



MEMORIES

Date of event: 14 January 1945

Written by: several contributors at various times

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION: Perhaps no event in the history of the 40th Bomb Group is more widely remembered by our members than the tragic bomb-unloading accident in Chakulia, India, on January 14, 1945. Many of us lost friends; we knew a few who laid their lives on the line to help others. The event is seared into our memories as one that shows the best and the worst of war. The accident occurred about noon when a weary armament crew was unloading dangerous M-47 cluster bombs from B-29 #224582 in the 44th Bomb Squadron. This issue presents the story from three sources: first-person accounts by several eye witnesses, excerpts from official records, and brief excerpts from a description by James O'Keefe, which he based on interviews and written accounts by witnesses. We are grateful to James O'Keefe for allowing us to use excerpts from his account, to Harry Changnon for making available the official records and some written accounts, and to each of the contributors who took time to record their memories for us.

Frank Redler, group armament officer (written September 1983):

This incident involved M-47 Cluster Anti-Personnel Bombs. Each bomb consisted of 10 fragmentation bombs in two clusters of five, which were secured with bands. These units were very dangerous to handle during the loading process as they were fully armed and could be detonated on impact. Many squadrons in the air force experienced difficulties in the loading process as the small frag bombs shifted and became loose in their bands.

As was true on every mission, two stand-by aircraft were loaded in case others aborted. There were no aborts. Orders came from operations to off-load the two stand-by aircraft. I vehemently protested, citing the danger of the additional handling of these clusters, and I recommended flying the aircraft and dropping on the bombing practice range. My recommendation was denied. It was a Sunday morning. I reluctantly gave the order to off-load one aircraft at a time, warning all to exercise extreme care. During the off-loading one of the cluster bands failed to hold the frag bomb, and explosion and fire resulted. I offered my resignation as I felt I was partly responsible for this tragedy. This caused me considerable mental anguish and will haunt me for the rest of my life.

The smoke had hardly cleared when a TWX was received from the ordnance department in Aberdeen, MD, declaring the M-47 cluster bomb unsafe and ordering that its use be discontinued immediately. The barn door was locked, but too late.

Nine killed, 21 wounded: they were wonderful men and could have been alive today. Understandably the morale of the remaining armament department was very low, and as there was one more aircraft to unload, a sergeant and I did the Job. It took quite a while as I secured each cluster with a GI web belt.

Nathan Kritzer was crew chief of aircraft #394, which shared the same hardstand with #582. His recollections (recorded on cassette about 1982):

My aircraft, whose pilot was Capt. Robert Moore, had been on a mission the day before and was not scheduled. I had to have some work done on my airplane on the right side, so I placed jacks between #3 and #4 engines to raise the plane for removal of wheels. I don't remember whether I had a tire change or a brake job. I remember that Carmine Merolla (crew chief of #582) came over to my aircraft and told me that he was going to have to scratch the mission because on the morning inspection he had found a crack in an inboard supercharger. While he was there, two bomb crews of three men showed up to unload the bombs.

During our discussion of his problem, we were distracted and looked up to see that his plane, #582, had flames leaping up in the front bomb bay. I don't know whether the gasoline had ignited, whether someone had dropped a cigarette, or whether a bomb went off. Still to this day I do not know exactly what happened. I do know that all hell broke out. Merolla started to run towards his plane, but I grabbed him as there was nothing he could do over there. I also saw that there was nothing I could do with my plane either, as it was on jacks, so I could not start engines and taxi it away. We took off and got out of range of fire and explosions and sat on the sidelines for a short period of time. We saw men rushing towards the fire, but there was not much that could be done until the explosions and machine gun bullets stopped going off. Finally the horrible fire died down. All they could do was rescue men who had been wounded. Some were beyond help.

Shortly after that time, Lt/Col Cornett came by and gave me a lift over to 40th Group Headquarters. I had been called in by the CO to make a report, which I did. Later on I went back to the barracks where I learned about the number of men who had been killed and wounded and the brave acts performed. I remember the Red Cross ladies went over to the base hospital to help the nurses. I also recall that a concert was performed that evening by Lily Pons and Andre Kostelanetz, which had been scheduled for the men on the base.

Excerpts from James J. O'Keefe's account (written late in 1982):

The initial explosion was followed by others, all of them deadly. Within seconds all of the men of the unloading crew were dead or seriously wounded. Bomb fragments penetrated the engines and fuel tanks of #582, setting the plane afire and exploding burning gasoline in all directions. The adjacent aircraft (#394), without bombs but with gasoline in the fuel tanks, was in immediate danger. A frightful chain effect seemed imminent, with flames from one burning plane spreading to the next in line.

Now men who were working nearby converged on the two planes. The crash crews came swiftly. M/Sgt Dobrowolski (crew chief of #269) with several of his maintenance crew came expecting to assist M/Sgt Kritzer and M/Sgt Merolla in moving #394 out of danger. A 44th Squadron flight engineer, Lt. Mike Knezevich, came over from his plane. Two 25th Squadron men, Cpl. Elliot Beidler and F/O Aldrich, came from their area. Father Adler found a jeep and raced to the scene. Aircraft #394, on jacks and without tires, could not be moved. Those who had hoped to move it were driven back by the heat.

The number of wounded mounted. Dobrowolski and Knezevich carried an armament man with shattered legs to a weapons carrier truck. Cpl. Al Schumacher, clutching his ripped and bleeding stomach, searched for Sgt. Ed Donnelly. Both had been members of the unloading crew. Father Adler led him to the temporary cover of a command car. Cpl. Schumacher asked that Sgt. Donnelly be brought to safety also.

He could not know that Sgt. Donnelly had been killed instantly.

A second series of horrendous explosions brought down ten men of the crash crew and the two men from the 25th Squadron. Father Adler came a second time driving a jeep and accompanied by someone who remains unknown, but whose actions are well remembered. Seated in the jeep, he leaned down and grasped F/O Aldrich by the wrist. Herb Aldrich, in turn, seized the collar of Cpl Beidler. Father Adler gently eased the clutch in, and the jeep, dragging two men behind it, was driven to a place of safety.

As the fires spread, the intensity of the flames added a new horror to the scene. The clothes of some of the wounded men began to smoke. Dobrowolski, already wounded by bomb fragments, was forced away by the heat. Staggering toward the safety of a command car, he was knocked down three times by explosions.

At the base hospital Doctors Roenigk and Hall worked through the afternoon and night. Those whose injuries would require the care of specialists were scheduled for immediate transfer to a hospital in Calcutta. Three men died of their wounds. The final toll was nine killed and twenty-one wounded.

Neil W. Wemple was appointed Commander of the 44th Squadron on January 11, 1945, three days before the tragic accident. His observations (written 1982):

My beginning as a new Squadron Commander was highly ignominious and inglorious to say the least. Within three days of my appointment as Commander, the squadron had suffered what was to be the worst one-day disaster of its history from the standpoint of B-29's destroyed, and worse yet it was self inflicted.

It happened like this: We had been ordered to prepare for a bombing mission, possibly the one that was to take place January 17 against Formosa, first staging through our forward base near Chengtu, China, known as A-1. An operations order from higher HQ called for 500-pound fragmentation bombs. The operations officer, Major Eigenmann, directed this loading and it was done. Then we received an operations order amendment to change the bomb loading to 500-pound general purpose demolition bombs; we did this. Soon afterward we received another amendment to down load the demos and reload the frags again.

By now we were definitely wearing out the bombs and, worse than that, the men. After we reloaded the frags, guess what. You guessed it. We were ordered to down load the frags and reload the demos! At this point the Armament Officer, Capt. Redler, came in to see me. He protested, saying his men were very tired. Much conversation ensued with the Operations Officer also present. In the end Capt. Redler was ordered to make the fourth change in bomb loading. Otherwise the planes would not be ready in time for the forthcoming mission. He departed disappointed, tired, exasperated. The downloading of the frag bombs began. All of this uploading and downloading of bombs brings to light the incompetence and inefficiency of higher HQ. Unfortunately this was recognized only belatedly and a limitation was eventually placed upon the number of load changes within a given period of time.

That same day I was attending to squadron administrative duties at the squadron headquarters and orderly room when I heard what I knew to be a muffled, but large and ominous, explosion. It seemed to come from the B-29 parking area. I ran to my jeep, jumped in and drove fast to the flight line. As I arrived it seemed that a major conflagration of several B-29's was in progress, and it was in my squadron area! Additional explosions had occurred as I was driving to the area. Everything was in total disorder. B-29's were on fire, and some explosions occurred

after my arrival. People were running around in all directions. I did not arrive in time to see or assist in the rescue of the first victims. Fire trucks were fighting the fires, but as I remember there were not many ambulances remaining on the scene. From there on it was a matter of fighting fires, mopping up and, the sad and worst part, the hospital visits and writing those letters of condolence to next of kin.

Fountain L. Brown was a pilot in the 44th Squadron. His memory (written February 1985):

In December, 1944, I was assigned the additional duty of 44th Bomb Squadron Assistant Operations Officer. I was working in the Operations Office on 14 January 1945, when word was received concerning an emergency in the aircraft parking area. I ran outside to an open area in front of the office and saw a smoke cloud billowing from a 44th Squadron hardstand some distance down the flight line. There was intense activity on the ramp in front of the burning aircraft.

While I watched the action, two people driving up in a jeep stopped and joined me. The three of us stood on the ramp behind the jeep, which was positioned broadside to us. Suddenly we saw the flash of an explosion; we instinctively crouched behind the jeep. Almost immediately we felt the concussion of the blast. Someone mentioned the possibility of flying debris, and we moved tightly against the side of the jeep. It soon became apparent that we were in no danger; no debris fell near us.

A minute or two later, a bomb truck came speeding from the disaster area. As the truck passed by, we saw a wounded man stretched out along the near side of the truck bed, against the base of the bomb hoist. I don't remember seeing anyone on the truck tending to him, but it is likely that someone else was there. I only remember the most shocking sight of the bloody remains of this man's shattered leg dangling over the side of the truck.

I suppose scenes of wounded personnel were common in a ground pounder's combat experience, but bomber crews and support personnel expected to be spared such trauma while in the sanctuary of their home base. Witnessing this dark moment in the history of the 44th Bomb Squadron was a sobering experience, and it seemed to serve notice that anyone, anywhere, at any time could become a casualty of this war.

Howard F. Andrews, radio operator in 44th Squadron (written December 1984):

When we first heard the explosion, someone in the "E" building where we were working ordered us into the slit trench alongside. There was debris flying all around, and no one was quite sure what was happening. As I recall, we stayed there about three hours--although that doesn't seem quite right when you realize that rescue operations were going on. Perhaps we were told to stay there as a safety precaution.

Fr. Bartholomew Adler, chaplain of the 40th Group, was on the line immediately after the explosion. His account (written 1982):

Andre Kostelanetz, conductor and pianist, and Lily Pons, operatic soprano, are familiar names in the world of music. I once had the opportunity of meeting them. I would have enjoyed doing so. But I never got around to doing it because of what happened on Sunday, January 14, 1945, the day they were scheduled to perform at the 40th Bomb Group base at Chakulia, India.

Around noon on that fateful Sunday I was visiting the operations office when an explosion was heard. Rushing outside I saw a column of smoke in the vicinity of where the planes of the 44th

Squadron were parked. I drove to the scene and on arrival saw a horrifying sight. The bomb bay of an airplane was on fire. I learned later the fire was caused when a cluster of fragmentation bombs broke from the bomb rack, fell to the cement, and several of the bombs exploded on impact.

As near as I can recall, four or five men were lying on the ground. They were badly burned, with wisps of smoke floating from their clothing. Several men were trying to drag them to safety; other men were trying to rescue those still trapped beneath the bomb bay. I joined in the effort. I distinctly remember helping Cpl. Schumacher to get away from the plane, assisting him to crawl under a command car that was parked some distance away. (The command car's chassis is high off the ground.) Although badly wounded, he kept asking me to help his buddy, Sgt. Edward Donnelly, who was still back at the plane. As it turned out, Sgt. Donnelly was killed almost instantly. When a second explosion occurred, someone jumped into the command car under which Cpl. Schumacher lay and drove away, leaving him quite exposed.

By this time fire trucks and ambulances began to arrive. There was a great deal of confusion. And there was a great display of heroism performed by many men, risking their lives to help those who were injured, dragging them to comparative safety, helping them into ambulances.

Cpl. Aloysius M. Schumacher was quite a man. Later that dreadful Sunday afternoon I found him at the Base Hospital, clutching his stomach where he had been struck by shrapnel, telling the medics to take care of another buddy of his, Pvt. Edwin Elefant, whom he considered was more seriously wounded than he. Pvt. Elefant died later that night. Cpl. Schumacher died the next day. Nine men died as a result of the explosions and fires, and eighteen men were injured.

No, I never attended the concert given by Andre Kostelanetz and Lily Pons, nor did I get to meet them. But I dare say, even if I had attended the concert, in all likelihood I would have long ago forgotten what songs were sung, what music was played. However, I have never forgotten what happened on Sunday, January 14, 1945, at Chakulia, India.

Richard Bornholdt, CFC maintenance man in the 45th Squadron, (written November 1984):

I was in the hospital recovering from surgery but not yet ready to return to duty on the line when the accident occurred. We heard an explosion and went outside to see if we could determine what and/or where it was. What we saw was a cloud of smoke rising from the general direction of the airfield. Our assumption was that it was a refueling accident, of which we always lived in fear.

The hospital staff went into action immediately, moving those of us who were ambulatory to one ward and taking those who were not ambulatory to the same ward by moving them in their beds. Entire wards were cleared and made ready to receive patients. Those base hospital wards were little more than a barracks with hospital beds down both sides. Each ward probably held 30 or more patients.

The first ambulance arrived before the first ward was ready. From then on it seemed as though there was a steady stream of ambulances arriving. The ambulance drivers identified how serious the injuries were, and the least serious were left on litters on the ward porch while the more serious were rushed to surgery. It was from the less severely injured that we learned that a banded bomb had broken its bands while being unloaded. Further flights to Formosa had been scratched when Luzon had been secured, so these bombs were no longer needed. Those of us who were ambulatory patients tried to help the less severely injured to be as comfortable as

possible while waiting for a nurse or doctor to move them to a bed.

Many of the most severely injured were from the fire fighting unit. They had assumed, as we had, that it was a refueling accident, and hadn't recognized the threat of additional bombs going off. Had they been aware of the hazard, they might have maintained greater distance from the burning plane, but that is pure speculation.

We had one surgeon at the base hospital. As I remember, he was a refugee from Greece who had escaped to the U.S. and had volunteered for the Army Medical Service. He did major surgery continuously for some 12 to 15 hours before a surgical relief team was flown in. After the relief team took over, he spent several hours walking around the hospital area. He was so keyed up that he was almost in a trance and just couldn't let down.

The result of that accident was three hospital wards filled with casualties plus some seven or eight in the morgue, which was located near the hospital. I specifically remember the hyenas collecting around the morgue and howling all night. Many of those who were hospitalized were badly burned and many had received shrapnel. Most of those who arrived at the hospital alive survived the ordeal, but many had life-long handicaps after recovery.

One of those who didn't make it didn't have a scratch on him. He arrived at the hospital in a state of shock. His turn for medical assistance came after the surgery was completed. He was obviously in pain, and the medical team determined that his kidneys were not functional. They catheterized and obtained nothing from one kidney and a teaspoon of bright red blood from the other. He was flown out to a larger hospital, but only made it a couple of days after arrival. After that I knew what "shell shock" really meant.

That night Lily Pons and Andre Kostelanetz performed at the base theater and then visited the hospital. I had always liked their music and tried my best to stay awake until they came through, but I was "beat" and had literally "passed out" by the time they made it. Some of the fellows told them how I had fought to stay awake, and Lily Pons came over and kissed me on the forehead. Hence, I remember the night I was kissed by Lily Pons and never knew it.

THE FOLLOWING EXCERPTS from Twentieth Air Force General Orders Number 29, dated 6 February 1945, describe the basis for awarding the Soldier's Medal to several men. These descriptions supplement the first-person memories described above.

Private Cleo I. Askins: Pvt Askins, a cook in the Base Dispensary, immediately left his post to assist two medical NCO's when a B-29 airplane loaded with gasoline and fragmentation bombs started to burn. They parked the base ambulance approximately 75 yards from the exploding aircraft. Pvt Askins immediately proceeded to the tail of the aircraft where five seriously injured men were lying. He assisted in administering morphine to the men, despite the fact that explosions threw shrapnel all around him and 50-caliber ammunition was going off nearby. Pvt. Askins went to the various positions where men were lying injured, assisting them to the ambulance, and, in the case of more seriously wounded personnel, he acted as a litter bearer, carrying them to the ambulance.

S/Sgt Morris Backer: When a bomb explosion occurred in the aircraft on which he was working, S/Sgt Backer, with no thought for his personal safety, immediately attempted to rescue those who had been seriously injured. He was successful in removing a seriously injured man who was lying alongside the rear bomb bay, where the explosion took place. He removed the injured man

beyond the tail of the aircraft and remained with him until a stretcher bearer arrived and helped carry him to an adjacent ambulance. During this time a series of explosions of gas tanks, bombs and ammunition occurred and S/Sgt Backer was wounded in the left thigh.

Sergeant Stephen A. D'Addio: Sgt D'Addio, medical NCO, immediately left the Base Dispensary, where he was on duty when a B-29 aircraft exploded while being loaded with bombs and started to burn. He parked the Base Ambulance approximately 75 yards from the scene, and proceeded to the tail of the aircraft, where five seriously injured enlisted men were lying. Despite the fact that bombs were still exploding, throwing shrapnel all around him, and ammunition was going off wildly, he injected morphine into the injured men, thereby relieving the pain, before bandaging them and sending them to the ambulance. After the fire had burnt itself out, he went through the debris, removing all bodies that had been trapped within. Sgt D'Addio treated numerous men on the line who had been injured, and then went to the Base Dispensary where he worked all night with the Group Surgeon, assisting in operations and the various other tasks that faced them.

Master Sergeant Emil Dobrowolski: Upon hearing the explosion, M/Sgt Dobrowolski rushed to the aircraft and was successful in removing seriously injured men to an ambulance. Despite a series of explosions of gas tanks, bombs and ammunition, he attempted to return to rescue other personnel and was wounded in the head, back and leg by shrapnel, forcing him to retreat.

Private First Class Elias T. Flessor: When a bomb explosion occurred in the rear bomb bay of the aircraft where he was working, Pfc Flessor escaped with two other seriously injured men. When one of the injured men fell and could go no further, Pfc Flessor remained with him until he saw an adjacent ambulance. Subsequently, he ran to the ambulance, obtained a stretcher and with the services of another enlisted man, ran back to the injured man, placed him on the stretcher and carried him to the ambulance. Attempting to rescue others, a series of explosions of gas tanks, bombs and ammunitions felled and wounded him, and he was forced to retreat.

First Lieutenant Michael Knezevich: Lt. Knezevich was responsible for the removal of four wounded persons. This was accomplished at great personal risk in the face of a series of explosions of gas tanks, bombs and ammunition. His courage and utter disregard for his own safety were meritorious.

Sergeant Charles McCarthy: Sgt McCarthy, medical NCO, immediately left the Base Dispensary where he was on duty, when a B-29 aircraft started to burn. He parked his ambulance about 75 yards from the scene of the accident and proceeded to the tail of the exploding aircraft, where five enlisted men were lying seriously injured. Despite the fact that ammunition was going off wildly and explosions were occurring repeatedly all around him, Sgt McCarthy administered morphine to the men, relieving their pain, and then bandaged them before sending them to the ambulance. After the fire had burnt out, he went through the debris picking out bodies that had been trapped in the airplane. Sgt McCarthy worked all night with the Group Surgeon, assisting him with the operations and the various other tasks that faced them.

Corporal Irvin A. Miller: When a bomb explosion occurred in the aircraft on which he was working, Cpl Miller, with no thought for his personal safety, immediately attempted to rescue those who had been seriously injured. He was successful in removing two seriously injured men from the aircraft. Wounded himself, Cpl Miller remained with an injured man and placed him on a stretcher during a series of explosions of gas tanks, bombs and ammunition.

S/Sgt Mayo W. Young: With utter disregard for his own safety, S/Sgt Young assisted in removing

two seriously injured men from the vicinity of the burning aircraft, despite a series of explosions of gas tanks, bombs and ammunition.

EDITORS' POSTSCRIPT: Doubtless others who were in Chakulia on January 14, 1945, will have memories of that fateful day. Send us your recollections, and we may be able to report more in a later issue. We also want to piece together future issues of Memories on other major events that we shared in the 40th Group. If you have memories of "The Battle of Kansas," very early in 1944 as we worked in the Kansas winter to modify and repair B-29's in preparation to go overseas, please send them. Also if you have memories of the two major firebombing raids on Tokyo on May 24 and 26, 1945, please send them to the editors.

Memories is supported by dues paid to the 40th Bomb Group Association, but we cannot continue to publish as frequently as hoped without additional funds. If you wish to make a voluntary contribution to help keep the Memories flowing, make your check to 40th Bomb Group Association, and mail it to M. E. Carmichael, Treasurer, 2514 Oregon, Alamogorda, NM 88310.

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