

Date of event: 26 October 1944
Date written: Completed early in 1986
Written by: John K. Jensen, with the assistance of other crew members

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION: Usually the mission of the B-29 was to deliver bombs accurately on target, but sometimes it was called upon for other duties--patrol or photo reconnaissance, for example. The mission described here was a photorecon follow-up (Oct. 26) to a bombing mission the previous day (Oct. 25). Major John Eigenmann and his crew, who called themselves, "Smiling Jack and his ten jokers," flew B-29 #582 on the photo mission. Their lone B-29 was engaged in a running gun battle with Japanese fighter planes for several hours, shot down a number of them, and returned to home base without any battle damage. Their flight became known as "the mission that saved the CFC system." By way of explanation, the B-29 had a General Electric computer-guided remote control turret system, known as the Central Fire Control (or CFC) system. Control of gun turrets could be switched among the gunners to concentrate fire power where needed. There had been some hints of plans to replace the CFC system with old-fashioned flexible guns, as some old line officers apparently distrusted the system and saw a possible opportunity to save weight and increase bomb loads. The mission described here proved dramatically the effectiveness of the CFC system in defending the B-29.

Crew members on this mission, including an extra observer, were:

Pilot:	John C. Eigenmann	Radar Op:	Samuel C. Still
Co-Pilot:	William E. Baker	CFC Gunner:	John K. Jensen
Bombardier:	Owen P. Donahue	Right Gunner:	David Lagoy
Navigator:	Donald L. Janasak	Left Gunner:	William Douglas
Flight Eng:	Michael Knezevich	Tail Gunner:	Clifford Bell
Radio Op:	Marian Disbennett	Observer:	Edward J. Potter

GUN BATTLE OVER JAPAN

In preparation for the Oct. 25 bombing mission to Omura, we attended briefing at about 9:00 p.m. on Oct. 24. We arrived on the flight line around 1:00 a.m. on Oct 25. After preflight we took off at 3:00 a.m. Shortly after takeoff, we developed some mechanical trouble and had to abort.

During the day on Oct. 25, we repaired the problem. As we were finishing the repair, Major Eigenmann arrived and informed us we were going to fly the photo recon mission to Omura the next day. After the briefing that night we went to bed and slept until about midnight, at which time we got up, ate breakfast, preflighted the plane and took off at 3:05 a.m.

The flight to the target was without incident until we were crossing the China Sea and saw a large number of fighters on some air strips located on some of the islands (Eigenmann remembers 40 or 50). As we approached the target we encountered an almost solid undercast, but there was a small break in the clouds in the target area, and we took what photos we could. At this point Col. Potter said he could see a break in the clouds to the north of us and we should fly up there and take some pictures. And, of course, being in no hurry to leave the target area, we obliged.

Just as we turned north, Bell reported 9 fighters coming up through the clouds behind us, and while they were climbing up to get in front of us, he reported 7 more coming up. As we approached the new target, the first 9 were in position to attack. Donahue and I coordinated the use of the upper forward turret so we could use it to the maximum. The first group came at us singly and in pairs so we each used it at different times.

The first pass was a single and he came in at 12 o'clock level. Donahue took both forward turrets, and the fighter made the mistake of climbing so Donahue could get both turrets on him. He was smoking as he passed just over our right wing--so close, in fact, Eigenmann said he could almost read his dog tags. This was very likely the one damaged plane which Donahue got credit for.

On the next pass two came in, one high and one low. Donahue took the lower turret and I the upper turret. The one that came in high rolled over and started into us just as I fired both upper turrets. He never made it all the way around before his nose dipped down and he went into a dive, straight down. In the meantime, Donahue had gotten his fighter, as confirmed by Douglas. As this was happening one of the second group attempted a tail attack, and Cliff Bell shot him down. As this was happening, Lagoy was taking pictures with the spare K-14 (I think this was the number of the camera) of the fighters as they went by. Bill Baker told me that he remembers thinking, "What the hell is Lagoy taking pictures for at a time like this," but Lagoy was our free spirit. The fact was that Douglas had the lower aft turret so Lagoy had nothing to do.

Another one came in on us from 12 o'clock high, and as he rolled over and started his attack, I fired at him with both upper turrets and his plane just seemed to stop, and after a second his nose dropped and he went down. I thought to myself, "Another one of the Emperor's little slant-eyed yellow devils sent into oblivion." (Sorry about that. It's been in me ever since I started this article, and it just had to come out.)

At this time, or just shortly afterward, three came in from one o'clock level, and here is where Eigenmann's ability came to the fore. He either turned right or left, went up or down, and adjusted the speed either faster or slower to either throw off the timing of the attack or to bring into play the upper turrets' fire power. Donahue fired at all three and hit every one hard as we saw smoke streaming from all of them. We are certain that he got all three; either Lagoy or Douglas reported seeing them disappear through the clouds still trailing smoke. However, the powers that be credited him with two shot down and one damaged.

Right after this, one came at us from 10 o'clock high, and I shot him down. When he passed over us, he was so close that he hit our radio antenna and snapped it off. This is not to be confused with another mission over Mukden, when I shot the antenna off, poor Disbennett.

If my memory is right, this was all of the first 16 to come up, and the rest were far less aggressive in their attacks than they had been. With some time to think now, I became concerned about our ammo supply, primarily in the upper and lower forward turrets, so we decided that Donahue and I would just fire at the fighters that posed a threat to us. We all felt that if we had more ammo we could have gotten some more of their fighters. Later, when I did check the ammo supply, the upper turrets were almost out, and the lower forward had no more than 100 or 200 rounds left.

By this time we were well over the China Sea, and the ones that came up were from the islands we had seen going in, rather than from the mainland. I do not recall that we had another frontal attack; these flew half-hearted pursuit curves and belly attacks. Up to this time Lagoy and Douglas really had not had many chances to shoot at anything, but the change in tactics now gave them several good chances. Lagoy reported that one was coming up from six o'clock low and he had him in his sights. I remember thinking after a while, "My God, why doesn't he shoot?" However, when he felt he had him in range, he fired at him and down he went smoking badly. Douglas got his about this time, and I remember the fighter just nosed over and went down. One of the last ones to come up Lagoy shot at and hit real hard as we saw him going down smoking very badly.

All in all, we were attacked by either 30 or 40 fighters and had seen many more, and we had been in a 3 or 4 hour running gun battle. I know that I had not smoked one whole cigarette during this time, and when I checked my ashtray, it was full of cigarettes with just one or two puffs taken off each one.

We all believe that the actual number of fighters we shot down was 11 and at least 4 or 5 more damaged, instead of the 9 plus 2 damaged we were credited with. The reason for this discrepancy, I feel, was because up to this time the gunnery system had not really been put to such a severe test and no one really knew of its tremendous potential. We CFC gunners knew, because we knew the system so well and how it worked. Probably the old flexible gunnery formula was used. However, a great deal of the problem, more than likely, was due to the pandemonium at the debriefing. I think that a lot of the facts may have been missed amid the confusion of twelve accounts being given at the same time. We are sure that Lagoy got one more and damaged another. We feel that Cliff Bell got another one, and I know I damaged some more.

After we crossed the China coast and the fighters had stopped coming, we sort of collapsed in a daze, the intercom was silent, and no one spoke to another. This went on for quite some time when over the intercom came, "When the days are hot and sultry, that is not time to commit adultery, but when the frost is on the pumpkin, that's the time for ____." Major Eigenmann. This relieved the tension, and things got back to normal again. The only thing that happened the rest of the trip was that somewhere over China all of a sudden one lone fighter appeared out of nowhere, but he did not attack.

When we landed at 1650 after 13 hours, 45 minutes of flying, we were informed that the operations room "knew" we had been shot down. The reason for this was that Col. Potter insisted that Disbennett send out an attack message every time fighters attacked us, so when we stopped being attacked, there was nothing but silence until we sent out the Yellow River (YY) message.

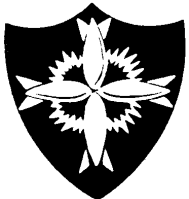
Footnote by the author: There are many gaps in this account that will never be filled in due to the fact that Donahue and Douglas were later killed in action over Yokohama by a Kamikaze. Bell, Janasak, and Knezevich have since passed on. This account is the result of about one year's effort on the part of all of us who are still here, as well as Harry Changnon, the General Electric Co., and some of the fellows I talked with at the 40th Group reunion in Denver. I would like in particular to thank Bill Baker; without his memory and help, I can assure you this account would have not been possible. We would bounce our thoughts back and forth until we were sure the facts were true. Thanks, Bill. To give you an idea of what I mean, I was sure at first that this mission was the time (on the way back from Omura) when Douglas reported that underneath us was the whole Japanese navy. Sure enough there below was a whole taskforce with their planes in the air above them. Among the ships one was later identified as the Yamamoto. Thank God their planes were up, as it messed up their radar, and very likely they didn't even know we were there. However, the date of that sighting was Nov. 21, 1944.

Bill also brought up a point that I had not thought of: what a terrible feeling Janasak, Knezevich, Disbennett, and Still must have had--being able to hear all that was going on but not able to see a thing, nor do anything about it.

Editors' Postscript: The editors of Memories invite you to submit your memories about experiences in the 40th Group. Please write to us:

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Your voluntary contributions of money are also welcome to help pay costs of printing and mailing. If you want to help, make a check to 40th Bomb Group Association, and mail it to M. E. Carmichael, Treasurer, 2514 Oregon Avenue, Alamogordo, NM 88310. The 40th Group Historian is Harry Changnon, 10455 Westacres Drive, Cupertino, CA 95014.



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