

Finishing the mission

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The B-24 was in a death spiral. Yet they didn't bail out. Was it panic, inexperience or sheer gravitational force that kept them strapped in their seats?

And it dawned on 2nd Lt. Stu Ruch, 'We're all goners.' He later wrote home to his parents that 'I prayed like I never prayed before.' That was when the 19-year-old bombardier had a vision of his family back home in Springfield. It was the only comforting moment of the mission. They took 75 hits that day from the Japanese anti-aircraft batteries.

Two years earlier, Stu had been sitting in his central Illinois high school. He'd always wanted to join the Army Air Forces, but his parents wouldn't let him enlist until he graduated.

And here he was on his second mission — complete 40, and you were on your way back to the United States. But now it seemed that life for him and his nine fellow crewmen could be at an end.

A willingness to place one's life at risk by carrying out the assigned mission is the essence of military life. It's that commitment to duty with all its consequences that we honor on Memorial Day.

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The mission on April 29, 1945, was Marcus Island, located 925 miles from their base in Guam. It was a difficult target. The island was small and almost perfectly shaped in a one-mile equilateral triangle. Anti-aircraft batteries were located at each point to protect this Japanese submarine refueling base.

The entire 431st Bomb Squadron consisting of a dozen B-24s was out to finish off this island once and for all. At least, that was the game plan. But Japanese soldiers were never easily defeated, and when they were, Americans paid a great price in life and limb.

In the tactics of war, timing is everything. Stay too long over the target — in this case, a minute — and you were bound to be hit. In war, something always goes awry. And so it did that day for the pilot, Lt. Jim Shaw, and his crew. The Japanese were not amateur gunners. One bombing run over them was always risky, a second would be outright dangerous, and a third? Well, by then they would have had you in their crosshairs.

Courage is not the absence of fear; it is doing what ought to be done despite the fear. And fear is best overcome by focusing on the task at hand.

Stu had his target — an anti-aircraft battery — locked into his sights as enemy flak was bursting below them. But only one bomb fell. The bomb bay doors were jammed. Lt. Shaw quickly peeled the B-24 off the target and out of enemy gun range.

The engineer leaped into the bay to fix the problem. Empty .50-caliber cartridges had fallen into it and prevented the corrugated doors from being fully opened. The engineer cleaned some of them out. So they tried a second run.

Sitting in the Plexiglas nose of the B-24, Stu locked his sights on the target. Nothing. So he pulled with all his might on the emergency salvo handle. Again, nothing. And then the flak came.

Wham!

They were hit just behind the bomb bay and in the tail. Lt. Shaw made another quick exit to safety.

But their mission was not completed. The target was there, they were there, the bombs were still in the bay and they were sent to do a job.

This time, the engineer feverishly cleaned out all the cartridges and reported to Stu that the doors were fixed. Over the intercom, Stu told Lt. Shaw: 'No use losing this mission; we can get the bombs off. So let's go over that (expletive) island again.'

'OK, boy,' responded Shaw.

The third time was not a charm. The Japanese saw them circling for another attack; by then, they had pinpointed their exact altitude and air speed. The rest of the squadron already had begun their return to Guam. The odds were now 15 Japanese batteries to one B-24.

A 30-second nightmare was about to begin.

Stu locked in on the target. 'I could see every gun on the island firing at us. No sooner had the bombs been released than all hell broke loose,' he said.

The plane shuddered. They were hit again just behind the bomb bay. Oxygen tanks exploded. One crew member was burned putting out the fire, another was wounded from the flak.

The No. 4 engine was in flames, the tail was hit a second time, and flak took out the elevation control cables and severed the hydraulic lines. Like buckshot through newspaper, flak was zipping through the plane's cockpit and Stu's picture-window home in the plane's nose. A piece pierced Lt. Shaw's flak-jacket, but it miraculously lodged in the top of a canteen inside his vest.

Yet they had done what they had been sent to do. Jim quickly hit the feathering switch to extinguished the engine on fire. The six-hour flight to Guam could begin.

Away from the enemy's fire, the engineer went to work on the hydraulic lines, a necessary fix if they were to make it back alive. He cleverly crafted a repair out of wire and used hose. 'In doing that,' Stu said, 'he saved the lives of the whole crew.' At last, all seemed well.

Then, suddenly, their third engine stopped. Two engines on the right wing were now shut down. That's when the B-24 began its downward spiral from 10,000 feet above the Pacific Ocean.

A drop to below 5000 feet didn't take long. 'Seconds,' Stu said, 'can seem like an eternity.' And so can the reactions of an inexperienced crew under stress.

It finally dawned on the engineer that the engine had suffered no flak damage; it had simply run out of gas. He quickly turned a lever transferring gasoline from one of the left wing engines to the third. To everyone's relief, it started up.

For their courage, determination, and faithfulness to duty, the entire crew received the Distinguished Flying Cross. But none of them saw themselves as heroes. They were just doing their duty to country like everyone else.

Stu, however, wrote in a letter to his parents: 'They left one name off the crew; and his name was God.'

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This is just one of thousands of war stories. But a single virtue unites them all: honor. American men and women honor the oath they have taken to follow orders and even risk their lives in fulfilling the mission assigned to them. This is what makes the American military the greatest force in the world.

Most make it back home, like Stu Ruch and his fellow crew members. Stu and his wife, Corinne, live in Pekin. Next to his desk hangs the Distinguished Flying Cross as a reminder of the men he served with. He, Jim Shaw and two other crew members will celebrate this Memorial Day. The others rest in eternal peace.

Some 416,800 from World War II and thousands more from America's successive wars never made it back.

Today we remember those who died in service to our nation, but also those who served or are now serving. If you can't make it to a cemetery or Memorial Day event, then take a minute with your family to remember them in the National Memorial Remembrance at 3 p.m. The theme is 'One Nation, One Moment.'

And when you see someone in uniform, tell them, "Thank you for your service to our nation."

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