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## EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

There were many times when B-29's received serious battle damage, and the pilot had to make hard decisions about how to cope with the situation, while the crew had to attempt in-flight repairs. This eyewitness account by a CFC gunner recounts one such case. The aircraft was #538 of the 44th Bomb Squadron, and it was sent overseas prenamed "Winged Victory II." The pilot was Fountain L. Brown, and the co-pilot was O. W. Burchett.

## BATTLE DAMAGE OVER SINGAPORE

At the briefing very early in the morning on 24 Feb. 1945, we learned that our target would be Singapore. I had been on three previous missions to Singapore and regarded it as an especially tough target. In Singapore the Japanese had accurate flak and good naval fighter pilots. Also it was a long penetration into enemy-occupied territory, nearly 2,000 miles from home base, most of that over unfriendly areas.

On 24 February the mission involved a daylight bomb run at an altitude above 20,000 feet. We saw no fighters near us before bombs away, but anti-aircraft fire started bursting around us at the time of bombs away. I was sitting in my "swivel chair" in the upper blister, scanning the sky for fighters. After bombs away, as we turned away from the bomb run, there was the "plunk" noise of flak striking us and a strange sensation as the cabin suddenly depressurized. At the time of the sudden noise I was facing to the left of the plane. I spun around trying to see where we were hit, and I saw a gaping hole, perhaps 5 or 6 feet in diameter, like a bite out of the trailing edge of the right wing behind #3 engine nacelle. We had taken a direct hit of an exploding anti-aircraft shrapnel shell. Strips of sheet metal from the wing were waving like small flags in the wind, but all propellers were still turning and we were flying straight and level.

My first impulse was to push the intercom button to report the damage. I found the intercom dead. Next I switched unsuccessfully to "call" and then to "command" position as emergency intercom, but all channels were dead. Then I felt more upset because we had no contact with the front of the plane. For me that was the most frightening aspect of the problem.

At this point Everett Nygard, the right gunner, reached up from his position in the right blister and tapped my leg. He was trying to tell me something. After the decompression, we were getting wind noise, and even after removing my headset from one ear, I could not

understand him and asked him to repeat. The second time I understood a few words: "...hit...Moncrief...wounded." Since Nygard could see into the radar compartment where Lloyd Moncrief, the radar operator, was at work, I assumed that he was telling me that Moncrief was wounded. I said, "Go back and help him. I'll cover the right side." Nygard tried to protest, but I said vigorously, with gestures, "Go back there to him." Then Nygard disconnected his intercom and oxygen and crawled into the radar compartment. Hours later I realized that he was trying to tell me that he was hit and wanted Moncrief to help him.

I remember some of my thoughts and feelings right after Nygard went aft. Knowing that those naval fighters in Singapore were dangerous, probably the most aggressive and skilled that we encountered, I kept scanning ail around the plane above our altitude and also to the right below our altitude where Nygard would normally scan. Every so often I would look at the damaged area to see if there was any sign of fuel or oil leak, but I saw none. I also looked through the tunnel, without success, for any sign of activity up front. I saw no one. I had the panicky thought that they could be bailing out up front. If the intercom and emergency intercom were both out, then the alarm bell could be out, too. How would we know if they put the plane on autopilot and bailed out? I strained to look down for any parachutes.

I remember puzzling over what to do. We were vulnerable to fighter attack, especially with the right gunner gone, and I felt that I should stay at my station, but I kept wondering if I should get a portable oxygen bottle and crawl through the tunnel to establish contact with the pilot. Soon afterwards I was relieved to note that at least one other B-29 was staying with us, which provided some protection. The plane that flew with us for several hours was not from the 40th Bomb Group, but from one of the other groups of the 68th Wing. He flew in close to survey our damage, and then he approached very close to the tail, apparently examining our tail gunner. We had no way of contacting the tail gunner, Harrell Moore. The presence of another plane was very reassuring. If we had to ditch or bail out, someone would report our position, and if fighters attacked, we would have help.

Once we got away from the target area and had a plane accompanying us, I climbed down from my seat and saw the Navigator, Leonard Jellis, at the other end of the tunnel. I tried by hand signals to get him to come aft. After some delay, perhaps to contact Brown, he did crawl back through the tunnel. He said that Brown wanted me to come forward. He looked at the wing damage and went aft to help with the wounded man. I got an oxygen bottle and crawled forward.

Once in the cockpit, I described the visible damage and the lack of any sign of fuel or oil leak. I also reported (erroneously) that Moncrief was wounded and Nygard was helping him. Brown told me to have Tepper, an experienced side gunner and scanner, take over the right blister and watch the engine closely. All the instruments for that engine were out.

Some time later, when all engines had kept running and the condition of the plane seemed stable, someone (probably Leonard Morris, the flight engineer) decided that it would help to repair holes in the fuselage so as to get some cabin pressure back. We had lost some oxygen from battle damage, and the wounded man was on pure oxygen, so the rest of us were using oxygen sparingly. The pilot, Brown, wanted to keep as much altitude as possible in order to stretch our fuel supply, so we were too high to stay off oxygen completely. Hence we used a pattern in which Tepper, the left gunner, and I took turns on oxygen, with the one on oxygen watching the

other for signs of hypoxia (purple fingernails, intoxication, etc.). While taking turns on oxygen, we also started plugging dozens of flak holes. Fortunately there was a large supply of chewing gum in the flight lunches, and we used it, together with torn pieces of cabin insulation. We worked hard at it, because restoring cabin pressure would minimize our need for oxygen.

We discovered many dozens of holes in the gunnery compartment and the tunnel. I remember taking up floor boards in the gunnery compartment and virtually standing on my head under the floor to plug holes with gum and with insulation that I ripped from the flak-torn fabric. Tepper was doing the same sort of thing. We succeeded in restoring some cabin pressure in this way. Later Tepper, who was an electrical specialist in addition to being left gunner, began repairing wires that were cut by shrapnel where they passed through the tunnel.

For a long time Tepper lay on his back in the tunnel with a flashlight trying to locate and read the identification numbers on the wires and twist them back together. He would work for several minutes while I breathed oxygen and watched him to see if he showed signs of hypoxia. Every so often I would pull his foot and get him to come out and put on his oxygen mask for a few minutes. A couple of times he resisted, and we almost got in a fight. I was concerned that he might be intoxicated from hypoxia and unaware of the danger to himself, so I tried to force him to come out for oxygen. He became quite angry and belligerent, probably from shortage of oxygen. In any case, his work paid off handsomely by restoring intercom and some other circuits.

With intercom restored, I felt much better. At some point about half way home, Brown turned the plane over to Burchett, the co-pilot, and came back through the tunnel to survey the damage himself, check on the wounded man, and talk with those of us in the rear of the plane. He seemed calm and leisurely about it, and he raised lots of questions to evaluate the situation. Psychologically his trip to the rear of the plane was a very good move; it was reassuring to us in back.

Only after letting down below pressurization altitude as we neared home base could we gain access to the rear bomb bay, where an electrical power bus was damaged and throwing sparks as it grounded against the fuselage. We wrapped rags and tape around it to provide temporary insulation.

In preparation for landing, Brown consulted with various crew members and made detailed plans. He decided that it would be too risky to try to lower the landing flaps, as the right flap seemed to be cut in half. Hence he planned a flaps-up landing at high speed. However, as both normal and emergency hydraulic pressure read zero, he did not know if we would have brakes. Hence we rigged a parachute at the rear escape hatch. After landing he would test the brakes. If they failed, he would give the order for Harrell Moore, the tail gunner, to spill the chute to slow us down. Also for landing we placed the wounded man, Nygard, on the floor of the radar compartment with his feet against the bulkhead, and one of us lay on each side of him to protect him in case of a crash on landing. As we approached base and lowered the landing gear, another problem turned up: the pilot's indicator light did not show the right gear locked down. After repeated efforts and visual checks, Brown proceeded with the landing.

I believe that the landing was the smoothest that I have ever experienced. Brown set us down very gently, though at high speed, of course. The gear held and the brakes worked. Right up to landing our safety was very much in doubt. We had about nine hours from the time of the

anti-aircraft hit over the target until we touched down safely (17 hours, 40 minutes total flight time). It is an understatement to say that I felt a great relief. I remember watching with amusement the faces of ground crews as we taxied past them and they saw the extent of the battle damage, and at this point I could take some pleasure in their sagging jaws and awed whistles.

I think that I have never felt so tired as I did the next day, probably partly as a hangover from the hypoxia and partly from tension. For many hours I had had too little oxygen while working feverishly a good part of the time. My jaws ached for a couple of days from chewing so much gum while short of oxygen.

It was only after we were safely on the ground that we discovered several additional things. For example, several pieces of shrapnel had gone completely through the gunnery compartment and out the other side of the plane, one of them passing an inch or two below Tepper's seat. Another piece had lodged in my back-pack parachute, penetrating most of the parachute and stopping a fraction of an inch from my skin. We counted over a hundred holes in the small gunnery compartment where three of us sat; yet only one was wounded. Tepper and I felt very lucky indeed. Perhaps having my back toward the explosion was the lucky break that saved me. The day after the mission was my twenty-first birthday, and I remember thinking that returning safely to base was the best birthday present I could have.

Footnotes to this story. From the official damage report for the mission:

Damage included severe damage to the right wing flap and adjacent wing structure, the right landing gear strut failing, a fuel transfer line, instrument lines including fuel quantity, a few control cables, numerous electrical wires including main power busses in the bomb bay, oxygen lines and bottles, pressurization ducts, bomb racks, right and top blisters, the IFF unit, the right stabilizer, and hundreds of holes through the fuselage and tunnel.

From memories of O. W. Burchett, the co-pilot: The aircraft that accompanied #538 leaving the target area communicated by light signals, visually checked the wing damage and the tail gunner, and reported back to the pilot by light signals.

Morris, the flight engineer, during the return flight calculated the flaps-up stall speed, allowing for the loss of wing surface from battle damage. Brown and Burchett consulted together, making detailed plans, and both were on the wheel for landing--a straight-in approach touching down at 165 m.p.h.

"Winged Victory II" was so severely damaged that Brown requested, and got, another plane. After major repairs, "Winged Victory II" was assigned to Capt. Papson and crew, who flew her to Tinian and then were lost over Tokyo on the first combat mission of the plane after repairs.