

## THE DITCHING OF LT. MCGREGOR'S B-29 CREW

23 JANUARY 1945

Lt. (Later Captain) Jack K. McGregor, O-26235, 869<sup>th</sup> Squadron, 497<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, was an aircraft commander of "Bad Brew." He ditched on January 23, 1945.

**Note: The ditching report of Lt. McGregor was retyped for clarification. This also involved shifting from double-spacing to single spacing.**



**JACK MCGREGOR, PILOT, RELATES THE DITCHING OF B-29 CREW 232-11,  
OF THE 869 SQUADRON, 497 GROUP, 73 BOMB WING  
OF XXI BOMBER COMMAND**

1 <sup>st</sup> Lt. Jack McGregor	–	Pilot
2 <sup>nd</sup> Lt. Bob Ballard	–	Co-Pilot
2 <sup>nd</sup> Lt. Jim Freeman	–	Bombardier
2 <sup>nd</sup> Lt. Jim Classick	–	Navigator
2 <sup>nd</sup> Lt. Al Young	–	Engineer
Sgt. B.E. Whitaker	–	Radar
Sgt. Glen Hoover	–	Radio
Sgt. Andy Henderson	–	CFC Gunner
Cpl. Joe Crucitti	–	R. Gunner
Cpl. Everett Crump	–	L. Gunner
Cpl. Frank Brown	–	T. Gunner

My crew was part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> echelon movement of the combat crew portion, 73<sup>rd</sup> Bomb Wing to Saipan in 1944. The first echelon (approximately ten of each squadron's combat crews) had flown the originally delivered B-29's over to Saipan, arriving there in mid to late October 1944. The second echelon (approximately 5 combat crews from each squadron) had been delivered to Saipan by ATC in early November 1944. This 3<sup>rd</sup> echelon contingent of five more combat crew from each squadron waited in the States for additional B-29 aircraft to be built. As each aircraft was delivered, one of the waiting crews would be assigned, check-out the aircraft and then fly the plane to Saipan to re-join their squadron, thus bringing a brand new B-29 plus several engines in the from bomb bay with them.

While waiting for our B-29 to be built by Bell, we were shunted to 2 o 3 different stations. Our crew was finally assigned aircraft F42-63467 at Herrington, Kansas, on or about the 13<sup>th</sup> of November 1944. We spent almost 2 weeks flying and checking out the aircraft. During this time final modifications plus a 100-hour check were made. This was required and desirable before leaving the country.

While putting flying time on our aircraft, an amusing thing happened, though at the time it was not amusing. One afternoon a number of crews were airborne in the general area of Herrington, with all our radios monitoring the common tower frequency. We were all in the clear about an undercast as I recall, which caused a ceiling of about 1200 feet. All of a sudden we heard voices from a crew that had failed to switch to intercom, and their chatter was being broadcast to everyone in the vicinity. They were excitedly shouting about props that were running away and what to do about it. Apparently the pilot or co-pilot was routinely changing prop pitch when numbers 1 and 2 went full low pitch, high RPM and then "ran away". The rest of us in the air were getting this in bits and pieces form high pitched wavering voices. It seems that the aircraft was in a

descending spiral that the aircraft was unable to correct, so he told the crew to bail out before they hit the undercast. Interspersed with this crew chatter was Herrington tower's attempt to find out who was in trouble, where they were, etc. After a long pause of about 20 minutes the tower came on the air (apparently talking to a rescue unit) and made the statement that Capt. Geyer (the aircraft commander) was at the mortuary in the little town of Latimer. Well, we were all literally glued to our radio, and we were shocked, saddened, and dejected over this statement since it appeared that one of our friends had "bought-the-farm".

After landing it was our custom to immediately head for the Officer's Club where those of us with wives would meet her at the door and spend the evening dining and dancing. As I walked in the door of the club, there was a smiling Mrs. Greyer patiently waiting for her husband. Those of us who knew what had happened diverted our glances and grabbed our wives pulling them aside and whispering the sad news to them. Most of us had ordered dinner and were eating while poor Mrs. Geyer still waited at the door. We wondered why someone – at least the base commander or Chaplain – hadn't informed her. However, none of us wanted that difficult job. Imagine our complete amazement, surprise and shock when after a few more minutes Capt. Walt Geyer walked in the door, kissed his relieved wife and threw the rest of us a cheery wave. It seems that all of his crew had bailed out successfully. Since they were very close to a small town, Walt having been a mortician in civilian life, headed straight for the local mortuary where he knew he could borrow a phone, get a calming drink, and assure a ride back to the base. The rest of us, of course, were tremendously relieved, and later often laughed at our hasty jump to conclusions.

On about the 26 of November the aircraft was ready and we took off for Mather Field, California which was our APOE (aerial port of embarkation).

We laid over several days at Mather before leaving the Z-I for the war. In talking to people and realizing its value due to the scarcity of alcoholic spirits overseas, I recommended to my crew that each of them pick up at least several quarts of whisky prior to our T.O. (We had already been briefed at Mather that taking whiskey overseas was a NO NO, that a shakedown inspection would be made prior to leaving to insure we were carrying none.).

I had also reminded the crew to hide any whiskey that they brought on board the aircraft. I hid 2 bottles in the upper sleeves of my flying jacket. It turned out that we were not inspected for alcohol, yet I was jubilant that we apparently had outsmarted the Mather people, because after we were airborne I got a count from the crew – 17 bottles. I patted myself on the back all the way to Hawaii and could hardly wait to tell the crew who landed about 10 minutes ahead of us of our cleverness. I climbed out of our ship and went over to the parked B-29 next to us and told the aircraft commander (whom I knew quite well) about outsmarting Mather with 17 bottles of whiskey. He cocked his, looked at me quizzically, and said in an unbelieving manner, "You're kidding! Come over here to my aircraft and check the from bomb bay." I did, and was shocked to see 10 cases of whiskey neatly stacked and tied down next to the spare engines. I shook my head in disbelief and realized how naïve I was.

(Sidelight: We had arrived in Hawaii on 30 November 1944, and while there, had to have a cracked cylinder replaced. During our stay, one of the crew members found an artist who painted the insignia we had designed and selected on the nose of the aircraft (for a fee, of course). The insignia was a naked woman with her arms stretched out in front of her with long blonde hair flowing back over her shoulders. The motto printed around the top was MISS-LEADING-LADY. The crew was extremely proud of that logo. So much so that each crew member had a replica of it on an 8-inch leather patch sewn on the front of his flight jacket.



We finally took off from Hawaii on 7 December 1944, (the 3<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the infamous bombing) and headed for our final destination of Saipan.

About 20 miles out of Kawjalein (refueling stop halfway to Saipan) we called the tower for landing instructions. They gave us a "Roger" and told us to hold 5 miles east at 2000 ft. since they had an emergency landing in progress. We circled and watched the unfolding drama and noticed a large group of people on the apron just off the single runway. One of my crew sighted an P4U "Corsair" doing a 360 overhead and landing. We soon received an "OK 467, come on in and land". On our approach we saw the group of people milling around the Corsair, and finally a jeep roared off toward the building area. After landing I asked the Kwaj operations folks if the Corsair pilot had been badly hurt. They laughed and said that this was the regular afternoon "freezing the ice cream flight", and that my having to hold was just a matter of poor timing. Our entire crew laughed over the incident as we enjoyed our ice cream after dinner that night. We took off the next morning and continued to our destination.

Upon landing on Saipan, the "follow-me" jeep led our aircraft over to the 498<sup>th</sup> Group's parking area. I was told to shutdown and have the crew take all personal belongings with them. It seems #42-63467 with our newly painted insignia on it, was to be turned over to another organization. Apparently the 498<sup>th</sup> Group had lost several more of their B-29's as a result of the recent Jap retaliation bombing raids on Saipan, than the 497<sup>th</sup> Group. Needless to say, Crew 232-11 was devastated.

By January 23<sup>rd</sup> the crew had made several supervised bomb runs either as part of another crew or with members of another crew riding with us. Additionally, two trips to the Empire had been solely on our own – one of these was to Nagoya on the 18<sup>th</sup> and it turned into a fiasco when as “tail-end-Charlie” on the bomb run, all generators had blown out, with resulting rapid decompression. This caused the aircraft cabins to immediately fill with condensation, which looked like and was mistaken by everyone for smoke. It appeared as though, and everyone jumped to the conclusion, that we had taken a flak hit. The turbos were surging which caused the engine manifold pressures to fluctuate from low to high. In addition, the props lost synchronization, surged, and whined. Admittedly, the pilot was somewhat nervous, which manifested itself in a few minutes of erratic flying – at least until the cause of the “smoke” could be determined. The electrical system was completely out as a result of the generator foul-up.

(Sidelight: Except for the internal combustion engines, everything on a B-29 operated on electricity – turbo superchargers, pressurization control, radio, intercom, radar, guns, gun turrets and gun sights, gear flaps, bomb sight, bomb doors, bomb release, fans, food warmer, etc., etc.)

Since they were unable to communicate with me or the co-pilot, the crew in the rear section of the aircraft (assuming a flak hit) put their parachutes on and had one foot in the doorway ready to jump. As they looked down and saw Japan, they remembered that the nicest thing likely to happen to captured B-29 crew members was beheading, so they closed the door and returned to their positions, apparently deciding to go down with the ship. One could literally hear a sigh of relief (over the engine noise) after a few minutes of continuous flight. It became apparent that the aircraft had not taken a flak hit, was not on fire, and was not going to crash over Japan!! This, of course, was confirmed when a brave soul crawled thru the tunnel and got the OK sign from me. I had Jim Freeman salvo the bombs (mechanical release) on Hammamatsu, and a safe return flight to Saipan was made at low level. Needless to say, the auxiliary power unit in the rear end of the ship (APU, often called “putt-putt” by crew members) got a big workout in closing the bomb-bay doors and later in lowering the gear and flaps before landing.



Checking out aircraft on hardstand - Saipan



Part of crew prior to checking out aircraft on hardstand - Saipan

On the morning of 23 January 1945, a little after dawn, breakfast and final briefings complete, our crew arrived at the aircraft up on the hardstand. In this case the ship being flown belonged to John H. Brewster of the 869<sup>th</sup>, a good friend and squadron mate of mine. The insignia painted on his plane was a big mug of beer appropriately named THE BAD BREW, the tall markings were A-Square-6.

(Sidelight: Each squadron was designed to have more crews than aircraft, thus each squadron B-29 was often shared by several crews – not always the same ones.)

The crew chief and his ground echelon were greeted and the flight crew dispersed to check their individual areas of responsibility (bombs, guns, radar, radio, etc.). Bob Ballard and I started

our “walk-around” with the crew chief in tow and immediately noticed large puddles of oil under each engine. I asked the crew chief about this, and was told that a new man had been on the oil truck and had over-filled each engine oil tank by about 5 gallons, all of which had run down over the engines and onto the hardstand. The chief had his crew do everything possible before we had arrived to wipe excess oil from the cowling, engines, cylinders, etc. At the pep talk before climbing aboard, I cautioned the right and left scanners that excess oil had been spilled on all engines and not to be overly concerned with more smoke than usual blowing back from each one – for at least the early part of the flight, i.e., until the oil had burned off. The side gunners (scanners) had a large round plastic blister type window and could see the engines, exhausts, flaps and gear that pilot and co-pilot could not see. The scanners reported the position of the gear and flaps and general condition of the engines and exhausts on all takeoffs and landings.

After routine engine starting and taxiing, it was our turn in BAD BREW to take off. The takeoff was more or less normal, if an overloaded B-29 takeoff could be considered normal. (The aircraft was designed for about 120,000 pounds maximum takeoff weight, and we rarely took off with less than 139,000 pounds.) The climb-out over the water to the northeast of Saipan was routine until an altitude of about 700 feet was approached. At about this time I was experiencing difficulty in banking the aircraft to the left to join the loose formation. I started to ask “what gives?” on the intercom, and at about the same time the engineer, Al Young, said that #4 engine was running extremely hot with the cylinder head temperature needle off the gauge. With that, Joe Crucitti (right scanner) chimed in saying that a tremendous more amount of smoke was trailing from #4 engine than from the others, and that it could possibly be on fire as he could see flames shooting back occasionally. He also said that my preflight briefing had kept him from mentioning this excessive smoke until he heard the engineer and me discussing a very hot #4. Since it was obviously on fire, I called for Ballard and Young to shut down the engine and actuate the fire bottles. At about the same time I yelled to the bombardier to salvo the bombs since the aircraft was very heavy and losing altitude and air speed rapidly.

(Sidelight: On the previous mission while flying at about 700 feet, Capt. L. L. Cox and crew of A Square 3, 869 Squadron had to abort the mission less than an hour out of Saipan, due to a malfunctioning engine. As Cox left the loose formation to return to base, he dropped down about 300 feet and salvoed his bombs. It was established later that the bombardier had apparently pulled the pins on the bombs before takeoff; consequently they went off when they hit the water. Since Cox’s ship was directly above the explosions, the bomb blasts caused the aircraft to crash. All but 4 members were killed and when those four were rescued, two were so badly injured and burned that they were returned to the U.S. immediately. This incident was included as part of the        wing debriefing after that mission, and directive was published warning all bombardiers not to pull the pins on the bombs until an altitude of at least 5000 feet had been reached. Needless to say, the Cox disaster went through everyone’s mind when I yelled for Freeman to salvo the bombs. (Fortunately, they did not explode as the pins were properly still in their places. Jim Freeman tried, but could not close the bomb bay doors.)



McGregor by "The Bad Brew" on the hard stand - Saipan



Capt. John Brewster and Lt. Jack McGregor - front of pilot quonset

It was getting more difficult to keep the aircraft level – it continued to try to bank and turn to the right. Ballard yelled and pointed to manifold pressure (MP) gauge on #3 engine, and I made a hasty glance and saw that it was reading less than 15 inches instead of the approximately 47 inches normal takeoff power. We did everything that could be done to raise the #3 MP, but were unsuccessful. It was later concluded in the debriefing that the engine had an almost total internal failure (?).

By now the aircraft was a number of miles from Saipan and down to less than 300 feet altitude. Complete left rudder and full aileron had been applied, yet the aircraft still tried to roll over on its back. It was now clear that I could not hold altitude with this heavy aircraft with bomb doors open and two engines out on the same side. Consequently, I indicated to Bob Ballard to ring the ditching bell as I slowly came back on the power on #1 and #2, to keep the aircraft from becoming inverted. I fought and tried to keep the nose up and let the airspeed pay-off because by now I had completely closed the throttles on the #1 and #2 engines. The aircraft hit the water at about 120 MPH, and there was what seemed an eternity of screeching screaming and tearing of metal as the plane ripped itself apart on the water. Since the bomb bay doors were open, it was later concluded that an auxiliary fuel tank carried in the bomb-bay had hung-up and not salvoed completely. All of this contributed to the destruction of the aircraft. At the low altitudes we normally flew to get past the Jap radar at Iwo Jima, many pilots left their window open. During the ditching my window remained open, but was now above my head instead of being by my left shoulder. Apparently the nose section of the fuselage had twisted a quarter turn to the right from the to gun turret forward. I remained conscious throughout the ditching, and when the aircraft finally stopped, I scrambled up and out of the window and started back to release the rubber life rafts.

As I got over the astrodome (the bombardier's ditching station), I saw Jim Freeman frantically pushing outwardly against the plastic dome. By now water inside the aircraft was rising above Jim's waist. In his panic he pushed instead of pulling the astrodome locking mechanism inwardly. In trying to help release Jim, I reached for my 45 thinking I could damage the astrodome enough to crack break it. Then I remembered that none of us carried our 45's because of its relative uselessness. I even tried to kick in the astrodome with my heel but this was hopeless. Jim Freeman disappeared. I turned back and released a life raft and climbed into it. I saw there was nothing left of the rear of the aircraft past the CFC (Central Fire Control compartment where 3 gunners normally sat. It was later learned from the surviving gunner that the tail section aft of the bulkhead 10 (the ditching station for the 5 crew members in the rear section of the aircraft) had sheared off and probably gone straight to the bottom carrying the three other gunners and the radar operator with it.

Crump (left gunner-scanner) was the only one in the after section of the aircraft to survive. He later told us that when the ditching bell hand rung, the others had started back to their ditching station. As Crump got up to follow them he looked out of his blister and saw that were quite close to the water. He figured that he probably could not get to the ditching station in time, so he sat back down in his seat and fastened his belt.



Jim Freeman, Bombardier and Jack McGregor, Pilot- 497th Bomb Group  
area - Saipan



Jack McGregor, Pilot and Jim Classick, Navigator

When the aircraft finally stopped, he unfastened his belt, stepped out into the water where the tail section, including his ditching station had been and swam to the life raft.

Bob Ballard had followed me out of my window and Al Young had followed him. By now the aircraft had sunk – the entire time probably took no more than 30 to 45 seconds from my climbing out of my window to the sinking of the plane.

All survivors were in shock and looked around at each other counting – “Four” – then a miracle happened. Jim Classick (a devout Catholic) bobbed to the surface. Apparently, as the aircraft tilted down and sank, Jim was washed out through the shattered nose of the ship and popped to the surface nearly unconscious. We grabbed him and pulled him into the raft, hung him over the edge and slapped his back as he coughed up and spit out a mixture of gasoline, oil and salt water. This was it – five. These were the survivors of Crew 232-11 – pilot, co-pilot, navigator, engineer and left gunner. These bedraggled humans sat in the bobbing life raft in shock. Some gazing off into space, others blinking or crying, all unbelieving that this had happened to them. It was especially traumatic for me having been unable to rescue my good friend, Jim Freeman, and also feeling that somehow this catastrophe was my fault.

After about 3 hours a USS destroyer escort (number or name forgotten), hove to and fished us out of the life raft. The Navy crew couldn't do enough for this sad remnant of a B-29 crew. They patched up our multiple cuts and bruises. The rescuers had fed us with food and drink and gave up their bunks and generally catered to our every whim. The Navy literally rolled out the red carpet for the pathetic crash survivors. Some hours later we were dropped off on Saipan by the

Navy DE and immediately taken to the USAAF hospital. The anxieties, minor wounds and stomach upsets were administered to, and all crew members were out of the hospital within a week. However, after the usual debriefing, four crew members (co-pilot, navigator, engineer and gunner) were sent to Hawaii for R & R. I was sent to Guam and assigned to A-3 of the 21<sup>st</sup> Bomber Command Headquarters with no R & R. There was some talk that I was the surviving pilot ditched, and my crew had been scattered, I might best be used to help train other pilots and crews for what was beginning to look like a “too often occurrence” – ditching. (Mine was about the 15<sup>th</sup> ditching in just 61 days of B-29 combat against the Japanese Empire.) With the losses from our ditching and breakup of the crew afterwards, the close contact was lost between most of the surviving members. The co-pilot was transferred to another group where he replaced a co-pilot who had been killed. His crew ditched several missions later, and being one of the three survivors of that crew, a compassionate command allowed him to return to the Z-I and was given an honorable discharge. It is understood that he returned to his home in Dallas, Texas. The navigator had been assigned to the 497<sup>th</sup> group navigator’s office, and worked in that capacity to the end of the war. I don’t know for sure what happened to the engineer, but it is believed that he became a member of another crew. The information available to me indicates that Crump, the left gunner, did not return to flying but worked in a ground job until returned to the U.S. at the end of the war. I remained at the 21<sup>st</sup> Bomber Command Headquarters on Guam and worked as a mission controller in A-3.



Lt. McGregor wearing flak suit front of the armor supply tent – Saipan 1944