

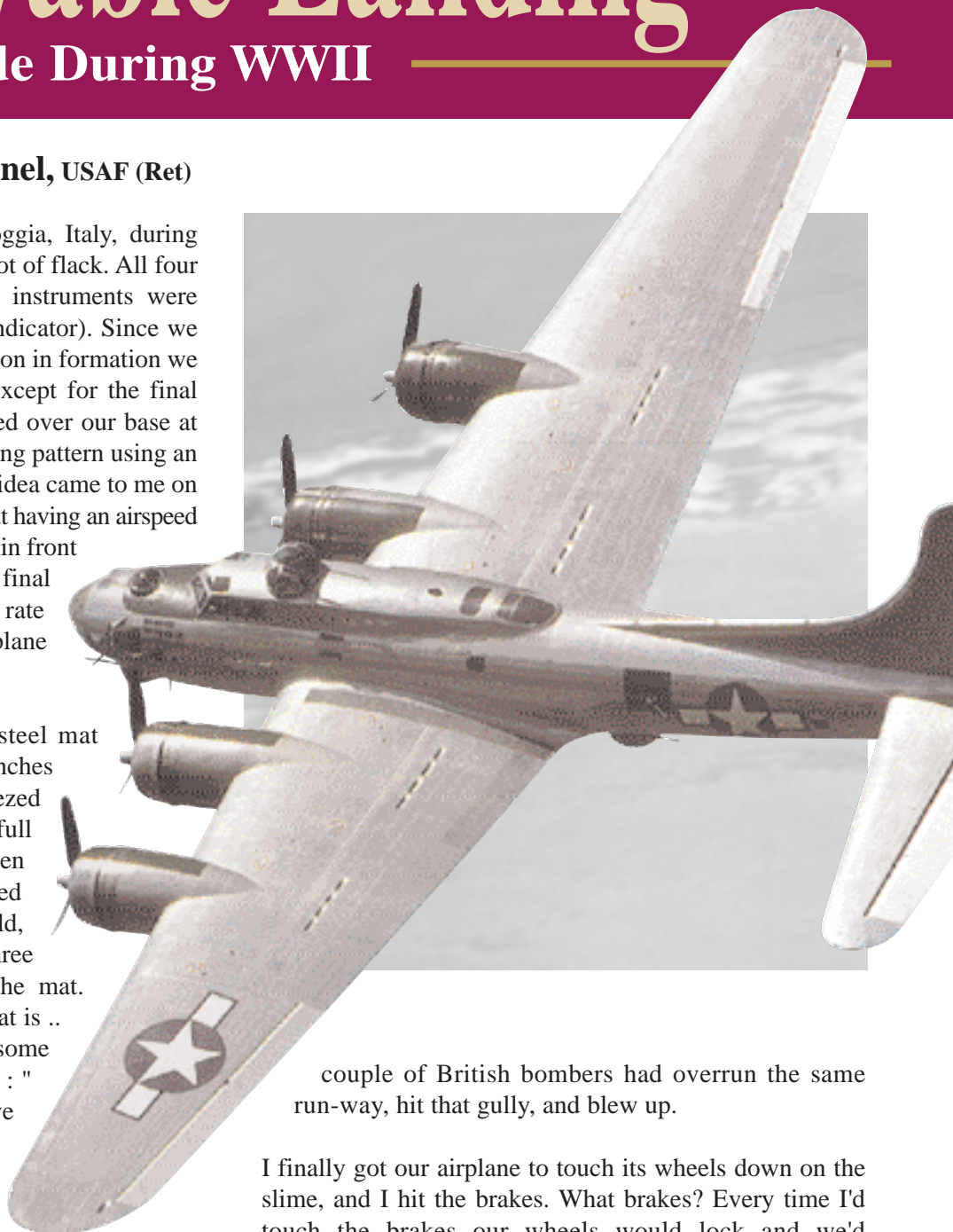
Unbelievable Landing

Made During WWII

By George Ureke, Lt. Colonel, USAF (Ret)

Flying a bombing mission out of Foggia, Italy, during WW II, our B-17 caught one hell of a lot of flack. All four engines were still running, all flight instruments were knocked out (including our airspeed indicator). Since we were returning from the bombing mission in formation we didn't really need flight instruments except for the final approach and landing. When we arrived over our base at Tortorella, we peeled off, flying a landing pattern using an in-trail formation. At that moment, an idea came to me on how we could make our approach without having an airspeed indicator. We'd ease behind an airplane in front of us, so that when we were on final approach, we could establish a closure rate with that ship to ensure that our airplane would be flying above stalling speed.

It had been raining for weeks. Our steel mat runway had been covered with three inches of slimy mud. Now, after we'd all squeezed it once again that morning with our full bomb loads, we'd no doubt forced even more slime up through the mat's pierced steel holes. As we approached our field, we expected that we'd have probably three or four inches of slime on top of the mat. However, I wasn't overly concerned that is .. 'til I asked the co-pilot to give me some flaps. He tried it, but immediately said : " The flaps aren't coming down. We've got no landing flaps ". It was too late to crank the flaps down by hand. We were committed to making a straight-in landing approach because I wasn't about to make a ' go-around ' without an airspeed indicator. Because of our ' too hot' final approach speed, we didn't touch down until we were halfway down the sodden runway. As the airplane immediately ahead of us cleared off the runway [about five-hundred feet short of our runway' send.] The pilot turned off on the taxiway, looked out his left cockpit window and saw us touching down on the slime half way down the airfield. He turned to his co-pilot and said, " Look out your window to the right. 'Ol George is going to crash into the gully at the end of the run-way." A few weeks earlier, a



couple of British bombers had overrun the same run-way, hit that gully, and blew up.


I finally got our airplane to touch its wheels down on the slime, and I hit the brakes. What brakes? Every time I'd touch the brakes our wheels would lock and we'd hydroplane along toward the fast approaching gully.. I had one choice: [something I'd always desperately attempt to avoid GROUND LOOP IT!

I pulled the power off completely on right engines No. 3 and 4, while simultaneously accelerating No. 1 and 2 engines to full emergency power, called the flight engineer for " emergency boost ", then began tapping the right brake in an effort to ground loop to the right. My immediate plan was to allow centrifugal force to dig our left wing tip into the mud, move us away from our line with the gully,



and slow us down). Hopefully, we'd rip up the airplane a bit, but avoid crashing into the gully. Normally, with that type of behavior on the brakes and controls, an airplane would leave the runway. On the other hand, this runway was so slimy; the ship's tires could not develop enough friction to cause a ground loop. So the plane just kept sliding forward toward the gully. But now, with left engines No. 1 and 2 straining at emergency power, the boosters kicking in, our airplane had spun around on its own axis and continued sliding down the runway .. backwards .. toward the gully. As we approached 180 degrees from our original landing direction, I shoved throttles on idled right engines No. 3 and 4 to full forward. Now we had all of our four engines emergency boosted at full military power. We were now sailing along .. tail first .. all four engines roaring still heading toward the gully. Well, we stopped right on the very end of the runway, hesitated briefly, then headed for the taxiway we'd just passed .. while sliding backwards.

You can imagine how scared our navigator and the bombardier were as they sat up there in nose, as we approached the gully, then began to spin. The 'maneuver' I've described is one that I'm sure has never been done previously .. nor will it be done again. It isn't something anyone would want to practice. I can only say that God was flying the airplane during that landing .. which is why I call it unforgettable.

We never heard from any of the tower people. And officially, nobody ever came to ask what caused us to land tail first. All the medals we received for combat missions seemed to be for far lesser accomplishments we were evolved in.. but that's fine .. because, it must had to have been God who made that nearly unbelievable landing anyway. 



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