

A Birthday Present For This Pathfinder

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A BIRTHDAY PRESENT FOR THIS PATHFINDER

By Jay H. Reichbach

The date was April 14, 1945; it all started on the island of Saipan in the Western Pacific. It happened to be my twenty-second birthday and I was feeling quite good. I was the Pilot of Z Square 23 from the 882nd Squadron, 500th Bomb Group, and at the briefing that day, our aircraft was chosen as a Pathfinder to precede the main bombing force for a night mission to a southern suburb of Tokyo called Kawasaki.

Z Square 23 took off at approximately 1700 hours. We climbed to 1000 feet, maintained that altitude in order to conserve fuel, and made our long lonely way across the Pacific to Japan, about 1500 miles away. When we could finally see the coast ahead we had a decision to make, for as a Pathfinder, our instructions were to bomb only between 5 minutes before midnight to 5 minutes after midnight. If we arrived too early, we were to circle offshore until the time was right to illuminate the target. If we arrived too late to do our job as a Pathfinder we were to join the main force.

By the time we spotted the home islands, we had already climbed to our assigned bombing altitude of approximately 4500 feet. We were early and were getting ready to circle when, to our surprise, bomb flashes lit up the target areas. One or more Pathfinders had bombed early, and it was quite obvious that the Japanese were now expecting us. Fuel was too valuable to waste, so we opted to go in. Sure enough, as soon as we crossed the coastline, the searchlights started probing and we were caught in their glare. Five or six searchlights locked on us and we couldn't shake them. It was unnerving and so bright in the airplane that you literally could read a fine print book without any difficulty. The antiaircraft guns were coordinated with the searchlights and were radar controlled, so we knew that if we were caught in their beams, we were more than likely to be hit. It is an awful sound when shrapnel hits an aircraft, and we heard it that night. Before we had time to think, the enemy had shot out our number four engine and a lot of the underside of the right wing, but we feathered number four and pushed on to the target. As we began our bomb run and opened the bomb bay doors, they hit us again, now shooting out our number three engine and doing further damage to the right wing and landing gear. We feathered number three also, which meant that now we had no engines on the right side; only the two engines on the left side were still operating. While the bomb bay doors were open, all of the gasoline from the damaged wing tanks was getting sucked into the aircraft, and we didn't like that at all. In a couple of seconds we had two inches of gasoline sloshing around in the aft section of the plane. That night nobody had a problem deciding to stop smoking cold turkey. To add to our crisis, the electrical system was damaged and we couldn't use it to communicate. It was a rather harrowing experience, but what do you know when you're only 22? However, there was plenty to keep us busy. We pressed on, dropped our bombs on target, jettisoned everything we could to lighten the aircraft, increased power on the two good engines and headed south to get the hell away from there as fast as we could.

To go back a little, when we salvoed our bombs, six live ones refused to leave us and remained hung in the racks, just to make our night a little more exciting. We closed our bomb bay doors and our bombardier, Dave Green, sweated with the rest of us while he disarmed those six bombs. That success did help make us feel a little better. What made us feel the best, however, was that each additional moment we were able to stay in the air took us further away from Japan, and even if we had to ditch in the Pacific Ocean and take our chance with the sharks, that would be much preferred alternative to going down over the target. Unfortunately, when we tried to utilize the fuel transfer system to save what remaining gasoline there was, we discovered that our fuel transfer pump wouldn't work – it, too, had been damaged. We couldn't save any of the gas that was still pouring out of the right wing. That really hurt, because no airplane can stay in the air long without gasoline, not even a B-29. Stan Breeden, our Flight Engineer, stepped into the bomb bay through the forward pressure door and balanced himself on the catwalk to see if he could fix the fuel transfer pump. He had been out there alone for about ten or fifteen minutes when suddenly we heard a loud “boom”, as if we had taken another direct hit. The plane shook violently. Before we could check out what had happened, our Navigator, Clint Cator, looked into the bomb bays, saw that the bomb doors had fallen open, and shouted over the intercom, “Stan fell out the bomb bay”. We were stunned Stan was a marvelous guy, and the few seconds that it took before Harry Lofblad, our Central Fire Control Gunner, let us know that Stan had just stepped into the aft section of the airplane was, I know, the worst part of the flight. Stan was one lucky guy, one foot was in the airplane and one foot was still on the bomb bay doors when they just dropped open, but he made it OK.

One thing had been working in our favor up to this time. The weather had been literally ideal, extremely clear all the way up to Japan, over Japan, and as we started south. However, about then things began to go from “hairy” to “really hairy”. Because of the amount of power required to maintain flying speed, we knew with certainty that we couldn't make it all the way back to Saipan. However, we were lucky; we had another possible airfield. There had been a lot of talk about the invasion of Iwo Jima, so we hoped we could make it to the vicinity of that island before we had to ditch. That way we would, at least, be surrounded by a friendly navy. In spite of all the preceding excitement, the two engines being shot out, the gasoline soaking the socks of the guys aft, the fuel transfer system not working, the six bombs hanging up in the bomb racks, the jettisoning of everything we could to lighten the aircraft and at the same time trying to control it and losing a lot of altitude at the same time, we finally were able to stop our descent and keep our airplane flying level at about 900 feet above the Pacific, for which we were thankful.

Anyway, we had to maintain higher than usual power settings on the two good engines in order to stay in the air, and this made us very conscious of the rate at which our remaining fuel was being used. Good old Stan, our Flight Engineer, checked our supply and figured out how much distance we might be able to cover at our current power setting. This way, we could determine whether or not we might have to ditch before arriving at our hoped for destination. We needed to make a decision based on facts instead of on wishes. Stan said that the best calculation he could make would put us out of gas about 100 miles before we could get to the area of Iwo Jima, which is approximately 750 miles south of Japan. He knew we all wanted a better answer than that because none of us was eager to ditch.

Miraculously, when he did a re-check, he said that we might just be able to “make it on fumes”, but that would be the absolute limit of our flying capability, if nothing else went wrong. Being a democratic crew, we took a vote based on all the information we had and decided to try for Iwo and forget about hitting the drink. This began a new phase in our effort to reach a safe haven.

Because of the configuration of the airplane, what with the damage, etc., we had to maintain about 190 mph, which was just above stall speed, in order to stay in the air, so we knew it would be a fun flight. Our long-range radios were inoperative and we were flying at about only 900 feet of altitude so our VHF radios, which still functioned, were not of any assistance as we tried to call anyone who might help. All we could do was proceed south and get as far away from the Empire as we could. We had anticipated that with each passing moment the aircraft would become lighter as it consumed fuel, and we were rewarded periodically as we were able to reduce power very slightly to give us some further distance availability. In spite of this we still weren't sure that we would be able to reach the vicinity of Iwo Jima. When we got within what we estimated was approximately 125 miles of Iwo we all began to “pucker up” even a little more because we were getting to the point where we could assume that we would be running out of gasoline. Furthermore, we now faced yet another problem.

While the weather had been picture perfect, now, all of a sudden, we found ourselves in thick clouds and driving rain and unable to see anything. This obviously was a major obstacle for us. So there we were at 0330 hours, at 900 feet, not knowing exactly where we were and being confronted with a very heavy cloud layer through which we had to fly. Each of us was concerned with his own thoughts; it was deathly quiet in the aircraft. My own thoughts ran something like this, “What the hell do we do now? We're not sure of our location, we've been trying to contact a “friendly” on the radio and have not been meeting with any success.”

Fortunately for us, at least for me, this tremendously anxiety filled time was relatively short. If anything of this nature can be short, because suddenly I was scared out of my wits by a brilliant red glare shining directly into the cockpit. I had no idea what it was, and all sorts of weird possibilities flooded my mind. To my infinite relief, it turned out to be an Aldis Lamp from a P-61 night fighter that Iwo had sent up and vectored to us. They had been trying to call us on the radio, to no avail, had picked up our IFF signal, which was the correct one, fortunately for us, and had sent up the P-61 to find out who we were. We were able to communicate with each other because we were so close, but it seemed like a bad joke when he told us to switch to another frequency to come into Iwo. We were not about to switch to any other frequency. We were afraid that we wouldn't even be able to hang on to the only one we had going. He knew enough not to argue, led us closer to the island and turned us over to GCA, something we had never flown before. True, on Saipan about two weeks earlier, we had a briefing about a new landing system that was going into effect called Ground Control Approach, one that required the Pilot to simply fly the approach according to the instructions of the ground controller. Now we were with GCA and he was telling us to make an identifying turn to the left. Again we dug in our heels and said, “Forget that!” We were now flying on fumes and our sole hope was that he would be able

to bring us straight in. That good old American voice did just that. Because of the loss of both our right engines, we had to maintain 180 mph to keep from stalling. On Saipan, our normal approach was 140 mph and then 110 mph over the fence. Furthermore, we were pretty sure that we could not stop before the end of the 3000 foot mud runway in front of us; it sure wasn't the 11,000 foot concrete and coral runway that we had on Saipan, but so what? We were home! and at least when we would go off the other end of the island and pancake into the Pacific, we would be right in the middle of the U.S. Fleet. Our guys would save us.

With our hearts in our mouths, we made our final approach on instruments only, maintaining 180 mph throughout our descent and watching the altimeter inexorably unwind to approximately zero feet. Not only was this done in total darkness, but we were in thick soup and torrential rain up to our eyeballs; we couldn't see anything. The first inkling we had that we were on the ground was when the airplane bounced. That's how effective GCA can be. Immediately we hauled off all the power that was keeping us at that speed and stomped on the brakes to slow us down. With luck we might stay on the island. Our eyes straining, we sought anything we could spot through the dark and the fog. What a shock it was when we caught sight of P-51's lining both sides of the runway, armed with bombs under each wing and auxiliary gasoline tanks. Then, as we fought with the controls, the damaged aircraft began slowly to veer to the left. Had we come this far only to die in a huge conflagration with our own P-51's? Suddenly in came into view, the only clear spot on that runway, a little mound, a small hill that stood at the very edge of the landing strip. Around it, our forces had not been able to park aircrafts as they would have prevented takeoffs and landings. Fortunately, we still had enough speed to horse the nose of the plane up and over that rise. The back of the airplane broke and we stopped dead on the crest of the hill. At a time like that, a man doesn't think, he just reacts, and our immediate instinct was to get out of there faster than we had ever done anything else in our lives. We had to get away from the six bombs and the gas fumes, which stood a good chance of exploding and setting off a chain reaction. We took off like bats out of hell. As an example of what a rush of adrenalin can do, a few hours later, when we came back to view the aircraft in daylight, we measured how far our tail gunner had dropped. George Mickey had jumped approximately fifty feet from the tail of the plane to the ground. He had been running even before he hit terra firma, if you can call volcanic ash terra firma, and he hadn't even realized how far he had leaped. We were one lucky crew. Nobody had been hit during the mission. Stan hadn't fallen out of the bomb bay. No one had been seriously injured during that landing, although Dave Green, our bombardier, did hurt his back on impact. In any event, we had made it OK.

We all got back to Saipan via other aircraft, as our faithful old Z Square 23, which had brought us through 13 missions over Japan, was a total wreck. So were we. She never flew again and was scavenged for replacement parts for other B-29's.

Every story should have a happy ending, and for us it was a much needed ten days at rest camp at Hickam Field, Hawaii. It was there that I was separated from my crew when Catarrhal Jaundice forced me to remain on Oahu without them for an additional four weeks before I was returned to combat, but that's another story . . .

