

CARL CLARK AND THE UNFORGETTABLE TAKEOFF

Written by John W. Howland

On June 3, 1944, Carl Clark was a 1st Lt. pilot flying a Pathfinder B-17 bomber out Bassingbourn, England with the 91st Bomb Group. Carl was nearing the end of his 30 mission tour of duty. Pathfinder crews were normally alerted six to twelve hours prior to a mission and required to fly to the Group they were scheduled to lead. Carl and his crew received their wake-up call at 1:30 A.M. Other men who played an important part in this flight were: Bayard Nelson, Co-Pilot; Clem Obler, Navigator; Frank Cowan, Bombardier; John Spierling, H2X Radar Operator; Joseph Schwartz, Engineer Top Turret Gunner; Jim Calderaro, Radio Operator; and gunners Harold Hepfinger, Charles Harrington and Johnnie Nosal. Also aboard that fateful evening was the Ground Crew Chief, Marvin Nichols.

Prior to takeoff Carl and Clem discussed heading, distance and flight time to the 398th Bomb Group at Nutthampstead. They were scheduled to lead this recently activated Group in a raid on coastal gun batteries in the Pas de Calais area of France. The weather was typically English. A light rain was falling and the ceiling was approximately five hundred feet. About two o'clock in the morning, Carl checked his engines. The tower cleared him for takeoff. Under war zone rules, pilots were not allowed to use landing lights for the takeoff run. The runway lights were capped to reduce overhead visibility. The twin row of dim lights ahead of him were the only guidelines for takeoff. As usual, Carl locked his brakes, revved up the engines to takeoff power and then released the brakes. The B-17 surged forward and picked up speed rapidly. As soon as he reached flying speed, Carl pulled back on the control column and lifted his lightly loaded plane into the air.

A few minutes before Carl started his takeoff, an armorer was on his way to load a plane with bombs. He was driving a bomb loading truck towing two low profile trailers. These trailers carried a dozen five hundred pound bombs. He decided to leave the perimeter and take an unauthorized shortcut down the runway. When he tried to make a sharp turn at a runway intersection, the truck engine stalled and he could not get it started again. About that time he heard the engines of Carl's plane and saw the plane approaching. He abandoned his truck and took off running.

Neither Carl nor any member of the crew saw the blacked out truck and trailers before the impact. It felt like they had crashed into a stone wall. The hydraulic system exploded like a cannon shot and red hydraulic fluid sprayed the interior of the cockpit at very high pressure. Miraculously, the plane continued flying and Carl retained control of the aircraft; but they were struggling to maintain airspeed and stay in the air. Unbelievably fierce vibration had ruptured a line in the hydraulic system located just behind the Co-Pilot. The windows, instrument panel and the entire cockpit were covered with hydraulic fluid. Without instruments, there was no hope. Willing hands of the co-pilot and engineer sped into action trying to wipe the goo from the artificial horizon so Carl could fly the plane. But their efforts were in vain. Vibration made it impossible to read the instruments, even when wiped clean.

Carl had no way of knowing the right landing gear and propeller of the inboard No. 3 engine had tangled with the steel I beam on the truck bed. Two feet from one propeller blade was missing throwing the engine horribly out of balance. Although less than one minute had passed since the impact, Carl realized time was running out. He could not fly by the seat of pants in pitch darkness forever. They were close to the ground and any misstep would be fatal. He had a gut feeling the No.3 engine (inboard right) was the engine causing the horrendous vibration. But he could not verify it by visual inspection or through instruments. He fully realized a mistake would have fatal consequences. Gingerly he eased

back on power to the No. 3 engine. The vibration lessened. Again he reduced power to Number 3, and again vibration diminished. The instrument panel came into focus. Confident he had found the culprit; he feathered the prop and killed the No. 3 engine while eager hands finished cleaning up the instrument panel. Carl gained visual access to all his instruments. The immediate crisis was over and he climbed for altitude on the fully functional three remaining engines. He reported to the base by radio that "he had hit something on the runway, lost an engine, and the cockpit was smeared with red hydraulic fluid. All on board were safe." He then asked, "What did we run into?" The tower reported, "We don't know right now, but we'll sure find out." The base commander was then notified of the accident. He drove to the Control Tower and immediately dispatched a second PFF crew to the 398th BG at Nutthampstead.

Shortly before 2:30 A.M. an orderly awakened me. It was the same orderly who had awakened my roommate and Navigator colleague Clem Obler about an hour earlier. "Lt. Howland", he called. "Get up! Lt. Obler and his crew crashed on takeoff and you will have to fly his mission." In an emotional outburst brought on by gut-tearing apprehension I yelled at the orderly, "What happened? Tell me what happened!"

The excited orderly replied, "A bomb truck and trailer stalled in the center of the runway while they were taking off. They barely got the plane in the air before they collided. Number three engine was knocked out; but they managed to stay airborne."

Greatly relieved to hear that Carl Clark was able to get the plane into the air, I reached for my clothes and started dressing. I was still worried about Clem who, like me, always rides in the nose of the ship at takeoff. By the time I reached the flight line, Clark had radioed back that all on board were safe. My pilot, Jim Tyson, and I desperately wanted to stay in Bassingbourn and see our friends down safely. However, the mission to Pas de Calais was our first priority of business. We took off in a drizzling rain bound for the 398th Bomb Group at Nutthampstead shortly before 0300 hours. Meantime, Col. Henry Terry took charge of recovery operations working directly with Carl Clark. He instructed Carl to circle within radio range while they evaluated damage to the aircraft and planned a course of action. For Carl, it was comforting to see the clear air and star-filled sky above the layer of solid clouds. However, comfort gave way to dismay when he was ordered to descend through the clouds and make an overflight of the tower. An evaluation of damage to the aircraft was made using a powerful searchlight. Ground observers could see the broken drag link and the dangling, useless right undercarriage. Carl was instructed to climb above the clouds and continue circling within range of the tower radio.

"Evening Folks - How Y'all" was the name of Clark's PFF bomber. The phrase was a trademark of the popular bandleader Kay Kyser and assigned by a nephew of Kyser who first flew the airplane. Marvin Nichols was the 324th Bomb Squadron Ground Crew Chief responsible for maintaining "Evening Folks - How Y'all" in tip-top flying condition. Normally, Marvin did not fly with a combat crew; but this mission was different. Carl Clark was scheduled to fly to the recently activated 398th Bomb Group at Nutthampstead where his aircraft was to be loaded with bombs. Fuses would then be installed. Marvin Nichols didn't leave anything to chance regarding his plane and decided to go along with Carl and double check performance of the Nutthampstead ground crew. He would personally run a final check on the engines prior to takeoff for the mission. Of course, Marvin had his tool kit on board.

Carl had done a masterful job getting the plane into the air. When they were once again above the clouds and relatively safe, the second key player in this drama went into action. Marvin determined severe vibration had ruptured a line in the hydraulic system. The broken line was directly behind the co-pilot's seat. A replacement section might make the system functional again. This would require careful cutting, shaping and fitting. However, Marvin was optimistic. He told Carl there was a fairly good chance the hydraulic brakes in the left main landing gear could be restored. Carl relayed this

information back to base by radio.

Under normal conditions a crew flying a damaged B-17 would be instructed to put it on auto pilot, head out over the North Sea, and bail out before leaving the coast of England. However, Carl's plane was special. His was a Pathfinder Force plane and contained one of the precious H2X radar systems so desperately needed at that time. Carl reported Marvin's observation, and the decision was made. Carl was ordered to fly around for approximately nine hours to use up all excess gasoline while Marvin attempted to restore the braking system for the left main landing gear. Providing Marvin's efforts were successful, Carl would then come in for a one-wheel landing. The landing would require full use of the left brake to slow the plane down after landing. This would cause the plane to veer to the left. However, the drag link was broken and the useless right landing gear was dangling. All concerned hoped it would provide some braking action as it tore up the landscape; but no one involved had ever used a torn-up landing gear as a brake. There was some concern that the landing gear struts would "dig-in" and cause a devastating high-speed ground loop. Indeed, there were many unknowns. All agreed that after touchdown, Carl would have to perform a delicate balance act requiring:

1. Application of hydraulic braking power in the left wheel to slow down.
2. Application of power to the No. 4 engine (outboard right) this would provide added right-side thrust to counteract drag of the damaged right landing gear. The increased flow of air over the right wing and aileron would also provide additional lift and improve the effectiveness of aileron control.
3. Judicious application of left aileron to keep the right wing high. This would prevent the damaged landing gear from "digging-in" and causing a disastrous high-speed ground loop. However, it was hoped that braking effect of the dangling and skidding right gear would help offset and counteract hydraulic braking with the left main landing gear.

It was now up to Marvin Nichols. If he could not restore hydraulic braking power, they would have to abandon the aircraft. A groundloop at 85 to 90 mph could be deadly. Marvin went to work with his wonderful bag of tools. He successfully fitted a replacement section using the hydraulic fittings and tools he had brought on board. About 8 o'clock in the morning he advised Carl, "I think we have brakes in that left wheel." Carl pressed the toe brake and agreed it felt normal; but he was puzzled. "Marvin," he said, "I can understand you having spare fittings and tools to repair the hydraulic lines. But how did you come up with enough hydraulic fluid to replace that which was sprayed all over the cockpit?" Marvin merely smiled and said, "The crew provided enough urine to fill the hydraulic tank." Carl laughed and said; "Will it work?" Marvin nodded his head in agreement and said, "Of Course. Just don't fly so high that it cools off and freezes."

It was almost eleven o'clock in the morning. They had been flying nine hours. Carl gave all crewmembers the option of bailing out over the base or staying with the plane for a one-wheel crash landing. However, the date was June 3rd and Invasion Fever was in the air. One day earlier base personnel were ordered to wear their sidearms in case of pre-emptive strikes by German paratroopers. Parachuting unannounced through the clouds into an airbase full of "gun-toting, trigger happy flyboys" could be extremely hazardous to your health. All crewmembers decided it was much safer to stay with the plane.

A light rain was falling as Carl made his final approach for the landing. He lined up so the left wheel rolled on the edge of the runway while the useless right undercarriage dangled over the grassy field. The right wing was held high at the moment of touchdown. Carl reduced power and the plane started to slow. A touch of the toe brake indicated he indeed had stopping power in the left wheel and the plane tended to veer to the left. Carefully, Carl lowered the right wing and felt drag as the damaged gear tore

up the grassy tarmac. He killed all power to the left side engines (Nos. 1 and 2). Judiciously, Carl applied power through the No. 4 (outboard right) engine to provide thrust, airflow and additional lift over the right wing and aileron.

Power applied to the No. 4 engine proved to be the critical factor in this emergency landing. There was so much right-side drag; Carl was able to apply full braking power in the left wheel. The severe braking effect of the damaged right undercarriage was counteracted by thrust power applied through the No. 4 engine. Aileron control kept the right wing from dropping and causing a ground loop at high speed. As the plane continued to decelerate, airflow over the wing and rudder diminished. Carl continued the delicate balance act of braking with the left wheel, applying power through the No. 4 engine, and plowing the infield with the right landing gear. Ultimately, they slowed to approximately 45 MPH. At that relatively slow speed, even with full left aileron, the right wing dropped. The badly abused right landing gear pulled loose and sheared off half of the right horizontal stabilizer. But they were done with flying. Carl killed power to the No. 4 engine and the plane did a gentle, non-destructive ground loop onto the grassy tarmac. No one on board was injured. The valuable H2X radar was undamaged.

Carl and the crew were then greeted by Col. Henry Terry, Commanding Officer of the 91st Bomb Group. Carl was promoted from 1st Lt. to Captain on the spot and later awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his performance. He was also ordered back into action. The following day he and his crew were directed to lead a 1st Combat Wing attack on German targets in the Pas de Calais area of France. Evidently there was some high-level concern about the trauma associated with their narrow escape. My PFF crew (Jim Tyson pilot) was sent along to fly as deputy lead for our close friends and associates. They did a first rate job leading our attack on coastal defenses in the Pas de Calais area. Two days later, on D-Day, June 6, 1944, Carl Clark led a Group of 18 bombers in a successful visual attack on an enemy Airport at St.Lo. My crew led a separate Group of eighteen bombers making a "through the clouds" attack on Gold Beach coastal batteries north of Bayeaux, France. Within one month both crews had finished their 30-mission tour of duty and were on the way back to the United States.

More than fifty years passed. Carl Clark and Marvin Nichols went their separate ways. Neither man forgot the miraculous takeoff; but time dimmed some of the details including the names of the principals. Marvin read a brief account of a truck-plane crash that occurred at Bassingbourn in a book review of "The Class of '43" by John W. Howland. The brief and sketchy details contained in the review convinced Marvin it might be the memorable flight he had survived. He ordered the book and his suspicions were verified. Marvin Nichols then contacted the author and Howland gave him the address and telephone number of Carl Clark. Marvin called Carl Clark immediately and they talked for more than two hours in a reunion that was highly emotional for each man.

In 1994 and 1995 Carl occasionally flew the B-17 "NINE O NINE" restored by the Collings Foundation of Stowe, Massachusetts. When scheduled to make a flight in the Orlando, Florida area, Carl realized that Marvin Nichols' home in Deltona, Florida was just a few miles away. Directors of the Collings Foundation urged Carl to contact his old friend. Carl phoned Marvin and offered to take him on another, hopefully less exciting ride in the restored B-17. Regretfully, Marvin had to decline because of health reasons. However, enthusiasm for the long overdue reunion was building. At the urging of Chief Pilot in Command, John Rising and the Collings Foundation's representative in Florida, Paul Vasconi, Carl was asked to proceed. As Carl put it, he decided, "If Muhammad couldn't go to the mountain, he'd take the mountain to him." Arrangements were made with Marvin to expect an overflight of his home at a certain time. Friends and family provided a mattress cover to wave indicating his location, and a reporter was on hand to record the event. Carl Clark arrived on schedule and these two wartime associates had a glorious and memorable air to ground reunion.

Later, while talking to friends and reporters Carl remarked, "I have told the story of that wild takeoff a hundred times and more. Marvin Nichols always got top billing in these accounts. He's the one who put that plane back together in the air so I could bring it in safely and under control for a crash landing. Perhaps it was fate; but I was lucky to have the best mechanic in the 8th Air Force flying with me that eventful night." Marvin Nichols is a very modest person. His only comment was, "I've made rougher landings on commercial airlines than the one made by Carl in that banged-up B-17."

More than one million men and women were trained by the Army Air Corps during World War II. They became adept at many new trades as they developed into pilots, celestial navigators, bombardiers, radio operators, mechanics, gunners, and armorers. etc. These were primarily young people in their late teens and early twenties. Carl Clark and Marvin Nichols were members of this group. Like most of their compatriots, they learned their craft and did it well. These people represent the "Winners". The price of victory was high. But it was young people like Carl Clark and Marvin Nichols who helped secure it. In times of stress they performed like experienced veterans twice their age. The United States of America was lucky to have "Winners" on our team like Carl Clark and Marvin Nichols."

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