

HOW POLSON RESIDENTS SAVED A WORLD WAR II BOMBER In 1943 a B-17 made a nighttime landing at the city airport

By Rick Hull

It must have seemed like a miracle when the flight crew saw a caravan of headlights headed out of Polson, pointing the way to safety.

The B-17 bomber was lost. It was February 1943, in the middle of World War II. The four-engine "Flying Fortress" had taken off from Walla Walla, Washington, on a practice bombing mission. But bad weather and a broken radio had left them airborne two states away from home.

It was ten at night and the plane was almost out of fuel when relatively clear weather revealed the lights of Ronan. The bomber circled the valley as the crew searched for a place to land, somehow avoiding the 10,000-ft wall of peaks in the darkness to the east.

The pilot had decided to try a wheels-up landing south of Polson, when suddenly a line of headlights appeared. Local residents, alerted to the



possibility of a missing bomber, were driving across the Flathead River bridge to the city airport, near the fairgrounds. The vehicles then lined up along the edge of the short, 2,500-foot runway, illuminating it with headlights, vehicle spotlights and flashlights. The bomber disarmed and discarded its practice bombs. And, using its own bright landing light to examine the runway, it lined up for the approach.

Nearly two feet of snow covered the unplowed runway. The bomber landed in a billowing cloud of snow and executed a 180 turn at the end, just short of the river. Then it taxied back to near the fairground grandstands and shut down the engines. There had been a problem tapping the reserve tank and less than five minutes of fuel remained.

When the crew spilled out, bombardier Lt. Hebert Egender kissed the ground. His next act was to remove the secret Norden bomb sight for safekeeping in the local bank.

The residents brought the eight crew members to town for a steak dinner at Baldwin's Hut Cafe and a night's sleep at the Salish Hotel. They had been in the air 12 hours.

Polson telephone switchboard operators Louise Malgren and Maude Brassfield had heard the lost plane, and called as many drivers as they could to assemble downtown. Highway patrolman Wallace Beaudry and cafe owner Les Baldwin led the procession towards the airport. The sheriff's office guarded the plane overnight.

The B-17 was a major attraction for the next three days, and school children and others were



A B-17 weighs over 18 tons empty and has a wing span of 103 feet. Photo from delpinmedia

allowed to sign the fuselage. The crew promised to name their plane the "Polson Express" when they reached Europe.

An experienced pilot and crew was brought in to get the bomber home. The Lake County road department plowed the runway and removed fences in case the 2,500 feet was not enough. But witnesses reported it seemed to leap into the air with a sixth of the runway still remaining.

Along with bombardier Egender, the original crew was pilot James Breeden, John Kauffman, navigator Maurice Floyd, John Mikkleson, Gustafson Lund, John Smith and Joseph Napalitaro.

Paul Fugleberg, publisher of the Polson Courier, later talked to Egender and Breeden's brother when they visited the newspaper office to research the wartime landing. The crew had been broken up after arriving in Europe and flew on separate planes. One crew member, who could not overcome his airsickness, never made it overseas.

On his first mission, Breeden's plane was shot down over Kiel, Germany, and he spent the remainder of the war in a prison camp. A few days later, Floyd suffered the same fate. The others went down with their plane over St. Nazaire. That left only Egender. But on his 15th mission his plane was shot down on the way to Schweinfurt and he also became a prisoner of war.

Pony Tracks July 2020