

## A Perilous Take-off

By Howard Eppler

40<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group 44<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron

**THE PRE-DAWN WEATHER WAS sticky, steamy and sultry as the 44<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron Commander, Lt. Col. Ira Cornett and his B-29 flight crew rolled out of bed for their 6:00 a.m. take-off for a flight over the Hump to A-1, the USAAF advance base at Hsingching, Szechwan, China. They had gotten used to the yapping of jackals in the jungle at night. Monkeys and peacocks were seen every day and giant Indian elephants sometimes wandered through the base housing area at night, leaving large footprints as evidence of their nocturnal visit. Giant scorpions and lethal poisonous snakes crept and crawled into the latrines and barracks. The smart soldiers would turn his leather GI shoes upside down and shake them before putting them on to make sure there were no such critters inside. The climate was outlandish. The barracks were outlandish. The food was outlandish. This place was about as far from the USA as any place on earth could be.**

**After an unappetizing mess hall breakfast with bad coffee, they rode in a rough weapons carrier over the rocky, bumpy road to Base Operations for pre-flight briefing for the seven-hour flight over the highest mountains in the world. Both bomb bays of the big bomber were loaded to the max with equipment to set up a base radio station at A-1. The fuel tanks were full to capacity. At 132,000 lbs the gross weight exceeded the manufacturer's limits.**

**As the maintenance crew, under the supervision of M/Sgt. Jake Belknap, finished their work to prepare the plane for take-off, the eleven flight crewmembers lined up with the mechanics and specialists on hand to pull each 4-blade, 16.7 foot propeller through several times before the Flight Engineer began the usual sequence of starting the engines. The engine oil pressure gauges were not working right, so the engines were shutdown and the instrument specialists were called to correct the problem. This involved bleeding air from the kerosene lines that transmitted the pressure readings from the engine to the cabin instruments. This task finished, the Flight Engineer started the engines again and checked the gauges. By now it was after 6:30 a.m. The copilot taxied the plane to the end of the runway to run up the engines and check the magnetos, instruments and propellers. During engine run up it was obvious that the governor for the number two engine was not working right. It would have to be replaced. After taxiing back to the hardstand, Prop Specialist S/Sgt. Jack Lewis replaced the governor on the hot engine. This took another hour.**

**Again the plane taxied to the end of the runway for the engine run up before take-off. This time number 3 prop governor malfunctioned and would have to be replaced. Back to the hardstand they went and S/Sgt. Lewis replaced another defective governor. M/Sgt. Belknap climbed into the Flight Engineer's seat and ran up the engine to be sure it was working right before Lt. Col. Cornett and his flight crew reboarded the aircraft and again taxied to the end of the runway for take-off. It was close to 11:00 a.m. and the temperature was nearing 100 degrees. There was very little wind as the pilot began the take-off. Just as the plane had enough speed to lift**

**off, the propeller for engine number 4 ran wild, well beyond the redline for maximum rpm. The Flight Engineer unbuckled his seat belt and scrambled six or seven feet from his position behind the copilot to feather the runaway prop. But Alas! In his haste he accidentally pressed the wrong feathering button and shut down engine number 3. The big B-29 shuddered as it struggles to reach 50 feet of altitude and was on the verge of stalling. Col. Cornett struggled to keep the plane in the air with number 3 engine shut down and the number 4 propeller running away. He ordered the Bombardier to salvo the cargo in the bomb bay. All the freight crashed into the bomb bay doors as they were opening, damaging them so they could not be closed. Mushing along at a perilous airspeed as if it were suspended by a fragile thread, with the landing gear down, wing flaps extended and encumbered by the open bomb bay doors, it seemed a crash was unavoidable. Somehow, and it must have been by the grace of God, Col. Cornett began a slow, shallow 270 degree turn to the left to land safely on the shorter macadam paved east/west runway.**

**The writer of this story was an eyewitness to this unbelievable event**