WHERE DID YOU COME FROM?

Written by Mike Banta

RMY A/C 936, IDENTIFY YOURSELF

February 19, 1994, on my eighteenth mission, I was hit in the right hand by a piece of flack. After landing, they took me to the hospital where the doctor took stitches in my hand and then took me off of flying status till my hand healed to the point where I could use my hand in flying.

Since the injury did not confine me to the hospital but prevented me from flying, they gave our crew a week's flack leave. This meant that we were free to go anywhere in Great Britain. We took a train to Aberdeen at the furthermost northern tip of Scotland, as far as we could get from the war, and we had a marvelous week's vacation from the terror of flying combat missions.

Upon our return, my hand still had not healed and the doctor kept me off of flying status while the rest of the crew started flying missions filling in on other crews where one of its members was unable to fly. On March 10, my hand had healed to the point where I was again put on flying duty.

During the nineteen days I was not on flying duty they assigned our B-17, Yankee Gal, to another crew. I was told that they did this because they were assigning us a new plane that had flown only one mission as we were now a seasoned crew and that Yankee Gal, which had completed many missions had been assigned to a new crew that had just arrived on base.

This sounded like our crew was receiving a great honor. We were told that since this was a new B-17 that we would have the privilege of naming it. I was told that the name and picture would be painted on the aircraft next time it had to be taken to the hangar. The crew brought up name after name but Ray, the copilot and I, being from California favored "Sunkist Miss," from the song "California, Here I Come." The debate raged on but to no effect, because after test flying the B-17G prior to flying it in combat, Ray and I flatly decided we did not want this aircraft.

On the test flight the number four-engine propeller ran away. This meant the mechanism for controlling the pitch of the propeller was not working when at full military power which is the power setting used for take off. On take off the propeller pitch control did not work and the RPM of the propeller and engine increased till it exceeded the red line on the instrument gage. We had to reduce the power of that engine or it would tear apart. Thus, it was almost like taking off with three engines, which was no problem on a test flight but could be very dangerous with a full bomb load.

At cruising power, the prop pitch regulator worked reasonably well though it had to be watched carefully. Next, the plane was vibrating so badly that the sliding window next to the pilot seat kept sliding open. I had to keep sliding it closed with my left hand while flying the plane with my right hand. This left no hand for the throttles and other controls which I found quite unacceptable.

We tried to trim up the ship with the trim tabs but they made little difference in the attitude of the ship no matter which way we turned them. The ship simply wouldn't trim up no matter how much Ray and I tried.

Next, we heard a tearing of metal and then a whoosh from the Bombardier - Navigator compartment below and in front of us. This was followed by an excited announcement from the navigator that the hatch through which the pilot, copilot, navigator and bombardier enter the aircraft had torn away and left nothing but a gaping hole. Many other smaller problems were reported from other positions on the

plane.

When we landed A/C 936, I loudly proclaimed to the crew chief that I did not want A/C 936 and please return Yankee Gal to our crew. The crew chief promised to fix every thing we had written up on the flight sheet but he said, as I knew, that he had nothing to do with assigning aircraft.

I went to the ready room for the 324th Bomb Group and spoke to the Major, telling him that A/C 936 was a piece of crap and we wanted Yankee Gal back.

"They told me that I was honored by being given this aircraft with only one mission on it that I could name as my own ship." I said, "but what has happened to Boeing that the quality of the aircraft they are now building had dropped so low?"

The major said that they could not reverse the assignments but that they would guarantee to repair all the faults in the aircraft prior to our first combat mission in A/C 936. He again reminded me of how lucky I was to be able to name my own B-17. I left the meeting naively believing him.

March 24, 1945, our crew flew our first mission in A/C 936. I was assured by the crew chief that the prop control on # four engine had been fixed and was working properly and that he had found the problem with the trimming mechanism so that we should have no problem trimming the aircraft.

On take off for that day's mission, with a full bomb load, the propeller on engine # 4 again ran away with the RPM again going out of sight. I again had to cut the power on that engine, a hazardous measure with the heavy loading of bombs plus a full load of fuel. The aircraft was hard to trim and Ray and I fought all day to hold close formation. When we returned from the mission, I called the crew chief over and told him of the danger in which he had put our crew. He promised to change every part of the prop pitch assembly system, which was a closed system, before our next mission.

Our next mission in our "new" B-17G, A/C 936, was on March 28, to an aero engine factory at Spandau. The crew chief said he had replaced every part of the prop pitch system and, therefore we should have no problem. Once again, #4 propeller ran away at maximum power used during take off but we had little difficulty lifting the aircraft into the air well prior to the end of the runway. We were fit to be tied. It seemed as if no one cared that we were flying a disaster waiting to happen. We were flying as right wingman to the Squadron lead ship and on the way into the target the group leader got slightly off course and inadvertently flew us over a known flack area. Our squadron was flying high squadron in the group formation and we received accurate and tracking flack as we unnecessarily flew over this known flack area on our way to the target. The squadron leader and the aircraft flying of his right wing received heavy flack damage. Captain Gaines, the squadron leader had two engines shot out while Lt. Smith on his right wing, lost one engine. We were the only plane in the element to receive only light battle damage. This was fortunate as we already had one engine acting up.

With the Squadron lead flying on only two engines, his aircraft was losing altitude and with the primary target still many miles away, he decided to attack a secondary target, the Stendal marshaling yards.

We were obviously anxious and irritated by the accurate flack area that the group leader had unnecessarily flown us over and also at being unable to attack our primary target. Thus, when we landed, I was in an especially irritated mood and lit into the crew chief for not correcting the problem with the prop control.

"Take the whole engine and propeller off and replace them." I demanded.

"Sir," he said, "there is nothing more in this world that I would rather do, but I asked and the brass say that we can't throw away a perfectly good engine. I've replaced everything in the prop control system and I don't know what more I can do."

"If that prop runs away on our next mission," I told the crew chief, "I will assure you that it won't be a perfectly good engine when we return to the base."

Our next mission was to Bremen on March 30th; to strike the submarine and shipbuilding yards. Since the sub pens were made of heavy reinforced concrete, we carried a maximum bomb load of thousand pound delayed action bombs. We were leading the rear element that day. Again on take off, #4 prop ran away and this time we barely had enough runway to lift off with a full load of gasoline and the extra heavy bomb load. This engine had to go, I determined. The engine blew about half way to Bremen.

"Feather #4." I called to Ray on the intercom.

Ray reached out and hit the feathering button on the instrument panel and turned off the ignition and gasoline. The propeller continued windmilling and black oil poured from the rear of the engine. The prop control mechanism not only wouldn't control the RPM on take off, but it was also incapable of feathering the prop. With the prop windmilling instead of feathering, the wind resistance of the unfeathered prop took one of the remaining engines to just push the dead engine through the air. It was like flying on two engines and with an extra heavy bomb load, our air speed dropped and we were unable to hold our altitude.

I called to our two wingmen and released them to catch up with the formation. I then called Major Klette, our Squadron commander and reported the mechanical difficulties and that we would be only able to hold an altitude of about seven thousand feet with the heavy bomb load. The Group was attacking at an altitude of twenty-five thousand feet. Since we had no bombsight, I informed him, we were aborting the mission which meant we were turning around and heading home. At this time we were flying all alone without any protective formation, a position in which the German fighters loved to catch a B-17.

Unbelievably, he told me to continue to the target, find the drifting smoke from a smoke marker bomb and drop my bombs on that. Bremen was very heavily protected by antiaircraft batteries. At seven thousand feet we would be sitting ducks. If the antiaircraft didn't get us, the German fighters would be waiting for a stricken B-17 flying alone miles into Germany with one engine out and windmilling. It became abundantly clear to me that the Major intended to use us as a decoy to bring up the German fighters who would be looking for a B-17 flying alone with one engine out. This would permit our little friends to make some kills.

By this time we had fallen far enough behind the Group that radio transmission was breaking up and it was hard to decipher our transmissions to each other. It was obvious that he was having trouble understanding what I was saying and he had no idea of what I could understand of what he was saying to me. I thought a moment and realized that to drop bombs on smoke markers from bombs dropped ten or fifteen minutes before would only plow up some German farmers sauerkraut patch. Yet our chances of surviving this desperate and foolish attack were extremely poor. Our aborting the mission was not impairing the rest of the group as our B-17 had been removed from the squadron because of mechanical failure which incidentally could have been avoided if someone had not been so stingy with new engines.

"I can't hear you clearly." I radioed to the Major. "Did you say return to base? The reception is so poor that I can't make out what you're saying."

"No!" he shouted. "I said . . . " and his voice became inaudible.

"Roger," I said, "I'm following your advice and returning to base."

When we reached the channel, we were holding our altitude at about seven thousand feet. We opened the bomb bay doors and released our unarmed bombs over the channel. I radioed the base for permission to come straight in for a landing. They cleared me for a straight in approach. We had a smooth landing with no difficulties and taxied to our assigned revetment.

The crew chief was waiting for us and came over to see his B-17 covered with oil and dripping all over the tarmac. "Well," he said I see you got rid of the engine. The plane will be going into the hanger for major repairs. Would you like to have the name you've chosen and a pretty girl painted on the nose? This is your chance to have the artist do the art work."

"Hell no!" I said, "I'm still trying to get rid of this dog. If I name it, it's mine for keeps." We never did get rid of A/C 936 and flew it for most of our remaining missions. After the engine and propeller were replaced, we never again had a problem with the prop running away on take off. We even got used to the ugly way it flew. I'd like to tell you that the ugly duckling grew up to be a swan but that would be a lie. We did however learn to love the ugly duckling though not enough to name it.

There was no way that they were going to tell me what had happened to A/C 936 prior to it being assigned to me. For fifty years I wondered and wondered. At the fiftieth reunion of the 91st Bomb Group Memorial association at Oklahoma City, I met Dale Darling (no relation to our copilot) who served as radio operator on the Laws crew. He has spent his last few years photocopying the records of the group at the Army Archives. At my request, he researched the history of Army A/C 936 and the following documents tell of the dirty trick those bastards pulled on me when they gave me that brand new B-17G with only one mission on it.

From a letter to Dale Darling, November 13, 1994:

My request concerns the information on what happened to A/C 936, DF-Z, of the 324th Bomb Squadron prior to its being assigned to me and my crew. From Ray Bowden's book, I can determine it was assigned to the 324th right after A/C 911, Bull Session, was assigned to the 323rd on November 5, 1944.

A/C 936 must have received major battle damage after November 12th when I flew my first check out mission. In checking the information you sent me, I find 926 did not fly on any of the missions I flew until it was assigned to me just prior to my March 24th mission.

I would be eternally grateful if you can find the time to check the mission critique sheets from November 5, 1944 through December 12, 1944 to see if A/C 936 flew any missions and, if so, any evidence of damage received. The mystery of what happened to A/C 936 between when it arrived on base in November or December 1944 and March 1955 when it was assigned to me is one I am most anxious to solve.

Your buddy in the 324th,

(His answer said that 936 had been shot down on it's first mission but made a forced landing in allied occupied France. It was flown back to Bassingbourn and declared salvage. After six months as a hanger queen it was resurrected from parts of several hanger queens and given to me.)

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