

## A "One Point" Landing During "OPERATION VARSITY"

The crash at Wesel, Germany, March 24, 1945, which John W. Heffner (Pilot, now of Vero Beach, Florida) and I (Co-Pilot) survived, happened something like the following:

Our CG-4A was loaded with a jeep and medical supplies. The jeep driver was T/C Wallace E. Thompson, a Medic and Paratrooper in the 17th Airborne Division, Serial Number 39041639, weight 150 pounds. He told us prior to take-off that he did not want to ride in a glider but had been ordered to, so he would be with the jeep when we landed. We assured him that there was nothing to worry about as it was like riding in a bus.

After a rough three hour flight (and many disparaging remarks from our Paratrooper passenger) into the LZ from B-44 Airfield at Poix, France, we released from the tow plane and started our descent. We deployed our deceleration chute and were within 10'/15' of the ground when we received the first 88 round back near the door of the cargo section. I don't know how many of you either participated in, or were witness to, the CG-4A here in the States that was "wired" with a number of plastic explosive charges so it could be detonated by the Glider pilots after landing. The idea being to chop the glider into 3 or 4 pieces which the Glider Pilots could push, pull or roll out of the landing area and clear the way for the other incoming gliders. It worked great when I saw it demonstrated. The reason I bring this up, is that at the same instant I reached up to release the deceleration chute and touched the handle, we received the hit from the first 88 shell. The thought that entered my mind at that same instant was, "which idiot wired this glider?" This round exploded causing the jeep to move forward, break the nose latches and pull the nose section upward where it locked. The jeep with the Medic driver still under the steering wheel exited the CG-4A through the open front and fell or "flew" the remaining distance to the ground, where it landed upright with no damage or injury to either it or the driver. We crashed immediately behind the jeep in a "One Point" attitude with the tail section pointing to the heavens. This left Heff and me in the nose section still strapped in our seats, with our backs on the ground and our feet in the air as though a chair had tipped over backwards. At almost the same instant we touched the ground, the 88 gunner removed our left wing tip with the second round. We released our seat belts and rolled over looking for a way out. I used my "Tommy Gun" to smash out the plexiglass window. We crawled through it and ran to a ditch along side the railroad tracks that ran through the LZ. We jumped into the ditch and began to crawl to our right. The 88 gunner not being able to see which way we had crawled, began to slam rounds into the embankment in an effort to hit us with shrapnel. We continued to crawl for probably 100 yards where we came up on another man lying in the ditch. It was the Medic Paratrooper who had ridden in with us. He did not seem to be at all pleased with the way his glider ride had been terminated and assured us that he had just taken his last one. His account of the landing was as follows:



He was sitting in the jeep inside the CG-4A one instant and the next instant he was sitting out on the ground in the jeep. While he was sitting there, more or less in a daze, a German rifleman hit his helmet at an angle with a round from his Mauser. The bullet cut the helmet in the vicinity of the Medic's white cross but did not enter it. At that time the driver left the jeep, ran to the ditch and also crawled to his right as we did a few minutes later. That is where we found him.

While we were in the ditch, and while the 88 rounds were still hitting the embankment, a piece of shrapnel, rather large from the sound of it, came fluttering up the ditch towards us. We could hear it coming and fell as flat as we could in the ditch. It hit Heff on one of his legs just above the knee and numbed his leg so that he couldn't feel it. It had hit him flat and didn't cut his clothing or his skin but ricocheted away. He was quite relieved when he found that his leg was still attached to him. Both of us had been wounded but had not had time to realize it. Heff had a piece of shrapnel lodged in the large knuckle where the index finger joins the hand. It was evidently grating on a nerve as everytime Heff moved or breathed he suffered excruciating pain. Either the Medic or I gave him a shot of morphine. After a bit this seemed to ease the pain somewhat. I had run the distance from our crashed glider to the ditch, not knowing I had torn the cartilage in my right knee, badly sprained my right ankle, and had received two shrapnel wounds in my upper right thigh. Shows what you can do when you have the proper incentive. I had also sustained a broken nose. We dressed my shrapnel wounds with Sulpha Powders and a bandage. The report in the squadron was that we had been slightly wounded by small arms fire. An 88 is some "Small Arm".

While we were still in the ditch, a B-24 with the right in-board engine on fire, came down, barely clearing the railroad embankment by us and "bellied in" on the other side. I talked to the pilot later at the aid station and told him that I had felt the heat from his burning engine when he passed over us. He said that he was afraid he was going to hit us at the time but was able to pull it over the tracks at the last minute. There is an interesting story about what happened to them after they "pan-caked" but which will be told at another time.

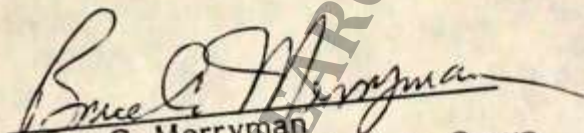
The Medic lay in the ditch with us for a few minutes and then stated that this was not getting his job done. He left the ditch, retrieved his jeep and began picking up wounded and carrying them to the aid station. He returned after an hour or so, picked us up in the same jeep and carried us to the aid station as well. Heff was given another shot of morphine and I received some more Sulpha Powders. After this, Heff was "in orbit" from the morphine. I don't know how many shots he received during this period but I don't think he remembers much about the rest of "Operation Varsity". At one point during the night he disappeared and was gone for a couple of hours. I couldn't go look for him for by that time I couldn't stand alone or walk. Later, a Paratrooper lead him back to me and told me I had better tie him down before he got himself killed. They had found him standing, leaning against a tree, watching the "Battle of Burp Gun Corner". I was able to keep him with me until sometime after daylight on the 25th when he got up and told me he was going to look for Jimmy (James L. Cox of Carlsbad, New Mexico, a tent mate of ours). He took off before I could stop him. After a couple of hours he



returned but I couldn't get anything out of him as to where he had been. After we got back to our squadron, a couple of weeks later, Jimmy told me that early on the morning of the 25th, someone sat down on the edge of his foxhole. He looked up and found it was Heff, so he pulled him down into the foxhole as there was a fire fight going on around them. Jimmy said he asked Heff where I was but it didn't seem to register with him. He was still "in orbit" from all that morphine. After a short time Heff left the foxhole and walked away. Jimmy said he figured that was probably the last time he would see Heff alive as there was sill heavy fighting in that area. That was when Heff came back to where I was. I managed to keep him with me the rest of the time until we were moved back across the Rhine that afternoon. The next day or two we were sent to different hospitals and didn't see each other again until a couple of weeks later back in our home Squadron. Another tent mate of ours, Warren Page, was killed on this mission.

So much for "Operation Varsity"

The above is a true and accurate account of the operation as I remember it, some 42 years after the fact.

  
Bruce C. Merryman  
62nd Squadron - 314th T. C. Group

Silent Wings Museum

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