YANK

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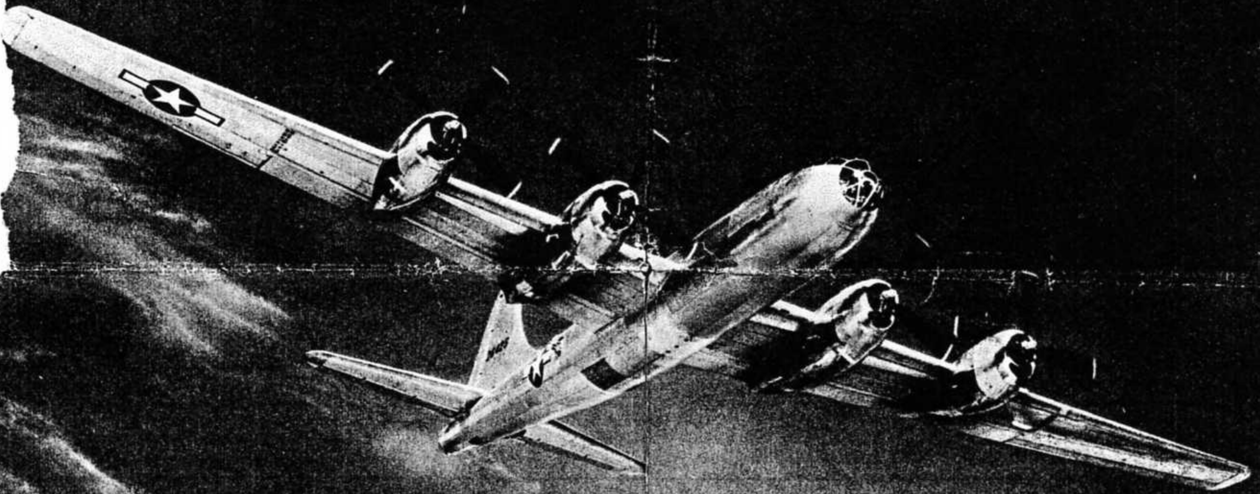
By the men . . . for the men in the service



SUPERFORTRESSES

A YANK Reporter Sees B-29 Bombs Fall on Japan

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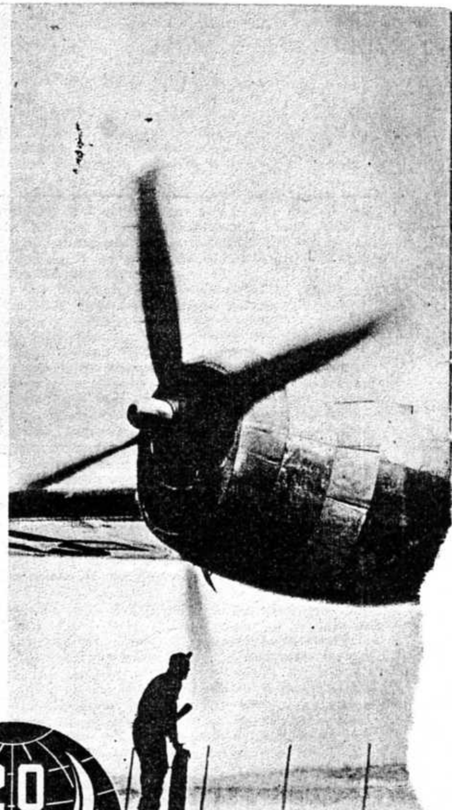
A YANK reporter describes trip to Nippon's Pittsburgh in a Superfortress of the new Twentieth Air Force.



Sgt. LOU STOUMEN
YANK Staff Correspondent

A FORWARD AIR BASE IN CHINA [By Radio]—For three weeks I had sweated out a ride on one of the B-29 Superfortresses that were going to bomb Japan. Luck finally came my way just two hours before take-off. I was given the chance to flip a coin with a British civilian correspondent for the last seat. "Tails," I called, as he tossed an Indian coin in the air. Tails it was. He tossed the coin again. Tails a second time. I grabbed a parachute and rushed to the field.

Brig. Gen. Kenneth B. Wolfe, the homely, smiling commanding general of the XX Bomber Command, was sitting in a jeep in front of Operations and looking unusually glum. He had just received orders from Washington not to fly with the mission he had planned for so long. Brig. Gen. La Verne G. Saunders, wing commander of the XX, who has a lot of South Pacific B-17 combat flying time under his belt, was going to fly this mission to represent the higher brass.

Soon I was drawing my equipment. I replaced my parachute with another, because mine had no jungle kit attached. I also drew a helmet with earphones and an oxygen mask, a rubber Mae West life jacket, a plastic-boxed survival kit (fishhooks, dextrose tablets, first-aid materials and other stuff), a pointie-talkie book of Chinese and English phrases in parallel columns, a heavy steel-filled flak suit and certain confidential material.

They told me that, except in an emergency, there was no need to take oxygen; one of the secrets of the B-29 is its sealed pressure cabin, which makes possible normal breathing and movement without oxygen at any altitude. I was also told the target: Yawata, the juiciest industrial center in all Japan, home of the Imperial Iron and Steel Works.

"Crew inspection! Let's go!" Capt. R. A. Harte of Lafayette, Ind., plane commander and pilot of our B-29, was speaking. The enlisted crewmen lined up in front of the silver Superfortress and alongside the big black letters K-26 on her nose. Each man showed his dogtags to Capt. Harte; each said yes, he carried an extra pair of socks. Then the captain, unsmiling, made a brief speech.

"We have," he said, "a pretty fair ship and a pretty good chance of coming back without a scratch. We are going to take as much cover as possible from the clouds. We won't take cover at the expense of hitting the target. If any plane pokes her nose near us, you know what to do. We take off in about 10 minutes. Man your stations!"

The B-29 needs a longer runway for take-off than any other plane. I stood on my knees during the take-off and looked out of a side blister as the ship, the world's heaviest aircraft, pounded and blasted her way down the runway. The strip unfolded like a never-ending drive belt of a factory motor, going by in slow motion until it seemed we had been roaring along for a full 10 minutes and were still not airborne. Then there was the green end of the runway, and we were skimming a few feet above trees and rice paddies.

During the take-off I also watched Sgt. D. L. Johnson of Rio, Ill., the right gunner; Sgt. R. G. Hurlburt of Gaines, Pa., the left gunner; S/Sgt. A. (for Algernon) Matulis, the chief gunner, and 2d Lt. Tash of New York, N. Y., the bombardier. They held on tight. When we were airborne, their faces cracked in smiles and their bodies eased. "She's a good ship," said Johnson as he wiped a wet hand across his face. "But some good guys get killed in take-offs."

That was the first of several sweating outs. A few miles out and a few hundred feet up, someone noticed the No. 2 engine smoking and reported it over the interphone to Capt. Harte. "Probably the fuel mixture's too rich," said Lt. Tash. And that's what it turned out to be; the smoking soon stopped. But the men sweated it out anyway. They were afraid the ship might have to turn back. As anxious as they were to return home safely, the dangers of the mission evidently meant much less to them than the danger of missing out on bombing Japan.

One ship did have to turn back, we learned later. The men returned only four hours after take-off, both GIs and officers with tears in their eyes, some of them openly crying and all of them cursing. The pilot kept repeating, over and over: "God damn the engines! God damn the engines! God damn the engines!"

After getting the plane commander's okay over the interphone, I followed Lt. Tash forward on hands and knees through the long padded tunnel over the bomb bay. Lt. Tash took his position in the greenhouse nose, and I kneeled over the hatch cover behind the pilot and next to the engineer, 2d Lt. G. I. Appognani of New York, N. Y. The engineer sits before a four-foot panel of dials, flashing lights, switches and control levers. He handles the main throttles for the four engines, controls the fuel supply and mixture, regulates the ship's electrical system and operates the pressure cabin's mechanism.

There was still light in the sky as we crossed the border of Free China into Occupied China, flying higher now, and began our next sweating out—waiting for interception by enemy fighters. There was a large force of B-29s on the mission, but we saw only an occasional plane ahead of us through the clouds or above and to the left of us. A B-29 needs elbow room to fly, to shoot and to bomb. This was not a formation flight.

Still no Jap fighters. It was dark now, and we were approaching the coast of China. Each man was wearing a Mae West over his parachute. The plane groaned on at terrific speed. There was practically no vibration inside and very little noise. In the cabin, the ride was as comfortable as a Pullman—a design for the airliners of the future. But the Jap fighters—where were they?

"We are four and a half hours from Japan," said 2d Lt. E. K. Johnson of Portland, Oreg., over the interphone. Then came the voice of Matulis: "No. 3 engine throwing a lot of sparks." The engineer, Lt. Appognani, looked out his window and confirmed this. No. 3 engine kept throwing sparks most of the way out and back. That was something else to sweat out.

B-29

The radio operator, Sgt. E. A. Gisburne of Norway, Maine, broke open a carton of rations and handed a candy bar to each man in the forward compartment. We were one short, and the engineer shared his bar with me. Candy never tasted so good. We downed it with long swigs of water from canteens. The engineer and the navigator also took benzedrine tablets, the same drug I remembered using back in school to keep awake for my final exams. By this time I was comfortably stretched out on the hatch cover in back of the pilot's, using my parachute and jungle kit as a bed. We were flying over the Yellow Sea toward Japan, but the sea was not visible; the weather was too dark and too cloudy.

At last a voice came over the interphone: "We are approaching the target." Everyone began to struggle into his heavy flak suit, putting it on over the parachute, strapping it securely at the sides and pulling the bottom flap down over the thighs like a baseball catcher's chest protector. Only Capt. Harte and the co-pilot, Lt. Haddow, busy at the controls, didn't put on their flak suits.

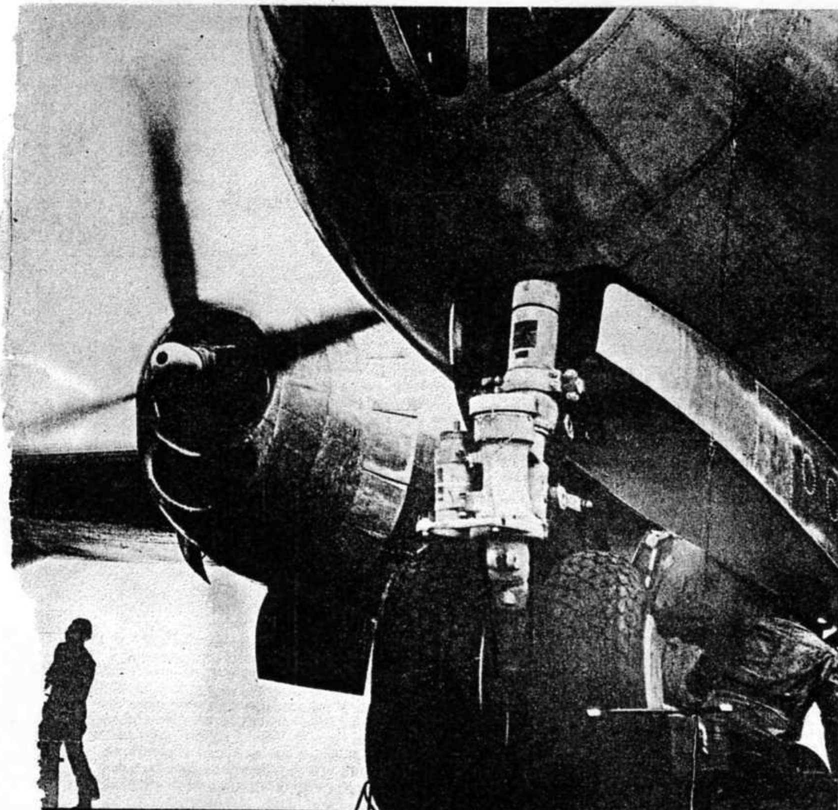
We were over Japan now. Through breaks in the clouds I could see the ground below. The Japanese blackout was perfect. Then dead ahead, a faint white globe—Jap searchlights over Yawata, the target city.

The sharp voice of Matulis, the chief gunner, came over the interphone: "Tracers. They are coming right past the ship." There was a pause, then someone said: "Tracers, hell. It's only No. 3 engine throwing sparks again." He was right. Over the interphone came a chorus of wry laughs.

The searchlights were brighter now, but their dangerous pointing fingers were diffused through the undercast of clouds. The tail gunner, S/Sgt. F. G. Hodgen, said our tail was caught several times by lights. Apparently we were not seen through the clouds, and the lights moved on. Still no Jap fighters.

The target was just ahead. There was no fiery glow through the clouds to show it had already been hit. We had been the fourth plane to take off from the field and were evidently one of the first over the target.

Based in China, Superforts struck Japan.



Raid on Japan

Flak! The gunners said the sky was full of exploding ack-ack shells, some close, most of them beneath us. Intelligence reports confirmed this later, calling the ack-ack "moderate to intense." But I saw no flak.

Later we learned that searchlights caught one of the last planes over the target, the one on which Bill Shenkel, *Newsweek's* correspondent, was a passenger, and held it in a firm bracket of light until gunners shot it down with all four motors streaming fire.

Our bomb-bay doors were swinging open now, without noise and without making the rest of the ship vibrate. The bombs dropped, one by one, one by one. . . . Then, over the interphone: "Bombs away!" The doors closed.

The K-26 seemed to sprout an extra set of engines and props. At a terrifically increased speed, she made a sharp left turn and headed back toward the Yellow Sea. Over the interphone, tail gunner Hodgen yelled: "I can't see very much through the clouds, but there's a big glow over the target."

The clouds were still below us. B-29s that came in later could see, from 50 miles away, columns of smoke and fire rising 5,000 feet into the air. Yawata, the Pittsburgh of Japan, had been hit hard. This was no token raid but, as Brig. Gen. Wolfe put it, "the beginning of the organized destruction of the Japanese industrial empire."

We were still tense after the bomb run. The Jap fighters had not come up to meet us yet, and the sweating out continued. We left Japan without interception and flew out over the Yellow Sea.

An hour out and radio operator Gisburne broke into the ration box. For each man there was a large can of grapefruit juice, which we opened with jungle knives, and chicken sandwiches, not too expertly made. The bread was too thick. Good, though. We chewed gum and smoked.

Over the China coast—Occupied China—not a single fighter came up. 2d Lt. E. M. Greenberg of Brooklyn, N. Y., combat observer, had by this time crawled forward to his station amidships and was helping the engineer make fuel-tank adjustments. "You know," said Lt. Greenberg, "the Fourteenth Air Force must have done a hell of a good job with their B-24s over the Jap fighter fields in China." Being a last-minute passenger, I had missed the briefing, so he explained: "The Fourteenth went out yesterday and bombed the Jap fighter strips we're flying over now."

But still, the raids could not have knocked out every Jap plane in the area, and even if they had, that wouldn't explain why there were no fighters over Japan. Either we really caught them flat-footed or they were plenty scared of B-29 firepower. Probably both.

Time marched on like a crippled snail. We had been flying almost half a day. With the flak suits off again, we were more comfortable. The No. 3 engine was behaving well enough. My parachute-bed was soft. I slept.

Dawn over Free China: a wild, gray sky of tumultuous clouds, empty of aircraft. I crawled back through the tunnel and batted the breeze with the gunners for a while. Then I returned to the forward compartment. Capt. Harte and Lt. Haddow looked plenty different from the eager beavers who had coaxed the K-26 off the ground so many hours ago. Now their bloodshot eyes hung heavily over pouches that looked like squashed prunes. You'd have thought that someone had been beating them about the head with a rubber hose, judging by their appearance toward the end of this longest bombing mission in history.

"Fighters!" exclaimed Lt. Tash. He put his binoculars on them. They were ours—fast, high-altitude American fighters flying top cover over the B-29 fields. At last, at the dead center of our course, the home field came into sight. It looked miles long, even from our altitude. Loud flopping, banging noises came from the No. 3 engine. "Engineer to pilot," said a voice over the interphone, "don't count on No. 3 engine for landing." "Maybe," said Sgt. Gisburne, "we got hit by ack-ack after all. It sounds like No. 3 was hit." There was a burst of sparks from No. 3's exhaust, and the engineer said he was afraid the engine would catch fire.

We made a long, sharp bank and approached for the landing. No. 3 continued to bang and throw sparks, but it didn't get any worse. We came in fast, about 20 feet above the end of the runway. Gently Capt. Harte set her down, like a mother placing a child in a crib. We rolled a

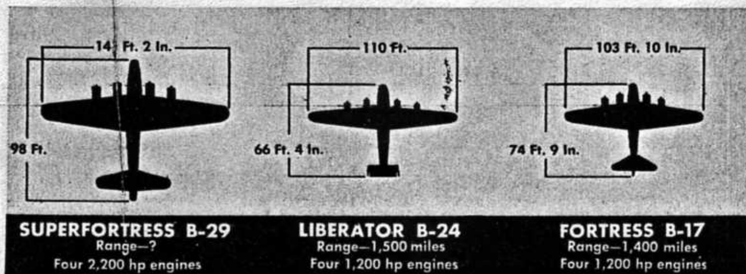
Landing strips were built by manpower. Here Chinese laborers give thumbs-up sign and shout *"Ding Hao!"*

great distance, about the speed of a fast car on a U. S. highway. Then slower, without stopping, we turned and taxied to a parking strip. The crew piled out through the bottom hatches, limp and happy. Ground crewmen and intelligence officers were there to greet them.

While the handshaking and congratulations were still going on, M/Sgt. Herb Coggins of Nashville, Tenn., chief of the K-26's ground crew, was already walking around the ship with Lt. Appognani, the engineer, looking for flak holes.

Later, in the interrogation room, A-2 officers gave each man some egg sandwiches, coffee and suitable refreshments. Then the questioning began. When the intelligence reports were finally tallied up, it turned out that four B-29s had been lost—one shot down over the target, one unreported and two lost in accidents. The entire crew of one of these planes, which made a forced landing just this side of Occupied China after completing the bombing mission, came back two days later. The pilot was wounded in the eye when Japs strafed and bombed his grounded plane.

Back in the barracks, still sweating out their unreported buddies, the weary flight crews turned to their sacks. From beneath the mosquito-net cover on a bed came a last crack: "Somebody tell me a spooky story. I love to hear a spooky story before I go to sleep."



Superbases

A SUPERFORTRESS BASE, WESTERN CHINA—Half a million Chinese laborers, working from dawn till dusk and getting about 10 cents and a bowl of rice a day, built the vast system of forward airfields in China that made possible the first B-29 raid on the industrial heart of Japan.

Lt. Col. Waldo L. Kenerson of the U. S. Army Engineers, a native of Marblehead, Mass., supervised the construction of the air-base system, together with officials of the Chinese Ministry of Communications. The bases form a great Chinese fan covering many square miles of former riceland. Several of the fields are oversized and extra hard, so they can take the B-29s. Others are fighter fields, housing new high-altitude pursuit planes. Still others are outer-ring emergency fields.

Army engineers here compared the job with the building of the Burma Road and the Great Wall of China. But they said this project was so vast and so quickly accomplished that it has no parallel in history. Construction of the air-base system cost 6 billion inflated Chinese dollars (about 150 million dollars in U. S. currency).

On Apr. 24, 1944, just 90 days after the first dike was broken to drain the water from the rice paddies, the first B-29 landed on one of the airfields. It was piloted by Brig. Gen. Kenneth B. Wolfe, commanding general of the XX Bomber Command, and co-piloted by Brig. Gen. La Verne B. Saunders, a wing commander of the XX.

Exactly 26 American officers and enlisted men, plus a large corps of Chinese engineers and government officials, supervised the half-million Chinese coolies. Individual U. S. GIs, such as T/Sgt. Aaron Jones of Shelton, Conn., Sgt. Henry B. Dresen of Seattle, Wash., and T-5 B. W. Harwood of Laredo, Tex., had as many as 23,000 men working under them at one time.

Behind the building of the superbases was the epic building and proving of the B-29 Superfortress. Behind it was much sweat and long-range global planning by the General Staff in Washington—for the XX Bomber Command is accountable not to the local China-Burma-India command but directly to Gen. H. H. Arnold, CG of the AAF, and to the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Target dates for completion of the bases were set by President Roosevelt and Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek at the Cairo Conference in November 1943. These dates were met and in some cases bettered.

Lt. Col. Kenerson, his small American staff and Chinese engineers began paper work in January 1944. Working 18 hours a day, they finished this part of the project in 20 days.

While the plans were still on the drawing boards, the preliminary draining and clearing of the land was already in progress, and the governor of "Air Base Province," under orders from Chungking, was already conscripting Chinese farmers for the heavy labor ahead. About 360,000 laborers were drafted that way.

The other 140,000 were employed as workers by private Chinese construction firms which had contracted to do various specific jobs, and as rice carriers, pay clerks, Red Cross workers and administrators servicing the armies of laborers.

Only in patient, hard-working China, with its manpower reservoir of 400 millions, could this job have been done in such jig time. "I doubt very much," said Lt. Col. Kenerson, "if we could require a job of similar magnitude in the States to be completed within the time allowed, even with the skilled labor and mechanical equipment available there."

The air-base labor draft hit the Chinese farmers hard. Already millions of China's fittest young men were in the Army, and many were dead. Old men, young boys, heads of families, women and young girls had to leave their homes and their growing crops in the hands of neighbors while they went to do unaccustomed manual labor on the airfields. These people were farmers, and they had to be taught the construction trade.

Families were broken up, crops were lost, the work was harder than any they had done before, and incomes dropped almost to the vanishing point in China's spiraling inflation. But the farmers of Air Base Province responded to the need with patience and good humor.

They moved out to the field sites in armies, as many as 110,000 on a single field. They smiled smiles of curiosity and genuine good-fellowship at the few Americans they met there, and exchanged thumbs-up signs and the words "*Ding Hao!* (Everything's okay!)" with them. And, best of all, the Chinese understood why they were working so hard—working all the time they were not eating or sleeping. Chinese propaganda units from Chungking explained to them why the Americans had come to China.

Specifications for the China air-base system were exceptionally rigid, for these fields were designed for the world's heaviest military planes. Slight dips and ridges that were okay on a B-24 or a B-17 field could not be tolerated here. And the high landing speed and long take-off run of the B-29 meant that the fields had to be longer than any forward combat fields ever built, so long that a man at one end of the strip could scarcely distinguish a man at the other.

THE rice paddies were drained. The soft century-old mud, sometimes six to nine feet deep, was carried away in the picturesque shoulder-borne tandem baskets so common throughout Asia. Tons of stones, worn round by the water, were carried from river beds to the strips in the same useful baskets. Larger boulders were patiently crushed with small sledges, the fragments were crushed again into gravel, the gravel was carried in the baskets to the strips. Acres of dirt were dug up with iron Chinese tools, a cross between a pick and a shovel. The dirt was carried to the strips in the baskets by never-ending queues of workers—men, women and children doing the job entirely by hand.

And then 10-ton rollers, some carved by hand from sandstone and others made of iron, were pulled on ropes by many hundreds of workers the wearying length and breadth of the strips. No bulldozers or other mechanical equipment had been flown across the Hump to do the job, although there were a very few trucks with very little gas on hand.

When the strips had been rolled, black tung oil—a tarlike substance that comes from a Chinese tree—was spread out to bind the dirt and gravel and help keep down the dust.

More than 80 Chinese workers lost their lives in construction accidents. The most terrible of these deaths were caused by the 10-ton rollers, which could not be stopped quickly. If an unlucky worker stumbled and fell in the path of one of these rollers, he was squashed into a bloody pancake—and the roller went on, for the work could not stop. Some 25 men died this way.

As barracks, built for the Americans at the expense of the Chinese government, went up, and as more U. S. administrative, ground and maintenance men flew in over the Hump to prepare for the coming operation, a new level of Chinese-American friendship was established. The Army and the U. S. Office of War Information brought American movies with Chinese titles to the laborers and townspeople. As many as 30,000 Chinese, few of whom had ever seen a movie before, craned their necks at one time on one flight strip to see an American film.

The Chinese reciprocated. Those who could afford to do so invited Americans to their homes, making no distinction between officers and GIs.

And when the B-29s roared back from Yawata, word of where they had been and what they had done spread quickly. Shouts of "*Ding Hao!*" were almost as loud as the motors of the B-29s, and Chinese grins of welcome to the flyers were almost as broad as the landing strips the Chinese had built with their own sweat and blood.

Thousands work to prepare the Superfort bases. Natives in construction crew tug on a mammoth 10-ton roller.

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