“Solo Sortie”

by

1st Lt. Winton S. Reynolds

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to fly in a heavy B-24 Liberator bomber deep into Germany – alone?

Much has been written about the formations, numbering well into the thousands, that sweep the skies over axis held Europe; when the weather permits, but little has been written about the 15th Army Air Force secret briefings that are held for crews that have been trained to fly – alone.

When the weather is “socked” in solid from five thousand up and the strength of the Air Force is forced to stand down, “the weather crews” are alerted to fly.

At an early hour, when camps are asleep, a few especially trained crews crawl out of their ”sacks”, dress and hurry off to the mess hall for a breakfast of hot cereal and coffee. In a truck they are carried to a war room. There behind locked doors they are briefed on the target selected for the day’s operations.

It is an entirely different sensation to be briefed for a flight without the company of the entire Air Force, without fighter escort, and through the greatest of all hazards to all pilots – weather! It requires all of the skill and courage of an entire crew. Complete co-operation and eagle-eyed alertness.

The crews listened carefully as they were given information pertinent to the flight. Pencils were busy copying down secret call signs and signals into pocket sized notebooks as the Major read the orders.

“You are carrying delayed action bombs today, men. You must drop them. You will be carrying two pamphlet bombs, also,” he pointed out.

There were strained expressions on the faces of the crew members as they looked at the course line stretching across a large portion of a sprawling map of Europe. They knew the dangers involved in a flight where cloud formations offered the only protection against enemy fighters. They knew the danger of ice that forms so rapidly on the wings and tail assembly of an aircraft, that to break it loose with the aids of de-icer boots is a relative impossibility. They were fully aware the concentrations of heavy 88 mm flak and aerial rocket barrages that were not confined to the target alone. If the navigation be faulty and the airplane off course, in some instances but a few miles, they would be subjecting themselves to a rather rude awakening of its presence. Perfect navigation in the “soup” is a rather ticklish business. It requires a great deal of energy and skill of the men who direct the flight of a large bomber.

Weather flying, from the pilot’s standpoint, is of course hazardous work. Intricate instruments, gauges and dials are the nerve endings of an enormous piece of flying machinery. Simply because there are numerous planes, and men to fly them, does not alter the

size or importance of one specific airplane and the pilot who is its brain. His judgment and psychomotor reaction to a given situation, regardless how he might feel physically or mentally, must be the right one or all may be lost. The instrument pilot has, of course, been trained to disregard all sensations that he may experience that may prompt his thinking in a split-second analysis of a sensation as to his relative position and attitude in the air. Sensations that contradict the instruments before him are known to all who fly in the "soup" as vertigo. Overpowering these sensations can be, in time, very fatiguing. The sensation of "stalling out" while in a climb, or banking to the right or left while the aircraft remains in level flight are extremely confusing to the pilot. There is but one and only one remedy to this almost nauseating sensation, which may attack without provocation. Fly on instruments! Not by the "seat of your pants."

At length the crews were dismissed and they filed out of the briefing room into a wet, cold drizzle. The dawn was a faint pallor which filtered through the heavy overcast. The pilot paused for a moment, before he climbed upon the truck, and scanned the skies.

"Through that muck and into Germany – alone. Well," he thought to himself, "I hope I make it."

With pseudo-zest he swung aboard and the truck, with the grating of gears, skidded off down the road filled with thick, sluggish mud.

At the "parachute room" on the "line" the men dressed for their assent into the overcast and into the sub-zero temperatures; where little by little, and in spite of every protection available (heated suits, boots, and gloves), the cold gnaws at one until you feel you can no longer stand it.

The crew chief and his assistants had checked and rechecked the plane prior to the crew's arrival at the "hard stand". Engines had been pre-flighted and were perfect. The armorers were busy fusing delayed action bombs with special "booby trap" attachments. The engineer and assistant engineer were busy safetying the gas tank caps. The oil had been checked and the caps safetied. The pilots were occupied inspecting the plane. Checking her de-icer boots for rips and tears. Her antennas were intact. The turbo-buckets had proper clearance and were in excellent condition. Gunners worked quietly and efficiently over their fifty calibers and deadly belts of ammunition. They handled them like babies. A solo mission can be a do-or-die affair, and an unprotected tail could spell death for eleven men. Cartons of chaff were loaded into the waist section. The oxygen was checked at all stations. The interphone, VHF, and command transmitters were quickly checked by the radio operator. The airplane was in order.

The pilots were in their cockpit and crew members at their appointed station for takeoff. Minutes passed. The pilot glanced at the clock snuggly set into the instrument panel.

"It's time to start," he thought.

From that moment forward the crew had to function not as eleven individuals, but as eleven crew members who had specific jobs to do.

"Let's start 'em up," he called out. "Main line and battery. Put-put."

The copilot snapped the battery switches and main line bar on. The assistant engineer started the put-put.

"Clear left!" came the warning from the pilot.

The copilot called out, "Clear right."

Routine checks were made. Inverters and instruments were cautiously checked for possible failure. Number three engine was accelerated, primed and meshed. The big Pratt & Whitney engines kicked over. The pilot pulled the mixture into auto-rich, and the engine began to run smoothly. Number four – number two – and then one. The artificial horizon erected itself as the gyro instruments came into operation. The pilots, after allowing the "power plants" to warm up, checked the mags and ran up the engines. Contact was made with the tower. Taxi and takeoff instructions were succinctly given. The big Liberator bomber responded to the slow advancement of the throttles by the pilot, and began to move. Onto the taxi strip, which would its way across the area and down to the end of the runway.

"Controls unlocked," was the pilot's terse command. "High RPM! Auto-rich! Booster pumps on! Half flaps! Okay in the waist?" The pilot called over the interphone.

There was a quick reply, "Roger!"

On cue from the tower the big lumbering bomber, loaded to the brim of her bomb bays, with death and destruction plus leaflets which were to be dropped along with the bombs to give the people of Germany a clue as to why they were being bombed. The unwieldy bomber pulled out on the runway. Poised and ready for takeoff, the pilot advanced the throttles and the bomber went thundering down the runway. With her nose wheel off the ground the plane was held in the proper angle of attack. Gaining momentum with every second that ticked with the beating of the hearts of the men who flew her, she lifted her heavy and splashed body from the runway, and flew into the quiet gray shroud of mist about her.

There was something graceful about that bomber as it took off for Germany. In spite of its awkwardness on the ground, there was a certain dignity in the way it flew. The way its gear almost automatically folded up into her wings. The drone of her four engines in perfect synchronization.

The "tri-bladed props" thrust their way into the overcast with every bite and the "solo" ship disappeared into the clouds.

This radar ship, known as a "Mickey", is different than most B-24's. It's equipped with navigational aids too secret to mention. Painted blue-grey to blend with the clouds she

flies through. There is no identification insignia smartly exhibiting her wing, group and squadron on her tail assembly. She flies alone and unnamed.

With almost rehearsed precision the plane and crew function as one. At fourteen thousand feet they were well across the Adriatic Sea and still in a steady climb. Requests for half-degree corrections from the navigators were quickly complied with by the pilot. Equipped with the latest advancements in navigational aids the course and position were frequently plotted. With the aid of the "G-box", the navigators were capable of pin-pointing their position within a thousands feet of their actual position in the air. With complete confidence the crew flew on through the never ending whiteness. The "Mickey" navigator continuously turned knobs and dials and reported with monotonous regularity to the dead-reckoning navigator their position over interphone.

"We are right on course, lads – nothing to worry about. How's our ETA coming out on DR?"

The DR navigator, after a few moments of calculation, responded with an encouraging reply. "On the ball."

Climbing steadily the free air temperature gauge fell. At eighteen thousand it had dropped to thirty-three below zero. Each time a man exhaled through the rubber vents of his oxygen mask the moisture immediately condensed into fog. Ice had begun to form on the silk scarves and the fur collars of the tightly zipped up jackets. There were frequent oxygen checks mad and all stations reported in. Every on was okay.

Suddenly it began to snow and the world they flew through was a swirling mass of white. The flakes came directly at the windshield and then just before they splashed, just like rain, they quickly altered their crazy course and blew by; never touching the windshield. The snow was forming and falling so fast the outboard engines were no longer visible. All sense of time, speed and direction would have been lost if it had not been for the instruments that told the navigators and pilots they were but one hour and a half from the target.

Slowly the cylinder head temperatures began to creep up as the engines pulled the heavy load up the long grade. Cowl flap was opened on number four engine.

"Not too much," the pilot cautioned. They could not afford to increase their drag.

A turning point was reached and the plane was promptly turned to a new heading. Nothing new on scenery – only the swirling snow.

The second hand on the clock went round and round and finally the larger hand decided to move. Minutes seemed like hours.

-- TO BE CONTINUED --

“Solo Sortie” – Part II

by

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As we left off…

The second hand on the clock went round and round and finally the larger hand decided to move. Minutes seemed like hours.

At twenty-two thousand it suddenly stopped snowing. It was lighter and the outboard engines came into view. The engines droned in the rarified atmosphere. Steadily the temperature dropped, and number four engine began to run dangerously hot for consistent operation. More cowl flap was opened and more drag was induced.

Deep into enemy territory and only a short time from the target the engine began to lose manifold pressure. Slowly it dropped. The possibility of carburetor-ice was extremely illogical with the cylinder head temperature so hot. All other instruments read normal. The amplifiers were checked and still it dropped. If the target was to be reached the other three engines must assume the load. The RPM and the manifold on the other three engines “stepped-up”.

At twenty-four thousand two hundred the weather ship, after having flown for hours on instruments, managed to climb above the clouds. As lonely as a ship in the middle of the sea they came out “on top”, barely skimming the high cirrus deck which stretched as far as the eye could see. The sun was bright and the clouds were dazzlingly white. The tail gunner called over the interphone that they were leaving a vapor trail. A long pencil-slim cloud that streamed from the engines like white smoke.

They were a dead give away for gregarious enemy fighter. The clouds immediately below, however, were comfortingly close to duck into.

It occurred to the pilot as well and the DR navigator that at the present power setting, due to the unexplainable reduction in manifold pressure on number four engine, a great deal more gas was being consumed than they had planned on. It was apparent that the engine was still good. Possibly something in the induction system. All instruments checked normal. Excessive manifold pressure had not been used and there had been no sudden reductions. This made the possibility of a faulty coupling doubtful. Precautionary measures were taken and the gas consumption problem was quickly worked out on cruise control charts and on an E 6-B computer. After a short controversy over the question it was decided that a high priority alternate target, producing oil and high test gasoline, would be their target.

The bombardier quickly consulted his “flimsy” and plans were immediately altered. The radar navigator informed the dead reckoning navigator and pilots that they were but a short distance from the IP for the alternate target.

The crew members and gunners quickly donned flak suits and helmets, of meshed iron, and readied themselves for the bomb run. The pilot cleared the interphone of all superfluous conservation. Carefully the pilot wheeled the plane to the left from the IP, as directed by the radar navigator. Starting down the bomb run the bombardier called for the bomb bay doors to be opened. The engineer quickly complied with the order. A rush of air was heard as the sliding doors were retracted into the open position. The bombardier quickly took off the heated bombsight cover and began to synchronize for rate.

"Coming up on – seventy. Coming up on – sixty," was the weird monologue form the radar man.

"Roger," replied the bombardier.

Nimble fingers, numbed with cold, made last minute corrections.

"Mickey to pilot – give me a couple degrees to the left. That's good hold it."

The crazy chant continued, "coming up on – fifty." There was a pause. The interphone rang in the high altitude. "Coming up on – forty. Pilot, give me a couple to the right – quick!"

Drift was killed. The bomb run, which was being made on PFF, was a long one and chaff was dispensed at a given signal. The tension increased as flak was reported by the pilot over the target

"Flak at twelve – intense – and accurate as hell," was his report in "almost" conversational tones. As if by magic, black curls of smoke began to appear about them. "The Jerry has got our course okay, but he hasn't quite got our altitude," the pilot said encouragingly to his crew.

"Pilot from 'Mickey' – I can hold the target within my scope if you want to take evasive action."

"Roger, ' Mickey', can you hold the target in view if I skid the plane?"

"Yeah – sure. Not too much though."

Flak was beginning to burst about the plane.

"Hold tight every one, we will be through in a minute," the pilot said.

"It's coming up to us now. It's popping off our tail," the tail gunner broke in.

"Okay," was the pilot's quick reply, "I'll skid her over a little bit."

After a short dialogue between the bombardier and the radar man, the radar man said, "it's all yours."

"Steady, hold her – that's it. Bombs away," was the bombardier's triumphant cry over the interphone.

The pilot peeled off into a sharp bank to the right and out of the flak. Clear of the flak there was a quick exchange of enthusiastic chatter over the interphone.

"Hot damn, we did it! We did it!"

"I hope we blew hell out of 'em down there," came another voice.

"Okay every one – we did a nice job. Let's go home." The pilot was quick to squelch superfluous interphone chatter. Granted they had made their run, dropped their bombs electrically, and they had not been touched by the hundreds of bearable flak guns. There was now the remaining problem of reaching their base. Hours of flying ahead. Back through the endless "white" and one engine which was pulling but a third of its power. Not a dangerous situation under normal conditions, but there was the extremely long route back – the possibility of severe storms and severe icing. The pilot noticed just before they ducked back into the clouds, on course for home, his own vapor trail leading from the IP and across the target, where the puffs of smoke from the bursts of flak still hung in the air, and then the sharp turn to the right and out of the area they had just flown through. The long white rope of the clouds cast a shadow on the flat, smooth deck of cirrus a thousand feet below. One of the most interesting of all cloud formations that airmen see – the vapor trail.

It was late afternoon and even in the dense fog they were aware that the sun had crossed the zenith and was well across the sky. It was darker in the clouds than it had been while enroute to the target. As the pilot began a "let-down" into the lower stratus the airplane began to pitch in turbulent air. Again they were in a violent snow storm. As the air became more turbulent it occurred to the pilot that there was a possibility of running into the core of an extremely dangerous cumulo-nimbus. The radar man turned his scope to the immediate course ahead. Carefully he analyzed the weird blips of light on his oscilloscope. He searched for check points. None could be seen. Only the reflections of mountainous terrain appeared in his scope. At seventeen thousand feet the pilot noticed rime ice forming on the leading edges of the wing and tail assembly. He leveled off.

"Mustn't go any lower," the pilot confided with the co-pilot, "we might run into clear ice below."

Things were not going any too well. Check points which should have been visible by now were not. Time came for a change in heading, but a deviation from the flight plan was thought to be a wiser move. Then, as if by some telepathic warning, it occurred to the navigators that they had encountered a serious shift in the winds. What was suppose to have been a tailwind on the reciprocal heading was not a tailwind, but a headwind of possibly a hundred knots. This changed the complexion of the situation considerably. The remainder of the flight was now a matter of time, distance, and remaining fuel. A gas check was made.

"Well, we are not doing so hot, sir," was the rather feeble reply from the engineer.

"Well, how much?" The pilot's tone of voice obviated his concern in the matter.

There was a pause. Then in a high voice the engineer replied, "I guess about two hundred in number one…"

There was an interruption on the interphone as the "Mickey" man broke in wildly, "I know where we are. I know where we are now." The instrument navigator relieved the tension considerably with his outburst.

"Well where the hell are we?" the pilot demanded.

What the radar navigator said in reply stunned the crew. After having flown for hours they were still hundreds of miles from their home base in Italy. It was concluded after a careful observation of the gas available that it might be possible, if unnecessary corrections for course were avoided and the RPM and manifold pressure reduced to a still lower setting, to reach the base.

The radar navigator, in conjunction with the dead reckoning navigator, took frequent pinpoint fixes, thus avoiding numerous flak areas to the right and left of the course. All of the fuel had been transferred from the auxiliary tanks to the main fuel cells. All that could be done had been done. The remaining problem was the weather. A rather serious problem confronted the pilot; the leading edge of the airfoil and vertical and horizontal stabilizers were sugarcoated with rime ice. As it built up the de-icer boots were inflated and the ice cracked off. The danger of letting down any lower was hazardous because of the mountains over Yugoslavia. The aircraft was being weighted down by the ice which was collecting in front of the turrets, aerials, and windshield. The defrosters were employed and managed to keep the windshield sufficiently warm to prevent the ice from caking over. It was growing dark, deep in the core of the mass of weather. The crew was numb with cold, and a constant check had to be made to prevent ice from forming at the connection of their oxygen masks. The crew was tired and the strain of flying "blind" for so many hours had begun to take effect. There were anxious questions over the interphone. The pilot intervened and asked the crew to relax. They still had engines and in spite of the gas, which he admitted to them was dangerously low, they had sufficient fuel to reach the base. Although in the minds of those who knew – there was doubt. Their progress was slow and the air was turbulent over rough Yugoslavian terrain. The icing was persistent and became slightly more adhesive.

At last the instrument man revealed to the crew that he could plainly see, through his radar scope, the coastline ahead. There was relief among the weary airmen who had sat in cramped positions for hours on end. Soon they would be able to take off their itching oxygen masks and stretch their tired limbs.

-- TO BE CONCLUDED --

“Solo Sortie” – Part III
by
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To conclude…

At last the instrument man revealed to the crew that he could plainly see, through his radar scope, the coastline ahead. There was relief among the weary airmen who had sat in cramped positions for hours on end. Soon they would be able to take off their itching oxygen masks and stretch their tired limbs.

Contact was made by the radioman with “Big Fence”. Bearings were taken and found to coincide with the course and position of the aircraft. “Air Sea Rescue” was alerted of their position, altitude and heading, and of their intention to reach their base. “Big Fence” and “Air Sea Rescue” cooperatively stood by while the airplane began its descent. From seventeen thousand feet they quickly descended to fifteen thousand, then to thirteen.

The pilot pressed the mike button and said, “you can come off oxygen now. All stations come off oxygen. We are below thirteen thousand and we will be down in a few minutes.”

Everyone promptly tore off their masks and exercised the tired muscles of their faces.

From the waist came a call over the interphone, “okay to smoke now?”

“Yeah, okay to smoke,” was the reply from the flight deck.

“How soon can we clear the turrets?”

“Any time, now is safe enough. We are at the coast and I doubt if the Jerry is within hundreds of miles, and even if he were, I doubt if he could find us in this stuff”

As the gunners cleared their turrets the pilots became genuinely alarmed..

“Good Lord, look at the ice forming on the wings!” The co-pilot’s tone of voice was convincing.

The pilot looked out his side window. “Break it off for Pete’s sake. Quickly, turn on the de-icer boots, we are picking up piles of the stuff. Pilot to crew,” his voice was sharp and he spoke quickly, “we are in heavy weather and picking up clear ice very fast. I don’t know if it can be broken off or not. Better get ready for an emergency in any event. Check the spare raft and ‘Gibson Girls’. Hey ‘Mickey’, how’s our course, can you see the island?”

The island the pilot made reference to lies off the eastern coast of the Adriatic and is the only place an emergency landing can be attempted. It is a very small island and rather hard to find in among the islets if the rugged coastline. It has proven to be, during the 15th

Army Air Forces activity over many countries to the north and east, a pilot's haven. A "last chance" stop before crossing the cold Adriatic Sea.

The radar plane's tanks were leveled by the busy engineer and in spite of the steps taken, they read alarmingly low.

"Yes! I can see the island, " yelled the "Mickey" man who sat immediately back of the pilot. After a few moments hesitation, while he peered into his scope, he exclaimed, "it's dead ahead. You will pass right over it."

"Are you sure?" inquired the pilot.

"Positive," the radar man insisted.

"Good, keep it in view. Unless we can break off the ice we may have to head for it. And besides," he yelled, "we sure as hell haven't got much gas left. We should have ample to reach the Italian coast, however; but damn it all, I can't trust these gas gauges."

"Roger," the "Mickey" man yelled in acknowledgement.

"How's the ice coming? Can you get it off?"

"Hell no, I can't get it off," replied the co-pilot dryly. "The boots won't budge it. It's cracked but it's piling up faster than the boots can break it off. What will we do?"

The pilot parried an answer. "Beats the heel out of me, let 'er pile up I guess. We will be down low enough in a few minutes for it to melt off."

Both the pilot and the co-pilot had their fingers crossed as the airplane continued its glide toward the sea.

"When do you think we will break out of this stuff?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," was the pilot's unsatisfactory comeback. "Above the water someplace I hope. We are 'unwinding' pretty fast – we are at eight thousand now."

"Think we ought to whack 'er back some more, maybe back to 1900 rpm."

"Oh – I don't know – I don't think so. Fifty rpm one way or the other won't make a hell of a lot of difference. Let 'er go. Roger? Pilot to waist – sit tight every one, we are doing okay – be home…" The pilot's voice trailed off. The pilot released the mike button on the wheel. "What's wrong?" His eyes snapped to the instrument panel. The number fuel pressure gauge fell to zero! "Pilot to crew," his voice was hesitant, "we are running out of fuel! Stand by to bail out!"

In a split second the co-pilot yelled for the engineer to transfer fuel. “Number one cut out!”

Near panic griped the crew. The pilot yelled at the radar man, as the co-pilot flipped the fuel booster pumps back on. “We will do a ‘one eighty’. – Head for ‘Yugo’ – better still the island. Can you pick it up?”

“Yeah – hell yes, we are only about ten mile from it now.”

The airplane began to fall like a rock. Power was added in an effort to keep the airplane, so heavily loaded with ice, from stalling out and falling into a spin. The pilot subconsciously cranked in trim to counteract for the yaw created by the “windmilling” prop.

The co-pilot presses the “D” button on his VHF set and immediately began a frantic call in the open. “Mayday! Mayday! This is St. Nick V-for-Victory going down. Out of fuel – Will try to reach the coast! Will try to reach the coast!”

Number one sputtered. The fuel pressure came up – and then went down. Then number three fuel pressure gauge fell to zero and the engine cut out.

“Now we are in for it,” the co-pilot yelled. “Let’s leave this crate.”

“And fall into that icy sea? No thanks.”

The co-pilot flipped off number one and number three fuel pumps and left two and four on.

“Pilot to crew – open the hatches and stand by. We are running out of fuel. If we break out of the clouds near the island we will bail out over it. We have two engines.”

“We are down to five thousand, let’s get the hell out of here,” was the co-pilot’s desperate plea.

“Hold on – we are breaking out of this stuff. There is the island. See! Right below us. See it? There’s the island! Hey ‘Mickey’ man you were right – there it is!” the pilot cried exultantly. The pilot pressed his mike button with his thumb encased in a heavy leather glove. “I can see the island lads. There is a landing strip on the island and I’ll try to make it.”

The icy sea below was churning and white caps made a froth on the surface of the water. To attempt survival in that angry sea would be a horrible ordeal for anyone.

“Clear the nose quickly. Clear the nose,” came the pilot’s sharp command.

The ice began to melt from the antennae and smashed against the windshield. The ice on the props hit the side of the fuselage and sounded like spent flak fragments.

The pilot and co-pilot were thinking fast now. They had a plan. Fly straight out and turn around. Then head back for the southern side of the island. A fifty-to-one shot of finding a narrow landing strip which they had never seen. They still had altitude and there was time to make an approach to the landing strip.

The radio operator continued to tap out “Save Our Souls” until the pilot told him to get ready for a rough landing. He then screwed the key down and took his position.

“I see the strip. It’s over to your right. See it!” the co-pilot yelled excitedly. “It’s right over that ridge.”

The pilot searched the rugged bush-covered island for the “strip” the co-pilot claimed to see. Yes, there it was. He could see it now. A landing strip – indeed! The wet metal runway located like a silver ribbon lying in the valley between two mountain ridges. The “pilots’ last chance” stop. There it was before them glistening in the waning light.

The pilot approaching the island began to make corrections to line up with the runway. The power on the two remaining engines was increased and a quick routine check was made for a landing.

“What’s that on runway? It’s another airplane. It’s cracked up on the runway!” The pilots were frozen with the stark realization that they could not land on the “strip”.

“Insult was added to injury” when number four engine cut out without even so much as a sputter. One engine hung in the balance between eleven men and death, which seemed imminent. The horror flashed across the pilot’s mind. Rather a rough grave for eleven airmen – on the side of a sea-eaten cliff on the island. The air speed indicator fell in air speed. Almost mechanically the pilot nosed the big “bird” down. He headed it for the lowest part of the island. A “gun-sight” which was formed at the vertex of the two ridges; barely wide enough to fly through.

In the sequence of events that followed, which took place in a matter of seconds, little was said. The time for tricks was over. There was nothing left to do but crash.

“Prepare for a crash landing,” was the last call made over the interphone.

The heavy bomber seemed doomed to crash on the crag. So close and yet so far from a runway that they couldn’t get on, even if they had had the power to reach it. The angle of glide was extremely steep. They were completely powerless to alter their situation. The airplane glided with the weak assistance of one remaining engine, which screamed – alone. As they slipped down, the few remaining seconds left little time for maneuvering – only gestures to survive. As they passed over the crag the waves were clearly visible, out of the corner of the pilot’s eye – dashing against the pinnacle of rock below.

The pilot yelled, ”watch the wings. Will they clear the walls of that canyon?”

"Yes – yes, we're clear, " the co-pilot replied with a sob in his voice.

Like an enormous gull the blue-grey "bird" glided between the walls of the canyon, and there below, nestled behind the ridge, but a short distance from the runway, was a small vineyard. Neat rows of vines suddenly loomed up.

There wasn't time to think as the pilot yelled, "gear down." The action of the pilot and the co-pilot was almost spontaneous as they nosed the helpless bomber down into the vineyard.

"Watch out for the fence." There was a quick tug on the elevators as the bomber, with its gear locked down, "high jumped" the fence. Just above the ground the ship rounded-out. Two wheels touched the ground. The co-pilot cut the main line and battery as the pilot applied brakes. Immediately ahead a stone revetment came rushing up. The plane's terrific weight settled in the soft, spongy earth. The nose gear snapped as if it had never been there. The big bomber's stubby nose shoveled into the rain soaked soil. The rate of deceleration was extremely rapid – but gentle.

When the bomber finally came to rest, a blade of the number one propeller was bent on the stone revetment. The rudder pedals were resting in the mud. The cockpit was filled with mud and shredded grape vines, which had been scooped in through the completely demolished nose compartment.

The crew left the plane like mad men escaping from an asylum. They ran in all directions. When the last propeller finally stopped turning, the scattered crew was stunned by the sudden silence on the rain drenched island. A bark of a dog and the sound of a gentle rain was all that was heard. The crew members felt limp. Almost too weak to stand. Some laughed a little and called to one another as they collected near the plane. "Guess we're pretty lucky." Some had tears in their eyes and broad grins on their haggard faces as they clasped hands. Others said nothing; just sat quietly on the wet ground. Shocked, tired, hungry and quietly thanking God that they were alive.