

Close Calls

*Narrative of Earl Grant Cleaveland
Transcribed from tape,
with addition by his daughter Patsy.*

"The worst was probably in Orlando when I was working at the Army Air Base. I was working on the line—in fact, I was in charge of the line work for the airplanes (electrical). It was my duty to go up on all test hops and balance generators and things like that. On this one day, we took a hop in a B-24 they had just redone. We barely got off the ground, and I noticed there was a flash at the right window over by the flight engineer. I looked out that window (I was standing behind the captain), and I saw the No. 3 engine was a solid mass of fire. The blaze was going right back over the top and bottom of the wing. I told him, 'No. 3 is on fire.'

"At about that same time, he was busy with No. 1 engine which had blown a cylinder, and he was feathering the prop. I noticed the rpm of that No. 1 engine dropping. When I told him about the fire in No. 3, I remember he said 'Oh, my God!.' Then he hollered to the copilot, who had never ridden on a B-24 before, to turn the fire extinguisher selector to No. 3. So, the copilot did, but he never pulled it. They're supposed to turn it and then pull it for it to operate. The extinguisher didn't work.

"He (the pilot) was making a fast turn just over the hangars, trying to get back to the runway, with this one engine out and the other one burning. We were loaded to the gills for this air hop because they have to fully load them with gasoline and everything to see that everything is all right. Anyway, we made this turn.

"I had taken this girl along; she wanted to do some flying and we needed somebody (sometimes they had two airplanes to test hop at the same time, and they'd have to wait for me, and they didn't like the idea). An electrician wouldn't go up on these test hops. They said they were too damned dangerous and they don't have insurance for that. Well, this girl volunteered. She said, 'I'd like to do that, if there is anything I can do to help them.'

"I said, 'Yeah, balance the generators wouldn't be too hard. In a couple of trips I can show you what's got to be done. That's about the main thing. In case we have two test hops, you can take one and I'll take the other.'

"She was along on this trip, and that was her first trip in the air. When this burning of the engine started, I looked at her and she started for the bomb bay exit. The flight engineer had operated the bomb bay door just long enough to see if they were going to work (opening about six inches each side of the center track and then stopping them). She started for those, but then she stopped, thinking they were stuck or something.

“I didn’t know that. Course, I was looking for another way out, and I saw an escape hatch up behind the copilot and pilot. I climbed up there and opened the escape hatch. The upper half of my body was sticking out while we were coming around this airport trying to make a fast landing. The captain was radioing for emergency fire apparatus and everything. I could see fire engines going on the runway trying to get alongside of this aircraft.

“The upper half of my body was sticking out of this thing, and I thought she was going to blow up. It was right by the machine gun, so I was hanging onto the machine gun barrel (there was a twin machine gun right behind the escape hatch).

“Anyway, when we hit the ground and slowed down to a stop, I climbed out of there. Then I found out that the girl came up the ladder after me. She changed her mind about the bomb bay doors, and I slid down on the wing, slid to the back of the wing and dropped to the pavement (which is about eleven feet). I hit all right. Then I heard a splotch up in front. I turned around, and here this girl had fallen from the front right down between the whirling prop and the leading edge of the wing. The prop didn’t hit her, but when she hit the pavement she broke her back. Of course, I didn’t know that at the time, but there she was unconscious.

“Then the pilot (Captain Vaca) jumped out and came down the same way and hit right next to her. He broke his ankle. That’s a high drop from up there in the front because it’s the leading edge of the wing. They fell from the escape hatch, which is another three or four feet above that.

“He grabbed one shoulder and I grabbed the other. She was kind of a heavy gal. We dragged her off the runway. Besides dragging her off the runway, I thought, ‘Jeez, we’d better lay her down.’ He was hopping on one leg, and he says, ‘No, don’t lay her down here. We got to get off this runway. That thing is going to cover the airport when she goes. I got 6700 gallons of 100-octane on there. When she blows, it’s going to cover the whole airport.’ So, we couldn’t lay her down until we got way over on the grass.

“The fire engines were at the plane, and they were pouring this foam all over it. I’ll be darned if they didn’t get it out. Well, anyway, it had melted right through two layers of the wing and blistered the gas tanks (they were kind of a rubberized stuff). I’ve got molten aluminum from the engine—there were melted aluminum drops that fell all around the plane from that fire.

“One of the oddities was that Catherine worked at Florida Aircraft, and it was lunch time, and she and the other girls were having their lunch outside. She said to the girls, ‘Oh, look at that plane all afire and coming in!’ They watched, and then when she called for me after work, she said: ‘Did you see that plane burn, coming in?’

“I said, ‘Yeah, did you see that guy sticking out the top?’. She said, ‘Yeah.’ I said, ‘Well that was me!’

“Oh, man, what a deal!

“But that poor girl, I don’t know what happened. She was in the hospital for eight weeks before I left Orlando. She was still in the hospital when I left.

“Captain Vaca’s ankle was broken so that his foot was just flopping around like it was on a hinge. He had no control of it at all after he hit that ground.”

.....

“Another awful close one was at Tomah. We were riding with Gene Wertz in his Hudson. We were coming north, and there’s a long shed stretching east from the highway and right up close to the tracks. We pulled up there, and there was a car ahead of us. He was stopped. There was a flagman out there—an old guy with a flag. He was waving this flag.

“Finally, this car ahead must have thought that there was a freight or something parked on the track, working the wigwags (the electric signals). So, he started up. This old guy never changed his flag waving at all. He stepped to one side, and he just wiggled the flag down alongside of his leg. This guy slowly pulled across the tracks.

“Just before he got over the tracks, Gene says, ‘Oh, it must be a freight or something. We might as well go, too.’ This old guy never changed his flag waving at all. Gene started up.

“It was icy on the road there, and there were just two little tracks that were worn through to the pavement. We happened to be in those. We started up, and , gee, here comes that 400, bursting out from behind that shed going about 100 mph, and the snow swirling, and it didn’t miss that other car (there were about seven people in it) by three or four feet . Ourselves, we were so close that the car just shook from the wind that that 400 made.

“Gene was mad. I was mad. I got out of the car, and if that guy hadn’t been so old, I’d have socked him one. I told him, ‘Boy, I’m going to get you fired from this job if it’s the last thing I do!’ He said, ‘I tried to stop them.’ I said, ‘The hell you did! You should have stepped in front of them. You never changed your flag waving or anything. You tried to get us killed, too. And you’d have got killed on top of it because you were on that side of the car. (It would have smashed right into him.) You’re just stupid, that’s all!’

“So, I wrote the Northwestern Engineer. They said the next time they had a flagman there, they’d take him off of there as long as that was the case.

“There was Gene Wertz, Catherine and I, and Pat sitting in the front seat. Pat was just little.”

.....

“Another close one was up at Naylor’s, west of Exeland. I was up there as a boy about eleven or twelve, and it was right after the First World War. Ed Naylor was home visiting. I was staying there for a week or so with his younger brother, as a visitor, also. Ed was going to show his folks the Manual of Arms, you know with a gun. So, there was a double-barrel shotgun lying in the corner of the living room. He picked that up and said, ‘I’ll show you Right-Shoulder Arms, Present Arms, and Order Arms.’ When he slammed it down on the floor, the gun went off. It shot right through the ceiling. Man, what a racket that was in the house.

“So, then, they went upstairs to see what damage it did upstairs, and it missed by about six inches two big boxes of dynamite that were stored in the attic. It blew a great big hole through the floor of the attic and up through the roof. If it had hit that dynamite, there’d have been nothing but a great big hole in the ground.

“Dynamite was used for blowing stumps out there in the field. The old man was busy doing that before this.”

.....

“I recall summers when I was doing some tower work at Hylengren’s, in Rice Lake, and had Lyle Knutson working with me (that’s Don’s red-headed brother). He and I were up on the tower, and I told him, ‘You just hang onto this. Don’t let go for any reason, because I got to get this bolt out and this thing wired so that they can slide it down. They had a pulley and a jin-pole up.’ I was pulling the last bolt out and he let go of where he was, to try and help me. I had told him not to let go because this thing was all unfastened. It was standing straight up about forty feet. When he let go, the upper section started to swing over to the east, and I only had one wire on it yet. I don’t know how it held, ‘cause that thing went over about 90 degrees and was hanging right over a high-tension line, just about a foot from the line when it was its lowest. If it had hit that high-tension line, we’d have had our work all cut out for us! That was close.”

.....

“Another one was a tower at Jess Baldwin’s, out by our lake in Blue Hills. I was up on the top of a seventy-foot tower in that area where you put an antenna on, etc. Lyle, he was ambitious enough, but he didn’t think. He climbed this tree with the climbers. He was going to saw off a couple of limbs that could interfere with the antenna. So, without saying anything, he just sawed off a limb—a nice big one—and it came down and hit the guy wires on one side of the tower. I was up there on the top of the tower, and man, I had my teeth loosened in my head. I thought the whole works was coming down. The limb hit one guy wire and then swung over and dropped to the next one, turned over again and dropped to the next one—each one when hit snapped that pole like a rubber band. I was almost shaken clear of the tower. That was an awful close one.

Right after that, I said, ‘That’s it. You’re all through.’ I couldn’t have a guy like that working around me. I had to let him go.”

.....

“Another occasion, I was putting up a radio antenna on top of a three-story house over in that area south and east of the Coakley (?) Building about two blocks. Anyway, the fellow said, ‘Here, I’ve got an extension ladder.’ It was a wooden ladder, an old one. I had to get up to the peak of the house in order to put an insulator there. This would be up three stories to the peak—two full stories and then an attic story.

“I got the ladder up there. I just got up about six feet from the top and I heard this crack down below me. The ladder busted, and I fell all the way down. The top half of the ladder that broke off hit the ground right when I hit and speared the ground with the broken split part. It stuck in the ground right next to my neck, only four or five inches away.

“Luckily for me, the owner had just plowed up with a fork the whole area around the house in order to plant some flowers. He had worked it up nice and loose, so I didn’t get hurt. I landed on my knees and this thing came screaming into the ground right next to me. Boy, that was close.”

.....

“Another one, up on Lendlow (?) Boulevard, north of Jerry’s a couple of blocks, was a two-story house with attic. I was up on the roof in the winter time. There was ice on the lower part of the roof, but the top four or five feet were dry, so I figured I could put up an antenna there. I managed to get up there, through the lower snow/ice part, with the use of a rope over the top of the roof. I pulled on that rope to get up. Once I was up there, I went to the other end of the roof to put in some insulators and stuff. I’d forgotten to bring a hammer, so the owner of the house who was out in the back yard said, ‘What do you need?’ and I said, ‘I need a hammer. I’ll come down and get it.’ He said, ‘Maybe I can toss it up to you.’

“I said, ‘I’ll come down as far as I can,’ and I came down that four or five feet of dry roof. I had my heels on the dry part but my toe was evidently in the start of the ice. Anyway, he threw the hammer not far enough, and I reached out to get it. My weight went onto my toes and down off that roof I went. I had my fingernails all torn grabbing into that ice, trying to stop my slide.

“Luckily, there was a two-stall garage out there, and he had shoveled all the snow so that it was all bare concrete except for the big pile he had made of all the snow he’d shoveled. I went right into the top of that pile of snow. I had snow up my sleeves up to my shoulders and up my trouser legs up to my hips, but I didn’t get hurt. I remember that his wife was working at the kitchen window when I went by. I heard this scream as I hit the snow. I thought I’d had it that time, but luckily the snow was there. Otherwise, I’d have hit on the bare concrete.”

.....

“Another occasion was when we were going to Milwaukee for Christmas—Catherine, Pat, and I and Henry Green and his wife. We were taking them down to visit their folks. We got down near the Dells someplace. Rice Lake was bare, and the country was dry. There wasn’t a snowflake on the ground. We were going right along. It was an night, pitch dark. Suddenly, here’s the bright headlights of a car right in our face. We couldn’t see anything. The highway had been dry, so I just kept on going to go past him. My lights, all of sudden, showed a snow bank—must have been seven-foot high—where the plows had just managed to clear a single trail through this snow bank. In the center of this trail, here’s this car parked with its bright headlights on. The only dry pavement there was these two tracks—in other words, a single lane leading away from there where the ice had been worn off. I was going about seventy miles an hour, and (I’d just had my brakes fixed) I thought if I hit that snow there’s no way we’re going to live through it. With the car’s high beam on, I couldn’t see a thing until that moment. I just had a short distance to stop. I headed right into those bare tracks and headed for this car, slammed on the brakes when I hit the dry pavement. I slid right up to this guy’s radiator, and I could see the people inside. Their eyes were like saucers. They thought their end had come, and actually it should have—a stupid stunt like that: to get right in that space and stay there with the high beam. I had flicked my lights a couple of times trying to get them to lower their beams so I could see.

“Then I had to back up and let them go through and around in order to go through that icy patch. Then, from there to Milwaukee there was snow like I never saw before. In fact, that’s the winter that everything got tied up in Milwaukee for better than a week. I don’t think streetcars or anything ran. I remember walking down Prospect Avenue, and you could walk right over the tops of the cars that were parked along the street. The plows had pushed the snow over, and then it snowed on top of those. It was sort of a bumpy walk, right over the top of the cars. I never saw anything like it. I believe they had 17 ½ inches of snow, and it buried that town.

“And we didn’t have a bit of snow up in Rice Lake.”

.....

“Another event, not really dangerous, was when Jerry and I were fishing out on the government pier. It was one of those rainy days. We had raincoats on, and we were on the outside of the pier—that sloped section. The big swells were coming along, and the horizontal part where you stand was real slippery. Anyway, a wave came along, and I was standing there with my fish pole—and I just slid (standing up) right off that edge, right into the water. The raincoat caught a lot of air, and I don’t think I got wet over about my belt or so. I went down, down as the swell went past, and then the next swell brought me back up. Jerry reached out and grabbed me by the back of the neck and pulled me out. I’ll never forget that. I could swim, so there wasn’t any real danger, but I never even got my shoulders wet.”

.....

“Once at Rice Lake when I was doing some repair work on a 140-foot tower out at the hill for our cable system, the wires were broke out near the end of the antenna. I figured, rather than take the antenna all apart, I could just put the belt around my back and around the top of the tower (the mast). Then I could stand on the edge of the platform and reach way out at maybe a 35- or 40-degree angle to do the repair without disassembling everything. I swung that lineman’s belt around and snapped it onto one of those rings on the side of my belt so I could face the break in the wires. I stood on the edge of the platform and leaned way out, just against the belt. I had forgotten that these big rings are about four or five inches across (one on each side). They were forward when I’d leaned out there and put tension on them (I’d just started to work on this thing), and the two rings snapped backwards and left me out about six or eight inches further from the tower. I was ready to just jump! I could see myself flying like a bird over that farmhouse down there, 140 feet below me.

“Boy, I’ll tell you, that was some thrill!”

.....

“Another close call I had was up here in the alley at Knapp Street, about three blocks west of our house. It had been raining for a couple of days, and this big old telephone pole was just slippery and wet. I was up over the cross arm doing some work. When I got down to the cross arm, I had to take the belt off to swing it under the cross arm. Of course, at that moment, you’ve just got one hand. My left hand was around the other side of the pole. I had to take one more step down and then swing the belt around.

“Well, my left hand slipped off that greasy old pole, and I went off the pole backwards from at the cross-arm part of the telephone pole. I landed in the alley, right in the wheel track. I was lucky there was some water in that wheel track. I landed right on my back. Of course, it knocked me out.

“First thing I could hear (I couldn’t see anything yet because everything turned black) was Mrs. Boulter (the state cop’s wife who lived quite close by). She had been up in the attic or in an upstairs bedroom or something and had seen me out there working on the pole. She had seen me fall, and she came out. First thing I heard was, ‘Mr. Cleaveland, Mr. Cleaveland, are you all right?’ I could hear that, but I couldn’t see a thing. I couldn’t breathe. Oh, I felt I was just shaken all over, like a high-speed vibration or something. I was seeing flashes of light in the dark. I don’t know what caused that.

“But, anyway, after a bit I got my breath and came to. I felt all right. My back was a little stiff and sore, but I looked and saw that right next to me—about three feet away—was a picket fence. My lucky stars, I thought. If I’d hit that picket fence on my back, that would have been something!

“Anyway, I thought I’d better go to the doctor to have my back checked. I was worried that maybe something broke loose from the bone fusion I had had in my back previously. He said that I couldn’t have landed any better. You picked a wheel track with water in it,

and that was a good idea. I said, 'Well, I had nothing to do with it. It just happened that way.' That was a lucky break."

.....

"This is something that happened when we were coming up Chesapeake Bay with the big boat. Hazel, Catherine's sister, was along. She talks almost constantly, and I would get so I'd let it go in one ear and out the other.

"When she said something, I didn't hear it or didn't pay any attention to it. Then she said it again. She said, 'Earl, what does Aband LH stand for?' I said, 'Gee, I don't know. It must be some radio channel or something.' She said, 'It says that on the chart.' I didn't pay any attention. I said, 'I don't know what it is.'

"We went another mile or so, and all of a sudden I felt a throbbing. It was familiar to me. Every time we get under thirteen or fourteen feet depth, I could feel the vibration of the propeller, evidently bouncing against the ground and coming back up to the hull. All of a sudden, I felt that and cut the throttles down because we were supposed to be in deep water. I turned on the depth finder. It registered eight feet.

"I pulled to a stop and looked at the chart. We were heading for the rocks (less than two feet deep). The course she had set (I had taught her how to set courses) was supposed to be around a new lighthouse. I didn't even see the mention of the old one. But that's what Aband LH means, 'Abandoned Light House.' She had set her course for the wrong lighthouse, and it would put me right up on the rocks.

"Holy Christ, I thought. That was too close for me. It would have torn the whole bottom of the boat out."

.....

Another time, going down to the Keys, John Makita was running the boat. I told him to steer 210 degrees or something. That would cover ten miles and bring us to the next set of buoys. It was all open there until you got that ten-mile distance. I told him, 'When you get down a ways, be watching for those buoys because there's shallow water down there.'

"Catherine and I sat in the back and relaxed. We were enjoying the trip, when all of a sudden John hollered, 'Hey, there's a bunch of porpoise up here. Come take a look.' We were planing along at a pretty good clip. We got up there to see the porpoise and lo-and-behold, he was going to plow right up on shallow water. It was only about a foot deep. The buoys he was supposed to look for were about 150 yards to the right. There was just a narrow channel (I guess they call it Steamboat Channel or something like that.) through this shallow area. If we hadn't gone up there to look at the porpoise, that boat would have been stuck up there high and dry yet. We never would have got that thing off.

Here and there you see the ribs of ones that run up on those shallows. They never get them off.”

.....

“We were looking for a home—a cottage or something—in Orlando. We wanted to move away from where we were staying because of bats. I came home from work one day, and Catherine said, ‘Oh, I found a place, out near the airport, too.’ I said, ‘I hope it isn’t too close to the airport.’

“ ‘Well,’ she said, ‘it’s pretty close, but it’s a nice little place.’ So, I said, ‘Let’s go look at it.’ She had paid \$30 down or so for the rent.

“We went out there, and it was the second or third house, right at the end of the runway. There were military aircraft flying over this thing all the time. I thought, Jeez, one of these days one of them’s going to go right straight through these houses.

“You know, it was only a couple of weeks later that a P-38 went right through the fence and crashed through the first and second house and exploded in the third one (the one that we were going to rent).

“It wasn’t so funny at the time, though. It killed a little girl in the second house. Nobody was home in the other two, thank goodness. The pilot managed to escape alive. I don’t know how that happened, but he got out of it.

“The woman wouldn’t give us our deposit back, either. She kept half of it.”