

The Milk Run that Turned Sour

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World War II bomber pilots measured their overseas tours in terms of credited combat missions. If your plane went beyond a certain arbitrary line on the map you and your crew got credit for a "combat mission" whether you dropped a bomb, fired a shot, or met any enemy resistance. In 1942 and 1943 in the ETO (European Theater of Operations) 25 combat missions comprised a tour. Their daytime mission losses to fighter interceptions and heavy anti-aircraft fire were running anywhere from 5 to 10% each mission. Hence, even at 4% loss per mission, it meant you would probably use up all your numerical chances of survival on your 25th mission. If you were lucky enough to complete a bomber tour in the ETO, this could usually be accomplished over a six month period, assuming normal weather conditions.

For those of us flying in the Southwest Pacific Area (SWPA) where the combat loss ratio was lower, but the living conditions were most miserable, the accumulation of 50 combat missions was your ticket home, the ultimate prize all of us sought. I say "almost", because there were a handful of dedicated pilots who after reaching this 50 mission goal continued to fly combat simply because the air war was still going on. Usually these few were in command spots and were committed to establishing exemplary military records. For most of us, however, we would chalk up each mission like a prisoner crosses off the weeks or months left on his sentence. Only 40 to go, then 39 to go, then 38. When you only flew one or two missions a week because of fuel or ammunition shortages, it would take about twelve calendar months in New Guinea to accumulate the requisite number. Thus, whether you made a big deal about your particular method of keeping track of your combat missions or whether you merely noted each mission in your own log, you knew exactly how many you had yet to go.

As previously noted, not every "combat mission" you went on involved or required combat. For instance, you might fly a four mission toward an assigned enemy target 300 miles away, but bad weather en route made your flight unable to reach its objective. (This usually made it equally difficult for the enemy fighters to locate you.) Yet, you still got credit for a "combat mission" because you were in a combat zone where interception was possible, and the emotional strain and suspense were still taking its toll on the mind and body.

There was yet another type of flight that entitled you to record a combat mission - one in which no combat was envisioned, expected, anticipated or sought. These were referred to as "milk runs", yet they counted on your total just as much as a 100 plane maximum effort strike to Wewak or Rabaul. Examples of these semi-hazardous missions would be flying some military big shot into a combat zone to observe a paratroop drop or a beach landing, or it might be shuttling between this forward air base and that one. Each take-off and landing constituted a combat mission. There were even a few times when unscrupulous headquarters staff pilots would assign themselves courier flights and could pile up six or seven missions in a day. None of them were over 20 minutes each and no

shots were fired. (None of these multiple missions ever got assigned down to the squadron level.

Another example of a "piece of cake" mission was the weather reconnaissance flight, usually of 3 1/2 to 4 hour duration, to observe weather and shipping developments in an assigned sector where an accurate knowledge of existing meteorological conditions would be helpful to the mission planners in trying to anticipate enemy plane and ship movements. It usually involved a single B-25 with its four man crew (pilot, co-pilot, turret gunner, and radio gunner) but sometimes an observer was also sent along. This might be the Squadron Intelligence Officer or the Group Weather Officer. Hourly radio reports to Fifth Bomber Command Headquarters were prepared and keyed off in code by the radio gunner. Once in a blue moon these "recci" missions would discover previously unreported Jap barge or ship movements or even a big convoy, but most of the time they were peacefully uneventful and benefitted only the rain makers plotting weather systems. There was also one other big benefit; it gave the plane's crew another combat mission - 2% of your ticket home. "Milk runs" didn't generate medals, but they were desirable to have in reaching your goal of fifty missions. Let me tell you about my "milk run" on July 9, 1943, that unexpectedly turned sour.

Third Attack Group Operations was responsible for receiving strike orders for designated targets from 5th Bomber Command and for assigning missions to one of the four squadrons in the Group. The shorter ones would be assigned to the 89th Squadron; A'20s whereas longer duration missions would be assigned to one of the B-25 Squadrons (i.e. the 8th, 13th, or 90th Squadron). If it was to be a maximum effort mission against a critical target over 300 miles away, all the B-25 Squadrons would be assigned to participate and depending on aircraft availability status, perhaps the Group could put up from 30 to 32 B-25s. The Group Operations Officer was to see that the difficult as well as the less difficult mission assignments were distributed equitably between the squadrons.

On July 8th, 1943 the Group Operations Duty Officer called 8th Squadron Operations to lay on a weather recci mission for the next day. The Ops plan called for a 6:30 AM take off on a four hour flight up the N.E. coast of New Guinea to about Salamaua, cut N.E. across the Huon Gulf to avoid Lae airdrome and pick up the south coast line eastward to Finschaven and then back to Nassau Bay (where units of the U.S. Army VI Corps hand landed June 29th in the first of General McArthur's leap-frogging moves) and thence back to our base at Dobodura. Captain Frances J. Murphy (Boston, Mass) the Group Weather Officer was to go along as observer to prepare the weather reports, and all the 8th Squadron had to do was provide a plane and crew. The route had been flown at least six times in the last week by 3rd Group aircraft with no Japanese shipping or aircraft sightings so it should be a "piece of cake", a "cup of tea", a real "milk run". As Squadron Ops officer, I took the call, and it looked to me like an ideal way to pick up a "cheapie". I filled in the crew assignment blackboard with pilot - Webster, co-pilot - Widener, turret gunner - Davis, and radio gunner - Allport. (Capt. Wm. H. Webster - Hinsdale, Ill, 1st Lt. Robert Widener - Boston, Mass, Sgt. Lawrence Allport - Salem, Ore, and Corp. Alfredo Davis - Detroit, Mich.)

The flight crew was alerted at 4: 30 AM, had our customary Spartan

breakfast at 5:00 AM, to the flight line at 5:30 AM for mission briefing, and take off set for 6:30 AM. Single plane morning mission take-offs, as well as training flights were refreshing because you didn't have the long delays and the billowing clouds of penetrating black dust that always accompanied a nine plane squadron or 27 plane group mission take off. The weather was slightly overcast and the temperature a damp 70 deg "winter" day on the equator. Having received the news of the birth of my son in late May and my promotion to Captain two weeks later, I was feeling confident and frisky. What a great day for a "milk run"!! Flight controls and radio check ok, engine run-up ok, and off we go! After take-off and climb-out over the water, all our systems were OK and we proceeded N.W. parallel to and about a mile out from the coastline, with broken to overcast clouds at 3,000 feet, off-shore winds 10-15 knots, and fairly calm water surface. We stayed just below the cloud level and occasionally dodged around small rain showers, Captain Murphy made the initial 7:30 AM weather report and Sgt. Allport sent it off by radio key. By now we had passed Nassau Bay and were nearing the point where we were to leave the shoreline and head N.E. out across the Huon Gulf. No enemy ship or barge traffic had been encountered.

At 8:15 AM I intercommed to Captain Murphy back in the navigator's compartment to get his 8:30 report ready to send. All of a sudden the plane gave a series of shudders, and the cockpit was full of smoke and small caliber bullets. I glanced quickly to my left and saw a Jap fighter off my left rear quarter and Widener reported a similar plane off the right rear quarter. I yelled to the gunners as to what was happening back there and got only a garbled response from Allport. We continued to receive gunfire from our pursuers - it sounded like someone pounding on the plane with sledgehammers. The plane was shaking badly now. The right engine pressure dropped to zero, and the cylinder head temperature went over the red line. I hit the right propeller feather button, shut off the mixture control, closed the oil shutters, and cut off the right tank-to-engine fuel shut off valve. Dropping the nose to try to maintain maneuvering airspeed, I was surprised to see several bullet holes in the right propeller blades. Repeated intercom calls to the turret gunner went unanswered. Turning right and then left, I tried to get the Japanese fighters to overrun us so that I could use our eight forward-firing 50 cal machine guns, but they would turn outside us every time. By now I could see at least five Jap planes tailing us, so close that they were almost flying formation with us. I could easily discern the dark helmets of the Jap pilots as they watched us struggle. I was able to maintain about 150 mph with the left engine at maximum power only only by losing 200-300 feet per minute, They kept trying to herd me in a northerly direction, and I kept trying to head south toward friendly territory. Another series of shots took out the pitot tube located on the right wing, causing the loss of all flight instruments. They seemed to be toying with us, like a cat with a tiring mouse, as they accurately concentrated shooting into the right wing and engine. The fire in the right engine nacelle wouldn't burn out despite turning off the main fuel line because the "lux" fire extinguishing system had been removed during the conversion project to make a strafing out of a level bomber. It didn't make sense to us pilots to save weight by removing the factory - installed 38 pound CO2 fire extinguisher system from each engine's fire wall when the conversion was adding several thousand pounds of machine guns, ammo and mounting brackets in the nose section and navigator's compartment. It was particularly fool-hardy when you were the guy with an engine on fire and no way to put it out!!

We continued to weave back and forth heading in a southerly direction but were still three or four miles out to sea. We must have looked like a sky rocke going across the sky being chased by six bumble bees. Suddenly I heard a loud thump, and the plane swerved violently to the right. The heat from the engine fire had melted through the up-locking mechanism on the right gear and out it flopped. It immediately became obvious that a B-25 on one engine with the opposite gear extended was not going to fly much longer. I had to drop the nose to keep from stalling, cranked in full left rudder trim and full aileron trim and went into a tight descending, barely controlled right turn. Our Japanese escorts could see we were in a death spiral and backed off to watch the imminent crash. Shouting at Widener to pull the cockpit escape hatch overhead, I unfastened my parachute leg and chest straps and my seat belt, I broadcast a quick "may day" and hit the crash alarm bell. By now we are in a 45 deg right bank and headed down. With no flight instruments I could only estimate our speed visually as we approached the water. I had no idea what direction we were heading when we hit or where land might be. At about 50 feet in the air, I shipped off my head set and throat mike, cut all engine switches, and gave a full left rudder, full left aileron, full back pressure on the control column. To my great surprise the plane responded by leveling out and mushed into the water with wings level. I heard the Plexiglas in the tail cone breaking up as it hit the water, and I let go of the yoke. This plane was through flying - no sense hanging onto the controls. The nose of the plane hit the water just as the right wing gas tank exploded, and I was catapulted up and forward through the open escape hatch. I was aware that I hit the right side of the hatch with my head and right shoulder and I could taste the salt water from the splash and blood as I somersaulted through the air at about 90 miles an hour. I remembered how much I liked swimming in fresh water (my parents had a summer cottage at Indian Lake, Michigan, where for years I would swim two to three miles every day in June, July, and August) and how much I disliked swimming in salt water. My life didn't exactly flash before me at this time of mortal danger, but I certainly had some strange childhood recollections about swimming. Suddenly I stalled out of my inside loops and hit the water with a jolt. I don't know how far under the surface I plunged, but by the time I surfaced the plane was completely submerged. The only floating debris was the right gear that sheared on impact, the oxygen bottle from the right wheel nacelle and the yellow life raft. Fortunately there was only a small amount of burning oil and gasoline on the water. In a few seconds, up popped Sgt Allport and finally Lt. Widener but no Corp. Davis. At least 30 seconds later, the inert body of Capt. Murphy with his Mae West inflated also broke the surface. Apparently he had been trapped in the Navigator's compartment when the blister ammunition racks collapsed inward on impact. In trying to claw his way up through the debris toward the silhouette of the escape hatch he had caught the CO2 tassels on his life preserver on something, and in his struggles to get free, the CO 2 charges were activated just as he lost consciousness. Up he floated right out through the escape hatch. (He later said he had no recollection of anything other than the outline of the open hatch getting dimmer as the plane sank deeper and deeper. How is that for the "luck of the Irish"?) I yelled out to Widener and Allport to delay inflating their life vests as the Japs were still overhead. My life vest had a bullet hole through both chambers at the back of my neck and was useless. Treading water, I took a quick inventory of my condition - I had a cut on my forehead and a banged up shoulder where I hit the hatch on being thrown out. I had burns on my left leg, and the right side of my khaki uniform was in shreds. I still had my shoulder holster under my left arm and my

.45 cal pistol intact along with my home-made escape and evasion kit, (i.e. a web belt with the pouches filled, not with ammunition clips but with my emergency equipment (plugs of chewing tobacco wrapped in foil and Australian florins - 2 shilling pieces - for trading with the natives, iodine tablets for water purification, sulfanilamide tablets for wounds, fishing line and hooka, dextrose tablets and some concentrated chocolate bars.) I checked my watch - it was still running at 8:20 AM - all this had happened in the course of five minutes. I felt my left shirt pocket and found my "good luck" charm, a rosewood Buddha my wife had bought me in San Francisco the day before we shipped out in September was still with me - good thing I didn't have it in my right side pocket. Also, my temporary bridge for my two front teeth which took 3 months to get (necessitated by an A-20 crash landing December 8th, 1942, after being hit by 3" ack ack fire over Buna) was still intact, but I could tell my head and jaw were going to swell up. To solve the problem I just put the bridge in the pocket with my little Buddha and figured I better get on with my survival course. With my life vest inoperative, I ducked down under water to untie and take off my GI shoes, I noted the right shoe had a hole in the sole, so if I was going to be lucky enough to survive, I was going to need a new pair of shoes anyway.

Maybe all this current status assessment took a minute or so, Our Japanese fighters decided to check the smoke and debris for survivors and made several low passes over the crash site. Each time they did, Widener, Allport, and I would duck under the surface and hold our breath as long as possible before coming up. Capt. Murphy was practically unconscious and just bobbed back and forth, oblivious of being buzzed by the Japs. Apparently they were satisfied with their work and flew off. Because of the cloud layer above us it was impossible to locate the sun and hence to determine which way was west. We were suddenly alone in a very big silent sea. Where the hell were we and which way was any land? With Allport hanging on the oxygen bottle and Widener and I taking turns towing Murphy, we were ready to strike out for somewhere but in which direction? A fresh breeze carried the life raft and wheel away from us, and I felt like we were inside a big, dark navy blue bowl. While there were five to six foot swells, we always seemed to be at the bottom of each trough and never up on the crest where we might get some visibility. Suddenly I timed a swell just right and thrust myself up at the exact instant to get the most height possible and, sure enough there was a little piece of rock jutting up on the horizon. I don't know how far away it was, but as I couldn't see the shore line where rocks met water, the curvature of the earth obviously became a factor, might have been about two miles away. It wasn't much to go for, but it was the only alternative we had.

In the Boy Scout Swimming and Life Saving Merit Badge manual there is a technique called "tired swimmer's carry." It involves the able swimmer doing a side stroke with one arm while holding onto the tired swimmer by either his hair or the back of his collar. I was the "able swimmer" (Eagle Scout, Troop 10 Hinsdale in the Chicago West Suburban Council) and Capt. Murphy was certainly a candidate for the "tired swimmer." He had swallowed so much salt water in his battle to get out of the sinking plane that he was barely able to respond to my entreaties to "kick your legs but don't flail your arms." He was wearing a wool knit sweater under his life vest, and this proved to be a real blessing because it enabled me to pull the tail of the sweater up through the neck of his life vest to make for a "hauling harness." Widener and I alternated towing Murphy and helping

Allport who had hurt his leg in the crash. It was slow going. At one rest spell, I finally had time to ask Allport what had happened to turret gunner Davis in the attack. He said that Davis had gotten down out of the turret to light up a cigarette at the very instant the Jap fighters (Oscars) who had been flying above the overcast happened to dive through a hole in the clouds to get underneath the layer on their way back to their base at either Salamaua or Lae. Davis had been mortally hit by several bullets in the initial attack and never had a chance to even get back in the turret to return fire. We did not get off a single shot in our defense!!

We made slow progress toward our little rock spit. I could see individual trees now and even a small sandy beach facing toward us. Up to this point I really didn't think we'd get there, but now that we were close, I started worrying about sharks. All four of us had numerous cuts and wounds that were bleeding, but maybe those two shark repellent pouches on each life vest really worked. Swimming side stroke, I kept digging my right hand ahead while holding Murphy's sweater tail with my left hand. Suddenly my lead hand hit something solid - a shark maybe? No, it was a coral ledge surrounding the rocks we were approaching. We pulled Murphy up on the formation and started to wade ashore when, when, splash back into ten foot deep water again!! This was repeated several times before we got over the last coral barrier and into waist deep water with a sandy bottom. We staggered up onto our little beach and my watch showed 9:30 - We'd been in the water one hour. I half expected a Japanese army officer with samurai sword to step out of the vine-covered trees and congratulate us on our swim for life before he summarily killed us by decapitation. Fortunately there was no such welcoming committee. My home-nade "E & E" kit envisioned either bailing out or a crash landing on dry land, so everything was soaked with salt water. I did have some Ausie wax matches and the sulfa tablets in waterproof screw top metal container, so we plastered our assorted cuts and bruises with soggy sulfa powder. Murphy continued to retch salt water and some blood - I was afraid he had some fractured ribs or a punctured lung and was therefore reluctant to use more Boy Scout training to get the water out of his lungs. Allport had a bad gash on his leg, but Widener and I seemed to be ok. I knew the deceleration effects of the crash would set in on muscle and tissue before long, so I kept moving around as steadily as possible. Up to that time I didn't realize I had cut the soles of my shoeless feet clambering over those coral ledges. My sock feet were in tatters. To solve this, I took off my socks, tied some fishing line around the sock cuff to make a new toe, made an inner sole out of some vine leaves and tree bark and pulled my socks on backwards to hold my new half soles in place. Sounds pretty crude but by golly, it enabled me to gingerly walk around exploring our new "home away from home." The clouds went from overcast to broken, and I could now see the sun well enough to figure out we were facing west and nothing but hostile water. The rock spit itself was undoubtedly of underwater volcanic origin, as it just popped straight up out of the water with 30 or 40 foot vertical cliffs on all sides except the 20 foot deep, 50 foot wide strip of sandy beach in a horseshoe shape we had found. I often wonder what might have happened if we had approached it from any other side and found only cliff walls, would we have had the strength and the resourcefulness to keep paddling around until we found a beach to crawl up on? As desolate as it may sound, at least we were out of the water. We had little energy left at that time to try to scale up the rocks to see what might be on the other side. For the moment, at least, we were alive and drying out. The vines on the trees had potable water,

My dextrose and chocolate bars would be adequate for a day or two. By now, however, our crew pistols were caked with oil and sand, and all our wrist watches gave out. I could hear some planes passing over us above the broken clouds, but was reluctant to try a smoke signal for fear it might be Japs. While I guessed we were slightly north of the allied beachhead, I still had no way of knowing how far away from the mainland we might be. All we could do for the time being was wait and think. With three good friends and tent-mates (Lts. Raymond Tabb, Ralph Payne, and Gordon Ruby) reported missing in action in the past two weeks, I wondered if they also might be sitting on some desolate rock waiting to be found. They will be pleased to know they also are new captains. (Unfortunately their fate was never discovered..)

After several hours of listening to Capt. Murphy retching and there being little conversation among the rest of us, I suddenly heard a new noise, a faint voice. Nobody in our foursome was talking, yet I could swear I had heard a human voice like a native laughing. It grew louder along with splashing sounds. Hey - we were about to have visitors and my only useful weapon was my parachute knife. (I forgot - I also had my fish hooks, florins, and chewing tobacco). Slowly around the corner of our little cove we could see the prow of a lakatoi (a native outrigger sailing canoe) then a native paddler, then the passenger decking and sail mast, then two more native paddlers. At this point I fully expected to see the booted Japanese Army officer who had neglected to meet us when we arrived on the beach earlier in the day as the commander of this vessel. Instead, it was a deeply tanned white man in native garb directing the native paddlers in pidgin English to make for our beach. You can imagine our joy at being found, and even better by someone on our side. Our rescuer was a Sgt. Pomeroy, an Australian coastwatcher and his his three police boys, all missionary trained fuzzy-wuzzies with filed teeth and wrap-around lava-lavas. He had been on his usual hilltop observation post south of Salamaua that morning watching the ten miles or so of coastline that was his special responsibility and had seen our B-25 on fire pursued by six Jap fighters a mile or so out to sea. With the angle of the plane's dive and the resulting crash, he was sure there were no survivors. This belief was strengthened by the fact that the Jap fighters had made several passes at the burning wreckage area and had moved on to better targets nearer the coastline. He had thought about it for several hours, undecided whether to risk a canoe and paddlers to make the mile or so trip out to that little spit of rock sticking up on the horizon. Normally he wouldn't have tried the trip because of possible attack by Jap fighters or even Jap P.T. boats, but with the successful Allied troop landings ten days earlier a few miles south of him, the possibilities of enemy attack had lessened considerably. They were too busy trying to slow down the expansion of the U.S. beachhead to worry with one small native lakatoi that probably was just out for some off-shore fishing. So he had gotten his boys together and headed out for the island in question. It is just a dot on the large scale coastal navigation charts but big enough to have a name, Musik Island, one of a series of coastal spits, part of the Fliegen Island group. It had taken them over an hour to paddle out to our rock and sure enough, he found four very bedraggled and forlorn "Yank airmen". I think he was as surprised at finding us as we were elated at being found. After introductions all around, he explained his duties as a coast watcher and asked our pardon for waiting so long to search for us. Normally he would have radioed in his sightings (whether Jap barges, aircraft or shot down U.S. planes) to his coast watcher's headquarters, and they would decide the

appropriate action. With us literally falling into his "front yard swimming pool" he had delayed his radio call while making up his mind whether to personally search for us or to leave it to the U.S. Navy who were in the vicinity. We were glad he decided to do it himself, and the slight delay was readily overlooked.

He now had a new problem - how to get the four of us into his lakatoi platform along with himself and three natives. He discussed it with his "police boys" and the solution delighted them. He authorized two of them to stay in the shallows around Musik Island and spear fish for a few hours while he and one native paddler took the four of us over to the mainland. On the slight chance a Jap plane might buzz us, he covered our "pale faces" with the palm mat sail and we headed around the west side of our island to make for the mainland. Once we got out of the limiting vision angle of our cove, the mainland became clearly visible about two miles away along with several other nearby spits of rock. However, from the easterly view we had from our cove, we might as well have been fifty miles from the nearest land. I think that in a day or two, I would have become venturesome enough to explore the situation more thoroughly, but for those four hours, I was happy to be where I was, considering the alternatives we came so close to experiencing.

As our paddlers slowly pulled us out into deeper water, the two police boys were enjoying their recess. Each had two six foot long fish spears, and they were wading noiselessly in the knee deep water stalking the bountiful reef fish. Every so often they would throw a spear 15 to 20 feet and most often they would hit their target which they strung on a vine "stringer". The coral formations that I had cursed so vehemently for cutting my feet as I struggled to wade up onto the beach suddenly looked feathery and fragile in the afternoon sunshine, and the sharks I had feared would find us became hundreds of varieties of blue and green and red and yellow reef fish. This scene with the two wading fish spearers would have made a sensational postcard or waterscape, but at that moment we were more interested in being headed for recovery. About an hour later we got near land and Sgt. Pomeroy was able to signal a nearby LCI (landing craft infantry) to take us off his hands. We clambered aboard the LCI, put Murphy on a stretcher and bid Pomeroy and his paddler farewell. I gave Sgt. Pomeroy my silver pilot wings and a set of captain bars and my reward to the natives was a gift of our life vests and to their great delight my fish hooks, my Aussie florins and best of all, those twenty plugs of "Apple Fresh" chewing tobacco, slightly water soaked. (Even then it was probably better than their customary "chew" of betel nuts.) I just hope the two other boys back on our island got their share when the lakatoi went back to pick them up later that afternoon.

The LCI skipper, a salty old chief, took us down the coast a few miles to the Army evacuation hospital at Nassau Bay. Two sailors carried Murphy's stretcher off, and the other three of us limped down the LCI ramp to the beach. A doctor there tagging the wounded GI's noticed my crude foot covering and asked my shoe size. He called over to a graves registration officer nearby who was sorting out "body bags" for shipment down to Oro Bay. "Get this captain a pair of 11C combat boots in good condition". Sure enough, the G.R.O. goes over to a pile of foot gear that had been salvaged from the casualties and brought back a pair of 11C GI high tops. It was a macabre but practical way to solve a supply problem. Incidentally I wore those same GI shoes on every mission I flew the next four months until rotation back to the States in mid November '43. The Army enlisted men standing around

the beach were astounded to realize that Air Corps crews were normal folks just like themselves and that we looked just as beat-up as they did after combat."Hey - look at that fly-boy Captain - I hear he's only 22 years old! And hey - no front teeth - Sure looks like a drowned rat. Those other three guys aren't much better off, Maybe those "Wild blue yonder" boys don't have such an easy time after all." I guess misery loves company, and we were a welcome novelty to those infantry boys. The medics gave us a quick checkup - no broken bones or bullet holes - and sent us by lighter out to a hospital ship that was ready to head back south with a full load of wounded and dead GI's.

We got up on the hospital ship just as it pulled anchor, A receiving medical officer promptly checked us over - Murphy was sent to x-ray for his chest injuries while Allport and Widener were sent to the wardroom. A med-tech was instructed to clean out the cut on my forehead and find me a bunk in the crew quarters. With my head swathed in bandages, I went down to the galley and wolfed down a Spam sandwich and some canned grapefruit juice. They found me an empty bunk, and I spent a fitful night tossing and turning with all kinds of unanswered questions. What could I have done differently to minimize our crash and could Davis' death have been avoided? All things considered, I figured we were pretty lucky to lose only one out of five crew members, but I did regret losing the plane. They were too hard to come by and this was the third plane the 8th Squadron had lost in two weeks. Finally fatigue won out over self-doubt, and I got a few hours sleep. My head wound opened up during the night and I bled all over that crew bunk. Sorry about that.

Our hospital ship docked at Oro Bay at noon the next day and we were taken to the 1st Evac Hospital there. While the medics wanted to hold Murphy, Widener, and Allport for a few days observation, they were willing to release me as soon as I could be signed for by our Group or Squadron medical officer. I got on the field phone and after an exasperating thirty minutes of getting "patched" through at least a half dozen switch boards, I finally got the 8th Squadron Dispensary. The Medical officer wasn't there so I was switched back to Squadron Hdqts where I got in touch with Maj. Downs, the Squadron C.O., who had been notified by the U.S. Army of our recovery. He couldn't believe it when I said four of us had survived and were at Oro Bay Station Hospital. Group Headquarters had already initiated the Missing in Action notification to next of kin even though it was only 30 hours since we were overdue to return. By now the fatigue factor and the stiffness had begun to take effect. I was so stiff I could barely get into the jeep when Maj. Downs drove up. The 13 mile bouncing ride back to the Squadron area was pure torture. Everyone, even the squadron mascot dogs, was happy to see me return and anxious to hear what had happened. After contacting the American Red Cross to arrange for an emergency "all's well" message to my wife, I finally collapsed in my own bed after a most exciting but exhausting real life survival test. My diary entry detailing the events of those two days opens and closes with the comment "On borrowed time. How sweet it is to be alive and in your own bed." I put a big star on my mission log to denote my "milk run" It doesn't pay to be selfish.

Note I - The other three crewmen were returned from the hospital to duty within a few days. Lt. Widener was soon up-graded to aircraft commander but was killed in action over Hansa Bay 8/28/43. Capt Webster flew 29 more missions in the next four months, closing out his

tour with the November 2, 1943 mission to Rabaul's Simpson Harbour.

Note II - Of the three pilot tentmates who were also missing the first week of July 1943, no traces of two (Lt Gordon Ruby or Lt Ralph Payne) or their plane were ever found. The third 41-I classmate KIA was Lt Raymond Tabb of Blair, Oklahoma, everybody's favorite, who along with Lt Harlan Reid disappeared July 3rd, 1943 on a night barge hunting mission. In July 1989, an historical research writer, Larry Hickey of Boulder, Colorado, came into possession of translations of recovered Japanese intelligence reports detailing the capture of Tabb and Reid after their plane crashed on their ill-fated mission and their subsequent "agressive interrogation" by their captors. They were later transferred to Rabaul for shipment to a POW camp in either the Philippine Islands or Formosa. A further search of Japanese POW camp rosters is being undertaken to determine their exact fate. We only know that neither survived the war.

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