

*In what has to be the most miraculous survival of WW II, 2 crewmen of the 381st Bomb Group survived a 22,000 ft descent in the tail section of a B-17 without parachutes. This information was gathered from Matt Berk, including letters he supplied from the principals involved which he received after the war and conversations with Matt Berk and with Michael McCook, Wade's son.*

The date was October 8, 1943. The mission was to Bremen, Germany. The plane was "75".

Flying deputy lead position, the No. 4 engine was lost over the target and when the lead ship went down, "75" took over. A few minutes later, fighters attacked and No. 3 engine ran away. The loss of 2 engines prevented them from staying with the group and they were forced to drop back to another group. They kept dropping back until they were alone. As soon as they were alone, the fighters attacked continuously. The order came, "Prepare to bail out, we may have to abandon ship."

One of the waist gunners called, "Oxygen out on the co-pilot's side" and they were ordered to switch over to the other side. The ball turret gunner informed the pilot that gas was leaking from the No. 2 engine, covering the bottom of the ship and that firing one of his guns could set the ship on fire. He abandoned his position.

Twenty minutes after dropping their load, out of ammunition and badly damaged, the glass nose was knocked out, either by an overhead attack or a loose propeller from the windmilling No. 3 engine. The navigator and one of the waist gunners managed to escape the ship through the forward escape hatch.

At about this time, Wade McCook, the tail gunner made it to the other injured waist gunner, Matt Berk. When the nose glass blew off, the ship went into a dive for a few seconds before breaking in half at the waist. McCook and Berk were trapped in the aft section with no way out. Berk, half dead, lost consciousness and McCook could only hang on as the entire tail section wafted to the ground like a leaf!

McCook was captured by the Germans, suffering only small cuts and bruises from his ordeal. He told the Germans that the other man in the tail was dead but he was mistaken. Berk was transported to a German hospital where he regained consciousness three days later and learned the extent of his injuries which included a split jaw, one arm in a cast and unable to walk without the aid of a crutch. He was eventually repatriated back to the United States in a prisoner exchange and went on to work as a crash investigator for the Federal Aviation Agency.

Wade McCook returned home after the war, moved to Tucson, Az. where he lived for a while before re-enlisting in the Air Force. He went to Korea as a crew chief and was killed in a mid-air collision between two B-29's.

By Matt Berk

According to 381st records the aircraft was B-17F #42-29941 (MS-R) "TARFU" of the 535th BS.

Pilot	Manchester, Edwin R.	KIA
Copilot	Jukes, Elton D.	KIA
Navigator	Smith, Marvin L.	POW
Bombardier	Moore, Keith D.	POW
Top Turret	O'Donnell, James J.	KIA
Radio	Darrington, Lorenzo M.	KIA
Ball Turret	Tucker, Arthur L.	KIA
Left Waist	Berk, Matthew (NMI)	POW
Right Waist	Budzik, Anthony L.	KIA
Tail Turret	McCook, Wade (NMI)	POW