

Milk Run

By Steve Rosenthal

(Based on an account of actual events)

The last time Bobby Johnson and I saw each other, we were shaking hands on the aircraft carrier *Bunker Hill*. It was in September 1945, right after the end of the war. The *Bunker Hill* was overflowing with Pacific Theater officers and men who wanted to get home quickly. We thanked each other for a job well done and promised to stay in touch. That was the last time I saw Bobby Johnson.

For two years, he was my ship's executive officer. We served together on a infantry landing ship in the Pacific. It wasn't the most glamorous command an officer could have, but it kept us quite busy. It was our job to deliver troops to invasion sites and support their landings. Our ship was designed to pull right up onto the beaches. The bow doors would open like a giant metal whale, coughing out a couple hundred Jonahs.

We were involved in two major Philippine operations: the invasion of Luzon, and the invasion of Mindanao. When we weren't in combat, we ran odd jobs for other commanders or branches of the service. We carried soldiers, prisoners of war, supplies--we even took a British submarine crew to Manila for R and R after they sank a Japanese destroyer. For two years we were in a constant state of motion. For two years, Bobby and I and our entire crew had little time for anything but war duty.

Bobby and I hadn't maintained contact after the war, but six months ago he wrote me a nice letter. He said he would be in Sacramento in the spring, and that he'd love to get together. I was excited to be seeing him again after all that time. I thought often of my crew over the years, but as my exec, Bobby was closer to me than any of the others. I had to rely on him constantly, and he never let me down. We shared a lot of experiences in a concentrated period of time. Now, forty years had passed, and that made for a lot of catching up.

I arrived at his hotel to meet him for drinks and dinner. I walked into the hotel bar and scanned the room. I don't know how, but even after forty years, we recognized each other immediately. He jumped up from his table and threw out his hands.

"Holy Christ, skip! What happened to all that red hair of yours?" he said.

"Bobby, lad, it's good to see you." We embraced. He was right. My hair was white now. He was still just as tall as I remembered him--over six feet, but

much heavier. He said in his letter that he owned a bakery in Phoenix. It was obvious. I had to stand back and look him over. We were two adult men. Fathers and grandfathers. Still, there he stood, right in front of me--the kid from Lawrence, Kansas.

“My god, Bob, can you believe it’s been forty years?”

We sat down and ordered drinks.

“We were just kids, skip. Kids.”

“You look great, Bobby-boy.”

“Skip, I look like hell.” He laughed with the same enthusiastic, heavy rasp that carried over the groan of the ship’s engines. “My wife keeps telling me what I need is a nice, relaxing cruise. You know what I tell her? I say, ‘Ellen, I spent two years of my life on a ship, and that was plenty. If we can get there by plane, I’ll take you anywhere.’ ” He smiled and finished off his drink.

“Oh, be serious, Bob,” I said.

“No, I’m not joking. Every now and again, I have nightmares about Lingayen.” His eyes fixed on his drink. He rolled the glass between his palms. I don’t blame him. Lingayen was the worst combat assignment we had. Japanese resistance was fierce and desperate. They would send men out into the water strapped with explosives. They would swim out to the ships and attempt to board them. We had to organize around the clock watches. We shot at anything that moved. It took two weeks for the island to be secured. Bobby didn’t talk much during that time.

“I’m sorry, Bob.”

“Maybe you’re right. Hell, nobody shoots at you on a cruise ship, right, skip?” He laughed.

We sat in silence for a few minutes. Bobby looked a little nervous. He squirmed in his chair and kept playing with his glass.

“Tell me something, skip. For forty years I’ve wanted to know. When we put into Mindoro for R and R, where did you go?” He squinted slightly and stared into my eyes.

“Mindoro?”

“Come on, now skip. You didn’t really think no one noticed you were gone?”

I could feel my face flush. I must have turned bright red. Technically, I went AWOL at Mindoro. I could have been court-martialed.

“Skip, you were gone for an hour. One full hour--and you never signed off. There was nothing on that goddamned island. Nothing.” Bobby looked twenty-one again. I found myself looking into the face of the same intense, young man I knew in the war.

“I was just about as bored as I’ve ever been.” I rattled my glassful of ice cubes and looked around for the waitress.

Mindoro was on the western side of the Philippines. By the summer of 1945, the island was completely under American control. We were sent there for R and R after a six-month stretch in the east. The Luzon and Mindanao invasions had kept us on the move since January. We took troops in; we brought prisoners out. When we weren't moving men or supplies, we provided anti-aircraft support for the invasion troops. We never sat idle. When the invasion areas had been secured, we were sent to Leyte to deliver a shipment of army patrol boats, then on to Mindoro for three days of down-time.

Bobby's memory of Mindoro was quite right. There wasn't much to the island--except for an army airfield. We brought the ship right up onto the beach. The airfield was only a few hundred yards away. We arrived at five in the afternoon on the first of our three days off. Our ship may have been built to hold up to two hundred troops, but when there is nothing to do and nowhere to go, it is downright claustrophobic.

We had been on missions--combat or otherwise--for six solid months. Suddenly, we were at a complete standstill. The extreme shift, from action to inaction was positively nerve-wracking. By the middle of the second day, I was pacing the deck of the ship non-stop. I had long ago read all my books. I had no desire to play cards. All I could do was think. All I could think about was everything else I wished I could be doing; everywhere else I wished I could have been. I had to leave.

No one was on deck when I left the ship. I didn't bother signing off on the ship's log. I just strolled down the gangway and headed to the airfield. I could see a half-dozen B-29s. Over-and-over again, I'd seen B-29s as they flew missions overhead, but I'd never seen one so close. They looked like huge, silver, hundred-foot cigars with wings. About fifty yards away, I saw a crew standing beneath one of the bombers. One of the men seemed to take notice of me and began to walk in my direction. I approached him. He was the crew captain. I introduced myself.

"Hi. I'm Bill Goldstein."

"Rich Burke." He shook my hand. He was a short, man, maybe five-foot five. His blonde hair was cropped short. He seemed young to me--maybe twenty-three or four. Hell, I was barely twenty-six. He looked at me from behind aviator glasses with what had to be blue eyes. We were both drenched in perspiration. He was soaked clear through the layers of his uniform and flight suit. He said he was from Bend, Oregon.

"What I wouldn't do to see a few pine trees and some snow." He looked past my shoulder to the beach.

"Yours, huh?" He nodded in the direction of my ship.

"That's right."

"Where you in from?"

"Leyte Gulf." I took off my hat and wiped my forehead. Within seconds I could feel fresh sweat beading up.

"Leyte. You must've seen quite a lot of action." He stood straight up,

smiling mildly.

“Well, we mostly just picked ‘em up and dropped ‘em off. Before that we were at Luzon. This is our first break in six months.” I looked down the field at the B-29 his crew was boarding.

Burke looked at me, the plane, and again at me. “We’re going on a little milk run. Why don’t you come along?” He emphasized the offer with a slap on my shoulder. I glanced back at the ship.

“That’d be swell,” I said, and followed him to the plane.

We boarded the bomber. Burke introduced me to the other four crew members.

“We’re going to Baguio. Just a mopping-up mission.” Burke examined his flight map. Baguio was north of Manila. It was the Japanese capital during the occupation. I was excited that I would be part of a bombing run on such an important location.

“Will we have a fighter escort?” I asked.

Burke looked surprised. He laughed. “Fighter escort? The Japanese have no air defense to speak of. We pretty much have our way around, here.”

The crew took their positions. Burke had me sit in the navigator’s compartment, behind the cockpit. We taxied to the head of the runway. The engines revved as we sped down the runway and took off. We made a lazy, right-hand turn and proceeded north. Through the small porthole in the navigator’s compartment, I could see my ship shrinking away as we climbed. I tried to remember the last time I had been in a plane.

“What do think of *my* ship?” Burke shouted over his shoulder.

“Very nice.”

“Smooth as butter,” said the co-pilot.

“It sure is,” I said.

After about five minutes, we leveled-off. Burke looked at the co-pilot, looked at me and looked back at the co-pilot.

“Did you hear about McKinnon?” he asked.

“McKinnon?” responded the co-pilot.

“Last week.” Burke stared at him.

“Oh, yeah,” he nodded, “McKinnon.”

Burke looked back at me. “Last week, this guy, McKinnon, was on a run to San Miguel. Everything went just right—”

“Exactly perfect” the co-pilot added.

“That is, until right after he unloaded.” Burke’s expression was deadly serious. I figured I was being hazed. We did it too. When we were at Pearl, the last day before we shipped out, the senior crewmen made the two youngest seamen stay onboard ship all night long. The two “greens” missed their last night of liberty because of “submarine watch.” The new guys always get hazed.

“Mac drops his load, then when he comes around,” Burke drew a finger across his throat, “he loses one of his engines.”

"It doesn't, usually happen, so I wouldn't worry," said the co-pilot.

"Hell, 29s can fly just fine on *one* engine let alone three." Burke shrugged. The co-pilot nodded in agreement.

"He would've made it back to Mindoro, but he lost too much altitude trying to compression-start the engine," Burke said.

"Should've just taken her back on three," said the co-pilot.

"Mind you, they didn't *buy* it," Burke reassured, "but they lost the plane."

"Mac caught hell for it. He's flying a latrine now," laughed the co-pilot.

"What's our ETA?" Burke asked. A tin-can voice responded over the intercom, "Fifteen minutes." Burke unstrapped himself and squeezed past me.

"That's plenty of time for the nickel tour." he said.

He led me through the first bulkhead into the navigator's compartment. He pointed out the map table, radio set, and charts, but the navigator was missing. Burke looked to the gun turret in the ceiling above us. "Fifty-caliber. There's an identical one in the belly. We control them from the cockpit." He raised his eyebrows and sighed. "Never had to use them."

The co-pilot craned his head around the bulkhead. "Last time I saw a Japanese fighter was in a picture back in flight school." He laughed and disappeared behind the cockpit wall.

Burke directed me to a hatch in the bulkhead beneath the cockpit.

"Best seat in the house." he said. He opened the hatch revealing the bombardier's position. The bombardier and navigator were sitting on the floor of the compartment, sharing a sandwich. Burke shook his head and closed the hatch. "Follow me." he said, as he slid past me.

He led me through the second bulkhead into the bomb-bay. We moved out onto a catwalk. On each side there was a rack loaded with bombs. Burke stopped half-way down the catwalk and turned around. He handed me a felt pen. "Here. Sign one of our little greeting-cards." I signed my name and rank.

We made our way back to the tail gunner's position. He looked up from a book and said, "Welcome. We don't, get many strangers in these parts."

"Don't lose your place," said Burke.

"Hey, cap. We're five minutes out." shouted the co-pilot. We moved back to the cockpit. Baguio didn't look like much from the air. I had no idea how the crew could tell which buildings were Japanese-held and which weren't. It didn't seem to matter much to them. Burke spoke to the bombardier over the intercom.

"Whenever you're ready."

"Twenty seconds." responded the tin-can voice. I could hear the air rush past the open bomb-bay doors behind me.

"Bombs away." said the bombardier.

The engines came alive and we banked sharply to the left. I looked out the porthole in the navigator's compartment. I hadn't any idea what we hit. All I saw was a pattern of smoke that looked like a garden of mushrooms.

"I heard we're getting a new movie tonight." said the co-pilot.

“Oh yeah?” said Burke.

“That’s what I heard.”

I pressed my face against the porthole, trying to catch a better view of our bomb run. Instead, I saw the left inboard engine wind down to nothing. A wave of adrenalin swept through me. I looked into the cockpit. Burke was shaking his head.

“Uh-oh,” he said.

I felt somewhat relieved. It was the punch line—just like McKinnon. I started to laugh. The co-pilot looked back at me and started laughing as well. Behind him, on the instrument panel, I could see a light begin to flash. My finger shot out toward it automatically. The co-pilot turned to the panel. His jaw clinched.

“Cap, number three is overheating.” He was not laughing.

“What’s going on?” said a voice over the intercom. It sounded like the tail gunner.

“Shut it down,” said Burke. He began toggling the switch for the left inboard. I could hear the whine of the starter motor, and I could see the prop jerking around in a circle, but the engine didn’t catch.

“Come on, come on,” he said.

“One and four hot, but steady,” said the co-pilot.

“What’s happening up there?” said the tail gunner.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was the navigator. He was holding a parachute, and life west. “Put these on.”

“Shit! Come on!” Burke kept trying to switch on the number two engine. I stepped into the harness and struggled to get the shoulder straps around. The navigator helped. He looked at me severely.

“If we have to evacuate, we’ll go out the bomb-bay.” He touched his right hand to his heart, where the rip-cord of his parachute was hanging.

“Count to five,” he said, thrusting his hand out all the way, “and pull like hell.”

A voice called up from the catwalk. It was the tail gunner. “Someone tell me what’s going on!”

“Engine’s out. Get back to your position!” ordered the navigator. He turned to his chart table.

“We’re about seventy-five miles out, cap.”

“Fuel’s good,” said the co-pilot.

“Keep an eye on those temperature gauges!” said Burke. He came back into the navigator’s compartment and moved me aside. He looked out the porthole.

“Well, at least it’s not on fire,” he said, patting me on the shoulder. He got back into his seat and continued working the ignition switch. “Turn over, you son of a bitch, turn over.”

The engine backfired like a cannon shot. It resonated the length of my spine. I felt stinging, cold beads of sweat on my forehead. The navigator looked at

me as if he were a coroner inspecting a dead body.

“There’s no head on this bird. If you’ve got to puke, do it in the bomb-bay.” I closed my eyes and breathed deeply. The cabin smelled like fuel. I felt even sicker. I opened my eyes and looked out the porthole. The engine was running again. I shrank down onto the floor of the compartment, and sat on my parachute, waiting for my nausea to pass.

“What’s our altitude?” Burke asked.

“Eight thousand,” said the co-pilot.

“Keep number three offline.”

Burke looked back at me. His face was emotionless. “We’ll be home in twenty minutes,” he said.

Twenty minutes was too long. All I could do was think. As we landed, I checked my watch. It was four o’clock. I’d been gone for nearly an hour. Through the porthole, I could see my ship. I unhitched the parachute. It seemed much heavier than at first. The navigator took it from me without saying a word. Burke taxied to the hangar area and brought the plane to rest.

As he helped me down the gangway, onto the ground, he took off his shades and looked at me with nut-brown eyes.

“Sorry, Bill. Just thought we might have a little fun.” He reached out his hand. I shook it and tried to crack a smile.

“It sure was interesting,” I said, “but I don’t think I’ll fly again for a while.” I walked back down the beach to my ship. It looked huge and deserted. No one was on deck. A few of the crew were in the water, swimming nearby. I went to the pilot house. Bobby was there, alone, looking over a map.

“Hello, skip,” he said. “How about a game of gin?”

“Sure.”

* * *

The waitress returned with another round. Bobby dunked his finger into his glass and licked it clean. He picked up the glass and took a drink.

“Are you going to tell me skip? You disappeared for a whole hour. What the hell did you do?”

“I went on a little milk run.”



B-29 Superfortress



The author's grandfather (left) revisits the "scene of the crime"

