

Is This Trip Really Necessary?

A speech given by Charles Arnett on May 19, 1994, in the town of Tuitjenhorn, Holland, at a ceremony commemorating the 50-year anniversary of the crash-landing of the B-24 Liberator BOOMERANG.

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By Lt Col Charles Arnett, USAF (ret)

Mayor Lauter, distinguished guests and citizens of The Netherlands: Thank you for joining us today in our pilgrimage to the crash site of our B-24 Liberator, Boomerang. You may think the name Boomerang was a misnomer, since it did not return. As you know, a boomerang is a weapon, and is designed to hit a target. If it is thrown properly, and encounters nothing in its flight, it comes back to the thrower. You might say that our Boomerang was true to form, for it did return twice but then it engaged in quite an encounter.

When Ernie Gavitt first suggested that we come here on the 50th anniversary of our crash landing and the death of Sgt. Uriel Robertson, I immediately felt that this trip was really necessary. It would provide a setting for me to express the love and respect that I have for the members of my crew, and particularly for Sgt. Robertson who lost his life here.

Over the years, I think we have been somewhat reluctant to talk about our experience of May 19, 1944. It was traumatic. That is easy to understand when you examine the recently discovered photos of the wreckage. Perhaps now this pilgrimage will have a healing or at least a soothing affect upon all the surviving crew members and their families. I know that the results of this crash must have been especially hard for the family of Sgt. Robertson.

This ceremony also provides an opportunity for me to apologize to the good people of the Neatherlands, and especially you who live in the area, for littering up your beautiful countryside. I'm sorry. Please forgive me. I had a choice, as I will explain later.

You may be interested in knowing my recollection of what happened when we dropped in on you fifty years ago today.

We don't even pretend to be heroes. Actually, we felt disappointment and shame for having done so little. We were only on our third bombing mission. We had great hopes of individually inflicting significant damage to Hitler's war machine -- at least the equivalence of a bruise -- but I doubt it was more than a pin prick. It is evident from looking at our crew picture that we were not old professional warriors. Some were barely out of high school. The only thing we had in common was that we all volunteered for flying duty. At the time, approximately three weeks before the Normandy invasion, hundreds of bombers were being sent over to Germany every day. We were proud to be one of the many.

We were one of the seventy-two brand new B-24 Liberators with seventy-two brand new crews under the command of Col. Snavelly. We were the 492nd Bomb Group which was based at North Pickenham Air Base in England, and had only been operational for eight days.

It had been such fun getting to know each other and training together as a crew. the crew had been randomly assigned in Salt Lake City, Utah, and we had two months of training at Davis-Monthan Air Base in Tucson, Arizona, then four months at Alamogordo's Holoman Air Base in New Mexico. After finishing our training we were issued a shiny new, all silver B-24. I well remeber the heavy responsibility, mingled with pride, I felt as I signed for this \$250,000 beauty.

We flew the southern route to Britain by way of Florida, Puerto Rico, Trinidad, Natal in Brazil, and over to Africa -- Dakar and then Marrakesh. We did not fly in formation, but each plane and crew was on his own. We kidded Ernie quite a bit about his navigational ability, but I want you to know that, even though from daylight until about ten in the morning it was impossible to take a reading on the sextant -- or any other way -- Lt. Gavitt brought us directly to Dakar. Our next stop was Preswick, Scotland, before arriving at North Pickenham.

Just off the west coast of Portugal, as we were heading for Scotland, we were suddenly made aware that this business was getting very serious. Axis Sally came in over the radio right on our frequency and welcomed Col. Snavelly's 492nd Bomb Group and his all silver ships and concluded by warning, "We'll be out after you to shoot you down."

I had previously had a two-year missionary experience, so I was delighted when some of the crew asked if I could lead them in prayer under the wing of the aircraft before every mission. As one might expect, the prayers I gave were not long, but definitely to the point. I asked that we might each perform our assigned tasks well, that we would work harmoniously together to successfully complete our assigned mission, and then asked for the thing that was uppermost in all of our hearts -- that we might return to our home base safely.

As we knelt under the wing of the plane before our third mission, and I spoke the words, "return to our home safely." I suddenly knew that we were not coming back. I was stunned. My knowledge, however, was unmistakably certain. I don't know how I was able to finish the prayer, but I know this: I couldn't tell my crew.

We had already made our preflight checks, but I had the crew check everything again, hoping they could discover some legitimate reason for not going. We climbed aboard and I gave the signal to fire up the engines, still hoping I could find a serious fault with one of the them and we would have to abort the mission. No such luck. Everything was working perfectly.

It's one thing to go on a combat mission knowing you may not return, but quite another matter when you know you will not see your home base again. How I longed to confide in a crew member, but who would believe me? Or if he did, how could it help his morale? I wrestled with this situation as we took off, climbed up through the clouds, located our group and took our proper position in the formation. Then, as we headed out over the English Channel towards Brunswick, I suddenly remembered the last time I had been home. Gasoline was rationed to civilians, and as a reminder to conserve energy, my parents had a sticker on the dashboard of the car that read, "Is this trip really necessary?" It seemed very apropos.

It was then that my thoughts turned to the Lord Jesus Christ and his experience in the Garden of Gethsemane. He knew what was ahead of him, and he was looking, at least temporarily, for an honorable way out as he prayed, "Father, if it be thy will, let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done."

A feeling of peace then settled over me as we crossed the channel and reached the Netherlands coastline. I was content to accept my future. I had no knowledge of what would happen to us, just that we would not return. I still hoped and prayed we would live.

We were at 17,000 feet and the ack-ack was firing at us, but not effectively. We were protected by our American fighter aircraft, and felt quite secure, in line with the other groups as far as we could see.

Just before reaching the target, our fighter escort had to return home because of fuel restriction. It was then I noticed our group of twenty-four planes was no longer properly in line, but rather far off to one side. This seemed particularly uncomfortable to me because my position in line put our plane among the furthest out.

Suddenly it happened. We estimated about forty Me-109 German fighters made a head-on attack on the outside twelve ships of the 492nd. I recalled Lt. Stewart's comments made on our first mission, "Say, this is getting serious! They're using real bullets!" We returned fire, but the rate of closure was fast and they were only in our range for an instant. There was only one pass made, but they immediately created death and destruction in the sky. I saw aircraft on either side of us ripped with flames from the front to rear before exploding. The lead plane of our twelve-ship element nosed down straight toward the ground. I did see a chute or two, but couldn't look long, because I had trouble of my own.

We had three engines severely damaged, and one of the vertical fins and rudders was badly riddled. We left the formation and headed straight home, throwing out everything we could to lighten the aircraft as much as possible. Bombs, naturally, were the first to go, then such things as flak suits (vests) and radio tuning units. There were six of these, and Sgt. Pierce, who had been told in radio school how costly they were, stood at the open bomb bay doors exclaiming as he threw each one, "There goes \$700."

Two engines were dead and could not be feathered, but were windmilling aimlessly, cutting down our flying speed. One damaged engine was still pulling full power, but was leaking oil. We let down to a much lower altitude, thinking we would be less vulnerable to enemy attack. Then we noticed an American fighter had picked us up and was offering cover on his return to England.

And so it was when we came to the coast of Holland. For a moment hope welled up in me. While we might not get back to England, we could come pretty close. Then the oil-spattered engine quit and caught fire, spinning us around in the direction of the now dead blazing engine. Lt. Stewart and I had considerable trouble in getting it straightened out. Now we were losing altitude quite fast, and we knew if the fire was not extinguished soon, the wing would drop off.

It was at this point that I had a choice of ditching the aircraft in the water, which would certainly have put out the fire, or gingerly trying to maneuver the aircraft back over land, hopefully with enough altitude to bail out. Fortunately I remembered that just the day before, our operations officer had read to us the average floating time of a B-24 after ditching in the water. Eleven seconds!

By the time we again reached land we were flying very low, and the instability of the aircraft made it certain that the co-pilot and I would never make it out. I directed Lt. Stewart to inform the crew that they could bail out immediately, but that we were going to ride it down. The crew assumed their pre-arranged crash landing positions, electing to stay with us.

Now the tatter fields were coming up fast. The ground looked okay, but the criss-cross drainage ditches were another matter. I knew this would be the roughest landing I had ever made. I prayed hard, willing to accept whatever the result of the landing would be, but reminded the Lord that I wanted to live, to be married, and to have a posterity. My mind flashed back to the cute young lady I had met at Sunday School in Indianapolis, Indiana who came to my graduation at Freeman Field and pinned on my wings. I promised God that if my life was spared, I would sever Him to the best of my ability for as long as I lived. They say there are no atheists in foxholes. I believe it!

The landing gear was lowered. The wheels had hardly touched the ground when the first canal was there. We had enough flying speed to skip it. We rolled along roughly, hoping to stop before the next one, but could neither stop nor lift the plane. The landing gear was sheared off by the far bank, and we slid along on the belly of the plane until we stopped.

The German military was there before we could get out of the aircraft. We had seen flashes from their rifles as we approached the field. Now we came out with our hands up. I was troubled to see that two crew members were not with us. We indicated this to the Germans and were granted permission to return and remove them.

As we re-entered the plane, Lt. Gavitt was just recovering consciousness, having suffered a severe blow to the head. As near as I could tell, the plane had buckled when the landing gear was shorn off, and an overhead hatch door had been jarred loose. As it fell open, it split Sgt Robertson's head, killing him instantly, and it also hit Ernie, whose crash position was just in front of Sgt Robertson. They were removed from the plane and taken a safe distance away.

I noticed the engine that had been on fire was still smouldering, though the dirt thrown up from the laning had diminished its intensity. Evidently, from the pictures we saw for the first time this year, sent by Mr. Maarschalkerweerd, it continued to burn.

My feelings at this point were divided. I was grateful that eight of us had survived the crash, but was grieved that Sgt Robertson had lost his life. My memory of this time is quite fuzzy. I remember being taken to a farm house, where a doctor came to check Ernie, before we were transported to the city jail in Amsterdam. I remember the warmth the friendly smiles from the people along the roadside as they flashed two fingers in the "V for Victory" sign. The photo the Germans took for my POW ID reflects my general feeling at the time. Quite a contrast from that taken shortly after I got my wings.

A couple of days later they took us by train to the interrogation center at Frankfurt. From there we were separated. The officers were sent to Stalag Luft III, near Sagan. The enlisted men went to other camps separately. But our prison experience is another story.

We often hear about people having a spiritual experience. I believe that we are all spirit beings having a human experience. I see everything that happens to us in this life presenting a positive learning opportunity for us if we accept it. What have I learned from this terrifying experience of May 19, 1944?

First I've learned that war is a horrible and terribly destructive thing. I didn't want to be involved in it, but the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor the same day I was released from my two-year mission for my church. A few months later I was drafted. As I wrote in my journal, "After two years of preaching Christianity and the gospel of love and peace, all this was going very much against the grain with me. But there was nothing I could do about it but tag along. So I did."

I have gained an even deeper feeling of patriotism. Our birthright in whatever land of our nativity is priceless. And rights must be safeguarded if they are to be enjoyed.

I have learned also that good can come even in an evil setting. It isn't so much what happens to us as how we react to our circumstances. I also believe that in any conflict between right and wrong the Lord sometimes allows those in the right to be persecuted -- even lose their lives so that His justice and judgement may come upon those who are in the wrong. We need not suppose that to die is a punishment. For, greater love hth no man than he who gives his life for his friends.

Most important, I have learned that we must somehow learn to live in peace and harmony on this planet if we are to avoid self destruction. We must go even beyond "peace" as defined by "absence of war." We must learn to love one another. This is possible. I've seen it repeatedly.

When I was liberated and returned home, after being a prisoner of war for almost a year, I found that my father had arranged for a couple of German prisoners, Ernst and Fritz, to help him operate a custom bay baling machine. The US government at the nearby POW camp furnished a meager sack lunch for them, but my mother took one look at the contents and insisted they join with the family for a proper "hot" dinner every day. They seemed to appreciate her love and compassion. Besides that, she was a great cook, and they worked happily and well to their mutual enjoyment. They were there for nearly one month after I got home.

A tender, memorable experience of my prisoner time was when we were being moved by train from Spremberg to Nuernburg. We were packed 50 to a car that normally carried cattle. It was bitter cold and food was getting scarce. The train stopped frequently, but we were not allowed to get off. However, at one stop, late at night, a German woman came down the platform with a large basket of fresh baked bread, sharing it with us prisoners of war. I shall never forget the love and compassion I saw in her eyes and felt as her hand brushed mine in giving me bread.

In a very real sense, whatever our station in life, there are prisoners all around us. Some are prisoners of their own wrong choices. Others have been coerced or intimidated. They are reaching out for us and we each have the capacity to give the sweet refreshment of love and compassion.

In another sense we are all prisoners of this planet earth. Many of us are confused and uncertain as to the outcome of our journey. But I feel assured that there stands one on the station platform with His arms full of the bread of life. All we have to do is reach out towards Him and He will fill our hearts with love.

My heart is full of love today for my country, my family, my memories, my crew and for all of you. I am especially thankful for my good friend Ernie Gavitt, and for the many hours of planning and preparation he has made for this occasion. I express my appreciation for all those who helped him, and for all of you who have come. It's great to be with Don Pierce again, and to meet his wife. We feel your love and support today, even as we felt it on that spring day, exactly fifty years ago. Thank you, and God bless you.

Sources / credits:

• Lt Col Charles W. Arnett, USAF (ret) from his book "Memories of Crew 717 of the BOOMERANG, a B-24J Liberator"
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