

were devastating: almost 17 square miles of the city were reduced to ashes. Estimates of the number killed range between 80,000 and 200,000, a higher death toll than that produced by the dropping of the Atomic Bomb on Hiroshima or Nagasaki six months later. Fourteen B-29s were lost. The B-29 was finally beginning to have an effect.

By mid-June, most of the larger Japanese cities had been gutted, and LeMay ordered new incendiary raids against 58 smaller Japanese cities. By now, the B-29 raids were essentially unopposed by Japanese fighters. In late June, B-29 crews began to drop leaflets warning the population of forthcoming attacks, followed three days later by a raid in which the specified urban area was devastated. By the end of June, the civilian population began to show signs of panic, and the Imperial Cabinet first began to consider negotiating an end to the war. However, at that time, the Japanese military was adamant about continuing on to the bitter end. As we know, the war came to an end in August 1945 after the atomic bombs were dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

During the entire Marianas operation, a total of 25,500 individual aircraft sorties were flown, and 170,000 tons of conventional ordnance dropped. A total of 371 bombers were lost. Some historians, with the excellent vision of hindsight, have opined that the firebombing attacks were sufficient to cause the Japanese surrender and the atomic attacks were unnecessary. Still others hold the view that the firebombings were cruel and the Allies should have limited themselves to the atomic attacks. Although these discussions are certainly significant, they are beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that the Virginia Aeronautical Historical Society is committed to the study of aviation history and this is a part of history that happened. I hope this background will be useful to you as you read the following article from someone who was actually there.

Sources:

GlobalSecurity.org for information on Weapons of Mass Destruction

Common Dreams News Center, www.commondreams.org

EyeWitnessToHistory.com, The Tokyo Fire Raids, 1945

B-29 Attacks on Japan from the Marianas, by Joseph Baugher, March 15, 2002



The Beginning of the End: The First Firebombing of Tokyo, 9-10 March 1945

By Robert O. Bigelow, VAHS member

Looking down the long line of silver airplanes, we checked our watches. Though the glint of the afternoon sun somewhat distorted our vision, we could see propellers turn in measured precision. Just as precisely, each plane, with its four engines giving a short burst of power, came slowly out of its revetment. Resting squat and heavy on its wheels, it would slowly turn in line and join the armada of B-29s flowing toward the takeoff end of the runway. Although the fears and concerns from the earlier mission briefing lingered with each crew member, confidence was building. The Bombardier in his nose position and the Central Fire Control Gunner in his top dome gave a running account of the progress of the gathering force. As it neared our turn to start engines and join the awesome “stream,” we knew that we were part of something big and important. We were taking the war to Japan.

Most of the 29th Bomb Group planes and flight crews had only recently arrived at their base on the island of Guam. One by one, almost as if part of an assembly line, crews had picked up brand new B-29s at the Wichita, Kansas, Boeing plant in early February 1945.



The B-29 Superfortress

After a short flight to nearby Herington Kansas Army Base, there were eleven days of processing and training that included issue of flak jackets, parachutes, side arms, and a host of personal and aircraft equipment. With no fanfare they were given some paperwork and made an early morning departure for a better test of men and machines - a longer flight to Mather Field at Sacramento, California.

Whereas crew personnel had been juggled and changed in the months at Pratt, Kansas, and availability of B-29s for training flights was haphazard due to engine failures and other maintenance problems, the crews now began to feel that they were a unit and (at least hope) that they would be able to call the present B-29 “theirs.” There would be no B-17s as back-up to fill training squares. It was now B-29 all the way. In a few days at Mather, they gathered their Norden Bombsight and navigation sextant, received an overseas route briefing, and it was time to begin their trans-Pacific crossing and to get to their war. The first leg to Hickam Field in Hawaii was easy and routine. The shiny B-29 Superfortress, whose engines proved so troublesome in training, performed flawlessly.

On arrival at Hickam, we noted uniforms everywhere, but there was nothing warlike about Hawaii; it was still the paradise of the Pacific. Too soon though, we were again airborne and headed west. Landing for fuel at the combat-shredded island of Kwajalein made it all too clear that we were catching up to the war. The few stumps of palm trees still standing were perforated with shell holes. After another reach across the great ocean, the arrival at North Field Guam let us know that we were there; we had caught up to the war. The Seabees had clawed a runway and living out of the jungle. Piles of coral and bulldozed logs from the forest of palm trees were stacked aside. A jeep led us to a hard stand to park our B29; then a crew truck took us to the tent city that was to be home. Greeting previously arrived 29th Bomb Group crews with bravado, we asked mockingly, “When are we going to bomb the Japanese?” Our humor seemed wasted on our comrades, and we newcomers found that the pungent odor of hot canvas and the outdoor latrines of the tent city made somewhat of a mockery of our attempt at bravado and humor. There was a grim determination about the 24-hour bustle of the place that made everyone know that they weren’t playing games; it had a feel of deadly purpose.

After a couple of practice flights bombing some Japanese on the close at hand by-passed island of Rota and seeing more of our crews arrive from the States almost every day, there was a feeling of growing readiness. It was a hot tropical midday on March 9, 1945, when the pilots, navigators, bombardiers, and radar operators were called to a mission briefing at 1300 hours. The rumor was that this would be the real thing. The target would be Japan itself. There had been frantic activity on the flight line all through the previous night. Airplanes were getting fuel loads, and bombs had been brought up the island and loaded. Armorers and ground crews learned before the aircrews the meaning of Maximum Effort.

The assembled crews' chatter and speculation about the target and mission information on the covered boards at the front of the Briefing Room had been intense but soon came to a halt. The room sprang to attention as the Group Commander, Col. Carl Storrie, and staff strode to the front of the room. All speculation ended as cover sheets were ripped off briefing boards. Mouths dropped open with what they revealed. Colonel Storrie began by saying that General LeMay had enough airplanes, bombs, and gasoline and had decided that it was time to finish the Japanese. There would be no more bucking of severe high altitude winds and trying to knock out individual factories. Tonight, we were going in, in-trail at 5,000 to 9,000 feet with incendiary bombs. We would spread fire over the industrial and working class parts of the city. This type of raid, if it succeeded, would disrupt industry, displace workers, and drive the seat of their government into hiding. Tokyo was the target.

All of our B-29 bombing training had been in the use of the secret Norden Bombsight that was claimed to allow us to hit a pickle barrel from the relative safety of 30,000 feet. Also, our training in daylight formations gave us the assurance that there was safety in numbers in a formation of massed defensive firepower. Now, we were scrapping all that and being told that we would be swarming at night as single aircraft over a heavily defended city at a mere 5,000 feet. Sure, it would be easier than hitting a pickle barrel as each aircraft scattered 15 to 20,000 pounds of fire bombs at low altitude. But, as the briefings progressed – Operations, then Navigation and Intelligence – the crews' long-held feeling of the safety of high altitude vanished. The comfort of the known was replaced by the Intelligence warning of a close proximity to virtually every caliber of ground fire, search lights to trap us, barrage balloons training cables, and night fighters. In short, at low altitude they could throw everything at us including the kitchen sink.

Colonel Storrie seemed to get a kick out of the alarmed looks and murmuring of the troops. His war had started earlier in Europe. He had spent a year or more commanding a Martin B-26 Group. Bombing from medium altitudes, they sought to destroy ports and railroad yards. They had to counter very efficient German fighters and flak. While these had been important targets to help the Army in the great land war of Europe, they seemed mere pinpricks and never offered the satisfaction of delivering direct payback to those in Berlin and Tokyo who had set this war loose. Tonight would be different. The Japanese, up to and including the Emperor, would see their dreams of conquest and glory shattered. It would be not just the loss of a railroad marshaling yard such as Storrie's unit in France might have inflicted; tonight the 29th Bomb Group, using the docks of Tokyo as the Aiming Point, would dump over 300,000 pounds of fiery destruction on the capital. This was direct retribution and it seemed to please Storrie. Added to that, his Group would be joined with three other Groups from Guam plus eight from the islands of Saipan and Tinian. Though Storrie and a few others had confidence that this great force would get through and cause great



Over 300 B-29 bombers participated in the firebombing raid against Tokyo, dropping tons of incendiary bombs on the wooden structures below.

damage none dared hope that they would destroy 16 square miles of a great city and render the entire target nearly useless with one raid.

The plan provided for the bomber stream to start arriving at midnight. B-29s would be racing across the Tokyo sky through much of the night. Bombs, with their fire and explosions, and a strong surface wind would help create deadly firestorms. Also each load included a few fragmentation bombs to send metal fragments ripping and tearing through any firefighters attempting to fight the fire. While the mission briefers quickly laid out the plan, its details and expected results, most of us couldn't shake the nagging question of "How many shattered B-29s would be a part of the holocaust below?" So much for our false bravado about "Let's get with it." We WERE "with it" and this first mission would be something we'd remember the rest of our lives.

As the sweep second hand on our watches stood straight up, it was our turn! The Flight Engineer began starting engines 3, 4, 2, 1. As each of the big R350s coughed, puffed out a cloud of black smoke, then smoothly spun its 16-foot propeller, our confidence gained. With all four engines running, the power was nudged enough to get our heavy, reluctant plane in motion and take position in the taxi line. Ahead we could see the great machines one by one, in the brilliant glare of the afternoon sun, move onto the runway and start the takeoff roll. Though most crew members were busy assuring that everything was ready for takeoff, there was time to take pride in the precision and almost fluid motion of this great air armada going into action.

We were next! After a momentary check of the magnetos with turbo superchargers and flaps set, the takeoff checklist was complete. Carefully and slowly edging to a position as close to the end of the runway as possible – there would be no room to spare and none could be wasted – we were ready! With a quick glance at watches, the green "go" flare arced over the runway. The throttle levers were steadily advanced to their limit. The engineer and co-pilot confirmed (and aligned) the manifold pressures and RPMs. All was well. There was surge of power as four huge propellers clawed at the air and the engines gave as much of the promised 8800 horsepower as could be gotten on a hot tropical afternoon.

At first, the fully loaded (140,000 lb.) behemoth lumbered reluctantly and awkwardly. The crew had never flown anything this heavy before, and anxious glances were repeatedly taken at the engine instruments to check the output of power. Though the upslope of the runway ahead had been added to the takeoff distance calculation, the back of our minds certainly wished the Seabees could have made it level. However, airspeed was increasing as programmed as we passed Runway Distance Markers. Soon firmness was felt in the controls, and the stiff, drooping wings began their magic of lifting and flying. As the end of the runway flashed beneath, the wheels no longer thumped and bumped; they were relieved of their burden. By the time gear was retracted in the nacelles, the cliff at Pati Point was passed; suddenly there was the luxury of a couple hundred feet of altitude.

Gently lowering the nose of the airplane, airspeed painfully increased and, instead of hanging on the props and balancing on the edge of a stall, flaps could be retracted and the strain of full engine power reduced. Seeming to touch the spray from the windswept waves below, our great airplane was now in its proper realm: it had airspeed and was flying.

Turning north, we aimed at Japan and climbed to assigned cruising altitude. Though we would continue to sweat out the plane as well as our skill and training for another fifteen hours and three thousand miles, for now the crew had a little time for a collective sigh of relief. There was time and daylight remaining to feel at peace watching the sun set over that great expanse of Pacific Ocean. We could scan ahead and spot the many

distant B-29s scattered across the blue. They had the appearance of stately schooners sailing in the tranquil evening sky – a beautiful sight. There was no hint, and indeed, it seemed inconceivable, that they were rushing to a rendezvous with violence!

Daylight faded into a void of darkness and though hundreds of miles of vast ocean were being traversed, we seemed suspended in the blackness of night. A blue haze of instrument lights and the drone of engines added to a feeling of standing still, adrift in time and space. It also had a soporific effect, and crew members began finding places on the cabin floor or in the tunnel connecting fore and aft, to stretch out and doze or quietly ponder what might await them in a few hours. Not all crew could share in this time of rest and reflection. The navigator could not rest - there was half a silent world out there in which to get lost. The bombardier had armed his bombs and, trained in navigation, he could give some help. The radio operator must guard a silence that might be broken only by the most compelling and fateful of command messages. The flight engineer and one of the pilots must stay in position and be watchful for any hint that, as the saying about aviation goes, the “hours of boredom” with a smooth running machine might be interrupted by an engine stutter and “moments of stark terror.”

As deep night settled in, the pilot, while checking instruments and watching outside the cockpit, slowly turned the crank on the radio compass broadcast band. He was hoping for a signal in the great emptiness of the Pacific. It was a long shot at best and certainly served no function other than warding off the boredom; it also added to the mystery and adventure of the flight into darkness. What’s out there? Suddenly the frequency meter on the control box jumped, and sound came through the headset. The sound, weird and almost unrecognizable, seemed to be some sort of music: the music of the Orient. Instead of the melody and sustained rhythm of our favorite Big Band orchestras, there was a twang on some stringed instrument, then moments of silence followed by a falsetto voice uttering sing-song, guttural nasal declarations, then silence again. In the eerie glow of the cockpit, suspended in a black universe over an unseen endless ocean below, this was a mysterious new world. What place sent that signal? The place must be distant; the direction needle lacked power to point toward the source. Was it Formosa, China, Okinawa, or Japan? Although we were hundreds of miles from any of them, there was nothing between ocean and ionosphere to impede the signal. The strange twang, silence, and then the guttural harsh utterances were weird and foreign. They added to our minds’ eye picture of cruel and ruthless Japanese.

Despite the feeling of being suspended motionless, time was not standing still; hours had elapsed. Whatever else it had done, the probing with the radio compass and self-assuring checks with the navigator and flight engineer had filled the void of time and space. A glance at the airspeed indicator pegged at 210 miles per hour dispelled the quiet sleep, reflections and musings of the crew. It was a reminder that we were rushing toward our deadly purpose! A dim red glow that appeared on the horizon ahead shook any remaining drowsiness. Our adrenaline took over. The Pathfinders and other B-29s had kindled the flames of Tokyo.

Now it was time to make sure that, after the 1,500-mile flight, the time and altitude over the Initial Point (IP) would be precise. With over 300 airplanes converging on what had been a small point on a map when they started, failure to meet their one-minute interval and 200-foot altitude separation presented hazards of midair collision or running through other aircrafts’ bombs. A consolation was that, at least, control of the time, speed, and altitude depended on the crew’s skill. Other threats to the mission such as Jap flak, night fighters, or barrage balloons were out of their control. They could only run the gauntlet and see who would prevail!

The crew came alive with busy preparations, throwing switches, adjusting parachutes, and donning flak jackets and helmets. All was ready for running that fateful course known as the Bomb Run. Any

complacency remaining from the quiet sojourn through the lonely night disappeared as the glare of dull red glowing clouds became brighter. Distance was rapidly being closed and the glow became lights winking, flaring, and erupting from what could now be seen to be a city on fire.



The devastation of Tokyo was widespread, destroying almost sixteen square miles.

After numerous attempts at precision bombing from the relative safety of 30,000 feet and being hampered by the jet stream and weather, General LeMay had made one of the most momentous decisions in the history of air warfare. He gambled that the Japanese would not or could not counter his low-altitude bomber stream. His confidence was such that he withheld ammo for the 12 defensive .50 caliber machine

guns. The saved weight was used for more gasoline and bombs. The moment of truth had already been met by our fellow B-29 crews who were first over the target. That moment was fast approaching for our aircraft and those that followed us; the bomber stream would not waver. Leaving the Initial Point at 5,800 feet altitude, though radio silence prevented any word of the fate of previous planes over the target, it was clear now that the enemy had not prevented the delivery of thousands of tons of bombs and that a great city was burning furiously. How many B-29s were down in that conflagration was not known, but there was no doubt that they and those surviving were accomplishing their mission. There was no longer any time for idle musings. All of the skill, training, and teamwork would meet its ultimate test in the next few minutes.

Passing the IP, the navigator, bombardier, and radar operator confirmed time and altitude. The props and throttles were shoved forward by the pilot and set by the flight engineer. The plane strained and pressed faster in its wild dash through smoke and anti-aircraft fire, seeking its target. Leaving the IP with the airspeed pegged at 250 MPH, the bombardier, navigator, and radar operator concurred on the Aiming Point (AP) and steadied on a heading very close to the 338 degrees briefed for the bomb run. The Norden Bombsight and autopilot were locked on the Tokyo docks, the Aiming Point. Crew would look out to avoid other B-29s; but, except for avoiding mid-air collision or enemy action, nothing would alter the rush to “bombs away.”

At 5,800 feet of altitude, the probe of searchlights was fearsome. The streams of tracer anti-aircraft fire crisscrossed the sky as if sprayed from garden hoses. When probing searchlights would blind the cockpit with dazzling white light, it would be followed with a measured jolting whomp! whomp! The aircraft would bounce as the death-dealing anti-aircraft shock found the track but barely miscalculated the altitude of their bursts. Surviving the explosions, we hardly noticed the shrapnel which rattled and tinkled as it rained down on the wings. Could anything get through there? Though such thoughts flitted through the subconscious mind, the conscious mind directed, “Bomb doors open.”

Now, attention was riveted to heading, altitude, airspeed, and time to target as the Norden Bombsight unerringly lined its crosshairs. With a relief of tension, the bombardier shouted, “Bombs away.” Suddenly the

huge airplane leaped as it loosed its lethal burden. The pilot settled it down, held steady for two minutes, then turned to a northeast departure heading out of the target area. The fervent prayer and hope of all was to get away from the deadly flak and escape those probing searchlights. This time there was no dread of the vast, dark emptiness of the ocean that loomed ahead. We banked sharply and raced for the safety of the coast – it was a sanctuary.

Leaving Choshi Point, Japan, we welcomed the empty Pacific. All crew reported OK and no known damage. Power was reduced to an economical fuel setting for the long seven-and-a-half-hour flight home. Although the crew was physically tired and emotionally drained, a total letdown could be fatal. The pilots, flight engineer, and navigator coordinated their efforts and prepared to battle fatigue and the momentary lapses into sleep that would end with a startling jump back into consciousness. There was still a long night ahead. Careful fuel use and navigation skill would be needed to get home. Adverse winds, weather, or faltering engine performance could drastically change the outlook for a return flight that was equal in distance to halfway across the United States. When the flight engineer reported the fuel remaining, some of the crew mused, “If only the Group and Wing Commanders weren’t in a contest to see who could haul the most bombs, we might not be sweating fuel and worrying about a watery landing short of Guam.”

As the tail gunner reported an orange glow from Tokyo’s fire still visible, the navigator chimed in that the city was about 150 miles away from the coast. Reconnaissance later provided the facts behind the great holocaust. Sixteen square miles of Tokyo had burned. There were 100,000 people killed, 250,000 buildings destroyed, and 1,000,000 people homeless. We had created an inferno beyond the wildest imaginings of Dante.

All were believers now; LeMay’s system was scary but it was going to be the coup de grace for Japan. It should be clear to the Japanese that no shouts of “Banzai” or destruction of lives and equipment they might bring to the Allies would matter; the end was in sight and the outcome not in doubt. The B-29 bomber streams could only increase. They could not be stopped. They were an inexorable force. We now knew it was just a matter of how many Japanese were going to die and what would be left of their country.



Smoke drifts over Tokyo in the aftermath of the bombings. The light from the firestorm could be seen by the departing attackers over 150 miles away.

The crew took off helmets and flak jackets, broke out sandwiches and began to relax. After this first awesome taste of war, some began to wonder how much time they would have before another one of these missions.

Although General LeMay was waiting back at Guam for a strike report as General Powers, the 314th Wing Commander, circled high above Tokyo, the next missions were already planned and, barring a calamity on the Tokyo mission, it was planned to strike in quick succession Nagoya, Osaka, Kobe, and then repeat attacks on some. Ground personnel and equipment were ready for refueling, maintenance, bomb loading, and

all that it would take to send these planes back to Japan again and again. The aircrews would soon know the meaning of Maximum Effort, but there would be little complaining. If this Tokyo trip was an indicator, it was the way to end the war. Our crews realized that all would not see the end. There would be empty tents and missing airplanes after each mission, but the Japanese were beaten and the planes would go back as often as needed.

Perhaps it is one of the tricks of leadership, but the pace of attack and frequency of missions gave us little time for concern or to ponder the empty tents. Or, perhaps we young citizen soldiers understood what we were about better than the historians and scholars who would later talk about and seek to explain it. The momentum was ours and winning was everything.



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Linda Burdette
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