



Date of event: June, 1945

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Written by: J. Nelson Sanders plus contributions from Dick Steiner, Bud Dimock and Harry C. Crim

Editor's Introduction: During the period beginning perhaps in April or May of 1945 and continuing until the day of Jap surrender, August 10, 1945, P-51s based on Iwo Jima flew missions to the Empire, blasting targets in and around Tokyo from low level. They were given navigational escort by B-29s to and from Iwo. Several crews from the 40th took part in the assignment escorting flights of P-51s. Nelson Sanders', Charles Thornsberry's and Jim Lyons' crews were among those pulling this duty from the 40th. This issue of MEMORIES tells their story.

Mothering P-51s to Tokyo

On 6 June, Bill Kingsbury, CO of the 25th, assigned us to temporary duty on Iwo to provide navigational escort for P-51s from there. Our entire crew went on this duty. The crew was made up of:

J. Nelson Sanders	-	A/C
Jack S. Walling	-	Copilot
Jim W. Evans	-	Navigator
Aubrey S. Perry	-	Bombardier
E.I. Mann	-	Flight Engineer
Joe Ned Brown	-	Radar
Robert J. Brophy	-	Radio
James A. Drnek	-	CFC
James G. Glessner	-	Right Gunner
J.E. Jarmon	-	Left Gunner
David A. Capshaw	-	Tail Gunner
Dearon J. "Pete" Bailey	-	Crew Chief
Andy Suwak	-	Assistant Crew Chief

Upon reaching Iwo Jima, we were assigned to a P-51 Group and our briefings came from the P-51 Group Commander. In addition to our crew, two other B-29 crews from other squadrons had been assigned to Iwo Jima to fly navigation missions. We were informed that all three B-29 crews would participate in each mission and that all crew members, with the exception of the Crew Chiefs, would receive credit for a complete mission after each flight. Also, since we were the ranking crew, we were selected to lead the missions involving the B-29 flights.

Iwo Jima was a barren island with little aesthetic appeal. Only approximately 2.5 by 4.5 miles in size, the island was almost completely covered, where possible, with runways, parking areas, maintenance areas and tents for the personnel. There was not a living tree, brush or blade of grass visible from our compound area. The uninhabitable areas were still scarred with potholes from exploded shells and bombs. In the mountainous area of the island, there were many caves. Some of these caves were still occupied by Japanese soldiers who would occasionally raid American compounds and attack small groups of American personnel. In fact, several P-51 pilots were killed by these marauding Japanese soldiers. As a result, we were advised to wear our sidearms at all times and to keep them nearby while we slept.

While living on the island, we were assigned tents in the visiting personnel quarters. The mess hall was located nearby and the food was similar to (and as bad as) what we ate on Tinian. It seems like we had lamb or lamb stew at practically every meal. (I must add, that to this day, I have never eaten another bite of lamb, just the smell of it makes me nauseous.) On the missions we flew out of Iwo Jima, we carried the usual K-rations.

One of the bigger problems living on Iwo Jima was the availability of fresh water. Because of the shortage, we usually had to drink desalinated water. When taking showers, we used hot water. There were several volcanic areas on the island, so we could at least obtain hot water for the shower tanks. The only time to shower was early in the day because the tanks were filled only in the morning. Showering on Iwo Jima was not a very pleasant activity despite the warm volcanic water. Soap would not lather in the salt water, and the water left a salt residue on the skin so that you never felt really clean.

The fields and runways on Iwo Jima were adequate for B-29 operations. The P-51s had their own separate runways which were much shorter. On our missions from Iwo Jima, the B-29s would always take off first. We would usually navigate a group of 70 to 90 P-51s. After the B-29s were in the air, we would circle at 5,000 to 8,000 feet and wait until all of the P-51s were airborne. We then headed to our targets in Japan at approximately 8,000 feet and at an indicated air speed of 210 miles per hour. Our altitude and air speed were dictated by the fighter Group commander. He stated this resulted in the best range for the P-51s. However, once we were en route to Japan and away from Iwo Jima, the P-51 pilots always wanted to increase the air speed. We always followed the Group commander's orders and never complied with the P-51 pilot's request for more speed. About once an hour, however, the fighters would individually take off at full speed to burn the carbon out of the engines. Although they would quickly disappear from our sight, they always reappeared within a few minutes.

We took a full crew, but carried no bombs and had only a small supply of ammunition for our machine guns. We carried a full load of wing gas (5,400 gallons) and usually one bombay gas tank (600 gallons). This would allow us to stay in the air for about 12 hours. The flight to Japan was approximately 650 miles one way, and the missions normally lasted 8 to 10 hours. The P-51s had problems flying on instruments in bad weather and especially through fronts. We were advised to abort the mission if we encountered severe weather while on our missions. Fortunately, we were never forced to abort a mission due to adverse weather. However, during the four months that P-51s operated out of Iwo Jima, approximately 160 aircraft and 90 pilots were lost. About one-fourth of the losses were due to bad weather. During one mission on June 1, 1945, 24 planes and pilots were casualties.

Upon reaching Honshu, the P-51s would have an hour combat mission over the Japanese mainland. The B-29s would circle over the ocean about five miles from the Jap coast. Once the fighters began their attacks, one of the B-29s would send out a radio signal as a homing beacon. We were also in contact with the submarines located in our homing area. The majority of the fighter planes would usually return to the rendezvous point within five to eight minutes of each other. One of the B-29 would lead the first pack of fighters back to Iwo Jima in a loose group formation. Most of the other P-51s would appear within the next ten minutes, and the B-29 that had been sending the homing signal would head back to base with these fighters. We then would turn on our radio signal and wait for any stragglers. Usually there were none, but on occasion we would lead one or two fighters back to Iwo.

While circling off shore, we would also keep in radio contact with submarines to make sure they were available and in the correct position should a fighter go down at sea. Luckily, we only needed a submarine on one occasion. A P-51 pilot radioed that he had been hit in his engine coolant and could only stay airborne for another three to five minutes. We advised there was a submarine off shore and where he should bail out. The submarine surfaced immediately, and we and the submarine saw the pilot bail out and his parachute open properly. Unfortunately, he bailed out too close to the Japanese shoreline. We don't know if this engine conked out or if he panicked and bailed out too soon. He was at an altitude of 8,000 feet and probably should have been able to glide to the submarine's position. We saw the pilot hit the water from a distance, but we were never able to spot him afterwards as he was too far away from our initial position. The submarine stayed on the surface for at least an hour looking for the pilot, but could never locate him. Nervous about being exposed so close to the Japanese shoreline, the submarine finally submerged. We kept in contact with the submarine while we continued an air search for another two hours without success.

On another occasion, a Japanese fighter (Zero) followed behind the P-51s and attacked the B-29 that was sending out the homing signal. We saw him coming and had just picked up the radio to warn the other B-29. At that moment, the Zero peeled off and strafed him with machine gun fire, knocking out one of the B-29's engines. Neither the B-29 crew nor the P-51 fighters were able to get a shot at the Zero as he rapidly disappeared into the clouds. The B-29 that was hit made it safely back to Iwo Jima on three engines.

We flew four missions out of Iwo Jima during our stay. Our targets were Nagoya (two times), Osaka and Tokyo. These raids were flown on June 7, 8, 9 and 10, 1945. This gave most of our crew the 35 missions needed to be rotated back to the States. Some of us ended with 36 or 37 missions, but no one complained. These missions were considered to be fairly easy and safe.

After we completed our missions from Iwo Jima, our crew returned to West Field on Tinian. We were sent back home approximately three weeks later in a war-weary B-29.

Dick Steiner Adds What He Remembers: As I recall, there apparently was a system in effect of rewarding the lead crews with a P-51 escort mission after five regular combat missions. I flew only one P-51 escort mission, and that was with Charles Thornsberry's crew for which I was the navigator. We did not stage out of Iwo Jima, but took off from Tinian with maximum fuel and ammo, but no bombs. We flew to Iwo and circled the island while the fighters took off, established radio contact with us, and joined us in formation. Then we cruised to the Japanese coast at medium altitude, guiding those P-51s like a mother hen. We turned them loose at a point near the Ie Shima, where we orbited for some time while they made attacks on various targets near the coast. When they had expended as much fuel as they dared, they assembled again in formation, and we led them back to Iwo. The radio conversations between the various fighter pilots and our airplane were interesting. As I recall, at this stage of the war, we were not worried much about communications security, and we spoke about various problems openly. Naturally, after the long flight to Japan and an hour or so of attacking targets, some of the fighters had problems, and some were short of fuel.

I don't recall that we lost any of the fighters on our mission, but they did a lot of worrying about losing the formation and facing 700 miles of Pacific alone.

The weather fronts were usually a problem in the North Pacific. They were worse in winter, which is probably why this fighter strike system was not attempted until summer. Those peashooters did fly close formation. I remember one desperate voice telling us he was losing coolant, and maybe we could let down a rope and keep him out of the cold, wet Pacific in case his engine failed. He made it, however.

Bud Dimock Reports His Memories: After we of Jim Lyons' crew had bailed out over the Bay of Bengal and were rescued, hospitalized and discharged, we were put aboard a ship for Tinian. When we arrived, we were given a new plane and assigned to the P-51 escort service. It was just a navigation service, not an escort. We met the P-51 pilots, and they were great guys. We lived in tents on the top of one of the hills on Iwo. When a typhoon was identified as coming our way---and there were a lot of them on Iwo we would strike the tents, put something over them to weight them down and then take off in our plane to fly out of the way of the weather. When the typhoon would pass, we would return to the island. When we escorted the P-51s up to the Empire, we could see a lot of flak coming up from Tokyo. We stayed out of the way.

I vividly remember the mission we flew on August 14. En route to the Empire, we got a call to return to Iwo, the war was over. Jim Lyons flew back and we buzzed the field so low we were looking up at the control tower. I am quite sure Jim got a call from headquarters to explain that one.

Editor's Afternote: What was it like for the peashooters who flew these missions? In the book, *Global Twentieth Vol. III*, the CO of 72 Squadron, Harry C. Crim, describes a typical mission. He titled his piece in that book, "Dante Could Have Used Iwo as a Model of Hell."

All our missions were repeats of the first, except Japanese interceptors became so scarce that we went down to their airfields after them. The Japs retaliated by scattering their planes all over the countryside. The only thing we could do was to search for them, which we did by flying down all the roads leading away from the airfields. We found planes as far away as 35 miles from the nearest air base. With better cruise control, experience and bigger drop tanks, we increased the time we could spend over the Empire. We ranged far, striking airfields from Chosie Peninsula north of Tokyo clear south to Kyushu. Yokahama, Nagoya, Osaka and Kobe came under our guns and rockets. In addition to airfields, we shot up a lot of trains and ships.

On 14 August, we had just come back to rendezvous after a strike on Osaka's airfields when the news of the peace feeler was relayed by a B-29 in our navigation group. When we returned to base, we were immediately put on maximum alert with a strike mission call for the next day. It was called off.

Not told by Crim, but written by other P-51 pilots who flew these missions sitting on a hard parachute pack as the only cushion and being unable to flex muscles during these seven-hour flights, some pilots had to be lifted out of their cockpits upon landing.



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