40th Bomb Group Association

MEMORIES

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Editor's Introduction: Previous issues of MEMORIES have told of the first Yawata mission. Likewise, previous issues have described some fiascoes that have taken place on missions. Don Starkey, in this issue, tells the story of a fiasco on the first Yawata raid. (Don, (Lt. Col. Ret.) was a captain and squadron navigation officer of the 44th at the time of this mission.)

The Yawata mission was a 3,200-mile, 14-hour flight. "Nippon Nipper" #289, was one of the 165 planes from the 40th Group to take off on the mission. Eleven got to the target of which two got to bomb visually. Nine bombed by radar. Results were classified as poor. There were four aborts from the 40th. Ole Nippon Nipper is credited with bombing Korea.

WAS IT LUCK OR THE WORK OF AN UNSEEN PARDONER?

On June 12, a general briefing was held at Chakulia. During the next two days, 19 planes departed Chakulia for Hsinching. Eighteen arrived safely. One was lost in the general vicinity of Jorhat.

Instead of our regular pilot, co-pilot and flight engineer, three new crew members took their positions for this mission. I was perturbed by the changes. There's nothing like going into combat with your regular crew--those in whom you have learned to place your trust. And the length of this mission dictated careful attention be given to the control of the rate of fuel consumption. Too, from long experience, I knew not all pilots trust their navigators to the same degree. I wondered just how receptive our new pilot would be to my directions. However, any misgivings I may have had were quickly erased once the flight got under way.

The final briefing was held at Hsinching at 9:00 on the morning of June 15 at which time the target was identified. To our surprise, the briefing highlighted a major map navigation problem. Not only were maps incomplete relative to land features, the elevation of mountain ranges was not to be trusted. Commencing about 200 miles east of Hsinching and extending for another 200 miles, a mountain range in our path was shown to be from 7,500 to 8,000 feet in height. But this elevation was suspect. Estimates from the 14th Air Force gave elevations as high as 11,000 feet in places. We were instructed to "play it by ear" as we got into the mission. If we were lucky, breaks in the clouds would permit glimpses of the terrain below enabling us to adjust our altitude accordingly. If we were socked in, well, we would have to take our chances with the help of radar.

Blanchard was at the controls of the first plane to take to the air at 4:16 p.m. He was followed by another aircraft or two, and then we lifted off at 4:20. The pilot trimmed the plane for a slow steady climb to 7,500 feet. The weather was good, and I sat back with a map spread out watching the earth go by. At the end of the first hour, the mountain range came into view right where it was supposed to be. The clouds were becoming more numerous, but we could still see out ahead for several miles. I spotted a herd of cattle grazing on the mountain side just below my window.

It was time to climb up through the broken clouds. Darkness would soon close in, hastened by our eastward flight. Our scheduled altitude of 11,000 feet was reached. So far the mission was going as planned.

We reached the China coast and headed out over the Yellow Sea. Six hours had passed since our departure from Hsinching. We should reach Yawata in about an hour. The weather out over the China Sea was quite soupy for two hours permitting only glimpses of the nighttime sky; then it began to clear up. I hurriedly shot a fix which showed us to be 15-20 miles north of course. We probably encountered a strong southerly jet stream. I gave the pilot a new heading.

Just after the course change, the flight engineer said into his microphone, "Flight engineer to pilot--I don't think we have enough fuel remaining to make it to the target and back."

"Are you sure?" the pilot asked with an element of skepticism in his voice.

"That's the way it looks from here," the flight engineer replied.

Following a brief discussion, the pilot requested that the flight engineer recheck his calculations.

Since I sat just opposite the flight engineer's station, I couldn't help but notice his meticulous attention to detail throughout the mission. It was almost as if he felt compelled to stay busy all the time. Judging from his conscientious performance, I suspected this was his first combat mission and possibly one of his very early B-29 flights.

In his eagerness to be certain of his evaluation, the flight engineer released the cabin pressure, stepped to the rear of the compartment and opened the forward bomb bay hatch. (The forward bomb bay contained two auxiliary gasoline storage tanks, one atop the other. Convinced that the bottom tank was essentially empty, the engineer removed the access cap and inserted his arm into the opening to, make a physical assessment of its fuel content. He felt no fuel. Leaving the cap off, he returned to his station and tripped the switch to transfer fuel from the upper to the lower tank. Suddenly--perhaps due to a change in altitude the highly volatile fuel gushed out of the opening and ran down into the ribs of the bomb bay doors where it collected. Rushing back to the tank, the engineer hastily replaced the cap. By this time gasoline was now spraying out in all directions and into the forward cabin. In the process, the engineer became drenched with gasoline from head to toe. He is chilled to the bone, suffocating from the fumes. However, he managed to crawl back to his flight station and resume his seat only to fall out onto the aisle unconscious.

Winn Cox, the radio operator, immediately strapped an oxygen mask on his face. In the meantime, the pilot ordered all members of the crew to put on their oxygen masks. (From the rear compartment, the gunners were complaining that they were about to pass out.) The fumes had, by now, become unbearable.

To this point, there had been a lot of chatter on the intercom, but now there was total silence. Suddenly, the plane started to fall off to the left in a spiraling shallow turn. I attempted to call the pilot, but there was no response. "Have he and the co-pilot both passed out?" I asked myself as my imagination began to run wild. If so, could I "fly" us back to the China coast where we could bail out? I concluded that my being able to perform this feat was doubtful. I had flown in the left seat a few times, but this was different.

I plugged my portable oxygen bottle to my mask and headed for the cockpit. What a relief it was to see the pilot and co-pilot connecting up their communication gear. In my near panic, I had forgotten all about this important step. In taking time out to hook up their communications, they had relinquished control of the plane for an instant.

The cockpit windows were now opened, but this only made matters worse. The escaping fumes were now being sucked up through the plane's interior. We had to open the bomb bay doors to get rid of that sloshing gasoline.

The pilot ordered the bombardier to open the bomb bay doors manually. The bombardier tripped the control lever, but nothing happened. He tried again. No luck. The system wasn't working. There was no alternative now but to use the electrical mode and hope it didn't spark and set off a catastrophic explosion. I had been told there are about 142 electric motors in a B-29. If any one of them gave off so much as a spark, we were goners. We waited prayerfully while the bombardier threw the toggle switch. The doors opened, dumping the fuel into night air. He then salvoed the bombs. We had aborted the mission. As the pilot turned the plane around, I gave the heading for home.

Within 30 minutes the atmosphere in the plane cleared, and we removed our oxygen masks. The engineer regained consciousness about the same time and crawled back to this seat. Being unaware that we had aborted the flight, his first words to the pilot were something like, "We have enough fuel to make it, Colonel. I apparently miscalculated." It fell to the pilot to tell him that we were returning to base.

With the near catastrophe now behind us, the trip home should not have been too difficult--so we thought. We hadn't counted on the electrical storms scattered across our route home.

Heading homeward over the China Sea, there was little turbulence, and the sky was visible most of the time. But the situation changed drastically once we crossed the China coast. Shortly we were flying blind dodging lightning bolts and thunderheads in our path. The radar operator assisted the pilot by pointing out the storm's center along the way permitting the pilot to choose the safest course in and around the raging clouds. For the next 400 miles the plane was tossed around like a chip as I attempted to follow the pilot in an effort to maintain an estimate of our position. During the course of the night, I must have counted eight or ten storms.

About 200 miles from Hsinching, the weather began to let up. Form this point on, the stars continued to appear in an ever-increasing numbers. We landed at 4:20 in the morning of June 16. The aborted mission had taken exactly 12 hours.

That same afternoon, the crew reported to the plane to pre-flight it for our return to India. To our surprise, we found the plastic radar dome hanging from the belly of the ship like a contorted paper sack. It was now soft and pliable. Removal of its drain plug confirmed that escaping gasoline from the night before had drenched its working components, yet they continued to work throughout the night. The dome was still about half full of fuel.

We all agreed we were indeed lucky to have made it home. Someone made the remark that we were living on borrowed time. The pilot perhaps said it best when he turned to the crew and said, "Gentlemen, we had an Unseen Pardoner riding with us last night."

A 40TH BOMB GROUP VIGNETTE

Editor's Note: There are a host of great stories in the 40th Group's history, many of them too short to make up a complete issue of MEMORIES. Here is one such vignette provided by Julian Cochran.

While pilots and crews got to name their own ships, there were some exceptions. The "Eddie Allen" was one such plane. Planes named for "Hap" Arnold and Admiral Nimitz were others. Julian, in this vignette, tells of another.

Julian Cochran's story: Boeing Aircraft Co. dedicated two B-29s which were purchased by them with war bonds. They named the planes "Eddie Allen" and "293." The "Eddie Allen" was named for the Boeing Director of Flight who was killed while test flying the first B-29. The other plane was dedicated to the crew of B-29 #42-24293. This original "293" was on the first Yawata mission, along with "Nippon Nipper," the plane in the foregoing story. "293" had an engine fire while returning from the mission and had to land in China where it was bombed and strafed by Japanese planes. The Boeing employees voted to name a second plane "Pappy Burns" after a fellow employee, Frank N. Burns, who was second shift fire lieutenant in the Wichita plant. Burns was a shy man and declined the honor suggesting that they name the plane "293" after the first plane with that number. It was this plane that we of Bobby Shanks' crew bailed out of 100 miles west of Rangoon on December 14, 1944. It is interesting to note that these two planes were purchased by employees of Boeing and were on loan to the Air Fore and were to be returned to Boeing after the war.

On May 24, the "Eddie Allen" was severely damaged on mission #23 to Japan from Tinian. It barely made it back to base and never flew again. Both of these planes were in the 45th squadron.

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