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“TRAIN OF THOUGHT”

by

Capt. Frank R. Train, U.S. Air Force (Retired), age 93.

(note: Capt Frank Train 93 recently joined the 55th Association. He was a Shoran Navigator on B29 and B50 aircraft in Alaska and Puerto Rico 1951- 53 with 338th SRS)

I was born on a farm in northern Michigan in 1919, graduated from high school in 1937, and worked in the auto industry and other jobs until I was drafted in 1942. Soon after being inducted, I became a “ninety day wonder” Lieutenant. I spent the next year and a half in various stations around the U.S., mostly in specialized training. After I was shipped to England in 1944, I became Intelligence Officer for a group flying A-20 and A-26 attack planes as part of the Ninth Air Force. Many interesting stories to tell about that time.

After the war, I came home, and tried my hand at running a gas station in my hometown. When that didn't work out, I rejoined the Air Force and was promoted to Captain. This was during what you now call the Cold War. Most of this time, I was a Flight Engineer, part of the flight crew, on B-29 and B-50 aircraft.

My children sometimes ask me why I didn't stay in the Air Force for the full twenty years, to get a pension. There are two reasons I resigned my commission when I did:

Close call #1 – In 1953 I was a SHORAN photo navigator in a B-29 called “Little Cheechako” with the 338th Strategic Recon Squadron. We spent summers in Alaska before it became a state, flying 18 hour missions, taking pictures at different angles for mapping purposes. During a flight over Mt. McKinley, at 40,000 feet, I looked out a window and saw fire coming from the #1 engine. For 30 feet behind the engine, there were flames coming out. I called Peterson, the pilot, who activated the extinguisher on that engine, but it didn't stop the flames. He told me that the only thing to do was to head straight down to blow the fire out. So he aimed the plane at the ground, and we felt the airspeed increase as we were headed straight toward the rocks below. We were fortunate twice, once because the dive put out the fire, and a second time, because pulling out of the dive didn't pull the wings off the plane. B-29's were not designed for vertical dives! Luckily, we made it back to the base, otherwise Jim wouldn't be here to write a column for you.

Close Call #2 – During the winter months of the same time period, we would fly out of Puerto Rico, measuring distances from Cape Canaveral to the offshore control points. Accuracy had to be one foot in 25 miles. We were about an hour out of Puerto Rico, flying over the Bermuda Triangle, when suddenly the inside of the plane turned blue. The entire cockpit and bomb bay were a haze of gasoline fumes. We had a ruptured a 2” fuel line above the radar antenna, which had a spark-gap indicator. Our crew had been trained for emergencies, so everything electronic was immediately shut off, except the radio to home base, to prevent a spark from blowing us up. We had nothing electronic working so as to prevent any kind of spark, so when we got close to landing we had to get the landing gear down by hand.

I was in the aft section and we had one oxygen bottle/mask, which I had Sgt. Cowert wear to go into the bomb bay to hand crank the gear down. I stood in the doorway, unprotected, without oxygen or a mask, to be sure he got out all right. When we got back to the base, we couldn't reverse the pitch on the engines to slow us down because it would have sucked fumes into them. The pilot landed, using full manual brakes, and blew two main landing gears. Thankfully all of the crew got out safely. To my surprise, my wife and daughter were waiting for me at the base. Because of the danger they had sent a car for the families of the men on board. I spent two or three days in the hospital from breathing in fumes when I was with Sgt Cowert, but we survived and that's what counted.

After these two harrowing experiences, as well as some others, I decided that I had used up all of my second (and third) chances, so I left the Air Force and started working in the private sector.

(If any of Jim's friends want to hear more of my old stories, I will be happy to tell them. I can be reached at (734) 807-0142, or on E mail at ftrain@buckeye-express.com)
