

Crash landing at Seething

Oak Mackey (392nd Bomb Group)

The date was January 10 1945, a bad day for the Jack Clarke crew at the 392nd Bomb Group of the Second Air Division of the Eighth Air Force. I, Oak Mackey was the Co-Pilot, Brad Eaton, Navigator, Bob Lowe, Bombardier, E.C. Brunette, Engineer, J.T. Brown, Radio Operator, Bob Heilman, Nose Gunner, George Peer and Jack Heckman, Waist Gunners and Kevin Killea, Tail Gunner, perhaps the best crew in the 8th Air Force.

We were awakened at 02:00 am for briefing at 04:30 am. The target was Dasberg in the Bastogne area to support our ground troops there. The weather was absolutely atrocious; through the night there had been a combination of freezing rain, sleet, snow showers and fog. The runways and taxiways were covered with a sheet of slippery ice. At briefing we learned our usual B-24 was not available and we were assigned the squadron spare. We were a deputy lead crew and we would be flying off the right wing of the lead plane of the leading squadron. Upon reaching our assigned airplane we found it had not been warmed up, the engines were cold and very difficult to start; only after much cranking, priming and cussing were we able to get them running.

By now most of the entire Group had departed, we made our take-off, climbed through the overcast to on top of the clouds and had the rest of the Group in sight. At this time the #3 engine propeller ran away probably because of congealed oil trying to pass through the propeller governor. This was a serious problem because of the engine over-speed the engine might turn to junk, or the propeller might come off the engine and pass through the fuselage or hit the other engine on that side. Jack told me to shutdown the engine and feather the propeller. I reduced power to the engine and pushed the feathering button. It immediately popped out again for it is its own circuit breaker. Brunette was sitting between Jack and I on the cockpit jump seat, as all good engineers should. He pushed the feathering button in and held it there which caused the secondary circuit breaker to pop open, which he immediately held down with his other hand; a risky procedure as it could cause the feathering oil pump motor or associated wiring to catch fire.

Oh so slowly the prop blades turned to the feathered position. With one engine out and a loaded airplane there is no way we can stay with the Group. We are now in the vicinity of Great Yarmouth so we flew out over the North Sea and dumped our bombs. We left the arming safety wires in place so the bombs could not explode.

As we turned to go back to our base, the #2 propeller ran away compounding our numerous problems. We got the engine shutdown and propeller feathered with less trouble than we had with #3. A B-24 cannot maintain airspeed and altitude with two engines out and full fuel tanks and we gave careful consideration to bailing out but decided to stay with the airplane for a while and conserve altitude as best as we could.

The weather at Wendling had not improved but we had little choice but to try to return there. We are now about due south of Norwich ten miles or so when we spotted an airport through a hole in the clouds, our first good luck of the day. We descend through the hole and have gone through the before landing check-lists, lowered flaps to the landing position, lowered the landing gear and are turning to line up with a runway from west of the airport when the thick bullet resistant windshields and side windows are iced up. We cannot pull up and go around with gear and flaps down; we are committed to landing.

Jack and I cannot see through iced up windshields, we must continue our descent to keep airspeed above stalling. Through a small clear place on my side window I see men running at full speed. I also see we are about to touchdown. I assumed those men were running from a building and we are lined up to hit it. Without any thought and perhaps with instinct, I pushed full left rudder, which caused the airplane to slew around to the left, and we touched down in a side-ways attitude. The landing gear snapped off, the two outside engine propellers broke off and went cartwheeling across the airport. We slid sideways on the fuselage for a long way on the ice and snow – it seemed like forever. The fuselage was broken behind the cockpit area and the nose tilted up which enlarged the window to my right a bit so that I was able to go through it with my back-pack parachute on, likewise Jack went out through the left cockpit window. I ran along the right side of the airplane, stopped at the waist window to look in to see if everyone was out, continued around the tail and there they were, all nine of them and nobody had a scratch.

We had landed at Seething, the home of the 448th Bomb Group and we had missed the control tower by only 100 feet or so. An ambulance pulled up in a few minutes and took us to the base hospital where the doctor looked us over to be certain there were no injuries. For medicinal purposes, someone brought in a bottle of 100 proof rye whiskey. We took our medicine like real men. Also, someone called our base at Wendling; a truck would come for us in an hour or so. So ended a bad day for the Clarke crew. It could have been much worse!

There is a wonderful sequel to this story. Fast-forward your mind to May 1997. The Second Air Division Association is having their annual Convention in Orange County, California and I have been elected President. Also there is someone selling books at a table in the lobby of the hotel and my wife Maxine has bought me a copy of Steve Snelling's book 'Over Here'. Steve's book is about the relationships between the Yank soldiers and the British people, about the friendships that endure to this day, about the mutual respect, about the memories of those days in 1942 through 1945. Steve started his writing career as a reporter for the Eastern Daily Press in Norwich in 1974 and he is still employed there. A chapter in his book is called "The Tragedies of War" and is mainly about B-24s, which have crashed for various reasons, and there are pictures and stories of each.

Under the picture on the top of page 125 there is no story, the notation there says "Unhappy landing - a salvage team clamber over a B-24 at Seething which has come to grief in a sea of mud". Well, it may have been a sea of mud when salvage crew arrived to remove the airplane but it was all ice and snow when the Jack Clarke crew left it there on January 10 1945. When I got time I wrote Steve a letter and related to him the story of how that 392nd BG B-24 happened to crash at Seething, and in due time he answered and thanked me for the information and told me how he had received that picture from Mrs Patricia Everson. The old control tower at Seething had recently been renovated and restored to like new condition and was now a Memorial to those 448th men who had lost their lives while serving there. It was open to the public on the first Sunday of each month and Mrs Everson was the leading volunteer worker there.

I wrote to Mrs Everson to enquire if she had more pictures of this B-24, and she replied she did and offered to mail me copies. By this time sometime in June I had received a letter from Mr Ted Inman the Director of the Duxford Air Museum, which invited me to attend Opening Ceremonies of the new American Air Museum building at Duxford on August 1, 1997. Queen Elizabeth and other members of the Royal Family would be there. Naturally I eagerly accepted his invitation and also determined to go to Seething. I wrote to Mrs Everson to tell her I would be at Seething on August 3 and could get the pictures then.

Maxine and I did indeed attend the ceremonies at Duxford on August 1 1997 and had a most wonderful time. After Queen Elizabeth concluded her speech she mingled with the crowd in front of the speakers platform and she spoke to Maxine as she did to many others. Also, I had the opportunity to speak with Prince Phillip and shake his hand inside the new American museum which houses 21 American airplanes dating from WWI to the present time, including a Boeing B-52. Well, this was a most momentous day and is a story alone, but has nothing to do with the crash at Seething in 1945.

Next morning, Raymond and Marjorie Mackertich collected us at our hotel in Cambridge and drove us to their home in East Dereham, which is not far from the old 392nd BG airfield. We had stayed in their home on previous trips to England and we are very comfortable there, they are most gracious hosts. Next day was Sunday and the new Control Tower Museum at Seething was open and the Mackertich's drove Maxine and I there where the first person we met was Mrs Patricia Everson. She gave us an exclusive guided tour of the Museum; the amount of artefacts, memorabilia and photographs is really astounding. She gave me more pictures of the B-24 left by the Jack Clarke crew on January 10 1945. I was able to walk out to the very spot and look around. All the buildings of 1945 are gone now, only the control tower remains; the memories come flooding back of that desperate day of so long ago. The Seething Airport is still active and Mr Bob Marjoram had his restored Piper Cub on display by the control tower. It was painted in camouflage stripes, as it would have been during WWII when Piper Cubs were used as artillery spotters. Mrs Everson asked Bob to give me a ride around the airport, which he did, for he was a very generous man. We flew

around for thirty minutes or so, including landings from west to east so I could view the airport, which I could not see when we landed there in 1945. Also, I was able to take aerial photos of the area and the airport and the control tower to send to Jack Clarke and Brad Eaton, the only other members of the crew still alive in 1997.

A remarkable day, which occurred only because Maxine bought a copy of "Over Here" by Steve Snelling. What a coincidence, life takes curious turns, don't it.