

I will describe in some detail one of the first raids on which we had P-51 support, partly because it illustrates how much they helped us but chiefly because it was for me one of the defining experiences of the war. It was Armistice Day, 1943. We were briefed to bomb Heho aerodrome, the largest Japanese fighter base in Burma. Heho is in the center of Burma, a little east of the Irrawaddi River, southeast of Mandalay. We [9th Bomb Squadron] led the entire Group that day. It was my job to navigate these 28 bombers to the Initial Point - a lake near Heho; avoid known A.A. emplacements on the way; majestically turn the entire formation toward Heho; point out the target to our bombardier, Lt. Cecil Day; and drop bombs at approximately 1100.

I was trying to do a good job that day, an especially good job, as it was one of my first experiences as lead navigator for the entire group, though I had several times navigated in the leading aircraft when our squadron, six or seven planes, went out alone. Furthermore, the new Commanding General of the Tenth Air Force, Maj. Gen. Davidson, was along, flying in the aircraft of our own group commander, Col. Conrad Necrason (later Lt. Gen.), on our wing. But most of all, I was doing my best because, at briefing, Capt. Joe Fears, our exceptionally capable intelligence officer, had told us of the unusually large number of Japanese aircraft spotted at Heho by our reconnaissance people.

We got to the lake southeast of Heho on schedule and without incident. I advised our pilot (Cyrus Kurth, the regular co-pilot, and Ben Graves, the regular pilot, had switched places for this mission) to turn the formation onto a heading of 310°. Kurth did this, very smoothly. Almost immediately we spotted the target, dead ahead, through the five-tenths stratocumulus at about eight thousand feet (we were at nineteen five). Just after “bombs away!” the unpleasantness began. We, our particular aircraft as the 28-plane formation leader, were simultaneously attacked by three Zeros. One dived down directly out of the sun while the other two pressed home head-on attacks from eleven and twelve o’clock. Sgt. Burch, in our nose turret, trained his guns on the Nip at eleven o’clock and got in one blast before being hit by one of a burst of .25 caliber machine-gun bullets that raked our nose and port wing root. These were from the diving Jap. The enemy fighter that made its pass from dead ahead scored a hit with a cannon shell, which caught Kurth in the center of his forehead, killing him instantly, and badly wounding Ben Graves.

Our left wing was on fire, no hand was at our controls and, with the weight of two inert bodies slumped forward onto the yokes, Old Twenty Six pushed down into a screaming dive. That was the last view the squadron had of us as

we disappeared into a mass of clouds. We did not disappear from the Zeros, though, which swarmed down on us like mosquitoes at a picnic. So too did a couple of P-51s (else you would not be reading these words), which kept the enemy planes from giving us their undivided attention. Meanwhile Sgt. Labatt, our flight engineer and top turret gunner, dropped from his battle station and leaped into the splintered and bloody cockpit, pulled the almost headless body of Kurth off the wheel, and, with what must have required truly heroic strength, pulled the plunging B-24 out of that long desperate dive, and wrestled it back into level flight. The fire in the wing had gone out, but that seemed the only good news.

Day and I in the nose were knocked flat by the explosion of the 20-mm shell on the flight deck, and rattled around like two dice in a cup as the uncontrolled plane streaked downward. We had begun a frantic effort to crawl aft, i.e., upward, to the nose-wheel door, to bail out, when Labatt pulled us out of the dive. As we resumed horizontal flight we were again attacked from ahead, with no answering fire from our own guns. Labatt's turret was of course unmanned, though I did not then know it, and we couldn't raise Burch in the nose turret on the intercom. I then looked back at the cockpit though my astrodome, saw Labatt alone at the controls, and realized that the pilots were out of action and the top guns unmanned. Telling Day to take over the nose turret, I went back to see what was doing on the flight deck.

Kurth's body lay prone between the two seats. Graves was slumped unconscious in his seat, seemingly bleeding everywhere. Labatt doggedly fought the controls, taking what evasive action is possible in a B-24, as the Nips made pass after pass at us. I heard an occasional burst from our ball turret, tail turret, or waist gunners, but knew they were powerless to prevent or hinder the relentless attacks from ahead and above. Further, each Zero did a split-S (a snap half-roll ending abruptly in a vertical power dive) as it broke off the attack, taking it out of range at incredible speed.

Labatt and I said what we had to say to each other with apparent complete indifference to the bleakness of our prospects at that moment. It was as casual as "You broil the steaks while I mix the drinks" sort of thing. Actually, Labatt said impassively, laconically, "Cy's all through; Ben's hit pretty bad; would you take over the top turret?" I answered, "You take it; I can cope here; you'll do much better with the guns than I would; Day is trying to get the nose guns going; I think Burch has had it." The stoicism there would have been heroic in the kind of spot that gave time for reflection. In our case, Labatt and I – and

Day, as you'll see – had the calm of utter desperation. There was only one way we could behave and hope to live so, naturally, that's how we did behave. No panic.

I took over the flying. A head-on pass; the Nip held his fire until absurdly close. He must previously have seen that our front and top guns were out. Labatt got in a wonderful burst. We later learned that he got one confirmed and two probable that day, and the P-51s a dozen or more confirmed, including what they did on behalf of our crippled plane. I can remember all the things that happened in the next fifteen or twenty minutes, or it may have been an hour, but I have never been able to reconstruct in my own mind anything like a definite sequence of events.

I can recall having the same feeling that I'd had before under fire, that these moments had an intensity and a reality that made all previous existence seem merely vegetative. It was as though one was alive to a degree immeasurably greater than ever before. Everything was intensely vivid. Actually, not everything, but only those few things in the sharp focus of one's awareness, because most sensations and emotions were entirely below the conscious level. For example, I knew afterwards that I had been painfully bruised and cut, and that I must have been horribly frightened, but none of that got through to my conscious mind at the time.

Fighters kept on hitting us. I flew into clouds when I could. Labatt kept on shooting. Day came back to the cockpit, said that the nose turret was jammed in such a position that he could not open its door, and that Burch was unconscious or dead. For a while he took over the top turret and Labatt flew while I bandaged up Ben Graves. He had been hit by shell fragments in the head, neck, shoulder, and chest, but I soon realized that a lot of the blood on him was Kurth's. Ben's shoulder and neck had pretty well stopped bleeding. I fixed up his head with a compress and what amounted to a great white turban of bandages. I did not discover, then or later, that he had also been hit in the chest, but with little bleeding.

Then I flew some more while Labatt got back up in his turret and Day went aft to see if anyone needed help there, and to tell them what was going on. I suddenly realized what it was that I had pushed off the right rudder pedal when I first took over the controls. It was a gelatinous mass of some sort and it then dawned on me that it was about half the contents of Kurth's skull and that the

rest was what was spattered all over the cockpit. But that macabre realization hit only the fringe of my awareness.

I had tried to organize my maps after bandaging Graves, but they were torn, bloody, and soaked with hydraulic fluid. In any event, I could not watch the ground long enough to pinpoint our position. When I first took over the flying our compass heading was almost due north. To the west, generally, lay India and safety so I headed us straight west until I had time to do some mental navigation. The nearest friendly airport I could think of was Chittagong, an RAF fighter base. After some very gross and hasty mental gymnastics, I selected a heading of 250°. Then as I altered course here and there to get into cloud cover, I tried desperately to maintain a sort of running average heading, mentally of course.

We were climbing when we could. No matter where we were in the Irrawaddi valley or where we were going in India we had to cross the long north-south range of hills that runs down the western part of Burma, from the Himalayas almost to the sea.

I don't remember when it was that Graves, over in the right-hand seat, began to have brief periods of a sort of consciousness. He would say to me, "I'll fly, you take care of Cy." I told him Cy was dead, but he kept forgetting it. He would actually steer for a bit, then slump back into unconsciousness, though trying hard to stay "awake," and one wing would drop and the nose begin to swing. I'd pick up the wing and correct our heading and pretty soon he'd come to again. Once he told me to order the whole crew to bail out. He said he could get "the ship" back home. I told him we would wait until we were back over the bomb line, i.e., in friendly territory. Then he forgot that and didn't mention it any more, but again asked me to take care of Cy. Of course we couldn't bail out, because he would have gone down with the plane, without us. Further, Burch was trapped in the nose turret, we surmised. Actually, we learned later that he had been killed instantly by that first Zero pass at us.

I never considered trying to get us back to Pandaveswar, our base 100 miles northwest of Calcutta. Since we had been on full power for a long time, I wasn't sure that we had enough fuel to get there, or that the airplane would hold together that long. Also, flying an extra two or three hours with severely wounded people aboard would have been a dreadful idea. Anyhow, eventually Chittagong came in sight (almost dead ahead, I must say as a plug for my outstanding luck as a mental navigator).

I sent for our gunner/radioman to come up and get on the radio, if we still had one, to ask Chittagong to get its Spitfires and Hurricanes out of the way. We could call them on 121.5 mc, the international distress frequency, I figured. This boy came forward to the flight deck, saw Kurth's body stretched out there, and panicked completely, total hysteria. Labatt shoved him off the flight deck and closed the door. We would land without radio. We would have also landed without wheels if Labatt and Day had not already cranked the landing gear down by hand, as we had not enough hydraulic pressure to do it in the normal manner. So with no radio I had Labatt grab the Very pistol and shoot off two or three red flares as we were on final approach. Really, though, I am sure the Chittagong control tower knew we were in a very bad way to be bringing in a B-24 on their little fighter strip. Anyhow, the RAF folks picked up their green Aldis lamp and flashed it at us: OK to Land! During all this, Graves came to, sort of, grabbed the wheel, then slumped back in his seat, out of it again.

Labatt told me that we had only enough fluid for one application of the brakes, so once they were on, keep them on. I did not forget it. As we got near the end of the runway, I saw a railroad embankment about twelve feet above the surrounding terrain, at right angles to our flight path. I knew we were coming in too low and too slow and figured we would either just miss it or hit it about a foot below its top. I also figured we would stall if I pulled up. Labatt shouted, "Pull up!" I made a conscious decision not to, our wheels hit the top edge of the embankment, we made a horrendous bounce but still had flying speed, and I, with marvelous beginner's luck, got her down on the center line of the runway. I put the brakes on hard and kept them on and we didn't hit a single RAF fighter, fire truck, or airman. When we stopped I said, "I'm through. I will not taxi this one inch." And I didn't.

A great many things happened the next hour, some of them just a blur at the time, and more now of course. I do remember how kind and considerate our British comrades in arms were, as they took off our dead and wounded, helped the rest of us down, and seemed to sense that we were a very battered lot, physically and psychically. They towed our rugged but beat-up B-24 off the active runway. That was a good thing, because our own Colonel Nick (Conrad Necrason) flew over Chittagong, saw one of his group's own planes on the ground, and landed to see what was going on. His landing was better than mine, but he was a West Pointer with thousands of flying hours, many in B-24s. He must have made arrangements with the senior RAF officers there as to what needed to be done and who would do it. I think they took Ben Graves to a British hospital nearby. Then Colonel Nick

made room for the rest of the survivors in his plane and we all went back to Pandaveswar.