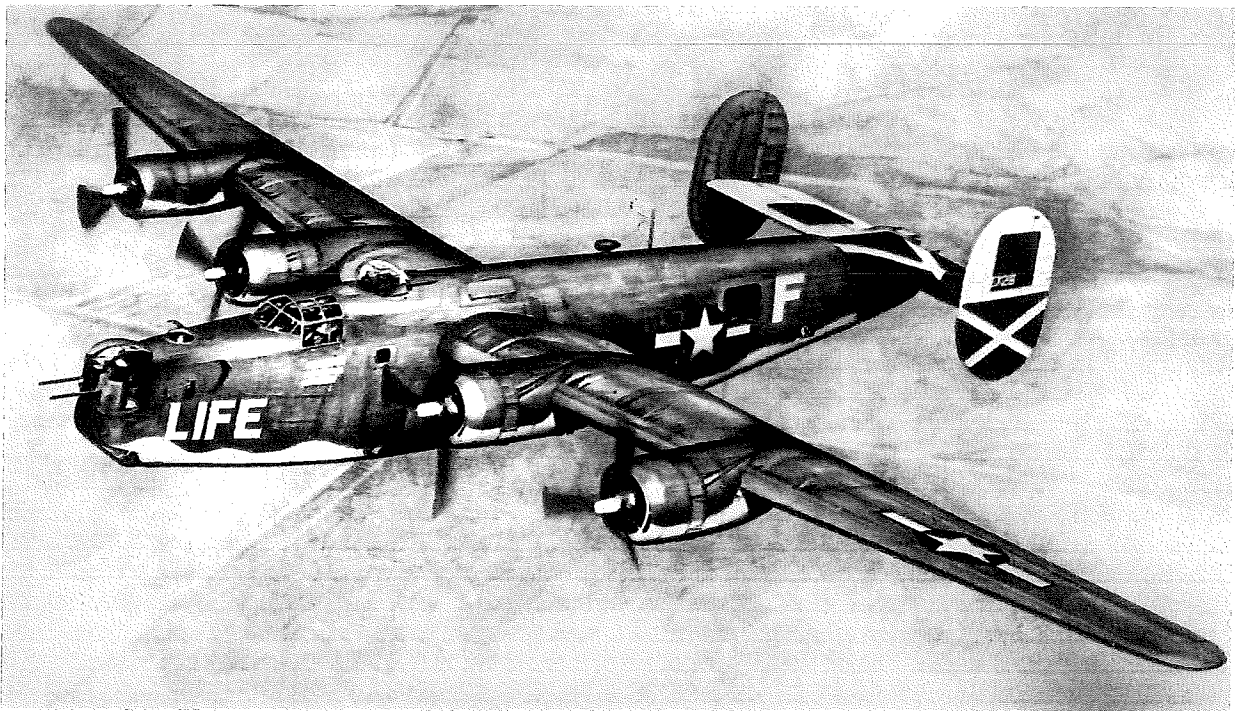


# The Three Miracles

George Russell



IN THE BEGINNING of 1945, I and my crew of 8 others were assigned to a Consolidated B-24 Liberator that we were to fly to New Guinea. In all, there were two dozen bomber crews scheduled to depart from Sacramento for the Pacific theater. The plane had no trouble making it to Hawaii; however on the second leg, the plane started to lag: we were losing time and burning through too

much gas. There had to be a problem with one of the engines, but when we landed on Canton Island and had the plane checked, we were declared OK for the next leg of our journey and we set off to Tarawa. There, we again claimed to the Navy, which ran the airstrip we were using, that there had to be a problem with one of the engines, but they cleared us for flight again and told us to take off for the Russell Islands. About one hour out, we lost one engine. We knew the bomber could fly on two engines, and possibly even one, if the engines had been well-tuned. With our heavy gasload, we started to lose altitude and Paul Humphrey, the pilot, decided to return to Tarawa. Losing more and more altitude on the way back, though, we were left with little choice but to start throwing everything that wasn't bolted down off the plane. We even had to resort to dumping gas, but the plane couldn't maintain altitude.

At that time, the military was requiring all pilots to make their landings in two legs, the first a down wind, then one on the up. When we arrived back in Tarawa, we were so low that Paul refused to make the downwind leg, but he did a fine job of getting safely onto the island. This time the Navy agreed that the plane would need a new engine, so we remained on Tarawa until a new engine could be flown out on an air transport. The first transport ended up in the drink and so we had to wait again for another engine. Twenty-five days later, it arrived, and we departed for the

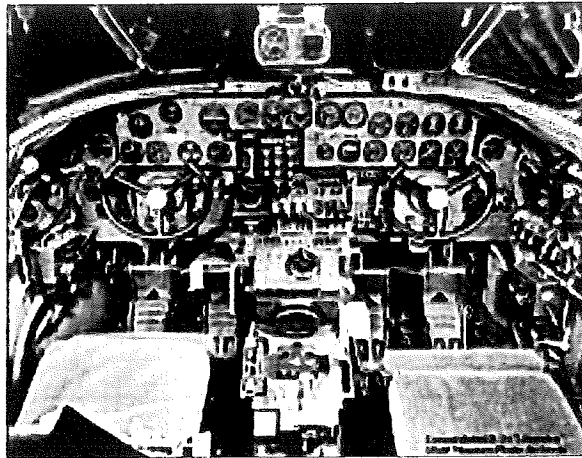
Russell Islands again. The flight was uneventful. But while we were still on the landing strip, we watched as one of the other planes came in for landing, but on the downwind leg, it missed the runway and went into the drink.

We were never told what happened to that crew.

After refueling at the Russell Islands, we took off once more for our destination, New Guinea. There, we were told that only 13 of the 24 flight crews had made it so far. But after checking in with the command center, we were left with the impression that we were in the wrong place. They told us we were supposed to be in Washington D.C. for radar bombing training. We feared we might have to make the trip all over again, but eventually, the matter came to General MacArthur, who reassigned us to the Philippines. We joined the 13<sup>th</sup> Air Force, 64<sup>th</sup> Group, 23<sup>rd</sup> Bombing Squadron, stationed at Guiuan Airfield on the southern tip of Samar Island.

On the day before the thirteenth mission, I went swimming in the bay on the Pacific side of the island. While swimming, I watched as the natives caught octopus near the shore. They would put bait around long poles and when the octopi latched on they'd raise them out of the water. Some of them were pretty big, so I decided it'd be better if I didn't swim in the bay anymore. The next day, June 18<sup>th</sup>, 1945, while assembled in the flight room to receive our mission, the squadron commander informed us that

five planes had been lost during takeoff, gone into the drink, in the past five days. Nobody had survived. Next, the staff claimed they had considered the situation and decided that pilots had been taking their landing gear up too soon. They told us that from now on no pilot should take up his landing gear until the navigator informed him that the plane had reached 200 feet above sea level.



During the end of the briefing, we were given instructions on how to take off and also told that, because the planes we would be

using were equipped with radar bombing gear, they'd be heavy, so we were to leave off one man out of our crew of nine. Instead of drawing lots, we decided to leave the only married man off for the mission. They scheduled us to take off to the west. We boarded the bomber and took up our positions. One of the differences about our B-24 was that I, as the navigator, sat directly behind the pilot, rather than in the nose of the plane, where the radar gear was located. It was a tight spot, and as a result, I couldn't wear the backpack parachute as I normally would, but instead had to fly with the clip-on chest chute that made it easier to sit behind the tiny desk. The flight engineer, bombardier, and radio operator all had to stand right next to my desk—Stitler, Orsini, and Breathweight, respectively. As we were taxiing, the wind changed and we were reordered to take off to the east. The three men around me remained standing as Paul took the bomber off the ground. I kept my eyes on the altitude and pushed the button to tell the pilot that we had reached 200 feet. That was the last thing I remember.

I woke up out in the water, water that was hot, water with flames burning off the oil and the gas. How the plan had gone down, how I had gotten out of the plane, and anything of what

had really happened between the plane's reaching altitude and my waking up in the water are all things that, in all my years, have never come back to me. There remains such a gap in my memory that at times I wonder if I ever experienced them at all. After I recovered my senses though, and realized I was in the water, I swam out of the flames and tried inflate my Mae West, but my CO<sub>2</sub> capsules were missing—someone had likely taken them out and used them to cool a beer. When I tried to blow up the life preserver manually I couldn't hold my lips around the nozzle. I forced out air and my mouth slid right off. It was then that I realized my jaw had been broken. I could hold the tube in place with my hands, but then I couldn't keep myself afloat. Every time I tried, I felt myself sinking. I felt the weight of my harness more and more, and hoped that by removing it I could stay up long enough to inflate the Mae West. I still sank, and that time I felt something grab me by the leg. All I could think of were the octopi I'd seen the day before. I was sure one was taking me under. I pushed my body up out of the water and ran 20 or more steps on the surface of the water before falling back in the sea. (That was the first miracle.) Next to me was a canvas water bucket, which I turned upside down and put between my legs. I could float on it and this freed my hands to hold the life preserver up to my mouth long enough to inflate it.

It was only then, after having escaped the most immediate dangers, that I became aware of my wider surroundings. I heard the bombardier, Mike Orsini from New Jersey, calling for help. On my canvas bucket, I made my way over to him, and on my way found a partially inflated raft. Though it had been punctured and wouldn't open all the way up, it was enough to keep afloat when I held onto it, and I managed to stay afloat with the weight of Orsini as well when I got to him. Carlson, the belly gunner, who was in the back of the plane, found us, and came to hang on to the inflatable raft.

Much later, I would put together that we must have clung to that raft for nearly three hours. Since the rescue boats were on the Western side of the island and had to come around the tip to find us, there was nothing to do but float in the vast Pacific.

I remember seeing the boat come for us, but from then on things became very vague. I remember being taken to a tent hospital. I remember being taken aboard a transport ship, the USS General Mure. At some point, I asked after Orsini and Carlson, and was told that they were flown back to the States, their injuries were more severe than mine. In addition to my broken jaw, my knee had been scrapped open. The doctors came down to the sick bay daily to look after my progress, because it wasn't healing properly. They decided to do a skin graft and froze

my rear end in order to slice off a layer of skin large enough to cover the affected area. After the skin graft held for a couple of days, they declared it successful and allowed me to go up on deck and sit in the sun rather than stay in the hospital ward all day.

The ship was heading for San Francisco, but it was slow in getting there. Like many things built in the rush of the war effort, there was a major defect. The generators were located right up against the smokestack and as a result they overheated and kept burning out one of the coils about every other day it seemed. I would sit and watch the other men walk past. On one occasion, I noticed the name Steiner printed on the back of a man's shirt. Seeing the name there immediately called to mind a childhood memory of a boy I knew from school as well as Sunday school. Sure enough, it was Carl, who graduated six months before me and had then enlisted in the Coast Guard. He took to visiting me and would often bring treats with him and we would reminisce about home and talk about all the things we would do when we got back there. When we stopped in Hawaii to get some replacement parts for the faulty generators, the Captain received orders that instead of California, we were to head to New York harbor, via the Panama Canal.

We entered New York harbor on V-J day. Before debarking, Carl came up to say goodbye and suggested we go on a double



date when we got back to Alton. I told Carl that I hadn't been home in three years and I no longer knew anyone back there. I'll get you a date, he told me, with my cousin. We'll go on that date.

He went on home, and eventually I went to a hospital in Creston, Iowa. After two weeks, I got a 30-day leave. I went on back home, and called up Carl. His cousin had turned me down, so we went fishing instead. His cousin's family had a fishing camp on the Mississippi River that we could use. Near the end of our trip, his Aunt drove up to the camp because she did not trust us to properly close it up. Her daughter, Marjorie, the girl I was supposed to go on a date with, had come along for the ride.

I guess that glimpse was enough for her, because afterwards she changed her mind and told her cousin that she'd go on a date with me. I found out later that the girl always imagined she'd marry a tall, dark handsome man who smoked a pipe. I was as black as an ace of spades after my 45 days on the USS Gen. Mure's deck, was smoking a pipe when she saw me, and, while I was never tall, I was standing on a boulder that first time. When I gave a call during the Christmas holidays, she said yes.

How I ended up meeting Marjorie was the second miracle. On January 22<sup>nd</sup> of 1946 I married her and it has lasted seventy years, though, even on that day, the priest, wary that I wasn't a Catholic, said it wouldn't last.

