
Tales From The internet

A very interesting story

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Not all burning B-24 stories have an unhappy ending.

The following is a reposting of the 90th BG's departure from the continental United States in 1942 to Hawaii. My previous job as Squadron commander was upgraded to lead the group out of California for deployment to a Combat Command.

Upon landing at Hamilton Field, the Group Commander, Col. Mussett and I checked with each pilot to ascertain whether his airplane was functioning all right and if it would be ready to make the flight the next morning at daybreak. It was found that two airplanes had difficulties in their short hop over, due to sabotage, and this put fear in everyone's mind to such an extent that many of the pilots stated they would rather fly their old worn out planes, at least they knew the condition they were in. Some of the other airplanes had developed small mechanical troubles that would have to be corrected before they could make the flight. At this time Colonel Mussett and I decided to split the flight in half and we would take the first half the next morning and would leave the other two experienced officers, Colonel Unruh and Major Bullis, to bring the other half after the necessary repairs had been made.

By this time all the crews were on edge as most of them had never flown over any water larger than the Mississippi. None of the navigators had navigated over water and they were none too confident of their ability. It is doubtful whether any of the Group got much sleep that night.

We were faced with the problem of whether to take off at daybreak or dusk. With a completely trained Group of thoroughly confident navigators and pilots the navigation problem would have been simplified by taking off at night, since celestial navigation is much easier because a fix can be made by any two heavenly bodies. In fact the first flight made by the Flying Fortresses before the War, by an excellently trained Group, was made at night and they landed in Hawaii the following morning. The reason we were forced to make an early morning takeoff was due to the fact we doubted the ability of the newly graduated navigators.

Colonel Mussett and I decided we would fly in the same airplane so that one of us could be checking the navigator's work while the other was flying. Our plan was to take off just at dawn and circle the airdrome until our young fledglings were all in sight of us, then strike out for the long distant Island twenty four hundred miles away. To execute this plan we had a great deal to do beforehand such as briefing our pilots on the takeoff procedure, the altitudes at which we could find favorable winds, emergency procedure in case of engine trouble, radio communications and recognition signals necessary to approach the Island of Hawaii. This, in addition to seeing that all the airplanes were properly serviced and a final check on the engines, carried us late into the night.

When the alarm clock sounded at four a.m., I was still awake and though I had not slept I was too excited to be tired. I jumped

out of bed anxious to be off. After our crowd had eaten breakfast and lunches were packed we had a final briefing of all of our crews that were to make the flight. We decided it would be necessary to top off our fuel tanks since it would cost us approximately fifty gallons of gasoline to warm up our engines and we knew that every drop would be precious if we were running short at the other end. Every crew was dispatched to his airplane and Mussett and I departed for our airplane. In addition to our normal combat crew we carried along our flight Surgeon, Captain Mitchell, as an extra passenger.

Due to a dry cigarette lighter belonging to Captain Mitchell, the flight surgeon, I received one of the most exciting moments of my life. All the crew were at their stations and I was checking my radio to see if I had contact with the tower. The big four thousand gallon gasoline truck was filling all of our tanks, which held thirty one hundred gallons of hundred octane gasoline and filling them to overflowing. All of a sudden the darkness was broken by a flash of light and I heard the screaming of our aerial engineer that the airplane was on fire.

Unless you have been sitting on thirty one hundred gallons of hundred octane gasoline and heard the word "Fire" you can never know the feeling that all of us had. We all made a mad rush to jump out of the bomb-bay doors, flames were coming from the concrete as though it were burning and the flames were filling the expanse in which the bombs were usually stored.

We all dove headlong into the flames which by this time were dying down some as the fire extinguishers had been put into action. This made our escape possible with only a few sines. Once on the outside we saw gas burning under the wings and right up to the nozzle of the large gasoline truck. We all grabbed emergency fire extinguishers and soon put the fire out. As soon as the last flame was extinguished everyone with one accord said, "How in the hell did the fire start?"

Our medical officer with a sheepish expression on his face stepped forward and said in a meek voice, "Sir, I did it with this blasted cigarette lighter. It was dry and I decided to fill it with gasoline dripping off the wing.

"When I opened the lighter, a spark sprang up from the flint and the next thing the wing was on fire." There is one thing to be said for the medical officer, after he had started the fire his reaction time was perfect, since the second after the fire started, he played the fire extinguisher back and forth putting out the blaze. I am sure all of our crew facing this emergency credit him with our lives for his quick thinking. It was indeed a shaky crew that went down to their stations just as the first light of dawn came over the horizon.

The End