

## LAST RUN OF THE RANKLESS WRECK

By J. Ivan Potts, Jr.

On June 5, 1945, the 25th Squadron, 40th Bombardment Group (VH) flew its tenth mission from Tinian, and its forty-eighth of World War II against the Empire of Japan ... a daylight mission, using incendiaries.

The day prior to the mission, Myrel Massey and I walked over from our tent to the briefing room a little before 10:30 PM, joining the rest of the crew who were already gathered outside. This was our seventeenth mission together. Myrel was careful and conservative..., extremely calm and concentrated over a target. I had developed a great deal of affection for him and admired his skill.

On this particular mission, we had a new bombardier and a new central fire control gunner, Dick Moore, who had requested to join our crew. An unreconstructed rebel from Texas, he carried his Confederate flag into battle in his glass blister, atop the mid section of the aircraft. We welcomed our new members, entered the briefing room and quickly took our seats.

In the briefing room, each crew sat together in a row in front of a stage and a large covered wall map.. We whispered to each other as we nervously speculated on the target, soon to be revealed. When the group commander entered the room, the order of attention snapped us to our feet and into absolute silence. At his "as you were", we settled back into our seats.

The briefing officer ascended the platform and uncovered the mission map. "Kobe is the target.... Takeoff is at 0200 tomorrow. Your assembly point is Murato on Shekoku Island.... The base altitude is 15,000 feet."

A loud "Oooh!" spread through the gathered crew members when the altitude was announced. They knew that every gun in the area could zero in at that height. The worst thing about Kobe was that there was only one approach.... straight up the bay.

"Be at your aircraft at 0100, take your stations at 0130. Your altitude going out to Japan will be 4800 feet. Assemble at your bombing altitude of f Murato and join your formation leaders over Shikoku Bay to the south. First formation will assemble and bomb at 15,000 feet, second at 15,500, and the third at 16,000.

"Dragon Leader." Guard D radio channel. Radio silence is required. Estimated time to leave the assembly point is 0856.... time to drop 0916. Maintain your current bombing precision and you won't have to go back.. Maintain base indicated airspeed of 200 miles per hour on the bomb run and over the target. Good luck to you!"

We were going to need it! Our 25th Squadron was the third formation.... last in line and last over the target.... fifty-six minutes after the first group had gone in. We'd catch it from all sides! WE knew it would be rough, we had been there before.

The trip to Japan was routine. At 0820, Joe Biersteker, our navigator, came up front and indicated it was time to start our climb to our assembly altitude. After a long thirty minutes, we reached assembly altitude and, leveling off, began to look for our formation leader. He was in his wide circle, nose wheel down, with six or seven planes already in position. We had seen the red flares from his location about ten minutes away.

Soon we were all in place. We pulled in behind the other squadron formations and headed for Kobe. The 44th Squadron was lead squadron at base altitude with Captain Carter McGregor in command. The 45th was second under Major Neil Wemple, and our squadron, the 25th was last in the group formation with Major George Weschler as our leader. Our bomb run would take us straight up Osaka Bay. Osaka lies at the head of the bay and Kobe stretches along to the south. We'd be just like a flock of geese on opening day of hunting season.

The day was beautiful below the scattered clouds. The morning rains had cleared the air over Japan, leaving only a light haze. As we flew the twenty minutes from Murato Point and started up the bay, all hell broke loose. Since the first group had gone over the target at 0800 at 16,000 feet, we were coming in almost an hour later and at about the same altitude. This gave the Jap fighters time to refuel and climb back up to get at us. The anti-aircraft batteries had our flight path in their sights and were warmed up as we moved into the target area.

As we neared the target area, the flak became intense. The very accurate concentrations of bursts were spectacular. Japanese Navy ships were in the harbor and their guns were mercilessly accurate.

My mouth was dry.... I looked around at Myrel. There he was, a picture of coolness and composure. Now it was requiring all our physical strength and concentration to keep our B-29 tucked in formation.

I winced as each shell exploded ahead and to our right. Great black balls with their orange-red flashes could be heard as they exploded, CRUNCH, CRUNCH, CRUNCH. Every time we would catch a flak burst above or below the wing the plane would shudder. You could hear pieces of flak puncturing the outside of our Superfortress. Two minutes before bomb release the fighters began to come at us in droves. They were flying through their own flak all the way in.

As we began the bomb run, I could see a "George" Jap fighter circling far out in front and slightly above in a great arc from the right. "Fighter at one o'clock," I called out on the intercom. All at once he decided to make his move. As he completed his arc, I had a sickening feeling in my stomach that he had picked us....a premonition.

As he came in almost level we could see the large round circle of cylinders behind the propeller and the stubby low wing which carried his armament. Several hundred yards away, he zeroed in on us, closing at a tremendous rate of speed. The moment he headed for us the four fifty caliber machine guns in the front turret above us and the two in the turret below us cut loose with a deafening roar, adding to the intensity of the battle. At about 100 yards we could see the flashes from the center of each wing as he began to fire at us with two 40mm cannon. He came straight on, firing again, and flipping quickly on his back, slid barely under our belly.

Dick Moore reports on the fighter attack: We were firing away as he attacked. As he approached, I was firing six caliber 50s at it in short bursts of ten. Soon it appeared he not only was inflicting a great deal of damage to our plane, but was going to ram us. Under those circumstances I really didn't worry too~~~much about burned out barrels and gave him continuous fire. He continued to approach and as he slid under the bomber, his plane exploded and bits and pieces went sailing by."

Back up front, Myrel and I had our hands full. One of the 40 mm shells hit our left outboard engine. Suddenly the engine went out in a bath of oil, smoke and orange flame. The plane felt as if someone had put on the brakes; the windmilling propeller was retarding movement rather than aiding it. The fuel pressure fell to zero. I hit the feathering button hard and fortunately the propeller responded. Zane, the flight engineer, pulled the fire extinguisher and the engine flames went out.

Another shell struck the fuselage just behind the front bulkhead where radio operator, George Kelly, sat and exploded inside the front bomb bay, knocking a large hole in the tunnel and severing an electrical cable. Shrapnel flew all over the bomb bay, severing the hydraulic lines to the landing gear. All the electrical systems to the cockpit were out, including the turbo-superchargers on the three remaining engines. One third less power was now being delivered. I wondered if we'd make it? There was no assurance the plane would stay together and we were four hours from the nearest refuge, Iwo Jima.

Fortunately for us the bomb bay doors had just closed when the shell struck the electrical cable, otherwise we would have been unable to close them; the increased drag would have consumed a great deal more precious fuel.

In our stricken condition, we slowed and since we could not keep up, the formation moved away from us. We knew we were in bad trouble, not knowing whether we would suddenly be hit again and go down, or even whether we could keep the Rankless Wreck flying. The coast was fifty miles away.

In what was only seconds but seemed like hours we looked around and there was a buddy B-29 snuggled in close on our right wing, slowing down to stay with us. He had seen us hit and would help us get out to sea. With no operating guns we would have been at the mercy of any fighter that happened to spot us. We were under attack a couple of times, but our buddy fended the fighters off without further damage.

Without our turbo-superchargers and with only three engines at two-thirds power, all we could do was start a power glide from Japan and hope we could pull the Rankless Wreck as far as Iwo Jima, four hours away. Tinian was out of the question.

After the immediate intense confusion, Zane started back to determine the damage. Dick Moore started from the rear crew compartment and they

met at the huge hole in the tunnel caused by the shell blast. Working together, they tried frantically to patch some of the wires from the severed cable. After a while Dick burned his hands badly and the project was abandoned with no success.

Joe Biersteker, navigator, recalls, "After we were hit we lost all on board radio communications, and Myrel was concerned about those in the rear compartment. Beyond the coast of Japan, I crawled through the tunnel to check on possible injuries. As I traversed the tunnel, I observed the hole and damage caused by the exploding shell." Joe reported there were no wounds in the rear compartment.

Now we were over the water, flying on only three engines. I reduced the propeller RPMs to 1400 and the airspeed fell to 160 mph. Our props were turning so slowly you could almost see each blade as it cut through the air. This slowness set up a terrible vibration and everything, not tied down, was dancing about the flight deck. The flight home was a strenuous ordeal for both Myrel and myself. Most of the instruments were out, we were having to do everything by brute force, and we had eleven men whose lives were in our hands.

After an eternity, we approached Iwo Jima. We could barely see the island to our left. We were now just 300 feet above the water and running out of fuel. Zane had tried to transfer fuel from the dead engine tank, but the only thing we did was spray gasoline all over everything. To complicate our situation, weather was poor over the island and deteriorating, and the air was filled with other aircraft attempting to land. We could hear no signals from the control tower. Suddenly, we saw a B-29 crash into the water, just off the island.

Zane crawled back through the tunnel and told Don Jones, the tail gunner, to start the small gasoline engine that powered the small electrical generator. Zane then resumed his position at his console. The emergency landing gear mechanism miraculously worked and the gear came down. With no indicator light, we would have to hope that it would stay down under the impact of landing. We turned on to our final approach . . . . we were now committed.

The center runway was dimly visible. We could see almost a hundred B-29s scattered in every kind of condition, on and off the runway. There was no room for us to land! We glanced to the right. There was the short gravel-covered fighter strip along the cliffs, overlooking the beach, barely 2000 feet long. Massey banked sharply right and we headed for it. As we were lined up with the gravel strip, flames began again in

the dead engine ... no extinguisher this time.

I moved the propeller pitch fully forward. Massey reduced the power. With no flaps, we hit the gravel. We both applied the brakes hard! Nothing happened.... the lines had been ruptured by the shell blast. The end of the runway was coming up fast; we cut the master switches and hung on. With no brakes, we quickly ran out of gravel. When we crossed the end of the runway we were still indicating 95 miles per hour.

Dick Moore remembers, "In the rear gunners compartment we were jammed against the front bulkhead in a crash landing position as we came in with no flaps and on fire. The airplane reeked of gasoline fumes. As we touched down and realized we were on the runway, we all jumped up and cheered. Then we realized the brakes were not operating. We again assumed the crash landing position as the plane sailed off the end of the runway, dropping several feet into a rough, muddy area, pock-marked with hundreds of shell holes. We were riding a 150 ton "bucking-bronco," out of control and lurching and bouncing crazily at just under a hundred miles an hour. Finally the lurching and bouncing stopped, barely missing the cliff by a few feet. The plane had turned half way around at a right angle to the runway."

Everybody scrambled like crazy to get out of the plane, fearing explosion.

I ran about a hundred feet, then I stopped and my knees buckled under me from the fright of it all. I couldn't rise! Our tail gunner, Don Jones, reacted differently. He ran and ran until they finally caught him with an ambulance.

The fire was out. Shortly thereafter a damage assessment officer informed us we had three minutes to get our gear out.

All of us were taken to the Iwo hospital and released after the medics determined we were all right.

Ground personnel gathered around the Rankless Wreck to count the shrapnel holes. There were holes everywhere and a count from the shell in the bomb bay alone accounted for over a hundred and forty. She would never fly again. Incredibly, not a member of our crew had a scratch.

It was the end of the line for 420, the Rankless Wreck. She had served us well after we had gotten the bugs out. She would be scrapped at Iwo Jima.

We wouldn't have to go back to Kobe. Another Japanese city had been stricken from General LeMays list. The price: 11 B-29s lost and 176 damaged.

In 1987 Myrel said that after all this time, he could still feel the loss of power in the aircraft after the fighter pass. He says, "We all came close to buying the farm, that day." We were lucky!