



CHRISTMAS AT PRATT -- 1943

Christmas, during WWII, was a yearly benchmark by which we measured the length of the war. Christmas 1943 was one that had a singular meaning for many in the 40th. To many who had been in Puerto Rico and Panama, it was the first Christmas in the States in two years. To others who had joined the Group prior to Christmas this holiday could be the last one at home for no one knew how long, if ever. Everyone who had the chance to get home grabbed it. And yet, in the midst of this scramble there were a few who found Pratt to be their home that Christmas. In this issue of MEMORIES eight members tell their stories of Christmas, 1943.

Date written: 1988
Written by: Neil Coleman, CFC Gunner
Subject: Birmingham Fiasco

On December 23, a requirement came in to fly a B-29 from the Boeing plant in Wichita to the modification center at Birmingham. With all of the crews gone on other flights, a volunteer crew had to be recruited.

Myself and Frank Rutledge, our crew's right gunner, happened to be in squadron operations at the time and were asked if we wanted to go as scanners. When told that we would have to wait in Birmingham for about a week or so for return transportation to pick us up, Frank said that we could catch a train out of Birmingham and go to his home in Nashville to spend Christmas with his family. It sounded like a good idea so we volunteered.

Early the next morning Capt. Marvin Goodwin, who was an aircraft commander in the 45th Squadron, a co-pilot, navigator, flight engineer, three radio operators, and Frank and I boarded a C-45 and flew to Wichita. On our arrival, the Boeing ground crews said that the B-29 had been fueled and was ready to go. After checking the weather and filing a flight plan, Capt. Goodwin and his volunteer crew boarded the brand new B-29 and took off.

The weather was forecast to be clear all the way to Birmingham, but just after crossing the Mississippi we encountered a solid overcast. Interphone conversation was at a minimum, Frank only reporting a slight oil leak on #4 engine. After flying for three and a half hours the plane suddenly broke out of the overcast. Looking out the left blister, I saw that we were very close to the ground, barely above the treetops. Just then Captain Goodwin called for a gear check, and moments later we reported both gear down and locked. It then occurred to me that the flaps had not been lowered nor had the flight engineer requested Frank to start the putt-putt so I told Frank to go back and start it.

I tried to call the flight engineer, but received no reply so I switched to the interphone command position and called Capt. Goodwin to report the condition of the flaps, but again received no response. Then Frank yelled that #3 engine was out! I quickly glanced out the left blister and saw the end of a runway pass quickly underneath, only 10 or 15 feet below the plane. Seconds later I looked up and saw #1 prop windmilling.

Suddenly the left gear slammed on to the runway, the left wing dropping to within two feet of the concrete. Then the plane bounced, rocked onto the right gear, and the left wing went high in the air. Again the plane rocked onto the left gear, the wing tip nearly scraping the concrete. On the third bounce, Frank yelled that #4 engine had just quit! As the B-29 screamed down the concrete strip, it flashed by several crash and emergency vehicles beside the runway, and they began following us. As the plane began to slow down, I saw #2 prop stop turning just seconds before the B-29 braked to a stop.

Being very new crew members (only our third flight in a B-29), I figured that Frank and I had done something wrong so we were reluctant to get out of the plane. Finally we decided to get out and take our chewing out. After climbing through the rear hatch and down the ladder, we joined the large crowd of men that had gathered around the nose wheel, still wondering what had happened. As soon as Captain Goodwin came down the forward hatch ladder, a Lt. Col. rushed forward, shook his hand vigorously and congratulated him on the great job he had done in bringing the plane in safely.

Frank and I were still confused, and when the radio operators came down the ladder, we asked them to explain what had happened. Sgt. Gilbreath told us, "the navigator got lost in the Memphis area because of the bad weather and when the flight engineer reported that our fuel was getting very low, I radioed Birmingham who gave us a heading to the airport. As we started to descend, all the cockpit windows iced over, as the defrosters are to be part of the modification, so Captain Goodwin told me to grab a crash axe and chop out two of the thick Plexiglas panes so he could see to land the plane. By then we were running very low on gas so the pilot radioed the control tower, declared an emergency and requested a straight-in approach. The flaps were not lowered so the plane would be able to maintain sufficient airspeed in case of engine failure."

The flight engineer grabbed a broom from a nearby truck, got up on the wings, and used the broom handle to check the four wing tanks. When he found them completely dry, Captain Goodwin became furious, knowing that the people at Wichita had obviously shortchanged the gas load.

As we were riding into Base Ops, the flight engineer told Frank that if he had not started the putt-putt, the airplane would probably have run off the runway and perhaps crashed due to the loss of hydraulic pressure when the inboard engines stopped, thereby losing the brakes.

Such was our Christmas, 1943 flight home.

Date written: Summer, 1989
Written by: Chester Gaugh
Subject: Christmas Operations from Pratt

After a couple of leaves back home during the summer/fall of 1943, I had decided that I was kinda serious about the girl I had been seeing in Indianapolis. (She's now my wife.) Then at Christmas time I learned I was lucky enough to be scheduled on one of the B--17 RON Santa Claus flights and would get to see my parents and girlfriend again before going overseas.

The morning arrived, and our ship loaded up, and we took off. We got to Stout Field, Indianapolis, without any problems and dropped several of us "Hoosiers" off. The plane went on to the East Coast by way of Cleveland and was scheduled to pick us up on Sunday, the 26th. I had a great two-day holiday before reporting to Stout Field on Sunday. After waiting several hours we received a phone call that our plane couldn't take off because of low ceiling. The same thing happened on Monday. It was getting monotonous, but fortunately I had a place to stay. On Tuesday the 28th, the situation changed; Indianapolis was socked in by a snowstorm. Our B-17 got in and out of Cleveland, but was forced to overfly Indianapolis and go on back to Pratt.

A telephone call was made to Capt. Harper B. Miller. We were told to catch the first train back to Pratt. You all remember train travel in 1943, especially without any military priority. The first train out of Indy to St. Louis and all points west was 5:40 PM. Of course by the time we got to Union Station, this train had left. After staying the night in a downtown hotel, I caught the 7:55 AM New York Central (which left at 10:00 AM). I stood up all the way to St. Louis. There I changed to the Missouri Pacific's streamlined "Eagle." After all the pushing and shoving was over, I found myself pushed up against what turned out to be a bar. This time the stand-up ride wasn't so bad as I helped drink more than my share of beer before arriving in Kansas City. After a normal wait plus a two-hour delay, I staggered onto the Rock Island at 11:45 PM and actually got a seat! We arrived in Pratt the next morning (Thursday, December 30th) at 8:30 AM. I reported to the Maintenance Office and worked that night until 9:00 PM. It was worth every bit of the effort.

Date written: 19 May, 1989

Written by: Neil Wemple

Subject: Christmas at Pratt--and Happy to be There

Christmas in Pratt? I was very happy to be there, not having had a Christmas in the States since 1940. Christmas of 1941 found me on alert in St. Croix, ready with my B-18A crew to bomb the French at Martinique. We didn't launch. In 1942 I was in Guatemala City celebrating Christmas Eve. Christmas morning was an early morning patrol to the Galapagos. There was about as much fog inside the cockpit of that B-17E on takeoff as there was outside--which was plenty.

My new bride of eleven months, Helen, and I were therefore very happy to be spending our first married Christmas together. My old Form 5 reveals that there was a four-day period at Christmas in which I performed no flying. I did, however, have 13 flights in December that year, six in a B-17F and seven in a B-29.

We really had miserable living quarters in Pratt, but we didn't seem to care too much. We had had miserable quarters ever since we came up to Pratt starting with the Roberts Hotel. The hotel room wasn't so bad, but the management was a bit weird, and the food at the cafe was awful - if you could catch it open. The emergency fire escape system in our room consisted of a rope hanging down near the window!

After the Roberts, we moved into a single room upstairs that Mr. and Mrs. Unruh had built into their house trying to help the badly overtaxed housing situation in Pratt. One must certainly compliment the people of Pratt for their fine efforts at relieving the housing shortage as well as their friendliness and understanding. Our room, however, was a boiling kettle on a hot July Pratt day or evening. It was unbearable. Although Mr. and Mrs. Unruh were very kind, we were extremely happy when we found better quarters--a basement apartment! These were the quarters in which we spent our Christmas, 1943. Who could ever think that someone would be happy to move to a basement? But it was cool, a bit too cool in the winter; however, it was rather attractively decorated. The house belonged to John and "Tink" Wrenchy, a very nice couple.

It was rather a dull Christmas in a basement--no excitement such as standing at the ready to bomb a French aircraft carrier, or a zero, zero takeoff with a hangover. It was O.K. with me however; I needed a Christmas that was calm and dull.

Date written: February and March, 1989
Written by: Henry Pisterzi and Paul Goreski
Subject: Hauling a Heavy Load Back from Denver

Henry Pisterzi Reports: We were informed that our Christmas furlough would be granted. Plans were made so that all of the people could be sent home and returned as quickly as possible. The reliable and almost indestructible B-17's we had were assigned for the job. One was assigned to fly to Denver and was flown by a pilot and crew from the Group whose homes were in Colorado. So near as I can remember, there were eleven or even thirteen of us. The only names I can recall are "Chuck" Thornsberry, "Speedy" Miller and Paul Goreski. A day or so after we arrived home, Mother Nature was to help us. We had a good snow (probably six inches or better), and the temperature stayed rather low. Our furlough was over, but the weather conditions had not improved. We called the officer in charge of the Colorado contingent (probably Thornsberry), and he told us all air travel was grounded. He relayed this to the Pratt command and was told to leave as soon as takeoff was permitted. This day-to-day business went on for four or five days, maybe more. Anyway, our furlough extended from three or four days to somewhere near a week to ten days. Pratt got "antsy" and called the pilot in Denver, told him to charter a bus and get our 'tails" back to Pratt. The pilot did as he was ordered and notified everyone of the departure time of the bus. We were all to meet at the bus station in Denver.

All went as scheduled except for the "fly in the ointment," me. The bus driver was ready to leave but was informed "we are one body short." Much to his dismay, he had to wait a little while.

Paul Goreski Reports: Finally Hank's dad drives up in his '41 Ford, and Hank rolls out and gets his B-4 bag out of the trunk. The bus driver was trying to be helpful in loading the B-4 bag, but it was so full of booze he couldn't raise it to the overhead luggage shelf. All the troops were laughing. (I had my share also, but managed to get it up without help.) It was a 17-hour trip back to Pratt.

Hank Pisterzi Resumes: I had been asked by some squadron members to bring back some spirits. Kansas was a dry state at that time. While Paul and I were on furlough, Paul, his dad and I made the rounds of the Denver liquor stores. However, we ran into a problem. The whisky was available, but in order to get one quart of whiskey, we had to buy three quarts of rum. Decisions, decisions--what the hell am I going to do with all that rum? You either do as the liquor dealer says or you go back empty handed and face the wrath of those people relying on you to bring them whiskey. We brought back as much as we could cram in to that B-4 bag. I had "riled" the bus driver by being a little late for takeoff. He wasn't any happier when he tried to put the B-4 bag on the overhead rack. In desperation, he left it on the floor. The squadron mates were glad to get the whiskey and after that was gone, the rum soon was consumed. For some who might be wondering how good a business venture this was for me, you decide. I sold for what I paid. I looked for no profit--making my squadron mates happy was enough for me.

Date written: 29 October, 1989

Written by: William A. Rooney

Subject: Only a Near Disaster

Somehow the word filtered down that there was going to be a fly around that I could get on which would drop me off at my home in St. Louis. It was early evening of the 23rd and dark and cold in Pratt. Those of us who were to be on the plane were gathered on the ramp in front of the hangar of the 44th. A B-17 was to fly us around, but it was at that moment being slow timed. We checked out what winter flying gear was available and donned it pretending, while we stood out on the ramp, that we weren't cold.

The plane landed, and we boarded. I can remember only three other people out of the crew and the passengers on board that night. Two of them are deceased. Bill Mueller was the pilot. Jim Ford, communications officer of the 45th, was serving as radio operator. Timothy Moriarty, another passenger, was bound for Chicago. There was a seat across from the radio operator's station, and I got it. As has forever been the case with me when flying, I immediately fell asleep. Shortly I was awakened by a commotion in the plane. All the lights were on. Jim Ford was pounding on his key. People were filing past me in to the waist compartment. I asked Jim what was going on and was told that we were bailing out; an engine was on fire. I struggled to get my parachute harness buckled over my winter flying gear. Ford gave me a hand. Half-awake I struggled to the bulkhead door to see in the dim light of the waist, people lined up preparing to jump out the door on the right side of the plane. The door had already been removed. As I got in line word came back that we were not going to bail. Instead we were going to attempt a crash landing. All of us filed back to our positions and tried to prepare for the crash landing. Through the door into the bomb bay I could see two crew members frantically hand cranking the wheels down. One would crank until exhausted, then the other would take over. By some miracle they got the wheels cranked down. Pilot Mueller had seen a runway and was heading for it. The landing field turned out to be Columbia, Missouri. At nearly the last instant the two guys got the wheels cranked down. We came directly into the field. Telephone poles were close to the field, and each pole had a warning light on the top. We knocked off the warning light on top of one pole as we came in to a safe landing. The fire in the engine was extinguished on the ground.

I remember some college students agreeing to drive me to the bus station in Columbia where I caught a bus to St. Louis. There was talk among the civilians in the club car on the train back to Pratt about some very secret bomber that was being flown out of the fields in Kansas that we passed near.

Date written: Fall 1981

Written by: Ira V. Matthews

Subject: Follow the Power Lines to a Cemetery

Pilots in the old Army Air Corps had a cynical cliché to describe the location of airports. It went, "Follow the highest power lines until you reach a cemetery. There you will see the airport." This applied to the old city airport in Terre Haute, Indiana in December 1943. Major Oscar Schaaf, 45th Squadron CO, was flying a B-17 at night in heavy clouds with a load of ice. Near Terre Haute, one engine lost power and had to be shut down. The bomber would not hold altitude on three engines. Breaking out visually, Oscar could see a beacon and runway lights on the south edge of the city. Unaware of the surrounding obstacles, he obtained clearance for an emergency landing. The short runway of 2,500 feet was covered by snow, and 40-foot high power lines crossed the approaches close to the ends of the runway. Major Schaaf managed to clear the power lines and sat the B-17 down smoothly skidding to a halt in a snow bank at the end of the runway with the nose of the plane only a few scant feet from a fence separating the airport from a large cemetery. The plane was undamaged.

The next morning Lt. Chuck Crecelius and I flew a B-17 from Pratt to Terre Haute with parts and tools to repair the ailing engine. We landed at a new, longer strip outside the city. Major Schaaf left his Crew Chief, T/Sgt. Harry Henning, with us to repair the engine and fly his plane out of the tiny airport. He then took our plane and returned to Pratt. While Harry repaired the engine, Chuck and I persuaded city officials to clear the runway. We then went over the airport very carefully to figure out how to fly the B-17 out safely. Such a takeoff would require several things. The plane must be lightened, so we drained the fuel down to 300 gallons. We would need a strong wind; therefore, we waited a day or so. We would also need cold air to give us more power. In December there was plenty of cold air in Indiana.

Harry Henning completed the engine repairs and pronounced the plane ready. The sky was clear. Surface temperature near zero, and a howling wind came out of the northwest. We filed a VFR clearance from the tiny airport to the new strip outside the city limits. When we boarded the B-17, the mayor, the owner of the Terre Haute Hotel and many city employees came to watch us takeoff. We taxied the B-17 as close as possible to the southeast end of the runway and lined up for takeoff. As we applied full power, Chuck closed the engine cowl flaps, and Harry held the throttles full on with turbo power boosting the manifold pressures just above the red lines for takeoff power. The light B-17 literally leaped off the short runway near the 1,500 foot point, clearing the power lines by a good fifty feet. After refueling at the new airport, we filed a flight plan and returned to Pratt.

Date written: 6 April, 1989 (Revised)

Written by: Harry Changnon

Subject: Christmas Holiday and Notes from a Letter Home

Monday, 22 December, 1943, Pratt, KS: Yes it's finally me. I hadn't written before because I had hoped to walk in on you, but now I won't so I had better write. Am very disappointed. With myself mostly, I've been planning more than I should have on being home Friday afternoon to stay until Sunday. They told us that those who flew Thanksgiving would have a better chance of getting home for a couple of days now. I knew Maj. Schaaf and Col. Parker were going to Spokane and Walla Walla, so I thought they'd drop me off in Pocatello on the way and pick me up on the way back. But now they have a full load going to those two cities and to Portland. I couldn't get on any other flights because they are more than loaded with guys going home, too. If only you didn't live up in them thar hills, I could get home.

I'm taking a load of boys to Denver at midnight tomorrow and will pick them up Sunday. May do the same to Chicago. I guess I'll just go to the show and fool around over in Wichita on Christmas. I'm really ashamed to say that I don't even have any presents for you. I've been disappointed so often this month going on longer trips that I haven't had any chance to do any shopping. I bought four pairs of stockings a while back and have that box of shotgun shells so far but I won't send them now. If you can just forgive me for not sending anything, maybe I can pick up something soon, and we'll count that as a Christmas present.

With a minimum crew we took 25 passengers from Pratt to California for the Christmas holiday. Friday morning, the 24th, was cold and dark (10-12° above). After we made sure all of the passengers were aboard with chutes, etc., we started engines to get an early start for sunny California. As we moved down the CheckList we saw that one of the four tachometers was not working. Usually, a gentle tap on the glass would loosen the needles, and they would register the proper reading. Wearing my big mittens, I gave the tach a jab. We heard the sickening sound of glass breaking.

On the day before Christmas, three hours before daylight, instrument repair men and replacement parts are not handy for Harry and miserable company. A few comments did reach my ears that were not favorable. Men were rather bitter to be delayed on the ground in Kansas when precious time was lost that could be used to take them closer to loved ones whom they might never see again. We were lucky. A technician was found who located a new instrument, installed and tested it. We were able to get off by 05:30 which reduced building tensions aboard that chilly plane.

As we droned across the snow-covered land, spirits rose as the sun climbed higher in the sky behind us. Glen Landreth was originally from the Los Angeles area, and his folks still lived there. I had been surprised that he would leave his wife, Audrey, alone in Kansas over Christmas, but we all felt that this might be a final trip to see parents.

We landed at Williams Field at Chandler, AZ to refuel. Five hours had zipped by. After a couple more hours of flying, we made a quick stop at March Field to drop off a few of our passengers before going onto cloud-covered metropolitan Los Angeles.

My grandparents live in San Diego along with a couple of uncles and their families. I walked over to Highway One and started the 125-mile journey. It was 15:00, and it wasn't far. However, my thumb wasn't working well as I hitchhiked along. I was traveling with a thin B-4 bag. I was wearing my leather A-2 leather jacket instead of a blouse.

I got several rides but only for a few miles at a time. Three girls picked me up one time, but they wanted to start a Christmas Eve party--even share me. Timing was poor, and I had to pass up that pleasant invitation. I never did see a bus, and darkness dimmed chances of free rides. Finally, well after dark, a sailor in a beat-up convertible hauled me all the way from San Clemente to LaJolla. I found a telephone to call an uncle to come get me, but was perplexed about how to use the phone. I had never had to dial a number before. Back in the sticks, we told an operator the name or number of the party we wanted, and she rang it for us. Boy, this modern world creates problems.

It was past midnight Christmas Day before I got to bed. Later in the day, grandparents were most surprised to see me, and we shed real tears of joy. My little grandmother was in bed with a terminal illness so I was fortunate to have a final visit with her. We didn't need gifts. Just being with relatives on that special holiday in wartime was great. I was able to call my folks in Idaho.

My uncle had enough gas stamps to drive me back to the LA airport the next day, Sunday, and we got there before noon. A quick stop was made at March Field to pick up the men there before heading across the Mojave desert to Nellis AFB at Las Vegas. We met an uncle of one of our 40th Group members who was helpful. He owned a liquor store. When we left Vegas Monday morning, our B-4 bags bulged, and they were heavy.

In all, we had some pleasant memories of that 1943 Christmas.



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