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INTERVIEW WITH COLONEL W. K. SKAER

Commanding Officer of the 40th Bombardment Group

By

Capt. F. G. Wood Jr, Historical Officer

(Colonel Skaer is 30 years old. After graduating from West Point in 1938 he was commissioned in the Field Artillery. He then went through flying school and transferred to the Air Corps. He served four years in the Training Command, rising from Instructor to Director of Training. Leaving the Training Command in the spring of 1943 he trained a B-17 provisional group and took it to England in the fall of that year. He returned to the States after a month in England and was made A-3 of the 58th Bombardment Wing until it was incorporated into the XX Bomber Command in July 1944. He was then made A-3 of the XX Bomber Command, a position which he held until January 1945. He assumed command of the 40th Group in February 1945.

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Question: To what extent was the mission of the 40th Group accomplished?

Colonel Skaer: The 40th Group, as part of the 58th Wing had two, perhaps three, missions,

(1) it was designated to actually service test the B-29 in combat and (2) it was to start bombing the Japanese home islands as soon as possible. If "mission" refers to these

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two phases of our activities, I think we accomplished it fully. The field testing of the B-29 brought about innumerable modifications and improvements which resulted in a 50% better airplane for the XXI Bomber Command. Carrying the attack to Japan was undoubtedly of great psychological importance to the effect it had on the Japanese people. Immediately after the mission to Yawata on 15 June 1944 blackouts and alerts became much more frequent in Tokyo as well as in other Japanese cities. The Japs didn't know our capabilities and they didn't know where we would strike next. In being able to harass them by measures which cut down their efficiency I think our efforts were of considerable value. In addition the sight of the B-29's flying over China picked up the spirits of the Chinese and undoubtedly contributed to the strength of their efforts.

On the other hand, if "mission" is defined as the successful accomplishment of the XX Bomber Command's original directive known as the Matterhorn Project (i.e. the crippling of Japan's iron and steel industry through the destruction of its coke producing facilities), and other subsequent directives, we were successful only after we were able to overcome the initial obstacles to our operations. In other words we did not successfully accomplish the Matterhorn Project; however, with experience gained during these initial operations we were able to carry out successfully the many subsequent directives that followed the Matterhorn Project.

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All of this refers, of course, to the India-China phase of the B-29 projects when our efforts were obviously limited by a number of factors. Since the start of operations out of Tinian the Group had, by any standards, more than carried its share of the war against Japan.

Question: What important factors contributed to or hindered the accomplishment of the Group's mission?

Colonel Skaer: If "mission" is defined as carrying the war to Japan there were few contributing factors and many hindering ones. The most important hindering factor was having to operate out of China. In the initial stages the XX Bomber Command was supposed to be completely self-sufficient (i.e., to supply itself in China in addition to flying combat missions against Japan) and although this was found not to be practicable the Bomber Command still had to supply itself to a large extent in China. In order to solve the problem we were given a fleet of C-109's. This helped a little but not much. We had to maintain, administer and operate the C-109's and that meant having to use our B-29 people as airplane crews, maintenance crews and administrative base personnel. Later on the C-109 project was turned over to ATC completely because it was felt rightly that they could accomplish the job more efficiently. Even after turning the job over to ATC, however, we were still required to furnish flight crews for a considerable time.

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One of the circumstances that hindered us also constituted, paradoxically, one of our greatest assets. Flying the Hump, while costly in fuel and engines, was one of the most severe tests that could have been given the B-29 anywhere in the world, and it enabled us to get the next best and truest picture of the sort of equipment we had to work with.

The factors hindering the successful accomplishment of the original Matterhorn Project were (1) the almost insuperable difficulties of the manner in which we had to operate which resulted in a low rate of combat operations, (2) the limitations of the original B-29's and (3) the inexperience of the crews with the new and untried airplane in addition to their lack of previous combat experience, all of which resulted in relatively poor bombing results.

The above factors were subsequently partially overcome in CBI and wholly overcome at Tinian.

Question: What do you consider the outstanding successes or failures of the Group?

Colonel Skaer: The first Singapore mission on 5 November 1944 was in outstanding success. The target was the 1000 foot graving dock at the Naval Base and the aiming point was the 20 x 100 foot sliding caisson of the dock. The bomb load per aircraft was a mere two 1000 lb GP bombs which necessitated extremely accurate bombing. One

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of our planes made a direct hit on the caisson and another breached it below the water line with a near miss. Some planes flew a total distance of 4100 statute air miles, which made this mission the longest non-stop bombing raid ever made up to that time. And with this mission we learned that the capabilities of the B-29 and our combat crews that flew it were far greater than we thought. This gave us clear evidence that we could accomplish the most difficult task if we had to.

Another outstanding attack was that directed against the large floating dry dock at the Singapore Naval Base on 1 February 1945. The dock was only 800 feet long and 200 feet wide but our three formations each scored direct hits from 20000 feet and left it sinking.

Of the missions run from Tinian our most outstanding mission was undoubtedly that run on 24 July 1945.

On that date 40 of our B-29's in four formations hit the Sumitomo Metal Works at Osaka. All formations bombed within an interval of approximately two minutes and the Group coverage was 85.4% of all bombs within 1000 feet of the aiming point.

There were other outstanding jobs but those mentioned were probably the best. I don't believe this Group ever had an outstanding Failure. On the few occasions when a mission was pretty much unsuccessful there were always alleviating circumstances beyond our control.

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Question: What were the primary problems encountered during the course of the war and what measures were taken to solve them.

Colonel Skaer: In the early days of our operations the biggest obstacle was the difficulty in getting fuel, equipment and people over the Hump into China. An attempt was made to solve this Logistic problem by converting combat B-29's to "tankers" (i.e., stripping them of all excess weight such as turrets, armor plate, etc). This wasn't the full solution so Washington gave us G109 tankers. However, we still had to divert much of our effort into their operation so eventually they were turned over to ATC. The peak of our operations, in December 1944, was still small compared to that over here.

Another problem was the engine of the original B-29. Our main difficulty lay in the proper cooling of this engine, particularly during our operations from India where extreme temperatures were encountered. From the information contained in our combat operations and Hump trip, however, it was possible to make necessary modifications so that now the engine is no longer a problem.

Poor weather in China and over the Hump hindered our operations and resulted in the loss of many planes. This particular problem was solved by installing homing facilities and other navigational aids and instituting an air traffic control system.

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Having to fly ATC routes over the Hump at the same time ATC was expanding necessitated flying at higher altitudes thereby lowering the amount of gasoline that could be off-loaded in China. This problem was solved when ATC gave us specific levels or altitudes at which we could fly.

The lack of adequate protection against night air attack in China was another problem. Near the end of our operations there some night fighters were brought in, but the problem was never adequately solved up to the time we left.

Then there was the mental hazard, for the crews, of flying over large areas of occupied territory and the Yellow Sea. Initially, crews felt that if they went down they had small chance of rescue. Arrangements were made with the US Navy to put life guard subs in the Yellow Sea. To my knowledge they never picked anybody up but the crews felt better just knowing they were there. In addition, with the aid of the Chinese, we had a considerable number of crew members who had crashed in or bailed out over occupied China returned to us. Naturally the return of these men greatly helped the morale of the other combat crewmen.

For a while we were losing a considerable number of airplanes that couldn't get back to the Chengtu area after being shot up or running out of gas on missions to Japan or Manchuria. This problem was solved by improving facilities at advance fighter bases just short

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of the enemy lines, installing homing beacons and other navigational aids and setting up rapid means of communications so that immediate aid could be sent from the Chengtu bases.

A major problem during our initial phases was that of poor bombing accuracy and the consequent failure to destroy targets. This was solved by setting up a lead crew system, giving crews increased training particularly on radar-bombsight procedure and putting greater emphasis on target identification.

Finally, we had no centralized well coordinated agency for organizing air-ground rescue in China and Burma. Numerous attempts were made to have the Theater set up an air-ground rescue agency but such attempts were never successful. The XX Bomber Command finally set up a section of its own which coordinated rescue information and also controlled two small parties that could be sent out when necessary. However, the problem was never solved in a satisfactory manner.

Question: What has been the trend in the administrative efficiency of the organization?

Colonel Skaer: I can't give a true overall picture of administrative efficiency of the 40th Group because I have been in the organization for only six months since its activation 4½ years ago.

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Question: Do you have any comments on the adequacy of the TO and E?

Colonel Skaer: Higher authority has always operated under a misapprehension concerning the number of airplanes assigned to this and other VH Organizations. Under the TC and E each squadron was assigned a certain number of airplanes and allotted enough men to maintain and operate them. However, higher headquarters has assigned us a certain number of additional aircraft designated as "reserve" planes. These so-called "reserve" aircraft are supposedly used only when a like number of TE aircraft are in the depot. In our operations, however, we have never had over one or two airplanes from the entire Group in the depot at one time, and we have been expected to operate our "reserve" at all times. The result has been that we have maintained and operated our TE aircraft plus "reserve" with the same personnel the TC and E set up to maintain and operate only TE aircraft. In my opinion the present TC is adequate only for equipment assigned under the TE.

Question: Do you consider the personnel and supply systems adequate?

Colonel Skaer: The personnel and supply systems have been adequate except for the period during which we were staging out of China. The necessity of manning two bases (rear and advance) with maintenance and administrative personnel constituted something of a problem and I've already described the supply difficulties we had.

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Question: How, if at all, has the efficiency of the command set-up in the POA effected the 40th Group.

Colonel Skaer: The present command set-up in the POA has probably had its effect on all B-29 groups. The Island (or service) Command being under a different headquarters than the tactical organizations that it serves results in numerous difficulties. When differences of opinion arise between the Island and tactical organizations it is necessary to go to many echelons above each agency for the necessary decision.

Question: What suggestions do you have for the improvement of overall efficiency?

Colonel Skaer: I'm an advocate of one department of national defense with three separate divisions consisting of Army, Navy and Air Force. In addition, while the dealings of this organization with the Navy have been few, on several occasions we were engaged in continued operations. On such occasions we had a paucity of information relative to the activities of the Navy. Had our operations been coordinated at a level lower than Washington I feel that our efforts could have been more successful. As an example during combined operations against Formosa in early January, we hit a target that had been hit the day before by carrier aircraft. Consequently much of the effort was wasted. I think every attempt should be made

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to have commanders in each division go to school and participate in maneuvers with other divisions so that an adequate understanding of mutual problems would be possible.