



World War II Memories of Nello Centore

20 June 44 - A Bad Day

The following story is written by Nello Centore, Engineer on the Val Preda Crew 601, as told to Lynn Pierce whose uncle was a member of this crew. It was printed in the Happy Warrior newsletter, 31st edition, Volume 8, No. 3, published 2003. With their permission, we reprinted it here.

by Nello Centore

On June 19, 1944 I returned from a pass in London. I was tired and sleepy. *Ack Ack* and V1 and V2s don't give you much interrupted sleep. While relaxing in our hut, we were informed we were scheduled to fly the next day. Later Pete Val Preda came to our hut and said he and the officers would abide by our decision. We talked it over - figured we were indestructible... we would go. A fatal decision, one that some would never live to regret.

Awakened at 11 PM, went to the mess hall and then to the briefing hut. After briefing went to our flight lockers, dressed in our combat outfits, received our escape kits, picked up our chutes and on to our aircraft.

With the aircraft crew chief, we performed preflight inspection, ground run engines and accessories. After shut down serviced the aircraft with full fuel load. When this was all completed I then checked out my upper turret for operation and ammo load. The armorer loaded the bombs for this mission. The only difference this day from other mission days was we were snapping at each other - like a premonition this was not going to be an easy mission. We were waiting for the Pilot, Co-Pilot, Navigator and Bombardier so we stood around by our lonesome selves smoking, thinking and waiting for load-up and taxi-out.

I felt once we started to move everything would fall into place, our thoughts would be on other things. When everyone was together we wished each other good luck, entered the aircraft into our respective positions waiting for the flare from the operations to start engines. Another flare to signal taxiing into take-off sequence.

Our position was deputy lead to Lt Kehoe. After take-off we assembled into a three squadron group. During assembly Val Preda informed me he lost turbo power to #1 engine. Replaced it with the space amplifier. Pete increased power setting and the amplifier failed while the group assembly was going on. I criss-crossed the discriminator tubes between the two units. After a couple changes the amplifier came on line and turbo power was restored to #1 engine.

My next task was to transfer fuel from Auxiliary tanks to the main. We were over the Channel in formation when the fuel transfer was completed.

After getting set in my turret, I noticed the Group was in close formation and reported this to Pete. Approaching Helgoland Island a strong flak center, Lt Kehoe made a shift away from the island resulting in the spreading of our Group. Reaching the Baltic Sea the formation was still trying to come together. I informed Pete we were still not tight as a formation should be. I don't know if he called Lt Kehoe to inform him of our formation.

Before we reached Rugen Island, because of cold temperatures, called the gunners to test fire their guns. Not long after this while traversing my turret, I stopped looking aft and saw what looked like flak explosions and remarked, someone was catching flak. With my next breath I called out, "Enemy fighters 6 o'clock low!" Then all hell broke loose. Me-410s hit us from all sides.

Note; we had RAF P-51 cover. This action took place as soon as they left us to cover aircraft coming out of the flak areas. German fighters usually waited for bomber cripples.

Aircraft behind and above were falling out of the sky. The 410s were having a field day. One 410 came alongside the left waist window. No one was firing from the waist position. The 410 then moved forward and up. Now my guns were able to fire. I began firing, scoring hits but the 410 just dropped below my wing. The gun interrupters cut in and my guns stopped firing. The 410 then dropped further and fell back below our tail section and began firing into the rear of our aircraft.

He was using 20MM cannons, explosions in the waist area were followed by explosions and a fireball in the bomb bay. We were carrying fifty-two 100 pound bombs. The next explosion was in the flight deck at Walt Kean's radio operator's position. He was hit in the right leg. Then our aircraft began spinning and going down. The force of the spin caused my seat latches to release and I fell to the deck next to Walt's leg. We looked at each other and thought this is what it's like to die!

Somehow Val Preda regained control. I entered the bomb bay and seeing fire around the bombs, I opened the bomb bay doors to cause the air direct the fire away from the bombs. The command deck where the oxygen bottles were stored was blown apart and down. The hydraulic tank was blown apart, mixing oil and oxygen resulted in the aft bomb bay ablaze. Kean was moving toward the bomb bay. I helped him hook up the static line to his harness and threw him out.

Meanwhile Val Preda was losing speed because he was using the engines for flight control. He tried the auto pilot and would get all the lights on, but when he hit the master switch, the aircraft would begin to roll. He turned off the switch, tried it again (and got the) same result. At this point he told me to get the Navigators (we carried two on this mission). Bombardier Rodriguez had already bailed out. As Navigator Bartell passed me, he remarked we were 20 miles south of Sweden. "Great," I said, I told him I was going back to fight the fire.

The fire was like a blow torch, oxygen under pressure and hydraulic oil feeding it. My #7 extinguisher was quickly emptied. The aluminum nearest the fire was running down like water. The access door to the waist position was partially open. It just moved a little. It was jammed. I called through the opening, bending down, I could see someone who appeared to be hanging by his harness. I called again and then I threw the fire extinguisher through the opening trying to get someone, anyone... no response. I believe this was Sgt Toepper.

As I headed forward I noticed the two Navigators were gone and Co-pilot Walton was sitting on the catwalk. As I approached him I told him to jump, which he did. I moved forward again but stopped because Val Preda was now standing in front of me. I told him I didn't have my chute on and to jump. As I cleared the bomb racks I put my chest pack on and bailed out. I was the last man out.

Hitting the slipstream, I tumbled many times. Suddenly everything seemed to stop. I felt like I was motionless. It was so calm and smooth it almost made me believe I was not falling. Realizing it was time to pull my ripcord... In my haste to bail out, I had put my pack on backwards. Grabbing with my right hand, no cord, looked down, saw it was on the left side. Pulled the cord, watched my chute deploy into a beautiful mushroom. Then a very hard jolt. Slowing me from 120 MPH to approximately 25 MPH. Glad my harness was on tight and snug. My body absorbed the shock without effects.

As I was coming down I heard a loud roar, looked up and saw my plane's wing go by, just missing the chute. I watched it as it continued to spiral and crash in the Pomeranian Bay and burst into flames. I noticed before the crash that #2 fuel tank was on fire.

Suddenly it was time to unfasten my harness in preparation of hitting the water, only released one latch before I hit the water going backwards. Tried to spin the chute so I could land falling forward without success. I was hovering directly above the burning aircraft. Fortunately a surface wind drifted me away from the fire landing about 75 to 100 feet from the burning aircraft.

I quickly unhooked the remaining latches, inflated my life vest, proceeded to swim away from the aircraft. My life vest had not been modified, the neck portion pushing my head into the water... very cold water. Whatever currents were present prevented me from getting away from the burning aircraft. I became waterlogged, cold and my *Lil Abner* heated shoes were dragging me down like cement blocks. I thought I was going to sleep with the fishes. A German crash boat from the seaplane base kept circling the crash site, as well as me. Finally, I whistled to attract their attention. Very cautiously they approached me, grabbed me and sped away.

One of the crew spoke English. He told me to remove my clothes, he spread them on the deck to dry. I was blue from the water. Standing in shorts under the June sun my body warmed up and the blue color vanished. This same crewman took my cigarettes, broke them apart and spread them on the deck. As sections dried he would gather a clump and with cigarette paper roll me a cigarette. Very pleasant inhaling added warmth to my insides.

They were curious about objects floating in the area. I told them they were oxygen bottles and they were relieved because they thought they were bombs. My watch stopped at 9:25. We cruised around long enough for my clothes to dry before we headed for shore. The town was Stralsund and we landed at the seaplane base. We walked up the dock with all dry clothes wondering what lay ahead.

All personal effects were removed. When the officer saw a box of matches the crewman gave me for the tobacco, he wanted to know where I got it. When I told him it seemed to satisfy him. All of the tobacco was taken as well as the matches.

We were taken to a room where we were questioned. Name, rank and serial number was all he got. There were five of us. Val Preda, Walton, Bartell, Saul and me. They put us into lockup. We slept. Later they brought soup, black bread and ersatz coffee.

The next morning we were taken by three guards to the railroad station in Stralsund for our trip to Dulag Luft for interrogation. Our life as POWs had begun!

End

Sources / credits:

- Nello Centore, 2003

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