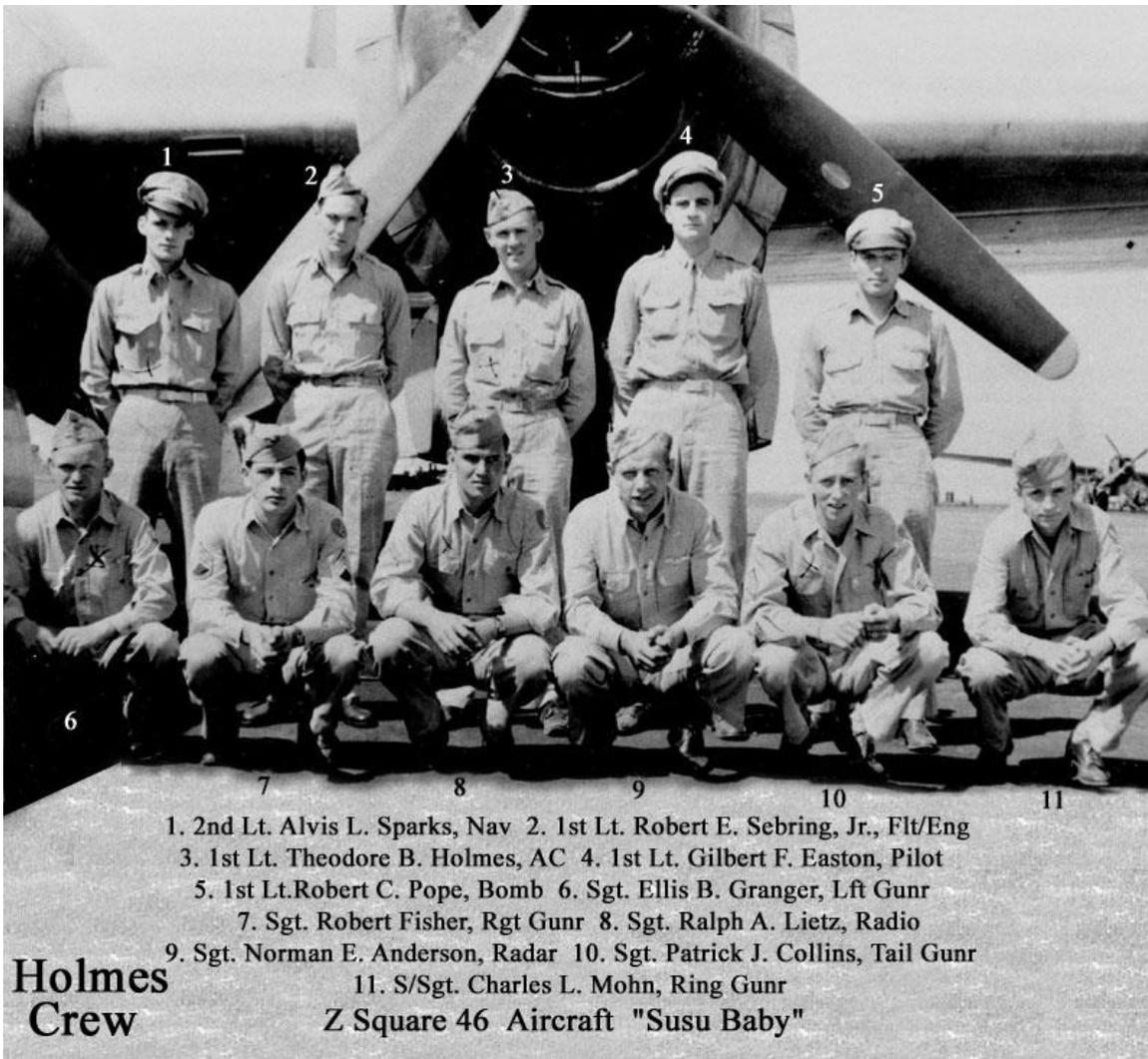


Personal Account

Gilbert Easton

883rd Bomb Squadron
500th Bomb Group

Easton, Gilbert G., (M) 1st Lt., 0-761716. 883rd. B-29 Pilot, 1093. b. 1920. AM, GO 74-I (XXI BC); 2nd Lt to 1st Lt, SO 93-4 (AAF); BS, GO 25-III (500th); BS, GO 33-III (500th); Z Square 46, Su Su Baby, Holmes. Photo, 883rd, Air Crews, Holmes.



LAST MISSION FOR Z SQUARE 46 RECALLED BY GILBERT EASTON

Our take off from Saipan was approximately 17:30 hours on the afternoon of March 7, 1945 to fly one of the nuisance – weather missions over the Japanese mainland of which there were 3 flights each night. I was flying my last mission with crew 354 as I found out later, been assigned as A.C to another crew which I would not care to identify as the aircraft commander of this crew had been demoted.

Major John E. Gay, who also had to “get in” his mission, went as weather observer on this trip. Inevitably, I was given the task of weather observer and Major Gay flew in the co-pilot seat. Perhaps this observer position was erroneously labeled “replacement” on this flight. Major Gay was the operations officer of the 883rd Squadron.

As weather observer, I had very little contact with the engineering, navigation or routing on this mission. Robert Sebring’s analysis of the route and planning seems very accurate as I recall. My brief contacts, while not monitoring the weather, was the period over the Kure Naval Base area. At this time we were briefly caught in a search light and experienced some inaccurate anti-aircraft fire. At about this time, as Sebring, our engineer recalls, the whole crew became aware of the marginal fuel situation and the aircraft was adjusted for minimum fuel consumption.

I continued to send coded weather information until about 0600, 8 March at which time the crew became engrossed in ditching preparations. About 30 minutes prior to ditching I went forward from the navigators station, which I had been using, to talk to Ted Holmes (Air Craft Commander) about ditching and if he would rather have me in the co-pilot’s position during ditching. He at first indicated he would much prefer this, but decided it would be better for me to ditch in the rear with the gunnery crew as there was some apprehensiveness about the ditching procedure. Major Gay offered to give up his seat and ditch with the crew in rear, but both Ted and

I thought I should go because of my familiarity with the crew. At this time I proceeded to the rear through the tunnel and found everyone was almost ready to ditch except for one crewman who seemed obsessed with staying in his gunner's position and had to be firmly urged to his ditching station. Incidentally, this person did not survive the ditching. Within a few minutes we all had our positions with our backs against the rear bulkhead. Robert Fisher, right gunner, was leaning against me between my knees as he was smaller than myself.

Just prior to ditching Ted called on the intercom to prepare for impact and shortly I felt the altitude of the aircraft change as Ted broke his glide. I recall shouting to the crew “here we go” and in a few seconds I heard a coarse rumble which indicated the rear of the plane had touched water. This is the last I remember until I awoke underwater. Looking up I could see a lighter area so I pulled the “rip cord” of the “Mae West” inflation cylinder. It seemed as though I would never surface, so I pulled the second rip cord and popped out of the water. I had swallowed or breathed in a lot of salt water and I was partially choking, so I took a deep breath of air and was hit in the face by a wave. The next thing I recall Collins, the tall gunner, had my head draped over his feet on his one man life raft and was calling for assistance. At some point I reawoked and looked straight into Al Sparks' face and opened eyes as he floated past being supported by Sebring on the edge of a life raft. I could recognize that Al was probably dead at this time. I periodically passed out from this time on. The next thing I recalled, I was on my back in a navy whale boat. As the destroyer crew started to put me in a litter, I heard one of them say, “watch his leg. It's bad”. We were taken top side of the destroyer U.S.S. Hudson and given transfusions which immediately brought me back to life. I spent the remainder of the trip back to Saipan, about 24 hours, in the Captain's cabin, making a thorough mess of it.

I spent about 2 weeks at the field hospital on Saipan and was then flown to Tripler General Hospital on Oahu, later being transferred to Walla Walla Army Hospital. I recovered sufficiently from back and knee injuries to be returned to active duty in August 1945.

On the last leg going across Japan I was very concerned about the gas supply and knew that it was going to be a very close thing. I mentioned this to Ted and Major Gay, but with Major Gay on board there was no way we were going to deviate from the as briefed procedure.

I think that if it had been daylight when we got as far south as Iwo, that we might have been one of the first to land there, but as it was with the battle still going on and no lights that a night landing there without being sure of the conditions, etc., we didn't consider putting in there.

A far as the ditching itself, we had enough warning to prepare somewhat, and were in radio contact with the convey that picked us up. I had removed the escape hatch by my seat and discarded it in the bomb bay. As you remember, my seat was low, so that I sat level with cockpit floor, with my legs extended down beside the nose wheel well and next to the skin of the fuselage. For the ditching I sat pushed over toward the right side of the airplane and Al Sparks sat beside me leaning against the same back rest. After we hit, Al went across my lap, and out the open hatch. I couldn't get out right away because my legs were down in the foot well and I was caught apparently because the fuselage structure had buckled, or the lower turret or the radio racks had come loose and created some damage to me and the airplane so that I was caught for a few moments.

By the time I got loose and got out the front of the airplane was hanging down, and was buoyed up by the empty wing tanks, the airplane having broken in two behind the wing. I got out about 20 feet below the surface, and inflated my Mae West and floated to the surface, bumping into the #3 propeller on the way up. The first one I saw was Al Sparks who was floating vertically, but his head was intermittently awash and he was either unconscious or perhaps already dead. There was also an inflated life raft nearby which apparently had been released and inflated after the impact. I was able to get an arm around Al to hold his head above water, and get to the life raft and hang on to the side of it, although it was impossible to get either Al or myself into the raft. About this time I saw you go floating past on a 1-man raft, and I remember that you looked green

and ghastly. I guess that we all were suffering from shock. I remember that the waves were so high that I only had one sight of you before you were at least one wave away and I lost sight of you. My raft was tethered to the airplane, and I was concerned that it might be pulled under if the plane sank, but the boat from the destroyer arrived shortly after and they pulled Al and I on board. I don't remember seeing anyone else, although Charley Mohn, who I talked to in Orlando, said there were “bodies and blood all over the place” in the boat that took us back to the destroyer.

That's the story of the ditching as I experienced it. I will fill you in more on recent events in a future letter.