



A ROLL OF
THE DICE

A LUCKY LIBERATOR CREW SURVIVES

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AS TOLD TO AND WRITTEN BY JAMES P. BUSH

When Allied airmen strapped on their aircraft for a combat mission during World War II, especially when piloting a heavy bomber like the B-24 Liberator over the vastness of the Pacific Ocean, the situation usually provoked the same thoughts from pilots and crew members alike. "Will we get this overloaded and overweight behemoth off the ground and safely into the air? Will this be a milk run? What if we encounter Japanese fighters? Will the flak be as thick and as accurate as on the last mission? Can we find our way back home?"

B-24J Liberator s/n 44-44052 owned by the Collings Foundation of Stow, Massachusetts, displays the markings of the 43rd Bomb Group's famous *Dragon And His Tail*. The original Liberator was scrapped post war at Kingman, Arizona. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)





B-24D s/n 41-24144 of the 13th AF stands ready for another mission from its New Georgia Island base in 1944. This aircraft has had its glass nose replaced with a tail turret from another B-24D. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)

There was always a chance something would go wrong. The thoughts of multiple, unforeseen problems were kicked around in the heads of the Liberator crews long before takeoff. The best-laid mission plans rarely went off without a hitch, but the brave young men who flew day after day through murderous flak, enemy fighters and long, tedious over-water flights didn't think of themselves as the recipients of the enemy's bullets or flak bursts. Their thoughts were on the other guys next to them in formation as the ones who would get hit today.

Being young and adventuresome helped the crews a little to make it through each mission alive, but the whispered, soft-spoken words of luck, fate, destiny and divine intervention carried much greater weight to a God-fearing crew. Here is a story of one such mission where all these factors came into play in the belly of a B-24 on a mission to Formosa.

Only long, mostly boring, over-water flights. By the time I was transferred to the 43rd Bomb Group at Nadzab, New Guinea, about the only thing that changed while flying the B-24 was the ever-present flak, and there was always plenty of it!

Our group was known as "Ken's Men," named partly after Gen. George Kenny, Commander Allied Air Forces and 5th Air Force. And also after Gen. Kenneth Walker, commander of the V Bomber Command, who was lost in action while on a group mission to Rabaul. There were four squadrons of B-24s in the group when I joined. One of them, the 63rd Squadron, was a "Snooper Squadron" that flew black-painted B-24s loaded with the latest radar equipment that was used with great success for night bombing, especially against enemy shipping. The other three squadrons were the 403rd, the 64th and the one I flew with, the 65th—known as "The Lucky Dicers."

Unlike our counterparts in Europe, who flew through snow, rain, ice and fog, at much higher altitudes with oxygen masks strapped to their mugs, awaiting the release of bombs from their lead B-24 as they fought off German fighters and accurate flak, we did things a little differently. Most of our bombing runs were made

at between 11,000 and 13,000 feet. We carried oxygen, but I don't recall a time we ever had to use it. Instead of releasing our bombs as a group when the lead B-24 did, we carried a bombardier in each B-24, and it was his job to zero in on the target and release our load as individual aircraft. We also had

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The Lucky Dicers

When I joined the 43rd bomb group in 1944, I already had several hundred hours of copilot time in B-24s flying patrols from the Galapagos Islands off the coast of Ecuador with the 6th Air Force. There was no flak or enemy fighters to deal with.

much better accuracy at these medium altitudes.

Japanese fighters were a thing of the past and were rarely seen in the skies over the Pacific, except when the Japanese used them as kamikazes. In fact, when we had Allied fighter cover on our missions and a Japanese plane was spotted, the fighter boys would argue amongst themselves whose turn it was to go after the lone bandit! It was a mismatch between our highly trained fighter pilots and the poor cadets of the Imperial Japanese Air Force. But, unfortunately, the one thing we did have in common with our brothers in Europe was heavy, concentrated, accurate flak.

In an attempt to confuse and disrupt the Japanese flak guns, our group used radar-jamming B-24s on many of these missions. I flew a large percentage of my 41 combat missions as pilot in the radar-jamming role. There wasn't a lot of difference in the outside appearance to the radar B-24, just some aerals out on the wing and a seventh man stuck inside the fuselage gazing at some magical scopes. With the added equipment inside and out, the B-24 was a little bit heavier than the others but handled the same.

My radar man used to tell me the Japanese had three different radar channels at their disposal. We would jam one of them as we flew towards the target, and the Japanese would switch to another channel as their flak guns tore into our formations. We would come back from a mission and tell our intelligence people about the multiple frequencies the Japanese had, and our own people would scoff at us and say, "They have no such thing!" The Japanese only had one frequency because that's all we had, and they couldn't have anything better than we did! But apparently they did, as evidenced by the numerous flak holes I carried in my B-24 after those missions. I soon proved this fact on a bombing mission to Formosa that almost became my last.

A deadly fact

May 18, 1945. Our target for this mission was the Japanese airfield at Tainan, Formosa (Taiwan). During our briefing we were told that the targets were Japanese aircraft parked in sand-bunkered revetments. We found out later they were kamikaze planes used in the ongoing attempts to destroy the American fleet off the coast of Okinawa. The additional targets were personnel and the flak guns that ringed the area.

The anti-aircraft guns were extremely accurate, especially against the lower-flying B-25s that followed us in on our bombing runs. In order for their mission to become successful, we had to

annihilate those flak guns. To achieve our goal, we carried a bomb load that would create the highest level of destruction; strapped inside our bomb bays were 40 100-pound fragmentation bombs.

The bombs were separated into bundles with a hand grenade attached to each bundle. When the bomb load hit the ground, the hand grenade would detonate the bombs throwing jagged metal all over the place. There was a slim chance of surviving the devastation that followed, especially if you were only a few feet from the blast—a deadly fact I would soon encounter.

Our aircraft for that day's mission was a B-24J named *Petty Gal*. She was all dolled up with nose art on the right front side and wore a red-white-and-blue-striped rudder. I had flown this plane on previous missions and found it very stable and nice to fly. As the sun began to rise above the horizon, we were given the go-ahead to start engines. The first echelon of three B-24s took off from Clark Field in the Philippines and led the way north. I was part of the second echelon and flew right wing on the leader, Lt. James Franklin. The left wingman was Lt. Charles Wilt. Little did I know at the time that this would be the last flight for all three of these Liberators.

It was a customary practice to fly single file to our



designated rendezvous point, where we would then move into target formation. It was a sight to see as other "flying billboards" accompanied us. B-24s painted from nose to tail with markings like *The Dragon and his Tail*, *It Ain't Funny*, and my favorite, *The Last Horizon*, decorated with the Golden Gate bridge, blue sky and puffy clouds reminding many of us of back home, were spread out across the sky. It was a long haul from Clark Field up the valley to Lingayen Gulf on the west coast of Central Luzon, then north over the South China Sea to the Pescadores Islands in the Strait of Formosa. This mission would last almost eight hours if everything went as expected. Unfortunately, it didn't. The first tell-tale sign appeared off our right wing as we approached Formosa with our bomb bays open.

I remarked to my copilot, Lt. Macintosh, that the leader was making an unusually long run

CAF B-24-A flown over north central Texas by Paul Stojkov. This is the oldest B-24 in existence. (Photo courtesy of Bill Crump)

St. Louis Blues, F-7A s/n 42-64172, was a photo recon version of the Liberator assigned to the 5th Air Force's 20th Combat Mapping Squadron and is seen at her base at Dulag, Leyte, PI in 1945. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)



B-17 VS. B-24 IN THE PACIFIC THEATER

The argument is inevitable. Especially when there are similar products produced by different manufacturers. The age-old question of "Which one is better?" always seems to come up in conversation—and some of it heated. It doesn't matter if you're talking about automobiles, guns, beer or airplanes; there will always be two sides of the fence when it comes to opinions. Case in point is the Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress and the Consolidated B-24 Liberator.

Now, we can all agree that both of these workhorses served valiantly on all fronts during WW II. In fact, when the war broke out, the B-17 was the only game in town to

shoulder the heavy bombing burden in the Pacific until the B-24 worked out some of its teething problems. Most of the early Pacific-based Fortresses that survived the initial Japanese attacks fought and bombed their way back to the rear from the Philippines to the shores of Australia—always outnumbered—as they attempted to slow the Japanese advance. Fewer than 200 B-17s saw combat in the Pacific theater, and those that survived were withdrawn by mid 1943. B-17 bomber crews switched over to the B-24, which quickly became the dominant heavy bomber in the Pacific—until the B-29s showed up.

The B-24 was well suited to the Pacific theater missions for a variety of reasons. It could fly a little bit faster than the Fortress, it carried a heavier bomb load, but most importantly, it won the long-distance range game hands down. With full fuel and an 8,000-pound bomb load, a B-24 could fly almost 2,000 miles. Land was a scarce commodity in the vastness of the Pacific, so in order to inflict damage on the enemy, the B-24 crews routinely flew very long-range bombing missions. So, which one was better? I'll let you be the judge.

Below: One of two B-24s still airworthy, commemorating the Liberator and their crews in both theaters of operation, the Collings Foundation's 44-44052 *Witchcraft* currently wears the livery of the B-24H flown by the 790th BS, 467th Bomb Group, 8th Air Force, based at Rackheath, England. *Witchcraft* amazingly survived 130 missions with no early returns or injured or killed crewmembers between April 1944 and June 1945. (Photo courtesy of Brian Silcox)



to the target. We had been at one altitude, speed and direction for almost five minutes, when Lt. Macintosh spotted a Japanese fighter flying parallel with us about a quarter mile away off our right wing. He maintained perfect formation with us, and there was no doubt that he was radioing to the anti-aircraft positions up ahead, telling them our airspeed, altitude and coordinates. Where were our fighters when we needed them?

The flak was very accurate with three distinct patterns of ack-ack bursting up ahead at our altitude. I called the crew and told them, "They're walking that stuff right onto us." The tail gunner responded and screamed over the intercom, "They're walking it in to us from the back, too!" Flak bursts filled the sky, especially all around our three-ship echelon. In an instant, our echelon leader vaporized before my eyes.

I felt a tremendous shudder as our B-24 was lifted violently upward. At the same moment, I saw our lead B-24 flown by Lt. Franklin explode into a thousand pieces. There wasn't a large piece of the Liberator left to tumble earthward, and there were no parachutes to count either. The only thing left of Lt. Franklin's B-24 were the hundreds and hundreds of pieces of hot metal that sliced into our Liberator. Our intercom came alive as one of the crew yelled, "Fire in the bomb bay!"

I looked back and saw flame and smoke coming from the bomb bay area. Instinctively, I pulled the emergency release and jettisoned the bomb load. We had been briefed that we should never drop the sensitive fragmentation bombs as a group and only salvo them one at a time. Either way, with that smoke in the bomb bay and a belly full of live bombs, I had to do something. This was my first "roll of the dice" as the bombs tumbled from our bomb bay and waited to explode when they hit the ground.

The B-24 that mirrored our position on the left, flown by Lt. Charles Wilt, was hit pretty hard, too, and was shattered with freshly made holes. The two of us broke ranks after dropping

our bombs and turned for home. There was no way we could continue on the mission, especially with both left engines on fire, pouring out thick, black smoke and reports of injured crew members being broadcast over the intercom.

I had my copilot shut down both engines and feather the props as we retrimmed the Liberator for two-engine flight. I gingerly turned left out of formation and headed out to sea, where I knew a submarine and a couple of PBV-5 Catalina flying boats were standing by. When I switched my radio over to the emergency channel, I heard Lt. Wilt

The Liberator's crew accommodations benefitted greatly from Consolidated's lineage of very long-range patrol bombers developed for the U.S. Navy. The cockpit affords an excellent view both above and below through its generous greenhouse-style glazing. Controls and instrumentation are of a traditional layout in the center pedestal and forward panel. (Photo courtesy of Brian Silcox)



screaming over the radio that his plane would not fly much longer and he was ordering his crew to bail out over the sub. Unfortunately, Lt. Wilt's initial pleas for help went





The CAF B-24 operates out of the Cavanaugh Flight Museum in Addison, Texas. The B-24-A has recently been through a complete restoration, which has returned it more closely to its original condition. (Photo courtesy of Bill Crump)

ANYONE WHO WANTED TO JUMP WAS FREE TO DO SO

unnoticed, as some idiot pilots were on the air playing a little game called “Who Dat, Say Who Dat!”

Each time one of these pilots would say the phrase, they would add another “Who Dat?” to the sentence. Despite my pleas and those of Lt. Wilt’s to knock it off and leave the channel, they refused to get off the air. Finally, Lt. Wilt was able to raise the pilots of the Catalinas. The rescue pilots said the seas were rolling with 25-foot swells and it would be difficult to land, but they would try if they had to. I heard Lt. Wilt tell the Cat pilots that he was circling

the sub and he and his crew were bailing out. He put his Liberator on autopilot, pointed towards Formosa, where we saw it crash into a mountain.

As I sat and waited for the men in the other B-24 to jump, I too circled above the submarine wondering how long our Liberator would hold together. I sent the copilot to the back of the B-24 to ready our guys to jump. The thought of jumping into a churning sea didn’t appeal to me, but it was better than crashing a B-24 into it! Our situation quickly changed when the copilot came over the intercom: “Two men badly wounded, unable to parachute.” I took another turn at the crap table and threw the next roll of the dice.

The nose gunner had taken the worst of the blast and sustained a compound fracture with a bone sticking out of one of his legs. The waist gunner fared no better and was injured, too. I then and there made the decision to stay with these guys and our stricken B-24 in hopes of making it back to an emergency field. I then informed the crew that I would continue to circle the sub, and anyone who wanted to jump was free to do so. The crew all voted to stay with me, and not realizing it at the time, the guys who were injured saved my life.

As we set a course for home, we knew we were in serious trouble because most of the instruments had been blown away. Thankfully, it was a clear day, and the magnetic compass was still working along with the altimeter that showed we were slowly losing altitude. With only two engines keeping air under our wings, we had to lighten our load. I ordered the crew to throw everything out of the plane that wasn’t nailed down. They even attempted to chop the tail turret out of the B-24 with machetes but were unsuccessful.

Another set of the dice

After the blast, we didn’t know what we had or didn’t have still operating normally. All we knew for sure was that our plane was full of holes including the three large ones near my head in the Plexiglas. The copilot and I couldn’t figure out where the shrapnel went because it should have hit my head. I had a flak helmet and jacket on, and



Above: From the 64th BS, *Cocktail Hour's* artwork was created and rendered by famed artist S/Sgt. Sarkis Bartigan (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet); *B-24H Glamorous* of the 13th AF in New Guinea 1945. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook); Most famous B-24 artwork of the war, Sarkis's *Dragon and His Tail* of the 64th Sq. survived the war and could probably be the last B-24 to be scrapped in Arizona waiting for someone to save its spectacular workmanship. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet); *Million Dollar Baby* was the mount of the 64th Sq.'s last CO, Carl Cramer when based at Ie Shima in July 1945 (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet) **Below:** B-24D s/n 42-42303 *Frenisi* of the 307th BG is really to leave her base at Los Negros, PI to return to the U.S. after completing 100 combat missions. (Photo courtesy of Jack Cook)

there were no marks or dents in either one. There were no holes on the other side of the cockpit or on the floor. So, whatever came in didn't go out. It was just unbelievable.

With our altitude slowly fading away, we tried to restart both the number-one and number-two engines. We got number one going but could not get it up to full power by any means. Although number one was still turning blades at half power, number two was totally dead. We found we could maintain altitude and even gained some slowly. *Petty Gal* had seen much better days, but she was still a beauty queen in my eyes as we neared the emergency field at Lingayen air strip.

PETTY GAL HAD SEEN MUCH BETTER DAYS, BUT SHE WAS STILL A BEAUTY QUEEN IN MY EYES

As the field came into view, we rolled another set of the dice. I didn't know if the wheels would come down or not, and if they did, would the tires be inflated? And if they were, would the brakes work? I set up for a long, straight-in approach, said some prayers and hoped for the best. When I lowered the gear, most of us were checking out the tires with at least one set of eyes at each window or port on the plane. The tires looked to be OK.

We came in with full flaps, crossed fingers and a crew full of choirboys, as we prayed for a safe landing. I eased the B-24 down to the end of the runway and made one of the best landings of the war. When we came to a stop, the ambulances raced towards us and cared for our wounded. As we exited *Petty Gal* for the last time, we counted noses and found everyone else to be OK. Then we

began to count holes.

As we walked around the Liberator, we counted more than 600 holes from nose to tail. The Plexiglas nose was completely blown out, and the right stabilizer was torn and twisted. The whole airplane looked like a big piece of Swiss cheese. We stood there gazing in disbelief, shaking our heads and rubbing our jaws wondering how we ever survived this. Then the bombardier found one last hole.

As was walked around the plane, I still wore my seat pack parachute. The bombardier tapped me on the shoulder and said, "You better take a look at your chute." I had been sitting on my parachute

the entire mission, and when I finally took it off, I knew for certain God was with me that day. I found a big, jagged hole in my parachute where a piece of red-hot metal had embedded itself, melting and fusing the panels together. If I had jumped, my chute would have never opened.

I signed *Petty Gal* over to the personnel at Lingayen Air Field as totally disabled and cut the piece of flak out of my parachute to save as a souvenir. Three days later, I was up again flying another mission to Japan from Clark Field. I also learned that only eight men out of the 10 in Lt. Wilt's crew had survived their jump into the sea. On that mission, we were short on Mae Wests and had to draw straws to see who would get one. Unfortunately, the two airmen who drowned went without and got a bad roll of the dice. ✚