

Bomb Loading Accident

On June 23, 1943, tragedy struck the 381st Bomb Group when a massive explosion killed twenty-three American service personnel and one British civilian. It was the second day of the group's combat tour and was a devastating blow.

Casualties:

The Robert Withers' crew, onboard #42-30024: T/Sgt Erwing Bohlander, S/Sgt Edward H. Harris, S/Sgt James J. Lintgen, Sgt Christian Langolf, Sgt Louis Smulowitz, Sgt Joseph J. Kristapavich.

From the Alexander crew onboard #42-29992: 2nd Lt Paul E. Tull.

The majority of deaths were among Ground Crew members: Cpl James H. King, Cpl Milton J. Foerstel, Cpl Charles A. Feeley, Cpl Joseph F. Sproha, Sgt Henry Bongiorno, Cpl Roger H. Allen, S/Sgt Michael J. Egan, Cpl James A. Main, Sgt Joseph L. Neel, Cpl Elmer F. Madden, Sgt Dennis L. Collins, Cpl Guy McDuffee, Pfc Robert N. Ashcraft, T/Sgt Charles H. Wilton, Cpl Melvin L. Jerkins, Cpl George Fiamma.

British Civilian: Mr John Hunwick, killed while cycling near the base on his way work.

From James Good Brown's The Mighty Men of the 381st: Heroes All:

'June 23rd, 1943. An explosion killed 23 of my men. 42-30024 [VP-A "Caroline"] (Wither's ship) was being prepared for a mission. 16-300-pound bombs were being loaded when 11 exploded. 6 crew members were in the ship cleaning their guns. Electrical specialists were working on the tail wheel.' - diary of Major Landon Hendricks, Commanding Officer of the 533rd Squadron.

"[Chaplain Brown writes] Hearing the explosion, I hastened to the scene and was appalled. When I arrived at the area of the explosion, I was shocked! Where a Flying Fortress had been standing, there was none. There was only flat earth. I looked around to see parts of that big ship; there were no parts to be seen. This is what I could not understand. I would have supposed that the bomb explosion would cause the plane to break up in pieces and scatter these to the four winds: a wing here; a tail there; a piece of metal here; and a big wheel somewhere else. But I did not see a piece of the metal the size of my typewriter. Things disintegrated. Solid metal was blown to powder. How a whole plane could be blown to power, I could not imagine. The largest single piece I saw was the small part of an engine far away."

"What of the men?"

"This is the inexpressible tragedy. There were no men left. No one man who was at the plane is alive to give account. There were a few wounded, but these were working on planes some distance away. They did not know what struck them. One officer was killed in a plane far away, having been there

inspecting his instruments. An object flew into his plane and blew his head off. The plane in which he was sitting was scrapped because it was wrecked beyond repair. It had holes all through it."

"I looked in disbelief over the airfield where the plane had stood. All I saw were smoldering ruins. But I also saw one man walking bravely and courageously into the burning ruins. He was Sergeant Gerald Riesen, Chief Armament Inspector, who bravely walked into danger to defuse the remaining bombs which had not exploded. Out of the sixteen (16) 300-pounders, three did not explode. He pulled these three out of the fire, an act far beyond the call of duty. But such acts are what make great men. And such men made the 381st a great bomb group. It was an act of heroism." (pp 50-51)



From Ron Mackay's [Ridgewell's Flying Fortresses: The 381st Bombardment Group \(H\) in World War II:](#)

"Around mid-morning on the 23rd and down on the flight line a mix of combat and ground personnel were hard at work preparing the bombers for the day's effort against St Martin Bernay airfield. At 42-30024 Lt. Eichenbaum (Ordnance Officer) was supervising the loading of bombs and ammunition; then, at 1057 he jumped into his Jeep and motored 'round to the adjacent ammunition area. In the

adjoining dispersal squatted 42-29992, with Lt. Jim Alexander standing by its nose talking to W/O Joe Nutt; up in the nose Lt. Tull (B) was checking out his bombsight. Among this B-17's mechanics were T/Sgt Balasa supervising bomb loading and S/Sgt Pinter standing by his Jeep. They were about to be joined by Sgt Miller who, acting on W/O Nutt's order, had followed him 'round from 42-30024. S/Sgt Francis E. Owen, a gunner on Lt Ballinger's B-17, parked on the other side of A/C 024, was engaged in gun maintenance. W/O Platz (also from the Ordnance Section) had returned to his office after dropping off Nutt, and a third Ordnance Officer, Lt Bannon, was several hundred yards distant in the bomb-dump. All those men, with one tragic exception, were about to be principal witnesses to the shocking event now unfolding."

"At 1100 there was a rush of air, and 42-30024 erupted into smoke and flame. Scarcely had the base personnel recovered from the literally stunning effect of this initial blast when there was a second, which a distant witness later said "blew the ship from the face of the earth." A mere 45 seconds had elapsed between the twin explosions, but in that period one officer and 22 enlisted men had perished in an instantaneously horrible manner. It later transpired that loading-up had been carried out with the nose-fuses in position. Whether a dropped bomb was the cause of the accident would never be fully determined, as there were no survivors among either the loading detail or the other airmen around or inside the B-17."

"Those working on the surrounding B-17s were either frozen into momentary immobility, galvanized into erratic action, or in one instance left lying injured on the ground. Hearing the first explosion S/Sgt Owens jumped out of his B-17 and started to run towards its tail - then sighting what he described as a "hail of corruption" hurtling towards him he promptly turned 'round. Hearing a weak call for assistance belonging to PFC Glenn W Burkland, and fearing further and possible fatal injury to the hapless man in event of further blasts if left in his precarious position, Owens gallantly went back and dragged the airman behind a piece of loose concrete curbing. No sooner was this act completed than the second blast occurred."

"Lt. Alexander and W/O Nutt were blown from one side of their B-17 to the other, and the later sustained an injury as well as ending up under one of the engines. On regaining his feet Nutt "took off" from the vicinity, but ran into Lt. Eichenbaum. He had seen the smoke pall, and after ordering an MP to keep all other personnel out of the affected area he arrived to render assistance. He remarked on Nutt's injuries, which the W/O shrugged off as superficial and asked for his help. Sgt Miller, who had been walking from 024 to 992, was picked up on the way over to the latter B-17. The trio now came across Owens and Burkland; fearing further injury to Burkland should further explosions occur, and despite the obvious pain the PFC was suffering due to a compound fracture of a leg, Lt. Eichenbaum had him moved on a piece of wood over to a vehicle."

"The task of rendering 42-29992 safe was then begun with additional help from T/Sgt Balasa and S/Sgt Pinter (Balasa had scattered, and Pinter had hidden behind his Jeep in the interval between the blasts.). As Eichenbaum clambered into the rear fuselage Lt. Alexander went up front, where he had the painful experience of coming across the body of Lt. Tull, who had been struck in the head by a big chunk of flying metal. His corpse was gently eased out of the nose hatch and down to the waiting W/O Nutt and Lt. Bannon (who had just arrived from the bomb dump), and laid down on the ground to await carriage to the mortuary. The young officer's combat career had been closed within a mere 24 hours."

This unhappy detail completed, some of the men set to fighting fires around the B-17's tail surfaces and surrounding ammunition boxes, while bomb de-fusing was made by Lts. Eichenbaum and Bannon, who gingerly handed the detached fuses down to Nutt, Balasa, and Pinter."

"By Now Cols. Nazzaro and Fiegel were among those being admitted to the disaster zone, but there was little more to do than hose down the remnants of 42-30024 and commence the grisly task of picking up whatever was left of the mens' bodies. With the impending mission in mind, Col. Nazzaro called for the taxiway to be cleared of debris. A Cleartrac was brought in, to which 42-29992 was hooked-up for towing away." (pp 20-22).

Here are a few personal quotations taken from Ken Stone's *Triumphant We Fly: A 381st Bomb Group Anthology 1943-1945*:

Lt George A Bannon: "I was 700 yards away in the bomb dump. Then I heard the explosion, I started toward the plane, Jo Nutt and myself carried Lt. Tull's body away from the plane. We carried the boy with the broken leg out to Creek's car. Ike (Lt. Eichenbaum) and I then ran around trying to put out the fire in the damaged plane. After that they decided they wanted to move the plane. So I took out the fuses from the bombs inside. We handed them down to Nutt and an enlisted man as we took them out. I then helped to get people out of the area. When we did all we could, I took off and finished loading my own planes for the mission."

T/Sgt Walter Balasa: "I was in the bomb bay of '992'. We had just got through putting in the ninth bomb. It was lucky we had the shackles hooked to the rack when the explosion went off. There was a state of confusion. The plane trembled from the blast. We went out to the right side of the plane facing explosion. There was a big cloud of black smoke. We all started running toward the civilian huts. Two guys passed me like I was standing still. Then the second explosion went off. We waited to see if anything else was going up. W/O Nutt and Sgt. Miller went up to the wreck in a jeep, and I came up a few minutes later. We started taking the fuses out the bombs in '992'."

Lt. Julius Eichenbaum (Squadron Ordnance Officer): "About three minutes before the first explosion I went to '024' to see how my men were doing. I sent three of them down to get more ammunition for another squadron the 535th. I then went to the ammunition area, about 180 yards from the plane. The first thing I saw was flames and black smoke, and then I heard the blast. I jumped in my jeep and told everybody to clear-out of the ammunition area, and I started toward the plane. I heard another explosion. I saw an MP, and told him to keep everybody away from there, I went to '992'. I knew it had fused bombs in it. As I cut across I gave orders to keep everybody clear of the area. I picked up Joe Nutt and Sgt. Miller enroute. We rushed over to '992', and we came across Burkland lying about 9 feet from the plane, behind a piece of concrete curbing . . ."

"I then took the extinguisher and went to put out fires burning near '992.' I used up three extinguishers but couldn't put the damn thing out. Col. Nazzaro, Col. Fiegel, Lt. Withers, and Lt. Franek came along. I started to defuse the bombs. I was handing them to Lt. Platz, Sgt. Pinter, and Joe Nutt. Bannon started to defuse some. He was giving them to Franek, Miller, and Balasa. When we got to the fuses out we went to work on the fire again. About that time the Cleartrack came along. We hitched '992' to it, and Lt. Withers got in and we pulled it away."

Later that day, the 381st flew its second mission as scheduled. Group C.O. Colonel Joseph Nazzaro flew the lead ship, there were no losses in the air that day.

Chaplain Brown conducted the funeral for these 23 men on June 26, 1943, at the Brookwood American National Cemetery, Surrey, England, located about 25 miles south of London.

In his book the Chaplain writes:

"There were too many caskets to be placed inside the little chapel. The funeral, therefore, was held at the graves. All caskets were covered with American flags."

"I was accompanied by a few attendants from the 533rd Squadron which had sustained the loss. The firing squad and attendants were from the permanent staff of the Brookwood cemetery. It was impossible for the men of the 381st to attend. The men had to stay with their tasks on the base."