



Date of event: 7 March, 1943
Date written: November 1985
Written by: Donald G. Starkey

Editor's Introduction: This issue of MEMORIES contains stories of two mercy missions flown by members of the Group. (Issue #20 of MEMORIES records mercy missions in August and September 1945 that were flown to Japanese camps holding Allied prisoners.) The mission described here by Don Starkey is on the borderline between comic and tragic. In the interests of sweet Christian charity, the name of the pilot is not given.

THE SNAFU MERCY MISSION

Flying blind. A feeling of fear and intimidation creeps over me. I feel like a man with his hands tied behind his back. After 800 hours of flying as a navigator, for the first time I'm lost. Never have I flown with a pilot who seems to know less about an airplane. And he's a West Point Colonel, too. My directions fall on deaf ears. There is no way he is going to fly my headings.

It is two hours past midnight on March 7, 1943, and we are flying north at 10,000 feet paralleling the east coast of Mexico. My best estimate shows us to be 15 miles southeast of Veracruz. But are we? What if we are too far inland? At any instant a mountain peak could come right through the nose of the bomber. That would be all she wrote.

Why did the Colonel take off with no instrument lights? And surely he must have known our communications system was out, too. And as for our radio navigation aids, we could forget them. Once airborne, we learned they, too, were not working. Apparently, the old B-24 had a major electrical system failure.

But why was our aircraft commander risking the lives of the crew and that of our critically injured passenger? Perhaps he felt an overwhelming compulsion to deliver our wounded airman to Randolph Field as soon as possible. From there the injured man would be whisked away to the Army's Brook General Hospital in San Antonio. The soldier had suffered a broken back the previous day while servicing another aircraft. It was imperative that he be flown to the States for medical attention without delay. But why didn't the Colonel ground the bomber and request another? I'm sure he knew he was breaking Air Force safety regulations. It's true, we would have to change-out the make-shift stretcher in the bomb bay, but that wouldn't take long.

I met the Colonel for the first time just prior to takeoff. He was a fighter pilot from Hawaii who had joined our 40th Bomb Group a few days earlier. It was rumored he had commanded a fighter outfit there. Now everyone knows the fighter pilot is the most independent of all airmen. He's his own navigator, gunner, engineer and bombardier--if he happens to be carrying bombs. Most of the time, he's accountable only to himself. His life depends on him. As a bomber pilot, his role is reversed. The gunners fight off the enemy, the flight engineer keeps him apprised of the bomber's performance, the navigator "tells him where to go," while the bombardier controls the aircraft during the bomb run. Total cooperation among the crew is vital.

However, right from the start of this flight it became obvious the Colonel wasn't taking directions from any First Lieutenant, pencil pushing navigator. We learned later he had never completed transition training in B-24s. No one seemed to know why. Since he outranked everyone on the base, perhaps no one bothered to check his flight experience record.

We had taken off about an hour before midnight from Guatemala City's single runway airport in the drizzling rain. The copilot switched on his flashlight to illuminate the flight instruments (he would do so periodically throughout the night), while we climbed to altitude above the surrounding mountains. At least the wind cooperated. We took off to the south which meant we would avoid having to clear the high-rise aqueduct at the north end of the field. I gave the pilot a heading for the first leg of the flight and slid down into the nose of the bomber to the navigator's compartment. I would get on with the business of directing the flight.

I enter our departure time in my log. I note the compass heading, pressure, altitude, temperature and airspeed. I will monitor these functions throughout the night with entries every 10-15 minutes. Their averages, combined with star fixes, will be used to plot our position along the course. If the Colonel will switch the bomber to automatic pilot, my task will be much easier as the variations in these parameters should be minimal. Then too, I need a steady platform for shooting the stars. Once we hit the Gulf, we will fly up the coast of Mexico about 15 miles off shore. We should cover the 1200 mile journey in about seven and one-half hours, arriving in San Antonio at daybreak.

We are now 15 minutes into the flight. I make my second log entry--airspeed-160, altitude-9,800, temperature-20 °F. (We must stay below 10,000 feet due to oxygen and temperature requirements for our injured passenger.) My compass reads 10 degrees right of our intended heading. Since our intercom system is out, I climb up to the cockpit and correct the pilot, then slide back into the nose again.

For the next 30 minutes, the compass continues to wander--5,10,15 degrees to the right, then back to the left of course. Our airspeed varies by as much as 15 miles per hour and the altimeter shows we are alternating between diving and climbing. The changes are gradual and almost imperceptible. However, the instruments leave little doubt we are wandering all over the blackness of night like a bent corkscrew.

I politely admonish the Colonel that he is making my task very difficult. He levels out at 9,500 feet and returns to my heading. However, it's only a matter of minutes until the bomber is back into the eccentric flying pattern, which continues throughout the night.

Realizing I have lost control of the flight, I will now attempt to follow the pilot--an impossible task--with any degree of accuracy. I will try to supplement my findings with star fixes, as questionable as they may be considering that I will be shooting from a rolling platform.

It is now two hours into the mission. I pick up my octant. I tell the pilot I'm going to shoot a star fix and ask him to hold the bomber steady. I take a reading on Polaris which is out ahead and slightly to our right. This should tell us our latitude. I swing around 90 degrees to my right and shoot a star high above the wing. Now we should know where we are on the latitude line. All the while, the aircraft is still unsteady, but I will try to estimate my sighting errors.

I plot the fix on my Mercator chart which is taped to the navigation table. It shows us entering the Gulf of Mexico about 140 miles southeast of Veracruz. We should be about 15 miles offshore from that coastal city in 50 minutes.

The bomber starts to rock and roll as we dart in and out of the clouds. The weather is starting to build. But that's customary this time of year, especially along the gulf coast. As the stars peep out, I hurriedly shoot another fix. This time it shows us to be about 50 miles southeast of Veracruz and 20 miles from shore.

We are now completely socked in. Even our wing tip running lights are no longer visible. Since the stars are now hidden, I will have to approximate our position by dead reckoning, using our heading, airspeed and time. Knowing we must avoid an 18,000 foot mountain peak near Veracruz, I give the pilot a heading which will take us further out over the water. Not being too sure of my previous fix, we must play it safe. He honors my request momentarily, only to let the bomber wander off again. By now I am fearful for our lives, but there is nothing I can do except ride it out and pray for the best.

Ten, 20, 30 minutes pass. I breathe a sigh of relief. We have made it. Now and then a star appears signifying the weather is starting to break up. Let's hope it's permanent. From now on I will track our course and forget about trying to direct the pilot.

Since takeoff, I have now shot nine star fixes. They graphically show an ever increasing deviation to the right of our planned course. At this rate, we will end up in the vicinity of Beaumont, TX, some 225 miles from San Antonio.

As we approach the Texas shoreline, city lights begin to glow on the horizon. For the first time, the Colonel wants to know where we are. When I tell him Beaumont is dead ahead, he requests a heading for Ellington Field. We are running low on fuel and will gas up there. Ellington will notify Randolph Field of our whereabouts and our expected arrival time, since we have had no contact with the outside world after departing Guatemala City.

As we taxi up to the parking ramp at Randolph after the flight from Ellington, an ambulance is waiting. The wounded airman is removed from the bomb bay on a stretcher, loaded aboard the vehicle, and the driver takes off for San Antonio. Since we were long overdue, we learn that an alert has been ordered extending all along the gulf coast to the far reaches of West Texas in an effort to track us down. I knew I would be pinned to the wall with regard to my navigation efforts, and sure enough the Flight Operations Officer of the base wants to know if I had become lost. I replied that the Colonel didn't know how to fly the airplane and complained about his lack of cooperation. The Flight Operations Officer shot back that my accusations were most unusual and quite serious. I told him I knew that, but nonetheless they were true.

Before the crews broke up, the Colonel thanked us for a "job well done" and acted as if nothing had happened. He said he would meet us the next day--a Sunday--around noon for our return flight.

By this time, I felt lower than a snake's belly. Never in my experience had I encountered such a flight. Nor had I ever missed a destination. Rather, most of the time I would split the field. I would often make bets with my pilots--prior to the flights, of course--that I could do so. I recall thinking it was a good thing I had made First Lieutenant a few days ago. With this flight hanging over my head, I might never get another promotion. After all, if the "push comes to a shove," who is going to believe my word over that of the Colonel's? I dreaded the flight back.

Checking into the Gunter Hotel, I moped around for several hours before getting up enough courage to call an old girlfriend who lived in the city. This being a Saturday night, she would probably be busy, since I hadn't had time to let her know that I would be arriving. (I had only learned of the flight two hours before takeoff.) However, Ruth was available--after breaking another date, as I recall--and we spent the night in a little club down by the Alamo River, dancing to the music of Glenn Miller and other big bands of the day. I'm sure I wasn't the best of company, but I remember she was quite understanding.

We took off around noon the next day from Randolph Field. Having spent the night with his wife and family (he was married to a general's daughter), the Colonel was in a good mood and said he would navigate on the way back. We would fly down the coast to the Gulf of Campeche, cross over to the Pacific Ocean, and on southeastward to Guatemala. However, to be on the safe side, I got out my maps and traced our flight by pilotage. And it was a good thing I did. About an hour out of Guatemala City, the Colonel became lost and requested I navigate the rest of the way.

Early the next morning, I reported to my commanding officer, telling him of my experiences during the hair-raising flight. I recall saying something like, "Don't ever schedule me to fly with that guy again until he has been checked out in a B-24 and knows how to cooperate with his navigator." The commander seemed skeptical at first until he did some checking around with other flight personnel. Other navigators, in particular, had registered the same complaint upon return from submarine patrol missions from Guatemala to the Galapagos Islands on which the Colonel served as pilot. Further investigation showed he had never completed B-24 transition school. How he managed to take over the left seat in the bomber for that snafu mercy mission, nobody seemed to know. He was immediately scheduled for familiarization training.

On June 11, 1943, the flight crew was awarded the Air Medal (or cluster to those who had already received the citation) for the flight. The citation read in part:

"The members of the crew successfully transported a critically injured soldier from Guatemala City, Guatemala, to San Antonio, Texas despite lack of time for proper preparation, adverse weather conditions, absence of instrument lighting facilities which required the use of a flashlight in order to complete instrument flying, loss of radio and communications and being unable to fly at safe altitudes over uncharted mountain areas due to the critical condition of the injured soldier. The courage, coolness and skill displayed by these men reflects the greatest credit upon themselves and the Army Air Force as a whole."

Author's Postscript: An amusing incident occurred following our return to Guatemala City. Some of us were gathered in the "bath house" shaving when the pilot came in and started talking about the flight. He remarked that maybe my octant would shoot the sun (as on daylight patrol flights) but not the stars. I and the rest of the guys just looked blank and didn't say a word. Obviously our Colonel knew nothing about celestial navigation.

Date of Event: 22 February, 1943

Date Written: March 1988

Written By: Ira Cornett

Editor's Introduction: This mission, like the foregoing, is a story involving precise navigation. It is a nifty trick to plot a course to intercept a moving ship. To do so in the short time that was available to prepare for the mission added to the difficulty. Coordinating the logistics of the mission and bringing it off as successfully as happened, was likewise a nifty trick.

AN AIR-SEA MERCY MISSION

On February 1943, the 44th Squadron stationed at Guatemala City, received a mission directive from the Sixth Bomber Command laid on by the Sixth Air Force headquartered in the Panama Canal Zone. It called for a mission to deliver 500,000 units of diphtheria anti-toxin using a B-24D aircraft.

The problem was the destination--a British aircraft carrier, the HMS Victoria and three destroyer escorts out in the Pacific. The urgency beyond health reasons was that the carrier force was proceeding at 14 knots on a westerly heading away from the 44th Squadron base. The message received at 0925 didn't leave much time for preparation for the unusual mission and still assure deliver of the anti-toxin during daylight hours. The anti-toxin was to be dropped to the lead escort destroyer in an inflated life raft. This necessitated it be securely packed in cotton for shock protection, wrapped in waterproof material and positive securement within the lift raft which was to be dropped from the bomb bay. Fortunately the anti-toxin, which was being flown in from a base 700 miles south of the 44th Squadron base, arrived in time for these actions to be performed. The selected B-24D was being serviced with additional fuel and otherwise readied for the mission. No bombs were to be carried.

The crew members consisted of Lt. J.H. Van Pelt, Pilot; Lt. W.R. Larwid, Copilot; Lt. H.B. Le Crone, Navigator; T/Sgt. R.M. Rogers, Bombardier; T/Sgt C.A. O'Lausen, Engineer; Sgt. J.P. Mahon and Corp. F.B. Guyne, Crew Gunners; Sgt. F.L. Tweedie, Photographer (to record drop and pickup by naval Personnel) and Capt. C.A. Hulse, Medical Officer; Lt. F.J. Wojtasiack, Intelligence Officer. The navigator, of course, in these simultaneous actions was busily engaged plotting an intercept course flight plan of some 622 miles. It was a one-time effort and it had to be right the first time. Success meant prevention of a possible outbreak of diphtheria among crews of the naval force.

Van Pelt took off at 1200 hours or two hours and thirty-five minutes after receipt of the directive. Van Pelt was intercepted by the carriers protective aircraft and, after exchanging recognition signals with the aircraft and surface vessels, proceeded to the lead destroyer. After letting down to 30 to 50 feet off the water the life raft was dropped alongside the lead destroyer, along with a smoke flare to mark the raft's location among the ocean waves. Van Pelt circled the destroyer for some ten minutes while it hoisted the raft aboard, using grappling hooks. Sgt. Tweedie was able to photograph the recovery effort.

The delivery, as "Mission Accomplished," ended when Van Pelt landed at Guatemala some three hours after dark.

Editor's Postscripts: Please send us your memories--any story you believe worth telling. Send to: William A. Rooney, 517-1/2 Ridge Road, Wilmette, IL 60091.

If you should like to send a contribution of money in support of the publication of MEMORIES, make your check out to the 40th Bomb Group Association. Mail it to M.E. Carmichael, 2514 Oregon Ave., Alamogordo, NM 88310.



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