



Date of event: 5 June, 1944
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INTRODUCTION

This first B-29 combat mission was flown 5 June, 1944. The target was the Makasan railway workshops, Bangkok, Thailand. In the summer of 1944, Fr. Adler wrote an article recounting his impressions of that fateful day. It was published in the SIGN magazine and later a condensed version was published in CATHOLIC DIGEST. The condensed version of Fr. Adler's account of that first mission (as seen from the ground) is given here. In April, 1986, Burt Elsner was asked to give us his impressions of that first combat mission. Burt was co-pilot to Maj. John Keller. Their plane crashed on takeoff. Burt's comments are inserted at an appropriate spot in Fr. Adler's narrative and they are so identified. Fr. Adler points out that security restrictions were heavy in those days, consequently names individuals and places were not included in his original article. "But," Fr. Adler says, "I think that most members of the 40th, especially those stationed at Chakulia at the time, will remember and recognize the men who are mentioned."

FIRST B-29 COMBAT MISSION - 5 JUNE, 1944

It is the night before the first mission of the B-29's. Tomorrow the men will strike their first blow at the Japanese. But tonight everyone is quiet. The cards are out as usual, and groups of men play poker.

The boys are not thinking much about the cards. You can tell that by the way they play. Joe, who never before drew to an inside straight, does it now. Maybe Joe feels that his luck is good, that it will have to be good tomorrow. Bill, who always jokes when he is playing, hasn't much to say. After the game he comes to me and hands me his wallet. "Keep this for me, Padre," he says, he's never done that before.

After I went to bed I lay awake thinking of the first time I met some of these men who were to fly the first B-29 mission tomorrow. Take Alex, for example. I remembered going up to him one hot afternoon at an air base in Peru and asking him to fly me back to Rio Hato, Panama. "Sure", he replied, "but it will be a little crowded." There wasn't enough room for me in the nose of the B-24, so I had to stand on the eat-walk between the bombs while the plane took off and landed. But I had confidence in Alex. He was a man's pilot, cool and calm.

Mac was going on this first mission also; Mac, whose comments were always good for a laugh. I remembered how hospitable he and his wife had been when I had come back to the States. They would invite me down to their house, and we would sit around the kitchen table and talk for hours. I had been with this Group since it was organized in Puerto Rico.

John, too, came to mind as I lay on my bunk living over the past two years with these men. John came in for a landing one morning with an engine burning. Just as he was about to set the plane on the ground the burning engine broke loose and dropped from the wing. He landed safely, however, and walked away. John didn't know it but he was going to fly an airplane for the last time tomorrow morning. I didn't know it either as I lay on my bunk looking up at the stars and reflecting that in all probability tomorrow would be a good day for flying.

I remember John at the Communion rail the day before he was killed. He was a clean, boyish-looking young man, who like to go around in the summer's heat clad only in shorts and shoes. Willie, a member of John's crew, was also at Mass the morning before he was killed. How happy he was when he burst into my office a few days before his last flight. He had just received the word he had so impatiently awaited. "Father", he yelled as he came through the door, "Father, I'm now a Daddy. Yes Sir, I now have a family." I finally fell asleep, my last thought being, "Tomorrow is the day these men have been looking forward to; tomorrow they will begin to play for keeps."

I got up early the next morning to attend the briefing. It was history-making. After it was over and the men were told what they had to do, I stood around watching their last-minute preparations, checking charts, seeing that they had everything in their kits, getting final instructions. "Well, so long, Padre", one after another called, "we'll be seeing you."

The time between briefing and take-off passes swiftly. After offering Mass I approach the runway. With the first faint light of day, the big engines slowly come to life, one by one. Louder and louder grows the crescendo until it rises to a deafening roar. Within a short time the entire field is a cloud of dust. The planes are to line up one after another. Slowly they move from their parking area on the taxi strip to take their positions. You can tell what the men flying the planes are thinking as one after another raises the thumb of his right hand into the air. That signal means, "This is it." It is hard to control your emotions. Now the planes are lined up, one behind the other, their huge propellers turning. There is going to be a minute interval, two minutes at the most, between take-offs. You drive over to the side of the east-west runway, and you stand and wait and "sweat." Your mouth feels dry when you try to speak, and when you notice it you can feel your heart beating faster. Here comes the first plane; it is taking its position. Slowly, majestically, it wheels into place. A few seconds are spent in the final warming up; then the plane begins to move. You are thinking of the short runway with the ditch at the end. You yell, "Give her the gun, Wimpy boy, get her rolling." Faster and faster she moves. By the time she passes you she is going 90. Carrying tons of metal, bombs, traveling on six wheels with 11 human beings aboard.

You keep your eyes glued to her. She's not moving fast enough, not yet. You notice that No. 2 engine is smoking a little. As your eyes follow the plane, you know she is gathering speed; she seems to move slowly only because she is so huge, the biggest bomber in the world, carrying the greatest bombload ever carried. Wimpy, the pilot, holds her to the ground as long as he can to get up flying speed, then he eases her off. She is air-borne, the first plane away. And a good take-off;

And so into position down the strip and into the air they go, one after another. So far the planes are taking off at the rate of one a minute, and this is good, very good.

The mechanics, who have labored long hours to get these planes ready; long, hard hours with the sun blistering their backs, causing the dust and grease to run in tiny trickles down their spines. Some of them have worked 36 straight hours preparing their planes for this morning. Now they stand on the sidelines, tired, dirty, hungry, but happy.

Not only mechanics, but all of us are there. The weather men, the medics, the bomb handlers, the cooks, the fuelers, the clerks - we all stand watching the last word in heavy bombers take to the air. We are in the nose with the bombardiers, or back with the tail gunners, or sitting in the waist, watching the engines.

And then it happens. Maybe John figures because of the cloud of dust at the end of the runway that the plane ahead of him hasn't cleared the runway so he is trying to lift his plane as early as possible. The plane doesn't respond. Instead, her tail skid drags the concrete, causing bluish flames to leap up from it. John puts her nose down again, but by dragging the skid the plane has lost precious speed. The end of the runway is coming up fast; he will have to raise her now. Again John tries to lift her off the concrete, she rises slowly and is air-borne. Johnny is away. He got out of that one nicely. But no, he isn't out of trouble yet. He rises to about 150 feet, and the plane is slipping toward the left. Johnny's left wing is down. "Bring her up, Johnny, bring up your left wing or you will crash. Dear Mother of God help him," you murmur. And then as the plane slips down behind the trees that lie west of the runway, you raise your hand in Absolution, "Ego vos absolvo...in nomine patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti..." The words are hardly out of your mouth when a huge column of flame shoots into the sky, and then over the sound of your racing ear you hear the dull thud of the explosion as the plane blows up. Frantically you drive down the road toward the wreck, over fields, and across streams. As you draw close you hear the ammunition popping off, set off by the terrific heat.

Burt Elsner remembers:

My time with the 395th in action was rather short. I remember as we reached the end of the runway, #2 tach. went back to about 15 inches. We had lost power on #2 engine. My next memory was seeing the ground coming up to meet us. Four days later, I came to in the base hospital and learned from the nurse that I was the only survivor. As 42 years have passed I still remember it vividly. I often wonder what I could have done to prevent it or help Johnnie. What a difference 10 more seconds would have made.

Fr. Adler resumes:

You drive as close as you can, and then you run across the field that lies between.

Suddenly you are thrown on your face by the impact of a bomb which "cooks off." Bullets whistle overhead. For a minute or so you hug the ground. Finally you circle and come up to the wreck from another direction. It is a gruesome scene. Sadly you make out various forms among the scattered, burning debris. John is there, and Willie. You scarcely recognize them. Willie will never bounce into your office again to tell you about Junior. He won't ever ask you again to buy him something to send home to the "kid"...And Johnny has received his last Holy Communion from you. As you have difficulty recognizing them, so you bend down to look at their identification tags. They are Burt and Al, co-pilot and flight engineer. Burt is still strapped to his seat. He was thrown clear by the explosion, with his safety belt still fastened. His legs are broken, and he has a deep gash over his eyes, but he is still breathing. You look a little more closely at Al. You can tell that he hasn't much of a chance. But he is still living. In no time at all, the doctor and his assistants are giving both men morphine and injecting plasma. Frantically they work over them, even while the stretcher-bearers carry them tenderly to the ambulance; a slim chance. All the rest have gone. Having paid the price of freedom, they have gone to the reward promised to men who lay down their lives for their friends.

By this time the last plane has taken off for the mission. It passes directly over Johnny's wrecked plane, a once majestic bird with glistening silver wings, now broken and shattered in a smoldering heap.

Back at the field, you run into Johnny's crew chief. He is the man who was in charge of maintaining Johnny's airplane. He has a dazed, hurt look in his eyes. It is the first plane he ever had charge of that crashed. You can't think of anything to say to him, so you just pat him on the shoulder.

Ten hours to wait, You still have one more thing to do for Johnny and his crew. You must make arrangements for their burial.

Then you hear a sound. There is no mistaking it. A plane is approaching the field. The sound grows louder. It is one of our own. You can hear it pass overhead; it is above the rain. The pilot cannot see the field. "Has he contacted the tower?" someone asks, as the sound of the plane fades. "No," comes the reply, "the radio operator reports his set is dead, knocked out by the storm." "Someone start the emergency power unit," yells the Operations Officer, and two men dash out into the rain. Again you hear the sound of engines. The plane is coming back. "Dear God, please let this 'stuff' lift!"

The rain does slacken slightly; there is a slight rift in the clouds, and the pilot takes advantage of it to come in to the field. The water on the runway rises in great splashes, as the giant wheels roll into it. The first plane is home! You want to cheer, but you don't. As the plane passes, you look anxiously to see if it is damaged. It isn't.

Then you hear the sound of another plane. By this time the weather has cleared sufficiently for it to come right in. After landing, the plane rolls about 1,000 feet, and the propellers, all four of them, slow down and stop. Old Luke, the pilot, had just enough gas to get his plane home. A tractor rumbles out, and as they tow the plane past, there springs up within you an immense liking for that airplane. You can't help thinking of her as a huge bird, giving it's all to bring the men home, and then being too tired to move.

And so one by one the planes come home. With the arrival of each the tension lightens. But not entirely. On checking with Operations you find that two planes are unaccounted for. One is flown by Alex, the other by Sandy. You stand around thinking of Alex and Sandy and the men with them; you can't help thinking of Johnny and Willie and the others, lying now so quietly beneath the two trees where you laid them just as the day of the first B-29 mission was coming to a close. May God be good to all of them.



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