

1958

Summary of Achievement

First Lieutenant James E. Obenauf, B-47 copilot of the 341st Bombardment Wing, Dyess Air Force Base, Texas, displayed conspicuous skill and fortitude 28 April 1958 to save his unconscious navigator and to bring his damaged bomber back safely after an in-flight fire and subsequent bailout of the other two crew members.

While on a night navigation and bombing training mission, the B-47 on which Lieutenant Obenauf was copilot experienced oil pressure difficulty with number three engine. A short time later, while cruising at 34,000 feet, the aircraft was rocked by an explosion. The aircraft commander looked toward number three engine and observed the reflection of a fire which he assumed to be in the fuselage. He ordered the crew to abandon the aircraft.

The ejection seats of both the aircraft commander and the copilot failed to fire. The aircraft commander and the navigator had left the aircraft through the navigator's lower escape hatch and were being followed by Lieutenant Obenauf when he saw the instructor navigator lying unconscious in the aisle.

Confronted with the unenviable choice of saving himself by bailing out or facing what appeared to be certain death by staying with the aircraft in an attempt to save his fellow officer, Lieutenant Obenauf returned immediately to his seat. The ejection seat was armed and might fire at any moment. The aircraft was burning violently and in danger of exploding. The canopy and the downward escape hatch were gone, filling the cockpit with frigid air. In addition, he had the problem of making a successful night landing alone.

Lieutenant Obenauf promptly put the B-47 into a steep descent in order that his companion might have a chance to regain consciousness in the lower altitude. At 11,000 feet the instructor navigator became semiconscious, and Lieutenant Obenauf succeeded in extinguishing the blaze.

Despite temperatures as low as minus 30 degrees Centigrade, in which his hands became so cold he could scarcely control the aircraft, and wind blast, cockpit debris, and cold that blinded him until he couldn't read his instruments clearly, Lieutenant Obenauf continued to struggle with the aircraft. He was able to make radio contact with another aircraft in the vicinity which relayed instructions from a DF station. Ultimately establishing communications with a GCI station, he maneuvered the plane into a local GCA pattern and followed instructions to a successful landing at his home base.

His heroism, valor and professional airmanship were superlative. His courage, conduct and professional skill under extremely adverse conditions were in the highest tradition of the United States Air Force.

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