



Windmilling Prop Over Hamamatsu = Bail Out Over Iwo

Date of event: 19 May, 1945
Date written: 1989 and 1996
Written by: Howard T. Anderson, R. Vincent Ford, Roland Geisler, Irving Smith

Crew members on this mission:

Maj. Donald M. Roberts A/C
1/Lt. John C. Harvell* (Deceased) C/P
Lt. Col. Oscar Schaaf* (Deceased) C/P
1/Lt. R. Vincent Ford N
1/Lt. Harry Polansky (Deceased) B
1/Lt. Joseph E. Phalon (Deceased) FE
S/Sgt. Charles W. Sullivan (Deceased) Radar
S/Sgt. Howard T. Anderson R
S/Sgt. Roland Geisler CFC
T/Sgt. Darrell Van Ormer (Deceased) RG
S/Sgt. Irving Smith LG
S/Sgt. Jack Mueller (Deceased) TG

*John C. Harvell was the designated co-pilot of this crew. It is known, however, that Lt. Col. Oscar Schaaf flew the mission and is referred to as flying in the right seat. It cannot be confirmed that Harvell was aboard on the mission.

Howard Anderson remembers: We were bound for our target, an aircraft factory at Hamamatsu in A/C 271. As we were climbing to our bombing altitude, Irv Smith reported on the intercom that there seemed to be an oil leak in #2 engine. He was told to keep checking on it. Except for that, everything was performing satisfactorily.

The target was under 10/10 cloud cover as we approached it. Accordingly, the decision was to make the bomb run by radar. Radar Operator Charles Sullivan and Bombardier Harry Polansky teamed up to get this done. The oil leak, meanwhile, had become worse. Joe Phalon's assessment of the situation was that the #2 engine had blown a cylinder. He decided then to feather the prop; however, the prop would not come to a complete feather. Soon after bombs away, it began windmilling and further attempts to completely feather it were unsuccessful.

Major Roberts asked me to notify Tinian about our troubles via the ART-13 liaison radio. I also contacted the Super Dumbo B-29 rescue plane which normally carried a range of droppable equipment including rafts, rations, survival kit and radios. It was in position orbiting off the Jap coast. The propeller windmilling gradually increased, and the vibrations were felt throughout the plane. Maj. Roberts and Col. Schaaf, who was riding in the right seat, considered the possibility of ditching. Radio contact was made with a rescue submarine which advised us that the seas were very rough and ditching would be extremely difficult. The alternative was to try to make it to Iwo. I remember that, although Schaaf outranked Roberts, when they were discussing our course of action over Iwo (whether to bail out or attempt a landing), he kept saying that Roberts was the aircraft commander and he would abide by his final decision.

The propeller began to really wind up as we headed south toward Iwo. Maj. Roberts instructed Vince Ford and me to leave our positions because it was becoming evident that the prop would come off soon and very possibly strike the plane. By this time, three P-61s from Iwo and a Super Dumbo were flying formation with us. Maybe we could make it to Iwo, we thought. The noise from the engine was nearly unbearable.

Approximately 45 minutes north of Iwo, the prop sheared off. On its upward swing, it tore a large jagged hole in the fuselage immediately aft of the navigator's station. It ruptured the small hydraulic tank and cut some control cables and electrical wiring. Luckily, the #1 engine seemed untouched. Maj. Roberts and Col. Schaaf decided it would be futile to attempt a landing at Iwo considering the damage to the plane.

Since we had no intercom or radio communications, Maj. Roberts and Col. Schaaf asked me to crawl through the tunnel with instructions to the aft crew members that we would make two passes over the Island in an effort to drop as many crew members as possible intending they would land on the ground instead of in the water. After turning and leveling off, Col. Schaaf would wag the wings twice as a signal to the aft crew members to bail out. They would then do a 180-degree turn and come back over the Island at which time the forward crew members would jump.

From approximately 2,500 ft., Iwo Jima (five miles long and two miles wide) didn't look very large. I do remember that it was extremely quiet after bailing out, as if I were in a vacuum. After my chute opened it seemed like only a few seconds until I was on the ground. Luckily we landed on terra firma (if that's what you can call Iwo). A few of us landed very close to the water's edge where Seabees helped gather our chutes. They took us to a dispensary tent. #271 crashed into the ocean while the Seabees took pictures of it. That's when my knees began knocking.

The only one seriously injured was Maj. Roberts who cracked a couple of vertebrae. He was later put in a cast for several months. Rolly Geisler broke an ankle. A couple other crew members had knee problems, but we considered ourselves very lucky. [Ed note: Joe Phalon experienced a back problem and remained at Santa Ana AFB pending discharge.] The parachutes were manufactured by Cole of California, Inc. All performed perfectly. We were all eligible to join the Caterpillar Club.

The night of our "arrival" at Iwo, all of us witnessed a spectacular night air show when five Jap Betty bombers came over. As we watched from slit trenches, powerful searchlights pinpointed the invaders as the AA shot them all down. At least one crashed into the Island creating a huge crater. It was some experience for us flyboys to observe (from the ground) such accuracy displayed by the AA gunners.

A few days after our bailout, most of us from the crew except the injured returned to Tinian via a Marine TAG C-46. Not long after that, our flight surgeon informed the crew members that we would be returning to the States. Our tour of combat duty had ended.

Irving Smith adds: In the bailout, I came down to a soft landing on a pile of Iwo Jima sand around an anti-aircraft gun. With regard to our last mission, I can only say that we were a very lucky crew. We outlasted three planes, and on our last mission only half the crew were injured.

Roland Geisler recalls: On the way back, P-61s were sent up to escort us back to Iwo. They were close enough that we could see their faces, and they would wave at us. When the prop came off, it just missed one of them. After that they were just little specs way out in the sky.

When the prop cut into the plane, it cut the intercom wires. I crawled up front to get instructions. Maj. Roberts wrote them down so I would not forget them. He said he would wiggle the wings as a signal for bailout.

My chute was fitted over a B-15 jacket, but it was too hot at low altitude for the jacket so I took it off. I rolled out of the back door when the signal came to bailout. When I saw the tail pass me, I pulled the rip cord. The chest strap hit me in the chin when the chute opened. I counted the chutes to make sure every one got out and watched the plane crash into the water. By that time I was getting close to the ground. I got my back into the wind, but I didn't know I was swinging sideways. I lit on the runway on my left foot and broke my ankle.

Vince Ford remembers: Joe Phalon figured the engine had blown the top two cylinders carrying the propeller feathering lines with them. This caused the prop to windmill freely while pumping out precious oil. The only control Maj. Roberts had was to reduce air speed as much as he dared.

As the navigator, I knew accurate position coordinates were crucial in the event we had to ditch. (For safety measures, Life Guard submarines were stationed about 150 miles apart on our intended flight path.) Howard Anderson sent my coordinates to our closest Life Guard sub and received the following response: "These seas are so damn rough I can't get up on top of them. Try to make it to the next one in line."

Along with navigating, I kept a watchful eye on #2 engine. The prop shaft went from red hot to white hot during the two hours of windmilling and pumping oil. Maj. Roberts suggested I leave my station and come up to the cockpit. I gladly moved.

The fighter escorts joined us to follow us on to Iwo. They looked us over and we heard this comment via radio: "I don't see anything wrong with this plane except an oil leak on the number two engine." Just about then, the prop came off, and the fighters went into instant evasive action to avoid the four 14-ft. prop blades.

The prop tore through the fuselage cutting out a large section and severing several key flight controls. Roberts and Harvell [Editor's note: Possibly Schaaf] determined that the extent of damage allowed us to continue flying as long as possible. They were able to maintain level flight, lowering altitude and making wide turns by using three engines. As luck would have it, we were flying in relatively smooth air. Any heavy turbulence could have broken the plane in two.

As we neared Iwo, Maj. Roberts agreed that the plane could not be landed safely due to the tear in the fuselage and the loss of controls. Bail out preparations were made. With communications cut off to the rear compartment, on the advice of Maj. Roberts I threw instructions through the crew tunnel. These simply stated to follow me when they saw me leave the plane and "to make sure Smitty (Irving Smith) got out even if they had to throw him out." [Editor's note: There are some conflicts between Vince Ford's account and how Roland Geisler remembers the communications between forward and rear compartment. Also there is conflict in the matter of signals to the rear compartment about when to bail out. These are reported here as the crew members remember them.]

Standing in the wheel well, ready to let go was an experience I'll never forget. Here I am, holding on to a very solid airplane and looking down to nothing but space and ocean. I paused long enough to get in a better drop position. I let go, counted to six, pulled the rip cord and looked down with relief. Ambulances and personnel were running around ready to help us, and I knew we were in good hands. I landed about two or three yards up on a beach, and three men helped me collapse my chute. All but the pilot and co-pilot jumped on the first pass; then they made a wide turn coming back for their jump. Of the eleven crew members five were not injured. Those who were injured sustained injuries when chutes dragged them through patches of stubbed roots.

My first name is Raphael. Drifting down in a quite smooth mode, I heard, "Hey Raphael." Looking up I saw Smitty swinging like he was on a ride at a county fair. Our concern over Smitty was needless.

Page 4

My parachute was sent to my home in the States. My wife eventually made dresses and costumes for my two little girls. The shroud lines were used for swings, it was a nice gesture by the Air Force to have sent it home for me.

As we began our bailout, a Navy pilot was landing. He had a camera and took a number of shots as we came down plus a shot of the plane as it crashed into the ocean. I'm grateful to have these actual photos and am happy to see them in the 40th Bomb Group history.

[Editor's note: This was the fifth mission from Tinian. There were 27 more missions from Tinian. It was the 38th mission over-all for the 40th Group.]



40th Bomb Group Association
2510 Tulane Ave., Alamogordo, NM 88310

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