Memories of a Belly Turret Gunner

By: T.W. McCarthy

Gunner, VD-4, USN

It may seem strange today, when almost everyone has traveled by air, but in 1942 when I joined the Navy, I had never been off the ground. A Ford Tri-Motor, a real ugly duckling if you will, had visited our small Indiana town but except for that my experience with airplanes was the occasional sight of a Piper Cub. So, I didn't know what to expect when the Navy made the decision that I should become an aviator!

After completing Radio Operator training, I was sent to Aviation Radio School, and then to Aerial Gunnery School at the Naval Air Station, Pensacola, Florida. Raised in rural Indiana, I was familiar with guns and I thoroughly enjoyed the training. We began by firing shotguns at clay pigeons on a skeet range, and concluded by shooting at clay pigeons from a moving vehicle. This was good practice in shooting at a moving target from a moving base, an excellent simulation of the problem that we would face when attacked by an enemy fighter in the air. We also had electronic trainers that projected motion pictures of a fighter plane on a screen and the gunner occupied a simulated gun turret where a beam of light represented the line of fire. When the gunner got the beam of light on the target, it registered hits. Let me mention that during our training, our instructors constantly reminded us that we would be firing machine guns, and we must be careful to fire short bursts so that we could conserve our ammunition. They were quite correct that it would be disastrous to waste ammunition and leave yourself defenseless (most of our guns could not be re-loaded in flight, once ammunition was exhausted.) But, as I'll explain later, there is a time and place for everything.

In 1943, I arrived at San Diego, California where I was assigned to Navy Photographic Squadron Four (VD-4). We flew the B-24 Liberator, four-engine bomber, which the Navy called a PB4Y-1. With the exception of the pilots and photographers, every member of the crew was also an aerial gunner. We had a ball turret on the bow and a .30 caliber machine gun mounted in the

Official Crew Photograph, Late 1943, Barber's Point, Hawaii.
Front Row: Left to right: Tom McCarthy Aviation Radioman (ARM) 2/C, Lt. (jg) James, Co-Pilot, Lt. Lowry, Patrol Plane Commander (PPC), Ensign Munsey, Navigator, Al Wick, Photo Mate (PhoM) 2/c.
Back Row: Left to Right: Sam Gange Aviation Ordnanceman (AOM) 1/C, Orvin Prellwitz, Aviation Machinist Mate (AMM) 2/C, Orville Price, Seaman 1/C (Ordnance Striker), J. R. Kaul, Aviation Machinist Mate (AMM) 3/C, Walter Lawhead, Photographers Mate (PhoM) 1/C, O. A. Bouterie, Aviation Radioman (ARM) 3/C.

"Witchcraft" in flight is almost my favorite because it really depicts the "tired old lady" that saw us through and brought us home.

bombardiers compartment so that even the navigator/bombardier had a weapon. The top turret, belly turret and tail turret each had two .50 caliber machine guns, and there was a single .50 caliber machine gun in each of the two waist hatches.

The belly turret is truly spherical, a ball about four feet in diameter, with only three windows or viewing ports; one between the two .50 caliber machine guns, a circular glass about a foot in diameter, and two small plexiglass ports; one on each side of the turret at eye level. With the guns horizontal, the gunner is laying on his back, with his feet straddling the circular window and the guns alongside him, pointing straight ahead. When the gunner rotates the turret so that the guns are pointing straight down, he is sitting (but still curled up) and this is the only position from which he can exit the turret into the fuselage of the airplane. It would have been possible, in flight, to turn the turret level and open the hatch (outside the airplane), but I was not able to wear a parachute, so this wasn't really an option for me.

I think the name speaks for itself. We chose that name in the hope that we might be able to work some magic. There was also the sly attempt at a pun: Witchcraft - Which Craft?" to fool the enemy!

Many gunners declared that they wanted nothing to do with the belly turret. The gunner was curled up inside a ball completely outside the airplane, and they simply couldn't conceive of operating in that environment. For myself, I wanted every advantage I could get, so I chose to man the belly turret because it was equipped with a computing sight. Actually, I loved it although to some extent I suffer from claustrophobia, and a fear of heights! My view was limited to what was directly in front of me, and to each side of me, but the turret turned 360 degrees in azimuth, and 90 degrees in elevation so by turning the turret I had clear access to everything underneath the plane and a wonderful view of the earth (or the ocean, as the case may be!) I was never uncomfortable in the belly turret, although it could be pretty exciting when flying very low over the water, which we did occasionally.

I said I was never uncomfortable and that isn't quite true of course. The occurrences were brief and not often, but there were a few moments I recall very well. Because we flew almost all of our missions at 20,000 feet, and we required oxygen at that altitude, I would enter the turret before we began our climb to altitude. Then I would remain in the turret until the mission was completed and we returned to a lower altitude. Bear in mind that in the PB4Y-1/B-24, the turret is retractable. It is normally stowed inside the fuselage of the aircraft, and during operations, it is lowered about four feet, so that the turret and the gunner inside are completely outside the aircraft.

The retraction mechanism is a hydraulic system. A pump just behind the bomb bay is used to pump the turret up, and when it is to be lowered, it is only necessary to open the hydraulic valve and the turret falls to its extended position. "Falls" is a good word to describe that, because on our first mission, we had agreed beforehand, that I would enter the turret while it was stowed and Earl Jobe, one of our photographers would open the valve and lower the turret as we approached the target. We hadn't practiced this; it seemed pretty straightforward, but without thinking, Earl opened the valve and SWISH the turret, with me inside, fell about four feet. I'm sure you can understand that at 20,000 feet with no parachute, that got my attention! From then on, Earl and I had an understanding; it certainly wasn't his fault, neither of us had thought of it, but after that first time he always opened the valve ver-r-ry slowly, so that the turret sank slowly into the extended position instead of falling

I hope you can understand and accept the fact that I do not remember being "frightened" except for

a couple of times. Most of the time, I was so completely occupied with being prepared for and responding to attacks by enemy fighters that I didn't have time to be afraid. It was certainly exciting! I always felt like it was a duel between the enemy fighter and myself, but I felt that I was well prepared to defend myself.

Crew portrait, 1945. L to R, Front Row: Sam Gange (Ordnanceman), Lt. Lowry, PPC, Ens. Munsey, Nav, Lt (jg) James, Co Pilot. Back Row: Bush Riley, Radioman, Orvin Prellwitz, Plane Captain, Walter Lawhead, Photographer, Tom McCarthy, Radioman, J. R. Kaul, Machinist Mate, Orville Price, Ordnanceman, Earl Jobe, Photographer.

I distinctly remember being terribly concerned (!) one time over the island of Nauru. The island had been a British protectorate and when the Japanese occupied it early in the War, they captured the British anti-aircraft weapons. There were no enemy fighters in the air, but the Japanese filled the sky that day with puffs of black smoke as they tried desperately to shoot us down with anti-aircraft guns. I must leave it to your imagination how it felt to sit in that ball turret while someone shot at me and I couldn't do a damn thing to avoid the unwanted attention. There was no doubt that they were trying to kill me, and I still have vivid memories of thinking that I was only 20 years old and I was much too young to die!

There was a moment of panic over Truk, one of the strongest Japanese outposts in the Pacific, and always well defended. As usual, I had entered the turret quite some time before we arrived at the target, but it wasn't until the turret was lowered into the operational position that I realized that I was effectively blind! Oil and dust covered the main sighting window, which was the only way I could aim my guns. Again, I recall quite well that I called out something like: "Oh, ..., I can't see a damn thing." Actually, it was only seconds until I calmed down, and pointed out that the other crewmen/gunners would have to tell me what was going on because I couldn't see.

We were well aware that the enemy fighters were quite good at assessing our capabilities, and it was immediately obvious to them if one of our planes was somehow handicapped. If they made an approach to our plane, for example, and the belly turret did not turn to protect the plane, it would be immediately apparent that something was wrong. Under such circumstances, it was standard practice for them to concentrate their efforts on the weakest, least defended, target. I knew that if I failed to respond to their presence, we would be in great danger, so I certainly was concerned! But again, once the rest of the crew knew of the problem, I knew that I could count on them and we could probably prevent the enemy from finding our weak spot. I could see out the side panels and keep track of fighters at a distance, but if they began an approach I had to turn as if I could actually see them and begin firing when the crew advised me that they were coming into range.

The B-24 with the phosphorous bomb trails is actually an unidentified plane, but it was taken over Truk Atoll on August 6, 1944. I like to think it could have been Witchcraft, but I really don't know.

I had a very good example of how a fighter pilot could search out a weak spot. It occurred on my first mission over Saipan in May of 1944. A Zero attacked us from below and I fired a short burst at long range. At about that point, the belly turret gunner in the plane on my right began firing and I was amazed at the fact that he seemed determine to spend all of his ammunition at this first opportunity. Based on our training, I actually thought that he must have a malfunction. I was so distracted by him that I fired very few shots at the enemy fighter. As a result of my failure to defend myself, that fighter came in very close, believing I'm sure that my guns were out of order. (Actually, it was the gunner that was out of order, not the guns!) I am

The plane flown by LCmdr Clark, our CO. I flew several missions with his crew when his first radioman became disabled and a replacement was necessary. In the cockpit is Harold Mittendorf AMM 1/C, Plane Captain. On the ground is me, and behind me (with the bomb) is (unfortunately) an unidentified crewman. Mittendorf and I were celebrating the addition of the Jap flag, (under the cockpit window) symbolizing the fighter we were credited with shooting down over Iwo Jima on November 7, 1944. Photo taken on Guam in mid-November 1944.

sure that fighter must have come within a hundred yards; much closer than any of the attacks that occurred in the future. I hardly fired a shot at him, and maybe because he was watching me, expecting me to begin firing at any moment, he failed to aim appropriately, because he didn't score a hit on us.

This seems to be the right time to speak of my belief in God and His power to protect us. Certainly it is not that God singles out an individual as being "righteous and worthy" but some Higher Power must have protected me that day. I freely acknowledge that it was my faith in God that made it possible for me to have the courage to engage in battle. In addition, I will always thank Him for the fact that, whatever the reason, by the time I engaged in actual combat in mid-1944, the strength of the Japanese had been somewhat dissipated. The first few encounters that we had with Japanese fighter planes were much more dangerous; the enemy fighter pilots were much more aggressive and were better trained, than the enemy pilots that we encountered later in the year. We, as a crew, gained from the experience, but the enemy was beginning to show the signs of defeat by the end of 1944. Many of my friends, who took a more direct path to combat, engaging with the enemy a few months earlier, gave their lives as evidence that the Japanese fighter pilots were more capable early in the War.

We returned to the United States in December of 1944 and the use of atomic weapons brought the War to an end just before I was scheduled to go back to war. It is tragic that so many died at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but it ended my exposure to war, and for that I will always be grateful.

God bless America!

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Credit: Bob Stevens/"There I Was..." Special thanks to Barbara Stevens.