



George Olson and the Blown Blister Accident over Texas

Editor's Introduction: In issue #54, we told the tragic story of the loss of Ed Hornyia on a mission over Formosa. This is the story of another blown blister accident. There is a happy ending to this story, the collecting of which borders on being almost as interesting as the story. This part of the story will be covered in the narrative following the contributions of Dean Tanner and Mrs. George Olson, widow of George Olson, the gunner who went out of the blister on this training flight.

Date of event: December, 1943

Date written: July, 1991 (Dean Tanner) and January, 1995 (Mrs. George Olson)

Written by: Dean Tanner, Mrs. George Olson, Wilbur Cooney, J.D. Ponder

Crew members believed to have been on this flight:

Pilot:	Colonel Warren E. Wilkinson (D)
Co-pilot:	Lt. Robert White (not on roster)
Bombardier:	Lt. C.E. Cole (D)
Navigator:	Lt. Neville Roberts (not on roster)
Flight Engineer:	M/Sgt. Edwin G. Holmes (D)
Radio Operator:	T. Sgt. Dean Tanner and either Wendell Meador or Gerald Clinton
CFC Gunner:	A.H. Gray (D)
Tail Gunner:	Not known

Dean Tanner tells what he remembers about the flight: The flight started as usual, and we began an ascent to an altitude which was to be much higher than normal. We had been selected to make a high altitude test flight to check performance at above normal altitudes. The planes we had flown before were B-18s, B-17s and B-24s. We were really enthusiastic about the room and comfort of this new plane. It was the first pressurized flight we had known. Wendell Meador or Gerald Clinton (I can't remember which) were with me as radio operator because we had to encode all messages. Morse code was to be used for all communication pertaining to the test flight. One of us was to encode and the other to transmit.

In an interval of free time I crawled back through the tunnel. I asked George Olson to let me sit at his position for a while so that I could enjoy looking out over the countryside. I am from Texas, and I pointed out the different towns I could see. Col. Wilkinson said we would pass over my hometown of Athens. I was able to identify Athens, Tyler, Dallas, Ft. Worth and Abilene.

By this time we were well above 20,000 ft. and still climbing. About this time the smell of gasoline began to permeate the plane. Col. Wilkinson notified all crew members to return to their stations and don parachutes. (What luck. We ordinarily did not wear them.) A short while after that, the gasoline smell scare eased up, and everything was back to normal. That's when it happened. Suddenly everything seemed to turn white, and the plane gave a big jolt. The pilot ordered everyone to don oxygen masks. We had been drilled on emergency procedures so many times it was nearly automatic.

The pilot then requested each crew member to check in with a status report. Each station, starting with the bombardier, began reporting in, and everything was normal until Sgt. Olson, the right gunner, failed to report. I'll always remember the next few minutes. It went something like this:

Pilot: Sgt. Olson, report in. (Silence) Sgt. Olson, report in. (Silence) Sgt. Carnes, check with Sgt. Olson and find out why he's not reporting.
Sgt. Carnes: Sgt. Olson isn't here, sir.
Pilot: Where is Sgt. Olson?
Sgt. Carnes: He's gone, sir.
Pilot: What you mean, he's gone?
Sgt. Carnes: He's gone, sir; the blister is gone. Everything at his position went right out the side.
Pilot: The rest of the crew, please report in.
Sgt. Gay: O.K. here, sir.
Pilot: Tail gunner (name unknown), report in. (Silence) Sgt. Carnes, will you check the tail gunner's position?

Sgt. Carnes then took a couple of walk-around bottles of oxygen with him and crawled back to the tail gunner's position and hooked the tail gunner's mask to the walk-around bottle. The tail gunner had disconnected the oxygen hose to his mask and had forgotten to hook it back up. We could not understand how Sgt. Carnes had managed to get back to the tail gunner's position and hook the bottle to the mask. It was difficult for anyone to get back to the rear gunner's position carrying nothing. With two oxygen bottles it was impossible, but Sgt. Carnes did it that day.

All of this happened in just a few minutes. The pilot then asked me to contact Pratt and notify them what had happened and to instigate a search for Sgt. Olson. We had to encode the message, and you can imagine my consternation when I couldn't raise Pratt on the radio. Luckily an Air Force base in the State of Washington had been monitoring our transmission and notified me that Pratt was receiving our message and that he would relay for us. By this method we got the message from Pratt, "Descend immediately to 10,000 feet, discontinue conducting any part of the test above this height and return immediately to base." The pilot chuckled when he read the message, "Descend immediately to 10,000 feet? We are already there."

We promptly headed for Pratt. It was a very somber and sad crew that landed. Just as we started to get out of the plane, the pilot called us over the intercom saying, "I have been notified that Sgt. Olson is safe. He called in from Texas and notified the base that the plane had blown up." Of course the base notified Sgt. Olson that the plane and all aboard were safe. You can imagine what a happy crew we were when Sgt. Olson returned. We really had a "Blister party."

Mrs. George Olson tells her husband's story: George was blown out with the blister. He automatically pulled the rip cord of his chute because he was flying out sideways. Because of lack of oxygen, he blacked out for a short time. When he came to, he was swinging back and forth in mid-air. He said his chute would open up, but as he would swing over to one side, it would collapse causing him to fall and swing back the other way. It took a bit of time for him to figure out how to work the shrouds to keep the parachute over him and open.

He landed out in the open on a ranch. He was gathering up his chute and trying to figure out where he was when the rancher drove up. His first words were, "Where in hell did you come from?" It must have been quite a surprise for him. Since B-29s were top secret, George couldn't very well say what really happened so he simply said sort of haltingly, "Oh, I fell out of an airplane."

George had landed near Fluvanna, Texas. The plane went back to Pratt. George was taken to a hospital in Fluvanna for tests and a check-up. Then he was picked up by a B-26 sent from Pratt and flown back home.

To give you an idea of the commanding officer's sense of humor, his first words to George when he reported in were, "What in hell do you mean going AWOL like that?"

While I was waiting in Pratt, I had no idea what had happened. George sent me a telegram from the hospital, in case I had heard something about the accident, saying "Landed O.K., be home in a few days." I didn't even know what he was talking about. I thought he had taken a few days off.

After the war was over, the rancher in Fluvanna sent us a registered collie puppy as a gift and a remembrance of him and his family. George died in 1993.

J.D. Ponder reports some of the aftermath: I was the crew chief on the aircraft, but I was not on the flight. When I was finally allowed aboard the next day, I discovered that the regulators were closed down for emergency operation. Max pressure-no regulation. After replacing both blisters and installing safety baskets, the gun sight and two regulators, the plane was ready for flight. The next flight was a bombing mission. The ordnance section spent all day loading 500 lb. practice bombs using the overhead, hand-operated hoist. Max load. When they finished, about dark, a guard was assigned to keep everyone out. About midnight a 2nd Lt. navigation student wanted to shoot some fixes from inside the plane. He had never been on board a B-29, and he was to be the number-two navigator on this trip. He finally talked his way on board. He was not supposed to turn on anything. He would just use the flashlight. The next thing the guard knew, all hell fell from the bomb bay. The navigator had salvaged the entire load onto the ramp. I don't know if that mission ever was completed.

Editor's addendum to the story: Many dead ends were pursued in the course of collecting this story. At first, the name of the gunner was thought to be "Brown." Browns were duly chased down to no avail. Then the name given was "Olson." An Olson in California, when tracked down, likewise produced a dead end. Then, in an overlooked letter from Wilbur Cooney, dated 1991, the name of George Olson was given with an address, care of W.L. Hicks, Bigsby, Idaho. Wrong address, but the addressee turned out to be a relative of George Olson's and from this source, the name of Mrs. George Olson was located with an address in St. Anthony, Idaho. Mrs. Olson was able to supply the name of the town nearest to the ranch where George had landed. Later, she was able to provide the rancher's name.

A call to Fluvanna produced no newspaper, it being an unincorporated town. However, the nearest town with a newspaper was Snyder. A call to the Snyder newspaper and a conversation with the editor, Ray McQueen, revealed that there had been no newspaper story published about George's emergency landing. Editor McQueen supplied the name of Bill Jones, a prominent citizen of Fluvanna. A visit with Bill Jones produced the information that at that time, his father owned the general store in Fluvanna and that the store had the only telephone in the area. If a call was made about the event, it had to have gone through the general store's telephone. Bill Jones advised that the Maynards were no longer alive, but they had a stepson who lived in the area, Don Cox. Don remembered hearing his folks talk about the event; however, at that time he was away. In fact, he was in the Philippines. Was in artillery originally but during the Battle of Bataan, he fought as an infantryman. He was taken prisoner, survived the death march and survived three years and 11 months as a POW mostly in Japan working in a coal mine not far from Hiroshima. Tragedy didn't end there. Seven men in the prison camp were killed by mercy package drops on their prison camp.

Wilbur Cooney's reason for remembering George Olson stems from 1942 times in Panama. Wilbur writes, "I landed at Albrook Field, then went to Rio Hato for jungle training. I met George there, and he helped me a lot in the jungle. I was 15 years older than most of the others. They took it easy on me. I was like an old man to them. Later, when we were on the Galapagos Islands, I was given a three-day pass to Guatemala. When we landed, I met George in the barracks. We spent the next day, Sunday, in Guatemala City. That was the last time I saw him. Then, when we got to Pratt, I heard the fellows talking about George parachuting to safety when the blister blew. I said, 'Thank God he is safe. He was the one that was so good to me when we were in the jungle at Rio Hato.'"



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