

Ditching In The North Sea

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According to Roger A Freeman “Ditching a B-24 was recommended only as a last resort. The flimsy bomb bay doors usually gave way on impact resulting in the aircraft being flooded in a very few seconds or breaking in two. From the very rare, partially successful B-24 ditchings in the North Sea only a few men had escaped.”

On April 29, 1944, the crew of Ken O Kay was to experience the reality of a crash landing in the icy waters of the North Sea. Frankly we were not trained for this situation. Our training consisted mainly of viewing the film clip of a B-24 gliding to a perfect landing on the Potomac River. While the plane floated the crewmembers climbed out of the hatches, inflated the life rafts and peddled their way to safety. Well, it wasn't that easy.

On April 29, 1944: The Quonset hut door opened with the usual message, “O.K. guys, let's go, it's mission time.” I thought, three o'clock in the morning – it must be a long one, no milk run today. Little did I know what lay ahead.

After a hearty breakfast of bacon and eggs, we assembled in the briefing room. You could sense the tension in the air as we waited for the target map to be displayed. The 453rd had been on “Maximum Effort” all during the month of April. According to Roger Freeman, “The month of April, 1944 was a month of sustained aerial combat that has no equal in the annals of Eighth Air Force history. Three hundred sixty-one heavy bombers were lost.” The 453rd had suffered more than its share of losses. In addition, the long- promised replacement crews had not arrived. We all knew replacement crews were essential if we were to complete our tour of combat missions. The loss ratio for the Eighth Air Force was extremely high; without replacements your chances for survival were slim at best.

When the curtain went up the red line stretched deep into Germany – all the way to Berlin. When the Air Exec. announced the target as the Underground Railroad station in the center of the city I was very excited. This was to be the second daylight raid on Berlin. I didn't want to finish my tour of combat missions without participating in the big one: BERLIN ! While we had been on a couple of missions to the Berlin area – mostly airfields – we had not been scheduled to fly the first daylight raid. Matter of fact, I had volunteered to go with another crew as a tail gunner. Fortunately, that mission was aborted after about two hours flying time due to weather. Flying in the tail turret was a very scary experience. I felt like I was sitting on a stepladder five miles above the ground, with wind blowing so hard I thought the turret would blow off any moment. Well, now I would get a second chance at Berlin with the security of being in the top turret or at the radio position in the cabin.

While we were at the “hard stand” sweating out take-off, the crew was unusually quiet; none of the jokes or smart remarks that always took place as we went through our respective pre-flight check lists. The maximum effort was taking its toll. Everyone was glassy-eyed from lack of sleep and struggling to perform their duties without error. God, where are those replacements?

Take-off and forming went without incident. I can remember sitting in the top turrett marveling at the sight of hundreds of heavy bombers flying in a formation that stretched as far as the eye could see. I felt a great sense of security seeing all of those well-armed friendly airplanes. Add to that the tremendous skill of our pilot Lt. Max Davison had displayed on our previous 18 missions and there certainly was no cause to fear this mission. (Oh, to be 20 years old again!)

Some flak was encountered as we crossed the coast, but nothing to worry about. We had a good number of friendly fighter planes accompanying us most of the way to the target. The question was: How far into Germany would their fuel supply take them? Unfortunately, not all the way to Berlin.

As we approached the city we were attacked by the Luftwaffe in force. ME's and FW's were all around us. Our gunners reported two kills and one probable. As we began our bomb run, flak took over and it was savage. On the bomb run it was my job to take photos of the target in order to determine how effective the bombing was. Lying prone, with my head, arms and the camera extended out over the open bomb bay taking pictures of the bombs exploding on the target as the flak was exploding almost in my face was exciting. I had the best seat in the house.

Soon after dropping our bombs, but before we could leave the target area, we took a hit from flak, which caused us to feather two engines. With only two engines functioning, we began to lose air speed and altitude. Worse yet, we were required to operate the remaining engines at maximum RPM, thus using up our fuel supply at too fast a rate. As we battled loss of altitude and enemy fighter planes, it became apparent that we wouldn't make it back to the base. At this point, I began to send out distress signals. What a surprise was in store for me: all the frequencies were jammed with S.O.S. signals. By this time we were over water but down to a couple thousand feet of altitude. Now I was really sweating. I kept tuning my transmitter through the range of frequencies for air-sea rescue; still no reply. We were under 1500 feet when I finally got a response to my Mayday call. I locked down the transmission key and prepared to ditch. Lt. Davison told me to go to the waist to make sure all equipment had been jettisoned and that the crew was in position to ditch. By the time I got through the bomb bay and to the waist, the plane was under 500 feet. Hobart, the waist gunner, shouted "We are all set here, get you're a - - back up front." I ran through the bomb bay and slid into my ditch position behind the co-pilot's armored plate seat about two seconds before we hit the water. SWISH - - POW. That was the Ken O Kay hitting the water.

The next thing I knew, water was flowing in from the overhead hatch like a waterfall. I can remember fighting the force of the water with all my strength and finally getting my arms on the fuselage. Then the top turret began to sink and in the process caught the sleeve of my heated suit between the ring and the gears. Using what must have been super-human strength, I was able to rip the sleeve wires free from the turret and float away from the plane. The thought struck me: If I had so much trouble getting out, what about the flight engineer Bill Lake, the pilot Max Davison, co-pilot Alan Kingston, navigator Lt. Rose, and bombardier Lt. Lustgarten? I looked around and, miraculously; they were all in the water. Lake came out of the hatch after me; the pilots, navigator and bombardier floated to the surface when the nose of the plane broke off. Lake apparently swallowed a lot of salt water, probably while I was trying to free my arm. Also, he couldn't swim, nor could Davison. At this point, Alan Kingston was a real hero - - holding Lake above the water line and at the same time letting Max Davison hold on to his Mae West straps in order to stay together. Meanwhile, when I pulled the cord to inflate my Mae West, nothing happened. The top had a big hole. Not to worry - - I felt very buoyant due to the air trapped in my heated flying suit.

I remember it was a bright, sunny day, the water seemed to have swells of about 30 feet. Friendly aircraft were circling overhead. I watched as the Ken O Kay slowly sank below the surface. All of this seemed like an eternity but probably took only five minutes at the most. The next thing I knew, an air sea rescue boat came roaring up to us. I thought it must be the one that answered my SOS call because his signal was very strong, indicating he was nearby.

Just then a very courageous British sailor threw a cork ring into the sea and jumped overboard. He got into the ring and began to paddle toward us. At that time I still had some buoyancy left in my flying suit so I told him to pick up my buddies first. I could see Alan was having a rough time holding up Max and Lake. This was rather dumb on my part because the air quickly dissipated from my suit and my body became numb. I was struggling to stay afloat when he reached me and grabbed my hands, which were then secured to the inside of the life ring. This kept my head out of the water. Good thing, because I lost consciousness at this point and didn't wake up until we were almost to Portsmouth.

I was later to learn that my best buddy, tail gunner Harold Oakes, was unable to get out. Poor Harold. Whenever I go to the American cemetery at Cambridge I stop at Harold's name up there on the marble wall and give him my love. It's a very emotional thing for me.

The fellows in the waist didn't fare so well. In addition to Harold being lost at sea, Hobart suffered a broken leg and a cut that ran from his mouth to his right ear. It was a terrible sight with his teeth and jawbone exposed to the salt water. Hobart was so strong he was able to swim the mile or so to the rescue ship. Hines and Hetherington made it to ship as well as Rose and Lustgarten but they were pretty banged up. After picking me up the British sailor was able to rescue Lake, Davison and Kingston.

When I regained consciousness, I asked the British sailor why he didn't pick up my buddies first, since they were in obvious trouble. He said they were trained to pick up the nearest survivors first. If they did it in the way I suggested they wouldn't rescue anyone. I thought that was a lesson I would never forget.

The next day, clothed in blue jeans, T-shirts, and tennis shoes, we were invited to a celebration on board the Royal Navy rescue ship. It seems that the ship, which successfully rescues someone at sea, hosts a party for the other ships as well as the survivors. After the party we were returned to Old Buck to rejoin the group and complete our remaining missions. Ironically when I returned to the Quonset hut, all of my clothes had been stolen. I later learned this was fairly common practice when a crew was missing. I went on to complete my tour of 31 missions shortly after D-day.
