

*By Walt Boyne*

*My first assignment out of flying school was to Castle Air Force Base , California, with the 93rd Bomb Group. There in January, 1953 I was introduced to the Boeing B-50D Superfortress. The introduction was a little rough . . for the day I arrived, a B-50D from another squadron had gone in, killing all on board, and no one knew why. They were pretty much not interested in a new second balloon for quite a while.*

*After flying T-6s and B-25s, the B-50 seemed enormous and capable, and so indeed it was. I'd like to take this opportunity to recap a little of the B-50's history, tell about some of its lesser known but really important accomplish-ments, and finally, at the end, tell a minor hero-story about myself, one I've never written about before except in the novel The Wild Blue where I used a different character and a different airplane to tell it.*



**B-50D Superfortress**

### ***Hero Story***

*I don't tell hero stories very often, primarily because I don't have many to tell, but there was at least one occasion in the B-50 . . when I earned my pay from the Air Force.*

*Shortly after my arrival at Castle in January, 1953, newly-wed and wet behind the ears, I was crewed up with a distinguished veteran of World War II, Captain Chet Schmidt. Chet and I were sent to Hunter AFB, Georgia, for simulator training In March, 1953, as I recall the date.*

*The B-50 simulator was pretty primitive compared to modern three-axis simulators, but it was impressive to us, and by the end of a session it was realistic enough for me to open the window to look out and see if the chocks were in place.*

*One of the last simulator lessons was on an emergency they told us could never happen, but they would show it anyway. The Boeing engineers had assured them that the B-50 could never experience a complete electrical failure--*

***BUT..***

*If it did . . the symptoms would be as follows : ( 1 ) lights out, ( 2 ) flap indicator drop from full UP to full DOWN, ( 3 ) the propellers RUN*

*AWAY, and ( 4 ) the electric flight instruments would remain relatively immobile for an interval until the gyros wound down.*

*No realistic problem. It was never going to happen.*

*On my first flight in the B-50 upon our return, I was asked to substitute as a copilot with another crew. The aircraft commander was a line pilot, as I learned later, but was suffering under a handicap.*

*Humor in the Air Force then was fierce and personal.*

*No flaw was too private to be the butt of a joke, and we were, in fact, not very sensitive.*

*The aircraft commander (lets call him Smith) had had one major accident and a couple of minor scrapes. His nickname, naturally, was "Crash" Smith. It was totally unfair, for he was a good pilot and a good man, and the nickname made him bitter.*

*It was natural that "Crash" Smith and his crew would be properly skeptical about a green-been second Louie like me, and the general message intended for me was " Watch. BUT but don't touch [ except for your simple responsibilities. ]*

*Still they were nice enough and we went through the usual pre-flight drill, including the copilot's task of getting the in-flight lunches.*

*It was a typical late winter's day in the San Joaquin Valley, fog, low ceilings, and clouds forecast up to about 10,000 feet. One has to experience the San Joaquin fog to truly understand it.*

*And on more than one occasion I drove to the base by opening my car door and driving along the white dividing line of the highway.*

*That morning it was a little better than that when it came to takeoff time--but not much. Everything was normal through the take-off, and we climbed out through the mist, engines roaring and totally cut off from the outside world in a wet sea of mist. The big Plexiglas cockpit windows of the B-50 seemed to part the clouds in rivulets of water, and I was glad that it was too warm for icing. ( This shows my inexperience, for the B-50 had a marvelous thermal anti-icing system.)*

*At about 3,000 feet on the on the climb out, I suddenly noticed that my needle and ball indicated a slip, with the needle moving to the left and the ball skidding to the right. ( The needle and ball was a primitive instrument, a ball in a liquid race and a single needle to indicate the degree of turn. With the airspeed and the altimeter, however, it could be used for instrument flight, and generated the old saw about . . needle/peedle and air-ball . . as flight instruments.)*

*As I checked the instrument panel . . **THE LANDING FLAP INDICATOR DROPPED FROM FULL-UP . . TO FULL-DOWN !***

*I can still see it happening in my mind's eye as sinister as the drop of a guillotine blade. I glanced at the aircraft commander's attitude indicator, and it indicated a level climb, and I realized at once :*

***COMPLETE ELECTRICAL FAILURE . . UP IN THE SOLID ' GOOP ' !***

*I also realized that I was a brand new copilot, with maybe twenty hours in the airplane, flying with a strange crew and an aircraft commander who was understandably a little sensitive about criticism.*

*Nothing happened, but in the next few seconds, the ball slipped more to the right, the needle dipped more to the left, and I saw the rate-of-climb indicator pass through zero to about a three hundred feet per minute descent. We were in trouble!*

*I yelled out : " I've got the airplane."*

*This was a signal that the control of the airplane was being taken over . . not unlike Mr. Christian grabbing the Bounty's wheel from Captain Bligh.*

*At the same time that I booted right rudder [ remember our " STEP ON THE BALL" instrument training in the ' goop ' watchword ] . . . I GRABBED the prop controls . . pulling them back . . just as their tachometers surged.*

*I shouted CRUISE POWER to the irate Flight Engineer, who wondered what the hell I was doing,*

*BUT . . I didn't want the props to run-away . . cruise power would be plenty.*

*Using the needle and ball, airspeed and altimeter, I fought the airplane, which by that time was in a fairly steep bank with the nose coming down.*

*We were already below 3,000 feet; in another twenty seconds we would be in an unrecoverable dive into the ground.*

*As the airplane slowly leveled out, "Crash" Smith looked at me like I was crazy, and I could hear the Flight Engineer bitching about me messing with his power settings.*

*Even when I again yelled "complete electrical failure" they didn't get it--they had not been to the simulator yet.*

*Finally when they looked close at the panel and saw that the electrically operated flight instruments were not working they began to understand.*

*"Crash" watched me as I began a 300 foot per minute climb on needle, ball and airspeed until we broke out, by which time the flight engineer had worked the problem through and gotten power back on.*

*And "Crash" resumed control and we went on through the rest of the mission without a hitch.*

*When we got back, the aircraft commander got out without a word and went in to the debriefing, but as I edged past the flight engineer, he grinned, turned his thumb up and said "Good job." It was high praise, coming from a seasoned NCO to a new guy.*

*We convened for the informal debriefing of the time, and not a word was said about the incident. I was naïve enough to think that maybe that "Crash" would commend me for saving the airplane. Not a chance--for it would have been a reflection on him, as I later realized. "Crash" Smith couldn't take any more blows to his reputation. I was too new to the squadron to mention the incident myself and the whole matter dropped.*

*Oddly enough, I never really felt short changed, for I knew what I had done, and the simple thumbs-up and "Good Job" from the flight engineer was praise enough.*

*End of hero story . . . but I still like to recall it to myself.*

**Walt Boyne**

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Walt has written more than 450 articles on aviation including . . . *BOTH fiction and nonfiction books . . . 'making' The New York Times Bestseller List.*

His nonfiction books include: *The Smithsonian Book of Flight . . . Leading Edge . . . Weapons of Desert Storm*, and *Boeing B-52 : Its Documentary History*; his fiction books include *The Wild Blue . . . Trophy for Eagles . . . Eagles at War . . . and Air Force Eagles.*