

The Jinxed Crew

By George W. Carney
as told to
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This story was published in the US Air Force "Friends Journal" Vol. 24, No.3 Fall 2001



From the George W. Carney (778th) collection.

February 1944 – The "Jinxed" crew (Carney's crew)

Back Row (L-R): Byron Bradford (Intelligence Officer); George W. Carney (P/Squadron Operations Officer); George Flannagan (CP); Ted Anderson (N)
Front Row (L-R): S/Sgt. Wendell McBeth (E); S/Sgt. Stan Lapinski; Sgt. Max Close; Sgt. Pat Carr; Sgt. Roland Barynbruck; Cpl. Earl Ballinger

"Captain, we're jinxed!"

I was on the airstrip walking towards the Squadron Operations office when a young Sergeant came running up beside me and saluted.

"Excuse me, Sir, but you've gotta break us up cuz we're jinxed."

I stopped to consider this fellow.

It was a February morning in Idaho. Over fifty Consolidated B-24 heavy bombers stood-down in rows off the airstrip with wing tips aligned. They weren't pretty planes. Not like the high-finned B-17, which was a beautiful, easy-flying ship. Bulky-looking, with two

shield shaped vertical stabilizers, B-17 pilots snorted that the B-24 was the “crate our ship comes in.” Still, with all those planes lined up ready, and with the winter light shining through the Plexiglas nose turrets, I was awed. In a day or two all of these planes would roll out together, leave that tiny Idaho town for their combat duty assignments in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations.

I loved flying. I had breezed through cadet training partly because by the time I was 21 years old and enlisted, I already had my private pilot’s license, instrument rating and aerobatics certification. I enlisted in the Army Air Corps in 1941. The training was a hoot. We flew just about everything, PT-17’s, BT-13’s, AT-6’s. I figured that I could fly just about anything. I’d wanted to be a fighter pilot but they put me in bombers. I trained in the B-17, flying cross-country through the Grand Canyon--below the rim.

Everyone had trained for months. Pilots, navigators, engineers, bombardiers and gunners. We’d flown cross-country, formation, night runs, practice bomb runs. The gunners had been given their positions on the 10-man crew and shot ribbons of bullets in target practice. Of the six gunner positions, the ball turret usually went to the smallest man. Ball turret gunners gained respect and notoriety by flying their missions encased in a Plexiglas carbuncle pasted to the belly of the ship. You couldn’t find a job anyone wanted less.

I was 23 and excited to be a part of the massive war effort, and to be able to fly. It was an electric feeling. Our training was over. The next thing was the real thing. So I looked at the Sergeant, shivering a little in the hard cold of that Idaho morning. Three of his compatriots stood a bit away, gloomy and foreboding like MacBeth’s witches. Their hands were pushed deep into their pockets, their arms rigid against their bodies and their shoulders drawn up under their ears.

“Ya just gotta break us up,” the Sergeant repeated.

His friends nodded in agreement.

“Let’s go inside,” I said.

Our feet crunched the dry cereal of a thin layer of snow and ice. We walked across the ramp to my tiny office. I was the Squadron’s Operations Officer. I took off my fleece-lined leather jacket and hung it on a nail beside a poster of Uncle Sam admonishing us: “You’ve Got What It Takes, Soldier, Now Take Care of What You’ve Got!” I turned back to the men, and told them to help themselves to coffee.

“Now, what’s this all about?” I said.

One of the others stepped up. He was a little guy with black hair.

“Sir, we’ve already had one close call, near miss, mid-air collision, we’ve run off the end of the runway, we blew a main landing gear tire when we were taxiing out for take off, had to feather the number 2 engines just after take off...”

The fellow who first had approached me spoke up. He composed himself and spoke slowly.

“What we’re trying to say is that we’ve had so many accidents and near misses already. It’s spooky. We’re all thinking we’re jinxed, either us or the ship, and if you don’t break us up we’ll never make it through combat.”

I sat down in the chair behind my desk and looked over at my assistant, Lieutenant Martin. He’d been at his desk typing when we came in, but had stopped while the sergeants were talking. He resumed typing tentatively.

I turned to the first man. “What’s your name?”

“Staff Sergeant Wendell McBeth, Sir.”

“How about the rest of you?” I asked.

“Sergeant Anderson, Sir.”

“Sergeant Carr, Sir.”

“Sergeant Close, Sir.”

“What about the rest of the crew? Are they part of this jinxed nonsense?” I asked.

“Yes Sir, they all are, Sir.” McBeth said.

“The officer’s too?” I asked.

“Yes, Sir,” they said.

Lt. Martin tapped out another sentence on the typewriter. I saw him watching us over the rim of his glasses.

“You guys aren’t superstitious, are you?” I asked.

“No Sir, but we’re jinxed, Sir,” said McBeth.

Lt. Martin typed another word.

I sat quietly for a minute. The crew closed in around my desk like buzzards. “Now listen”, I said. “I don’t believe in anything like jinxes or hexes or whatever. You’ve been training as a crew for months. You’re about to go overseas. You need to keep your crew together. I’m not superstitious. There’s nothing wrong with you or your plane, and to prove it I’ll personally pilot your plane overseas.”

Lt. Martin abandoned his typing altogether.

“Go get your pilot and co-pilot. I’ll talk to them.” I said.

This was not the outcome they’d anticipated. No one spoke. A gust of wind blew down the stovepipe of the wood stove and a puff of smoke came through the grate into the room.

During the next couple of weeks I sent the crew’s co-pilot overseas by boat. Since I was to fly the plane, the pilot would now be my co-pilot. In mid-February, the bomber group planned to depart but bad weather forced a stand-down for five days.

On February 18, 1944, at 5:25AM, the group was cleared for take-off. Everything seemed okay with our ship. The ground crew had completed the pre-flight checkout with nothing amiss. We taxied to our place in the line-up. We were the second aircraft in line for our squadron. That cold, clear Idaho Valley hummed with the sound of 200 Pratt & Whitney 1200 hp, radial engines. Our first leg would take us to Lincoln, Nebraska.

We started down the runway. Following normal procedure, I put my hand on the throttles with the co-pilot’s hand over mine and followed it up to full throttle. Once we had full throttle I’d remove my hand and the co-pilot would lock it in. But as I applied power I noticed that the engines didn’t sound right. At full throttle I could tell we weren’t drawing full power. A quick look at the instruments confirmed we lacked the manifold pressure and rpm’s for take-off. I chopped the throttles. We got out of line, taxied in, and parked on the ramp. Before I could get out of my seat, the rest of the crew had filled the cockpit and the catwalk leading to it.

“See what we mean?” someone said. “We’re jinxed!”

I could see that they all looked satisfied with this turn of events.

We listened and watched as the remaining 46 planes departed at about 40 second intervals. Then the valley was quiet and the airstrip deserted. The ground and flight crews discovered that most of the spark plugs in all four engines of our aircraft were fouled. It was curious, because the plane had been pre-flighted and the spark plugs were clean before take-off.

We finally departed around noon, a lone bomber, counterpoint to the grand exodus of the morning. The flight to Lincoln was uneventful. We arrived at dusk, tied up and went to our quarters.

The next morning we heard that during the night, a B-24 had been hit by a fire engine and that the nose had been knocked off. When the crew heard this they said, “Well, that’s our plane!”

I said, “You don’t know anything about that. There’s no way in the world you could know about that.”

They looked at me with pity and exasperation.

We ate a quick breakfast and went down to the flight line. We couldn’t find our plane. The crew wasn’t surprised. I went to flight operations.

“Where’s our plane?” I said.

The Operations Officer said, “Oh, it’s in the depot for repairs.”

“What repairs?” I asked.

“A fire engine ran into it last night,” he said. “Knocked off the nose along with the bomb site stabilizer. It’ll probably be in the depot a few days.”

I went back to the crew, gave them the news, and started off towards my quarters. I could feel them watching me. I was a little ways off when someone said, “See, we told you.”

While the ground crew fixed the damage done by the fire engine they also completed the task for which we had flown to Lincoln in the first place. They installed twin 50 caliber Browning machine-guns at the two waist windows of the plane.

The rest of the group departed for their overseas destinations. Once again, we were alone at the field.

On February 27th, we made the second leg of our trip to Morrison Field, West Palm Beach, Florida. This would be our last stop in the States. The crew, always a little edgy over that jinxed business, was even more so when we were issued 45 caliber Colt automatic pistols. The reality of what lay ahead was sinking in. Fortunately, we had a good laugh at each other when we all got our heads shaved. Jinxed or not, we were one ugly crew.

We left the next morning for Trinidad. The manifold gauges and tachometer were reading erratically but since there were no repair facilities at Borinquen Field, we had to interpolate their readings.

We stayed overnight in Trinidad then left the next day for Belem, Brazil, near the mouth of the Amazon River. The weather was horrendous. The visibility was zero, so we were flying on those fickle instruments. Our aircraft blundered into a thunderhead. We were bouncing all over the sky and I could barely maintain directional control. There was so much rain it was like flying through a barrel of water. Our cockpit was a shower stall and it didn’t do the gauges much good.

I tried to keep us at about 9,000 feet altitude, but it wasn't easy. We got into the violent updraft of a thunderhead within a thunderstorm. The altimeter was spinning so fast I couldn't keep track of our altitude. I'm guessing we were sucked up about 5,000 feet in less than a minute. My biggest concern was to keep the aircraft in a nose-down attitude so that we wouldn't stall. That, and I was really worried about the downdraft of equal intensity that was sure to come on the other side of the thunderhead, and come, it did. It pulled us down as fast as we'd been pulled up. All the way down I worried what attitude I should keep the plane in order to avoid an induced stall. Fortunately, the artificial horizon was working so I just tried to keep the plane as level as possible.

I was so busy fighting the controls that I didn't think of the crew in the back. Whoever wasn't buckled down was sure to have spent his time bouncing off the ceiling and everything else.

We exited the storm in time to see the mouth of the Amazon River. Its size was overwhelming. At cruising speed it still took us 25 minutes to cross it. Beyond the river was nothing but jungle, dark, perfect and relentless. Our tiny airstrip in Belem appeared without warning--a swath cut out of the black jungle. There was no margin for error on the landing. You only got one shot at it. We landed okay and the sour-faced crew jumped from the plane rubbing bruised elbows and shins.

We were all pretty tired, but looking around at this hole in the jungle we didn't figure to find much in the way of facilities or recreation. There was nothing to do but refuel and carry on down the coast to Fortaleza, Brazil.

The last few days and especially the last leg of the trip had drained us all. We were totally strung out when we reached Fortaleza and hoped for a rest. It is true that some of our instruments were acting up. It's also true we might have exaggerated the problem to Air Traffic Control in the hope that they'd fix them and we'd have a day or two to sack out. Air Traffic Control had other ideas. In their view of the war I think all they saw was a continuous flow of metal across their runway. They wanted every ship out of there as soon as possible because more were on the way.

As it turned out, we got our two days rest in Fortaleza. It wasn't by design; it was more from pure exhaustion and a bit of French bedroom farce. We had arrived in late afternoon. Air Traffic Control said they wanted us out of there the next morning and would give us a wake up call. We checked out the plane, the navigator checked his charts, the engineer checked the engines and we checked into our quarters. At 5AM the next morning someone knocked on my door.

“Captain Carney?”

“Yeah?”

“Time to get up.”

He left. I went back to sleep. When I woke up again it was mid day, too late to leave. There were no complaints from the crew. That afternoon, Lt. Flannagan (the jinxed crew's pilot, but my co-pilot on this trip) and I sat in my room talking. He commented that my bed was so much better than the one in his room. I could sleep on anything so we switched rooms that night.

The next morning someone knocked on what previously had been my door but now was Lt. Flannagan's.

"Time to get up, Sir," the man said.

Lt. Flannagan immediately went back to sleep.

At 10AM, with all the crew still sacked out, I got a summons from the base Commanding Officer. I knew we were in big trouble. We'd missed two wake-up calls and departures. The Major glowered when he saw me.

"Did you receive a wake-up call this morning, Captain?"

"No, Sir, I didn't."

He shoved a quarter's roster in my face.

"You signed this?"

"Yes, Sir."

"But you didn't get a wake-up call?"

"No, Sir."

I had a tenuous truth on my side, and I guess he didn't feel up to arguing about it. He said, "You're going to leave tonight."

The crew was happy enough about that. They'd gotten some rest, and didn't seem to mind if jinxing worked in their favor.

At this point we entered the short-lived realm of the best part of "playing army man," the game of little boys. None of us had experienced combat. It was still heroic, manly and clean. None of us had seen our friends and squadron mates fall from the sky in burning ships slowly turning; tails and wings dismembered and cast aloft. We did not know the hollowness of returning from a mission in ragged formation, never filling the empty positions of those ships, and the 10 men in each one, that were shot down. We were young, and strong, and quick and male. Our sense of purpose and the great mystery of war were only heightened when we received our first secret orders to a destination that we would know only after we had been enroute for an hour.

We left at 10 that night. We would fly across the Atlantic Ocean to Dakar, in West Africa, about 12 hours away. This was almost the maximum range for the B-24 “Liberator”, and I economized fuel by flying “cruise control”, which is a scheduled reduction of rpm’s and engine manifold pressure as the weight of the plane is reduced by the consumption of fuel. We had been in flight about an hour but hadn’t yet opened our orders when I felt a presence behind me on the flight deck. I turned around to see our radioman standing there with a frozen look on his face.

“What is it, Lapinski?” I said. I thought he was going to vomit.

“Cap’n, I don’t know how it happened, but I left our secret code book in the radio shack back at the field.”

I couldn’t believe I heard him right, but his supreme dejection told me that the worst was true.

The momentousness of his mistake was two-fold. Not only could we be court-martialled for leaving secret codes lying around, but if we were challenged by any surface ship, not having the correct response made us open season as a target for anti-aircraft guns. If that weren’t enough, if we returned to Fortaleza we couldn’t incriminate ourselves by admitting our mistake and we would have the Airdrome Officer down our throats if we claimed an abort by returning under questionable circumstances.

I pulled my hand down across my face and examined Lapinski through the web of my fingers. Apparently, he had been agonizing over his mistake for 20 minutes. The Liberator droned on through the darkness. I turned the ship 180 degrees back toward Fortaleza and got everyone on the intercom.

“Ok, here’s the deal.” I said. “That Airdrome Officer’s gonna be on us the minute we land so you gotta be quick. This afternoon I noticed a couple of the Dzus fasteners on the number two engine were loose. Here’s what we’ll do. You get your screwdrivers ready and the minute we taxi in and shut the engines down I want all of you out there unscrewing those fasteners. Lapinski, you get your butt over to the radio shack and pray that code book is still there.” I clicked off the “com’s” feeling sick.

We approached for our landing. No doubt, we had the attention of the Airdrome Officer. We taxied in, got to the flight line and shut down. The crew was busy out on the wing with the engine cowling just about to fall off when the Airdrome Officer drove up as expected.

“Whaddaya doin’ here, Carney?” he whined.

“Well,” I said, “the engine cowling fasteners were coming loose and it looked like it could turn into a dangerous situation, so we came back.”

He looked up at the crew on the wing. They smiled hideously in the pasty light on the ramp. The plates on the engine cowling dangled dangerously. I'm sure it didn't escape the officer that our abort had a bogus stench, but he couldn't countermand that the engine cowling was indeed loose, so he let us off.

“Okay then, get the thing screwed on, top off, and get your butt out of here.” He loaded into the jeep and drove off.

Shortly after, Lapinski returned and happily waved the codebook at me.

I turned away and climbed into the cockpit.

We topped off again with 2750 gallons of gas and departed Fortaleza about midnight. After about an hour we opened our secret orders. Our destination was Djedeida in North Africa with assignment to the 15th Air Force.

Until then, the fame of bomber operations in Europe had been with the 8th Air Force based in England. During the first few months of U.S. involvement in the war, the 8th Air Force had suffered terrible losses to their bombers, sometimes nearly 20 percent on a single mission. Newsreels recounted their heroic efforts. They also had the actors Jimmy Stewart and Clark Gable in their ranks, which didn't hurt their notoriety. We'd heard of the 8th Air Force. I showed our orders to Lt. Flannagan.

“15th Air Force?” he said.

“Yeah.” I said.

“What the hell's that?” He said

I shrugged. Whatever it was, the jinxed crew was on its way to join up.

I turned my attention back to the night sky outside the windows.

“Hey, Flannagan,” I said, “you see that bright light on the horizon?”

“Yeah,” he replied, “I noticed it awhile back. Hasn't moved.”

“No, weird.” I said.

The light was in the same position and of the same intensity five hours later, and just past the point of no return, when McBeth came up to the cockpit.

“Cap'n,” he said, “I checked our fuel. We only have 600 gallons left.”

Lt. Flannagan and I both rubbernecked to the fuel gauge behind me. It read 600 gallons.

“Not good,” I said.

“Damn!” Flannagan said.

McBeth was helpful. He was ready to jettison anything not bolted down and to unbolt and jettison everything else in order to lighten the plane and conserve fuel.

“No good,” I said. “If we started off with 2750 gallons and we’ve gone just a little over halfway, we’re not going to make it so there’s no point in doing anything. I’m on cruise control already. We wont dump any of our load.”

If the crew thought their number was up over the inky Atlantic, they all took it with dignity. After the initial flurry of interest, no one monitored the fuel gauge. I asked the navigator, Lt. Anderson, to check his charts and see if there was an island or anything to explain that stationary, brilliant, orange-ish light on the horizon. We were hundreds of miles from any land. He found nothing. The light stayed with us the entire journey to the coast of West Africa. We never found out what it was. It was a mystery.

We landed in Dakar six hours later with 600 gallons of fuel still remaining.

I flew our crew across the dunes of the Sahara to Marrakech, then to Tunis and finally to our base at Oudna in Djedeida where we trained for several weeks. Our orders sent us to a base in Italy called Giora Del Colle. I didn’t fly with the jinxed crew again.

I don’t know if luck and fate are commodities that can be manipulated. I guess my bravado back in that Idaho office about there being no such thing as a jinx was hypocritical because I believe in luck, so jinxing must be luck’s evil twin. I was lucky. I flew 50 mission including targets in Ploesti, Munich, and Vienna, and lived when I was certain I would surely die.

If the jinxed crew out-ran or coerced fate to any degree is anyone’s guess. As for so many others, fate danced helter-skelter through their young lives and chose her partners by unfathomable criteria. Over Budapest the jinxed crew took a direct hit in the bomb-bay and the plane broke in two. Lt. Flannagan, Sgt. Carr, the co-pilot, and two gunners made it out. SSgt. Lapinski, SSgt McBeth, Lt. Anderson, and two others perished.

Note: The photographs show the Jinxed Crew, Captain Carney, and the Intelligence Officer, Byron Bradford prior to their adventure overseas. The crew compliment for the fatal mission over Budapest included the original co-pilot, Harris Frausel. William Brown, William Floyd and Gerald Ford (not the President) were on that mission instead of Max Close, Earl Ballinger and Roland Baryenbruch.