

The Greater Mark of Valor

The B-29 was about to explode. Sgt. Paul Ramoneda knew there were survivors in the tangled wreckage.

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THE sky was clear with ten miles' visibility on the night of August 5, 1950, as the B-29 Superfortress lined up for takeoff from Fairfield-Suisun (now Travis) AFB in California, its destination Hickam AFB, Hawaii. Aboard were nineteen members of the 9th Bomb Group and Brig. Gen. Robert F. Travis, 9th Bomb Wing Commander—ten men forward and ten in the rear pressurized compartment.

It looked like a routine flight: good weather, an experienced crew, and only minor write-ups in the plane's Form 1-A. But as the B-29 broke ground an hour before midnight, aircraft commander Capt. Eugene Steffes reported a runaway propeller. He was cleared for an emergency landing on runway 21-L.

Then, Captain Steffes tried unsuccessfully to raise his landing gear in order to reduce drag while he came around for the landing. At an altitude of 200 feet, he notified the tower that the gear would not retract. The Superfort, heavily loaded with fuel, bombs, and ammunition, never made the runway. Its left wing hit the ground near the border of the base and sheared off, rupturing the fuel tanks. The rear compartment was immediately engulfed in flames. As the bomber careened toward a trailer park near the main gate, the fuselage broke at the forward bomb bay, the nose section cartwheeling past the base bake shop.

Four airmen on duty in the shop saw the plane hit, burst into flames, and skid past them. All four ran toward the B-29, Sgt. Paul P. Ramoneda in the lead. As they approached the nose section, they

heard cries for help. All the crew members and passengers in the forward compartment were injured, dazed by the violence of the crash, and disoriented in the tangle of darkened wreckage.

In the minutes before the crash crew arrived, Paul Ramoneda and his companions managed to extricate eight men from the nose section and carry them to safety. One of the injured men told the rescuers to get away from the plane before it exploded. Already, .50-caliber ammunition and flares were cooking off, and the heat from the blazing tail section was becoming intolerable. But Paul Ramoneda knew there were still survivors in the nose section, which was now beginning to burn.

Since the crash crew had arrived, Sgt. Lewis Siqueira, the NCO in charge of the four bakers, ordered his men back to the bake shop.



As Sgt. Paul Ramoneda ran toward the nose section of the crashed B-29, he heard cries for help.

“Ramoneda was behind the rest of us, and one of the other men yelled at him to come on,” Siqueira later recalled. “He started toward us and then yelled back that he was going to save those men and turned around and started back for the plane. The last time I saw him, he had wrapped his apron around his head and face and was going back into the plane, which was on fire. That was when it blew up.”

Exploding bombs left a crater sixty feet in diameter and six feet deep. Sgt. Paul Ramoneda, five members of the crash crew, and twelve men still aboard the B-29 were killed in the fire and explosion, and 175 others in the area were injured.

Heroism has been defined as an act performed voluntarily at the risk of one's own life—an act which, if not undertaken, would subject a person to no justifiable criticism. By that criterion or any other, Sgt. Paul Ramoneda died a hero. He was awarded the Soldier's Medal posthumously and later the Cheney Award, which has been given annually since 1927 for an “act of valor, extreme fortitude, or self-sacrifice in a humanitarian interest performed in connection with aircraft.” In April 1951, Fairfield-Suisun was renamed Travis AFB in honor of General Travis, who died in the crash.

Before he joined the Air Force, Paul Ramoneda had served with distinction in the Marine Corps during World War II. But his heroism on the night of August 5, 1950, was not the spontaneous reflex that often yields unexpected bravery in the heat of combat. He had been at the crash site for at least ten minutes, had felt the awful heat of the fire, had heard the ammunition detonating, and had been warned of an imminent explosion. Nevertheless, he deliberately accepted the certainty of painful injury and the probability of death in his attempt to save the lives of men he did not know.

For all that, his act had the greater mark of character, and of valor. ■