

Where Were You On September 11th?

By Al Ciurczak



No....I'm not referring to the terrorist attack in New York City, which I also watched all day long on 9/11/2001. My September 11th was one of my most memorable days. It came in 1943 on a bombing mission to Paramushira in the northern islands of Japan. I was a T/Sgt. Photo Gunner with the 404th Bomb Squadron (H) in the 11th Air Force. On that day I was flying with the J.J. Jones crew. I flew with a different crew on just about every mission the squadron was involved in since we were short of photographers. We took off on the 10th of September, 1943, from Adak Island and headed to a forward base on Attu Island at the end of the Aleutian Island chain. The idea was to give our B-24s the necessary range to the target by using an extra bomb bay tank for the long over water Bearing Sea flight.

On September 11, 1943 at 0800 we took off along with every available B-24 and B-25 of the 11th Air Force and headed west. This was not like an 8th Air Force mission. With two dozen aircraft, this was one of the largest show of bombers in the North Pacific theatre of operation. No fighter escort, just lots of gunners manning .50 caliber guns from two turrets on each plane (we had no belly turrets on the B-24's), two waist guns and two flexible guns in the bombardiers compartment and two forward fixed guns mounted under the deck operated by the pilot from the cockpit. Our bomb load was a bomb bay full of 500 pounders.

The following is a quote from Al Ciurzak's diary:

"September 11, 1943: Took off at 8 o'clock for Paramushira. Trip was uneventful on the way out, but after the bombs dropped on the target our flight was attacked by a flock of Zeros. We all headed for the deck, and when we got there we stayed at about 50 feet. Major Gash's ship on our right wing crashed in the water not over a hundred feet from us due to enemy fighter action (Feuer was the photographer on that ship.) It sure was a shock to see them hit the water for I knew the crew well since I flew with them on prior missions, especially Walter Feuer who I have known since I first joined the Army. The Zeros kept coming. We got hit above the bomb bays. All our radios were knocked out and another shell put a big hole in our de-icer tanks and hydraulic system, it's lucky we didn't blow up. I went up to the flight deck to tell Lambe (our engineer) about the de-icer tanks. Just as I stuck my head in the door, two 20mm shells hit the top hatch and went off when they hit the armor plate of the top turret. The place was filled with

smoke. When it cleared a bit I climbed in to talk to Lambe who was standing behind the pilot and co-pilot. Just then a shell hit the front windshield, hitting the co-pilot in the face. Lambe and I got the co-pilot out of his seat, sat him in the corner and Lambe got into the co-pilot seat. I took care of the co-pilot. He was bleeding like a stuck pig. I ripped open all the first aid kits I could find and put on all the bandages but the blood kept on coming. I then ripped off my winter underwear for it was the cleanest thing I could think of and wrapped it around his head and face leaving an opening near his mouth so he could breathe. The blood slowed up so I gave him some sulfanilamide tablets. He was sure taking it well, didn't squawk one bit, even when I gave him a shot of morphine in the leg to ease the pain. A shell hit alongside me, just above the radio table and the felt lining of the plane caught fire. I put it out by pulling the felt loose. The Zeros finally left and was I glad, so was the rest of the crew, especially the pilot for it was a hard job flying the plane with one hand (the shell that came through the front wind shield had also hit him in the right arm.) It's a good thing Lambe, our engineer, knew a lot about flying and he really helped the pilot. When we were sure the Zeros had gone for good, Lt. Lemons, our bombardier, came up to the flight deck and we cleared the empty shells from the top turret and made a place for the co-pilot to lie down. We had a few blankets and bed rolls in the plane so we wrapped them around him to keep him warm.

Then I left the flight deck and went to the back of the ship where the gunners were talking about the zeros they had shot down. Rodd, the top turret gunner, found a hole made by a 30 caliber bullet in the bill of his hat (he wore it with the bill turned up.) There were a lot of happy gunners, four Zeros to the ship's credit. (Top turret – one; fixed nose guns – one; tail gunner – one; left waist gun – one.) Our happy spell didn't last long for when the engineer tried to transfer fuel from the bomb bay tank to the wing tanks, he found that the pump wouldn't work. That meant that we had about one chance in ten of making it back to Attu. The pilot gave the order to toss everything out of the plane that was loose. Everything went out the bottom hatch; machine guns, cameras, radio equipment, and we even chopped the armor plate out alongside the gunner's position and tossed that out the bottom hatch. We all put on our life vests and went up forward so the ship would fly better. I don't know about the others, but that's when I started to pray and think. I guess this was the hardest I ever prayed in my life. The

thought that kept running through my mind was not being able to see Kitty, my wife, again. The engineer and I climbed into the bomb bay and tried to fix the fuel pump. No use, we didn't have the tools. All we could do was pray. According to the gas gauge, we had enough fuel left in our wing tanks to fly until 6 o'clock. The navigator told us we would hit land at 5:55. I relaxed a little for I knew if the weather was clear we could find the field. At 5:15 we were told to go to the back and prepare for a crash landing. We packed our sleeping bags against the rear bulkhead. While this was going on the radio operator was helping the pilot fly the ship. We all stuck our noses to the windows to look for signs of land. At 5:55 we spotted land and our hopes went up. Fog was rolling in, no sign of the airstrip. The ship banked sharply and headed away from shore. We didn't know what was going on but found out later that the pilot couldn't find the Attu landing strip and headed for Shemya, 16 miles away. It was 6 o'clock and our gas gauges read empty. We were flying on borrowed time. Landing gear went down. We heard the wheels hit the end of the strip and we all jumped out and hailed a jeep, sending the driver for an ambulance. We all helped the co-pilot out of the ship and waited for the ambulance. The mission was over. Looking the ship over later, we found it was full of holes and it's a wonder it didn't fall apart."

I'll always remember the co-pilot as we helped him out of the ship at the end of the flight. His head was covered with my bloody underwear. He was standing and he wanted to pee. Someone said, "Pee in your pants." He said, "Are you kidding?" The ambulance came after he relieved himself near the nose wheel and climbed on the stretcher. They slid him in and away they went. Although I had tossed out the cameras when we got the word to lighten the load, I kept the exposed film magazines and headed to the base photo lab. Great pictures. Wasn't able to keep a set - "Classified."

I will always remember September 11, 1943.

Crew: Pilot: LT. Jerome J. Jones, Top Turret: S/Sgt. Walter E. Rodd, Co-pilot: Lt. Raymond K. Underwood, Radar Operator: S/Sgt. Vale W. Wright, Navigator: Lt. James S. Elliott, Tail Gunner: S/Sgt. Jack Leffler, Bombardier: Lt. Roy L. Lemons, Gunner: S/Sgt. Charles Beech, Engineer: T/Sgt. Dwight C. Lambe, Radio man: T/Sgt. John Stroo, Photographer: T/Sgt. Alexander D. Ciurczak

Editor's Note: Retired U.S. Air Force Capt. Al Ciurczak received two DFC's during his Aleutian Island tour.



AIR ATTACK FROM THE ALEUTIANS -- Pulling out of a highly destructive run, this Mitchell bomber is over snow-covered Kashiwabara army staging area. Paramushiru Island in the northern Kuriles, where it has just strafed troops and buildings after scoring direct hits on a 2,500 ton cargo ship seen exploding and burning in the bay. The medium cargo ship was one of six cargo and escort vessels sunk or damaged by a force of U.S. Army 11th Air Force Mitchells and Liberators which surprised a convoy in the Kataoka Naval Base, Shimushu Island, to score their biggest day's toll of enemy shipping in almost two years.

(Photo credit National Archives via the Reddie Archives)