

### B-24J – S/N 110109 – Casualty of War<sup>3</sup>

In preparation for a wheels up time of 0800 on 5 May 1944 the ground crew spent the night preparing the B-26J Liberator, S/N 110109, and loading a full complement of bombs. 72<sup>nd</sup> Bombardment Squadron Commanding Officer, Major Gerald Cass, would join the normal crew of 10 and pilot the lead plane on a bombing run to **Biak Island**. In addition to Major Cass the crew consisted of:

- 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Willard L. Horn, Pilot
- F/O<sup>4</sup> Joseph Broncato, Co-Pilot
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Anthony J. Goode, Navigator
- Capt. Oscar E. Wisner, Bombardier
- T/Sgt. Vernon E. Packard, Engineer
- T/Sgt. Joshua E. Swanner, Jr., Assistant Engineer
- T/Sgt. Robert Chapman, Radio Operator
- Cpl. William D. Blumenthal, Assistant Radio Operator
- S/Sgt. Joseph Sleshinski, Gunner
- Sgt. Melvin L. Colson, Gunner



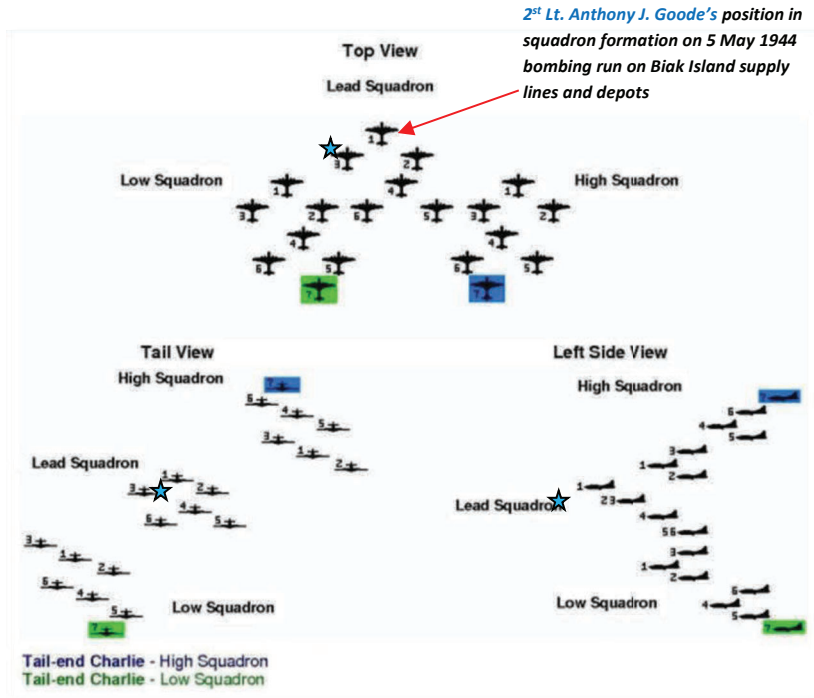
After wheels up the aircraft would rendezvous with 19 other bombers and line up in a standard “combat box” formation, holding that formation for the duration of the mission.

**COMBAT BOX** - The US Army Air Force developed the combat box formation for its heavy bombers that was designed to provide the maximum amount of protection for the bomber formation.

The basic combat box was a four (later three) bomber formation that arranged the bombers both horizontally and vertically to give the clearest fields of fire for its machine guns.

Machine gunners in the various positions were assigned sectors; they could engage targets in their sectors but not outside of it as it risked hitting bombers in the box.

And the bomber box was supposed to be tight: a tight formation meant that the bombers were within a wingspan or less of each other, not an easy feat when the bombers were buffeted by turbulence from other aircraft in the formation, flak and weather.



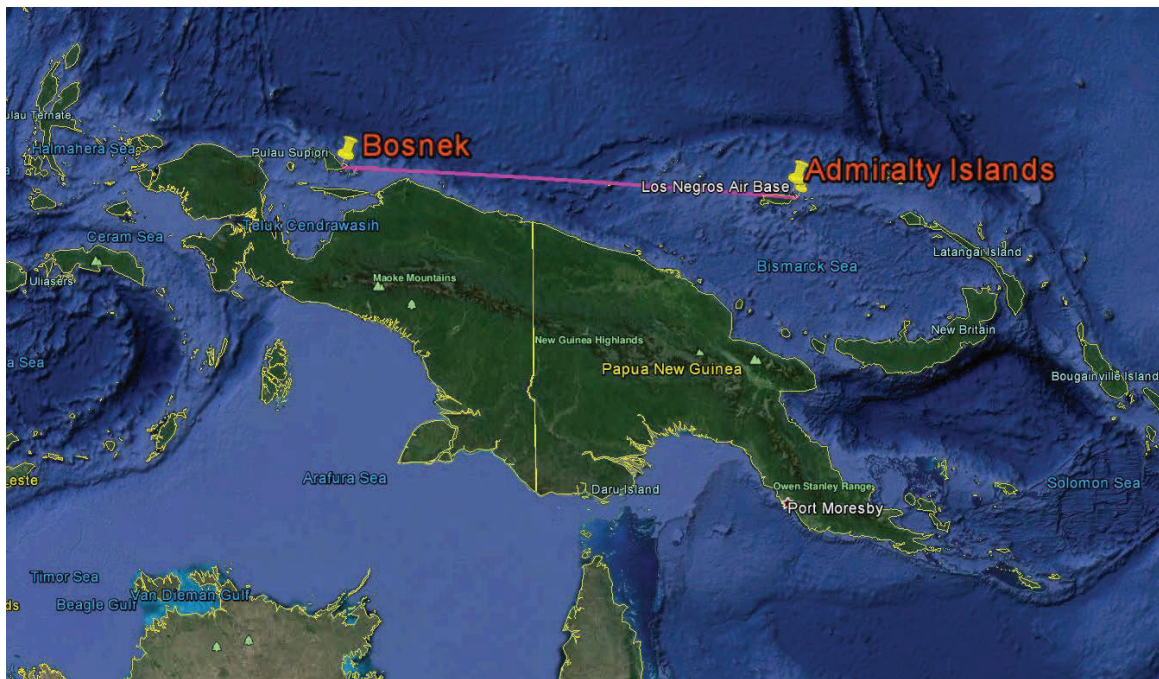
<sup>3</sup> This material is taken from the declassified Missing Air Crew Report #5083 issued on 11 May 1944. A micro-fiche copy of that report and eyewitness accounts is attached to this document as Appendix II.

<sup>4</sup> A Flight Officer is a member of the aircrew of an aircraft who is responsible for specific functions. The flight officer may function as the navigator, responsible for planning the journey, advising the pilot while en route, and ensuring that hazards or obstacles are avoided. The flight officer may also be responsible for operating aircraft mission/weapon systems, including mission planning, mission timing, threat reactions, aircraft communications, and hazard avoidance. Enlisted and aviation cadet trainees who successfully passed air qualification training were appointed as Flight Officers and served as rated pilots, navigators, flight engineers, bombardiers and glider pilots.

The most vulnerable bombers in the box formation were the "Tail-end Charlies." They had the fewest number of bombers and machine guns covering them and were consequently the preferred targets for German fighters who were looking for the easy kill. However, the most effective biggest prize was the disabling or destruction of the lead plane (number 1 in the lead squadron) since that crew had primary responsibility for setting the altitude, direction and speed for the bombing runs and for primary targeting. All the other planes in the formation dropped when they did. The job of the other bombardiers was to trip the bomb release switch in their own plane when the lead dropped their bombs. This method/technique was intended to concentrate the bomb pattern for maximum destruction. This routine led to the creation of another role and title when there were personnel shortages. Some enlisted crew members were selected to sit in the bombardier's position and trip the switch when the lead plane dropped their bombs. That role was called a "togglie."

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The squadron of B-24J's left the **Los Negros** airspace on a heading of 275° magnetic set by 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. **Anthony J. Goode**, the navigator in the lead plane, for the 2 hour 45 minute 775 mile flight to **Bosnek Town** on **Biak Island**. Weather and conditions permitting there would be one run to the target area of the **Bosnek Town** supply and defense area, a turn to the north away from **Biak** Air Field and her defenses then straight back to **Los Negros** on the reverse heading of 95°.





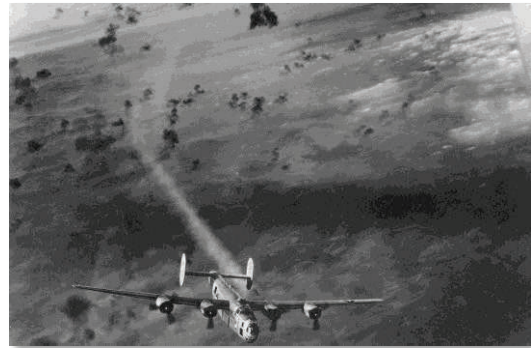
As the attack was somewhat of a surprise there were manageable anti-aircraft defenses on the way in. This allowed for both high altitude saturation bombing and low altitude selective bombing as shown here. The bombing run went as planned and the squadron turned for home. However, the now fully alerted anti-aircraft positions at **Bosnek** and Japanese pilots based at Moloner Runway at **Biak Island** Air Base were not going to sit idly by. This would make the trip home an entirely different story.



B24's Bomb Bosnek on Biak Island in Preparation for the Invasion

A waist gunner from one of the B-24J's returning that day, Roy E. Talbott, remembered the day.

*"We got hit by anti-aircraft fire. Everything happened so fast you didn't have time to think about it. There was a lot of dirt and dust flying. The bomber was crippled managed to limp to a part of New Guinea, which had just been invaded by American troops. We crash-landed on a dirt runway -- originally placed there by the Japanese -- near an Army field hospital, where the crewmembers were treated for their injuries. I suffered shrapnel wounds to the thigh during the attack and a broken wrist and a knot on my forehead during the crash landing. Other personnel were hurt pretty badly but we all survived. I was fortunate compared to some of my crew mates. My injuries were minor compared to what the others' were. I was what you call a walking casualty."*



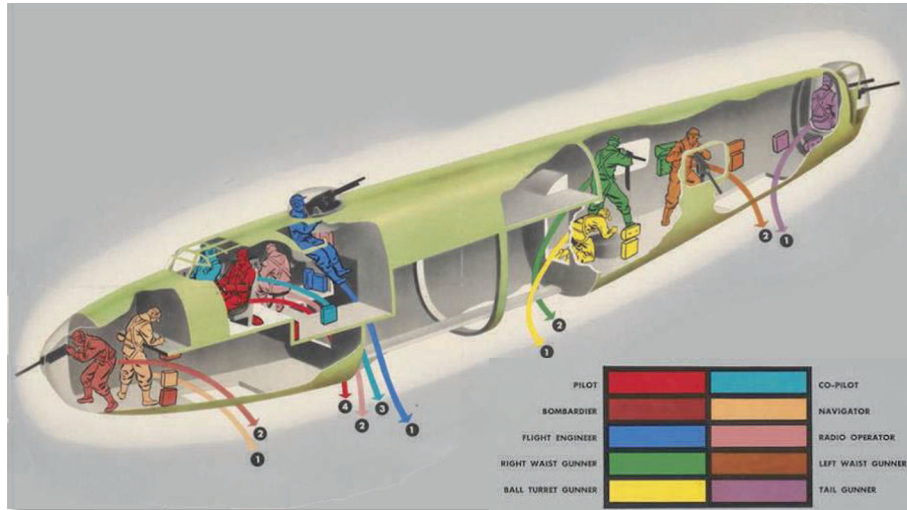
Elsewhere the Zeros were swarming with those manning the B-24J nose, upper turret, waist, belly and tail guns going through ammunition rapidly. Once off the coast the anti-aircraft fire ceased to be a problem but the Zeros pursued.



At 1148 on the return flight, less than 15 minutes past bombs-away, the squadron was attacked by Japanese Ki84 fighters. Cannon fire hit Major Cass' lead plane in the #2 engine on the left wing causing the engine to fail and catch fire. It quickly spread to the back edge of the wing. The engine was feathered and the plane seemed to lose speed but appeared under control as B-24J's can easily fly on three engines. However, there must have been more significant damage causing the pilot to call abandon ship.



The crew has certainly been trained and practiced the abandon ship maneuver but in a crisis situation on a crippled and possibly out of control ship it is a daunting task.

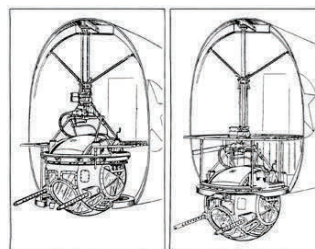
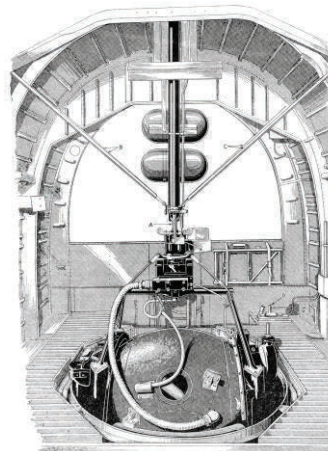


If -

- all of the crew members heard the abandon ship call,
- the pilot could maintain some degree of control,
- the bomb bay doors remained open following the bombing run,
- debris was not blocking the narrow passages,
- there were no interior fires,
- none of the crew was injured,

From my mother's sleep I fell into the State,  
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.  
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,  
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.  
When I died, they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

... those closer to the center of the fuselage could get out first. The tail and belly turret gunners would no doubt have been at their stations and have the additional challenge of getting out of their harnesses and getting out of their enclosures. In particular for the belly gunner the ball turret can only be exited if it is in the properly rotated position and that requires hydraulic power or the ability to disengage it, rotate it manually and lift it vertically.





The radioman, engineers (also serving as top turret gunner while under attack) and pilots and co-pilots have a short drop to the bomb bay and if that was closed run across the catwalk through the bomb bay to the waist windows or main hatch in the rear. The navigator and bombardier who also serve as the nose gunner can only exit via the front landing gear wheel well and only if the wheel is extended. That can be done manually as well as under hydraulic power. The airman in the nose gunner position has the same harnessing and enclosure problems to overcome as the tail gunner.

Two men were seen to bail out of the right-side waist window implying the bomb bay doors might not have been accessible and that was a quicker exit than dealing with the closed main entry hatch in the rear floor.

Could it have been the waist gunners that emerged first or were they incapacitated by the initial damage or wing fire that could be sweeping back into the fuselage? Perhaps it was two of the crew from the pilot's area racing aft and out the one clear waist window having been the first to hear the abandon ship call?

Their chutes opened. Seconds later two more men followed – but this time there were no chutes. Surely desperate but perhaps injured or disoriented, they fell into the water from 1700 feet now fifty miles at sea.

Moments later still at altitude the left wing crumpled at the number two engine. It was a fatal blow and the structure had failed. The plane fell 1700 feet and dove into the water. It was 1152. The whole incident took less than four minutes.



Captain William E. Stuart who was second in command flying in the number 2 wing position of Major Cass' lead plane immediately called to the formation to fly top cover for him as he went down to find and circle the survivors and to give them an emergency flotation box and life raft.

Two Zeros were still above and dropped incendiary phosphorus bombs on them while they were circling the survivors. The survivors were located and Captain Stuart's navigator immediately gave the position of the survivors to the radio operator who in turn notified Dumbo (rescue flight operations), Hollandia (rescue flight base and major Allied Air installation) and Los Negros (their departure point and home base). They climbed back into formation giving orders to get on his wing and then began the slow two-and-a-half-hour flight back to base. Knowing they had lost their comrades and that they were leaving two survivors behind was agonizing.

