



**Date of event:** 18 February, 1942  
**Date written:** 31 May, 1985 (final draft)  
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## INTRODUCTION

The 40th had a good many adventures before becoming a B-29 Group. Less than three months after the declaration of war, the Group was flying anti-submarine patrols in the Caribbean. Equipment was "Digby's", tired, old Douglas twin engine B-18s. The following is an account of one of those B-18, anti-submarine patrols written by Ira Matthews. Credit for this onerous anti-sub patrol duty was grudgingly given by higher command--if any was given at all. The 40th received credit for sinking one submarine during this period. Chick Koenig was the pilot and Bill Lessin was the bombardier on that mission, which took place August 22, 1942, north of the Panama Canal entrance.

## SUBMARINE IN THE HARBOR

It was noontime on Aruba Island, Dutch West Indies, February 18, 1942. Three of us were wolfing down a cold meal of canned rations, in a windowless shack at the upwind end of the gravel surfaced Aruba airport. The downwind end of the 3,000 foot strip ended on the shore of the small Oranjestad harbor. Gusty, easterly trade winds of some 20 miles per hour poured through the shack, covering us with gritty dust.

We had completed a six hour patrol in a B-18, escorting a convoy of four shallow draft tankers from Las Piedras, Venezuela, across a 50 mile stretch of German submarine infested waters in Oranjestad harbor. This harbor was not protected by a submarine net. Our fuel was low as the last tanker entered the harbor. We then landed on the Aruba airport for more fuel and a quick meal. The Crew Chief/Gunner, Sgt. Bennie Slonina was busy pumping fuel into the bomber for our afternoon patrol to protect outbound Allied tankers carrying aviation fuel to Great Britain. We were to take off as soon as our pilot, Colonel Ivan Palmer, Commander, 40th Bomb Group, returned from a short luncheon meeting with Dutch and U.S. Navy officials directing anti-submarine operations in the south sector of the Caribbean.

As we ate, the Bombardier, Sgt. James E. (Buck) Dozier glanced over my shoulder toward the harbor. His eyes widened as he yelled, "SUBMARINE IN THE HARBOR!" I whirled to look. A mottled gray submarine with a German insignia on the conning tower was fully surfaced, very near the west end of the runway. Crew members were coming down the conning tower ladder, moving toward their 88 MM deck gun. (We were unaware the crew had already fired a torpedo at the berthed tankers. Luckily it missed, skidding onto the shore without exploding, coming to rest very near the Harbor Masters Office, which housed the Allied anti-submarine operations.) It appeared obvious, the crew intended to shell the tankers, Oranjestad and perhaps the airport at point blank range. Ours was the only plane on the field at the moment.

I vaulted the window sill, calling, "Let's go" to the others. They were close on my

heels as I sprinted some 200 feet across the runway to the B-18. Bennie Slonina, still pumping gas, looked up in surprise. I pointed to the sub and yelled, "Move that fuel truck and clear the props." I clambered through the rear hatch, followed by our Navigator, Lt. David Snow. Sgt. Dozier ducked into the bomb bay, pulled the four depth charge pins and entered the nose compartment through the forward hatch. (Unknown to me, Sgt. Slonina also entered the nose section, where he normally served as another set of eyes as we searched visually for subs during patrols.) A B-18 had no sonar, or radar detection gear for anti-submarine warfare.

I reached the pilot's seat, donned a headset and flipped the batteries ON. As I pressed the right starter, the navigator pulled the rear ladder aboard and shut the hatch. He then rushed forward and grabbed the wobble pump handle, pumping rapidly for starting fuel pressures, as he slipped into the co-pilot's seat. I meshed the right starter and the still warm engine caught quickly and coughed into a steady roar. As I cranked the left engine, the Bombardier called, "Pilot from Bombardier, the pins are pulled and all charges are armed. Ready for take off sir." I replied, "Roger, we will take off downwind. When you hear the gear start up, open the doors and drop all the charges on that sub. You won't have much time." He replied, "Roger, level off at 100 feet and fly straight at the sub, try to hold 130 MPH until release." I replied, "Roger," trying to conceal my anxiety. My mouth felt full of cotton and my eyes were glued on that sub crew around the gun on their forward deck.

Let it be said here that I was the greenest co-pilot assigned the 40th Bomb Group. Only five months out of flying school, with less than 200 hours in B-18s. Fortunately I had flown a few times in the pilot's seat with my regular pilot, 1st Lt. James Ira Cornett, who had let me make a grand total of five landings from the left seat. The anxiety of seeing that sub, plus the uncertainty of trying to take off downwind, filled my head with understandable doubts. There was little time for thought. Since there was no sign of Colonel Palmer, I decided to tackle the downwind take off, with Dave Snow acting as Co-Pilot.

I gunned both engines and turned the B-18 onto the runway. As I locked the tail wheel, we were headed straight at the sub, some 3,500 feet ahead of us. I hurriedly went over the gear retraction levers with Dave. He calmly replied, "Don't worry, I know how. Let's go!" His confidence helped some. I then released the parking brakes and started to advance power for take off. Suddenly I glimpsed a khaki clad figure in the dust directly in front of the plane. It was Colonel Palmer. I cut the throttles to IDLE and locked the brakes. He ducked under the left wing, opened the rear hatch and climbed aboard. The plane filled with dust. Dave moved out of the co-pilot's seat and aft to his normal position. When the Colonel reached the cockpit, he said, "Move over". As I quickly slid across the aisle, I said, "Colonel, I was going to take off downwind, to be sure we get that sub." Easing his long frame into the pilot's seat, he calmly replied, "Lieutenant, that tail wind is too strong. We could never get off the ground. We will taxi to the other end. There is plenty of time."

He then released the brakes and taxied at normal speed, directly toward the submarine. We reached the halfway point and that sub looked awfully large to me, particularly that big deck gun, surrounded by its crew. Anxious beyond measure, I blurted, "Co-Pilot to Bombardier, start strafing the sub with the nose gun, force them away from that deck gun." Colonel Palmer cut in, "Disregard that Bombardier, this is the Pilot, we will be turning in a moment and you might hit a prop as we turn." The Bombardier's subdued, "Roger Sir!" matched my sinking feeling completely. By this time, we were less than 500 feet from the sub. Some of the crew was climbing the ladder and four men were still at the gun controls. Some glanced nervously at us. An officer in a white, visored cap, stood in the conning tower, visible from the waist up, He ignored us, signaling to the gun crew with both hands. Binoculars hung from a cord around his neck.

Colonel Palmer turned the plane into the wind, tail pointing directly at the sub. I locked the tail wheel and called, "Ready for take off, Sir!" Colonel Palmer then set the brakes and advanced the right throttle, checking both magnetos and the props. I could barely conceal my emotions. We were almost within pistol shot of a German sub, yet the Colonel was delaying take off for routine engine checks. Finally completing the left engine run up, Colonel Palmer waggled the flight controls, released the brakes and shoved the throttles forward to full power. We rumbled down the runway, spreading a huge cloud of dust behind, thus relieving some of my thoughts of an 88 MM shell tearing the B-18 to bits. At 85 miles per hour, the plane lifted into the buffeting wind. I yanked the lever when the Colonel called, "Gear Up!" Those were most welcome words and helped to calm my jangled nerves. I then adjusted the engines and props for climb power.

The B-18 always slow to climb, inched upward at 200 feet per minute. At 300 feet, Colonel Palmer started a shallow turn to the right, as the plane rocked and yawed in the strong turbulence. I looked back. The submarine was slanting toward the harbor channel, bow submerged. It was crash diving for the safety of deeper water outside the short channel. I called across the aisle, "Colonel, he is diving into the channel, we have to hurry if we get there in time." Colonel Palmer did not reply and continued the shallow turn. The Bombardier called, "Pilot I can see the periscope wake, center the PDI and level off here. Hold 130 miles per hour and give me a level." The Colonel replied, "Roger, level, PDI centered." We had reached 1,000 feet and the turbulence had decreased.

I could see a faint sub wake, merging with the seething waves at the channel mouth. We were still a good half-mile from the wake. The Bombardier calmly called his pre-release angles from the fixed bomb sight and the bomb bay doors opened. He called, "Pilot from Bombardier, the doors are open, hold this heading and speed, keep it level." His voice lost its customary confidence as he continued, "I have lost the wake, I'll try to estimate the release point, stand by for bombs away." In a few seconds the B-18 lurched upward, as it was freed from the 1,200 pounds of the four depth charges.

Colonel Palmer banked into a steep left turn. The concussion from the exploding charges thudded in our ears. The water's surface was covered with tossing whitecaps and foam. The sub's wake was not visible. Well below the surface, we could see four circles from the explosions, in a neat line, well beyond the channel entrance. We had bombed in deep water. As the plane continued to circle the channel mouth, we strained to see an oil slick, air bubbles, or possibly wreckage, as evidence the submarine had been damaged. We saw nothing but waves, whitecaps and foam streaks. Reluctantly Colonel Palmer turned back and landed on the Aruba airstrip, where we would load additional depth charges and fuel for our afternoon patrol.

As we discussed our astonishing experience, Colonel Palmer described the dangers of my attempting a downwind take off. (Palmer was an unusually gentle man, very polite. He treated his subordinates in an almost fatherly manner.) I listened carefully to his comments. When he finished, I was keenly aware I had been stopped from risking our necks in a dangerous, if not impossible attempt to take off downwind. By this time, members of the Allied Naval staff had arrived and we gave them a detailed account of the event. We then departed for our next patrol.

Later on, Sgt. Dozier, Dave Snow and Bennie Slonina often discussed this incident with myself and others flying the four B-18's from the 40th Group operating from Aruba and a sister island, Curacao. One primary fact stood out. That German sub captain was watching our B-18 through his periscope, as the last tanker entered the harbor.

Obviously, he was not afraid of our bomber. He must also have known Oranjestad Harbor had no defenses, from a channel net, or shore based guns. His daring foray into the harbor in broad daylight, literally under our noses, showed his disdain, even contempt for, the Allied forces operating around Aruba and Curacao.

Much speculation and discussion followed us for days after this event. Could I have made that downwind take off safely? Would the Bombardier have had time to open the bomb bays, aim his sight and release the charges? Would the charges set for 40 feet, have cracked the hull of the surfaced submarine? Could we have reached the sub in time, if Colonel Palmer had not checked the engines before take off? Was the sub damaged by our charges as it dived for the safety of deep water at the channel mouth? Of course these questions were never answered. Despite our failure to destroy the submarine, we did take comfort in the knowledge that we prevented the sub from shelling the tankers and possibly Oranjestad with their deck gun.

Despite some rather extensive reading of USAAC histories and U.S. Navy reports, as well as several dozen books about the Allied anti-submarine warfare in the Atlantic Ocean, the writer has never found an account of this event. The 40th Bomb Group histories for 1942 were either lost or destroyed. The lengthy histories of World War II by Samuel Eliot Morison on the Battle of the Atlantic, fails to mention this unique encounter at Oranjestad. Perhaps everyone involved simply preferred to forget the incident. Bennie Slonina, Dave Snow and the writer, the only known survivors of the B-18 crew, remember it, as if it were yesterday.

**EDITORS' POSTSCRIPT:** We want to put together more issues of MEMORIES on other events that we shared in the 40th Group. If these issues of MEMORIES remind you of other events that you would like to see covered, write us about them. Best of all, write them in your own words and send them to us.

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