



Date of event: 24 May, 1945

Date written: August, 1989

Written by: Otto Kerstner

Editor's Introduction: We have published issues of MEMORIES about ditchings (Lyon's crew, Issue #21), but this is the first publication of a story of what it was like to ditch in the Pacific. This experience took place after a successful mission to Tokyo. Robert V. Boalton tragically was lost in this bailout. All ten other crew members were rescued within eight hours.

SUCCESSFUL MISSION--THEN A BAILOUT IN THE PACIFIC

Our B-29 is gliding toward Japan. Ahead, far below, an orange glow sets flame to the night. As we approach, the blaze looms larger. It's our target. Bombs, dropped from the B-29s that preceded us, have set a city on fire.

Hours before, our crew and hundreds of others had begun to prepare for another mission. Each man gathers his flight jacket, pistol, canteen and candy bars (those which the ants hadn't discovered) and walks to the nearby briefing hall, each crew sitting together in the same row. On stage, huge colored maps of our target remain covered. All becomes quiet when the briefing officer walks in carrying a long wooden pointer. A map of Japan is uncovered. The officer announces, "Our target is Tokyo. Your bombing altitude is 9,000 feet. By the time you arrive, parts of Tokyo will have already been bombed."

"Pick out a section of the city that is not burning for your bomb drop, but--and this is important--do not drop any bombs on or near the Imperial Palace. Also, there have been reports from recent missions that the Japanese have a new type of night fighter equipped with a very bright spotlight to help the pilot visually pick out B-29s, making it easier to shoot them down. We are not totally sure about this, but be on the alert. The first plane will take off at 16:00. Good luck to all of you." Father Adler closes the briefing with a prayer for our safe return and gives us his benediction.

We wend our way out to the waiting trucks, one for each crew, and are driven to our plane parked on the flight line. Our ground crew is waiting. Soon all their many sweaty hours of conscientious preparation will be put to the test. We preflight our plane, "B-Sweet," each crew member checking that for which he is responsible. I take my position at the controls, and using the intercom, I check with each crew member to verify that he is ready. We strap ourselves in. The flight engineer starts the engines, and the tower gives us clearance to taxi. We wave goodbye to the ground crew and join an endless line of planes, inching our way toward the runway. Countless spinning propellers and changing shadows created by the movement of the planes in front of us give me an eerie feeling. Reaching the end of the runway, we line up, and when the plane in front of us breaks ground, we're given the signal for "go."

With full throttle on all four engines, the plane shudders, and we start to roll. My co-pilot calls out the airspeed--80, 100--at 120 MPH the plane becomes alive and separates itself from the earth. Wheels up. Flaps up. Turn to our compass course. Climbing to our cruising altitude, I set our engines to cruise. We're on our way.

Hundreds of B-29s, each carrying ten tons of bombs, nose their way toward a city's destruction. I think, "How strange war is. Most of the people who will die tonight are as convinced of their cause as we are of ours."

En route the crew makes small talk, smokes cigarettes and chomps candy bars. Vigilantly, I watch the flight and navigation instruments and constantly make small corrections. The contented purr of the engines tells us that everything is as it should be. We pass Iwo Jima. We are part of a long aerial pipeline filled with B-29s. Eventually I look at the clock on the instrument panel and conclude that soon we will be approaching our target. Then we see the orange glow. As we get closer, the glow gets larger, and we see Tokyo burning. A city built of wood--the perfect fuel--is now a gargantuan bonfire.

Our bomb bay is filled with large bomb clusters. When dropped at a sufficient distance from the plane, each bomb will explode and release dozens of small fire bombs. The bombardier tells me that he has chosen a dark section of the city just ahead of us, not yet burning, to drop our bombs. He opens the bomb bay doors. We're now on our bombing run.

Suddenly, searchlights select our plane for their target. Brilliant fingers of light are concentrated on our plane, and in the cockpit it's as bright as day. I know that on the ground, anti-aircraft guns are firing at our plane caught at the apex of the searchlights. Breathlessly, I await the deadly bursts. Agonizingly slow, the seconds drag by, and, finally, we fly safely out of the range of the blinding glare. My eyes again become accustomed to the darkness, and ahead and below I see what appears to be several planes on fire, trailing large sheets of flame as they go down.

Our bombardier drops the bombs in a long trailing sequence. I cannot see the bombs impact and ignite since they hit their target directly below us. But I can see dozens of bomb patterns created by planes all around us. They form oblong patterns on the black ground, each about 100 yards wide and nearly half a mile long. Hundreds of sparkling diamond-like lights are shining in the oblong pattern, and there are many such patterns. Fire spreads everywhere. Stretching to the horizon, as far as I can see, Tokyo is burning. The Emperor's Palace is an island in a sea of fire. The Emperor, no doubt, is in his protective bunker. For him, it must be a nightmare. As for us--so far, we're lucky. We have escaped the searchlights. We were not hit, as far as we know, nor did we collide with another B-29. We have dropped our bombs, and we're headed home. Home is 1,500 miles away, Quonset huts and a mess hall permeated with the smell of New Zealand mutton.

Suddenly, over the intercom our right rear gunner yells, "Jap fighter with a powerful spotlight diving on us, one o'clock high!" I look up and see the brilliant light of the diving fighter, just as we had been told about at the briefing. To escape, I push the B-29's nose down, diving and turning to the left. Then right. Now climb. Turn left. Right. Level out. I look up and see another fighter with its brilliant spotlight diving at us. Awaiting the bullets, I cringe and again dive, turn, turn, climb, level out. I look and see another fighter. No, wait. That light doesn't move. Then, finally it dawns on me. The atmospheric conditions were such that they created a layer of air which acted like a huge lens and magnified the light from the planet Venus. Over the intercom, I explain to the crew what the light really was and how the power of suggestion had fooled me. In the darkness, we continue toward home. Now we can relax. Someone opens a lunch package and hands me a wet chicken salad sandwich and a can of grapefruit juice that tastes like acid. As the sun rises on a new day, we approach Iwo Jima, and I check our fuel reserve with the flight engineer. He assures me that the fuel gauges and calculations show adequate fuel for our homeward flight to Tinian.

Halfway between Iwo Jima and Tinian, the flight engineer catches my attention, and in a subdued voice says, "Lieutenant, we don't have enough fuel to reach base." I thought this was some sort of grizzly humor. After repeating over and over that he was serious and that he couldn't explain where the fuel had gone, I finally believed him. Reluctantly, I told the radio operator to contact Tinian, explain our problem, give our location, and tell them that soon we would be forced to bail out. Over the intercom, I revealed our plight to the crew.

The ocean below seems angry; there's a whitecap on every wave. To ditch in an angry ocean is almost impossible, probably only half the crew would survive. From the rear compartment, one of the gunners asks over the intercom, "Lieutenant, can we ditch rather than bail out? There are several of us here in the rear section who can't swim. If we ditch, we can all stay together." What a dilemma! If we bail out and a non-swimming crew member is lost, I would feel responsible and forever carry a load of guilt.

As I mull over this problem, one of the engines starts to sputter from lack of fuel. The engineer tries to transfer fuel, but then another engine begins to sputter. I instruct the radio operator to advise home base of our final location, and to tell them we're ditching. I start our glide down toward the ocean's surface, and then the plane shudders from a violent explosion. A gunner yells, "Fire in number three?" I toggle the CO₂ fire extinguisher switch for number three engine, but the fire keeps burning. The decision whether to bail out or ditch has been resolved. Not wanting to ride our burning plane into the sea, I hear myself say a phrase I never dreamed of saying, "Bail out!" I toggle the landing gear switch to "down," instruct the bombardier to open the bomb bay doors, and flick the bailout bell-switch to "on." To make sure the men in the rear got the message, by intercom I yell, "BAIL OUT. NOW!"

One of the crew members in the front section steps down into the wheel well and places his feet on the angles in the well. I see the white-capped waves far below him. I watch, expecting him to go, but he just stands there. I yell and wave at him, "GO--GO!" But, he hesitates and doesn't jump. Finally he says, "Why don't we turn and go back to where the rear crew members bailed out, and we'll all be in the same area?" The suggestion is a good one. I flick the automatic pilot switch to "Off," and manually make a 180° turn. In the distance, I see a group of parachutes floating down. When we are over the floating parachutes, one of the crew members steps down into the wheel well, says, "So long," and disappears.

As I watch the crew members disappear through the wheel well, I am not apprehensive. Soon I'm alone, and now it's my turn. It's nervous time. I check my parachute buckles for the last time, step down into the wheel well, place each foot on an aluminum angle, say good-bye to our plane, "B-Sweet," and snap my legs together. In an instant I'm tumbling through the air. I don't remember pulling the parachute rip cord, but I felt a sudden, shocking jerk, and I thought my head had come off. When I realized I was in one piece, I looked around. The parachute above my head was a billowing white disc against the clear azure sky. Everything was quiet--beautiful. I had always mentally entertained making a parachute jump. Ever since, as a young boy, I had observed parachute jumping from open-cockpit planes. I pulled on the parachute shroud lines and was surprised at how little resistance each one offered. The thought crossed my mind, "I don't hate anyone so what I am doing here floating down into the Pacific? This is where our movie heroes, maybe Clark Gable or Spencer Tracy, should be."

After a while, I looked around and saw no other parachutes, but I did see our airplane. A long, black, smoking trail was pouring from number three engine. To my horror, the plane was making a large descending turn to the right. Mentally I continued the circular path that the plane was taking, and judging from my vertical descent, concluded that the plane and I would arrive at a point below me at the same time. I couldn't believe what was happening. I had made a mortal error! Before I jumped, I should have flipped the autopilot switch back to "On," and the plane would have continued to fly straight ahead. However, at the time my mind was busy with other things. Now the plane and I were approaching a crossroad. Soon I would be staring into the nose of my approaching B-29 with its 17-foot propellers churning the air. Maybe "B-Sweet" was angry with me for abandoning her. Was she seeking revenge?

I closed my eyes and waited helplessly for the inevitable. But, it didn't happen. The plane passed about fifty feet directly below me. In horror, I continued to watch it. Since it missed me the first time, it was spiraling around again for a second try. After completing three-quarters of the second circle--and not far from where I was--the B-29 increased its dive and hit the ocean at about a ten-degree angle.

Upon impact, the front part of the fuselage and wing section stopped, and the vertical section of the tail kept on going, appearing to slice through the cockpit section. Everything disappeared beneath the surface of the ocean in a second.

I was so mesmerized by the unbelievable events that I wasn't prepared for entering the water. I just had time to undo the chest buckle of my parachute harness and pull the two knobs on my "Mae West." The vest inflated, and I plunged into the water. The waves were ten to fifteen feet high and each wave crested with a curling white cap. As I plunged into the water, the parachute canopy completely covered me. When I came to the surface, the churning action of the waves and the flailing of my arms and legs caused the parachute and its shroud lines to become entwined about my body, arms and legs. I struggled and panicked. It seemed like a bad dream. The more I struggled and thrashed, the worse things became. I thought, "My God, I'm drowning." Then an inner voice said, "You're floating, aren't you? So relax." It seemed like a good idea. So I relaxed and carefully unwound myself from the shroud lines. I eventually got out from under the wet, clinging parachute.

My next task was to get my raft package inflated. But, I couldn't get to it. I swam, and struggled, but I was being held by something, and I didn't know what. Finally, it dawned on me that I hadn't unbuckled the two parachute leg straps. After unbuckling the straps, I was able to get to the floating raft package. After searching, I found the cord that, when pulled, triggered a CO₂ cartridge to inflate the raft. What a lovely sight as I watched the small square package evolve, like a balloon being blown up, into a small one-man life raft.

My strength gone, I was totally exhausted, and I had difficulty getting into the raft. Once into the water-filled raft, I rested. Riding the waves was like riding a roller coaster. I didn't see any other crew member and hoped and prayed that all my men were safe. Recovering some of my strength, I put out the sea anchor to keep the raft at right angles to the waves. Using a sponge which was part of the raft package, I bailed out the raft to make it as dry as possible. I continued to search through the raft package and found a fishing kit. How thoughtful of the designers of the raft to include it! Never having fished in an ocean before, I thought I'd give it a try. Before I got to fishing, a strange feeling came over me. It didn't take long to diagnose--I was seasick. At first barf, I tried leaning over the edge of the raft and almost fell out--the raft almost flipped over on me. Since I was alone and didn't have to make a good impression on anyone, I threw up everything onto my chest. Good-bye chicken sandwich. Eventually I cleaned myself with sea water and the sponge, and, again, dried out the raft.

The whitecaps kept irritating me by playfully flicking water down the back of my neck just as I started the roller coaster slide down each new wave. I gave up the idea of fishing and, being very cold, I pulled a cover, attached to the raft, over me. Being black, the cover absorbed heat from the sun to warm me, and I soon fell asleep. When I awoke I saw a PBY search plane approaching on the distant horizon. Using a mirror which was also part of the raft rescue package, I wiggled the mirror towards the plane. After wandering around, it eventually headed straight for me, and from an altitude of about 200 feet, a PBY crew member dropped a chemical marker into the sea around me. Knowing that I'd eventually be rescued, I let the waves rock me to sleep. Awakening again and as my raft topped a wave, I saw a ship's mast on the horizon. After a considerable length of time, the ship's motorboat approached me. I was hailed with, "Are you hurt, buddy?" When I was in the boat a sailor said, "Say, fella, do you have any souvenirs you want to give away?" I said, "Yes, you can have the raft." "Don't want that." "What do you want?" "Your 45 pistol." "Sorry, but that's no souvenir!" Before long, the motorboat pulled up to the mother ship *Cook Inlet* (named after a southern Alaska inlet). I walked up the lowered stairs to be greeted by my crew who by this time had cleaned up and were wearing new navy clothes. Except for our left gunner, Robert Boalton, who was never found (ironically the best swimmer of the crew), we were all safely aboard.

No one was hurt, but several were severely sunburned. These individuals, in their chutes, believing themselves to be just a few feet above the ocean's surface, slipped out of their harnesses, and their parachutes, carrying the life raft packages, were blown away and were never recovered. Their Mae Wests were their only means of support. The direct and reflected rays of the sun had given them severe facial burns. We had all been in the water from six to eight hours.

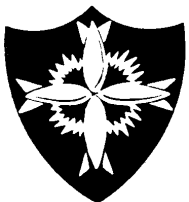
The crew of the *Cook Inlet* treated us royally, often serving us fresh eggs and waffles for breakfast. Several days later we docked at Saipan and were flown back to Tinian.

Since we had lost "B-Sweet," our crew was broken up, and each of us was sent where we were most needed. I was fortunate to become co-pilot on Major John (Dusty) Child's lead crew. I flew the remainder of my missions with Dusty, which included the last combat mission flown by the B-29s. This was several days after the atomic bombs were dropped. Somewhere along the line, I was asked to sign a document to verify the loss of my aircraft since I was the one responsible for it and the one who last saw it. The price tag for a B-29 on that document was over a million dollars. I signed after I was assured that I personally would not have to pay for one lost B-29.

A few weeks after the peace treaty was signed, we flew eastward, stopping at Kwajalein and Hawaii. I said good-bye to plane and crew at McCallan AFB, California. Separated from service, I returned home and to civilian life. I am deeply grateful for my good fortune and since then have repeated many a silent prayer for my comrades who were not so lucky.

Footnote: Members of the crew of "B-Sweet" who participated in this mission were as follows:

Otto Kerstner	AC	Melvin L. Otto	Radar
Robert W. Morrow	CP	James L. Lausa	CFC
Richard J. Porter	N	Shelby L. Sephens	RG
Melvin B. Searcy	B	Robert V. Boalton	LG
Clarence R. Montgomery	FE	Leonard A. Busch	TG
Donald J. Kolp	R		



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