

SCHWEINFURT

Written by Robert (Bob) Slane

REVIEW OF EVENTS

14 October 1943 - 1st Lt. Robert Slane -Age 20 - Pilot/ Crew Commander of a ten man B-17 Bomber Crew - stationed at Bassingbourn, England. 401st Bomb Sq., 91st Bombardment Group -8th Air Force. Crew assigned to fly B-17 aircraft #42-5714, a 323 Bomb sq. aircraft.

Mission to Schweinfurt, Germany.

It was an early wake-up call on 14 Oct. 1943. My navigator, Lt. Foster, had returned from pass and my crew, without substitute, was scheduled to fly this mission.

We discovered, just prior to the mission briefing, that our flight position would be tail-end Charlie. The Group leader would be my roommate, Captain Harry Lay. This was to be his 30th and last mission with the 91st Bomb Group. Lt/Col Milton would accompany him as co-pilot and mission commander.

It was still dark and very foggy after the briefing as we were being trucked to our aircraft. We were the last crew out of the truck - arriving at an aircraft from another squadron. (aircraft 42-5714, 323rd Squadron).

When we arrived at the aircraft I was met by the aircraft crew chief. He was distraught and excited when he informed me that there must be a mistake because his aircraft was not Combat Ready and it had never, ever, been scheduled for combat. In response to my question concerning it's use, he informed me that it was an older aircraft used only for local flying and primarily for instrument flying. While this discussion was taking place the bomb-loading crew arrived and began loading the bombs . I had no time to discuss this situation further with the crew chief as it was obvious the aircraft was on the schedule if bombs were to be loaded.

We discovered the aircraft had the old style bladder type oxygen system and that meant we needed extra masks as the bladder types would clog up with ice at high altitude. My crew had flown with this equipment when flying older model B17's during training missions prior to our overseas assignment. The "Demand" type oxygen system on the later model aircraft corrected this problem. The crew chief - once reconciled that his aircraft was going into combat - did everything possible to assist my crew in obtaining additional oxygen masks and additional ammunition. He advised me that the engines on the aircraft were "high-timers" and that particular problem was his main concern. The extra weight from the additional ammunition was one of my concerns and both the flight crew and ground crew monitored the distribution of the additional ammo.

The weather remained wet and foggy and we would not have been surprised if the mission was scrubbed, but after a long wait the green "go" flare appeared and we were on our way.

Once on the runway, the only visible directional mark was the white center stripe. It was a full instrument take-off and climb-out using air speed, climb rate and timing procedures.

We were the third aircraft to locate Capt. Lay's lead aircraft and after waiting for some time for other aircraft to join up, I pulled into formation on the right wing of the high element leader. It became increasingly obvious as we started on course that several aircraft assigned to our formation had either aborted or for some reason were having difficulty in locating the formation. The left wing position in Capt. Lay's lead element remained vacant for a considerable period of time and I debated whether or

not to fill that slot; however another B-17 finally pulled up into that position.

Enemy aircraft of all types began attack at coast-in. ME-109's and FW-190's were the principal attack aircraft - coming in from all directions - while JU-88's, ME-110's and Hinkle 111's were observed flying parallel to our formation - just out of range of our gunner's 50-caliber guns. These aircraft were reporting our position and firing rockets into the formation. Any aircraft in our formation that was crippled or fell behind could expect to be singled out for mass attack by the enemy. On the way to the target, FW-109's were lining up ahead of the formation and then making head-on attacks; doing a split-s maneuver after passing under the B-17 formation. It was during these attacks that the navigator, bombardier and lower turret gunner were most effective in providing defensive fire from our aircraft,

At the initial point (IP), the fighter attacks lessened and intense enemy flak was encountered. Just after bomb release over the target our aircraft received what appeared to be a direct hit by a burst of flak and the #4 engine caught fire. We were able to feather the propeller, the fire was extinguished and we remained in formation with three operating engines.

After bombs away and leaving the target area, the fighter attacks resumed and all gunners were firing at the enemy. I heard S/Sgt Brown, the ball turret gunner, and several other crew members call out kills; however there was no time for discussion - everyone was too busy fighting off the enemy.

Approximately 45 minutes after departing the target area we were still in formation and for the first time on this mission I turned over control of the aircraft to Lt. Johnson, the co-pilot. We were holding our own and the three operating engines were also holding steady despite higher than normal power settings. At this time FW-190's were observed flying above our formation and they were releasing what appeared to be bombs, down, into and through our formation. I was busy looking up and trying to help S/Sgt Sly, the top turret gunner, in locating the enemy fighters flying overhead. It was during this period that our aircraft was suddenly struck by heavy enemy gunfire. The right inboard engine (#3) was hit, severing fuel and oil lines. The main oxygen tank - located in the passageway below the pilot - exploded with a loud "bang". Concurrent with the explosion Lt Johnson let go of the control wheel and "hunched" down and forward, covering his head and face with his arms. His shoulders shoved the control wheel forward and the aircraft immediately started a severe descending dive out of formation. From my seated position I could not force Johnson to release the control wheel. I unbuckled my seat belt and standing in the aisle used all my strength to finally force him back to an upright seated position. These actions were immediate and necessary before I could regain control of the aircraft.

I had recovered control of the B-17, but we were out of formation and had descended about 1500 feet below our formation. I feared that Lt. Johnson had been hit by enemy fire, however he was not injured and the only explanation offered by Lt Johnson was that when he heard the oxygen tank explode he feared a 20mm cannon shell was in the cockpit and about to explode.

Regardless of the cause, our aircraft was now out of formation and severely crippled with two engines inoperative. I was unable to feather the propeller on #3 engine. There was no fire despite an obvious fuel leak in the inboard section of the right wing. We continued to drift further behind our formation and in fact we found ourselves, for a short period of time, in the middle of another group of B-17's that were at a lower altitude but following the route of the 91st Bomb Group leader. That formation, also, soon left us behind.

It was a battle trying to keep the aircraft airborne without exceeding the engine operating limits on the two remaining engines. Main system oxygen had been destroyed and the emergency oxygen was near depletion. The bladder type masks were a major problem. I descended to 18,000 ft - the maximum

altitude where we could operate for a time without oxygen. There was no cloud cover below us that might help in evading the enemy.

During the 30 or 40 minutes after departing our formation, our crew was under constant enemy attack and it was a life or death struggle to survive. We were no longer being attacked head-on, but we had enemy fighter and fighter-bombers attacking us from side angles. The last words I received from the tail gunner, Sgt Smith, were "Skipper, there are 7 ME-109's trailing us with their gear down. They are making single passes - gear up - then attack". I told Sgt. Smith to "get one for me".

We, the crew, still had a limited supply of ammunition and we retained the hope that we could fend off the attackers and return to England utilizing the two remaining operating engines. I wanted to maintain altitude until we were closer to the enemy coast-line before starting a descent with two engines inoperative on the right wing. A descent too early could result in having to ditch in the North Sea. During this period of struggle for survival, I heard several crew members announce hits and possible destruction of enemy aircraft. I remain convinced that S/Sgt Brown, the ball turret gunner, and other members of my crew destroyed as many as four enemy aircraft during the unrelenting attacks by German aircraft.

Suddenly and without warning #1 engine lost power. It appeared from my position that the two top cylinders had blown and smoke was coming from that area. Flames were coming from the lower part of the engine. My attempt to feather the propeller were futile. I hit the bail-out warning bell and gave the verbal order to bail out. All crew members acknowledged with the exception of Sgt Smith, the tail gunner. Lt. Johnson and S/Sgt Sly assisted each other with their chutes - the bomb bay doors were opened and both men jumped out from that area.

As the crew members were departing the aircraft, I received word from S/Sgt Kuhlman, the radio operator, that Sgt. Smith was unconscious - no apparent wounds. Kuhlman had been to the rear of the aircraft to obtain additional emergency oxygen bottles. After this report I received no response from any crew members in the rear of the aircraft. All forward members of the crew, with the exception of the navigator, Lt. Glen Foster, had departed the aircraft. Foster had not yet bailed out, but had assisted Lt Runner, the bombardier, in evacuating the aircraft. Runner was suffering from mild anoxia and appeared to be confused; however, thanks to the valiant efforts of Lt. Foster, his bail out was successful.

Foster came to the cockpit area wanting to know if I was going to crash-land or bail-out. He wanted to do what ever I was going to do. I told him that I was going to parachute out, but that I had received word that Sgt Smith was unconscious in the rear of the aircraft and I wanted him to check on Smith and if he was in the aircraft but unconscious to attempt to get Smith to an exit and if possible throw him from the plane concurrent with pulling the parachute ripcord. That accomplished, he should notify me and immediately bailout. If Smith was not in the aircraft, Foster was to notify me and then bailout without further delay. Foster acknowledged and headed for the bomb bay.

Shortly after Lt. Foster entered the bomb bay on the way to the rear of the aircraft, a Ju-88 - coming in from the right rear, strafed the B-17 - putting gunfire in the fuselage and in the cockpit area just to the right of the pilot's control column. The co pilot's windshield and the right cockpit window were shattered. as well as the co-pilot's instrument panel. I was not injured but my left leg felt numb from the shock of the explosion in the cockpit.

All crew members with the exception of Lt. Foster and possibly Sgt .Smith, should have been out of the aircraft before the initial hits from the JU-88 were received. The landing gear on the B-17 had been placed down after the bail-out order was given in the mistaken belief that the aircraft would not be fired

on when it gave the wheels down signal and it became obvious that the crew was abandoning the aircraft. My first action was to retract the gear. I glanced to the left and saw the JU-88 pulling up into position just above and behind the left wing of our aircraft- possibly positioning for gunfire into the left cockpit. I immediately made a sharp left turn directly toward the JU-88 and kept the B-17 in a tight spiral turn to the left . I maintained maximum air speed while in this circling dive.

I had no report from Lt. Foster , so had to assume the gunner, Sgt Smith, and possibly the navigator were still aboard and could not bail out. I was flying at 18,000 ft. when the Ju-88 struck and the spiral dive was started. I could see a small postage -sized clearing of land in the middle of what appeared to be a dense forest . I decided on a forced “crash” landing. #1 engine was still on fire, but I could see only white smoke - no flames. I kept the air speed above 300 mph. until level-off about 200 feet above the ground. The descent had been so rapid the windshield and pilot’s side window were frosted over. I opened the side window as I flew over the small clearing. The airspeed was still high, 240 mph. I saw Lt. Bill Runner on the ground, at the edge of the clearing, wildly waving his arms as the aircraft went by. I made a tight circle to the right as I had full visibility from the shattered windshield and co-pilot side window. I could not maintain airspeed on one engine for any extended period. I completed the low-level circling maneuver, leveling off for the final approach. The airspeed had slowed to 150 - I slapped the flap lever down and flew flat for a fairly high-speed, gear-up landing. I went through a small wire fence - stopping just short of a larger wooden-wire fence and a ditch. I had “unbuckled” to take control of the aircraft from Lt Johnson and from that period on had been so occupied with the recovery and control of the aircraft that I had no opportunity to get “strapped” back in. I had made the crash-landing without benefit of the seat belt and shoulder harness.

With the bomb bay doors open, all of the sounds of an aircraft making a belly landing were amplified. The first sound I became aware of after the aircraft came to a stop was the pounding of my own heart. I glanced out to the left wing - the fire in #1 engine had been in the lower part of the nacelle - there was some smoke, but no visible fire. The landing had evidently smothered the flames. I had cut the ignition switches just before touchdown. I glanced around the cockpit and remembered to push in the IFF destroyer buttons.

I called out Foster’s (navigator) and Smith’s names as I scrambled through the aircraft to the rear entrance. There was no response - and there was no one in the area of the main fuselage. Once outside the aircraft I checked the tail-gunners position and it was also vacant, I then assumed that all crew members had bailed out.

I initially departed the immediate vicinity of the B-17, fearing the JU -88 might strafe the downed aircraft. Seeking cover I ran across the field to a hedge growth at the edge of the clearing. A few minutes after taking cover, the JU-88 flying at low altitude, flew directly overhead and started a climb to altitude. With departure of the JU-88 from the area and no one in sight, I returned to the aircraft, intending to destroy the B-17 by firing a flare into the #3 engine nacelle where fuel was still flowing down the wing-root. I found the flares but could not find the flare-pistol. I found the canister designed to destroy an aircraft, but I could not get the firing mechanism to work. While thus engaged I was startled to hear voices outside the aircraft. I immediately leaped out of the rear exit and began to run. I heard a sharp order to “Halt”, glanced over my shoulder and saw a man holding a rifle that was pointed right at me. I stopped running, raised my arms and walked back to the aircraft. Two ME-109’s flew over, dipping their wings. In front and to the right of the grounded B-17 was a “36” Ford. Incredibly, two Germans in civilian clothes, had driven directly on the field - apparently coming from a small village located at the south edge of the clearing - providing me with only 10 or 15 minutes of freedom after the crash landing.

I was held at the aircraft for a short period and during that time one of the German's discovered Sgt Smith's body behind the bulkhead located aft of the main entrance door. This area is not visible from the main fuselage interior and was an area, that in my haste, I had not searched. Sgt. Smith had evidently left his gun position and had crawled forward toward the main fuselage interior. The Germans would not let me view his body. I was told he had been killed by massive wounds in his chest. He could have been wounded during the fighter attacks, but more than likely, in my opinion, he was killed by gunfire from the JU-88. The radio operator, S/Sgt. Kuhlman, reported that Sgt Smith was unconscious during the time frame that crew members were complying with my bail-out order and he, Kuhlman, stated he saw no wounds or other indications that Smith had been hit by gunfire. I will always believe he was initially suffering from anoxia and would have survived had it not been for our last encounter with the JU-88. I was taken from the vicinity of the aircraft before Sgt Claud Smith's body was removed.

The events immediately following capture on 14 Oct. 1943 are still vividly clear; however, it is sufficient to state that all crew members with the exception of the navigator, Lt. Foster, were captured - most within hours of the bailout. The radio operator, S/Sgt Kuhlman, received the only injury - a broken shoulder. The bombardier, Lt. Runner, delayed parachute opening and was on the ground waving to me when I made the first pass over the area where I crash-landed. The crew of the Ju-88 sighted him and fired at him. He was knocked to the ground by the force of an explosion from a 20mm cannon shell . A shell fragment from the JU-88's gunfire entered his shoe and lodged under his big toe. He took cover in a wooded area and was free for 2 days before being captured. The navigator, Glen Foster, relates that he was initially captured after bail-out, but was able to "subdue" his two captors, get in touch with the underground (French Resistance) and with assistance from the underground make his way to Switzerland. In Switzerland he was granted asylum as an "escaped POW". When American forces reached the Swiss border in September 44, he was allowed to leave. He was in in London for a month of debriefing before returning to the United States.

Although not held in the same prison camp as the officers, all imprisoned enlisted members of my crew survived and were released at the end of World War II - the exception was the radio operator who did not receive timely or proper medical treatment for his broken shoulder and he was subsequently hospitalized during his days as a captive. S/Sgt Kuhlman's medical condition made it possible for him to eventually - through the Red Cross - be exchanged as a wounded prisoner. He was held prisoner less than a year.

The three officers , after undergoing an initial interrogation period of solitary confinement in a "Dulag Luft" at Frankfort, Germany, were sent to the prison camp southeast of Berlin, Stalag Luft III.

I was assigned , as was my copilot, LT. Joe Johnson, to Room 15, Block 36 in the South Compound. Eight prisoners occupied Room 15 at that time - the additional two brought the total to ten and before the forced evacuation of Stalag Luft III in late January of 1945, total room occupancy was fourteen. Lt Bill Runner was in the same Compound but was assigned to another block .Assigned to a room adjacent to room 15 was Lt. Glenn Oster who was later to participate in an escape attempt with me.

When the forced march from Stalag Luft III was ordered on the 27th of January, 1945, the undersigned was in solitary confinement - serving a sentence as punishment for an escape attempt on 15 January, 1945. That escape was the first of four.

The escapes are another story.

Robert M. Slane

Col. USAF (Ret)

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