

Some Commentary on "What's Up Doc,"

by T/Sgt Robert E Self, Engineer-gunner

In Vol. #12 of the Torretta Flyer that you just sent to me, on page 30 in the article "What's Up Doc." The continuation of the story by M/Sgt Harold C. Jacobs 825th Squadron, I take issue with his viewpoint as I was the engineer on the morning of Dec. 10, 1944 on that very airplane that attempted to take off normally.

I was the engineer on the Howard Steinberg crew and we drew # 34 "What's Up Doc" for what was to be an all out maximum effort mission. Anything that could get in the air that day was supposed to fly. When we got to the pad of # 34, the plane was not ready to fly. They were still working on it. The bombs had not been loaded, the guns had not been put in the turrets nor any ammo laid out along with the guns, They loaded the bombs and just tossed the guns and ammo into the plane and told us to install and load after we were airborne.

He states in his article that a new crew was flying that day. He tries to lay the blame for the engines catching fire on inexperience of a new crew. Jacobs, what is your idea of a new crew? I don't think he could have any reason to call a crew that was taking off on their 25th mission a new crew. We knew about engines, mixtures etc. His statements were made by a Saturday armchair quarterback. He was not in the plane and any thoughts of his were just that, thoughts. Before he made the statements and wrote the article that he did as if he were the last word on what happened, he should have checked his facts. I don't remember ever having been contacted by him.

As we were in line waiting to take off, the pilot said to the co-pilot and myself that "This plane was born to groundloop" You see, we had flown this plane other times, one being on August 22, 1944 to Vienna, Austria. That day we had engine trouble and lost #2 as we approached Austria. We could not keep up with the formation, being heavily loaded and losing altitude. It was discussed among the crew and we had the choice of turning back or going on and picking up the formation as they came off the target.

The group was to come in from the north east over the target headed home. When the formation left us, we were hit by Me 109s and FW 190s. There were about 15 of them and they gave us a going over but we got two and the fighter escort that came to our rescue took out many more of them. It is documented that a 109 came out of the sun and I along with our navigator looked him directly in the face as he cut out the radio antenna with his wing. One of them hit us on the right wing just behind the #3 engine and left a hole about a foot across. One of the 20mm shells went into the #2 engine from the rear.

We got to the target and the formation was not in sight, as they were to bomb from 26,000 ft. We were at this time flying at only 13,000 feet. The pilot told the bombardier to line up on the target as we were going in. With one engine dead we could not hold a perfectly straight heading and I think this is what saved us

from being hit by flak or fighters.

They threw everything but the kitchen sink at us and as we pulled away from the target, we could see at high altitude the group getting ready to bomb. They passed us up and beat us home. For some reason that only the good Lord knows, the fighters did not attack us again. We finally landed at home base and the plane was filled with unexploded 20mm in the gas tanks. This plane was on the ground in repair for over 6 weeks, Now back to the Dec 10 crash. We had gotten about 50-75 feet off the ground when one of the crew came from the waist to tell me the engine was on fire. I went back to the waist to see it and the fire was extended past the tail. I got it cut off and feathered and we were just maintaining an altitude of about 300 to 400 feet. #3 caught fire so we had no choice but to start #2 back. Got #3 put out and in a short time #2 was back on fire so we cut out #2 and started #3 back.

We were told we could not land until all aircraft were off the runway for the mission. We decided we were going to land anyway and we started on the downwind leg and I was firing flares, any flare I could put in the pistol. In fact I shot the entire contents of the flare kit. We were about half way down the downwind leg and still about 300 ft. and flying on three engines with a full load of fuel and loaded with booby trap 500 pounders. At this point the three running engines quit. I was standing between the pilot and co-pilot as usual on landing to call air speed. When the engines quit, the pilot shoved the nose straight down and then he and the co-pilot pulled the control straight back and we were lucky in that the field had just been plowed and it had been raining. We hit and one wheel sheared off and the plane turned and went down the field backwards, filling the rear compartment with mud and there were bombs laying around the plane with broken off fuses. Only the navigator got hurt, his foot was cut when the strut of the nose wheel broke back and landed on his foot. He was standing on the catwalk directly under the top turret, which did not fall, for whatever reason. The plane was finally blown up where it lay after sufficient time to give the bombs a chance to explode if they were going to. *See photo page 34.*

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Engineer
Howard Steinberg Crew

Editor's Note:

The B-24 was built in such great haste that not enough engineering man hours were devoted to many of its systems, including some gross errors in the fuel transfer design. Also fuel burn out could not be estimated with any accuracy unless the engineer plotted a cruise control chart.