

40th BOMB GROUP B-29 COMBAT CREWS WW-II

Harry Changnon, April 6, 2001

As WW-II Progressed in Europe, our leaders decided they had to have newer and better bombers than the B-17s and B-24s. Boeing was awarded contracts to build the new super-bombers (Superfortress) and the first one flew in 1942 out of the Seattle factory. By that time a thousand new B-29s had been ordered. It became apparent that the B-29s would not be used against Hitler and Germany, but would be sent to fight the Japanese which had taken over the Far East territories from the British, French, and Dutch. The U.S. tried to keep the Chinese in the War forcing Japan to keep over a million men in China to rule the land and to obtain raw materials. Thus those men were not available for defense of their Pacific Islands from Allied invasions. Since the Japanese had control of the Far East seas, the only access for the Allied forces to China in 1943 was by air over the 500-800 miles of the Himalayan mountain range separating India from the Orient. That dangerous stretch of land was called the HUMP and is still not useful today although it lays between the two most populous nations. It is mountainous jungle with few humans living there.

New bases were built in India and China for the B-29s which were being assembled in new factories located in the central US because there was worry that coastal plants could be attacked. It wasn't until after we had flown our first shakedown bombing mission to Bangkok on June 6, 1944 that the US Marines invaded Saipan in the Marianas. It was fall before they could start building the first runway and airfield on Saipan for B-29s.

When B-29 production started, it was necessary to find, select, and train the men to fly those new planes. The USAAC didn't want to interfere with the air war over Europe, but located top men who had already served overseas early in the war, were instructors at flight schools, or were new graduates from those schools. The newly formed 20th AF and 58th BW were assigned four newly built bases near the new Boeing plant. The 40th Bomb Group had been on submarine patrol duty in the Caribbean guarding the Panama Canal since 1941. The 40th Bomb Group was brought back to the States in July 1943 from the Panama area. Due to pre-war economy they had flown B-18s because it was the only plane available before B-24s and a few B-17s arrived for patrol duty. Men in the 40th were thrilled to be assigned to the new B-29s, as well as chance to be with families again.

The B-29 was the biggest, fastest, and best bomber of WW-II. The new Superfortress was the first to use pressurized area for the crew to fly in, could move around in comfort and shoot new remote electrical controlled guns. New radar and other equipment became available. There were eleven men on a crew; the pilot was called the Aircraft Commander and shared flying duties with a co-pilot; two dual-rated navigator-bombardiers could both alternate duties on long flights, or if injured; a flight engineer who was a graduate of an engineering college and the radio operator flew in the front section. Two big bomb bays were in the middle with a tunnel over them connecting the radarman and gunners in their rear pressurized areas. The tail gunner was in a small area alone, but usually was in the central compartment with the CFC (central fire control), right and left gunners who sat in blisters so they could check the engines, wings, and watch for enemy planes. All of the crew

members attended special schools while training in the new bombers which had many “bugs” due to the design of the plane and wings and new engines and propellers.. Most all of the officers in the nose section had attended college; in fact the pilots, until 1942, had to have two years of college to enter the aviation cadet program.

It was decided that the 40th BG would be split equally in half to form the core of a new 40th Group and a new 462nd Group. Experienced men from the 25th and 395th squadrons were sent to nearby Walker AFB in Kansas under command of the famous Col Richard Carmichael from the 19th-BG B-17s in the Philippines in December 1941. Meanwhile, the men in the 44th and 45th squadrons stayed at Pratt, KS. after they had received a month to visit their homes and families. New men of all flight categories poured in from around the nation. Finally by the end of the year, flight crews had been selected and training for B-29s begun, but rarely did they ever fly in the new bombers which were slow coming off the Wichita production lines. In fact, the 40th BG got the first one, #954 which had 3-bladed props and gave some of us a thrill to fly in it for the first time. It never left Pratt, nor did a few other early production models. Many changes and modifications were made before the final 150 “War-production” planes were assigned in February of 1944.

As mentioned earlier, each squadron was filled with new crew members and support personnel. The extra men were sent to Clovis, NM for replacement crew training or to assignment to the four new groups in the 73rd Bomb Wing which replaced the 58th BW at Kansas bases, It was necessary for everyone in the B-29 program to train in B-17s because a B-29 was seldom available to fly. Engine problems caused most of the delays, or new modifications had to be made as problems arose. The flight crews who flew their B-29s to India got 75 or so hours on their trip overseas which was more than they had accumulated till then. Most winter month training in the B-17s were navigational trips around the States with simulated bombing attacks, usually alone at night. Not much formation flying.,

The 73rd Wing with its four Bomb Groups moved to Saipan in October 1944 and were not bombing mainland Japan until late November while our 58th-BW had been operational for six months. The 313th-BW and four Groups replaced the 73rd-BW at the Kansas fields until they moved to North Field on Tinian in February 1945. They were followed by 314th and 315th Bomb Wings which were located on two fields on Guam when they were completed in the spring of 1945. After the 58th BW relocated to West Field on Tinian in April-May of 1945, still more B-29 and B-32 Wings were in training for assignment to new bases under construction on Okinawa. There were about 3,000 men in each B-29 group although there were over 100,000 of us on Tinian when the A-Bombs were dropped. It took a lot of men to handle support duties of housekeeping, food service, medical, fire protection, safety, radar and radio, armament, gunnery, and other necessary functions. Very few nurses and Red Cross ladies served with us overseas.

We found that the CBI missions were not very successful, but we proved that the B-29s could do the job, but our logistics were terrible. Since all materials sent to China had to be

flown over the Hump from India, we were wearing out our B-29s because we had to make six round trips to China to get the gas & oil, bombs, and supplies there so that one mission could be flown to Kyushu, Japan (the other three Japan islands were out of reach from our Western Chinese bases). We lived in tents near our B-29s with the hot weather of India a big item. Maintenance could not be done during the day and takeoffs had to be early.

In September 1944, Gen Curtis LeMay replaced Gen Kenneth Wolfe who had been in charge of B-29 development and construction and had taken us to the CBI. Gen LeMay came from successful bombing operations over Germany with the 8th Air Force. He made several major changes in our B-29 procedures and operation.. We started flying 12-plane formations with Lead Crews instead of our former 4-plane flights and added other proven methods. They also eliminated one squadron from each of our four Groups; in the 40th-BG, the 395th was deactivated with transfer of crews into 25th, 44th, and 45th squadrons. By the time we moved to Tinian in April 1945 we had added a few replacement crews, and a few experienced crews had been sent back to the States to pass on' information and procedures they had learned on our trips to targets in Japan and captured countries in Asia such as Singapore, Saigon. Bangkok. We had bombed targets in ten countries.

The reason the 395th BS was dropped from the Group was that they had suffered more losses than the other squadrons. On the first mission on June 6, 1944 to Bangkok, Major Keller and his crew crashed on takeoff (only CP Eisner survived) and Major Zamry and Capt Sanders ditched their planes on their returns. It was a bad way to start; losing three planes and 20 men. Other losses followed as shown later which caused a morale problem for the Squadron. As our flights continued from Chakulia, India and Hsinching, China, we lost many more planes and men despite having great pilots in the 40th Group. Most losses of planes were due to engine fires and development of B-29 capabilities. It would have been better to have spent more time testing and learning how to use the new bomber, but there was a war to fight and in order to meet commitments to the Chinese and Allies there was a rush to get the B-29s into combat. Other planes had longer time to solve problems.

Flight crews developed a comradeship and learned to fly the planes first hand and from the experiences of their comrades. Men were not always available to fill out a crew for flights over the Hump or on missions due to sickness, accidents, injury, compatibility, personality, etc. Crews learned to work together, but others could replace them, like pilots, gunners, engineers, mechanics, and so forth. Sometimes when most of a crew was lost, there were experienced men who might not be put back on a crew for awhile. When we first went to the CBI, we expected to be able to complete a tour of duty in a certain period, like after we had 25 missions as in Europe. It turned out that some people returned home because of experiences they could teach others like B-29ers still in training. Others were sent to Muroc (now Edward AFB) to show procedures or help on Lead Crew training. Some of those early returns only had 8-10 combat missions. By February, the Air Force helped our morale by sending home four crews made up of members who had the most missions. We also found that the 25 mission goals were extended to 30 and later to 35 missions.

The first replacement crews started to arrive with a new B-29 during the summer of 1944, and with new engines and parts. The ATC was also bringing newer Superforts to replace those lost in accidents or from operational problems. Later, the ATC would fly an old "War Weary" home as was done by the lucky ones who were sent home to teach. Our new replacement crews soon found that old timers were bragging about how rough it was when we first reached India. Then we had no power, refrigeration, mess halls, little or poor food, tents under the wings of the planes, some sabotage, snakes, scorpions, and bad insects, not enough tools or maintenance equipment, etc. Later that bragging was about we had moved to new housing away from the flight line, but still necessary to have crew members take turns sleeping in planes to help with security. Those of us who had joined the 40-BG at Pratt, KS were sick of hearing about how bad serving patrol duty had been around Panama and "the Rock" (Galapagos Islands). Later on Tinian, we newcomers would hear about how bad living conditions were in the CBI (China worse than India).

We mentioned at the start that each of the four squadrons had 15 flight crews and only nine planes. After reduction to three squadrons, we had 20 crews and a few more planes. On Tinian we finally had sixty B-29s per group with an increase personnel; We have listed 181 crews as serving in the 40th, but there is a little duplication when a Co-pilot would take over a crew he had been with, or get one of the new replacement crews. Sometimes there was a change when a crew was transferred to another squadron to keep officer rank more equal, or lead crews.

25th-BS had 57 crews; 44th BS had 50 crews, 45th-BS had 56 crews
395th-BS had 16 crews, 40h ~BG Hdqtrs had 2 crews: total 181

B-29s assigned to 40-BG: 38 original to India; 66 CBI replacements
& 8 added; 33 Tinian replacements for total of 145 planes out of the
3,970 built by Boeing, Bell, & Martin Aircraft companies. We lost a
total of 79 B-29s, more than any of the 21 Bomb Groups in WW-II

Since this crew list is not exact, but made almost 50 years after the war, we invite veterans to make corrections or additions. Some of the microfilm on the 40-BG History is hard to read, or in the 25-BS is missing (or only listed names of A-Cs). The 44th and 45th squadrons had more experienced men to work in Operations, Intelligence offices, or some of us had access to diaries, log books, and other records that kept wartime information and data available at this late date.

In the 21st Century we have computers and electronics that would make keeping track of the planes, materials, supplies, maintenance, etc very easy whereas it was very difficult to have records available in the 1940s. Now we can assemble data and statistics that are easy to read and for verification. Trouble is that some of us are too old and can't use the newer equipment and information. We should have started fifty years ago, but then we were too busy with family cares and making a living.. Let us try to teil others about our old stories.