40th Bomb Group Association

MEMORIES

Issue # 21
May 1988

Date of event: 26 February, 1945

Date written: Late 1987 and May, 1988

Written by: Jim Lyons, John Topolski, Anthony P. Peleckis, Louis Sandrick, Larry Dover plus log data from HMS SEADOG

BAIL OUT AND RESCUE OF JIM LYONS' CREW in #804

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION: Returning from a photo mission to Singapore on 26 February, 1945, the crew of plane #804 was forced to bail out after being attacked by a Japanese fighter. In an extremely rare instance, a British submarine participated in the rescue. The submarine, HMS SEADOG, survived the war. Portions of the log of the SEADOG are used in telling the story of the rescue in which nine of the twelve crew members were brought to safety.

None of these accounts has been edited to reconcile one memory with another (with one exception). Each account deserves to stand on its own as written.

Members of the crew were:

P. - James Lyons
CP - Mills Bale
N - Nathan Teplick
B - William Kintis (KIA)
FE - Frank W. Thorp
RO - Joseph M. Dimock
RCM - Vernon Lester
V - John Topoiski
CFG - J.M. Moffit (KIA)
RG - Anthony P. Peleckis
LG - Louis L. Sandrick
TG - J.J. Carney (KIA)

Lyons, Bale, Thorp, Peleckis and Sandrick were rescued by the British PBY. Teplick, Lester, Dimock and Topolski were rescued by the British submarine.

Memories of Jim Lyons, pilot of #804

Our crew was a last minute replacement for Joe McWilliams' crew. We flew their plane which had the cameras installed. I was having a most successful night at poker when I received word to report to Operations. The flight to the target and the photo mission itself was uneventful...beautiful weather, no enemy action, and according to the person running the cameras, excellent pictures.

On the return flight, I changed seats with Bale and relaxed in the co-pilot's seat. An hour or so later we saw a fighter (later identified as a Jack) approaching us from one o'clock high. Bale turned to take him head on, and our forward guns opened up. The fighter was untouched, and to this date I believe those guns were out of sync. On his first pass we received a shell in the nose that started a hydraulic fire and turned Bill Kintis (bombardier) into a human torch and knocked

out #2 engine. While Bale and the engineer were feathering the engine, Joe Dimock and I put out the cockpit fire with the extinguisher, dousing Kintis in the process. Dimock shouldn't have been flying as he still had a bullet wound in his arm, received in a previous accident when ammunition exploded on a nearby plane. My hands were burned while I was attempting to pull Bill Kintis out of the flames, but I did not realize this until sometime later.

During this time, the Jack made two or three more passes, and in so doing, set our bomb bay tank on fire. For some unknown reason, he then broke off the attack and flew away. When the gunners informed us of the fire in the bomb bay, Bales went back to assist and I took over the controls. Teplick and Dimock managed to get the bomb bay doors open, but the bomb bay tank would not release. The gunners stood in the open bomb bay and chopped at the shackles with an axe. It finally came loose, but in falling, struck the doors so that they would not completely close. This negated any thought of ditching at that time.

I was able to maintain a reasonable altitude and speed, but the cockpit was an utter shambles...maps burned, etc. At this point, the other 29 caught up to us and gave us an accurate position and course home. I thought that, with any luck at all, we would make it home, but two hours or so later, conditions changed radically. We had thrown everything we could overboard and were maintaining altitude when I noticed a small spot on the leading edge of the wing adjacent to the feathered #2 engine. I glanced at it from time to time and suddenly realized it was getting larger and there had to be fire in the wing.

We made preparations to bail out, including rigging a line to Bill's chute. We hoped we could drop him and land close enough to keep him afloat. He was badly burned and had never regained consciousness, but we couldn't bear to leave him behind. We stayed in the air about another hour, gradually losing altitude and constantly monitoring the wing. Now we were at about two thousand feet and the fire could be seen. During that hour, Bale had taken over the flying because 1 had finally become aware of the condition of my hands. When I tried to release the wheel I left skin behind. We opened the doors and two of us dropped Bill out and tried to go with him, but his chute opened almost immediately and we never saw him again. I am sure it was no coincidence that we never saw Carney and Moffit again as they wore chest-type chutes and could not break free of them.

Parachuting into the sea is tricky. I found it very difficult to judge my height from the surface of the sea. This is critical as you have to drop out of the chute, otherwise the chute can envelop you and pull you under.

We had nearly waited too long, as the plane blew up before I hit the water. I dropped free of my chute much too high and went quite deep. I pulled the cords of my Mae West, only to find there were no cylinders. When I finally surfaced, I managed to partially inflate the vest manually, kick off my shoes, and discard everything on my person (including my wallet, thick with over 3000 rupees from the poker game).

I soon found that it is much easier to stay afloat in sea water than in the old swimming pool. Luckily, four of us landed within shouting distance of each other and eventually managed to get together. We tied ourselves together and for the next twenty-five or so hours, the boys would take turns holding me up out of the water so I could inflate my Mae West.

(A framed clipping from a British newspaper hangs over the desk of Jim Lyons today. It picks up the story.)

"Signals were picked up at the Strategic Air Force HQ of Eastern Command that the B-29 was on fire and as soon as the crew was known to have bailed out, RAF and USAAF rescue aircraft were on their way to the last recorded position--300 miles away.

"Five of the men were located at daybreak of the second day of the search by captain of the first Catalina F/O E.A. Lickorish. He spotted a yellow object, circled 50 feet above the waves and discovered it was an injured flyer. Within an hour he found four other survivors.

"The other four men were picked up first by a submarine and then transferred to another Catalina captained by F/Lt. C.R. Bradford, which was just finishing the third day of the search when it had a message from the submarine. One of these men had been in the water 36 hours."

(The way in which we obtained this clipping, says Jim Lyons, is a story in itself. My father-in-law's family and the pilot of our rescue plane lived in the same township in England. They recognized my name in the clipping and mailed it to my wife.)

Memories of John Topolski, Radar Operator

On this mission, we made it to our photo target and were returning. Someone spotted a single Jap plane off in the distance. With our guns and the CFC system, we were confident we could defend our plane. We opened up on the plane when it came within range in a head-on approach. Nothing happened to the Jap plane and we were incredulous. The Jap plane hit the nose section of our plane with its guns and was successful with its second attack as well. I could hear everything that was said in the plane because I kept my headphones on throughout.

While dealing with the fire in the forward compartment and treating Lt. Kintis, Sgt. Sandrick (LG) reported trouble with the #2 engine. We got orders to jettison everything in the plane. It was hard to see everything we thought valuable a moment ago, being thrown out to try to save the plane.

I was one of those who went into the back bomb bay to try to kick out the auxiliary tank that was hanging half in and half out. No chutes. I don't know how we had the daring to do what we did.

After the wing showed fire, Sgt. Sandrick kept advising the pilot the state of this fire and encouraging him to consider bail out.

When we bailed out, I saw all eleven chutes in the air (in addition to my own). We were told to bail out in as rapid succession as we would so we would land as close together as possible. Lt. Bales, who had stayed behind to make sure everyone was out of the plane was the last to have his chute open. He landed some distance away. The instant my chute opened, I saw the plane's left wing break off. When that happened, the body of the plane nosed straight for the water. It hit the water before we did. It is incredible, when you think back on it, that we were making judgements like we did when we were only 19-20 year old kids. I know I was in shock afterwards and I know it lasted for a very long time. Even though I had been on 16 previous missions, I don't know if I will ever get over the shock of this experience and I don't think others in our crew ever will either.

I was in the water from bail out about 2:00 p.m. on the 26th until about 5:00 p.m. on the 28th.

I didn't release my chute early, before hitting the water, as we were trained. When I landed in the water, I looked up to see this giant chute above me. Somehow I got free of it.

First thing I did upon landing in the water was get rid of my shoes and gun and anything that would weigh me down.

It was an unbelievable relief to see the plane following us see us in the water. They dropped all of their ditching equipment to us, including the small dinghy. Dimock and two other crew members were together. Dimock was able to swim to the dinghy. We couldn't see one another in the water so it was agreed we would call out and Dimock would paddle to the sound. By this means Dimock was able to get together with the other crew members but not me.

A Mae West does not keep you afloat. You have to keep fighting to stay afloat every minute. You can't let your legs drag or you will go under. I got bumped by sharks several times. You bob like a cork on a fishing line. You have to keep the back of your head to the waves and you have to fight constantly to do this. If the water is said to be calm during the day, the swells are really strong at night. You can feel all of the big swells building up as much as an hour before they arrive to hit you.

One of the PBY search planes flew around the area looking one way and then banking to look the other and trying to see directly below the plane. It seemed like the plane was within 50 feet of me. I waved and tried to signal to them, but they didn't see me and eventually flew away.

The desperateness of being alone in the water can't be described. You search in vain for something--anything--to hold on to, even a pencil or a twig but there is nothing.

The worst was seeing the B-29 making its last circle. You knew they could not stay any longer, but they never saw me. I said to myself, "I'll never last another night." I know that you can never give up or you're lost, but I was ready to give up when this giant submarine surfaced directly in front of me. The submarine crew threw me a line. I resolved that I was never going to get go of that line. I began swinging around toward the stern of the sub and there was concern that I would be sucked into the propellers. One of the sub crewmen, a champion swimmer, dove in and pulled me away.

I can't say enough for the British. They treated us like kings. Years after the war, I wrote the British Navy Information Office, trying to locate members of the submarine crew. The best they could do was offer me access to the files if I should come there to look up the information myself, or if I should hire someone to do the research for me. I was never able to do that. With respect to further details of the rescue, I can only remember being picked up. I have some vague recollection of being in a bunk. I hardly remember being transferred from the sub to the PBY.

The danger to the sub from enemy surface ships was such that after it picked up the first three crew members, the sub was for getting out of there, but my rescued buddies pressed the sub commander to stay around and search some more, because, they insisted, there were more men to be rescued. That is the reason they found me.

I don't remember anything about the return to Calcutta or the hospital. I know I promised myself that I would never go over water again. So what happened? We were taken up for a test flight and certified by the flight surgeon for return to flight status. By the time we were released from the hospital, the Group, of course, had moved to Tinian. So we went by boat to Tinian. Thirty days on the water. Shortly after arriving at Tinian, we were detailed to Iwo Jima to fly escort ship for P-51s. We flew virtually every day. Our last mission was August 15. Among my duties as radar man was to locate air-sea rescue submarines along our route. You can be sure I located every one of those subs every trip.

Notes from log of submarine, HMS SEADOG, Lt. E.A. Hobson, D.S.C., R.N. Commanding

Photostats of the SEADOG's log pages were furnished by the British Public Records Office, along with a statement of British copyright regulations which limit direct quotes from the log or even paraphrasing. Accordingly, what is told here is a general detailing of the SEADOG's story. Notwithstanding, MEMORIES editors are extremely grateful for this splendid assistance from the British Ministry of Information.

About 1548 on 27 February, SEADOG sighted a B-29 orbiting and sailed toward it. The submarine fired off flares and grenades in an attempt to attract the attention of the circling B-29, but to no avail. Reluctantly, the sub broke radio silence to signal the B-29. The B-29 called for the sub to fire off a red flare. All but one flare had been fired and the final flare was malfunctioning. The sub captain noted in the log, "I fully expected that it would be us who needed rescuing." The sub held out its largest ensign to signal the B-29 and finally got the flare to function. They were then able to pick up the raft carrying Teplick, Lester and Dimock.

Realizing that the raft would be downwind of the crash sight, the submarine began a northward patrol, knowing that the rest of the survivors, if any, would only be in Mae Wests. The sub sighted what was thought to be a shark fin and wondered if a shark might be after a man in the water. Instead, it turned out to be "the dim, solitary figure of a man feebly waving at us."

They picked up John Topolski, whom they reported as having been adrift for 27 hours. The sub's log stated, "He was utterly exhausted and clearly would not have lasted another night."

At 1000 hours on the 28th, SEADOG signaled the nearby Catalina to come and take off its passengers. The submarine continued searching until 1830 on the 28th when it abandoned the search and returned to patrol off the Andaman Islands.

Memories of Louis L. "Sandy" Sandrick, Left Gunner

Our crew was scheduled for a bombing mission, but when we pre-flighted the plane, we had engine trouble. The mission was then cancelled. Captain Lyons' crew was scheduled to fly a photo mission, but he did not have a full crew. Some of Capt. White's crew were picked up to fill in and I was one of them.

After taking our pictures around Singapore, we started home. Then all of a sudden two Japanese fighters came in on us out of the sun. (Other crew members reported sighting only one Jap plane.) No one saw them coming. Before we knew what had happened, they hit the nose section of our plane. Then I noticed smoke coming out of the leading edge of the left wing. When I notified the pilot, he told me to keep a sharp lookout on the wing. He also told us in the rear of the plane to throw out everything loose and anything we would get loose. We knew we would have to bail out or ditch.

We had an an extra gas tank in the bomb bay full of gas. So the bomb bay doors were opened to drop the tank. Before I could notify the pilot that the tank was only half way out, they closed the doors. The doors then got bent. The doors were opened again and I was told by the pilot to take the fire axe and go out on the catwalk and free the tank. One of the shackles did not open, so I gave it a good whack with the axe and out went the tank. I was shaking in my shoes because I was afraid and worried about falling out of the plane. I did not have on my parachute.

After I got back to my position, I kept watching the left wing. I saw puffs of smoke coming out once in a while, so I notified the pilot. He told me to keep a close eye on the wing. He told me to let him know if a fire broke out or when I figured it was time to bail out.

Capt. Lyons told all of us in the back of the plane that he figured belly landing the plane in the water was out. What with the bomb bay doors bent and such a large opening, we would not have a chance getting out if the bulkhead door broke open. The only thing left was to bail out when the time came. As I was keeping an eye on the fire in the left wing, I heard a big explosion. The top half of the wing raised up about a foot or so and settled back down.

That is when I told the pilot we better get out of here. He sounded the alarm to bail out. The back door was already open, so I was the one that made sure everyone bailed out by order of the pilot. Some of the fellows came up to the door and froze for a few seconds. I just gave them a push and out they went. I made sure everyone got out, then I jumped. (No one was around to give me a push.)

As soon as I figured I had cleared the plane, I pulled my rip cord and let go of it. I kept on falling and did not feel the chute open. I looked down and saw my rip cord hanging. I grabbed it real quick and gave it a hard yank and my chute opened. As I was falling, I was facing the plane going away from me. I saw the plane explode in mid-air, way before I hit the water. We sure cut it close getting out.

About midnight, Captain Lyons and I drifted together. My waterproof wristwatch (a PX watch) kept on running. Four others and I were picked up in the morning by a British flying boat. The water was choppy and they had a hard time getting us in the plane. We were in the water for 20 hours. We were fortunate there was another B-29 in the area that reported our position when we bailed out. This was the third plane I went up in and did not bring back; two B-29s and one B-17.

Memories of Anthony P. Peleckis, Right Gunner

Forty-two years is a long time to remember an event, especially when one tried to forget it initially. I arrived at Chakulia about six weeks earlier as a member of a replacement crew. After all the indoctrination, etc., we were assigned individually to fly with various veteran crews for experience. On this particular day (my second mission), I was assigned to fly with Jim Lyon's crew.

Everything seemed to go well, in spite of seeing several Jap fighters scramble while we were over Singapore. We completed our mission and headed home. After a couple of hours, we relaxed a little and broke out some chow. It was while we were eating that the Japs made their first pass, followed quickly by a second which set us on fire. The plane quickly filled with smoke. With the fire and all the damage being in the cockpit area, you know it was good to hear Capt. Lyons calming assurances. With the loss in altitude and power, we were ordered to jettison everything we possibly could. What a weird feeling It was throwing out everything that was so very vital just a little earlier.

With each passing minute, we were getting closer to home and I began to feel that somehow, some way, we were going to make it. And then the order to bail out came over the phones. I couldn't believe it. Everyone hesitated, no one wanted to be the first one out. Again the order to bail out came and I guess reality set in and so we went. As it turned out, we got out none too soon, because while I was still coming down, our plane banked right and blew up.

Teaming up with the crew was the next priority and it wasn't too successful. Only a few got close. You could hear people, but not see them. It's difficult to describe my feeling while in the water, especially when it began to get dark and no rescue had arrived. My Mae West had a slow leak which required regular re-inflation. And then there was the business of fighting off the fish. Thank God I still had my 45, which I used.

It was a very long night, but then at daybreak, I saw one of the most beautiful sights ever, a Catalina coming in over the horizon. He flew over and for a minute I was afraid we weren't sighted. But he turned and came down. When taken aboard, I felt I had gone to heaven.

Memories of Larry Dover, co-pilot of one of the rescue B-29s from the 40th

Probably my most satisfying mission was not a bombing mission, but a search one. Three crews were briefed and sent out to find Lyons' crew. We had mechanical problems and didn't get airborne until several hours after the other two crews had left. While enroute, we learned that the other two crews searched until they were low on fuel and had to return. Our navigator, Jim Alford, had just moments before, said we were nearing the search area when we spotted a mirror flash on the water. We dropped down and I got my only experience as a bombardier as we let fly

with a couple of large rafts with provisions. We had the satisfaction of seeing one of the survivors paddle up to one of them. Our radio operator, Calvin Lamb, got hold of air-sea rescue, and we circled the area until a British sub came to pick them up.

EDITOR'S POSTSCRIPT: Please send us your memories--any story you believe worth telling. We have planned a future issue of MEMORIES to be about the funny things that happened to us. Send your account of any amusing situation or event to either editors: William A. Rooney, 517½ Ridge Road, Wilmette, IL 60091, or Robert L. Hall, P.O. Box 544, St. Michaels, MD 21663.

If you should like to send a contribution of money in support of the publication of MEMORIES, make your check out to 40th Bomb Group Association. Mail it to M.E. Charmichael, 2514 Oregon Avenue, Alamogordo, NM 88310. The Group's historian is Harry Changnon, 10455 Westacres Drive, Cupertino, CA 95014.

40th Bomb Group Association
517½ Ridge Road, Wilmette, IL 60091