



Date of event: Spring 1943

Date written: 1984

Written by: Ira V. Matthews

Editor's Introduction: Anytime you got into an airplane in wartime, it could become an experience. Ira Matthews tells of one such an occasion on a flight from The Rock. Col. Mooney was at this time base commander of the island. He returned to the States as CO of the 40th and remained as Group CO until relieved in July 1943.

A FLIGHT OVER THE GALAPAGOS VOLCANO

In the spring of 1943, a 5,000-foot peak on the south end of the Island of Isabela erupted into a raging volcano. Located some 50 miles from Baltra Island (The Rock) in the Galapagos Islands, the volcano tossed towering clouds of ash into the atmosphere, forming a huge cumulus cloud cap, visible from the airfield on Baltra. The eruption terrified a handful of Air Corps technicians who operated a radar station on a cliff at Cabo Cristobal, five miles from the volcano. They sent an urgent radio message, requesting the Baltra crash boat be sent to rescue them. When the boat had been dispatched, Colonel Henry Mooney, Base Commander at Baltra, decided to fly one of the 45th Bomb Squadron's B-24's to the radar site. I flew co-pilot with the Colonel, since he was not fully qualified as a B-24 pilot. Our veteran Flight Engineer, Technical Sergeant Louis Grace was assigned to accompany us. The Colonel and I would be thanking God for sending Louie with us although we didn't know that when we started out.

Twenty minutes after take-off, we rounded the southwest corner of Isabela Island at 3,000 feet under a heavy overcast ceiling of about 5,000 feet. As we turned northward toward the radar site, we viewed an awesome landscape. A huge river of red lava was cascading into the Pacific some two miles south of the radar site. Great columns of steam rose from the surf as the lava disappeared into the water. Where the cloud deck shrouded the peak, a gaping crater on the west face was spewing a continuous barrage of house-sized boulders aloft. A number of the boulders were careening down the lava stream which covered the mountain with a bright red stripe several hundred feet wide. We banked around the steam clouds and descended toward the radar site. The tents and buildings were intact. We spotted the men clustered on the boat landing. They were all wearing Mae West life jackets and waving like mad at our plane. They were safe for the present, but the deadly lava stream left no doubt. They must be removed as quickly as possible. We had passed the crash boat en route and estimated it would arrive in another two hours.

Colonel Mooney decided to take a closer look at the volcano while we waited for the boat. After buzzing the boat landing and trying to reassure the men with a friendly wave from the flight deck, we circled over the water and climbed to 4,000 feet just underneath the cloud ceiling. As we turned toward the volcano, the cockpit filled with acrid fumes that smelled like rotten eggs. By the time we reached the water's edge heading toward the crater, the stench was almost unbearable. Our course was, luckily, slightly to the right of the lava flow and the clouds of steam. The B-24 was indicating 180 MPH with engine power set at normal cruise RPM and Manifold Pressure. The mixtures were still in AUTO-RICH, which would be to our advantage for the events we were about to encounter. The

Colonel was flying the plane and gazing at the yawning crater above and to our left. Suddenly the plane entered violent turbulence. The nose dropped, and the airspeed fell with sickening speed to less than 125 MPH. The B-24 dropped like a stone toward the onrushing mountain side. We had entered hot, gaseous air where the temperatures were simply too high to sustain flight.

I grabbed the controls to assist the Colonel in turning the plane to the right, down the slope. Before I could call for increased power, Louie Grace sensed what was happening and added Full Power with all Turbos ON. With the increased power and cooler air near the water, we brought the B-24 out of the deadly descent at 1,400 feet. The curiosity of the Colonel and our total ignorance of flying in the extremely hot air near a volcano had come within an eyelash of killing us.

When normal power was reset, we circled over the ocean to recover our nerves and evaluate what had happened. The Colonel, whose tanned face was much paler now, pointed out that air temperatures near the volcano must have been at least double that of normal air temperatures. He then turned to Louie Grace who was standing between the pilots' seats, adjusting the engine controls to normal cruise settings. The Colonel said, "Sgt. Grace, you saved our lives when you increased the engine power. We would never have recovered from that stall if we had not had the extra power. Thank you!" Louis, who was ever the cool customer in a plane, replied, "Colonel, I would appreciate it very much if you stayed out over the ocean while we wait for the crash boat. I can't stand another close one like that." The Colonel smiled weakly and assured Louis we would circle over the water, well away from the volcano.

The crash boat did arrive and removed all the men from the boat landing. In a few days, the volcano sent new sheets of lava down the slope, which destroyed the radar site, the tents, and the boat landing. I flew with Louie Grace until the end of World War II. We often discussed our near disaster with the volcano. It was the type of incident which does not bring one pleasure in recalling the past.

Date of event: Summer 1945
Date written: Sometime in 1987
Written by: Delmar Johnson (deceased)

Editor's Introduction: Before his death in 1988, Del Johnson filed a number of short sketches of his experiences as bombardier on John Hug's crew with the editor of MEMORIES. Del had a style of writing which could be described as "understatement." He had the capability of telling, in a light-hearted way, about a frightening situation. That is shown here in the description of one of the experiences he and his crew endured.

A LITTLE EXCITEMENT ABOARD "MISS DONNA LEE"

One night during early summer in 1945, we took off for Japan, carrying 40 five hundred pound Comp B. demolition bombs reserved for a target on Honshu. I'm not really sure of the city's name, but it really doesn't matter.

The trip was uneventful, with the usual climb through the front after passing Iwo, and arriving over the mainland shortly after dawn. I recall seeing some flak as we approached at 14,000 feet. Our PDI set and stabilizers locked in gave me a little time to correct and adjust for wind. Technically, with the Intervalometer set, as I recall, for the bombs to drop at 50-foot intervals, we would cover 2,000 feet. Each light on the Intervalometer would go out after the bombs dropped, except: there were still two red lights that didn't go out, and they weren't the last two.

Now we had a problem and, according to Hoyle or somebody that wrote the book, these bombs were going to be armed. I had about 45 seconds to get back there, grab those little propellers on the front of the bombs, and squeeze them together before they spun around about 400 times! First, though, I had to remove my bulletproof vest, sustenance jacket, and parachute, and run back to the tunnel. I've never crawled 50 feet so fast in my life, because it was in the rear bomb bay where this problem was. It was hazy and smoky in the bomb bay from the target--plus daylight just arriving. And guess what? The bottom two bombs up in front, facing forward on the right side, had not released. In fact, the three above had bounced off the fourth, leaving a dent about 12 inches long, 8 inches wide, and 3 to 4 inches deep. This fourth bomb (each bomb had a 2-A-2 release lock on it) had a broken front lock and was hanging crossways over the bottom bomb. Now, I had to jump over to the 8-9 inch walkway to the front of the bomb bay, because that's where the bombs "was."

You gotta remember, the wind and smoke were coming up. John (Hug) and Wilkie (Wilkerson) were trying to keep the plane steady. Hinkle, Low, Loughridge, and Harris were watching for fighters and watching me. Joe Dunsmore was praying, and I think Ed Hanis was softly singing, "How Great Thou Art," -- not about me, but to the Lord. And me -- there I was on my belly with screwdriver and pliers, trying to remember all I was taught about what the hell to do. I got those fins squeezed together and realized I had to put my arm between the two bombs. One was creaking and moving in the wind, and I thought--my gosh, if the top one fell first, I could lose my arm. The bottom one fell first when the small bolts holding it broke off, but the top one was hanging at about a 50-degree angle. Following procedure, I got it too to drop.

Fourteen-thousand feet is a safe altitude without oxygen, but I felt very weak and queasy and remained on the catwalk for several minutes while gaining my strength or whatever...but on trying to get up, my legs were very weak. After the bomb bay doors were closed, Bud and Jim reached out and literally hauled me back in. Some might say we were lucky, but we say someone was watching over us, or we would not be here today since those particular demo bombs were thin-skinned, and with 1500 pounds of bombs bouncing off the other two, there could have been a very big "bang."

The trip back to Tinian was quiet and uneventful.

Editor's Postscripts: Please send us your memories--any story you believe worth telling. Send to: William A. Rooney, 517½ 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 Avenue, Alamogordo, NM 88310.



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