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The Personal Story of B-24(H) Liberator 'Little Gismo II' Bombardier, 1st LT Charles Ray Skinner

The Air Battle over the Jindřichův Hradec Czechoslovakia region resulted in the crash landing of four B-24(H) Liberators from the 15th AAF 464th Bomb Squadron – this is the story of one of the eight-men that survived a Liberator crash in Cimer, Czechoslovakia.

Personal Story of B-24(H) Liberator Little Gismo II Bombardier 1st LT Charles Ray Skinner

By Charles Ray Skinner

The following is an edited excerpt from Charles Ray Skinner's personal journal detailing his experiences serving as a bombardier on a B-24 with the US Army Air Corps 464th Bombardment Group 776th Squadron on August 24, 1944. Permission is given to Tom Will to use this information for the 2015 464th Bomb Group Reunion.

The morning of August 24, 1944 was much like any other mission morning. We were up really early, ate breakfast and then went to briefing. The pilot, co-pilot, navigator and bombardier attended these meetings while the enlisted crew went to the plane and checked the equipment.

A curtain was drawn back to show the map of the route to the target. The target for the day was an oil refinery and gasoline storage tanks in the northern part of Czechoslovakia near the Polish border. This would be a long mission right through the heart where the Germans were concentrating most of their fighter planes to protect the oil refineries. The Russians were within a few days of capturing Ploesti and the Germans were retreating. The Finto Oil Refinery at Pardubice had only been bombed once by the British at night doing negligible damage. It was the fifth largest refinery the Germans had. After the loss of Ploesti, it would be the second largest refinery; therefore, we could expect the maximum effort by the Germans to defend it.

The 55th Bomb Wing, which was made up of four groups, was assigned to this target because of our consistent bombing. Sixteen other groups flew diverging raids to cause the Germans to send their fighters to other targets. This would allow the 55th Bomb Wing to get to the target without fighter opposition. This plan actually worked. My particular target was some storage tanks which supposedly contained the largest aviation fuel reserve which the Germans had. Our group was selected to take out these tanks. We should have known that these tanks were dummies as soon as we saw them. They were standing out from miles away. The Germans would have camouflaged them if they were as valuable as we were briefed they were. They looked like a flower garden out in the middle of a field. Our bombs landed right on target sending nothing but dirt and the wood they apparently were made of flying into the air. What a beautiful mission we had just wasted.

Needless to say, intelligence would never be willing to admit that they had fallen for such a stupid trick. The group's mission report does not mention about these storage tanks. The report said that we bombed the refinery but the lead pilot and I agree that we never went over the city and refinery. What I am writing here is the only challenge I have to the report. The sight of those tanks being blown into the air and no fire as a result of the bomb explosions is almost as clear in my mind as what I saw on August 24th, 1944.

The Journal of the American Aviation Historical Society, Winter 1975 magazine had a write up about this mission. A witness on the ground substantiates my claim that my group did not go over Pardubice and bomb the refinery. The wing formation was as follows: The 460th bomb group would lead. The 485th bomb group would follow them. The 464th bomb group would follow the 485th group, and the 465th bomb group would bring up the rear. The 464th bomb group at the initial point of attack would take a heading leading to the storage tanks instead of the refinery. The 465th bomb group would take a heading to the refinery at the initial point of attack.

A witness on the ground which was interviewed for the article describes the bombing as follows:

"At noon on August 24, the roar of the sirens from the town and from the refinery announce that the Americans are approaching. A few minutes later a group of 15 German fighters take off from the nearby airfield and I look up to see hundreds of the familiar glittering dots that mark the American bombers. Suddenly, a shrill whistle, hundreds of bombs are falling from the sky. I fling myself onto the ground as a series of strong explosions shake the air. The roar of the engines and the shock of the explosions seems endless. Finally, I dare to raise my head. A giant column of black smoke and flames billows from the refinery one mile away. I have no time to stare, another wave of bombers approaches. Again the unbearably sharp whistle of falling bombs. Some of these bombs fall on our village. A blinding flash and a deafening explosion, then another and another. The ground and the air vibrate under the impact. A hurricane of hot air and bomb fragments whip the trees. The roar of the engines, the explosions of the bombs, the crash of falling buildings, the cries of wounded and dying people...It is Dante's hell. Helplessly I await death. Then the noise stops, but only for a minute, another wave of bombers is approaching. Again the whine of falling bombs. Will this hell never end? Finally all is quiet. Slowly I stand up and look around. The village is a dreadful sight."

This witness describes the bombing from three groups. The order in which the groups bombed was the 460th, 485th, one minute space, and the 465th. The one minute represents the location of the 464th which had pulled out of the formation to bomb those special gas storage tanks. After we bombed the tanks, the group circled around and rejoined the wing formation in the third position; which was the same position we vacated. Air crew members did not write the history of the group. The 464th part of the mission was plainly left out of the official report. The description of the target was correct in every way except the 464th.

The magazine article apparently was from the official Air Force report regarding the mission. It reports the 460th bombed first, one minute later the 485th dropped their 270 bombs with an undetermined number landing in the village of Svitkov. This corresponds with the testimony of the witness. Her only report of bombs falling on the village was from the 485th bomb group. She did distinctly describe bombs falling from three different groups.

I make a big point about this mission report because I was one of the bombardiers bombing the tanks, and I witnessed the 464th's bombs destroying the dummy tanks. This picture of the target and bomb hits is almost as clear to me today as it was sixty one years ago, and I know that the lady witness lived with her picture in her mind for the rest of her life.

We knew that there were other groups attacking an air base about thirty miles to our right. As we were coming off of our target, we noticed a B-17 which appeared to be in trouble flying all alone.

Normally this plane would have attempted to join our group for protection. It never made any attempt to turn towards our formation and was eventually shot down by German fighters shortly thereafter. The magazine report did not report the loss of two B-17's; however, an article from the magazine Perspective reports that two B-17's were lost to enemy fighters. The famous Tuskegee trained pilots of the 332nd Fighter Groups were furnishing fighter protection for these groups.

I think that it was a mistake for any fighter group to claim they never lost a bomber they were protecting. The fighters never accompanied the bombers all the way back to their bases. The fighter pilots would have no knowledge of the planes that eventually go down after having been damaged by fighter attacks.

Shortly after witnessing this air attack, I was ordered to report to the flight deck because the pilot was changing formation position. Because of an order from unknown sources, when flying this position, the bombardier on this plane was to direct the gunners firing on any attacking enemy fighters. I had to crawl from my position in the nose about twenty feet

through a narrow tunnel to get to the flight deck. I had difficulty getting up on the flight deck for flack suit being on the door. As I cleared the door, my oxygen bottle gave out of oxygen, so I had to disconnect my bottle in order to breathe. Having been off the intercom for several minutes I thought it best that I should plug in my ear phones and see if anything was happening. I could hear the gunners talking about the identity of a fighter plane at three o'clock. I proceed to get upon flight deck so I could look at this plane from the co-pilot's window. The plane had started to turn away from our formation. One of the gunners remarked that "it must be our fighter escort because here they come now." Another gunner interrupted him saying "escort hell, you had better shoot them." Immediately most of our gunners were firing away at the oncoming enemy planes. I was real lucky to be out of the tunnel. As for me being able to tell the gunners where to shoot, I was completely helpless.

I could not see anywhere but straight forward and the attack was coming from the rear. Fortunately, I was probably standing in one of the safest places on the plane. I was behind the top turret and only my legs were exposed to the incoming bullets. The first wave of three planes knocked out our tail turret. The gunners shot down one of the enemy and probably wounded the group leader because he flew his plane, with his other wingman flying with him, straight up to another group where they were both shot down killing the group leader. I am not sure how many waves of fighters attacked our plane. There were lots of shells exploding all around inside our plane. Finally a 20 millimeter shell hit exploded on the armor plating of the top turret wounding the gunner. He released his turret seat. As it hinged downward it struck me from behind knocking me almost up in the cockpit with the pilots. I turned to see what had happened and I saw the gunner lying on the deck about three feet from me. As I began leaning down to check his wound, he reached for a small fire extinguisher to put out a fire in the bomb bay. Just as he held the extinguisher toward the fire, a bullet hit the extinguisher and knocked the top off. This is when I first saw the bomb bay was completely engulfed in a roaring fire. I knew we were going to have to bail out. Ankney, the gunner, immediately threw the fire extinguisher into the bomb bay and as he turned around I handed him his parachute and told him to bail out. I knew from the size of the fire and location that it was only going to be a minute or two before 'a large gasoline tank in the bomb bay was going to explode.

As I hit the pilots on their shoulders to tell them of the fire, the co-pilot was acting like he was watching a movie. I said, "We are on fire and we have to bail out." The co-pilot, apparently thinking we had plenty of time, pointed to our right wing to show me we were missing about 15 feet of wing. I said, "We got to bail out now." I turned to leave and, stupid me, I had not hooked my parachute to my parachute harness. Just as I hooked one side I realized I was hooking it on backwards. Now there was about a fifty percent chance that if I jumped hooked up this way the parachute would turn me loose when it opened. I did not like those odds so I moved to the side to let the pilots get by. I thought about what a stupid thing I had done and it was probably going to cost me my life. I knew that if I was going to get any help only God would be able to help me.

My prayer was not long. I simply asked for a little more time before the plane exploded. Just then, the co-pilot stopped beside me, and I told him to go ahead and bail out. There was no reason for him not to but he said "after you." All the time he was taking off his right glove. He reached out and unsnapped my parachute. I flipped it around and snapped it on as I was heading for the bomb bay. I always got in and out of the plane on the left side and I wondered as I was getting to the bomb bay which bomb bay door Ankney had opened to bail out. To my surprise, the left bomb bay door had been blown off by the fighters. The wind blew into the bomb bay and caused a little space between the fire wall and the fire allowing me to not have to expose but one arm to the fire. I barely touched the cat walk with one foot before I stepped into space at about 16,000 feet altitude. The plane was probably traveling about 160 miles per hour downward. I thought we were flying straight and level at the time I bailed out because I did not have any problem getting out. My pilot, Virgil Leverett, said he had held the plane

level as long as he could but it had begun to fall off to the right and was beginning to spin as I left the plane.

When I hit the wind, I do not think I was ever that cold before. I instantly felt like I had landed in ice water. It felt like my clothes and all my gear including my parachute were gone. I could not see because of my eyelids were flickering so badly. In about five seconds after I bail out, the plane exploded. I felt the explosion and the heat but while I was freezing my left leg was getting hot. I realized I must have been wounded when the plane exploded, but even that didn't squelch my happiness and the feel of floating on air. I immediately realized I was still in an area where stray bullets were possible. I felt that it was in my best interest to continue my free fall for a few more seconds. During this time, my speed of falling had reduced and I was able to see. What a wonderful feeling it was to be alive even though I was in some pain.

At this time I thought that all my worst fears were over. There could not be anything that could happen that would be half as exciting as what I had just been through. I was wrong. I was falling on my back in a sitting position on air. It is an unbelievable feeling. The only pressure on your body is from the air you are falling through. I almost did not want to pull the ripcord, but I knew in about two minutes it would be all over with unless I did. I was falling with my back toward the ground when I pulled the ripcord. The parachute came out of the pouch just like it was supposed to. I watched it gently go away from me and I said to myself, "when is this thing going to open." Believe it or not, the chute just disappeared. At that point, I had no reason not to believe that I was separated from my chute. It is amazing how scared I was for a second. Then a calm came over me when I thought that I would be dead in a matter of a minute or two. I was thankful that when I would hit the ground, there would be no pain but immediate death. My eyes had been fixed in one direction and just as sudden as my chute had disappeared, it reappeared fully blossomed out. I asked myself, since nobody else was around, "where did that come from?" Just as suddenly as it had before, it disappeared once again. With all the clear sky I was looking at, how was this thing disappearing? To my amazement, I finally realized that I was oscillating back and forth under my chute, and now I am completely overjoyed that I have one more chance to survive.

Just as I was able to stop my chute from oscillating, I found myself in a shower of debris from the plane. Guns were the first things to fall by, then ammunition, then boxes and one parachute still in its pack. With all the joy I was experiencing, I saw this parachute and I knew someone did not make it out of the plane before it exploded. I knew the explosion happened about the time my co-pilot should have bailed out. It was like the weight of the whole world had fallen on me. Now I owed my life to a friend who helped me survive but gave up his own life. Once again, I went to God in prayer. I asked God to bless him and have mercy on him. As I finished my prayer, I suddenly realized that my friend wasn't wearing that type of chute, but another member of our crew had died.

Evading capture was my next project. I began looking for roads, towns, forest, and streams. All of these things are important to an evadee. Otherwise you can easily walk right into those who are searching for you. I drifted over the town where part of the plane was burning. I was glad that I was not going to land near this little town.

Fortunately, I drifted over another hill and thought that I was going to have a perfect landing site. There was a field completely surrounded by woods, and as far as I could tell there were no houses around. I could land, gather my parachute up, hide it, and then move out of the area. I had about six hours before dark to find a suitable place to spend the night. It appeared that I was going to overshoot the field so I pulled a shroud line on my chute to spill some air and reduce the distance of my glide. I spilled too much air out of my chute, and now I am landing in the trees short of the field. I crossed my legs to avoid straddling a limb at 35 miles per hour. The trees were coming up very fast. There was a round hole about six feet in diameter in the tree tops and I went through it without touching a limb. The trees appeared going up so

fast I thought I would break a leg when I landed. Then I stopped falling. I am spinning around like a top on a string. I did not want to make any sudden moves for fear my chute would untangle with whatever it was caught on. I did not know how high I was from the ground. I looked to see what my chute was caught on and decided that I could swing over to the trunk of the tree and slide down to the ground. Then I looked down to see how far I was off the ground, and to my surprise I was hanging over a large pile of big rocks and all I had to do was push the toes down and I touched the rocks.

The getting down was simple. I had a small knife in my pocket, but because of my leg straps it took me several valuable minutes to get it out of my pocket. All of that was not necessary since I had a trench knife strapped to my leg where it was easy to get to. I cut the shroud lines and stepped off the rocks. I attempted to pull my chute out of the tree to no avail. I proceeded to take off all my flight gear and piled it where my chute was hanging. I took my 45 cal. Pistol and hid it under a rock. Just as I started to run, a German 109 fighter buzzed me.

Momentarily I was frightened thinking he might strafe me. He made another pass. This time I think he wanted to see which way I was going to run. I gave him a hand wave and he did not come back.

I was not able to run like I thought I would because of my wound. I found what I thought would be a good place to hide and put a compress and sulfur powder on my wound. I was sitting on the ground in a thicket of small trees pulling my pants up when I saw a Czech home guard walking slowly out in front of me. As I lay back down, I looked over my shoulder and saw another one a few feet behind me. I thought, "how lucky can you get? These two guys are walking right past me." When I turned my head back I saw a limb moving in one of the trees and into my little clearing stepped another soldier almost stopping on my feet. As he released the limb he saw me and let a blood curling yell that you would have thought I had stuck him with my trench knife. After all my planning, I was captured within an hour after I had landed. The guards had apparently seen my chute since they immediately walked me over to where it was still hanging in the tree. The people that captured the prisoner usually got to keep the parachute. When we got to the chute, I lay down on the ground and watched these guys try to pull the chute out of the tree. The leader of this group proceeded to try to shoot the limb off which the chute was caught on. He missed about three shots. I decided to see if he would like for me to shoot the limb off because he was wearing real thick glasses and I assumed he could not see well enough to hardly see the limb. As I walked up to him and made my offer he readily accepted my offer. Now the other three guys had stacked their guns well away from where we were. As their leader was handing me the gun these other guys started yelling something at him. Just as the gun touched my hand he snatched it back. I suppose he realized that if he gave me the gun, they would be my prisoners. Needless to say, my gesture did not go over very well. The leader ordered me to go over and help the other guys pull on the shroud line. The limb broke and the other three guys fell and stacked up on the ground like dominoes. I looked down at them, pulled my arm up to show them my muscles, long sleeve shirt and all. It took me quite a long time to explain all of my equipment. We finally got to our Mae West flotation device. One of the guys just did not understand what it was all about. Finally, after I gave out of motions, I decided to put the thing on him. This guy was sure enough dumb. After I had tightened the Mae West on him good and tight he still did not understand. I figured if he let me go this far with him, I might as well finish the job. I popped both CO tubes at the same time and his eyes almost popped out when the Mae West inflated. The other guys jumped back but when they realized what it was, they started laughing at this guy and I began to think we were never going to get out of the woods. My concern was these guys might just shoot me and leave me in the woods.

These guys turned out to be pretty nice to me. I figured they would make me carry all of my equipment but they carried it themselves. They let me walk as slow as I wanted to walk. We

finally met a soldier and I was turned over to him. Now they loaded me up with all my equipment and, maybe in a strange way, they said goodbye.

The soldier that took charge of me was not a very big man. I had to walk a few steps ahead of him. We were walking through a field on a narrow dirt road when we met a girl riding a bicycle. As we approached her, she got off her bike and pushed it as she passed me. I do not remember the soldier stopping me, but I stopped under an apple tree.

The explosion of the plane knocked most of the apples off the tree. I did not think I would be getting any food, so I ate one of the apples which tasted real good. I proceeded to fill my pockets up with the apples. I presumed the soldier had told the girl how he had captured me single handed. I was looking at some deer out in the field and I had my back to him when he got ready to go. He came up behind and hit me in the back with the butt of his gun. I don't know why I did what I did, but before he could bring his gun down, I grabbed his gun about middle ways with my right hand and gave him a push so hard that he almost fell down backwards. I didn't attempt to attack him, but I shook my finger at him to warn about hitting me again. This little fellow was nice after that. He walked at least 20 feet behind me for the next hour or so until we reached the little village of Cimev where the wing and the motors fell on a house and barn setting them on fire. The town's people were using an old fashion hand operated fire pump to fight the fire. They stopped for a moment to look at me but apparently I wasn't too much to look at. They immediately resumed their pumping. I was glad because some of the crews shot down were hanged by local citizens.

I was taken to a little empty building except for a table and a bench. My pilot, co-pilot, and the top turret gunner were lying on the floor against the wall. My gunner acknowledged me slightly but the other two did not look up. I was really glad to see these guys because I had my doubts as to whether the pilot and co-pilot were able to get out of the plane.

After I bailed out, Selby, my co-pilot, followed me to the bomb bay and he thought he had bailed out. He said that the plane blew up and blew him back under the flight deck. He was knocked unconscious but when he awoke he was lying in some small fires. He kicked his way out of the plane but lost consciousness again. He woke up again falling and then pulled his rip cord but his chute failed to deploy properly. This being a back pack he had to use his right hand to get his chute to deploy. Since he had taken his glove off to help me, he had no protection from the fire thus sustaining third degree burns on his right. He damaged his right hand when he used it to pull his chute out of the pack. He lost consciousness again and he was on the ground when he woke up and the people were taking his chute off of him.

The amazing part about this story, he did not get fatally burned in the plane and he woke up in time to push himself out of the plane. He lost consciousness again as he fell out of the plane. This allowed time for the wind to blow the fire on his clothes out. Otherwise, he probably would have opened his chute while he was on fire causing his chute to burn and he would have fallen to his death. Another miracle, he awoke soon enough to open his chute before he crashed into the earth. Maybe my prayer for him did some good. I know that he probably saved my life and I was really overjoyed to see him alive.

Leverett, the pilot, seeing Selby and I working on my chute and partially because he could see the furious fire in the bomb bay, elected to bail out through the top escape hatch. This hatch was used mostly when ditching a plane. Leverett was able to get the top half of his body out of the plane but the pressure of the 160 mph plus wind and some centrifugal forces pinned him to the top hatch. He was luck the plane exploded. The explosion of the plane created a force inside the plane greater than the forces outside. Therefore, he was literally blown out of the top hatch. His pants were torn and his legs were badly bruised. He apparently suffered from the shock of the explosion and was temporarily knocked unconscious. He regained consciousness and realized he was falling and opened his parachute with similar problems as Selby had. He landed on top of a small barn with a slate roof. The force of his body when he

landed caused him to break through the roof and fall in a hay loft. He proceeded to get out of his chute and climb out on the roof. There was a small tree growing near the barn and he was able to climb out on a limb and get down the tree. He had landed in the middle of a small village and he had lots of company.

It just so happened that morning he had gone by the supply tent and got a new jump suit. When he got down from the roof, he saw his bag of clothes lying on the ground near him. He was able to replace his old torn jump suit with a new one before the soldiers arrived to capture him. This was near to where Selby had landed.

Ankney, the top gunner, had landed in a field. Two men, one with a gun, came out in the field where he was. The man without the gun walked up to him and, in English, asked for his .45 pistol. He told Ankney that he was sorry he had to turn him in but he needed the gun to keep the other guy from shooting him. Ankney said the two had an argument but the guy with the pistol won out. Ankney told me he had been in the building for quite a while before Leverett and Selby arrived. He was awake when the little soldier brought me in. They strip searched me but did not find a small compass, about the size of a dime, that I had hidden in the front of my pants where the stitching had come unstitched.

About dark, an ambulance came and took us to a larger town where they put us in the jail for the night. I was concerned about the co-pilot and asked our guard if he could possibly get him some medical help. He said he would and sure enough about 8pm he had a doctor there in the jail to examine each of us. Since I made the request, I was the last to be examined and the doctor gave me a report on each of us. He said he was sorry he did not have any medical supplies with which to treat us, but that none of our wounds were life-threatening. I thanked the guard and the doctor and went back to my cell which I shared with Leverett. The cots in our cell were quite comfortable. Finally we were brought some water in a pitcher with nothing to drink out of. We drank from the pitcher and the water in Europe is real good. We went to sleep about 9pm and the guard had us up before day light. It wasn't long before we boarded a civilian bus to a train station.