

The Saga of B-24 '117'

by Herman (Red) Moldenhauer (779th)

"Assigned to the 779th Bomb Squadron at Pocatello, ID about 15 November 1943, I was joined by my brother Ted, who had completed gunnery school at Harlingen, TX. Ted was on Bob Wingfield's crew and was on Big Fat Momma when it collided with Dave Samson's B-24 on the Parma, Italy mission, Tuesday 2 May 1944 (MIA p 11). Colonel Sylvan Hand bailed out thru the top hatch to be taken prisoner. Wingfield with Ted's help, landed the plane safely on the island of Corsica with Samson's right rudder impaled on the nose turret 50 calibers, with Mike Bordak in the turret." (Reference 464th BG newsletter – January 1996). Red continues with THE SAGA OF B-24G #117, BLACK P - PAPA.

On 21 April 1944 our airplanes and flight crews arrived at Gioia de Cole. It was a great sight after our long voyage on SS Jonathan Grout and SS Lyon. Lt. John Jones, my pilot and engineer, Noble "Chick" Shires, was really glad to see me. Little did I know what they meant.

Lt. Jones told me that flying over the airplane was in a "tail down" attitude. The controls were always stiff and heavy. She would not get up "on step." To fly straight and level, the control wheel had to be turned 1/8 of a turn to the right.

After the mid-air collision that Lt. Bob Wingfield and my brother Ted had been involved in, we had to fly practice missions for a couple of days. During this time, John Jones, "Chick," and I decided we would try to remedy the situation.

We got the T.D. out and started reading. The T.D. said both ailerons should have 1 inch "down droop." The right aileron was correct, but the left one had an inch "up droop." We thought we had found the problem. We re-rigged the left aileron, checked the up and down throw (which was even), checked the cable tension (which was within specifications). The trim tab operation was okay. We flew test hop the next day on the practice mission, but it was much worse than before. The controls were so sloppy Lt. Jones could not fly formation. And then he said, "Put it back like it was." This should have been a clue to me, but I went on--fat, dumb, and happy. This was a "G" model, made by North American.

The next day or two, Lt. Jones told me the manifold pressure on all four engines was fluctuating all over the gauges, no steady power and very hard to fly

formation. Dug out the T.D. again. This "G" model had the old oil regulated turbo controls. The oil would congeal at altitude and cause the problem. The T.D. said to drain the engine oil, replace with new oil, and flush the turbo controls. This was an all-night job plus our other maintenance.

The next day the manifold pressure was still the same, fluctuating all over the gauges. That night we replaced #2 and #3 turbo controls, same thing next mission. We then replaced #1 and #4 turbo controls, same thing. Lt. Jones was an old B-24 pilot in Anti-Sub Command, and he never had an airplane like this "dog." We checked with other pilots, read all we could and no solutions. M/Sgt. White had a "G" model too, but no problems.

One mission we had "Anti Personnel Cluster Bombs." When the "dog" landed, upon opening the bomb bay doors prior to starting the APU, out rolled 3 or 4 of the bombs. The Armament men were always parked at the end of the runway for such things. They ran out to recover them before the next airplane landed. They said later, it was by the grace of God that at least one of the bombs didn't explode. One had hit right on the nose fuse. When we parked the airplane, armament men were there checking the bomb shackle releases and arming wires, everything was normal.

Sgt. Freddie Riggs, my assistant, was leaning on right main gear tire talking to the gunners. He said he thought he felt the tire move, but thought that wasn't possible. The tire moved his hand, so he looked and saw a large bulge and getting bigger. He tried to yell at us in the bomb bay, but couldn't, he just ran. When the tire blew it scared the hell out of us and the airplane settled about a foot.

This is a change of pace story. One day our First Sergeant, Earl Gaston, received authorization to fly with Lt. Jones and crew on a mission. He wanted to see just what the flight crews went through. He was in the waist with the gunners. Earl really got "baptized", there was lots of flak and fighters. He said, "My hat is off to all flight crews." Those Germans tried to shoot us down, but we showed them. I believe Earl was the only non-combat man to fly a mission.

One morning, early, about 0300 hrs., Freddie and me were replacing the pilots window where a 4" piece of Flak entered and landed in Lt. Jones lap. I still have the Flak.

We were using the spot light on the Cletrac. All of a sudden there was an awful noise, the right life raft door blew out on the wing, then fell on the steel matting. Now, if you don't think that is enough to scare the devil out of you! We inspected the pull cable, safety wire not broken, couldn't find a thing wrong. After finishing the window, we slid the life raft down the wing, cannibalized a life raft and door from an airplane that was not flying this day. We finished just as the flight crew arrived for their inspection.

On the way over, while in South America, Lt, Jones and crew had a picture of a Black Widow spider painted on left front fuselage. It was flying with guns blazing and dropping a bomb. Some organization said this was hostile, so they had to paint it out. The title, "Widow Maker."

Lt. Jones had been lead crew for some time, but just couldn't fly a good formation with such a "LEMON." Still had flight control problems and fluctuating manifold pressure, no steady power. He was assigned to a good airplane for lead crew.

On 29 May 1944, Lt. Jones and crew was shot down over Atzgersdorf, Austria. What a sad day for them, and for me too. (Still is when, like now I am writing). This was quite a bad blow for me. You do get close to your crew, maybe we were closer than most because of the problems old "117" had, and trying to solve them together. It seemed forever before the Red Cross finally notified us they were POWs. They spent over a year in this "Hell Hole." What a terrible experience.

The following paragraph is a direct quote from Lt. Jones in one of his letters to me, written 12-15-89, Davis, CA. "Old 117 was a strange airplane. In one mission over Northern Italy, the airplane turned to the left and down. I had full right rudder and aileron and it still heeled to the left and down. I could have chopped the top two throttles but I would have hit plane below us. We fell in a slow spin from 18,000 to 3,000 feet. I had taken my hands and feet off the controls, and I knew this was "IT". There was a very bright pink light. It seemed I was in a tunnel walking beside a stream of water. The light was at the end of the tunnel and there was a "Presence" there. There was a definite knowledge that I was separated from my body. There was an abnormal feeling of peace, joy, happiness and contentment. About 3,000 feet the plane righted itself and we came back to base." This is the first I knew of this experience. John said after returning home his wife, Nancy, told him he had an "out of body experience."

[Ed. of the 464th BG newsletter - Although the autopilot was not energized during this "formation" flight, could this have been another case of the Sperry Autopilot creating havoc as it was reported to do by other pilots? Reference 464th BG August 1997 newsletter]

When we received our first bomb group roster, I found John Jones name. I wrote him hoping this was the right Jones, it was. We wrote back and forth for quite some time. John was a Doctor now, and started a free clinic for the young people on drugs and alcohol. He also told me he had lung cancer. I was trying to find a time to go see him, but John died before I was able to go. This has bothered me ever since. The irony of this, John lived in Davis, CA at the time I was stationed at Travis A.F.B., CA, only 40 miles away, life is not fair.

One morning during our preflight inspection we saw fuel leaking out the drain hole in center wing. After checking the underside of both wings, we found fuel stains on right side. After defueling right wing, putting jacks in place, we removed the stress plate. On the stress plate written in red wax pencil, "Condemned Do Not Use". Some rivets were not bucked, some screw holes elongated. Some rivets on wing spars were 2" long, were just bent over. We had our inspector, M/Sgt. Spivey, look at this, he checked to see if there was one available, no luck, so we had to put the same one back on. Of course, the fuel leak came from the last fuel cell to remove. One of the upper corners developed a soft spot. Another 24-hour day for us.

One afternoon the old dog came back with all four bomb bay doors flapping in the breeze, tied shut as good as possible with bomb arming wire. The hydraulically operated doors were slow to open, so the bombardier dropped the bombs through the doors. Now here was another bad job, to get 4 new doors to operate close to what the original ones were. The sheet metal men helped with their metal shears and files, and still took most of the night. We worked on the doors whenever we had time, but they still were not quite right.

Close to the end of flying combat missions for the "old dog", operations needed the airplane to fly flight crews to Rome for rest camp. There were two new pilots that came out to preflight and wanted me to fly as an engineer. Most of us crew chiefs were used to flying. We always flew on test hops to "slow time" a new engine. On a new airplane, we flew when the pilot wanted to know the "stall speed." We checked out new engineers on fuel transfer, and how to parallel generators. I

jumped at the chance to see Rome. The pilot told me to bring my khakis and mess kit.

Before we landed, we flew close to the Coliseum, what a sight that was! After we parked, the pilot told me to meet them at Base Ops, after chow. I hurried up and ate, changed clothes and ran to Base Ops, and waited and waited. They didn't show up. I went back to the airplane, changed clothes to lie in the shade.

After an eternity, I saw them walking toward the airplane. When they got close, the pilot turned to the other and said, "Damn I knew we forgot something." I said, "you sure did, I wonder what." We started engines and were checking them out, all was good, except #1 prop governor wouldn't decrease RPM. They said, "Oh good we can stay in Rome tonight." I said, "Oh no you don't." They said we have one hour to be airborne, because of the mountains we had to circle. I told them to be back on time, we would make it.

I knew there wasn't any supplies available, but the Good Lord provided. There was a B-24 a short distance away with the left main gear collapsed. I grabbed the tools I needed and ran over to #1 engine. There was no way telling if the governor would work, but it looked good. In no time, I was running back to my airplane, of course there was nothing in sight to stand on. Getting the old governor off and on was going to be a chore. I had to sit on prop dome with my head in the engine. Believe it or not, I was able to get the old one off, the "new" one on and run up just as the pilots walked up, and it worked like a new one. I gave them the OK sign, come aboard. Kept #1 and #3 engines running, as soon as they were aboard, I started #4 and #2 engines. They didn't look very happy, but I was.

We started to taxi out to the runway, I noticed the co-pilot's right arm close to the mag switches. I looked closer and he had two mag switches on right instead of both, trying to foul out the spark plugs. I told him in no uncertain terms to put the switches back to both. The engines checked out fine, but the engine instruments quit working. One of them had turned the inverter switch off, I put the switch on and said the instruments were OK. By this time my red headed temper took over. I told them this would be reported and don't ever come back to my airplane. We had a good flight back to the base, except they got lost. The tower shot a flare, it was back of us. Soon we were parked on the matting.

I walked to the Engineering Office to call the fuel truck, does anyone remember "Crash Parrish"? He was from Georgia and was very "Goosey". He was the very best driver ever, and would always be there when you needed to top off your fuel tanks in the morning. Crash helped me this night. He earned his name by crashing a light plane in the tree tops in Georgia. I talked to Lt. Marsh, our Engineering Officer, told him what happened, he said he would talk to the Ops. Officer. Lt. Marsh said he appreciated my efforts getting the airplane back, because it was flying a mission the next day. By the time we fueled and pulled our inspection, it was another long day.

One day we had a brand new "J" model sitting on the hardstand with heated wings and a lot more goodies. It sat there a couple or three days and everyone wondered who would be the lucky guy to crew it. One morning after the airplanes took off on another mission Lt. Marsh called us all together. He had decided who would crew the new "J" model, and it was ME!

From the November 1999 issue of the 464th Bomb Group Newsletter.
Published with the permission of Tony Schneider, Sec./NL Ed. (464th, 776th)