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An Atlantic Odyssey

By Philip L. Swift

Part 3

Blowing in the Wind

But that wasn't enough. When the wind warning sign went up someone was supposed to go out and sit in the airplane. So two of us drew that duty. We went to our B17—two times, I think—and while the 70 mile-an-hour gale whistled we sat there in the cold aluminum cylinder wondering what we might do if the plane escaped its tethers and blew away. As I recall, we were supposed to radio someone if this happened. But it didn't happen and we escaped the ignominy of crawling out of our wrecked aircraft. I am still wondering about what value we would have offered, caroming about inside a four-engine bomber cartwheeling across an airfield in the grasp of a 70 mile-an-hour gale.

The war news was good and bad. The Allies had the German army grudgingly retreating toward the east but the Wehrmacht and the Waffen SS suddenly launched a fierce attack in the Ardennes and the Battle of the Bulge was underway. Another piece of news on the radio told us that band leader Major Glenn Miller, on a flight across the channel from England to France, was missing and presumed lost. Miller, a legend of the Big Band era, was never found. The English channel had swallowed another victim.

Another Takeoff Attempt

After several days of work by the technician, the authorities said our airplane was ready to go, cables taut, controls precise. It was early in the morning when we again prepared for takeoff. Engines started, we taxied to the runway, ran the roaring Wright radials through their tests and were cleared for takeoff to Prestwick, Scotland. Again, I was sitting of the floor of the radio room as we started the roll down the runway. Dean Sullivan was sitting in his chair to my right. I looked up at him and he crossed his fingers. He seemed to have some doubts about it all.

We were at full throttle, turbo-superchargers pumping 49 inches of manifold pressure for the cylinders to inhale. The plane moved toward takeoff speed—70, 80, 90—it began to bounce it little seeking to free itself from the ground. Then suddenly, as before, the engines stopped. Power was abruptly pulled off and brakes applied. But this time the brakes didn't help, we were on ice and we were near the end of the runway.

From my position on the floor I couldn't see out. I knew what was happening through other senses but not from sight. So when the engines stopped I thought the braking would not be a

problem and we would stop before reaching the end of the runway. I sat there waiting, my back to the door into the bomb bay. I first knew we had a problem, a big one, when we ran off the pavement and into the rocks at the end. I couldn't see this, of course, but when the plane began pitching and rolling about violently and the noise of strained and tortured aluminum became deafening it was apparent that we were totally out of control and crashing across the rock-strewn ground.

A Very Short Flight

Then after four or five seconds of this violent and wild careening about it was all over. All was smooth and serene. I thought: "Well, that wasn't so bad." I didn't know that we were at that time airbourne. We were flying through the air. It was a very, very short flight.

The scene was this: As are nearly all runways, this one was built on what engineers call a fill. Dirt and rocks are pushed into an area to create a level plane on which to place the pavement. This usually means, and particularly on rough and hilly ground, that there is a substantial dropoff at the end of the runway. Iceland has a rough, lava-strewn landscape, a mass of volcanic rock. At the end of this runway there was an abrupt drop of thirty to forty feet to the rocks below and it was through this airspace we were traveling when I, for two or three seconds, thought everything was okay, that we had stopped.

Then we hit. It was a wild ride, albeit a short one, as we skidded across those rocks. The plane didn't go far but when it stopped it was a total wreck. Why it didn't disintegrate into a huge fireball I don't know. The landing gear was torn away and pushed into the fuel tanks. One hundred octane gasoline was all over the ground. The plane's spine was broken at the waist, the hot engines, ripped from their mounts, drooped to the ground.

From the position where I sat I looked toward the rear into the waist. The ball turret, which protruded underneath the fuselage, was about eight feet in front of me. It hung from the top of the fuselage. The turret was electrically controlled and had a main power cable going down the column from which it was suspended. When we hit the ground the landing gear collapsed allowing the belly to crash against the rocks erasing the ball turret, pushing its supporting column through the top of the fuselage. When that happened every-thing shorted out and the scene in front of me was like a huge fireworks display.

There were five of us in that part of the airplane and four up front. Between us was the bomb bay, which had a narrow catwalk that might slow one down a little. But the group in front lost little time in traversing the bomb bay. They thought they would have to scramble over us folks in the back on their way out. They said later that, as they charged through the door out of the bomb bay, expecting some hindrance from the crew in the back, there was no one in sight. We had left in record speed.

There are three hatches in a B17, one near the nose just behind and below the flight deck, a small one under the stabilizer a little forward of the tail gunner's position and a larger one in the waist. After skidding across the rocks two of those were wiped out, so the waist hatch was our only exit.

Another Character in the Drama

Emerging through that hatch we saw that there was a peripheral figure involved in our dramatic arrival. About 30 yards away, just to the side of the path we had traveled, was a small building like a house trailer. It held radio navigation equipment and contained a gentleman who had the whitest face with the widest eyes I had or have ever seen. Not used to having a B17 careening across his rocky patch he was virtually speechless when we raced over there.

The plane must have made a deafeningly fearsome noise as it went by his front door and when he got his wits back he said it did. I told him, "You should have been inside the thing." The noise, however, would have been much louder had spark touched gasoline.

The four from up forward arrived on our heels at the radio shack and we stood for a moment looking at each other and back at the airplane. The interior of the shack was brightly lighted but it was pitch dark outside. It took only seconds for it to strike me, and I think maybe Burgess, Bodenhamer and Miller all saw it at that same time. There was our crumpled bomber lying dead on the rocks in the Icelandic blackness. And the lights were on! Those little blue lights on the tail and the top of the fuselage gleamed as if nothing had happened for they were getting their full power. The main switch had not been thrown.

It is a basic doctrine in flying that in case of any accident the main switch is to be turned off. This shuts down all power and prevents fire from electrical sparks. If the main had been off when we hit the ground all the fireworks in the waist wouldn't have occurred. But there had been no chance to throw the switch before the ball turret struck.

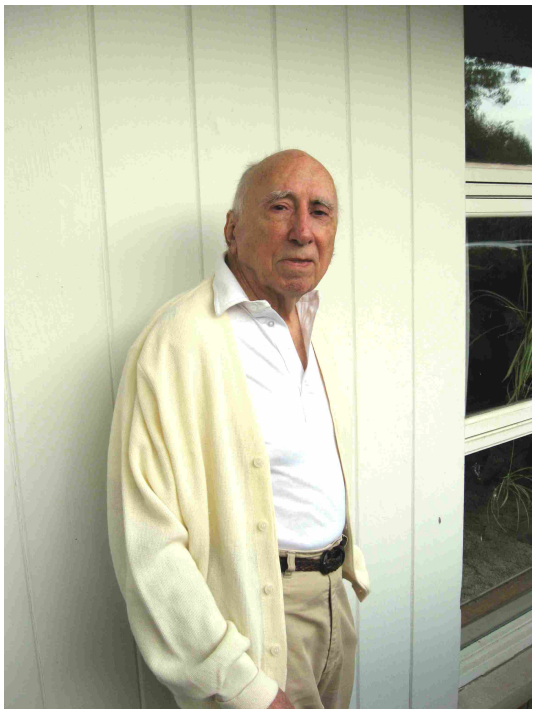
We knew a crowd from flight operations would be on the way in a hurry. Fire trucks, ambulances, operations officers were sure to arrive soon. Burgess, against my judgment, although I remember saying nothing one way or another, determined to go back into the plane and turn off the switch. Miller volunteered to go with him and the two entered the waist hatch, climbed through the length of the plane to the flight deck and shut off the power. In my view at the time it was a risky move and I still believe it was. A thrown switch makes a spark.

Fun Journey Ends

And so we finished three-quarters of our journey, with a few cuts and bruises but alive. We had lost our airplane and were forced to turn to the Air Transport Command for a ride on to Prestwick. That wasn't to come for another two weeks so we settled in, orphans in Iceland, the entire crew, this time more democratically housed, in a quonset hut. We had started our trip in 1944, it was

now 1945. The day came when we boarded a freight-loaded C54, took off and landed in Scotland, our "fun" journey over.

The crew was assigned to the 306th Bombardment Group near Bedford, England, and many more perilous times were ahead. But that is another story.



The only injury Phil Swift suffered was accidental. After a mission, 50 calibre machine guns are removed from the bomber and stored in a special tent. He once carried a heavy tail gun which unknown, still had a live bullet in the chamber, and it fired through his leg. He was hospitalized for five weeks before he was allowed to return to flight duty.

On his return to Kentucky, he became the State Commissioner of Aeronautics, a post he held for eight years. He became interested in state politics and became Campaign Manager for Dee Huddleston, who was elected as a U. S. Senator. He moved to Washington, D.C. and became Huddleston's Chief of Staff and served as his chief administrative assistant until his retirement.

Phil lives a quiet, contemplative life in a very quiet neighborhood in Frankfort. He is an avid reader of mind challenging books, and is a lover of fine music, which he plays constantly. I have urged him to write memoirs, a suggestion he resists, though his daughter also urges him to do.

I am delighted to know Phillip L. Swift as a new friend.

Some Brief Thoughts on Ken Burns' *The War*

Lee Hawes wrote me recently to ask me to write something about my reaction to Ken Burns' monumental documentary shown on PBS. I refused, wrongly, because I had so many mixed emotions about the story Burns told so eloquently. My main thoughts were on the realization that our government kept so much of what we were doing militarily as strict secrets. I believed the propaganda that we were fed constantly. When I did an informal interview with Phil Swift, I asked him what he thought of it and he said it was exactly as he remembered it. The accounts were true, however terrible. I was ten years old when Pearl Harbor was attacked, and like most citizens, followed the progress of the war only in outline. I participated in scrap metal drives, and experienced the inevitable rationing of gasoline and tires and food. But I had no idea of the intensity of the savage conflict in both Europe and in the Pacific.

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