

My Roamin' Bullet



Jim Scheib was the co-pilot on Bob Baker's 831st Squadron replacement crew, and was with the group from October 1944 until the war ended. He hasn't identified the date this incident occurred, but it happened in very late 1944 or early 1945. This story points out that there were other dangers, along with those commonly associated with flying combat missions over enemy territory.

It was customary for the Bomb Group formation, as we were climbing to altitude over the Adriatic Sea, to spread out so that the gunners could charge their machine guns. The purpose of the spread formation was that live caliber .50 rounds could be dropped overboard and that was an obvious hazard to trailing aircraft.

On this flight, our crew was flying position #4, (the slot) directly behind #1 (Leader). Before the signal was given to spread formation, the belly gunner of the leader's B-24 charged his turret's caliber .50 a couple of times and, as co-pilot, I saw a couple rounds coming at us for just an instant and I heard a sound like popcorn. As we were mentally preparing ourselves for entry into German airspace, I thought no more about it.

When we returned from the mission, Sgt. Houlihan, Crew Chief of our airplane, directed us as we taxied onto the hardstand. With the props slowing down and coming to a stop, Houlihan signaled me and yelled, "You O.K., Lt.?" At that point in the mission, I was kind of groggy and had to think for a second before I answered that I was O.K. He said, "Could you come down here and look at this?" I disconnected the half dozen wires, tubes, belts, etc. that connect an air crewman to the B-24 and climbed down through the flight deck to the bomb bay and out to where he was standing in front of our B-24. He said, "Look at that hole." Looking up at my position in the aircraft, I saw a hole in the side of the plane just where my thigh would be while sitting in my seat. I searched the cockpit, thinking I would find a piece of flak, and finally located half of a .50 caliber cartridge. This didn't happen every day, so I put it in my flight suit pocket to look at after our crew's interrogation.

It took a bit of sleuthing to determine why half a bullet would be at my crew station. Then, it all fit together - - - one of that belly gunner's caliber .50 rounds was struck on the butt end by one blade of our #3 prop which was just to my right. That fired the primer, sent the projectile somewhere through the Group's formation, and left a deep scar on the back of the round. Then, I surmise, the spent round was again struck and cut in half by a succeeding blade of the prop. That propelled the butt half through the aluminum skin on the side of the B-24 by my thigh.

I call it my "Roamin' Bullet" experience because it happened in Italy, and I acquired a souvenir of Italy because it fell from one B-24 and entered our B-24 while we were enroute to the target.

I expect that I will tell this story at a Bomb Group Reunion and some son-of-a-gun will say, "Hey, I remember dropping some rounds overboard like that!" I will show him my souvenir.

1st Lt. James A. Scheib
831st Bomb Squadron
485th Bomb Group