



Date of event: 5 June, 1944
Date Written: June, 1944 (Est.)
Written by: Wayne Wiseman

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

The ditching and rescue recounted here occurred on the first B-29 mission, June 5, 1944. The target was Bangkok, Thailand. This account is being published posthumously. Wayne Wiseman, who wrote it, died in 1975. His death was due, in part, to injuries sustained in the ditching. Maj. Alex Zamry, pilot and Sgt. Joseph W. Harvey, radio operator, were lost in this water landing.

This manuscript was found by Barney Wotipka among his WW II effects and given to Ira Matthews in July, 1982. Ira made it available to us for use as issue #3 of MEMORIES. This report is not intended to be a comprehensive account of the mission or even of the ditching. Rather it is intended to let everyone see the story of this experience as told by someone who lived it.

Ditching - First B-29 Combat Mission

We were notified one morning to report to a certain place that afternoon for briefing. Of course, there was lots of speculation as to what the briefing was about, and as to where the target might be if it were a bombing mission. We reported to briefing and found out, much to our surprise, the mission would be the next day and the target wouldn't be disclosed until just before our departure next morning. They told us we would be doing most of our flying over water and what interception and anti-aircraft fire we could expect to and from the target.

After briefing, everyone went to their planes and began preparing and getting the planes in the best of shape, for it was here--what we had been waiting on for a long time. I remember while I was working on a turret late that afternoon our pilot, Major Alex Zamry, came up and said, "Wiseman, are you going to get one tomorrow?" (Meaning a Jap Zero.) I told him, "Yes sir, think I'll get two just to make sure." He smiled and went on over to the tent to get his personal things together for the flight.

All our regular crew was to be on the flight except our bombardier, Lt. Greenfield, who was in the hospital, and in his place we were to have Lt. Wotipka. In addition to the crew, we were to have one observer, Capt. Drislane. There were twelve men to go on the mission--Pilot-Major Alex N. Zamry, Co-Pilot-Lt. Ashley Briggs, Navigator-Lt. Jim W. Evans, Bombardier-Lt. Barney Wotipka, Engineer-Lt. Joseph Phalon, Radio Operator-Joseph Harvey, Radarman-Lt. Jesse C. Beal, Right Gunner-Sgt. Gilbert Bleyl, Rear Gunner-Sgt. William F. O'Connel, and myself as Left Gunner.

That night I guess we were all rather restless but we got some sleep and were awakened early next morning, about two O'clock to be exact, some to go to the final briefing and others to give the last minute check of everything. The pilot returned from the final briefing and we all lay down on our cots for a last minute rest and to discuss the target and what we expected. We found out the target was to be a big Jap supply base. I remember our pilot commenting that he didn't sleep much for he had fought flak and fighters all night long. This tickled all of us and we had a good laugh over it.

We all lined up in front of our plane for a final crew inspection and last minute orders from the pilot. Major Zamry then said, "Gather around" and we all went into a huddle like a football team with our arms around each others' shoulders. The pilot said, "Well boys, this is it and I know everyone of you are ready so lets go and give them hell, good luck!" Of course we all had a little tingle in our blood, or at least I did. We all are close to each other on our crew, but I ran around with the radio operator, Joe Harvey, and I suppose we thought the most of each other. We were always kidding each other about different things and I remember now how we were hitting each other that last morning and saying, "Oh man, I'll live to on your grave." That was just the way we were and we had lots of fun telling each other such things. (I would have given my right arm for that boy.)

We took off and I won't say much about the target etc. I will say we gave them hell and we didn't run into much flak or interruption.

After we had left the target a few minutes, I felt someone tap me on the shoulder and I turned around to see who it was. I was keeping my eyes peeled for enemy planes, but I turned around, and it was Joe. He asked me what I wanted to eat, a spam or peanut butter sandwich and I told him spare. He laughed and went away to get me one. He soon brought it back and I remember him saying, "Boy, I'll get your --- if you let a Zero get in here on us!" and laughed. Little did I realize that was the last time I was to see him, for he left and went back to the radio compartment.

In a few minutes, the pilot called up on the inter-phone to our tail gunner, O'Connel, who is a very good mechanic and said, "O'Connel, the transfer system is out and we haven't enough gas to get home. Come up and see what you can do." All of us were confident that if anything could be done O'Connel could do it. We had enough gas for about an hour or more of flight we knew and with the pilot changing R.P.M. and mixture control maybe longer. We worked on the transfer system for over an hour, all the time sweating out having to land the ship in water. After we saw it was useless and that we were going down, we prepared. All the time the pilot was doing everything he could to get us as close to land as possible which he did beautifully as long as we had any power at all.

I won't go into detail about what we did preparing for a water landing such as getting our water ready and the position we all got in etc., for that will mean nothing to you.

Anyway, the pilot brought the plane down and made a beautiful landing considering the high waves, etc. The co-pilot later told me Major Zamry was smiling up to the last. (Truly a great pilot in my estimation, and the reason the others of us are here now.) The radio operator was continually sending out SOS and when we started to hit the water he braced himself, for it was his job to pull the life rafts. On the contact with the water, some object hit the radio operator and that was the end of him and I presume the pilot hit his head against something, for he had no time to put a pillow or anything in front to protect himself.

Upon hitting the water, we were blown out of the ship, all except Lt. Briggs and Lt. Phalon who escaped through a window, and it seemed it shot me under the water like a bullet for I could feel the water pressure on my chest. To be perfectly truthful, I could see the gates of hell opening up to receive me. After coming up and going down for the third or fourth time, I finally got my Mae West to inflate and could see some of the other fellows around. It seemed as if Lt. Beal and I were further away from the ship than the others and I saw Lt. Briggs and Lt. Phalon finally get the rubber life rafts out of the top of the ship.

They began to pick up everyone which was a bad job, trying to paddle those little light rubber rafts in such waves. It seemed I was being carried further away by the waves. I saw Lt. Beal float by one time perfectly still and I thought he was gone. I kept hollering for the waves were so high I couldn't see anything and I know the boys on the raft couldn't see me. I heard Lt. Beal hollering too in a few minutes and recognized his voice, but I still didn't hear the boys in the life rafts. They (all the rafts) later told us they all paddled until they were given out, for some were throwing up blood from the salt water and some had broken bones etc. They were forced to give up getting to Lt. Beal and me and left us there to die.

I floated around and kept hollering until nearly night for it was four thirty in the afternoon when we hit the water. I kept thinking I might hear the boys on the raft but I heard no one, not even Lt. Beal. When it became dark or just at dark, I heard some one holler and I recognized it as Lt. Beal. I yelled back and he answered. I told him to keep calling and that I would try to get to him, so we both kept hollering and I kept trying to get to him. Finally, it seemed the waves changed and brought us right together. He grabbed hold of me for he was nearly gone and he had an oxygen bottle under one arm. I took that and put it under his head. This brought him out of the water enough to get air. He told me he didn't think he could make it any longer for his leg was broken and so was his arm. After getting his head up on the bottle and getting a little air, he felt some better and I told him to keep holding on to my arm. I put my head up on the bottle beside his and he held on to my left arm while I held the bottle under our head with my other arm and the string in my left hand. We floated around with the waves rolling over us and kept drinking the salt water and throwing up blood. We would go as long as we could and Lt. Beal would say he had to have some air so I would tell him to hold on, and with my legs I would turn us around so our heads would be into the waves. The bottle would break part of the wave and I would push Lt. Beal up as high as I could and jump myself until we got some air. After going this way awhile, a squall came up and we thought sure that would be our end for the waves began to get higher and the sky was the blackest I have ever seen, with lightning flashing and pouring rain. We tried opening our mouths to get some rain water but every time a big wave would roll over and fill us full of salt water. Lt. Beal and I prayed that night and now as I sit here writing this I can look back and see those prayers were answered. I have thanked the Lord many times since then and I will continue to thank him by trying to live the kind of life I think he wants me to. After this first squall, it cleared up and got fairly calm but of course we were still getting waves to cover us up. We kept on floating and wondering just when we would run into one of those sharks, for we knew they were there. We kept fighting the waves and the crabs that would pinch us with a terrific pinch. I had more trouble with them for my clothes were torn and Lt. Beal was weaker and so was I. It seemed now he was even delirious at times. We weathered that squall much the same as we did the other, by going as long as we could and then turning us around to get a little air. That was the longest and most dreadful night I have ever spent or hope to spend in my life.

After we could faintly see day breaking, we decided to try to go in a certain direction for we knew land was that way somewhere but had no idea how far. We could see another squall coming up but we were on the edge of it and only got some high waves from it. We could paddle until we couldn't and then rest, and paddle some more. Lt. Beal would say he couldn't help much and then rest, and paddle some more. He had one good arm and he had to use his good leg to hold the broken one up, but I had two good legs and the cuts on me didn't bother me for the salt water seemed to have helped them so we kept paddling on and on.

The next day about noon we sighted land and it looked like the waves were going to help us reach it, but all of a sudden the wind and the waves changed and we just couldn't get any closer. We tried and tried but couldn't do any good. It was some feeling being so close but yet so far from land. We kept on trying and about two O'clock we saw a small boat of some kind so we started toward that. We couldn't tell what kind of boat for the saltwater and sun, also the blows we had in our eyes, had them nearly closed so we couldn't see very well. After seeing the boat, we both were encouraged and I started paddling as much as I could. When we got close to the boat, we could see it was our own men on the two life rafts and they had them tied together. When we first saw the boat we thought it was a Jap boat for we had no idea which way we had been washed during the night.

We were very relieved when we got to the boat and found it was the rest of our crew. They put me in one raft and Lt. Beal in the other. They had just a little fresh water for they weren't able to find our big water can out of the wreckage. All they had was a few little half pint cans that were in the life raft, four to be exact and most of those were empty. We were in sight of land and we thought we could get water when we hit land so they gave Lt. Beal and me all the water we had and boy it was good. My tongue was swollen so much from the salt water I could hardly close my mouth. They had salvaged a kit or at least Lt. Phalon had gotten out with a jacket that contained some sulfanilimic powder and they sprinkled our cuts and wounds with that. They covered us up with the boat sail and kept sea water on that to keep us cool for the heat from the sun was almost unbearable. I didn't realize I was so weak or that Lt. Beal was in such a bad shape until they got us in the boat.

We found out we couldn't get into land trying to paddle with both rafts tied together so we decided to cut loose and both try for land. The one to get there first would try to get help and come for the other. On my raft were Capt. Drislane, Lt. Evans, Lt. Wotipka, Belcher and I. They started paddling, at least Capt. Drislane, Lt. Wotipka, and Belcher did for Lt. Evans had a bad arm and I was even too weak to sit up. They paddled until they gave out and we still weren't doing any good for the tide was terrific. Right after dark, the wind started blowing and we put up our little sail and started for an island we could barely see in the distance. The raft started going off the edge of the island and nothing we could do would make it hit the island; however, in a few minutes with the wind blowing strong, we sighted another so we headed for the top tip of this island hoping to at least hit the lower tip for we were drifting terrifically and we didn't want to miss it as we had the other island.

We hit that island but when we got close to it we could see high rocks with the waves beating against them and we knew the waves would end us if they caught and smashed us against the rock, but it was a chance we had to take. Just as we got close to the island, it seemed a big wave just caught our little raft and put it down gently on the rocks.

On the island, we thought we would be o.k. and could build a fire, find water etc. All got out of the boat and Belcher had to crawl around everywhere on his all fours for he had a bad leg. I tried to walk but was so weak I fell. Lt. Evans found a little open place and we all got to that. They tried to build a fire, but all the matches were wet. Lt. Wotipka tried digging to find some water that wasn't salty but that was useless. They all finally lay down to try to get some rest in order to get up early next morning and start looking for some fresh water, streams or something. We couldn't sleep for we were all wet and cold and the mosquitos were terrible. All that night I was still passing blood from being in the salt water so long.

At the first sign of day next morning, Lt. Evans and Lt. Wotipka started out to see what they could find and try to find some water and food. In a few minutes they came back and said there was a river not too far from us so we all got the raft back in the edge of the water and they pulled Belcher and me to the mouth of the river. The tide was just coming in and it would take us up the river a long way, maybe to a native village or up where there was fresh water. We went up the river as far as we could go and the sun was awful, but we found nothing at all and that afternoon we started back down the river to the shore where we had stayed the night before. That was an awful day with no water. I can't explain how awful it really was.

When we got back to the mouth of the river or whatever it was, we went back to the place we had stayed the previous night and prepared the sail etc. to catch rain water for we were hoping and praying it would rain that night. I had only my shorts on and didn't have the sail to cover in that night for we had to have it ready if it did rain. Lt. Wotipka dug me a big hole in the sand and covered me up with sand to help keep me warm. No rain that night and no sleep for any of us for you can imagine our condition.

The rest of the time on the island was much the same, no water and we were all too weak to attempt to get in the life raft to try to paddle to another island or anywhere. We just had to hope for rain but none came. That is really a miserable feeling to want water so badly and not be able to get any. All this time we didn't know where the other fellows in the other raft had landed.

Late that afternoon we saw a little sail boat and two natives in it away off shore, so Lt. Wotipka took a mirror and flashed them and waved etc. They waved back and took their sail like they were going to paddle towards us but later put up their sail and went on off. This was very disappointing but we had hope they had gone back for help.

Next morning after a bad night with no rain, we heard a whistle and some one hollering for Lt. Wotipka. We were all about done for with no water and no luck fishing. Lt. Wotipka answered and started down to the water and found Lt. Briggs and Lt. Phalon who had contacted some natives. The native chief had found an interpreter and gotten a boat and had come after us for the little native boys had told them about seeing us that afternoon before on the island. The native men and the chief had

with him on the boat water and coconuts, which they would open and give us the juice. They wouldn't let me drink but a little at a time, but when I first got water I couldn't help but cry like a baby with joy.

It seemed the other raft had landed on another island. They had been having much the same trouble as we had about finding nothing but salt water, and Lt. Beal was in the worst shape of any with pain and wanting water. They had sent out different ones to try to find water or some natives or something. They finally contacted the natives. Lt. Briggs and Lt. Phalon did as I have mentioned and they came for us and carried us over to their island by the natives to pick up the others, but when we got there some native doctors had been there for O'Connel had contacted them at a district dispensary. They then made a stretcher and started through the jungle with Lt. Beal to the dispensary for they thought that would be faster than by boat. O'Connel was already at the dispensary for they had kept him there when the natives took him there to get help.

The natives took all the rest of us in their boat and the chief said he was taking us to his village for food and water. The natives rowed the big boat and the chief seemed to like me for he kept a piece of cloth over me to keep the sun off. We got to his village and they took us to the chief's house to give us water and make us some hot tea. The chief had me a bed fixed and they put me to bed. They asked Lt. Briggs if he wanted some fish and he said yes, so they went out in the channel and in a few minutes they brought back two great big fish and put them on the floor in front of Lt. Briggs. The fish were still flapping. He said they were very nice so the natives took them and prepared us some stuff to go with it. All ate much, but I drank tea and water for I was afraid to start putting much hard food in my stomach yet. I ate only a small piece of the fish but it was certainly delicious. The natives put some of the prettiest green banana leaves I have ever seen over the table for a table cloth and the food was really clean. They were certainly wonderful to us and you should have seen them gather around me and talk to one another and point to my cuts. I will never forget those people for they did everything they could for us.

Late that afternoon we heard a plane flying low and Lt. Wotipka ran out with the mirror to signal it, but it didn't see his signal. Later it came back and saw our signal and let us know that he had seen us. It was an amphibious plane so he landed in the channel behind the chief's hut. After finding out the plane was looking for us and was to take us to a hospital, the natives got the boat to carry us out to the plane. From the chief's house to the boat, Lt. Briggs started helping me and the old chief was white headed he was so old, but he held on to me and went right along until they put me in the plane. The other natives lined the shore and waved and shouted for if there was one there were hundreds out there. The natives all seemed to be enjoying the whole show and had a good time watching us take off. Guess we owe our lives to them for it seemed they came just in time, and did all they could.

Footnote to this story: Wayne Wiseman was born in Adel, GA. He was attending Emory University, Atlanta, at the start of WW II. He returned home from college to help his father until drafted. Wayne was married about a month before he was drafted. Mrs. Wiseman survives Wayne and lives in Adel. After the ditching, Wayne was returned to the States and given a medical discharge at Maxwell AFB in December 1944. He sustained a head injury in the ditching that was the ultimate cause of his death.

Shortly after the ditching, Corey Ford, a widely known author in the war years, visited the 58th Wing/ Bomber Command headquarters in search of a story. Reed Sass, Bomber Command historical officer put Ford on to the story of the ditching. The article Ford wrote was published in Cosmopolitan Magazine, January 1945. It was reprinted in Reader's Digest. In his article, Ford told about an Evasion & Escape vest that Louis Jones, Assistant S-2 had designed and which his wife had sewn together in Pratt from an old vest an uncle had once given Louis. The vest was worn by Joe Phalon on this mission and proved extremely useful.

Ford interviewed the surviving crew members together. In the course of the interview co-pilot Ashley Briggs took the lead among those present. He told Ford, "Id like to go on record right here for all of us that what Sergeant Wiseman did was undoubtedly as fine an act of courage as I've ever seen."