



Editors' Introduction: This issue consists of several short contributions. The first four are additional contributions by people who remember the bomb-unloading accident in Chakulia, India, on 14 January 1945. They sent in these recollections after reading the accounts in Memories #4.

THE BOMB EXPLOSION AT CHAKULIA: MORE RECOLLECTIONS

Memory of J.E. ("Dusty") Child:

By coincidence, when #582 exploded on the hardstand on 14 Jan 1945, I was at base operations. I was in the tower talking with one of the controllers. We heard a pop, much like a *firecracker*, and looked in the direction from which it came. There was a flash of fire from one of the hardstands. The controller jumped to the intercom and alerted the crash crew: "There is a fire down at #582's hardstand." The crash crew acknowledged and responded immediately. At no time, as I recall, was there any mention of bombs being off-loaded or of any particularly hazardous operation in progress nor did the controller or crash crew indicate they were aware of such an operation. In retrospect, this lack of information had to be procedural error #3, following the initial problems, cited by others, of multiple bomb handling actions and the especially hazardous type of bombs involved.

In any event, the crash crew pulled up to #582 quickly. Almost instantaneously the first of several major explosions occurred. The crash crew was leveled, literally. It is ironic that their very speed in reacting may have cost them so dearly.

I left the tower and went down to the ground level. There was a maintenance vehicle (cletrac) parked near the entrance to operations. Two maintenance men (names unknown) were there. I thought there might be a chance of moving the aircraft parked next to #582 and thereby saving it. We started the cletrac and headed for the hardstand. We were approaching the hardstand when another major explosion occurred. I have no estimate of the distance, but we hit the ground in a hurry. A few pieces of shrapnel fell around us, but we were not hit. By then it was clear that we could do nothing about moving the adjacent aircraft. So the driver returned the vehicle to the area near operations, and I returned to the tower.

By this time there were a number of ambulances in the vicinity of the hardstand. From the tower I saw several litters being rushed away from the explosion and fire. At least two of the victims were shattered beyond help. It was a terrible sight. It was another step in my indoctrination, as I had reported to the 25th Squadron (Maj. Bill Kingsbury) only a month or so earlier and had flown only one mission at that point.

PAGE 2

Memory of Howard Eppler:

It was Sunday morning and we were preparing the planes in India for a mission out of A-1. I reported to the line soon after breakfast and had work to do on A/C #394 and #582, among others. When I finished the work on #394, I went to the Line Chief, M/Sgt Burchell and requested permission to take time off to go to church. I planned to return to the line after lunch to work on #582. As our group was meeting in a clearing in the jungle just south of the 44th Squadron housing area for Bible study, prayer and worship, we heard a couple of explosions which we thought were ack-ack, but when we looked skyward, we saw no flak bursts. Then we heard a tremendous explosion as #582 blew up. We looked toward the line and could see the tell-tale pillar of smoke ascending. By the time we could catch a ride to the line, the fire was nearly burned out with only the smoldering remains and craters to portray what had happened. I suppose that I would have been working inside of #582 when it exploded had I not taken time out for church. I will never forget 14 January 1945!

Memory of Lester C. Dahms:

I was in the 40th Bomb Group sheet metal shop when the B-29 exploded. I ran outside, and parts of the plane were flying all over. So I ran for the ditch that was alongside the plane. In the ditch there was a man that had shrapnel in the face (I think) because his face was all blue. There was no blood as far as I could see. He was a little crazy. He said his friend was out there. I said, "Don't worry. I'll get him." I stayed with him till a medic came along in a jeep. I called the medic to help me. We put him on the stretcher and put him on the jeep. The medic said, "Are you going along?" And I said no, I was going to look for his friend.

I went back to the plane, and there was a body under the plane's bomb bay doors. His leg looked bad. I think he was dead. I don't know if that was his friend or not, so I dragged him from under the plane to the tail of the plane when parts of the plane were flying all over. I lay there because he was too heavy for me. I saw two medics in the back, so I waved to the medics to come and help. They put him on the stretcher. I then walked away. There was more, but I'm not good in writing all the details.

Memory of Charles I. Seluzicki:

This terrible event remains in my memory--and is felt deeply--and I intimately knew Cpl. Al Schumacher. I somehow was spared even though I was in the plane when the first explosion occurred. For the sake of piecing together fragments to add toward completing the total picture, I submit that (see page 4, paragraph 4 of Memories #4) I was driving a bomb truck with speed from the disaster area, and the wounded man stretched out alongside the truck bed was Cpl. Al Schumacher, whose bravery cost him his life, because it was only after he went back into the bomb bay in an effort to pull someone out that another blast literally blew him out of the bomb bay.

It was at such moment that I picked him up and rolled him onto the truck bed. I know how he felt physically upon my lifting him; namely he felt like (through concussion?) he didn't have a bone in his body--with no body structural support whatsoever. That he could have lived through the night is most remarkable!

I guess (if only to acknowledge such a man as was Al Schumacher) I wish to reiterate the events in sequence. As soon as possible after the first explosion I jumped out and into the bomb truck that was alongside the bomb bay of #582. I saw Schumacher and pulled him aboard, but he jumped back into the bomb bay (!!) to try to get someone, when he was greeted by an explosive blast that seemed to transform him into a mass of jelly.

Editors' Introduction. The following account was written by Ferris Albers, a radar operator in the 44th Squadron, describing a bombing mission to Saigon which nearly became a disaster.

A NEAR MISS AT SAIGON

Date of Event: 26 January 1945
Date Written: January 1985
Written by: Ferris A. Albers

I recall a mission to Saigon during which I was nearly the cause of a major disaster. For me it began at Kharagpur. As many of us remember, after General LeMay took over as our Commanding General it was decreed that all bombing would be done in formation. Each formation would be led by a lead crew. Lead crews were selected, and we were sent to another field (Dudkundi, I believe) for ten days of intensive training in the new procedure. Frank McKinney, Bombardier, and I as Radar man found ourselves on Joe McWilliams crew in the 44th Squadron.

General LeMay, as one of his first acts on taking over command, went on a mission with Col. Ira Cornett. During the mission over the target there was little or no fighter interception but some flak. An account of this mission, written by Ira Cornett, was published in Memories Issue #1.

I do not wish to imply that General LeMay was in any way responsible for what happened on the Saigon mission. However, something he said may have partially and subconsciously prompted my actions on that mission and led to consequences which neither of us, nor anyone else, had foreseen.

Came the day of our first and, I think, only mission to Saigon. We took off in ship #804 among the first and were to lead a formation. My journal further indicates that we circled for forty minutes at the assembly point before gathering a formation. Our IP was at or near one of the mouths of the Mekong River, and Saigon lay a few miles almost due north. Our target was supposed to be the dock area.

I had gone to the gun compartment to look out the right side blister a few minutes before we arrived at the IP and had beheld a solid undercast. These seemed the thickest and most solid clouds I had ever seen. I remember thinking that it looked as if one could get out and walk on them. This was confirmed a few minutes later when Frank McKinney called back to me that it would be a radar show all the way.

My radar set was functioning well as I guided us northward toward the target area and all seemed to be going as planned. However, on reaching the drop point all reliable indications vanished from the scope. After a few (which seemed like many) tense moments I realized that we had passed the target. Major Mac, always the most patient of men, called back, "Albers, where's the target?" I had to give him the most unwelcome news that we had passed it and would have to go round again.

Major Mac controlled himself admirably and set about the impossible task of leading the formation in a tight turn of 180 degrees to come back on the reciprocal course while keeping some semblance of a bombing formation.

Fortunately, on the second run the radar set showed the indications I had hoped for but not had on the first run and I toggled out the bombs crying, "Bombs away" as I did so. A few seconds thereafter someone screamed over interphone, "Look out! Here comes the other formation!" My blood almost literally froze in that instant as I realized the situation I had created. I knew that the closing speed of the two formations would be (for that time) phenomenal and that any evasive action would be useless.

Of course, we missed. Lt. "Ben" Bender was the radar man leading the second formation and most happily had selected a slightly different aiming point. However, it must have been a spectacular moment for those able to see out the front of the ships. Back safely at base I sought out Ben and embraced him fervently somewhat to his surprise.

It was with dread that I wended my way to critique the following day. Sure enough one of the first questions asked, by Col. Luna, I think, was, "Who was the radar man of the lead crew of the first formation?" I started sinking in my seat preparatory to making my confession when someone, I never tried to find out who, said, "Lt. Albers." "Oh," said Col. Luna. And that, unbelievably, was all. I breathed a great sigh of relief hardly believing that that could really be all.

In 1984 I dug out my memoirs (written in 1948) to check on what they said. To my astonishment I found only the barest mention of the mission - the date, the target and the ship number. It seemed that everyone had mercifully, if unwisely, forgotten the whole thing.

Although here I may be in error, I shall always believe that it was shortly after this mission that we always carried a formation commander and for at least one obvious reason. Over Saigon there were eleven ships in our formation and probably about the same number in the second formation.

Editors' Postscript: The editors of MEMORIES are William A. Rooney, 517 ½ Ridge Road, Wilmette, IL 60091, and Robert L. Hall, P.O. Box 544, St. Michaels, MD 21663. Please write us about your experiences in the 40th Bomb Group--any story you think is worth telling. M. E. Carmichael is Treasurer and would welcome contributions to defray the cost of printing and mailing MEMORIES. If you want to help, please make a check to 40th Bomb Group Association and mail it to M. E. Carmichael, 2514 Oregon Avenue, Alamogordo, NM 88310. Harry Changnon, 10455 Westacres Drive, Cupertino, CA 95014, is 40th Group Historian and would welcome your sending him military records and information for his extensive archives.



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