

Dear Dr. Shupak,

Jan 26, 2008

Sorry for the tardy reply to your request for a little information on what our Missions were like but an unexpected and urgent matter arose.

To start with, virtually every mission was composed of two very suspenseful parts -- the first being the Take-Off. Although the B-29 had a designed Maximum Gross Weight of 128,000lbs, we were taking-off at 141,000+ -- more than 13,000lbs overweight which left no margin for error. With an 8,400ft runway and a 300ft drop to the ocean we often referred to the last 1,000ft of the runway as "the Undertakers Parlor" because -- at the speed attained at that point of the run -- plus the weight of the aircraft there was simply no way we get it into the air on 3-engines or stop it short of the cliff! I remember one night in particular during the 15-minutes of so that it took us to taxi out and into position for take-off, we saw 3 B-29s crash into the ocean from the base at Tinian, only 15-miles away. And with up to 8,100 gallons of 130 Octane gas -- plus -- up to and/or 20,000lbs of bombs -- when they crashed it would light up the sky like a mini A-Bomb! Once that we had made it off safely, however, and reached an altitude of say 500ft or so on our climb-out -- virtually every member of the Crew felt an enormous sense of euphoria -- "How sweet it was!" Yet, what were we so happy about? In just a few short hours we would literally be playing the role of a Duck in a shooting gallery! I remember one take off in particular when we lost an engine just after getting airborne -- salvoed our bomb load immediately and when they hit the water exploded sending many heavy bomb fragments up through the rear section of the fuselage where Jake was, seriously damaging our horizontal stabilizer. Such was just the Take-Off part of the Mission.

The Combat Portion included a whole new set of dangers and concerns: We were often hit by Flak (Anti-Aircraft fire) --faced conventional Fighter attacks in which the Pilot hoped to live -- sometimes by Kama Kazi's who intentionally didn't --were sometimes beset by Phosphorus Bombs capable of burning through the airplane -- narrowly missed by a couple of Baka Bombs (piloted rocket- powered missiles)--and always had the knowing fear of what would happen if we were shot-down and taken as prisoners!

On one occasion, a high altitude (32,000ft) mission over Nagoya -- always a tough target -- we were hit by over a dozen fighter attacks which knocked-out our #3 engine but also destroyed its "feathering motor" in the process, making it impossible to feather the propeller. After making it safely back over the coast, a quick assessment of the situation with my Engineer and Navigator revealed there was no way that we could possibly make it back to Saipan with a "Windmilling Prop" which creates an enormous amount of drag. Faced with the inevitability of Ditching I decided to try to shake the Prop loose by aggravating the situation. By this time we were probably down to around 28-29,000ft. I put the bird into a fairly steep dive (a little past the Red-line) and when the prop-shaft turned moulten-red from overspeeding I leveled-off and gave the control stick a sharp jolt. This caused the Prop to fly off like rocket straight ahead for about 3-miles or so where it stopped and just hung there like a picture hanging on a wall. Believe me, seeing a giant hunk of metal over 16ft in diameter hanging motionless (other than its spinning) at more than 25,000 feet in the air was indeed an almost hypnotizing sight to behold.

Then, just as we came abreast of it (maybe 200 yards to the left) it suddenly arched right across the top of our fuselage missing us by no more 20 feet. It was like it was "coming home to roost" exactly to the spot it had left on our #3 engine. But by now (actually before) we had other problems: the act of aggravating the situation had also set the engine on fire! And while an Engine-Fire at anytime is a hair-raising experience – at 25,000 ft over a hostile ocean more than doubles the blood-pressure index! Fortunately the 2 fire-extinguishers still worked and we were able to put out the fire.

The "low-altitude" (4,800 to 9,000ft) missions that we started flying in March of '45 posed other types of hazards. Theoretically, we were to be separated as individual planes on our bomb-run by 200ft in elevation and at least 1 minute in time. But after taking off from Saipan on parallel runways – one minute behind the aircraft on our runway and a half-minute behind the plane on the other runway – and then flying 1,500 miles to our target in Japan – that "separation" was almost laughable. I remember one mission in particular in which (whether the light came from the fires below) I looked up and we were sitting directly under another B-29 with its bomb-bay doors open. This meant that they were within seconds of dropping their load and we were close enough to read the lettering on them. Naturally I slid out from under that plane ASAP only to find ourselves in the prop-wash of another '29 in front of us. Such anxious moments often came so fast that it left little time to dwell on the previous scare. On the first low-level mission to Tokyo on March 9th, 2 Baka Bombs (unknown until then) came wizzing by us resulting in explosions probably to other B-29s. Often too, it would be impossible to avoid the smoke-clouds rising from the fires below which would hit us with the ferocity of a tornado, tossing us uncontrollably many thousands of feet into the air. The foregoing are pretty good examples of most of our missions.

The first time that I saw Jake after the War was at the Reunion in Tuscon. And as I recall – the very first sentence he uttered was "Do you remember the time that we landed at Kobler Field?" "Indeed I do!" I replied. We were coming back from a High Altitude mission on a 45-degree final approach (wheels down, etc) when the engines started failing from fuel starvation. Without even a call to the Kobler Tower I turned in there which was less than a mile closer, with only one engine running and when we touched down it, too quit. Jake continued "And when I dipped the tanks that day I couldn't get a reading on any of them!" (Jake was usually in charge of re-fueling anytime we were away from our home base.) Yes, we had flown a 3000 mile mission and ran out of gas less than 1 mile from home. How close can you get? Many crew weren't as fortunate and crashed in the attempt. Incidentally, did Jake ever tell you about the time we landed at Iwo Jima – 19 days before the fighting ended?

Again, it was a pleasure to serve with Jake and I shall remember him always.

Sincerely,