

Last crew member recalls down

• Now 92, he was on the WWII B-24 when it crashed into the Adriatic Sea.

BY SILAS ALLEN
The Oklahoman

Val Miller still doesn't know who fished him out of the Adriatic Sea 70 years ago.

He never saw the faces of the two men who pulled him into their boat and took him to safety. They never said a word to one another.

A few years ago, Miller, now 92, wrote to a name and address in Croatia that he'd learned might have information about them. He never got a response.

"I don't know who they are, really," he said.

Miller, of Oklahoma City, served as a bombardier in the U.S. Army Air Corps during World War II. He was on the 10-man crew of the B-24 bomber nicknamed the Tulsamerican on the day it crashed into the sea off the coast of Yugoslavia. Wednesday marks the 70th anniversary of the crash.

Miller had joined the military in 1942 when his father drove him to Lawton to enlist. Two years later, he ended up on the fateful final flight of the Tulsamerican.

The plane was the last B-24 Liberator produced at an aircraft assembly plant in Tulsa. Employees at the plant bought war bonds to help pay for the plane.

Once it was built, they signed their names on the plane and painted its nose art.

On Dec. 17, 1944, the Tulsamerican was part of a group of six B-24s based in Italy that made a bombing run into Germany. The mission was a day after the Battle of the Bulge had begun. As Allied troops fought desperately to hold back Nazi advances in the Ardennes, planes bombarded German oil refineries in an effort to disrupt the enemy's fuel supply.

Suddenly, as the six bomb-

of clouds, a group of German fighter planes attacked them, Miller said. The fighters quickly shot down four of the six bombers. Miller dumped the 5,000 pounds of bombs the plane was carrying to allow it to maneuver. The crew of the Tulsamerican fought back, shooting down two or three fighters, he said. Eventually, the German fighters left.

"I guess they figured we were already severely damaged or they were out of fuel or something," Miller said. "I don't know."

At the end of the attack, the Tulsamerican and one other plane were in bad shape but still in the air, Miller said. One of the Tulsamerican's four engines had been shot out, its hydraulics system was damaged and one of its fuel tanks was leaking.

The crew was left to decide what to do. They began heading south, back toward

The tail section of the Tulsamerican, the last B-24 bomber made in Tulsa during World War II, where it crashed in December 1944 with Val Miller of Oklahoma City and nine others. The antenna, which was mounted atop the fuselage at midship. DANIEL FRKA/Courtesy

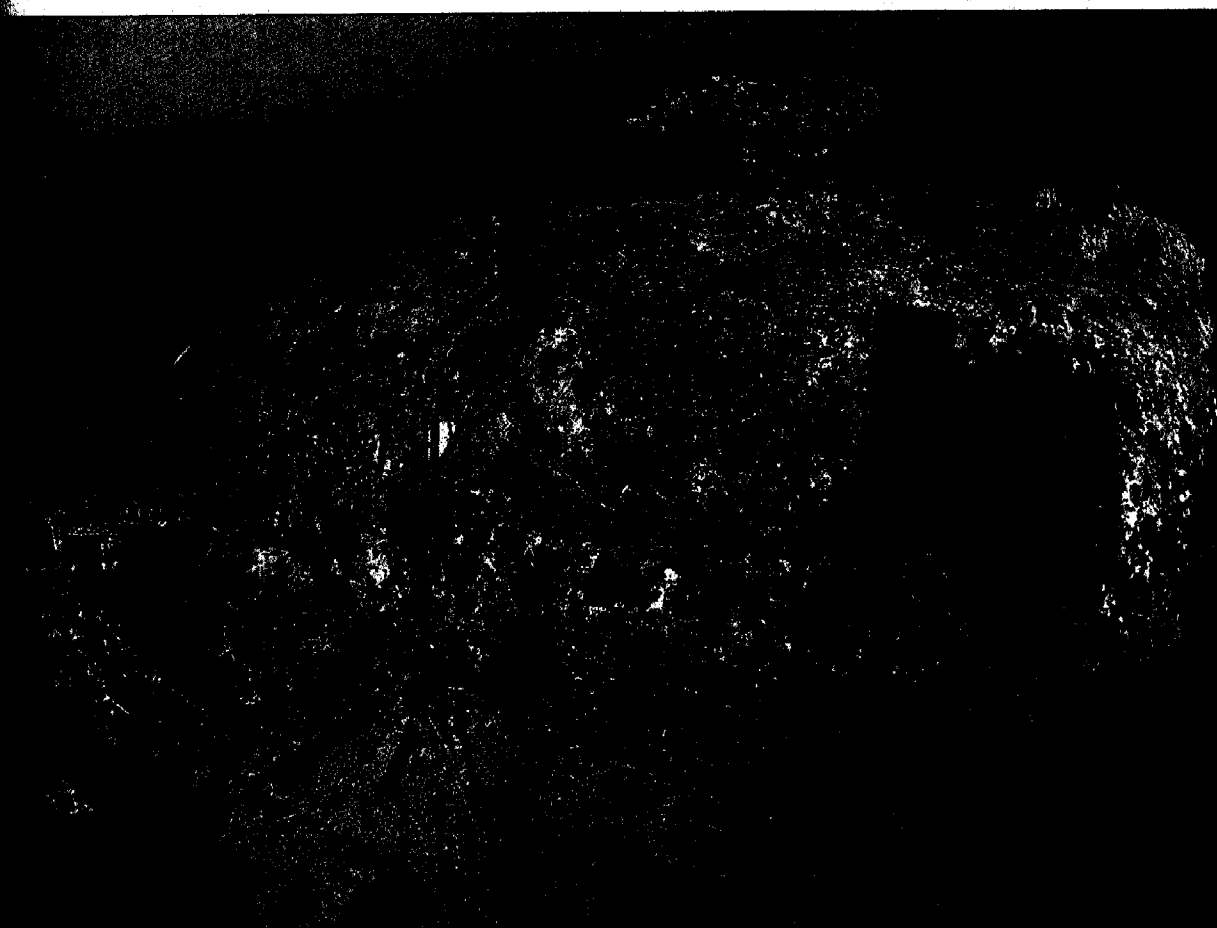


A B-24 bomber flies over Air Force Plant No. 3 at National Airport, where workers assembled such as the Tulsamerican. The last B-24 off the line at the Douglas Aircraft Co. in Tulsa. TULSA AIR AND SPACE MUSEUM/Courtesy

They could have parachuted down into Nazi-held Yugoslavia and risk dying in the jump. If they survived, they would almost certainly have

been taken prisoner. Instead, the

Member recalls downing of Tulsamerican



Wreckage of the Tulsamerican, the last B-24 bomber made in Tulsa during World War II, rests underwater off the coast of Croatia. It was downed in December 1944 with Val Miller of Oklahoma City and nine others aboard. The football-shaped item on the plane was mounted atop the fuselage at midship. DANIEL FRKA/Courtesy

group of German planes attacked, Miller said. The fighters shot down four bombers. Miller said the Tulsamerican was carrying 10,000 pounds of bombs to maneuver. The Tulsamerican was shot back, shooting down three fighters, Miller said. Actually, the German fighters figured we were severely damaged and were out of fuel, Miller said.

After the attack, the Tulsamerican and one other bomber were in bad shape but still flying, Miller said. The Tulsamerican's hydraulic system had been shot and one of its engines was leaking.

The Tulsamerican was left to descend. They began to jump back toward the base in Italy.



A B-24 bomber flies over Air Force Plant No. 3 at Tulsa International Airport, where workers assembled such aircraft during World War II. The last B-24 off the line at the Douglas plant was the Tulsamerican. TULSA AIR AND SPACE MUSEUM/Courtesy

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been taken prisoner, Miller said.

Instead, the crew decid-

ed to try to bring the plane down on a landing strip on Vis, an island off the coast of present-day Croatia that was held by the British. The island was in sight when two more engines gave out, sending the plane over onto its side, Miller said. Seconds later, the plane plunged into the frigid sea.

Miller said he thinks he lost consciousness during the crash but awoke seconds later to find sea water rushing into the cockpit. He kicked his way out of the wreckage and inflated his life vest, which carried him to the surface. But when he tried to swim toward the island, he realized his right leg was broken and dangling. Unable to swim, Miller floated alone for hours in the cold water.

"There wasn't much I could do except pray," he said. "I was doing a lot of

praying."

As the sun began to set, a small watercraft pulled up next to Miller. Two men pulled him into the boat, placing his broken leg on top of the good one. For the first time, his leg hurt. At some point, he lost consciousness again, he said.

The two men took Miller to the island, where a British doctor working in a Quonset hut treated his broken leg. While he was on the island, Miller learned that the pilot, navigator and engineer had all been killed in the crash.

Miller is believed to be the last remaining Tulsamerican survivor.

After a few days, Miller was taken to Italy and eventually sent back to the United States. He was sent to Borden General Hospital, a military facility in Chickasha, while his leg healed. He spent 16 months there.

After his discharge from the service in 1946, Miller enrolled at the University of Oklahoma, where he went on to get a law degree. He opened a practice in Duncan and shortly after ran for election for the state House of Representatives.

Miller was elected and served four years at the state Capitol, representing Stephens County.

His time in Oklahoma City led to an invitation to join a law firm now known as Crowe & Dunlevy, he said, where he worked several decades — the last 25 years in oil and gas litigation.

Now, Miller said, he likes to visit friends and play cards once a week.

"I find things to do," he said.

Seventy years after the crash, Miller can still recall that day.

"It brings back a lot of memories," he said Tuesday. "I think about the people that were with me that day that didn't survive."

"I think about how cold it was in the water. I certainly do remember that. It looked kind of hopeless for a while, but it turned out well for me."