

*Remembrance*

MISSION - 10 January, 1945 *(by Al Bertin)*

You might say that this mission had, for our crew, its beginning on the 9th. On that morning we were awaiting to start engines when the air raid warning sounded and all the lights went out. In the scramble in the pitch dark to take shelter our radio operator (Mathis) ran into a maintenance stand and knocked out 2 or 3 of his front teeth. After the raid, which did little or no damage, the back up crew took our place so the R/O could get medical treatment. Thus we were ensured a place on next day's mission which was a group effort to Grace Park Aerodrome outside of Manila, a round trip of a bit more than 2,000 nautical miles and requiring the use of a bomb bay tank for extra fuel. Take off was at 0300 and uneventful in that we lifted off with an overloaded airplane and no run way to spare. The route was from Morotai to Zamboanga to the rendezvous point at the southern tip of Mindoro where the group formed up and headed due north for the I.P. As navigator I was located just behind the bulkhead to the rear of the pilot's seat. I don't recall if there was a navigation table there but I always used this area and the pilot's instruments if the navigation position was in the nose since other than an astro compass everything I needed was on the pilot's panel. Our entire crew was aboard for this our second mission except for the bombardier <sup>BEN WALSH</sup> who was bumped to make room for another bombardier flying his last mission. The crew included the following:

Winston W. Brown	Pilot
John C. Roienburg	Co-Pilot
Alfred Bertin	Navigator
Alfred R. St John, Jr.	Bombardier
Sherwood P. Jones	Engineer
William R. Mathis	Radio Operator
James G. Moody	Ball Turret
Roy L. Birkel	Nose Turret
Royce A. Tasker	Gunner
Vern R. Boles	Tail Turret

Our bombing altitude was at about 14,000 feet and around the target the sky was clear with some scattered clouds below. We started getting flak around the I.P. some of it 120mm and the rest of a lighter variety. I was standing between the pilot and co-pilot watching the flak and noticing the different shapes of the bursts until near the bomb release point when I took my position at the bomb bay door to watch for hang ups and spot the bomb hits. Some ~~to~~ time during all this we must have had a burst under one of the wings as the pilot told me later we did a pretty good wing up from a near miss. After we turned off the target we flew in group formation for ~~xxx~~ about 20 minutes during which time the engineer occupied himself with his fuel pumps and gages, whereupon he came up to the pilot with a worried look and told him the gages were reading lower than they should. (Prior to joining the crew the pilot and engineer had been instructors so were pretty familiar with the vagaries of the B-24 fuel system). After some discussion it was decided one or more of our tanks must have been holed during the near miss and we were losing fuel. The pilot tried to contact the group leader to advise him he was dropping out of formation to fly at a more economical speed and altitude. Power was reduced to 1600 rpm and 27 inches of manifold pressure and our indicated air speed dropped from 155 to 135 miles per hour. Since we were tail end Charlies I don't think anyone noticed when we dropped back and took a direct course for Morotai. As we flew south the clouds began building up courtesy of the Intertropical Front blanketing the southern Philippines and it became undercast with tops up near our flight altitude of about 9,000 feet. During this time there was some discussion about jettisoning equipment to lighten the plane but we didn't want to lose our guns, ammunition or survival gear. I think they also considered dropping the bomb bay tank but decided against it as the tank might not drop cleanly. At this point we fully intended to reach Morotai although the fuel gages continued their decline towards the empty mark.

When we were abeam of Saluan, Cotabato Province in Mindanao it was clear we had no chance of making it back to Morotai but would probably have to ditch near the Talaud Islands which the mission briefing indicated still harbored Japanese troops

and they probably <sup>would</sup> not take kindly to visitors dropping in on them. We also had not been able to contact anyone on the radio to advise them of our circumstances so we turned back and made for Dipolog on the north coast of Mindanao about 40 miles east of Sindangan Bay and no further than the Talaud Islands. According to the Intelligence briefing there were supposed to be Filipino troops in this area. The plan was to head for Sindangan Bay and if fuel permitted, fly up ~~to~~ the coast to Dipolog. Accordingly we started our let down near Margosatubig where I had been lucky to get a glimpse of the ground through a hole in the clouds and thus our exact position as we crossed the coastline. This was fortunate as it allowed us to descend on course and time our rate of descent to arrive a couple of miles out in the bay at an altitude of 500 feet in the event the ceiling proved to be that low. Since Mindanao is mountainous with peaks up to 8,000 feet along our course, our exact position was doubly important. I think we broke out of the clouds <sup>JUST OFF SHORE</sup> at 500 to 800 feet with visibility of a couple of miles. It was now 1500 hours and there was no fuel showing in any of the gages so it was decided to land the plane in a rice paddy while there was still power on all engines. (We found out later that one of the villagers realized the plane was in trouble and came running along the beach waving an American flag in the hopes we would land in the water just off shore but we didn't see him and I don't think a water landing would have appealed due to the possibility of breaking the aircraft's <sup>BACK</sup> ~~bag~~ and killing the people in the back of the airplane). The touch down was perfect and the only indication that we were no longer flying was the intense deceleration as the mud and water gripped the plane, peeled off the bombay doors and tore out the bombay tank. It is probably at this point that there was a woosh of flame from the bombay which swept fore and aft through the plane. The radio operator and four gunners were in the waist section while the officers and engineer were on the flight <sup>DECK</sup>. I was kneeling and braced against the bulkhead behind the pilot and when I felt the wave of heat I glanced behind me and then forward. During this short interval the pilot had opened his window and gotten out whereupon I put my hands in front of me and dove through the same window and landed in about a foot of mud and water. When I looked back the

engineer followed by the bombardier was coming out of the top hatch. They must have been between me & the fuselage during the crash landing and escaped with relatively few burns. The pilot and co-pilot were burned on the right and left sides of their faces respectively, while I had about 30% 2nd and 3rd degree burns on my face, right side and left arm. As soon as we got out our main interest was getting away from the plane in case it exploded which it never did, ~~I think~~ <sup>HOWEVER,</sup> the hydraulic fluid and aluminum skin caught fire and burned most of the fuselage and wings. <sup>EVEN SO</sup> ~~However~~ the villagers were able to salvage some of the guns and ammunition so there must have been little damage to the nose and tail turrets. I was with the pilot slogging our way through the mud when we saw a figure about a hundred yards away running towards. We ducked behind a low dike and I drew and cocked my .45 until he got a bit nearer and we could see he was a Filipino and he called to us to come towards him and led us to a house a short distance away in a grove of palm trees. By this time I was feeling a lot more relaxed and I remember spotting a mirror hanging by the back door and looking at my face as it felt quite warm although no worse than a good case of sunburn. It didn't look too bad; several shades darker than normal with quite a bit of baggy skin and I wouldn't be needing a haircut for a while. When we got inside I took off my shoulder holster and pistol belt with canteen and gave them and the gun to someone then took off my coveralls which brought a lot of skin with it. The pilot who was still with me gave me a shot of morphine and one of the Filipinos cut off my undershirt with a machete. Then we were led to another house nearby which I believe belonged to the village mayor Joaquin Macias where we were to stay. I remember feeling quite tired and glad of a chance to sit in a large wicker chair which was brought in. Someone went out and brought back banana leaves which were wrapped around my burns and allowed me to lean back in the chair. I think at this time the pilot went off to look for the rest of the crew who had been picked up by some of the other villagers and were scattered around the other houses. I must have dozed off and when I came to I remember a girl feeding me some chicken broth although I don't think I was too hungry, and didn't eat it all. I don't remember anything until the next day

Although I was told later that I was pretty cheerful and took part in the conversation. That night a runner was sent to Dipolog, some 60 miles over forest trails, where he arrived early the next morning and told the local Filipino military unit that a U.S. aircraft was down in Sindangan village and the crew members needed medical treatment. The unit commander managed to get a message to Morotai the same day. I don't remember <sup>much</sup> ~~misc~~ about our second day except that someone came in with a bottle of morphine and gave me a shot. He also tried to clean me up by cutting off the loose skin with a pair of scissors but gave it up as a bad job. It was about this time that I learned Moody had died in the crash and had just been buried with a proper burial service. The funeral had been attended by all the villagers and the crew with the exception of Mathis, Tasker and myself. Mathis and Tasker were both badly burned having been in the back of the plane with Moody during the landing as were Boles and Birkef. The last two on the other hand had very minor burns. My next recollection was of mid afternoon when two of the villagers came in and were trying to figure out how to carry me somewhere. I told them I thought I could walk if it wasn't too far and we started off with one on each side supporting me. When we reached the beach I noticed there was a Catalina out in the bay and I was helped into an outrigger canoe here I waited until Mathis and Tasker were brought out and also placed in the canoe. It was the first time I had seen them since the crash and they looked worse than I felt so weren't much interested in conversation. We were paddled out to the Catalina and helped aboard although <sup>it</sup> wasn't too easy as there weren't many places on us to hang on to. Some other members of the crew must also have been brought out but I <sup>can't</sup> ~~can~~ remember who. There was a Filipino military doctor on board who looked us over and gave us a shot of morphine. By this time it was getting difficult to remember much of what was going on except that we spent the night in the airplane in the Dipolog area and the next morning took off for Morotai. At least four of the crew stayed in Mindanao for a few more days and from what I heard later had themselves a good time and when they left were given gifts of a monkey, bolo and a few other items of local manufacture. When we arrived at Morotai we were taken by ambulance to the 155th Station Hospital then to the same

surgery where we were treated in turn and when I came out of the anesthetic found myself bandaged from the waist up except for my face and left arm. I don't know why the face was left bare but it was certainly cooler than if it had been all wrapped up. Whatever the doctors did worked extremely well because the bandages weren't touched for about two weeks and when removed showed new skin all over except for a few spots where the burns must have been extra deep. Of course the skin was like tissue paper and is still quite thin to this day, but there are no scars. Mathis and Tasker were later evacuated to the Z.I. for skin grafting and possible reconstruction of their ear on one side. The rest of the crew members were assigned to other crews except for the pilot and me who flew with one and all for about a half dozen missions before being sent to Nadzab as instructors where we completed our missions. Although the pilot tried to keep the seven remaining crew members together and we all wanted it that way this was not to be.