

Whippoorwill E-Comment

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An Atlantic Odyssey

By Philip L. Swift

Part 2

Oil Was Thick as Grease

It seemed to me that our problem was in the number of heaters we could use. We had four engines and one heater. We would turn the heat into an engine and warm it, take off the canvas sleeve and put it on another engine, not an instant process, and heat that one. By the time we got to the fourth engine the first one or two were as cold as ever. It was a losing proposition.

After going through this heating procedure Burgess and Bodenhamer climbed into the cockpit and tried to start the engines. They would hardly turn over, the oil in them as thick as grease. They just wouldn't fire and following several more attempts at warming them we gave up for the night after facing that painful wind for three hours.

The next night we were back. Same story except for a small success. We did get one started. You cannot fly to Iceland on one engine, though, so we went back to our frigid barracks.

I'm not sure why the third night was different. It certainly didn't seem any warmer. Maybe we had learned something. Maybe we kept the heaters on longer. Maybe Burgess and Bodenhamer had learned to prime a little more fuel into the cylinders. Whatever it was allowed the engines to start. They

groaned and complained, they started without enthusiasm but they were running. A victory and our hearts were warmed. We sat there on the ramp with all four turning over, making some heat, the pilots waiting for instruments to indicate that all was well inside the churning crankcases, that cylinder head temperatures were coming up to green.

But the cold would not be denied. After taxiing out we taxied back in and took our old familiar place on the ramp. The oil was so cold and congealed the pressure would not go down to an acceptable level. We could not, with the oil pressure the gauges were showing, run the engines to full throttle for takeoff. It was back to the barracks after a night of near success, but ultimate failure.



On the fourth night we had to go through it all again. This night we won, if winning is achieving the ability to fly

out into the black night over the stormy North Atlantic feeling our way down a faint signal from a radio beacon toward the tip of Greenland and on to Iceland 1,500 miles away.

A Long Christmas Flight

This night was Christmas Eve, 1944. I and the others had little time to think about Christmas while we crawled over that frozen airplane in the cutting wind. On this night we “borrowed” a couple of extra pre-heaters. We went through the same motions we had been through the previous night and this time the engines started. Perhaps Burgess took a little longer, giving the heat a chance to build. But the oil pressure went down and we were able to lift the big bird into the night and turn east.

It was at about midnight, the time we took off. Nothing much for me to do for the next 10 hours. Dembowski had wanted me to help him navigate but we were following a radio beacon and Joe didn’t really have much to do, either. We climbed to 10,000 feet and set our course on the low frequency beacon.

I thought about what I was doing just the year before and the year before that. The previous Christmas Eve I had walked guard duty in a gentle snow at Montana State University where I was an aviation cadet. The Air Force had sent me there to learn some meteorology and physics and navigation and taught me to fly an airplane. I was to be a pilot, but the Air Force determined that there were far too many pilots being trained, and they washed out ten thousand. So I became a tail gunner. The year before that I was a senior in high school in Lawrenceburg, Kentucky. Here, I was a long way from Lawrenceburg. What-

ever the measure, it was a long, long way from Lawrenceburg.

We wore on through the night. The cold turbulent Atlantic below, where death would come in 10 minutes should one be so unfortunate as to drop into it, really held no terror for me. I was young and, like most of the young, thought I would never die. Probably the others felt the same. Maybe not Burgess. He was flying the plane and was uncertain of his skills. Burgess, weighed with responsibility, had had little training for this sort of thing. To say that his instrument training was marginal is an under-statement. He told me 55 years later that when we crossed the Atlantic he could barely fly by instruments. When we gathered in El Paso Burgess was just out of flight school and B17 transition, had probably only 200 hours of flying time. That was not unusual. Most of the pilots were marginally prepared. Burgess loved flying, though. He never gave it up and after the war pursued his craft, eventually becoming an airline captain. But today an airline looking at a pilot with the experience and training which Burgess had in 1944 would hardly let him peer into a cockpit, much less send him off across the ocean in charge of a new airplane.

Bob Bodenhamer, sitting at the controls next to Burgess, was even greener. He hadn’t been sent through B17 transition. He had just gotten out of flight school.

Not all the planes which left Goose Bay that night made it to Iceland. Some went down in the wine dark sea, their crews never to be heard from again. But we made it to the island, although it was touch and go when we got there, fuel tanks nearly empty. We were at about 10,000 feet when land was seen below through a hole in the overcast. It was

Iceland, of course. There isn't any other land around there.

When we made contact with Keflavik approach control we were advised that conditions at the field made landing questionable, this after we had let down from 10,000 feet to about 2,000. The erratic weather was bringing periodic gales through every 15 minutes and to get on the ground one had to time the landing between those blasts. But we were going down one way or another. The fuel gauges were nudging empty. So we would try a landing and started a descent through the clouds toward a beacon at the runway. We let down lower and lower, coming out of the overcast just above the water. It seemed we would touch the angry swells which reached up for us. Altitude was less than 100 feet.



Ice Almost Finished the Flight

But there was no way we could land. There was a 90-degree crosswind of 30 knots with gusts to 50. The pilot pushed the throttles forward and we started climbing out.

Keith Miller thinks that we then entered a period where we faced the most dangerous condition encountered during our flying experiences. We were forced to begin a climb through the clouds to 14,000 feet, with heavy ice forming on the wings and engines. The

airplane became almost uncontrollable as the ice changed the shape of the wings and it reached a point where pilot, co-pilot and engineer all thought we were going into a long spin into the ocean.

At 14,000 feet we broke out above the clouds and the ice finally fell away. Nervous, with near empty tanks we tried again and made it to the airfield at Keflavik. On tired wings, fuel gone, we touched down.

It was Christmas Day, we hadn't arrived in time for dinner but the left-over turkey and potatoes and gravy seemed as tasty as mother had ever made. The best thing about Iceland, we thought, was the temperature. It was warm, relatively so. The Arctic Circle passes through the northern tip of the island and we hadn't thought of getting a respite from the bitter temperatures we had endured in Labrador. But when we stepped out of the plane we felt as if we were in tropical heat. The temperature was above freezing.

Housing at the base for us transients consisted of a Quonset hut with an oil stove and cots. We humble enlisted men were assigned one and the nobility of the crew, Burgess, Bodenhamer and Dembowski, all officers, were given another. They probably had sheets on their beds. No egalitarianism in the armed forces, although of the three branches the air force was the most democratic, and still is.

First Try Fails

Plans were to be on our way as soon as possible but weather delayed departure for a day or so. There was little to do there, brief daylight at that time of the year (Keflavik is about 175 miles south of the Arctic Circle), and we were ready to get away when we fueled

the airplane and started engines. This was to be a shorter leg—maybe four and a half hours, depending on the winds aloft. It's about 800 miles from Keflavik to Prestwick.

It turned out to be a very short run, for we were not to get off the ground that day. I settled down on the radio room floor, back to the bomb bay as we taxied out to the runway, pilot and copilot went through the usual engine checks and we were off at full throttle. The B17 shuddered and vibrated at the power, accelerated and began to get light, starting to bounce a little as a plane does when it nears flying speed and reaches for the air. The four 1,200 horsepower Wright engines were at full volume when suddenly they were silent. Burgess had abruptly pulled back the throttles and tramped on the brakes. Something was wrong and he was trying to get this big heavy airplane stopped before we reached the end of the runway. He was successful. We stopped and taxied back to the ramp.

A B17 can be pulled off the ground at about 90 miles an hour, depending on the load, but most pilots will prudently let it run to about 120 before lifting off the runway. In the case of this takeoff Burgess had reached a speed of about 100 and eased the controls back a little when he realized that something was wrong with the ailerons. The plane was wanting to roll severely to the right and would not respond to correction. If he had continued the takeoff roll at full throttle and pulled the plane off the ground we would have gone into a slow roll to the right and crashed.

Better a few more days in Iceland.

Sabotage is Suspected

But what had happened to the controls? The ailerons, the hinged control surfaces at the edge of the wings, are moved by cables. The pilot turns the wheel to the left and the left aileron goes up, the right goes down. That turns the airplane to the left. So something was apparently wrong with the cables and that had to be repaired before another takeoff could be attempted.

The base at Keflavik was not well equipped for repairs and there were no real experts in adjusting B17 control cables. A man was found, though, who could work on our plane and with his instruments did whatever one does to make the proper tension adjustments to the cables.

There has always been a mystery surrounding this mechanical difficulty and the final judgement was that there was sabotage involved. The mechanic who worked on the cables apparently did not correct the problem and we were to suffer from that.

In the several days it took for the work on the cables a new Icelandic phenomenon came on the scene. As we learned in our approach to Iceland, severe gales blow across the Atlantic during the winter of the year. There would be "wind warnings" posted. Such as "Notice—Wind Warning—70 miles an hour beginning at 1400". When we landed we tied our plane to the concrete with stout ropes and piled sandbags on the wings and around the wheels. This was the only place I had ever seen that done.

End of Part 2

Whippoorwill E-Comment is the journal of J. Hill Hamon, who lives out in the sticks near Frankfort, Kentucky. KyHamon@AOL.COM