it is better to be lucky than smart.



All went fairly well through the evasive action as we moved away from the target area. I looked back over my left shoulder to see black smoke billowing high above to the 23,000-foot level. At this point, I pushed the intercom button: “Nice going, Dave, a direct hit!”

We continued our evasive action with apparently all wing planes still in place: right, left, down, up, faster, slower. All appeared to be going well in spite of heavy Japanese fighter interaction and what was considered to be moderate anti-aircraft bursts at or near our level.

We were 5-10 minutes off the target and had picked up the heading to home base that had been given to me by Jerry Burns, our navigator. Jerry, from Sparta, Wisconsin, was probably the most intelligent guy on our crew. After the war, he became an attorney and an executive of the Chevron Corporation. I always felt, as did others in our squadron, that Jerry was the best navigator in the group. He was very personable, accurate, and in general a fine crew member. Each of our guys contributed in such a way that made our crew the “Special One”.

As I was feeling somewhat comfortable looking out through the front windshield, I noticed two Japanese Zeros coming in from 11 o’clock low and closing rapidly. I called over the intercom “two Zeros 11 o’clock low” which I did not usually do. I usually kept constant contact with the other plane commanders and let Pat, the copilot, handle the intercom and sighting activities. Just as I switched back to the command channel, I noticed two bright charges of fire coming from the barrels of the Zeros that were boring in. Almost instantaneously it happened – WHAM!!



One 20-mm shell exploded in the cockpit off my left hand. The other entered the fuselage below the flight deck, rupturing the hydraulic reserve tank, severing a rudder cable, cutting off ignition to the #3 engine and causing problems in the operation of engine #4. We did not know at the time that all of this had happened, but in retrospect and with the passing of time, this is pretty much a summary of where our problems were found to be.

I looked down at my flack vest to see about a third of a 20-mm shell protruding out of the steel vest. My chest felt like it had been hit by a 210-pound fullback. Sitting stunned but still flying the plane, I looked around to find blood in many locations. My left hand and arm had probably 20-25 penetrations. The right hand had some too, but not as many. The right knee was bleeding under the flight suit. The left leg was peppered with smaller pieces of the exploded shell. There was a sizable hole in the back of my right thigh, one I will never understand

I did not move for a few minutes, trying to gather my thoughts, when I realized the pilot's seat seemed to be filling with moisture that turned out to be the bright red stuff that by now seemed to be everywhere.

At about this same time, I began to "lose it", as they say. I think I was suffering from shock and was close to passing out. I recognized the feeling because I had passed out once on the parade ground in pre-flight training. We would stand at attention in the hot sun for extended periods of time and some would faint. I had to add to the complication by falling on a gun causing an abrasion that required stitches to close the wound. I thought surely I would be washed out, but the medical officer said, "You are



trying to be too good a soldier!” He suggested that I loosen up when standing at attention in formation. I got a lucky break there and it never happened again.

When I began to feel dizzy, I felt I needed to get out of the pilot’s seat and somehow get my head below my knees so that the blood would return to my brain. I told our flight engineer to sit in the pilot’s seat and had Pat Patrick, the copilot, fly the plane. With this I made a quick review of the instrument panel before leaving the cockpit and lying on the floor on the flight deck. I thought everything was going well with the exception of the #4 engine, which was drawing only half power for a reason that was not apparent to me at the time.

Jim Kendall pulled out his field knife and gave it to our navigator, Jerry Burns, who cut away pieces of my clothing to get at the wounds. I was in a pretty solid daze and don’t remember really what went on during the next few minutes; I have no idea how long this went on. Later, as I was getting up, I saw a formation of planes going over us that I supposed were going to the target. Wrong! They were coming from the target. We were out of control, going back into the refinery area, and were under heavy fire from pursuing Zeros.

I staggered back up between the pilot and copilot seats to look at the instrument panel. I read an altitude of 16,000 feet on the altimeter which I soon realized was not 16,000 feet, but 600 feet. I immediately got the flight engineer out of the pilot chair and ordered everything thrown out of the plane except the parachutes and bombsight. Pat said, “I can’t hold it, Sid!” That was my military nickname. The rudder cable was severed which meant we had to attempt to control the direction with power settings, a very difficult thing to do with a big plane.

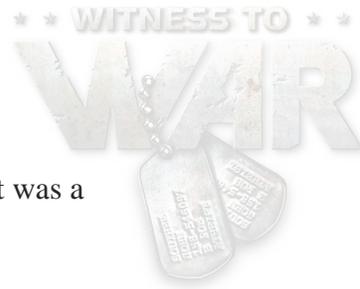


I quickly made another review of the instrument panel. Manifold pressure was OK and the rpm looked OK on all engines, but then there was the cylinder head temperature. The cylinder head temperature on #3 engine was 0 degrees which meant no ignition on that engine. #3 engine was windmilling, creating no power and a big drag.

I said to Pat, the copilot, “Feather #3 engine but make sure you get the right one. If you get the wrong engine, we’re in the drink!” As Pat feathered #3, it was one of the most memorable times I can recall. The propeller blades turned into the wind and came to a standstill. We previously had problems with windmilling propeller blades not feathering, but this one did!

When a propeller is windmilling, it is creating no power. The engine is not working. The instrument panel shows good manifold pressure and rpms according to the power settings, but the windmilling propeller and engine are contributing nothing to the power equation. The reverse is true in the creation of a tremendous drag on the plane. It is quite comparable to a weather vane on the top of the country barn. The flow of air over the wing drives the propeller instead of the propeller driving the flow of air.

This was the main turning point of our struggle to remain airborne. For the first time since the two Japanese 20-mm shells exploded in the cockpit, we were gaining altitude. The rate of climb indicator showed 100 feet per minute but it could have been a mile and I would not have been anymore elated. We were at last winning. After some five minutes had passed, we had gained approximately 500 feet. I don’t know for sure how low our plane had gone. I thought it was down to at least 600 feet, but one crewmember said he thought it had gone as low as 200 feet. In any event, we had gone into some sort of a rapid decline in the time that I was passed out on the flight deck. Why



I happened to regain consciousness at the time that I did will never be known; it was a good time to “come to”.

With #3 engine feathered, even though #4 was pulling only partial power, we were able to control our direction within a 10-20 degree span which we had not been able to do before. The Zeros were apparently running low on gas and the number of attackers was rapidly being reduced. I said to Pat, “I think we have a chance to make it.”

A plane flown by the Lawson crew had followed us down. The navigator, whose name was Trost, later confirmed this. Also John May followed us down, both planes providing protection from the hoard of Zeros that attacked relentlessly. Without those two planes, we would not be here today. Lawson and May were also prepared to drop provisions if we did finally ditch in the ocean; fortunately, we did not.

After the war, John May became a very successful California businessman. He and his wife, Margaret, started the Shoe Corral, a women’s soft line store in Danville, CA. I think there were several stores. I also believe he was a founder and director of the local bank and became mayor of that city. John passed away on February 10, 1994.

We were now moving out of the target area and on the correct route to Morotai, the secondary landing spot. Under almost full power we were very slowly gaining altitude, but at least we were gaining. Our flight engineer was feverishly working on the rudder cable. He had in his box two devices that I had picked up while working with the B-24 maintenance crew in Fort Worth. They were called cable sleeves and were used primarily for repair work. I think our engineer made use of these during the repair effort; however, it was never discussed after the incident, so I am not positive of their use.



I did some things when going through training that others may not have done. Before going through cadet's training, I had worked on the final assembly at Beech Aircraft Corporation in Wichita, Kansas. I developed a strong attraction for airplanes and was excited about doing the mechanical work. In addition to working 12 hours a day, I was working on what was then known as an A&E license. I had pretty much completed the "A" (aircraft) part of the license, but had a long way to go on the "E" (engineer) requirements. It was at Beech that I decided to be a pilot in the US Air Force.

At that time, I was also riding and maintaining a large Harley Davidson 74 overhead valve motorcycle that was the pride of my heart. The engine on the Harley was only two cylinders, but was not an awfully lot different from the air-cooled Pratt & Whitney engines that powered the B-24. Because of my interest in and real love for mechanical work, I would don an old pair of coveralls and head to the repair hangers on the week-ends while going through B-24 transition in Fort Worth.

While the mechanics really did not allow me to do much, I loved being there and this is where I got the cable sleeves and learned about the function of cylinder head temperatures which may have "saved our bacon" this day.

At this point, an hour off target, we are progressing. Johnny May was heading back to Noemfoor. Lawson was to land at Morotai. While things were much better, we were not out of the woods yet. We were limping along on 2 ½ engines and #4 would not respond to any type of therapy that we would apply; there may have been another control cable problem that was not apparent at the time. This was not good. If two engines went out on one side, life would become even more complicated.



The hydraulic reservoir had shattered with the impact of the 20-mm. It really didn't matter that much as the hydraulic pump was on #3 engine and would not operate at any rate. This meant that we would have to crank the landing gear and flaps down by hand and if lucky would have one constant application of brakes. Once we eased off on the brakes, it was all over.

We decided to climb back up to 3000 feet and maintain this altitude until we reached Morotai. I think Morotai was about a 4 to 4½ hour journey at normal speed. We had cut our air speed to approximately 165 mph in an effort to conserve gas which had become the big problem. As we attempted to maintain altitude and direction, our gasoline supply had diminished rapidly.

When we came by the Celebes Islands on the way to Morotai, we discussed bailing out even though we knew the Celebes were in the hands of the Japanese. The atrocities of the Japanese against captured US airmen pretty much boiled down to – Take No Prisoners! So together we decided to go for Morotai. We felt Morotai was in US hands, but we still were not positive as it had changed hands several times during the week.

What I did not know was that during this trying time the crew had sort of taken a vote over the intercom as to whether or not they would bail out over the Celebes Islands. Because of my condition, they decided to stay with the ship. Jim Kendall said when we were down to what he thought was about 200 feet he was wondering if it had been the right decision. When throwing out the last of the 50 caliber shells to reduce weight, he said he could see them splash in the water; it was that close!



So on we went. The weight had been reduced. Our flight engineer had made his best effort to repair the rudder cable and we had control. The gas from #3 tank had been transferred into the tanks of the producing engines. The reading on the gasoline gauges was getting desperately low when Jerry Burns, our navigator, said, “Sid, that’s Morotai up ahead.”

At one point when we were limping along on 2 engines, barely able to stay in the air, Jerry Burns announced that he was going to take a nap. He also said that if another one of those fans quit turning, to please wake him up.

I don’t remember how long it took to get this far. We started out in the early, early morning and it now seemed to me that it was late in the afternoon. As we approached Morotai, all we had left was a shell of a B-24. I instructed Pat to tell the crew to attach their parachutes to the gun stanchion in the waist window and that we would drag the tailskid. When the nose wheel eased down on the coral runway, that was the time to release the chutes. We would need this braking power to slow the plane as our hydraulic system was non-existent. Interestingly enough, some of the crew was still working at dropping the ball turret to reduce weight. The engineer reported that one gas tank was empty and another nearly so.

I told Mac, our engineer, to put all tanks on cross feed. This meant that gas would go to the 2½ engines equally. When we were out of gas, all engines would stop at the same time.

This is a point of interest. It was at about this time that Major Richard Bong, the P-38 fighter Ace (42 Zeros) of the South Pacific theater, crossed above us and through



radio contact asked us how we were doing and if he could be of any help. Our answer was, “We think we’re going to make it. Thanks much!!”

We were at last on final approach to Morotai coming in from Balikpapan. I called Morotai Tower for landing instructions. Yes, the field was in US control. The conversation went something like this.....

The tower response was difficult to comprehend. Their answer: “Army ABC third on final approach, do not land! Do not land! Pull up and go around! Pull up and go around!! The runway is congested and blocked! Please go around!!”

My response: “Morotai Tower, we are on two engines, hydraulic system is out, wheels put down by hand are locked in place, full flaps, wounded aboard. We are out of gas, can not go around. Army ABC landing Morotai far left!”

The airstrip blockage was certainly true. There were six or seven B-24s at the far end with one parked at an angle about 2/3 of the way down and in line with where I had planned to land; there were no taxiways.

We simply could not go around.

I don’t think the plane could have made it if we had tried. By this time, there was a very small amount of fuel left. We had to land no matter what.

With that, I took off my earphones, dropped them beside the seat, and began the laborious task of landing the crippled B-24 to the far left. We just missed the first plane on the runway as our left wheel skidded somewhat off the coral strip. The crew popped the chutes at exactly the right time and with a partial application of brakes we coasted to a stop just shy of the 6 or 7 planes on the end of the runway.



We were on the ground at Morotai. I doubt if anybody could even imagine how good it felt to step out of the plane on solid ground.

I staggered out of the plane to a waiting corpsman ambulance. I do not know what happened to the plane after that; I never saw it again. I remember saying, “Damn good crew, damn good crew,” as I was helped into the ambulance.

I was on the first bunk of the carrier and it felt wonderful. On the floor was a person completely covered by an army blanket. I asked the corpsman, “What’s with him?” He said, “He didn’t come out as well as you did.” I learned later that it was the tail gunner of the plane blocking the runway.

The trip in the Corps ambulance to what they called an advanced hospital was long and on a rough road. I estimate it was probably 5-6 miles on a freshly cut, single lane road; but you know, I didn’t mind one bit I was so happy to be there.

The hospital was a tent in a coconut grove with probably 25-30 cots that were mostly occupied. The personnel consisted of 2 doctors and one orderly. They were completely under-manned.

It was a very busy place. I would estimate approximately eight or nine guys were ahead of me on the operating table. Those waiting were lying on the dirt floor. They gave me an intravenous hook-up with a bottle hanging on what looked like a 2x4-type frame. I nestled down under a blanket and believe me, I was never so happy to be anyplace in my life. I really felt as though I was living on borrowed time.

I think it was about 2 ½ hours before it became my turn on the table. I was doubly relieved when one of the doctors said, “This looks like an easy one.”



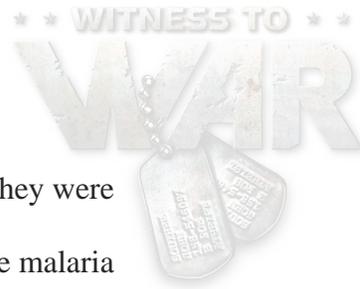
If my recollection is at all accurate, I believe I was in the advanced hospital for approximately three weeks. At first, I could not get out of bed without ripping open some of the stitched-up wounds.

We had three to four single ship air raids per night, and we were alerted by three loud blasts from 80-mm guns just outside the hospital tent. When I say just outside, I mean like 10-15 feet away.

Foxholes surrounded the tent and when the alarm was given, there was a big dash into the holes for all those who could leave their cots. Many could not leave their bunks as the island had been taken just a few days earlier, and there were a number of severe casualties. We joked that the doctors were always the first in the holes – they were really quick!

The marauding planes were usually Japanese Bettys dropping their bombs and they would be picked up at high altitude in our strong searchlights with a lot of 80-mm shells bursting around them. All of a sudden everything would go quiet and the Black Widow P-61 night fighters would come busting through from above and that was all she wrote for the Japanese bomber. The night fighters seldom missed and two or three Bettys were destroyed almost every night.

After the first week or so, I ate all my meals with the doctors. I particularly enjoyed the straight shots they had at dinnertime. I felt those shots had a lot to do with my early recovery. The doctors enjoyed degrading my home state of Kansas which I assured them was “God’s country”.



As I began to feel better and became more mobile, I tried to help out. They were so short handed and had a full hospital most of the time. We had a lot of severe malaria cases in the hospital. Every body seemed to have it – even the doctors

Also I got so I could hit the foxhole in about two jumps. One night the doctors and two or three others dove into a foxhole and came out screaming. It seems a large tarantula spider had taken residence during the day.

Major Bong's commanding officer's bed was right beside mine. As his guys came to see him, we would get the low down on what was happening on any given day. I was a little surprised to find that Major Bong was not particularly popular. The P-38s flew in pairs and apparently Bong had a tendency to leave his partner stranded if he thought he had an opportunity to get another Japanese Zero.

I did participate in operations while in the advanced hospital. A young man was brought in with a bad case of appendicitis. The operation was a necessity, but the hospital was out of anesthetic. This operation was performed with a local anesthetic like Novocain or something else. It was my job to hold the patient's head between my hands and talk to him about pleasant things such as home, family, girl friend or anything that would keep his mind off the operation.

Actually it went quite well until they came to the inner lining of the stomach wall at which time the kid hit the ceiling. We had to hold him down. One of the doctors looked at me and said, "You look pale; I think you should get some fresh air." I did not do so well, but the patient survived with no complications.



In the middle of that operation the 80-mm air raid alarm sounded. I fully expected the doctors to dive for the foxhole as they had always done before. They did not blink an eye nor did their hands waver on the scalpel – they were indeed a good pair.

In time, a plane was sent to take me back to the 372nd squadron on Noemfoor and I was back flying the B-24s to all targets and performing the duties of the squadron operation's officer. It was shortly thereafter that the 307th was moved to Morotai to continue its combat efforts in the Dutch East Indies as well as the Philippine Islands.

You can be assured that I will always remember October 10, 1944, the Balikpapan Oil Fields, and you guessed it – Fresh Eggs for Breakfast!!

Respectfully submitted February 25, 2001,

Tom Harris
372nd Squadron
307th Bomb Group
13th Air Force