

Splash One Dreamboat

BY THE LATE ARVID SHULENBERGER



A Black Widow shoots down a Superfortress

“You know me, Al; they kicked the game away behind me.” Thus began Maj. Arthur C. Shepherd’s letter—the first one he had sent in the 13 years since we were two-thirds of a night-fighter team off Iwo Jima and Ie Shima in ’45. Shep was in Saigon to train the Vietnamese in fighter tactics. Thirteen years ago, my name was Al, and I was a lieutenant and a radar observer on a P-61 Black Widow.

Shep got hold of my address somewhere and wrote to me; it was a good letter. Its opening gag line was from the book that had been Shep’s favorite on Iwo: Ring Lardner Sr.’s, “You Know Me Al.” There was only one disturbing line of news in his letter: “There was a printed story, Al, about shooting down the B-29, in True magazine. All fouled up. They got the names wrong. Somebody sent in a correction, and they got the names wrong again.” It was the first I had heard of the printed story.

Shep and I shot down that Superfortress—nobody else. I found it, and he shot it down. We got our names in the papers and on the air, and there was a syndicated feature story about the incident. It didn’t mean a thing, but it was our only contact with public relations and fame during WW II. Besides, it was a funny thing; it’s the only instance I know of in which a B-29 was shot down from the air by friendly fire.

PHOTO BY ROY WOLFORD; COURTESY OF WARREN THOMPSON

I remember it as if it were yesterday. Yesterday was June 9, 1945. Our unit, the 548th Night Fighter Squadron, had been on Iwo Jima for about two months. Iwo Jima (translated, it means “sulfur island”) is a wind-bitten, eight-square-mile stretch of rock and ashes 700 miles southeast of Tokyo. The beaches are black sand, and you couldn’t stand too long in one spot because the fire underneath would burn your feet.

Earlier that spring, one of the bloodiest battles of the Pacific had been fought on Iwo Jima. During the battle, more than 23,000 of the 70,000 invading Marines had been killed or wounded, or suffered later battle fatigue. Some 20,000-plus Japanese defenders were also killed.

It was a beautiful day—blue sky, bright sun. The night before had been our night off-duty; we hadn’t flown night patrol, so we were awake that day to enjoy the weather. At 3 a.m., we had heard the Superforts flying overhead, heading north for an Empire strike—target: Tokyo. Hour after hour it seemed, the 29s droned overhead. Hundreds of them



The author and crew with their P-61—Iwo Jima, 1945 (left to right): Lt. Arthur C. Shepherd (pilot), Lt. Arvid “Al” L. Shulenberg (radar officer), M/Sgt. Donald E. Meech (gunner). The terrier is “Rags”—the P-61’s good-luck mascot. Rags flew combat at Arvid’s feet or in his lap, wrapped in his own sleeping bag and with his own oxygen mask (photo courtesy of Eric Shulenberg).

were coming from Saipan and Tinian. “Dreamboats,” they were called in the fighter code. We knew that they were winning the War for us, as they came in endless echelons—not bunched and high—but in a steady stream at 10,000 feet (or “Angels Ten”). This was the way our new general, Curtis LeMay, was firing them at the Japanese.

Every afternoon, we night fighters checked our ships and radar with a short flight to ensure that everything was OK for the night operation. These daylight flights were called “squint hops.” (“Squint” was any error in radar calibration; it could be corrected in daylight by a visual check on our readings.) During those flights, we would be put on air/sea rescue patrol. Sometimes, our squint hops turned into something bigger.

That’s what happened on this day. The Dreamboats were now coming back by the hundreds—a steady stream overhead on their way back to Saipan. A few were crippled, and a few were going down; some of them would have to stop on

Iwo Jima, if they were lucky enough to get back that far. Some of them were shot up so badly that they couldn’t land, and they would be abandoned close to Iwo after their crews bailed out. By mid-afternoon on this sunny spring day, there might be as many as 30 parachutes coming down around the island at once. They looked pretty against the blue sky, drifting like dandelion seeds down over the calm ocean.

Shep and I were up in the air for a squint hop/air-sea rescue patrol. The airstrip was hot, and whenever we flew in the afternoon under that Pacific sun, the inside of the airplane was hotter. I was sweating in the radar cockpit. Once we were airborne, the intercom clicked: “Warm enough back there?” Shep asked.

“Hotter’n Dutch love,” I said. The dialogue was standard operating procedure.

“OK,” I said. “Generators off.”

“Generators off,” he echoed. I switched on the radar. “Generators on,” I said. The set warmed up; a dot appeared on the A 720 scope, which had ranges of two, 10 and 100 miles on it. I switched the nose spinner on, and the dot became a streak across the scope, then a dance of “snow” to be tuned down and tuned out so that targets would register.

“Weapon flashing?” Shep asked.

“Flashing,” I said.

We were vectored out on a heading a little west of north—three-four-zero. At 150 miles out,

we would pick up a destroyer that was on rescue patrol—a “Bird Dog”—and be directed by it for the remainder of our patrol. Meanwhile, we could check our radar set for squint using the Dreamboats flying overhead, going south. They were still at Angels Ten, while we patrolled at 6,000 feet—Angels Six.

Half an hour later and 100-odd miles out, we ran into a towering squall line and flew straight through it. That was a mistake. The rain streaked across the Plexiglas, and we were then nice and cool. It sprayed into the tiny air vent, and that reminded me to close it. At 15-miles range, a bright blip marking a Dreamboat moved cleanly across the darkened scope and registered cleanly a few degrees above us on the B, or elevation, scope. No squint, we guessed.

Then, suddenly, there was nothing but light on the scope. It was out. I knew why, but that didn’t help the situation. Up ahead in the nose, the driving rain wetted the fiber-composition nose cone, and the spinner had shorted out.

“Hell, Shep,” I said. “Weapon bent. It’s out.”

“Huh?” he said. “Bent? Hell. Wet.”

“Yeah,” I said.

No sound for a minute or two while we digested the bad news. Neither of us wanted to abort a squint hop, but there was nothing else to do.

“We’re out of the squall,” Shep said then. “Think it’s worthwhile to wait a bit to see if it dries out?”

“I doubt it, but we can see.” I glanced down from the scope. “Wait a minute ...”

“Yeah?” he said hopefully.

“The IFF. It’s working like a charm.” It was. The little, old-fashioned green scope—nothing but the round end of a cathode-ray tube with a green light dancing on it as if it were a Christmas tree—was registering the B-29 at a distance of 10 miles. A clean signal, code four: two small blips then a big one—dit-dit-dah—on the starboard side of the scope.



P-61s on patrol over Saipan (photo by Jean Desclos via Warren Thompson).

“You know,” I said, thinking fast for an excuse to avoid aborting the flight and having to do another, “We might hunt for Dreamboats with the IFF. I can get a range and azimuth reading, and if they’re in trouble, they ought to be flashing their emergency signal. We could report any ships in trouble.”

Shep asked, “Would that work?”

“Never heard of it being tried,” I said.

Shep did not want to give up the flight and do another, either. “I’ll call Bird Dog,” he said. “See what you can find.”

Bird Dog was ahead and off to port some 30 miles, and it was coming in loud and clear on the radio while I switched the IFF to the 100-mile range and checked it. The little scope was never meant to do this job—only what its name indicated: identification of friend or foe.

Shep spoke again. “I didn’t tell ‘em the set was out. I’ll keep an eye peeled. It’s CAVU [ceiling and visibility unlimited].”

“What they don’t know ...” I began. “Hey, wait a minute.”

Shep clicked his button to show that he heard me but said nothing.



Left: a view of the B-29 landing strip on Iwo Jima. Judging by the roads and the number of temporary facilities, this photo was probably taken toward the end of the War in the Pacific. The view is to the southwest, and Mt. Suribachi is in the background approximately half a mile from the end of the other strip that appears in the top of the photo (photo by Bill Charlesworth via Warren Thompson). Right: another view of the landing strip on Iwo Jima from a different vantage point. Mt. Suribachi is in the lower right foreground (photo by Bill Charlesworth via Warren Thompson).





One of the many Dreamboats (B-29s) the Iwo Jima fighter crews heard flying over their island base. When Shepherd and Shulenberg came up on the portside of the stricken bomber, they could see the massive damage that caused its errant path and understood why it was sending an emergency signal (photo by Claude Logan via Warren Thompson).

"I got one," I said. A big blip opened out over the scope face. "It's an emergency all right," I said.

"Where?"

"Sixty miles, I think." The calibration on an IFF scope was pretty uncertain.

"Where? Where?"

"Well, it ought to be over on the starboard side ahead, or over on the port side behind." It was a trick of such primitive

scopes that a target could give the same signal from opposite directions. I was about to explain this to Shep, in case he had forgotten, when he spoke again—this time, with heavy irony.

"You want me to fly both directions at once?"

"Turn starboard," I said. "Climb gently."

Our two engines took on a deeper roar as the Widow dragged its great acreage of smoky black wing upward toward Angels Ten. It was a great, powerful airplane, with more wingspan than any comparably powered ship in the service, and it had more guns and horsepower than any other fighter did.

The guess turned out to be good. The emergency blip got wider, then stronger, then closer. It moved into the center of the scope. "Level out

of your turn," I said.

We were approaching the signal almost head-on, and the blip moved down the scope. For some minutes, we flew toward it. We were making history, perhaps. I had never heard of intercepting a target on IFF. "Angels?" I asked.

"Eight."

"Climb. Range ten. Starboard again. Turn starboard."

"There's a Dreamboat over there," Shep said. "I see it."

We climbed again in a gentle turn, holding the target at scope center for a head-on interception that should have brought us onto its tail. Shep called, "You sure it reads emergency? That ship ain't in trouble. Still above us, going like a bat out of hell."

A crippled B-29 comes in for a safe landing on Iwo Jima. The island's airstrip, only used by B-29s in emergencies, saved thousands of B-29 crewmen who would otherwise have ditched into the Pacific and would probably never have been found or rescued (photo by John Casey via Warren Thompson).



"Yes, dammit," I said.

"I'll swing up on it," he said. On the scope, the target was moving starboard at three miles now, though our turn had steepened.

"Climb," I said. "Steepen your turn. Firewall your throttle."

"You said it." He didn't need me to tell him. The Widow roared, shook and climbed.

The target swung to port at a mile. "Look out there," said Shep. "That son of a gun doesn't need help. He's indicating two hundred twenty knots at ten thousand." Two-hundred was fast; it was close to 300 knots true airspeed. I looked out as we swung closer and higher. It was a Dreamboat—big and shiny in the sunlight, and flying high-tailed and steady; all its props were going and not a mark on it.

"Hell," I said as I looked back at the scope. The emergency blip was so big that it almost filled the scope when it flashed. Shep tried calling the B-29: "Dreamboat, this is ..." No answer. We moved in closer. "I can't get him," Shep said.

I was looking at my compass. "On this heading, he'll miss Iwo by a hundred miles."

Shep: "I'll swing under him." The Dreamboat moved over us to our starboard side. We came up close, almost in formation off its wing. "Ho-ly cow!" said Shep.

Half of the big plane's nose had been shot away. From the other side, we had not even seen the damage. Framed in the gaping wreckage, a man sat waving at us. The pilot? No. There was no pilot. It was the copilot. The pilot's half of the cockpit was gone. The pilot was gone. The copilot sat there with what looked like half of the instrument panel before him, the air blasting past his left side and whipping his sleeve. A

direct hit had blown the entire port half of the nose away, not neatly but effectively, leaving a ragged, twisted-metal hole that was too big to be called a hole—almost a decapitation of the airplane.

"We'll give him a steer," Shep said. "Wave and point." We waved, close enough to see the copilot's teeth. The Dreamboat kept beside us as we corrected our heading for Iwo. He had been heading out over the ocean, beautifully flying blind.

He stayed beside us now—or we beside him, for the 29 flew fast and clean, at a true airspeed a good deal faster than normal cruise. We later learned that there hadn't been any gauges left in his ship, and the copilot couldn't know his speed, heading, or altitude.

In half an hour, we were over Iwo, calling in to tell what needed to be told: the Dreamboat couldn't land because its nosewheel had been blown away. We crossed the island, turned gently in formation and came back.

The Dreamboat's crew bailed out. Just off our wing, we watched them fly out on one another's heels. The air blast caught them by turn, whipping and tumbling them like dolls thrown into a hurricane. The expressions on their faces remain in my memory. Their chutes popped open and then swung below, coming down over the island. Then the copilot jumped.

The crippled 29 was now headed northwest, still flying. It was flying straight and level toward Japan. "Stay with it," was the word from Control. We flew formation on the derelict.

"Splash it," said Control. The order startled us, but it was logical enough. The Dreamboat appeared to be on its way to Japan, if not to Siberia.

We pulled up, and Shep made a pass, taking his time but giving it the works in a long burst. Four .50-calibers and four 20mm firing at once were enough to set the Widow back on its heels momentarily. Our plane filled with powder-smoke and stink. We pulled out of the pass.

"Hell's bells," said Shep. Looking out, we saw the 29 flying as straight and level as ever, apparently untouched.

"You didn't miss," I said.

"There were chunks as big as dishpans flying past."

Shep clicked his button and snorted.

Another pass, and a longer burst. Another look at the 29 revealed it was still flying on its own toward Japan. This time, there was a lace of yellow fire down its port wing. Nothing else! It was a ghost ship, a Flying Dutchman; it couldn't be shot down. It was on its own and going places.

Two more passes placed rounds in the wings and engines. We recklessly sprayed the bomb bay, not knowing whether it was still loaded. All that happened was that the 29

swung into a gentle turn, dragging its fire-laced wing a little, back toward Iwo. We began to feel desperate. Pieces flew off it; a propeller windmilled; it flew on.

We had 450 rounds of ammunition and used them all. By the time the gleaming bomber had steepened its turn and started to spiral toward the ocean, we were on the edge of defeat, whipped and disgraced. In full view of 10,000 men on Iwo, an empty ship had all but beaten us. We had never heard of an aircraft absorbing such punishment.

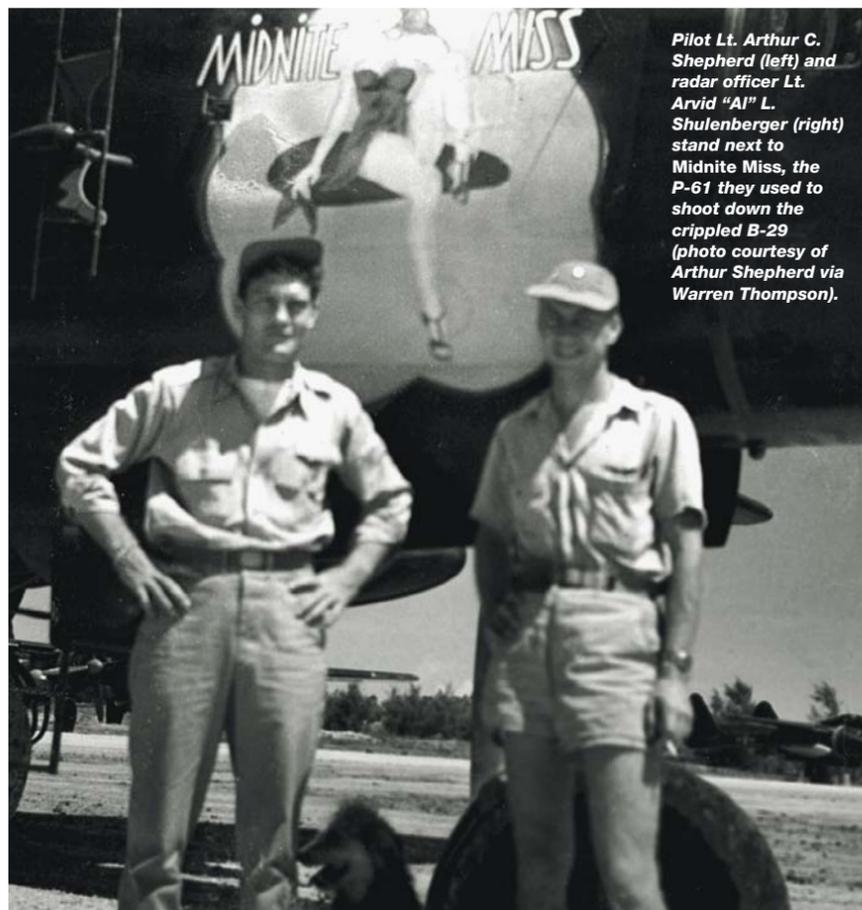
Out of ammo, we circled above the 29. It flew disdainfully and grandly, steepening its spiral; its great wings gleamed in the sunlight and streamed flame. The spiral became a dive. In the sunshine, the sea below was like a flexing mirror. The 29 was not shot down, but it *flew* into the sea as if into a mirror.

As it touched, the napalm bombs and gasoline aboard produced a roar and a great plume of smoke; the explosion rocked the air around us.

We turned steeply, looking down. Shep called in, with more relief than happiness in his voice, "Splash one



The surviving crew of the B-29 K-37 "Dreamboat" that was splashed by the author and Lt. Shepherd. Front row (left to right): F/O Wallace Mussallem (radar), Lts. Robert L. Fast (navigator), John Logerot (bombardier), Robert M. Woliver (pilot). Capt. Arthur Behrens (aircraft commander) was killed over Osaka, Japan. Back row (left to right): Sgts. Jack Engel (radio), James L. Cipolla (tail gun), Charles D. Whitehead (flight engineer), John Berguson, Joe Celardo, Herb Corby—gunners (photo courtesy of Eric Shulenberg).



Pilot Lt. Arthur C. Shepherd (left) and radar officer Lt. Arvid "Al" L. Shulenberger (right) stand next to Midnite Miss, the P-61 they used to shoot down the crippled B-29 (photo courtesy of Arthur Shepherd via Warren Thompson).

Editors' note: an interesting twist to this article occurred when we mentioned to contributing editor Warren Thompson that we were going to run it. He told us that he had interviewed the pilot of the plane in which Shulenberger was the R/O. Here it is:

INTERVIEW WITH MAJ. ARTHUR C. SHEPHERD

PILOT: 548TH NIGHT FIGHTER SQUADRON

MARCH 24, 1976

“Concerning our famous June 9, 1945, ‘kill’ of a B-29 Superfortress off Iwo Jima: on days when the B-29s were returning from their raids on Japan, we would fly out and give whatever assistance we could. If we saw one ditch, we would call in a Dumbo Sea Rescue plane and direct it to the downed crewmen. While on one of these missions, my R/O, Al Schulenberg, picked up an emergency IFF and directed us in on it. I pulled up on the right wing and tucked in real close. I could not see anything wrong with the aircraft, but the crew was all at the windows waving like mad. At first, we thought they were being friendly, so we peeled off and moved away; but Al continued to receive the IFF, so he directed me to pull in close again.

“This time, I moved in on the left wing and looked down on the nose of the aircraft. The hole in the nose was big enough to drop a piano through! A 90mm had gone right through the pilot’s seat, killing him and injuring the copilot. We led them to Iwo. Over the island at 4,000 feet, on autopilot, the crew bailed out without incident. I was just about to ask if I could shoot it down when I was directed to do so. It didn’t seem like much of a contest with a ‘sitting duck’ flying straight away and me right behind it with four .50-caliber machine guns and four 20mm cannon that were loaded with armor-piercing and incendiary rounds!

“I did not realize that the bomber still had its full load of ordnance, as the first burst from my guns blew the bomb bay doors open. I don’t remember how many rounds we pumped into that old bird, but it didn’t want to go down. The 20mm shells were ripping big holes in the fuselage and wings. At last, the left wing dropped a little and it started turning back toward Iwo, losing altitude all the time. At that time, I decided to concentrate my fire on the two left engines. When I scored hits on both, the aircraft began a tight left spiral into the ocean. I actually felt sorry for it and wished that the copilot had been able to bring it in. What a magnificent aircraft it was.” —Warren Thompson †