

Swamp Chicken

Robert Mims

From B-26 Marauder at War, by Roger A. Freeman

In Mississippi we have a game bird, a quail, that during the war was partly protected. You could shoot them to eat yourself but it was illegal to sell them. Hunters did sell them illicitly as 'swamp chicken'. The B-26 reminded me of a quail; it had a large body, small wings and had to flap real hard to stay in the air. So when I picked up my regular B-26 at Barksdale Field, Louisiana, for the flight overseas I named it *Swamp Chicken*.

A B-26C-22, she was an excellent aircraft and handled beautifully. Marauders varied considerably in their flight characteristics, some having to be constantly trimmed out. *Swamp Chicken* was so smooth she was often flown as a lead ship - Colonel Thatcher, the Group CO, used her quite a bit. Although it was my regular ship it was often flown by other crews and became the first B-26 in the Group to reach 50 missions - and without ever once having to turn back through mechanical failure.

I took *Swamp Chicken* on her 52nd mission which was my 26th. The target was a Noball, one of those V-weapon ski-sites hidden in French woods. With only a shallow penetration of enemy occupied territory it looked like a milk run, but the Germans were moving hundreds of guns into these areas so obviously they didn't like the way we were knocking the Noballs out.

My crew was co-pilot Leon Jackson, bombardier John Brush, engineer Michael Miyó and radioman Bill Vermillion. My regular tail gunner, Ollie Myers, had a cold and didn't fly that day. Instead we had Sgt McCandlish, a former ground man who applied for flight status and had just come in from gunnery school. This was his first mission.

We took off in the early afternoon, the Group putting up three boxes with more than 50 airplanes. There was broken cloud at around 3,500 feet which thinned as the formation flew south to our first checkpoint at Gillingham. Nearing the English south coast we turned at Shoreham and headed out over the point known as Beachy Head. It took 15 minutes to reach the French coast where landfall over Berck-sur-Mer was greeted with heavy but inaccurate flak. The cloud below us had built up again as we crossed the Channel although there were clear patches ahead. I could see the familiar French countryside below as the formation weaved in evasive action; it was a fine winter's day and visibility was good.

We were briefed for an eight minute run to Prévent where the formation would turn north-east eventually to locate our IP at Bruay and hit our targets on the run out to the Channel. *Swamp Chicken* was flying the No

5 position, lead squadron, second box. We reached Frévent and had just completed our turn when there was a tremendous crack and the airplane pulled violently to the right. The right wing went up and I lost control. There was a seventh B-26 flying the slot in our element and we must have narrowly missed colliding with it as we went out of the formation. I don't recall seeing anything and assumed from the behaviour of the airplane that we'd taken a hit in the right engine. To counteract the pull we cut the throttle on the left engine and I told the co-pilot to feather the prop' on the right - normal procedure in this sort of emergency. Leon replied: 'We don't have any right engine.' I looked across and was horrified to see a tangled mess of metal and fuel lines protruding from a torn nacelle; the whole engine had disappeared!

With all the power on one side, the unbalance created by losing 2,500lb from the right wing and broken fuel lines spraying

gas around to create a fire hazard, we really were in trouble! I applied left rudder and aileron and managed to bring the left wing down, while we both tried desperately to trim the plane for level flight. It needed all our strength on the controls. I knew I had to salvo the load of eight 500lb bombs fast as we were heading down all the time. I pulled the salvo knob above my head but nothing happened. By this time John Brush had come up from the nose - no place to be in an emergency. As the cockpit release wouldn't work John went back into the nose and managed to jettison the bombs with the controls there. It took a lot of courage in the circumstances as the plane might have gone into a spin at any moment. Free of that weight we hoped we could maintain altitude but when we applied full power to the left engine *Swamp Chicken* kept skidding to the right. We had a choice of holding altitude and flying in a circle, or holding a course and losing altitude. We decided to try for a course for if we couldn't make England we might get to the Channel and ditch.

After a few minutes we could see we were not going to get very far as altitude was being lost too quickly. To add to our troubles we were now all alone and being continually fired on by light flak. Our position was very vulnerable to say the least and sooner or later a shell was going to knock the plane out of control. There was now no hope of making the coast so at 4,000 feet I ordered the crew to bale out. I knew that if both pilots left the controls the plane would turn on its back and go in before either of us could jump. Somebody had to remain. So I said to Leon: 'I'll hold it if you would like to get out, or are you going to stay with me and crash land; it's your decision.' He said he would bale out. When he let go the controls to leave it became very difficult to hold the plane, taking all my strength on the rudder pedals to keep her straight.

With the strain I had to get down quickly and picked out a suitable spot ahead, slightly rolling farmland with woods dotted around. When the engine had been knocked off the main wheel came down. With no hydraulic power I could not lower the other wheel or raise the down wheel. It was a pretty precarious situation; if there had been time to reflect on the chance of coming out alive I guess I would have realised it was very slim.

I was down to about 500 feet, trying to line up on the open area ahead, when the aircraft twice jerked violently and I saw that a stream of 20mm fire was coming up at me. Then I realised that the field I'd chosen to belly into had a flak battery at one end! The only thing I could think of was to fire the five fixed guns in the hope that they would quieten the flak gunners or spoil their aim as I tried to get

on the ground. I went directly across the site just a few feet from the ground, cut back on the power and dumped the aircraft onto the field which had a slight uphill gradient. I was doing about 160mph when she hit and really didn't think there was much hope of getting out because with one wheel down she would be bound to spin round, cart-wheel and explode. After the first impact I didn't remember anything; either my head hit the control wheel or it came back and hit my head; I don't know - but I was stunned.

I awoke in a gold cloud, an eerie feeling until I saw I was still in the cockpit and not some celestial place. The fire risk immediately had me scrambling out through the top hatch and on to the ground. Half concussed, with a bad cut on my forehead, I was in no state to run and in any case the troops from the flak battery were soon there. They were certainly surprised to see a complete engine missing from the airplane. It turned out the gold cloud was made by the aluminium oxide

powder from sea dye markers that had broken open in the crash. Old *Swamp Chicken* was still pretty well in one piece and evidently the lowered wheel had been hanging free and doubled up as soon as the plane hit the ground.

I was taken to the flak battery and after a while they brought in a body wrapped in a parachute. Of all tragic ironies, it was Leon Jackson; apparently his 'chute hadn't opened. Brush, Vermillion and McCandlish were captured but they never did get Miyo who contacted the French Underground and worked in a bakery until they got him over the Pyrenees into Spain.

In prison camp I learnt that the 5 February mission was one of the most costly our Group ever flew. The flak barrage knocked down two other B-26s after mine was hit by the first bursts. Another 30 planes were damaged, one so badly the crew had to abandon it over their home base after heading it out over the North Sea.