

DITCHING AN AIRCRAFT   by James Wheat's Crew (which included tail gunner, Alvin Thomas Franklin Carter).

Among the risks of flying a combat mission was the possibility of having to ditch a damaged plane or one without enough fuel to return to England. The watery runways in this case could be the North Sea, Strait of Dover or the English Channel. Pilot, 1st Lt. James R. Wheat, Co-pilot, 2nd Lt. Leslie Nielsen, and S/Sgt. William J. Sullivan, Jr., tell what it was like to experience the ditching of their B-17G. Although each contributor to this article tells something about the same happening in some instances, they also relate incidents that they, alone, endured.

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The mission to Hamburg on June 20, 1944 started out much the same as all of our previous ones. My crew and I had not flown since June 14th. All of us had been on pass to London. We had been rather busy, having flown our first on April 10, 1944 and this was the 28th in 80 days.

The crew was composed of myself, 1st Lt. James R. Wheat, pilot; 2nd Lt. Leslie (NMI) Nielsen, co-pilot; 2nd Lt. Walter M. Cooney, navigator; 2nd Lt. George D. Berner, bombardier; T/Sgt. Calvin 0. Decker, top turret gunner; T/Sgt. George R. Maisch, radio operator and gunner; S/Sgt. William J. Sullivan, Jr., ball turret gunner; S/Sgt. Robert (NMI) Mercado, waist gunner; S/Sgt. Alvin T. Carter, tail gunner.

The 527th Squadron was not scheduled to fly this mission, but we were alerted to fly spare along with two other crews. We were assigned a position in the lead group formation and the first AC was airborne at 0445. The wing assembled over Molesworth at 0549 hours at 5,000 ft. We departed the English coast at Maplethorpe. It was 0621 hours at 7,400 ft. The enemy coast was crossed at Orking at 0819 hours at 25,000 ft. The target was an oil refinery.

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Everything went along about normal until we left the IP, which was about a 10-minute run at 25,000 ft. Less than 1 minute before bombs away we encountered very heavy and accurate flak and a push rod went through the side of the No. 1 engine and it was throwing oil. Co-pilot, Nielsen feathered the prop and I threw full power on the three other engines. No. 3 engine was hit by a flak and lost oil pressure and could not be feathered. We managed to stay in formation long enough to drop the bombs with the group. No. 2 engine was also hit and was on fire. We could not stay with the formation and dropped out with two engines out and No. 3 engine prop windmilling. We were down to 23,000 ft. but the fire had gone out on No. 2 engine— but it was leaking oil.

We were putting all the power I dared on the No. 2 and No. 4 engines, but with the No. 3 engine windmilling we had a lot of drag and were losing altitude. Two hours later we were down to 15,000 ft. We had already contacted Air-Sea Rescue by radio and told them that we expected to have to ditch. We were reporting in to Air-Sea Rescue every 30 minutes or so and giving them a progress report. They would take a fix on our position. At 15,000 ft. I ordered the crew to throw everything out of the plane that they could get loose. And they did. At about this time we lost No. 2 engine, but Nielsen got it feathered. We were losing altitude at about 700 ft. per minute and were indicating about 90 miles per hour. All the crewmembers except myself and co-pilot Nielsen were in the radio room in their ditching positions. We had an under cast from about 800 ft. down to 500 ft. I did not have much time to pick a heading for our final approach to the water. The wind was blowing about 50 miles per hour and the swells were high. We were in contact with Air-Sea Rescue for the last minute or so of our descent and they had a good fix on our position. We made a good landing in the water but the sea was so rough that the plane broke in two at the ball turret, co-pilot Nielsen and I went out the windows on our respective sides.

The first thing I noticed after getting into the water was the crew in the radio room had not gotten the life rafts to release from the top of the plane where they were stored. My thoughts were to try and reach the external release for them. I would swim up to the plane and before I could reach the release handles, a wave would break over the plane and wash me back out to the end of the left wing. I made two attempts at releasing them before (Alvin) the crew finally succeeded.

About this time one of the two, one-man life rafts that we carried in the radio room washed up in front of me. I grabbed it and pulled the release to inflate it, as well as my “Mae West” vest that all of the crew wore. By this time all of the crew had gotten into the water on the left side of the plane, but the raft that released on the right side of the plane had broken loose and floated away from us. We managed to hang on to the raft from the left side of the plane and tied it to the one-man raft that I had gotten hold of. By now the plane had sunk. I would guess that it did not float more than 2 or 3 minutes. Nobody seemed to be hurt too badly, but bombardier Berner was dazed. We found out later that he had received a concussion.

Perhaps it would help to give an account by ball turret gunner Sullivan, from his diary, of the events. So I’ll turn this story over to him.

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“The boys had been there a few days before, (the June 18th, 1944 mission to Hamburg) while we were on a pass and told us about the flak so we expected a rough time in that regard, but not as much as we received.

Procedure was normal until we turned on our IP and number one engine started to act up. We just about feathered it and started on the bomb run when “All Hell’ broke loose. The flak was the most severe we had ever encountered and each burst seemed to be aimed at our particular are squadron.

After a few close bursts, number 2 started to burn and number 3 was knocked out. We tried to feather number 3 but “no soap,” so we just had to let it windmill.

The pilot told us to put on our chutes, for he thought it was all over for us. We fell out of formation after dropping our bombs and started in the general direction of home.

The smoke had stopped coming out of number 2, but it was pouring oil. We were losing altitude but everything seemed to be under control. The pilot got in touch with Air-Sea Rescue and told them of our plight. At about 10,000 ft., we started throwing out equipment, when the pilot informed us that we would probably have to ditch.

The radio room was cleared of all unnecessary equipment and we prepared to take our stations. While still descending, we went over our duties and ditching procedure, each man making sure of what he was to do. The radioman remained on interphone, informing us of our altitude and distance from shore. When about 6 miles out the pilot told us that it would be any minute now. Everyone braced themselves, as we could feel the plane slowing down for the attempted landing.

The first crash was slight as it was only the tail hitting the water, then in a few seconds the big impact came. Water came in from everywhere and we were tossed about like corks. I landed face down in the water, in the opposite direction from which I had been sitting. The floor of the radio room gave way and we all went down. When I regained my senses I was under water but soon came up, as we all had half of our “Mae Wests” inflated. I grabbed for an oxygen hose and some wires on the right side and tried to pull myself up. I could feel someone’s body underneath me as I started to climb out the hatch. The tail gunner (Alvin) was partly out and trying to pull the life raft release. He told me to step on his arm and when I did he gave another yank and the life raft popped out. The plane had broken in half at the ball turret and was sinking fast. The second raft appeared and I jumped into the water and grabbed a rope on it. The first one was washed away before anyone could get to it, so we all held on to the other one. A K-dingy floated into the pilot’s arms and he inflated that. I kicked myself away from the wing of the plane as I thought there might be a suction created, but it just slowly slid out of sight.

The bombardier was floundering around so we managed to get him in the large raft. Then the co-pilot and waist gunner climbed in, followed by the radioman. That left the engineer, the navigator and myself in the water, as the pilot had climbed in the one-man raft. By this time the sea had become quite rough and both rafts were shipping water. The ones in the raft attempted to bail out some of the water but each wave would fill it again. With the pump in the raft, they tried to pump up the seats so that another man could enter, but the position of the bombardier made it difficult.

We saw a buoy about fifty yards away and attempted to paddle towards it but were swept by too quickly. Between the swells we could see the top of a tower and a beacon on land, so we knew we weren’t too far out.

After about forty minutes someone spotted a launch heading our way and everyone felt better. My arms were quite tired from holding on and my body was shivering from the cold water but the sight of the boat seemed to give me strength and I knew it would only be a matter of minutes before we were picked up. As the boat came by, they threw over a net and lines and pulled is towards them. In no time we were all aboard, exhausted but happy and shaking hands with all the crew. They seemed almost as happy to see us.”

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And, here is an account of the ditching from co-pilot Nielsen. “Our squadron was not supposed to fly this mission but they needed one more spare ship so we were assigned to it. We had just returned from pass while all the others had been flying.

Two crews were late arriving for briefing so the Colonel scrubbed them and put us in their place. We didn’t like the idea because we knew it would be a rough mission. However we set about with the preparations.

Everything went along smoothly until we got on the bomb run, then things began to happen fast. A half minute before bombs away the number 1 engine started throwing oil, the cause being a push rod through the engine, so I feathered it. About the same time number 3 engine was hit by flak and lost oil pressure. I tried to feather that also, but was unsuccessful; this caused a lot of drag. Number 2 engine also was hit and was on fire. By that time we had dropped our bombs and dropped back from the formation. We lost some altitude but did get the fire put out. With the number 2 and 4 engines pulling full rated power, number 3 windmilling, creating drag, we managed to hold our altitude for nearly 2 hours.

During this time we contacted the base by radio, got a QDM and fix also telling them we expected to ditch in the channel. About 50 miles from England we lost the number 2 engine at 15,000 ft. altitude and knew we would have to ditch. We contacted Air-Sea Rescue again and told them the situation so they kept a constant fix on us all the way down. We lost altitude at the rate of 700 ft. per minute and were flying at ninety miles an hour. All but Jim and I went back to the radio room to clear out any loose equipment and to take ditching stations. We made a good landing in the water, only five miles from shore, but the sea was very rough and the ship broke up very badly from the bomb bay back. Jim and I were first ones out and it seemed a long time before any of the others came out. Carter got the life rafts out and they filled up quickly. We let one get away from us, which didn’t help any, but Jim got hold of a one-man dingy and got into that. I was first into the big raft and helped get Berner in, as he seemed to be dizzy and quite helpless. After a fashion, we got Mercado, Maisch and Carter into the raft, in that order. As the dinghy was almost full of water and not completely inflated the others stayed in the water while I started to pump more air into the raft and bail water out. Cooney, Decker, and Sullivan never did get into the raft as we sighted the rescue boats coming, so they just hung on and waited. On the boat the British treated us wonderful. They undressed us, dried us off, rubbed us down, and then dressed us in warm woolen clothes. At the naval base they gave us a complete GI issue of clothes, fed us and did everything to make us comfortable. We remained overnight and the base sent a Fort to pick us up and bring us back

Flak over the target was the most accurate and concentrated I have ever seen. Our target was a synthetic oil refinery and we got some very good hits on it. Flames and smoke could be seen 15,000 ft. high and reports indicated it was still burning two days later. General Travis led our group on the mission. Plane #261. It turned out that we were about 5 or 6 miles from England, just off the coast of Great Yarmouth in the North Sea when this mission was completed. We had ditched at about 11:30 and picked up about 12:10 by Air-Sea Rescue, which was a branch of the Royal Navy of Great Britain.

I don’t think I could add a whole lot to the story after 51 years, except to say, we all lived to tell the story, and survived because of team work, on behalf of all the crew and the training we had received."