

comrade. Jerking the quick-release tabs on his flak suit, Bud turned, grabbed his parachute, and started forward, clipping it on as he went. At that moment he was distracted by a piece of the radio-room door whipped off in the slipstream, which was bouncing along the fuselage towards him.

When he looked up, Ed had fallen from the table and, with increasing horror, Bud realized that his crewmate had been sucked through a gaping hole in the fuselage. Ball gunner Bernard L. Spragg watched, sickened and helpless, as Ed's body tumbled past his turret. Falling earthwards, the figure diminished until it was lost from view. Bud, peering into the radio-room, gaped at a hole 'a jeep could be driven through,' and realized the B-17 might break in two at any moment. Bud nervously called Lt Gibbons, and his report drew shocked disbelief from the pilot, who ordered engineer Ira Arnold aft to give an unexaggerated account. Bombs were jettisoned to ease airframe stress, but in his progress over the catwalk Ira discovered more troubles. One of the 500 Ib bombs had jammed in its shackles. This was frightening enough, but Ira's face showed real terror when he reached what was left of the radio room, where loose aluminum shrieked in the slipstream. Handing control to co-pilot Lt Robert Dykeman, John Gibbons came to see for himself, and Bud saw the pilot's eyes widen with disbelief.

To add to the mounting confusion, it was realized that several parachutes had been lost or damaged, and Ira's panic increased when he realized that his was missing. To placate his frightened crewman, John Gibbons courageously unclipped his

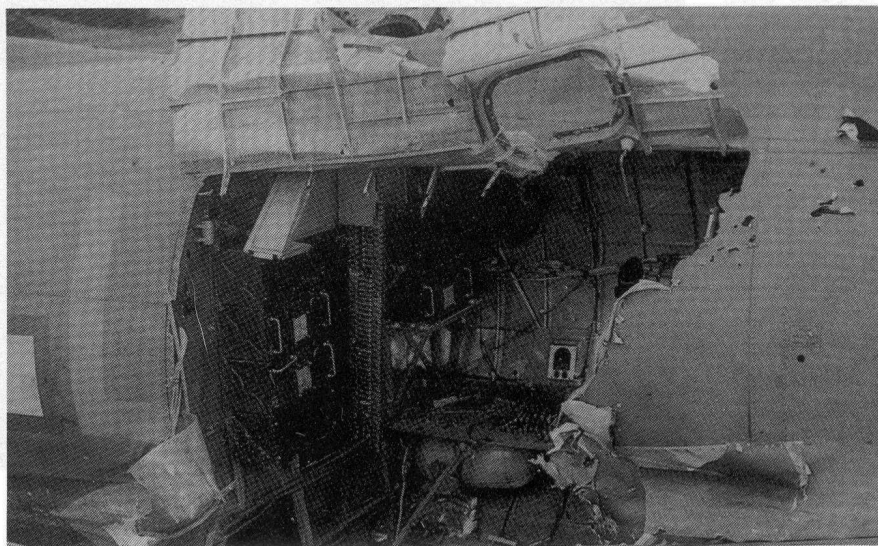
own parachute and passed it to the engineer before returning to the cockpit.

As armorer, it should have been Bud's task to deal with the hang-up, but access across the radio-room was impossible. Bud tried explaining to Ira how he could trigger the release mechanism manually using a screwdriver, but the badly-shaken engineer failed to comprehend. Finally, the bombardier, Sterling Blakeman, encouraged and helped Ira to release the bomb while Miss Irish circled gently over the Channel. Stretching from the narrow catwalk over a wind-screaming abyss demanded courage, and both men were exhausted when the bomb tumbled clear. While they struggled, further misfortune struck when one of the damaged parachutes opened and a stream of silk erupted through the gashed fuselage, threat-

ening to wrench off the weakened tail section. Leaning from the right waist window, Bernie Spragg caught and deflated the writhing nylon by holding it against the fuselage. The structural integrity of their B-17 was now so precarious that Gibbons abandoned thoughts of Thorpe Abbotts and searched for the nearest airfield. Darkness was subduing the landscape when they spotted the 358th Fighter-Group base at Raydon, in Suffolk. The pilot knew that their lives depended on the sweetest of touchdowns: a heavy landing might break the bomber in half with disastrous consequences.

Easing into the final approach, John called for gear down and welcomed the comforting green from the

instrument panel as they shed height. Once before, on a Stateside training flight, John had landed a B-17 on one main wheel, and his crew trusted him. However, no one could anticipate what would happen when the bomber's damaged spine suffered landing stresses. Gently, gently, John eased off the final inches and *Miss Irish* came softly in to land. Tires touched tarmac in gentle puffs of rubber and the bomber settled, her crew scarcely believing they were down as it rolled to a standstill. Within moments the battered B-17 became surrounded by admiring airmen as her crew spilled gratefully on to terra firma. Soon, two bottles of Scotch appeared as gifts to celebrate their amazing arrival. Nine weary survivors appreciated something strong to ease the tension of their so-called 'milk-run'.



Two views (above left and below right) of the radio compartment of "Miss Irish."