

HOW I LEARNED TO PRAY AT 20,000 FEET:
DEDICATED TO ALL THOSE WHO PRAY IN BATTLE

BY

FORREST S. CLARK, 44TH BOMB GROUP

To the Men and Women of the US Air Force in Iraq and Afghanistan and who fly today all over the world.

"We're going down. Into the North Sea. Only God can save us now"

These were my words as our bomber sank closer and closer to the waves and the bitter cold sea. I knelt down in the piles of hot spent shells and blood and prayed. "This was it."

We were returning from a bombing mission to Norway when attacked by a dozen enemy fighters. We were lagging behind the bomber formation and were easy prey to enemy fighters.

I could see the enemy pilots' faces they came so close. I pressed down on the triggers of my twin 50s and filled the sky with fire.

The enemy fighters, too many to count, lined up to come in at us, firing all the way. The date was November 18, 1943. I was a 21 year old tail gunner on a four engine bomber returning from a mission to destroy a German airbase in Norway. We were on our way back to England after a successful mission.

They flew so close I could see the pilots' heads, their helmets and make out their faces before they dove their planes down and away again. I cried over the intercom, "They're going to ram us, they're going to ram us."

The wings of the fighters were alive with fire, blinking darts of death bearing down on us. One after another they came. Why were they shooting at me, what had we on the crew done to deserve this?

We had thrown out all unneeded equipment, including oxygen bottles, and were still going down, straight for the frigid icy waters of the North Sea. We were skimming the waves by now and yet the attackers pressed on determined to finish us off.

All hope was gone and we knew we were going into the sea.

I heard the bail out bell ringing which meant we had to parachute and let the bomber crash. I fell out of the tail turret and rolled over on the body of one of the other gunners. He was bleeding from the head and I thought he was gone, dead, from enemy fire. The shell that hit that

gunner had narrowly missed me. "Got to get out a here," I cried.

I pulled the hatch door and looked down at the cold waves of the North Sea. Then I hesitated to jump and sank down on my knees and started to pray. I prayed like I had never done before, for the survival of our crew, the bomber and a safe return to base.

Suddenly as I prayed a thin layer of clouds formed over the sea and we went into it, escaping from the enemy fighters. The battle was over. We limped home with three of four engines gone over 500 miles to our base in northern England. Every minute could have been our last. We finally had to bail out as we approached the base.

When the repair crews went through the wreckage of our bomber they found two unexploded 20 mm shells in the one remaining engine. If they had gone off we would have been blown to bits.

Did my prayers make the difference? Who knows? But I like to think they did and maybe, just maybe, a good pilot, a sturdy aircraft and God's will made our survival possible.

There is an ecstasy to the contrast of the pristine sky, the redeeming blue at altitude and the death that can come there. At times there was nothing but this innocent blueness all about the sky and I was in it immersed like a willing fly in some exotic atmosphere. The air was full of promises of everlasting life, a sort of affirmation of the human condition and of life itself. During these periods I would think of romantic poetry, of the love of man for woman or of woman for man, the purity of friendships, and the compassion of ordinary people.

Yet at the next moment I could be facing ugly death from an enemy fighter that would appear out of the purity of sky and heavens.

I learned to pray, not the usual kind of Sunday School prayers, but a highly charged literary type of prayer. I learned to pray at 20,000 feet in those harrowing moments just before and after "bombs away."

I learned to pray at the moments when the flak was close and the plane shuttered and wavered in the sky over some bombed out German city.

There is an exhilaration from survival and often on homeward bound parts of the mission images and scenes would appear to me etched with extraordinary clarity and power.

Years later I went back to our base in England. There I met the farmer on whose field we had landed that day in 1943.

"God was with you boys that day," he told me as we stood on the same farm field.

"How are you so sure?" I asked.

"Because," he said, "I too was praying for you."

However, that is not the end of the story. About 40 years later I found a fellow airman who had been in a German prisoner of war camp. He told me that the Germans made a practice of posting the numbers of our bombers shot down. He said he had seen our number posted among those shot down.

Then, I knew the Germans had given us up for lost. Who formed that cloud bank at the last minute over the sea?

One more thing in the story. That wounded gunner I was sure was dead did survive and was found alive in the wreckage and pulled to safety. Did he owe his life to a miracle?

Mechanics on the ground crews and the top officers in the bomb group could not give the answers. No one to this day has the answers.

Did prayer make the difference?

I think so. In the Bible it speaks many times of faith and prayer.

Psalm 33 in part says, "A king is not saved by a great army. Nor a warrior delivered by great strength."

Our bomber was in the hands of God and He got us back. It was a manifest miracle. For which we should be eternally grateful.

By Forrest S. Clark—One of the survivors and tail gunner on that same bomber, November 1943. I still believe in prayer. I am sure I was not the only one praying that day.

After the war I felt why did God save us and not so many others? I decided then to go into journalism to tell the redeeming stories of all men and women. I thought that in writing I could find the challenge: Why my life had been saved that day over the North Sea.

That way I might make up for the guilt I felt in being saved.

I still want to fulfill that challenge and am still looking for ways to do it. Some day I hope I can meet that challenge that God gave us so many years ago.

I finished my missions before D-Day and was shot down and escaped into France in the closing days of 1944. I was rotated back to the USA in January 1945. My escape was over the Alps and to Annecy, France, in December of 1944. I was discharged in October 1945 at Salt Lake City and I have the Purple Heart and Air Medal.

Dedicated to Scott Ramsey for his memorial video of WWII and his duty to WWII veterans of all kinds. Forrest S. Clark 2006.

TO ALL THE BRAVE MEN AND WOMEN OF THE US AIR FORCE WHO ARE FLYING AS I WRITE I GIVE THEM ALL A SALUTE AND HAPPY LANDINGS AND MAY THEY ALL COME HOME WHEN DCO, DUTY CARRIED OUT. THE BROTHERHOOD OF THOSE WHO FLY IS UNIVERSAL. WE ARE ALL BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN THE SKIES.

DEDICATED TO ALL THE RUTGERS MEN WHO SERVED IN WWII AND FOR THEIR COURAGE IN BATTLE AND FOR THEIR SERVICE TO OUR NATION. ALSO TO LT. WILLIAM TINSMAN, WHO SERVED WITH OUR AIRCREW IN THE 8TH AIR FORCE.