An Atlantic Odyssey

By Philip L. Swift
Tail gunner, crew of Pilot James A. Burgess
306th Bomb Group, 368th Squadron

Preface

(added by 306th BGHA Secretary)

Swift's article of the crew's Atlantic crossing to reach England received high praise from his pilot, Jim Burgess, who wrote 7 March 2012 to the 306th BGHA Secretary:

"Attached is the article written by Phil Swift (my WWII tail gunner) about our adventures in our early months in the B-17. I treasure it as a very well done and accurate memoir!

"As I told you, post war he became a journalist and editor of the Frankfort, KY newspaper. He became the Chief of Staff for a Senator from Kentucky and spent 12 years in Washington in that position.

"He now lives in Fankfort and I visit him there once or twice each year. Sitting at his bar, we share many hours recalling events in our young years in combat.

"I will add some comments about the crash in Iceland: The accident investigator determined that the main control cables were sabotaged while on the ground in Iceland. Very likely by an Icelander employed by the U.S. who was sympathetic to the Nazi regime!"

Philip Swift (who did not use email) relayed his permission for the 306th BGHA to publish his article, via James Burgess' 11 March 2012 email to the Secretary: *"I contacted Phil this morning (3/11/12) and gave him your E-mail address- he also has your postal address. There is no difficulty with copyrights to his article and he told me it is ok to use it in the 306th Echoes at your discretion. I encouraged him to contact you and I hope he does. He is a very private person and I believe he only speaks of 306th combat missions when we get together. I sure do treasure his friendship as he is one exceptional man."*

Dr. Vernon Williams (then Editor) placed the article as a front-page story in the next issue of the *306th Echoes*, Winter 2012, adding two photos from Dr. Williams' East Anglia Air War Archives collection: On p.4 of that issue is a photo from Goose Bay, Labrador, circa 1944, of their processing area for Incoming Personnel. On p.5 is a photo from Prestwick, Scotland, circa 1944-1945, showing their Transient Air Transport Terminal, where air crews and other Army Air Force personnel waited for transportation.

An Atlantic Odyssey

By Philip L. Swift

I keep hearing the statement that "getting there is half the fun." I don't know where it came from, or when it was first said, but whoever said it was not talking about a time in the winter of 1944 when I and eight others tried to fly across the North Atlantic in a bright new B17-G. The place we were trying to reach was Prestwick, Scotland, the destination of new aircrews and their planes, replacements for the U.S. Eighth Air Force, busy making daylight raids on Hitler's Germany. The Eighth, which lost more young airmen during those days than all the rest of the U. S. air forces combined, played the strategic role in the onslaught against the Reich, daily bombing rail centers, factories, bridges, oil refineries, anything that would cut into the war-making ability of the Germans. The Eighth Air Force paid a terrible price for less than three years of action—about 26,000 killed.

Much has been written about the mighty Eighth, it's exploits still are seen on the television screen, Hollywood has made many movies about that fierce combat over Europe. In those movies, few of which are accurate, the aircrews are of sturdy stuff—handsome mature men, square-jawed and eager for action. There is John Wayne or Gregory Peck at the controls, fighting to keep aloft while engines smoke and splutter. In the back there is gallant Van Johnson dying at his guns as he shoots another Focke Wulfe out of the sky.

But in reality this air war was being carried out by a bunch of green kids, not far out of high school. Twenty-five was considered pretty long in the tooth. And so our little band of youngsters, ill-trained and inexperienced, but willing, set off in that bitter winter over the dark Atlantic in our new B-17.

We had trained as a crew for three months at El Paso, Texas. There were 10 of us at first. I was the tail gunner, turned 19 the month we went out there. Jim Burgess, the pilot, was 21 and Bob Bodenhamer, the copilot, was 19. There was Dean Sullivan, radio operator, 19; Joe O'Brien, waist gunner, 18; Loren Harter, ball turret gunner, 19, and three old guys—Keith Miller, engineer and top turret gunner, 23; Joe Dembowski, navigator, 24, and Joe Pinela, toggelier, 25. These were the ones who were aboard on the Atlantic crossing.

During the El Paso training we had with us a bombardier but he was dropped from the crew before going overseas. The Eighth Air Force used very few bombardiers. Joe Pinela dropped the bombs but never looked through a Norden bombsight and wouldn't have known how the thing worked if he had tried to use it. He sat in the nose, watched the lead aircraft in the squadron, which did have a bombardier, and when bombs came out of it he toggled a switch. Hence the sobriquet, "toggelier".

Over the New Mexico desert we practiced bombing, flew gunnery missions at 50 feet above the cactus, did some cross country work and at the end of three months had a big graduation party with Stan Kenton's band furnishing the music. Then, by train, on to Lincoln, Nebraska, where we hung around for a few days getting new equipment, new flying suits to use at the 65 below temperatures over Europe, and a new airplane.

Now at this time we had no idea where we would be going. There was fighting going on all over the world and we knew we could be sent to any theater of combat. So there was considerable speculation over one item in the equipment we were issued.

Each one of us was given a new parachute harness with a *jungle pack* attached. Mosquito netting, quinine,

machete, the works. Someone in the Pentagon must have thought this would throw the Germans and Japanese into a terrible quandry—where are these guys going—Borneo, Guatemala, Congo? We were a bit puzzled, but I don't recall that we worried much about where we were going. With this jungle pack we didn't get summer uniforms.

The harness itself was the item we were more concerned with. No one had ever seen one like it. It was said to be British. It was so large that no one could adjust it down to his frame. And don't ever jump with a loose parachute harness. Instead of snapping a strap around each leg and one across the chest this harness had a large buckle on the chest and all straps went into it. Hit the buckle while hanging from the chute and you would be instantly free of all hindrances. I never saw one before and after turning it in a month later I never saw one again.

When it became apparent that we were flying to Europe the harness was not a factor. We didn't need a parachute over the Atlantic anyway. Bail out there and you were dead in a few minutes. We all agreed that we would not jump in any case.

They had to tell us soon that where we were going there would be no need for mosquito netting and machetes and after putting a few hours flying around Lincoln on the airplane we were briefed and sent on our way. The route was to take us about 1,450 miles from Lincoln to Bangor, Maine on the first leg. From there it was on to Goose Bay, Labrador, where we would refuel for the long 1,500-mile trip over the North Atlantic to Keflavik, Iceland. From Keflavik there would be a shorter hop of 800 miles to Prestwick, Scotland.

These distances seem like a piece of cake for the jet travelers of today, but they were not that easy for a B17. A jet-powered descendant of the Boeing bomber would make either of the longer legs of that trip in under three hours cruising comfortably at 550 miles an hour. The jet, with its passengers sipping cocktails in a warm cabin would fly high over the weather at altitudes well above 30,000 feet. It would have an intensively trained pilot with thousands of hours of flying experience operating equipment so sophisticated that he could, on the ground before takeoff, program some flight course numbers, flip a switch and sit back and watch.

The B17, sleek as it may seem in photographs and on the television screen, was slow and had no cocktail bar. And the temperature inside was the same as the temperature outside. Cruising airspeed was about 150 and the average altitude flown on that trip was probably 8,000 feet, down there where all the clouds were. It took us probably eight and a half hours to fly from Lincoln to Bangor. Today a twin-engine Boeing 737 would fly that in two and a half hours, getting a nice high altitude tailwind boost.

It was a night in mid-December when we left Lincoln Army Air Force Base and aimed northeast passing a little south of Chicago, close to Toledo and on to Maine. Daylight had arrived when we got to Bangor. We serviced the plane, stayed there overnight and left the next morning for Goose Bay, about 700 miles away.

It was cold in Bangor, very cold. But it was colder in Goose Bay—a bitter penetrating cold. There was snow and cold like none of us had ever experienced before. Maybe Dembowski had. He was from Wisconsin. New York City has some pretty good snow storms from time to time so perhaps Joe Pinela had gotten a brief glimpse of what we found in Goose Bay, and so, perhaps, O'Brien had seen hard winters in his town of Washington, Pennsylvania. But I was from Kentucky, Miller from Seattle, Sullivan from Arlington, Va., and the other

three, Burgess, Bodenhamer and Harter, were from southern California.

We were high altitude fliers who operated in unheated planes at temperatures down to 65 below and we, of course, had warm clothing. It was state of the art stuff with fur collar and insulated lining. I was still cold. The barracks were cold, the mess hall was cold. What is my memory of Goose Bay? Cold. In the time we were there I found one place which was warm enough to be comfortable. The base had a small library and it was heated. I spent a lot of time during the day reading.

Why did we stay at Goose Bay so long? Why didn't we just gas up and leave? The cold wouldn't let us go. Weather, of course, was a factor in determining when the planes would take off, but it wasn't too bad at that time and we had a clearance to leave—an order to leave for Iceland.

The crew met at the airplane at about eight o'clock the night after our arrival , ready to start engines and depart. That's what we always did. Just get into the airplane, start the engines and go. But this airplane was tethered to the coldest ramp in the world. Someone said it was 40 below and I believed it.

The wind was blowing and we were climbing around on the wings tying heaters to the engines and it didn't do much good. There were devices at the base called pre-heaters. They used kerosene and had a powerful blower. This pre-heater was placed on the ramp in front of the airplane and a long canvas sleeve was attached, one end at the engine, the other at the heater. This delivered hot air directly to the surface of the cylinders.

It seemed to me that our problem was in the number of heaters we could use. We had four engines and one heater. We would turn the heat into an engine and warm it, take off the canvas sleeve and put it on another engine, not an instant process, and heat that one. By the time we got to the fourth engine the first one or two were as cold as ever. It was a losing proposition.

After going through this heating procedure Jim Burgess and Bob Bodenhamer climbed into the cockpit and tried to start the engines. They would hardly turn over. The oil in them was as thick as grease. They just wouldn't fire and following several more attempts and warming them we gave up for the night after facing that painful wind for three hours.

The next night we were back. Same story except for a small success. We did get one started. You cannot fly to Iceland on one engine, though, so we went back to our frigid barracks.

I'm not sure why the third night was different. It certainly didn't seem any warmer. Maybe we had learned something. Maybe we kept the heaters on longer. Maybe Burgess and Bodenhamer had learned to prime a little more fuel into the cylinders. Whatever it was allowed the engines to start. They groaned and complained, they started without enthusiasm but they were running. A victory and our hearts were warmed. We sat there on the ramp with all four turning over, making some heat, the pilots waiting for instruments to indicate that all was well inside the churning crankcases, that cylinder head temperatures were coming up to green.

But the cold would not be denied. After taxiing out we taxied back in and took our old familiar place on the ramp. The oil was so cold and congealed the pressure would not go down to an acceptable level. We could not, with the oil pressure the gauges were showing, run the engines to full throttle for takeoff. It was back to the barracks after a night of near success, but ultimate failure.

On the fourth night we had to go through it all again. This night we won, if winning is achieving the ability to fly

out into the black night over the stormy North Atlantic feeling our way down a faint signal from a radio beacon toward the tip of Greenland and on to Iceland 1,500 miles away.

This night was Christmas Eve, 1944. I and the others had little time to think about Christmas while we crawled over that frigid airplane in the cutting wind. We went through the same motions we had been through the previous night and this time it started. Perhaps Burgess took a little longer this time, giving the heat a chance to build. But the oil pressure went down and we were able to lift the big bird into the night and turn east.

It was at about midnight, the time we took off. Nothing much for me to do for the next 10 hours. Dembowski had wanted me to help him navigate but we were following a radio beacon and Joe didn't really have much to do, either. We climbed to 10,000 feet and set our course on the low frequency beacon.

I thought about what I was doing just the year before and the year before that. The previous Christmas Eve I had walked guard duty in a gentle snow at Montana State University where I was an aviation cadet. The Air Force had sent me there to learn some meteorology and physics and navigation and taught me to fly an airplane. I was to be a pilot but someone suddenly realized there were far too many pilots being trained and they washed out ten thousand. So I became a tail gunner. The year before that I was a senior in high school in Lawrenceburg, Kentucky. Here, I was a long way from Lawrenceburg. Whatever the measure, it was a long way from Lawrenceburg.

We wore on through the night. The cold turbulent Atlantic below, where death would come in 10 minutes should one be so unfortunate as to drop into it, really held no terror for me. I was young and, like most of the young, thought I would never die. Probably the others felt the same. Maybe not Burgess. He was flying the plane and was uncertain of his skills. Burgess, weighed with responsibility, had had little training for this sort of thing. To say that his instrument training was marginal is an overstatement. He told me 55 years later that when we crossed the Atlantic he could barely fly by instruments. When we gathered in El Paso Burgess was just out of flight school and B17 transition, had probably only 200 hours of flying time. That was not unusual. Most of the pilots were marginally prepared. Burgess loved flying, though. He never gave it up and after the war pursued his craft, eventually becoming an airline captain. But today an airline looking at a pilot with the experience and training which Burgess had in 1944 would hardly let him peer into a cockpit, much less send him off across the ocean in charge of a new airplane.

Bob Bodenhamer, sitting at the controls next to Burgess, was even greener. He hadn't been sent through B17 transition. He had just gotten out of flight school.

Not all the planes which left Goose Bay that night made it to Iceland. Some went down in the icy ocean, their crews never to be heard from again. But we made it to the island although it was touch and go when we got there, fuel tanks nearly empty. We were at about 10,000 feet when land was seen below through a hole in the overcast. It was Iceland, of course. There isn't any other land around there.

When we made contact with Keflavik approach control we were advised that conditions at the field precluded landing, this after we had let down from 10,000 feet to about 2,000. The erratic weather was bringing periodic gales through every 15 minutes and to get on the ground one had to time the landing between those blasts. Keith Miller thinks that we then entered a pe-

riod where we faced the most dangerous condition we encountered during our flying experiences. We were forced to begin a climb through the clouds to 14,000 feet, with heavy ice forming on the wings and engines. The airplane became almost uncontrollable as the ice changed the shape of the wings and it reached a point where pilot, co-pilot and engineer all thought we were going into a long spin into the ocean. At 14,000 feet we broke out above the clouds and the ice finally fell away. Nervous, with near empty tanks we tried again and made it into the airfield at Keflavik.

It was Christmas Day, we hadn't arrived in time for dinner but the left-over turkey and potatoes and gravy seemed as tasty as my mother had ever made. The best thing about Iceland, we thought, was the temperature. It was warm, relatively so. The Arctic Circle passes through the northern tip of the island and we hadn't thought of getting a respite from the bitter temperatures we had endured in Labrador. But when we stepped out of the plane we felt as if we were in tropical heat. The temperature was above freezing.

Housing at the base for us transients consisted of a quonset hut with an oil stove and cots. We humble enlisted men were assigned one and the nobility of the crew, Burgess, Bodenhamer and Dembowski, all officers, were given another. They probably had sheets on their beds. No egalitanarianism in the armed forces, although of the three branches the air force is the most democratic.

Plans were to be on our way as soon as possible but weather delayed departure for a day or so. There was little to do there, brief daylight at that time of the year (Keflavik is about 175 miles south of the Arctic Circle), and we were ready to get away when we fueled the airplane and started engines. This was to be a shorter leg—maybe four and a half hours, depending on the winds aloft. It is about 800 miles from Keflavik to Prestwick.

It turned out to be a very short run, for we were not to get off the ground that day. I settled down on the radio room floor, back to the bomb bay as we taxied out to the runway, pilot and copilot went through the usual engine checks and we were off at full throttle. The B17 accelerated and began to get light, starting to bounce a little as a plane does when it nears flying speed and reaches for the air. The four 1,200 horsepower Wright engines were at full volume when suddenly they were silent. Burgess had abruptly pulled back the throttles and tramped on the brakes. Something was wrong and he was trying to get this big heavy airplane stopped before we reached the end of the runway. He was successful. We stopped and taxiied back to the ramp.

A B17 can be pulled off the ground at about 90 miles an hour, depending on the load, but most pilots will prudently let it run to about 120 before lifting off the runway. In the case of this takeoff Burgess had reached a speed of about 100 and eased the controls back a little when he realized that something was wrong with the ailerons. The plane was wanting to roll severely to the right and would not respond to correction. If he had continued the takeoff roll at full throttle and pulled the plane off the ground we would have gone into a slow roll to the right and crashed.

Better a few more days in Iceland.

But what had happened to the controls? The ailerons, the hinged control surfaces at the end of the wings, are moved by cables. The pilot turns the wheel to the left and the left aileron goes up, the right goes down. That turns the airplane to the left. So something was apparently wrong with the cables and that had to be repaired before another takeoff could be attempted.

The base at Keflavik was not well equipped for repairs and there were no

real experts in adjusting B17 control cables. A man was found, though, who could work on our plane and with his instruments did whatever one does to make the proper tension adjustments to the cables.

There has always been a mystery surrounding this mechanical difficulty and the final judgement was that there was sabotage involved. The mechanic who worked on the cables apparently did not correct the problem and we were to suffer from that.

In the several days it took for the work on the cables a new Icelandic phenomenon came on the scene. As we learned in our approach to Iceland, severe gales blow across the Atlantic during the winter of the year. There would be "wind warnings" posted. Such as "Notice—Wind Warning—70 miles an hour beginning at 1400". When we landed we tied our plane to the concrete with strong ropes and had piled sandbags on the wings and around the wheels. This was the only place I had ever seen that done.

But that wasn't enough. When the wind warning sign went up someone was supposed to go out and sit in the airplane. So two of us drew that duty. We went to our B17—two times, I think—and while the 70 mile-an-hour gale whistled we sat there in the cold aluminum cylinder wondering what we might do if the plane escaped its tethers and blew away. As I recall, we were supposed to radio someone if this happened. But it didn't happen and we escaped the ignominy of crawling out of our wrecked aircraft. I am still wondering about what value we would have offered, caroming about inside a four-engine bomber cartwheeling across an airfield in the grasp of a 70 mile-an-hour gale.

After several days of work by the technician, the authorities said our airplane was ready to go, cables taut, controls precise. After 56 years dates are a little foggy but this must have been just at the end of December. The war news was good and bad. The Allies had the German army on the run but the Wehrmacht and the Waffen SS suddenly launched a fierce attack in the Ardennes and the Battle of the Bulge was underway. Another piece of news on the radio was that Glenn Miller, on a flight across the channel from England to France, was missing and presumed lost.

It was early in the morning when we went to our airplane and prepared for takeoff. Engines started we taxiied to the runway ran the roaring Wright radials through their tests and were cleared for takeoff to Prestwick, Scotland. Again, I was sitting of the floor of the radio room as we started the roll down the runway. Dean Sullivan was sitting in his chair to my right. I looked up at him and he crossed his fingers. He seemed to have some doubts about it all.

We were at full throttle, turbosuperchargers pumping 49 inches of manifold pressure for the cylinders to inhale. The plane moved toward takeoff speed—70, 80, 90—it began to bounce it little seeking to free itself from the ground. Then suddenly, as before, the engines stopped. Power was abruptly pulled off and brakes applied. But this time the brakes didn't work and we were near the end of the runway.

From my position on the floor I couldn't see out. I knew what was happening through other senses but not from sight. So when the engines stopped I thought the braking would not be a problem and we would stop before reaching the end of the runway. I sat there waiting, my back to the door into the bomb bay. I first knew we had a problem, a big one, when we ran off the pavement and into the rocks at the end. I couldn't see this, of course, but when the plane began rocking violently and the noise of strained and tortured aluminum became deafening it was apparent that we were totally out of control

and crashing across the rock-strewn ground.

Then after four or five seconds of this violent and wild careening about it was all over. All was smooth and serene. I thought: "Well, that wasn't so bad." I didn't know that we were at that time airbourne. We were flying through the air. It was a very, very short flight.

The scene was this: As are nearly all runways, this one was built on what engineers call a fill. Dirt and rocks are pushed into an area to create a level plane on which to place the pavement. This usually means, and particularly on rough and hilly ground, that there is a substantial dropoff at the end of the runway. Iceland has a rough, lava-strewn landscape, a mass of volcanic rock. At the end of this runway there was an abrupt drop of thirty to forty feet to the rocks below and it was through this airspace we were traveling when I, for two or three seconds, thought everything was okay.

It was a wild ride, albeit a short one, as we skidded across those rocks. The plane didn't go far but when it stopped it was a total wreck. Why it didn't disintegrate into a huge fireball I don't know. The landing gear was torn away and pushed into the fuel tanks. One hundred octane gasoline was all over the ground. The plane's spine was broken at the waist, the hot engines, broken from their mounts, drooped to the ground.

From the position where I sat I looked toward the rear into the waist. The ball turret, which protruded underneath the fuselage, was about eight feet in front of me. It hung from the top of the fuselage. The turret was electrically controlled and had a main power cable going down the column from which it was suspended. When we hit the ground the landing gear collapsed allowing the belly to crash against the rocks erasing the ball turret, pushing its supporting column through the top of the fuselage. When that happened everything shorted out and the scene in front of me was like a huge fireworks display.

There were five of us in that part of the airplane and four up front. Between us was the bomb bay, which had a narrow catwalk, and might slow one down a little. But the group in front lost little time in traversing the bomb bay. They thought they would have to scramble over us folks in the back on their way out. They said later that, as they charged through the door out of the bomb bay, expecting some hindrance from the crew in the back, there was no one in sight. We had left in record speed.

There are three hatches in a B17, one near the nose just behind and below the flight deck, a small one under the stabilizer a little forward of the tail gunner's position and a large one in the waist. After skidding across the rocks two of those were wiped out, so the waist hatch was our only exit.

Emerging through that hatch we saw that there was a peripheral figure involved in our dramatic arrival. About 30 yards away, just to the side of the path we had traveled, was a small building like a house trailer. It held radio navigation equipment and contained a gentleman who had the whitest face with the widest eyes I had or have ever seen. Not used to having a B17 careening across his rocky patch he was virtually speechless when we raced over there.

The plane must have made a deafeningly fearsome noise as it went by his front door and when he got his wits back he said it did. I told him, "You should have been inside." The noise, however, would have been much louder had spark touched gasoline.

The four from up forward arrived on our heels at the radio shack and we stood for a moment looking at each other and back at the airplane. The interior of the shack was brightly lighted

but it was pitch dark outside. It took only seconds for it to strike me, and I think maybe Burgess, Bodenhamer and Miller all saw it at that same time. There was our crumpled bomber lying dead on the rocks in the Icelandic blackness. And the lights were on! Those little blue lights on the tail and the top of the fuselage gleamed as if nothing had happened for they were getting their full power. The main switch had not been thrown.

It is a basic doctrine in flying that in case of any accident the main switch is to be turned off. This shuts down all power and prevents fire from electrical sparks. If the main had been off when we hit the ground all the fireworks in the waist wouldn't have occurred. But there had been no chance to throw the switch before the ball turret struck.

We knew a crowd from flight operations would be on the way in a hurry. Fire trucks, ambulances, operations officers were sure to arrive soon. Burgess, against my judgment although I remember saying nothing one way or another, determined to go back into the plane and turn off the switch. Miller volunteered to go with him and the two entered the waist hatch, climbed through the length of the plane to the flight deck and shut off the power. In my view at the time it was a risky move and I still believe it was. A thrown switch makes a spark.

And so we finished three-quarters of our journey, with a few cuts and bruises but alive. We had lost our airplane and were forced to turn to the Air Transport Command for a ride on to Prestwick. That wasn't to come for another two weeks so we settled in, the entire crew, in a quonset hut. We had started our trip in 1944, it was now 1945. The day came when we boarded a freight -loaded C54, took off and landed in Scotland, our fun journey over.

The crew was assigned to the 306th Bombardment Group near Bedford, England and many more perilous times were ahead. But that is another story.