

The Bomber on the Golf Course

An emergency landing resulted in weeks of entertainment for a small town.

Air & Space Magazine

William Bennett



Residents of Enterprise, Oregon, inspect a B-24 Liberator that landed on the golf course after getting lost. (Photo: Wallowa County History Museum / Illustration: Bill Witcher)

On the night of May 31, 1944, my brother and I were awakened by engine noise—overhead. We were up and outside in an instant. I was nine, and in my mind, nothing ever happened in Enterprise, a small town in northeastern Oregon. Hearing what sounded like a big multi-engine airplane circling Enterprise in the middle of the night was thrilling. The few airplanes we had seen were small, single-engine varieties. Our father ran to the car and drove off.

In the morning, Mom said a bomber had landed at the golf course on the far side of town, about a mile away. We were ordered to eat before we could go see it. We wolfed down breakfast, jumped on our bicycles, and raced off.

There it was, a Consolidated B-24 Liberator, sitting in ruts up to the wheel hubs. A military guard kept us at bay.

The weekly Wallowa County Chieftain headline was “Lost Bomber Lands Here After Harrowing Experience.” The B-24 had taken off between 4 and 5 p.m. on May 30 from Walla Walla Army Air Base, Washington, with a trainee crew including pilot, copilot, and instructor to fly bombing and gunnery practice over the Boardman Bombing Range in Oregon, about 80 miles west of Walla Walla. It was just past a quarter-moon night, and stormy. With no

navigator, the crew got lost. Beyond Walla Walla and Pendleton, Oregon, there were only a few small towns and ranches, and back then few of the ranches had electricity.

Northeastern Oregon has severe terrain, with mountains up to 10,000 feet, and forested ridges 5,000 to 7,000 feet with canyons 2,000 feet at the bottom. That night, it was pitch-black and visibility was minimal.

Later into the night, Lieutenant Lee Ward, the instructor, took the controls. When the snow-covered Wallowa Mountains loomed ahead, he took them to be moonlit clouds. With seconds to spare, Ward realized his error and banked hard, barely avoiding a crash.

Then the crew spotted the lights of Enterprise. By 11 p.m. they were circling our town. Soon the U.S. Forest Service warehouseman alerted households of the predicament and asked the men to drive to the golf course and aim their headlights at it. He put lit railroad flares down the center of the course. Set between two hills, and less than 200 yards wide, the golf course was the only emergency landing site within 40 miles.

The bomber circled for some time to burn off fuel in case of a crash landing and to reduce weight. At one point it flew north, over dark forest and ranches, and jettisoned ammunition for the same reason. The crew was prepared to bail out if necessary.

After returning and making a few passes over the golf course, Ward decided he could land there. It was now 1 a.m. The outboard right engine was running rough. All crew members except the pilot and copilot lay down and braced for landing. On final approach, the bad engine caught fire. Ward brought the B-24 over the spur of the hill on the northeast end of the valley, avoided the little clubhouse, and touched down. With braking, the airplane rolled to a stop in about 2,100 feet, just shy of an irrigation ditch.

Top gunner Sergeant Bradford Botts jumped out with an extinguisher and doused the burning engine. As the crew piled out, townspeople, some in pajamas or nightgowns, rushed to the airplane.

"Where are we?" Botts asked.

"Enterprise."

"Why, I'm from Flora!" Botts said. Flora was a small ranching community 25 miles north of Enterprise (it's now pretty much a ghost town).

The crew was taken into town, fed, and housed for the night. Lieutenant Webb, the pilot, called the air base to report they were down safely in Enterprise. By early morning, military police, engineers, and advanced preparation soldiers, dispatched from Walla Walla Air Base, were on site. Webb thought he could take off from a steel-mat runway, and the engineers apparently agreed. The Army sent a company from Geiger Army Air Base in Spokane, Washington, to set up a tent city for 160 men. Most of the company, from East Coast cities, were startled awake by serenading coyotes the first few nights.

Within a few days, workers were stripping (and saving) sod and carving out a runway area. The damaged engine was repaired. By June 14, nine train car loads of steel mat arrived on the local line connected to the Union Pacific.

Locals visited daily, especially young women. It was late spring, the weather was nice, and with so many men from this farming, ranching, and logging community having been sent off to war, all these young men were a welcome sight. One morning Phyllis Zolman was given an orange out of the lunch sacks the crew had left with the airplane. She tucked it away as a keepsake.

Some girls rode their horses over. One offered a soldier a ride, and in a show of bravado, he jumped on. The horse took off down the meadow, but the soldier managed to stay on for 100 yards before being thrown.

As the runway was prepared, the airplane was stripped of all non-essentials to reduce takeoff weight. The 300 gallons of aviation gas on board had been pumped out. Ranchers and farmers showed up to get free, high-octane gas without having to use precious ration cards.

Departure was scheduled for mid-morning on June 15. A twin-engine, low-wing VIP transport—could have been a Beechcraft C-45—brought officers from the air base, a test pilot (for the tricky takeoff), and a copilot. Everyone from town who could get there came to watch. My brother and I rode out with Dad. None of the original crew was on hand. The weather was clear, with little or no wind.

The two pilots boarded and started the engines. After a short warm-up, the bomber roared down the steel matting and lifted off about 200 feet before the end. The pilots pulled up the landing gear and, climbing slowly, cleared the fringe of tall cottonwoods along the Wallowa River. After the B-24 circled back over the golf course and headed toward Walla Walla, the military brass took off, and the townsfolk went about their business.

Within a couple of days, the steel matting was dismantled and new sod was laid down to somewhat restore the golf course. The matting, free for the taking, was dispersed among locals and ranchers; four- by eight-foot panels of steel grid would always have some use. Dad took a grid to use as a heat vent over our sawdust-burner furnace, which heated the main floor. There was a dance that Saturday night at the county fairground's 4-H building; to the delight of Enterprise's young ladies, most of the Army engineer soldiers showed up. First thing the next morning, the engineers finished loading up and returned to Geiger Army Air Base.

The crew that landed in Enterprise finished training with a full crew and a brand-new B-24, which they ferried to southern Italy—they were stationed near Manduria as part of the 15th Air Corps, flying missions into Austrian industrial areas. One day, when the mission was cancelled, Botts and three of the crew headed to the nearby town. The pilot, copilot, navigator, and engineer stayed behind and later took the bomber up for some flight time. It crashed in an olive orchard a mile off the end of the runway. All were killed.

The remaining crew members filled in for other crews who had suffered casualty losses. On one mission, Botts was a waist gunner charged with throwing handfuls of aluminum foil radar chaff from a hatch. As he leaned back, he heard a loud BANG and saw that flak or a bullet had hit mere inches from where his head had just been.

Botts survived 50 missions, logged 250 combat flying hours, and returned to Enterprise to work with the Forest Service on a road survey crew. When he met Phyllis Zolman and told her he had been on the bomber that landed on the golf course, she showed him the nearly petrified orange she still had. They later married. For years after the landing, wheat ranchers north of Enterprise tilled up .50-caliber machine gun bullets that the crew had jettisoned.