



Ditching off the Africa Coast

Editor's Introduction: In Issue #24 of MEMORIES dated November, 1988, Dick Steiner wrote about this event. Leland Jones, who was co-pilot of this plane, has expanded on the story recounting more of the flight, the ditching and the rescue. He sets the stage by telling a bit about how this crew was organized and prepared for combat.

There is a thread that connects this story with the story that will make up the next issue of MEMORIES. That thread is Jim Cowden who takes over this crew as Leland Jones notes at the end of this story.

There was also an adventure on the plane on which Jim Cowden flew to India as co-pilot. Dan McNew tells this story. It follows Leland Jones' story.

Date of event: June, 1944
Date written: September, 1994
Written by: Leland G. Jones

Our B-29 crew was formed in early December 1943 at Clovis AFB Airfield, Clovis, New Mexico

Crew members were:

Captain	Edsel O. Clark	Aircraft Commander (not on roster)
2nd Lt.	Leland G. Jones, Jr.	Co-pilot
2nd Lt.	Floyd D. Steiner	Navigator
2nd Lt.	Ira C. Redmon	Bombardier (deceased)
2nd Lt.	Leonard J. Koenig	Flt. Engineer
Staff Sgt.	Ray P. Adamson	CFC Gunner (deceased)
Staff Sgt.	William J. Salmon	Radio Operator (not on roster)
Staff Sgt.	Edward W. Bronson	Left Gunner
Staff Sgt.	Michael P. Shebak	Right Gunner
Staff Sgt.	Glen L. Voris	Tail Gunner

We attended a 30-day B-29 course given by a Mobile Training Detachment Unit. However, after this B-29 course, due to a lack of B-29 training aircraft, we did our initial flight training in B-17s.

We were scheduled to fly the "Memphis Bell," the B-17 that became famous for being the first B-17 to fly 25 combat missions in the ETO and return to the states with the crew that flew her on those missions. At the time, we didn't think that just flying the "Memphis Bell" was such a big deal.

We received B-29's for further training by May 1944. We flew these B-29's for 64:00 hours, made 14 flights, shot 40 landings, achieved 13.25 of nighttime flying through the month of May 1944. On June 1, we were told to immediately ship our household goods and families home, as we would be leaving Clovis, less families, for Herington, Kansas, to arrive June 9, 1944, for final processing prior to departure for overseas.

At Herington, the next few days were filled with frenzied preparations of all sorts, plus being assigned our B-29 aircraft, #-42-6383, that we would be flying into combat. To emphasize what we felt, was undue "haste" to get the B-29's into combat, they refused our flight engineer's request to allow us to make a residual level fuel factor test. This would have taken a couple of days, which was the reason for the refusal.

A day or so later, we got orders to take off for West Palm Beach, Florida. We were told that we would receive further orders there. After arriving in Florida, we were briefed that we would receive sealed orders at the aircraft before taking off for our next destination. We were given a heading and altitude to fly after departure, and we would fly this heading and altitude for an hour. Then we were to open the sealed orders and find out where we would be fighting the war. We were also told to land at Borinquen Field, Puerto Rico for refueling and rest. Our next stop was to be Roberts Field, Georgetown, Guiana, for fuel, then on to Natal, Brazil (we crossed the equator on this leg). After landing at Natal, we rested for a day. We had a chance to go into town for a few hours to shop. The fad among the fly boys then was to own a pair of "mosquito boots." We felt real lucky to be able to actually have a pair of Natal mosquito boots. It seems that Natal was the point of origination of the mosquito boot. I couldn't locate a pair that would fit me, so I finally bought a pair that felt a little loose on my feet. (Boy! was I sorry about the loose fit. I'll get to that later.) We all bought Natal mosquito boots and then had to get back to the base and get ready for a midnight takeoff.

(One other thing. Before we left town, I bought six pairs of sheer silk hose for my wife, Barbara, and mailed them that afternoon. When she received them she wrote me saying that she was the talk of the town. I guess she was the only lady in Greenwood, Mississippi, who actually had a pair (6 pairs) of silk hose.)

Just as we lined up for the takeoff that night, the control tower told us to hold up our takeoff. They had a priority passenger that had to get on the aircraft, and he would arrive in a jeep very shortly. It turned out to be a crew member from another B-29 that had just left the day before and was proceeding to the same destination as us. He had gotten sick from bad food in the mess hall. After he boarded, we took off, flew up to our assigned altitude of 7,500 feet, and took up our course direct to Accra, Africa, without stopping at the Ascension Islands. We were informed during our briefing before takeoff that we would be the first aircraft to fly direct to Accra without stopping at Ascension. During our weather briefing prior to takeoff, we were informed that we would penetrate a front approximately one-third of the way across the ocean at about a perpendicular angle, and that we should be through it and on the other side after about 75 to 100 miles.

After about an hour we finally realized that this was either one hell of a wide front or that the weather predictors had "guessed" wrong about the angle of the front, with regard to our course. Due to the lack of radio legs or facilities, coupled with the thick clouds, our navigator, Dick Steiner, had to rely on dead reckoning navigation only. Dick called the Aircraft Commander (AC) and informed him that we were going to have to climb over and out of the clouds for him to take a celestial fix, to know exactly where we were. The AC suggested we continue on at this altitude for another one-half hour or so, and if we weren't out of the clouds by then we would climb up until we broke out.

After this time period was up, we were still in thick, soupy and rough weather. The AC ordered the flight engineer to set up climb power. We climbed and climbed and still weren't out of the clouds. Finally, at about 25,000 feet the AC made the decision to level off and cruise at this altitude for a while. Possibly the cloud formations would thin out and give us a chance to take the celestial shot. After cruising at this altitude for about an hour or so, we were still socked in as tight as ever. Flight engineer, Leonard Koenig, informed the AC that due to the real rough weather, we had burned a lot of fuel on the unplanned high climb leg. The AC made the decision to remain at 25,500 feet. We remained at this altitude for about two more hours and still were in thick clouds and rough air.

The AC asked Dick for a landfall ETA. Dick informed him that, based strictly on dead reckoning, landfall ETA would be 13:21 GMT. Elapsed time from takeoff was 11:21. The AC stated that if we didn't break out of the weather by the time we reached the "predicted 100 miles out" from the landfall expected time, we would then start a let down from the 25,500 foot level and descend all the way down, even to 250 feet over the water if necessary to break out underneath. By doing this over the ocean, we wouldn't have to worry about hitting any "rock lined clouds" when we did make landfall. In the meantime, we would correct our course--15° left and intentionally hold this course until landfall. This should ensure us of definitely being left of our expected and planned-for landfall point on the African coast. When we spotted the coastline we would turn right and hopefully be able to visually spot and recognize navigational features, such as rivers, shapes of bays, etc., locate them on our sectional navigation maps, and then fly in to our destination. This seemed to be a very sound and logical plan.

When Dick notified the AC that we were at the 100 miles out point, the AC directed the flight engineer to set up descent power configuration for the engines. At the same time, he notified the navigator that he was correcting the course 15° to the left. We made a rather sharp descent down and finally broke out under the weather. We were only 350-400 feet over the water, but at least we could see something. The ocean was real frothy, with large swells. We were in and out of rain storms every few minutes, looking for the coastline. Within a minute or so of ETA, unbelievably, there was the coastline ahead! When we were about a mile out, we made our right turn and flew parallel to the coastline, looking for landmarks, trying to locate our position.

Our biggest problems now were the very frequent rain squalls we were running through. The heavy rains would blot out the land features that we were trying to identify and locate on our maps. We flew this course for about 30 or 40 minutes, still not identifying any landmarks.

Finally, the AC ordered the radio operator to request a QDM (direction finding heading) from the Accra Air Base tower. We were not able to use the voice radio, due to security. German subs were known to be lurking in the area, listening to radio traffic, so we had the radio operator encode the QDM request. This, of course, took 10-15 minutes. Finally he got the encoded request out. Then we had to wait several minutes for them to decode our message. Then they requested a one-minute CW tone from us. Of course their message was encoded. After decoding, the radio operator held the CW key down and transmitted the tone signal for one minute. Then we waited for the heading we were to fly into the base.

All this time we were still flying parallel to the coast on our original course after our landfall right turn. After a few more minutes we finally received a message and, a few minutes later, after decoding, we turned 180°. Apparently we had been flying through one of the rain storms when we were over the base. We held this new heading for about 30 minutes and still couldn't find the base. We requested another radio fix. After the decoding, encoding, etc., we finally received a new heading. Guess what? They said that we had flown over them again, so we made another 180° turn and flew the new heading, to no avail. We requested one more time, and of course they said do a 180° turn again. In the meantime, about one-and-a-half hours of fuel had been expended, doing these 180° turns and coding and decoding.

The flight engineer informed the AC that the fuel situation was becoming critical. The AC asked the navigator how far Monrovia, our alternate, was. Steiner told him, around 500 miles. The flight engineer chimed in with the news that we didn't have fuel to make it that far. He said that the only chance we had to make that distance would be if this aircraft happened to have a real low residual fuel factor, which we didn't know because back at Herington they didn't give us time to make the test before kicking us out to go to war. So, based on the hope that our aircraft had a low residual fuel factor, we headed for Monrovia, still flying under the stormy weather, at 250-300 feet.

Of course, we had been ordered to prepare for a possible ditching, and to take up the ditching positions that all of us had previously been briefed to use. As far as we knew, if we wound up having to ditch we would be the first B-29 to do so. (It turned out that we were actually the third B-29 to ditch. We found out later that, five days before we ditched, two others had ditched in the Bay of Bengal while returning from the first mission.) The navigator and bombardier ditching positions were in the gunner's compartment, against their rear bomb bay bulkhead. So, at this time they both left via the tunnel to their briefed positions (the tail gunner and passenger were to ditch in the aft unpressurized compartment. We continued flying on course, just off the coast, toward Monrovia Air Field, expecting at any time to run out of gas.

We flew on for 40-50 minutes. Suddenly the engines started coughing and running rough, which was the signal that this was it. The AC hollered for half flaps as he pushed the nose down some to maintain speed at about 160 mph. We were now down to about 80-100 feet above the ocean. The AC, began to flare and slow the rate of descent some and then began to feel for the surface effect just a few feet above the ocean. As we began to slow down more, he kept easing the nose up, to flare out just as we made initial contact with a large sea swell. We skipped over to another large swell, hitting it horizontally, nose first.

I remember the seat belt digging into my lower stomach and hips. The early B-29's were not equipped with shoulder harnesses. I do recall that the deceleration G's just about doubled me forward. I had both hands gripping the control wheel, so I must have shoved the control wheel forward, because I did not hit my head on the top of the control column when I doubled up. Also, I remember how the daylight began to fade out as the nose went deeper. The light just about disappeared; then it began to get lighter and lighter, and the nose bobbed up out of the ocean.

I was utterly amazed that not a pane of the nose glass was broken, missing or cracked. What an airplane the folks at Boeing designed and built, to withstand this type of punishment!

Of course, I immediately unfastened the seat belt and exited out my window, which was opened prior to hitting the water. The next thing I recalled was seeing the AC running along the fuselage near the CFC dome. He yelled and then jumped out of view on the other side of the aircraft. I asked him later why he ran down the fuselage and then jumped into the ocean. He said that he wanted to get to the rear and try to help the others to exit, but as he neared the celestial dome he saw that Dick Steiner's head was in the dome, and Dick had his .45 pistol and was trying to shoot and shatter the dome, so that they could get out of the compartment. As it turned out, the .45 slugs only made holes in the thick plastic--it did not shatter.

It was estimated later that we had ditched into 12-14-foot high ocean swells. We were right in the middle of a very active tropical weather front.

In a matter of minutes after ditching the rough ocean swells twisted and broke the aircraft fuselage in two sections at the trailing edges of the wing. The nose and tail sections, held together by flight control cables, wiring, etc., were both out of the water at an angle, and the leading edges of the wing were slightly out of the water. The fuselage back to the leading edge of the tail empennage was completely submerged, with five of our crew members trapped underwater in the gunner's compartment (navigator Steiner, bombardier Redmon, CFC Adamson, left gunner Bronson, right gunner Shebak).

The most despondent and hopeless feeling that I have ever experienced was at the moment of realization that these people were in this dire situation. There wasn't anything I could do about it. I recalled at this precise time my mother's voice, or my memory of her, teaching me through my upbringing that "regardless of how hopeless or impossible the situation seems, always remember that Jesus is right there with you through thick and thin." I then prayed for their deliverance or for God to accept them into heaven if they died. I then paddled around the nose to check on Clark and Koenig and, hopefully, the radio operator, Salmon, and possibly the tail gunner Voris and the passenger that we had picked up at Natal.

The two large life rafts could not be released, due to the twisted and warped fuselage; the life raft release doors were jammed. We all had on our Mae Wests for flotation, and they worked fine. I saw Clark, Koenig and Salmon bobbing up and down together, and, amazingly, back on the horizontal stabilizer sat Voris, the tail gunner. He was hanging onto the passenger by the collar of his flying suit.

Approximately 10-15 minutes had passed by, since the broken ends of the fuselage had sunk. Then an absolute miracle started happening. I heard a yell behind me, and there was Redmon, sticking his head out of the pilot's escape hatch. He squirmed through and fell into the ocean. Immediately, Dick Steiner's head popped out of the same exit. He wriggled out most of the way and became stuck, hanging with most of his body outside the aircraft.

I immediately swam over to help him dislodge his left leg, which was stuck inside the aircraft. Just as I got to him, one of the large swells coming by lifted the nose high (6 or 8 feet), with Dick hanging out, still stuck, yelling for all he was worth. At the same time, I was sucked up under the nose section. I looked up and was horrified to be looking into the barrel of a .45 caliber pistol. (What a large bore!) Dick said later that he was never aware of the fact that he still had that gun in his hand after trying to shoot out the CFC dome. The action of the nose falling back into the ocean squirted me back out from under the aircraft. I swam back forward to Dick again and knocked the fully-cocked pistol from his hand. I grabbed his flying suit by the leg area and was going to use it to climb up, to see if I could get his foot dislodged, when suddenly he broke loose and fell into the sea. Bronson and Shebak had exited through the flight engineer's hatch, and Adamson exited out my hatch.

Without any doubt this was one of God's true miracles, to deliver these crew members from the jaws of, in anyone's mind, death by drowning! Don't ever tell me that God doesn't answer prayers.

Later, I asked Redmon, the bombardier, how in the world they survived 10 or 15 minutes under water. He explained that there was a bubble of air trapped in the tilted compartment, up over the tunnel, and they all stuck their heads and noses into it and could breathe. He said that when the air became stale, he wasn't going to stay there and drown, he was going to try to swim up through the tunnel and get out via one of the exits in the forward compartment. He took a deep breath, ducked down, entered the tunnel and swam through that 80-foot long tunnel. He held his breath and finally popped out of the upper end of the tunnel into the nose section of the forward compartment, which was partially out of the water. He then exited the aircraft commander's hatch. The other crew members decided to follow Redmon's example, and they all successfully exited from the front.

After we all grouped together, Redmon started giggling. I asked him what was funny. He said, "Back there a while ago, we were all grouped together breathing in that bubble of air, and that Shebak was just a-praying and making crossing signs with his finger, and I was just a-cussing! I sure am glad that he won out." Redmon had the greatest sense of humor and driest wit of anyone I have ever known.

Amazingly, none of our crew members were hurt. They had no more than minor bruises or scratches, but the passenger was cut seriously with a long jagged laceration on one of his legs. He was bleeding rather profusely and the stain of his blood was all around us. Someone mentioned that in the overseas briefing, we had been told that the water along the African Coast was infested with sharks. Salmon, our first-aid-trained man applied a tourniquet to the passenger's leg and stopped most of the bleeding. The AC told us to stay together and dog paddle out of the area of the blood stain.

Regarding the shark threat, we were confident that the shark repellent (each Mae West life vest was equipped with two packets of repellent) would be effective in warding off the sharks. While we were in the blood-stained water someone released a packet, and it spread out around us for 8-12 feet. The best I can remember, it made a bright yellow or orange color around us. About every 25-35 minutes, we would release another packet and renew the colored stain around us. I was surprised to read several years after the war was over that the Defense Department had released news that the shark repellent was only effective in the belief that it worked. The Defense Department said that it didn't have any effect at all in repelling sharks, but was created to keep up the morale of downed flyers.

Just before ditching, we had crossed over a point of land that jutted out into the ocean, and we had wound up ditching about halfway across a rather large bay. So we were several miles from shore when we grouped together and started to swim for shore. We wound up being in the water several hours before we finally made it to shore.

When we were still several hundred yards out, we noticed a long line of black natives apparently awaiting our arrival. We became pretty apprehensive after we noticed the spears and shields--just like a Tarzan movie. Of course, we didn't have any choice--we had to get out of the water. The first native to speak came straight up to me and in perfect English, asked me if we had any penicillin for his gonorrhea. We had heard about penicillin ourselves just a few weeks earlier, and, here in British Africa, an African tribesman asks such a question, while speaking perfect English. I told him we didn't have any penicillin and asked him how he knew about it and gonorrhea. He said that he had been schooled in England and had been reared by a British army major and his family since a little child. He had just recently come back to Africa from England and rejoined his people's tribe. As it turned out, those were very friendly tribesmen, and this English-speaking native told us that they wanted to help us and that they would escort us to their village.

It was seven or eight miles back to the village (just into the jungle from that point of land where we had landed). I noticed that one of the tribesmen picked me out as his focus of attention. He stayed up close to me everywhere I went. I was annoyed, but I decided that I'd better not make an issue out of this. I noticed that he was badly handicapped. He couldn't walk normally, and his legs were huge and cylindrical in shape. It appeared that he didn't have feet, only stubs that had toes and nails showing. Plus, he had a strap around his neck that was attached to a bag with some huge something in it about the size of a large pumpkin. I asked the English-speaking fellow about this, and he stated that that large pumpkin-shaped load in that bag was this man's testicles. This, and his huge legs were a result of his condition of elephantiasis.

I nearly fainted! I recalled that back in the states during our sanitation and survivor training they had shown pictures of different afflictions that people had contracted in the tropics, and one of them was this elephantiasis. Here, one of the tribesmen that wanted to be my benefactor had this horrible disease. I recalled that you could contract it in the native streams, by mosquito bites, and in several other ways.

Earlier I mentioned that I had acquired a pair of mosquito boots in Natal, and that I had settled for a pair that was actually too large. Well, here is where they came back to haunt me. I stupidly had

decided to wear these mosquito boots instead of my perfectly good-fitting GI shoes. So I wound up having these on during the ditching and swimming to shore. Being soaking wet and trying to walk with them in this condition only stretched them more.

During our walk back to the village, I started trying to walk faster and faster to get away from my admirer. He couldn't walk very fast because of his condition. The shoes continued to stretch, and finally I was walking on the side leather, with the soles now being on their side edges facing each other. I began stopping momentarily to pull them back up properly, and while I was doing this my admirer would catch up to me. I tried several times to get away from him, but he would always catch up when I'd have to stop to pull up my flopping boots.

Finally we came to a stream that we would have to ford. My admirer stepped into the water and motioned for me to come on. I finally realized that he meant for me to get on his downstream side. I suppose that he intended to break the swift current of water so that it would make it easier for me to wade. I reasoned that if I did that the water which flowed over his diseased legs would then flow over my legs. At the last second, as I stepped into the water, I got on the upstream side of him and hurried on across. At least his water didn't wash over me.

We finally made it to the village. The English-speaking native took us to the residence of the chief, and a white man came out to greet us. Boy! Were we happy to see that white man. He was a missionary. He had very recently relocated to this tribal village from his former location about 50 miles down the coast.

After the greetings, the missionary took us to his hut and had some natives bring out a large bale of clothes of all sorts. He broke the bale open and invited us to pick out something that we could wear. I finally wound up with a pair of golf knickers, a shirt, and some other things. At least they were dry and clean.

I asked the missionary if he smoked. He said that he didn't, but he had a fellow missionary about 100 miles up the coast that did, and he could probably get us a few cigarettes by tomorrow. I believe that he was serious. He said that he would see the chief about sending for them. He left in the direction of the chief's hut. About 20-30 minutes later, drum beats started up, and the missionary stated that that was our message being sent out to his buddy about 100 miles away, asking him to send cigarettes. He said that the natives had a certain drum beat signal to a specific village; then the message was sent to a village about 10 or 12 miles away, and that village, in turn, relayed the message all along the coast to the village where the other missionary was located. The villages were located within drum sound distance of each other.

About the same time that the drums were beating, the missionary pointed out how busy the natives were. He said they were preparing the village for a royal affair for that night. The occasion was the chief's son's wedding. It was late in the afternoon by this time, and, being that we hadn't had anything to eat since the day before, we were very hungry. We were fed some sort of lean meat that had been roasted over a pit fire, some wild-type rice that was gritty with sand, some native fruits, etc. It was a feast! After eating, we were to be the guests of the chief that night for his son's wedding party. The chief assigned us to sleep in two or three huts close to his hut.

The next morning, we took an inventory of everything that we had with us on our persons when we ditched. We wound up with two rusty .45 pistols (mine and one of the other crew members), two clips of eight rounds of bullets each, and several pocket knives. About everything else was either ruined or lost. I took the two .45's, disassembled them and, using a rag and sand and fresh water, I cleaned most parts free of rust. I used some liquid animal fat that was used for lamps, oiled the parts, and reassembled the guns. We told the missionary that day that we had the guns in working order, and if

needed we could go with the natives and possibly could shoot a wild animal for food. He talked to the chief regarding this and said the chief told him we could shoot some of the village chickens for supper. We knew that shooting chickens with .45 bullets wasn't an ideal way to do it, but, being that it was the chief's idea, we thought that maybe we ought to try it.

The missionary was concerned about this, because most of the natives had never seen or been around a gun, and it might be dangerous. But our crew said that they sure would like some chicken. These chickens were very skittish. You couldn't get close to them or they would get up and fly out of danger. The missionary was talked into the hunting and shooting chickens deal, providing he could get the natives to stay behind us and out of danger. The chief had the rules spread to the villagers.

In the meantime, I was appointed to do the shooting, because I was rated as a .45 calibre pistol expert. All the crew made sure I realized that we only had 16 rounds of ammo and cautioned me not to miss when I shot. We started driving the chickens ahead of us through the village to the far side. We got all the natives behind us. Then I stepped out and prepared to shoot us our supper. I drew a bead down on a chicken that was 20-25 feet from me, but then I thought that that big .45 slug would hit that little chicken and all that would be left would be feathers. So, coupled with my confidence and known expertise, I drew a bead on the chicken's head and squeezed the trigger. The gun went off, followed by terrified screaming and eruption of panic. Simultaneous with the loud bang of the gun, the natives began fleeing in all directions. The chicken that I shot at and missed took flight with them.

After things settled down, we held a meeting with the chief and decided that we would try one more time. The chief called his villagers together and told them to spread out and make another drive through the village--this time to the other side. Again, several chickens were driven through. Now it's my turn again with the .45. After ensuring that all the natives were behind me, I drew down on one of the chickens, again about 25 feet away. This time I aimed at the chicken's body, not at his head. I began to sense, due to the sudden quietness, that every eye was on me. The gun went off, and the chicken leaped straight up and flew into the jungle. The bullet had hit the ground between his feet. Was I embarrassed! This time the natives seemed to be cheering that the chicken got away. The crew members told me later that the cheering was coming from the natives that had bet I would miss.

After this attempt, there was another meeting. This time there would be no shooting (not too productive thus far). A plan was devised to make another drive and drive the chickens into the huts on the far side of the village and catch them. This they did, and in a short while we, or they, had caught 12-15 chickens for our supper that night. The crowning blow to my ego was when they were bringing in the caught chickens. One of the native women was a large, stout woman. She trotted up to me holding this live chicken that she had caught. Her legs were bound together with long grass. As she got to me, she bent over and tied this poor little chicken to a plant. She pointed at my pistol and then at the chicken. She closed her eyes and stuck her fingers into her ears. Everybody roared. She wanted me to shoot that chicken tied to a plant right at my feet. What a sense of humor! We ate mighty good that night.

The next day the missionary came around and handed me this cloth-wrapped package. It was a package of Camel cigarettes! Remember, these natives didn't walk, they ran these cigarettes-only 4° above the equator, in mid-year--100 miles, so that those of us that smoked could have a Camel.

There were only three crew members that smoked, so we got together and agreed that we would only light one cigarette at a time, and each smoker could only take two draws and pass it to the next guy until it was smoked up. We drew for short straw to see who would carry the cigarettes and agreed that we would only smoke one every three hours, using the two-puff plan. Remember, we didn't have any idea how long we would be here.

On the third day the weather seemed to be improving some, but it was still stormy. We had, with the help of the missionary and the natives, built a pile of dry vegetable plant matter that we could set afire if we heard any search planes looking for us. We heard one airplane, and got the big pile alight; however, rain had soaked the plant matter, and it didn't burn very well, so the search plane didn't see our fire.

Redmon announced that he had a plan that he was going to try out. He got permission from the chief, with the missionary acting as interpreter, to lead a group of the blacks out to the white sandy point and stay there with him if necessary for the entire day. This group of about 40 were told to stand on the white sandy beach close together to form a round group. Several hours after Redmon left with his knot of people, we heard an airplane. The airplane was flying over the beach, and suddenly he started rocking his wings. He made a circle, came back over the point of land where Redmon had taken his bunch of natives, and continued rocking his wings. Then he flew off in the direction from which he had come.

Redmon and his native buddies came running in, shouting hilariously. They brought in a package that the aircraft had dropped that had a note that said a PBY-2 flying boat would pick us up. Red's plan had worked! Redmon had refused to tell us what his plan was after he had announced that he had a plan. After he and his black buddies got back, we asked him again what was his plan. He said, "Hell, it worked, didn't it?" We agreed that it did, but what was the plan? Redmon grinned and said, "I had those black natives group up in a tight wad, I stripped buck naked and got in the middle of the group, and we all started jumping up and down. They saw us--a white man in the middle of the blacks."

After the airplane spotted Redmon, a couple of hours passed, and then a Martin two-engine flying boat came, circled and made an approach to land in a fairly long lagoon that was close to the beach. He hit the treetops that were on the downwind end of the lagoon and nearly crashed, but managed to stagger back into the air and left. A couple of hours later, a PBY two-engine flying boat came and landed in the big bay close to the shore (the bay in which we had ditched). The water was still fairly rough, but he made it down okay. The pilot taxied in pretty close to the beach (about 200-300 yards out) and anchored his aircraft. The natives canoed out to the aircraft and brought the pilot back to shore. Arrangements were made, and several outrigger canoes were used to transfer the crew members to the flying boat.

My faithful buddy had big tears running, following me to my canoe. Just before I got into the canoe I turned to him to bid farewell. I took off my dog tags and placed them around his neck. As we were leaving the shore, I looked back, and most of the natives were ganged up around my buddy. They seemed to be inspecting his prize (my dog tags). At least for the moment, he was getting some attention.

Combined with the PBY crew, we had something like 16-18 people on board, which was way more than the aircraft designers ever planned for. The bay waters were still pretty wavy and rough, but the pilot applied full power to the engines for takeoff. I don't know how to prove it, but I'll bet that we made the longest takeoff run in the history of aviation. It was at least several miles before we finally staggered into the air. We would get up almost to takeoff speed, then the aircraft would skip from swell-top to swell-top for several miles, slowing down each time we hit a swell, until we finally were airborne. It seemed to me that smashing into those swells while trying to take off was almost as rough as when we ditched the B-29.

After we finally landed at Monrovia, we were admitted to #25 Station Liberia Hospital, checked over pretty thoroughly, released, and flown back to Accra field to await orders.

Several of the crew officers decided to check out the British officers' club the first night we were in Accra. Redmon was known to us as a pretty sharp poker player. He decided that he wanted to play a few hands of poker. None of us, including Redmon had any conception of the British monetary system. Red asked the club dealer to give him the equivalent of \$50.00 American dollars (the dollars had survived the ditching). Not knowing the value of each unit of British currency, Redmon stacked the bills up beside him on the table and, when the bets were placed, he would call and put in the same kind of pictures and color of their bills. He seemed to be handling the money angle okay.

Finally, he apparently got a good hand, and when it came his turn to put up or drop out, Red looked the table over and said, "I'll cover your pound, and (as he reached down and shoved all of his money to the pot) I'll raise you a ton." He didn't know about the wording of how to bid his English money, but he sure made it plain when he shoved it all in. The Britishers' mouths dropped, eyes bugged out, and each one of them threw their cards in. Redmon won a pile of British pounds and broke up the game.

We were all sworn to secrecy about the B-29 program, so naturally, we usually had to lie when people asked us what type of aircraft we flew. We would usually say B-17 or B-24 bomber. It was amusing to us to be sitting at the bar, close to some of these folks--the locally based and the transients coming through--and hearing them comment about the top secret, super-high-flying new bomber that flies at unbelievably high speeds and at altitudes of 78,000 feet, that one of them had ditched off the African coast and the wreckage hadn't yet been found.

While sitting at the officers' club bar one day, a young lieutenant came in and took the stool beside me. I introduced myself and we began to chat idly. I asked him if he was a transit, and he said that he was permanent personnel, and one of his duties was small arms officer for his detachment at Accra. He asked me if I liked to shoot skeet. I said, "Man, that's my favorite sport." He said, "In that case, you're talking to the man that can arrange a couple rounds of skeet or trap." We made a date to meet at the mess hall the following morning to shoot trap.

When he showed up in his jeep he had the shotguns, ammo shells, and clay birds. We drove off the base and down a road into the jungle, about a mile or so, and into a village, where he stopped and hired one of the natives to go with us. The man he hired would be shown how to load and cock the clay bird thrower. The range officer had an electric power unit in a small shed at the range. He would release the bird electrically by pushing a hand-held button when I called "pull." The loaded bird thrower would release and fling the clay bird. The native would re-cock the thrower each time and reload it, ready for the next release.

After these instructions, the native understood his duties. We got all set up, the power unit cranked and running, the native sitting in the "bird house." Finally I was ready to shoot my first clay bird. I hollered "Pull." There was a terrifying, blood curdling scream, which I think gave me buck fever. The bird flew out into the air. I didn't shoot. By this time, the native was running across the trap range screaming about voodoo demons and I don't know what all. He disappeared into the jungle. The range officer and I couldn't imagine what in the world had happened to the native. We shut the power unit down, stowed the guns and ammo and clay birds in the jeep and headed back to see if we could find another person to cock and load the bird thrower.

When we got back to the village, it was completely deserted. Not a soul around, we decided to return to the base and try again the next day.

About halfway back to the base we met a native heading towards the village. We stopped and talked with him, and he agreed to go with us to do the bird loading.

We returned, got all set up again with the auxiliary power unit running. I hollered "Pull." There was an agonizing, blood curdling scream, and the bird flew from the shed. I froze on the trigger again, as the man went running, zig-zagging across the range screaming about demons, and voodoo.

Both the British officer and I were in shock. The identical thing had happened again! We finally shut the power unit off and stowed everything again. The Brit went over to the bird house, looked inside, and then called me over. He said, "There's the demon and voodoo creature." We both started laughing. The electrical cord from the A/C 115 volt power unit was sticking up through knee-deep water that was in the pit. The wire was naked where it came out of the water. Imagine sitting in that pit, with water up to your knees and your hand on the metal cocking handle, and when my friend mashes the switch for the bird release, a pulse of 115 volts A/C current flows through you. I never did get to shoot a round of skeet.

During the time we were at Accra station awaiting orders (two to three weeks), we were re-equipped with uniforms, flying suits, weapons and other lost items. I got replacement dog tags and new AGO identification cards were issued. We were sent to the beach for our ID photos to be taken. The only photographer in the Accra area had his "studio" located there. The camera was a cigar box that had a small hole in the end panel. The box was mounted on a crude tripod equipped with a black curtain which the photographer stuck his head under. He had his left hand over the aperture and said, "Stand still." He then took his hand away from the box, waved it over his head and immediately recovered the hole. That covering and uncovering and recovering maneuver served as a shutter and exposure time. Dick Steiner and I doubted that the picture would suffice as our likeness for our new AGO ID card. We were amazed at the quality of the pictures.

About 10 days after arriving in Accra, our Aircraft Commander became very ill. He was evacuated to a large hospital someplace in Africa. Several days later we were told that he had been returned to the States. He had contracted a severe case of malaria, probably in the village where we had stayed.

A short while later we received orders shipping us to India to our assigned outfit, the 45th at Chakulia. In mid-July, 1944, Jim Cowden was assigned as our Aircraft Commander, to replace Edsel Clark. Now we were in place to wage war against the Japanese Empire. We had had a few obstacles and time delays in the process of getting here, but here we were at last!

The Adventure of a Fuel Transfer over the Atlantic

Date of event: Early Spring 1944

Date written: Summer, 1994

Written by: Dan McNew

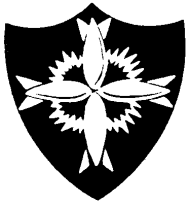
I worked all night on our plane after landing in Newfoundland. The next morning Marvin Goodwyn, our pilot, told me we had just so many hours before takeoff, and he asked me if I'd rather take off early or take some more time. I told him the plane was as ready as it would ever be, so let's go.

After takeoff, I told Marvin I had to get some sleep, but I cautioned him to be sure to awaken me before making a fuel transfer. At that time, the only way to determine if the fuel pumps were properly in select was by the feel. We had experienced problems with this procedure before. Our Flight Engineer had little experience, and I wanted to be present for any fuel transfer operation.

I crawled through the tunnel to the rear compartment after takeoff and immediately went to sleep. The next thing I knew, one of the gunners was kicking me and yelling "Fire." I looked through the tunnel, and it looked like lightning striking. I shot through the tunnel and saw that the Flight Engineer had removed the portion of the instrument panel that retained the fuel transfer switches. Due to the rough weather, he was hitting about every point of that area.

After taking the panel and trying to stabilize it, Jim Cowden helped me stabilize the Flight Engineer. I checked the switches and wiring and found that one wire had burned all the insulation off. The switch was a pile of carbon. I removed the burned switch and taped the wire as best I could. That left possibly one pump and one good circuit. I told Marvin what I had done and that I was going to try to transfer fuel with the one system. He agreed and the operation started. I think Jim Cowden was the most calm individual on the plane during this time. Marvin tried to act brave, but you could tell he was somewhat doubtful of our success.

About 30 seconds after I turned on the pump, Marvin looked over and asked, "Is it working?" I told him it'd take some time to tell as one pump would work slow, but I didn't see any fire or smell any smoke. After approximately ten minutes, the fuel gauges began to change. I announced the probable success, and there were shouts of joy and relief. I looked at Jim, and he was just smiling.



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