
A Tribute To My Engineer

by

T W Tikey 566th Bomb Group 8th AF

T/Sgt. Ivan S. Roberts was my Flight Engineer on B-24 "Slick Chick," and later in 1944 on our various Pathfinder craft. My crew (those who still correspond) lost track of Ivan after we returned to the States, so we don't know if he's still living. But, I remember him well because we owe our lives to this laid back, extremely loyal, Ozark-talking fellow crewman — even before we flew one combat mission out of England.

In early February 1944, after phase training in Casper, Wyoming and Alamogordo, NM, we embarked to our combat base in Attlebridge, England via the southern route (Herrington, Kansas; West Palm Beach Florida; Trinidad; Belem, Brazil; Fortaleza, Brazil; Dakar, Senegal; Marrakech, Morocco, and Prestwick, Scotland). This narrative essentially covers our leg from Fortaleza, some 2200 plus miles over the South Atlantic, to Dakar. Aboard that evening were: J.W. Tikey, pilot; Richard Smith, copilot; Henry Tevelin, navigator; Francis Spigelmire, bombardier; Ivan Roberts, flight engineer; Frank Simek, radio operator; Marlow Jovaag, waist gunner; Boyd Condon, ball turret; Bernard Massing, tail gunner; and Frank Bois, waist gunner.

We spent two days in Fortaleza and were confined to the base awaiting better weather conditions. We finally

were told to take off around 10 PM one evening in early February, with the warning that we would hit one of those numerous, huge South Atlantic storms and that the best penetration would be at 9,000 to 11,000 feet. Not to worry, they said !

About midnight we hit it, and it was an extremely vicious one, tossing us around like a feather! We had to go straight through because we didn't have radar then and couldn't skirt around it.

My airplane had a Sperry A-5 autopilot aboard, but since the Altitude Control was "wired" off for technical reasons, I chose not to engage it and flew manually. (Probably a mistake because automatic rudder and aileron control would have helped.) (I later spent 36 years working for Sperry.)

Thunder ! Lightning ! Tremendous wind gusts! Up and down! Spigelmire, my bombardier, was praying like crazy. Weren't we all ! This huge storm lasted two to three hours. But here's the scary part. After about an hour of this buffeting, I noticed the number three engine manifold pressure slowly, dropping from 30 inches.

Here's where Roberts came into the picture, and he started to frantically try to resolve the reason for this ever slow drop on number three. We could never have made it to Dakar from our position on three engines. We would have run out of gas.

The number three manifold pressure was down to 12 inches and I was thinking of feathering, when Roberts, thank God and praise the Lord, found the trouble. He removed the #3 oil dilution fuse and the pressure started a slow rise up to normal. The shaking and super Gs on the plane caused a short in the system. With the benefit of hindsight, the malfunction probably occurred in the #3 oil dilution switch in the cockpit. It was "off" but "shorted" to "on" because of the storm.

There was no reason for Ivan to suspect this trouble, and why he pulled that fuse, God only knows. This was truly a miracle !

Gas was steadily pouring into the #3 engine oil manifold and would have caused an engine failure and/or a fire. The tremendous rains must have helped to curtail a fire.

Specifically, on the B-24 some gas was normally poured into the oil system in small amounts, for cold weather starting. Overdilution causes sludge and carbon to be loosened in the engine, causing oil lines to clog and oil screens

to collapse. A very dangerous condition.

Lt. Pastovich's plane, another crew in the 466th Group on this Dakar leg, lost one engine, then two, and never made it. Immediately upon landing and refueling, we helped search for this plane and absolutely no trace of its disappearance was found.

So, T/Sgt. Ivan S. Roberts, wherever you are, many, thanks for what you accomplished on that dastardly night. You saved our crew—pure and simple.

Truthfully, I can say that this midnight to 3 AM episode in early February 1944 was my most frightening WWII experience. No combat mission compared to it.

Editors Note: For the non technical readers oil dilution was used during cold weather on piston engines only when an extended stay on the ground was anticipated. The oil was diluted with fuel before engine shut down reducing the viscosity facilitating a cold engine start later on..

